

In the mid '50s when the Dexter Dam was being built, construction workers flooded to the Dexter Theater after work for dances, films and shows.

When the dam was completed the workers moved on and the theater, along with the town of Dexter itself, fell on hard times.

Since then, this 350-person-capacity hall has been a roller skating rink, a warehouse, a video arcade, a dance hall and three pizza parlors. Remnants of these failed attractions linger in pizza ovens and a projection room.

But eight weeks ago Lea Jones and Shannon Atkinson acquired the lease to the theater in "beautiful downtown Dexter," 20 minutes from Eugene on Highway 58. They dream of, once again, making the Dexter Theater the area "hotspot" for entertainment and community events. They also hope to buy the hall from its present owner within two years, Jones says.

Both theater managers know the difficulty of such a venture in the small, economically depressed community, but they foresee success by attracting the Eugene-Springfield market, as well as the Dexter-area people, with a wide variety of programs and a philosophy shown in a slogan borrowed from the Apple Computer Company: "The hall for the rest of us."

Atkinson and Jones have also begun restoring and renovating the old building.

"It did look like an empty warehouse," Atkinson says. "It was a pit with big holes in the wall, real bleak and bare."

Jones also says the acoustics needed work.

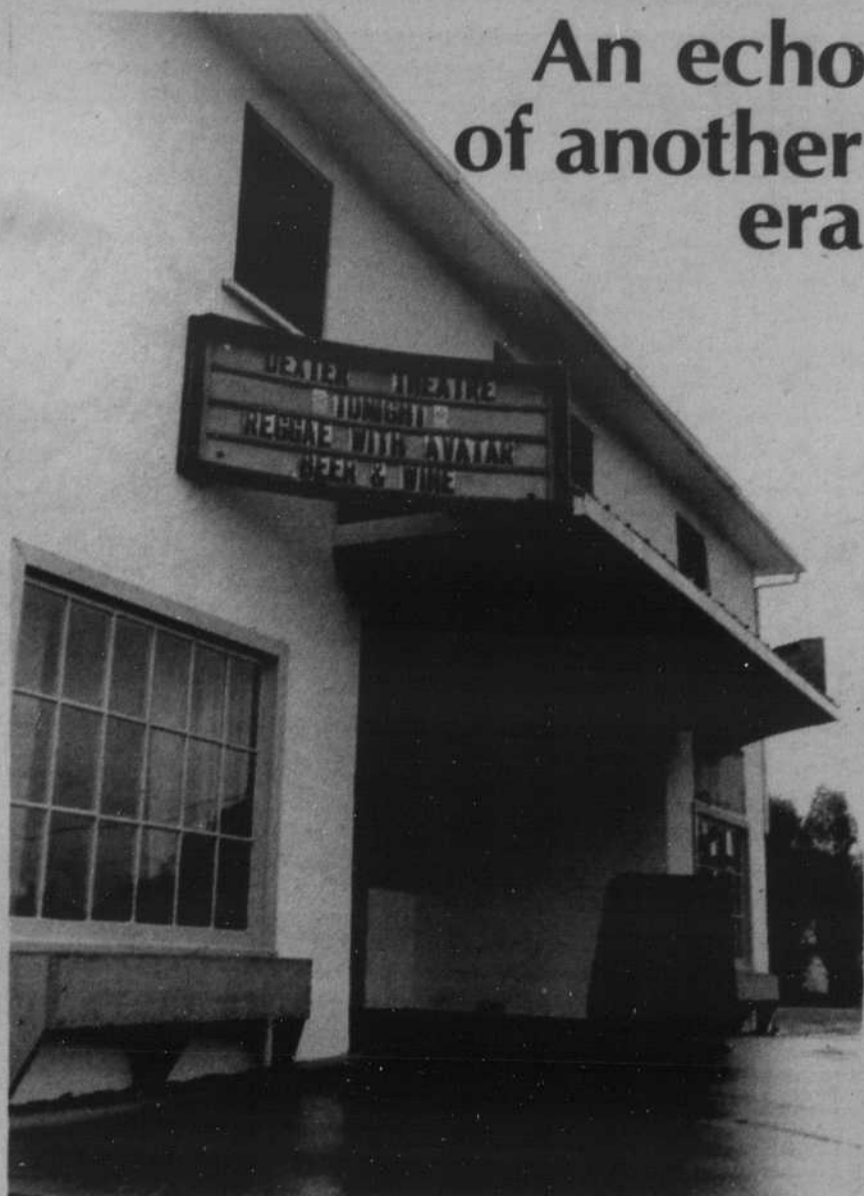
"It was maddening trying to communicate in there because of the echo," he says.

Help was provided for the old hall with carpeting, wood paneling, paint, a bar (complete with a beer and wine license) and an expanded and acoustically improved stage.

In the future Atkinson and Jones say they hope to expand the theatrical capacities of the hall and make the lobby a replica of an old movie theater with velvet ropes and classic movie posters.

Atkinson, whose entertainment background includes a degree in theater arts from the University, movie script writing and professional comedy, says the hall will be employed for a variety of functions, many using his talents.

"This building is not just a dance hall and a concert hall, but is also a community center," he says.



An echo of another era

These community-related events include junior theater, fund raisers and a theater group, the Dexter Theater Repertory Company, headed by Atkinson.

The company's first production, Nov. 30, will be a murder mystery play, "Murder at the Dexter Theatre," where audience guests in assigned costumes try to solve a series of "murders" that occur throughout the night of dancing and partying. Guests will not know who the actors are mingling in the crowd in this participation play. But they will have a chance to solve the who-done-it through a series of clues given during the evening.

"We do it very authentically," says former Portland policeman Atkinson. "I mean, I was a cop and I've worked enough murders to know."

The musical expert of the Dexter Theater duo is Lea Jones. He is currently a singer with the '50s-style acappella group The Whitetones and is also with the

band Incognito, which will play at "Murder at the Dexter Theater."

Jones says country and bluegrass bands are booked to draw people mainly from the Dexter area. Other groups are intended to draw from a larger area as well, including Eugene, as at the grand opening of the theater on Nov. 16 and 17, when two popular Eugene bands, The Cashiers and Curtis Salgado and In Yo' Face, will play.

Jones and Atkinson know the hardship facing them in this new venture that has given the area another music and performing arts outlet.

"Entertainment is, at best, a heartbreaking experience," Atkinson says.

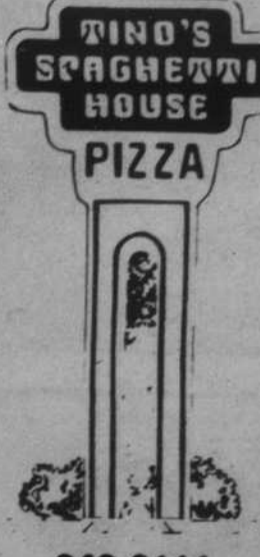
But with the variety that's already on-tap and a little beginning luck, the Dexter Theater is in business to do more than survive; they aim to thrive.

Dave Carlson
Photo by Michael Clapp

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