

Mississippi River Festival To Be Discussed In Book Presentation At Carlinville Library

by Tom Emery

November 30 2023 1:56 PM



CARLINVILLE – Mark Pierce never attended a show in the twelve years of the Mississippi River Festival, a fabled part of the culture of southwestern Illinois from 1969-80.

“I was only 12 when the final concert was held,” said Pierce. “But I was so fascinated by the festival’s history that I was passionate to write about it.”

Pierce is the author of *When the Stars Came Out*, an acclaimed look at the magic and memories of the MRF throughout its twelve-year run on the Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville campus.

He will discuss his book during a free, one-hour program at the Carlinville Public Library on Tuesday, Dec. 5 at 5:30 p.m.

The 300-page book, released this March, captures the remarkable story of the MRF, the legendary summer concert series on the campus of SIUE with a who's who of music talent. Though it lasted for only twelve years, the legacy and memories of the MRF live on.

The list of performers from the MRF reads more like a roster of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Among them were Chicago, The Who, The Beach Boys, Ike & Tina Turner, Smokey Robinson, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Jefferson Starship, Chuck Berry, Alice Cooper, Rod Stewart, Loggins & Messina, the Doobie Brothers, and Joan Baez.

The Mississippi River Festival was born from a desire to create more cultural opportunities in the bi-state region, particularly on the Illinois side. The festival was intended as a summer home for the renowned St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO), allowing the symphony to extend its performance season while helping its players earn more money.

At the time of the festival's inception, SIUE was just twelve years old. "The MRF was originally a joint endeavor designed to help the fledgling university and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra," said Pierce, a lifelong music fan who attended SIUE from 1986-90. "Although the festival lost money during most years of its operation, it was a success in terms of establishing SIUE's presence in the Greater St. Louis area."

The SLSO made 100 appearances at the festival through 1977, and featured superstar guest conductors like Boston Pops icon Arthur Fielder and Henry Mancini (*The Pink Panther Theme*).

In addition, big-band music like Glenn Miller Orchestra tributes, various dance troupes, and other cultural experiences were regularly presented. After the inaugural season, however, the festival became better known for popular music, including rock, folk, and country.

“My favorite aspect of the MRF story are the interactions that fans and students experienced with the stars,” said Pierce, a Senior Director of Internal Communications at Nestle Purina. “The ability to get up close and personal with the stars was a unique aspect of the MRF.”

Much of the concert venue was covered by a tent patterned from an exhibit at the 1967 Montreal Exposition, with canvas stretching 140 feet by 170 feet and 65 feet high at the masts. The tent would become the signature of the MRF for much of its existence.

As a result, an enduring figure of the MRF was created in Roy “Skip” Manley, the tentmaster, who had formerly worked with Ringling, Shrine, and other big circus shows. Manley and the tent remain cherished memories of the MRF, though little of the venue site remains today.

In its 12 years, some 353 events were hosted by the festival. The attendance record at the festival was 31,756 for The Who in August 1971, followed by 29,491 for The Eagles in July 1975.

In some stretches, concerts were held each night, or every two to three nights. In 1976, a banner year for the MRF, a total of 43 events were staged. Many performers made more than one appearance during the run of the MRF.

Pierce’s book includes fan reviews, artist recounts, and numerous rare photos. “I love presenting on the MRF, sharing photos and stories from the book,” said Pierce, “and discussing the history of the festival and its impact on the community and people’s lives. There are so many MRF stories out there, and I love to hear and talk about them.”

For more information on the Mississippi River Festival program, contact the Carlinville Public Library at 217-854-3505 or mail@carlinvillelibrary.org.