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Members of "A South Dakota Acoustic Christmas" (above) are back after a three-year hiatus and will perform a show at Yankton's Dakota Theatre on Thursday, Dec. 20. Guest artist will be Michael Johnson (left), who is best known for his 1978 hit "Bluer Than Blue." (Courtesy photos)

Acoustic Christmas

A South Dakota Holiday Tradition Returns To Yankton With Guest Artist Michael Johnson

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Mike Connor wasn't looking for a musical gig when O'Gorman High School contacted him about performing at the Sioux Falls school. Connor had founded "A South Dakota Acoustic Christmas," a popular traveling show that had become a holiday tradition. The Catholic school inquired about booking a performance this year. "The O'Gorman theater wanted to get into promoting the use of (their facility) outside the school," he said. "They called in January and wondered if 'Acoustic Christmas' would be putting on a show here."

One problem — there was no longer an "Acoustic Christmas." The show had ended its 19-year run in 2008 after cast member Doreen Pospisil lost her battle with cancer. The band hadn't seriously talked about reuniting — until the O'Gorman call earlier this year. "First, we had to decide if we were doing (the show) this year. But the phone call proved to be the catalyst," Connor said. "It wasn't long before we committed ourselves and were playing eight shows."

Yankton hosts one of those shows, as "Acoustic Christmas" performs at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 20 at the downtown Dakota Theatre. The original group will bring back some of the best-loved songs from nearly two decades of performances, as well as offer some new holiday sounds.

Renowned national guitarist and singer Michael Johnson will join the group in presenting its unique take on the music of Christmas. The performance features something for the entire family.

Original members of "A South Dakota Acoustic Christmas" on-stage this year include Boyd Bristow (guitar), Judy Connor (concertina), Mike Connor (guitar and mandolin), Kathy Dains (tin whistle), Tom Dains (guitar), Fred Evans (drums), Barb Porter (bodhran), Terry Pospisil (guitar) and Kenny Putnam (fiddle). All of them perform the vocals.

Bristow, Pospisil, Putnam and Mike Connor also perform with various ensembles throughout South Dakota. The groups include the Shamrockers, the Song Pilots and East of Westerville.

Putnam, who traveled with country star Roy Clark's band in the 1980s and 1990s, is well known to South Dakotans for his mastery of the fiddle. As a college student, Putnam played in three of the first South Dakota Old Time Fiddle Contests in Yankton, winning a pair of titles.

Putnam was studying art at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion when he competed in the first Old Time Fiddlers contest in 1973. The new contest drew a great deal of attention, he said.

"I got a wild hair and just entered it. I had a great, wonderful time and developed a relationship with the contestants. It was my start, in a way," he said. "I hadn't intended to play music professionally, and then this (contest) happened and I kept going into music from there."

Putnam joined the Red Willow Band, helping launch his career. Then, thanks to Arne B. Larson of the Shrine to Music Museum (now National Music Museum) in Vermillion, Putnam was selected for two summers with the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington. He performed in 1975 and then returned during the nation's bicentennial in 1976.

Putnam toured with Clark, notably of "Hee Haw" television fame, for eight years and now lives in Rapid City.

"A lot of things came from that little fiddle contest (in Yankton)," Putnam said.

INVITING A GUEST

Johnson has released 21 albums, and his hit singles have included "Bluer Than Blue," "Give Me Wings," "The Moon Is Still Over Her Shoulder" and "That's That." One of his latest albums included "Whenever I Call You Friend," a duet with Alison Krauss.

Johnson's most recent album, "Moonlit Déjà Vu," was released in October of this year. The album includes a duet with Truly Carmichael, his daughter given up for adoption when he was 25 years old. He searched for her for many years, and they were reunited in 2009. She is also a classically trained musician.

Johnson was a member of the Chad Mitchell Trio, which included John Denver. He has appeared with artists Clint Black, Judy Collins, George Carlin, Vince Gill, Roger Miller, Bill Monroe, Wynonna Judd, Trisha Yearwood and Jennifer Warnes.

Johnson last toured in South Dakota during fall 2011 with Putnam, Bristow, Terry Pospisil and Mike Connor as his guest artists. It was the first time the five musicians had ever played together.

When members of "A South Dakota Acoustic Christmas" decided to tour this year, they invited Johnson back to appear with them.

"(Johnson) adds a classic-style guitar, while most of us play a steel string acoustic guitar," Connor said. "He gives us a different sound instrumentally and adds a great sense of humor. He will be featured on a couple of songs that he recorded, but basically it's seasonal songs."

Johnson, originally from Denver, has played professionally his entire life. He has played extensively on Midwest college campuses, including USD, South Dakota State University in Brookings and Augustana College in Sioux Falls.

However, the record may be held by Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn., a Lutheran college with Swedish roots.

"Michael told us the other night that he played at Gustavus Adolphus 44 times," Connor said. "He's a Swede, and they just love him there!"

Putnam first saw Johnson in concert while attending USD and became an immediate fan of the singer-guitarist. "I always thought (Johnson) was a really great artist," Putnam said.

With Johnson on board for this year's tour and everything else in place, the "Acoustic Christmas" cast started working together in March, Connor said. They have crafted a two-hour show, including nearly a half-dozen original compositions.

"It's a compilation of our old materials, some new material and some classic stuff from the past. There is going to be good variety," he said. "It's mostly Christmas oriented, but we don't do a lot of the 'Jingle Bell' type stuff. We do it our own way. We try to put our own stamp on familiar songs. I think we have many songs that I don't hear other groups doing."

CHANGING TIMES

The holiday concert landscape has changed tremendously during the last 20 years, Connor said.

"When we got started doing this thing, there were a couple of acts during the holidays, mostly some college choruses," he said. "Now, it's pretty much saturated with concerts."

Despite the stiff competition from other events, "Acoustic Christmas" has received a strong response from people happy to see the band's return, Connor said.

"We have kind of a down-home approach to the Christmas acoustic. By that, I mean, South Dakota music. We really like to promote the fact that we are local folks and have done this stuff all our lives. It's folksy," he said.

In many ways, "Acoustic Christmas" is returning to an intimate show by playing smaller venues, Putnam said.

"It started as it did because we wanted to play Christmas music, and audiences came back year after

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