

Looking for the Good Life

Kris Stuart sings songs about Americana, the northwest, and the working man.

By Scott Laird

Kris Stuart is a working man. He's a traditional working stiff who holds down a weekly job in order to support his family and earn a living.

But when he's finished with work he likes to strap on a guitar, write songs and make



some music. Over the last few years Stuart has found inspiration and an interested audience for those songs in the Vernonia area.

Stuart has been the front man for two recent bands that have forged connections to Vernonia. The first was 'The John Brown Band,' with lyrics taken directly from poems about life in Vernonia penned by John Brown, a former resident town, and set to acoustic music by Stuart. Stuart's second band is 'RootJack,' a hard jamming, roots rock, power trio, that takes their name from an old logging tool and finds the subjects of some of their songs in the woods of the great northwest.

RootJack played a show at The Birk on

March 29, a roadhouse just twenty short miles from Vernonia in the tiny town of Birkenfeld. It's the second time RootJack has played The Birk and the third time Stuart has been invited to play out in the country. "Mike and Wendy (Birk owners Mike and Wendy Ingraham) are really dedicated to music," says Stuart during a set break in his show. "We love it here."

Inspired by the story of Americans moving west, just as he did himself, Stuart has managed to grab creative energy from this theme and turn it into music and songs.

"The first thing I thought of was the gold rush," said Stuart, explaining the impulse for his craft and subject matter. "When I started looking into it I found out it was horrible. It was people at their very worst and all about greed. And I didn't want to tie my art to that."

The next thing Stuart looked into, about why people would move west, was logging.

Stuart has a theory he likes to share about working men in America finding ways to survive - a theory that has become a catalyst for his music. "If you lived in Detroit and you had to feed your family, you built cars. If you lived in Kentucky, you mined coal. If you lived in Mississippi, you picked cotton. And if you lived in Oregon, you logged trees. That's what you did to take care of yourself and your family, if you were an uneducated man. And that's exactly me."

Stuart takes this description a step further on RootJack's Facebook page: "There is a long tradition of the bohemian laborer that works during the day to support his family, then comes home at night to write songs, and often those songs are about his struggle. RootJack sings songs of that same

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Vernonia Elementary Progresses Through 'Focus Schools' Program

By Scott Laird

Vernonia Elementary School has made significant progress over the last year in student academics, according to a new assessment program instituted by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE).

Two years ago ODE switched to a new system called 'Next Generation of Accountability.' Under this new growth model, Vernonia Elementary School (VES) was identified as a 'Focus School.' Being classified as a Focus School put

VES on a watch list for ODE, but also brought additional dollars and resources to help the school address identified shortcomings.

"This can help us address the areas where we're not performing that well, and help our staff learn how to address those issues with our students," explained VES Principal Aaron Miller during a recent interview.

VES has used those resources well and seen improved test scores overall as a school, and by individual students. Miller says some of that success can be attributed to the hard work and extra dedication shown by the teachers at VES.

"Our teachers are really

looking at individual students and trying to determine how to best meet their needs and then putting those things in place in the classroom," says Miller about his staff. "I know it's been a lot of work for them and it's been an extremely difficult and time



consuming process. But they've seen the benefits and they've done an outstanding job of being dedicated to their students and moving forward."

Under the new state-wide evaluation, 'Priority' and 'Focus' schools are schools that receive Title I funding who have been identified by the ODE as needing additional support. Priority schools ranked in the bottom 5% of Oregon Title I schools; Focus schools ranked in the bottom 15%. Model schools are Title I schools which are ranked in the top 5% and are showcased as achieving demonstrated student growth through actions they have

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Equestrian Team Qualifies Six for State

The Vernonia Oregon High School Equestrian Team (OHSET) has had a great season and has qualified six of their seven competitors for the state meet in Redmond, Oregon on May 15-18.

Proudly representing Vernonia High School this year are returning senior Sarah Wagner, junior Makayla McCord, sophomores Kassidy Fetch and Sheyanne Pedersen, freshmen Lauren Glass and Pearl Cook, and new student, sophomore Jordan Brickley. The team and coach Diane Benes welcomed Dawn Carr as co-coach this year with Dale Pedersen returning as their Cow-Coach.

State Qualifiers for this year were as follows: Team Penning team "B" - Brickley, Wagner, and Glass took the Gold at District; this is the first time in Vernonia's equestrian



VHS OHSET: (From l to r) Jordan Brickley, Sheyanne Pedersen, Kassidy Fetch, Makayla McCord, Sarah Wagner, Pearl Cook, Lauren Glass. Coaches: Dawn Carr, Diane Benes, Dale Pedersen. Photo courtesy of Stainakers Photography.

history that a team of Loggers have represented the Northwest District in this event! Pedersen and McCord placed 6th in Two Man Bi-Rangle, and placed as the 2nd alt. McCord placed 6th in District Figure 8 and placed as the 2nd alt; McCord

also took 5th place in Pole Bending and qualified in the top 10%. Fetch took the Gold in Individual Flags; in Steer Daubing Fetch took the Bronze. In Break Away Roping, Pederson took the Gold and Fetch

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