

The endless journeyman

Portland icon Lewi Longmire has found success on many stages, but his roots still run deep beneath the Rose City

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Lewi Longmire is a staple in the Portland roots rock 'n' roll music diet. He plays gigs more nights than not, appearing with any number of bands. In a 2008 interview with the Willamette Week, he said that in 2003, he peaked at playing 282 shows that year. He continues to collaborate tirelessly with other musicians, from national to local acts, including Michael Hurley, Victoria Williams, Blue Giant, Dolorean, The Minus 5, Fernando, Little Sue, Casey Neill, Michael Jodell, Freak Mountain Ramblers and The Peasants.

A multi-instrumentalist, the fair-skinned redhead left his home in Albuquerque, N.M., 16 years ago for the more forgiving skies of the Pacific Northwest and headed for the vibrant music scene in Portland. In that time, Longmire has cultivated a reputation as a "hired gun". He is the booking agent for the Laurelthirst Pub.

He recently returned from an Alaskan tour with the Lewi Longmire Band and sat down with Street Roots to talk about songwriting, the Vanport Flood and life in Portland.

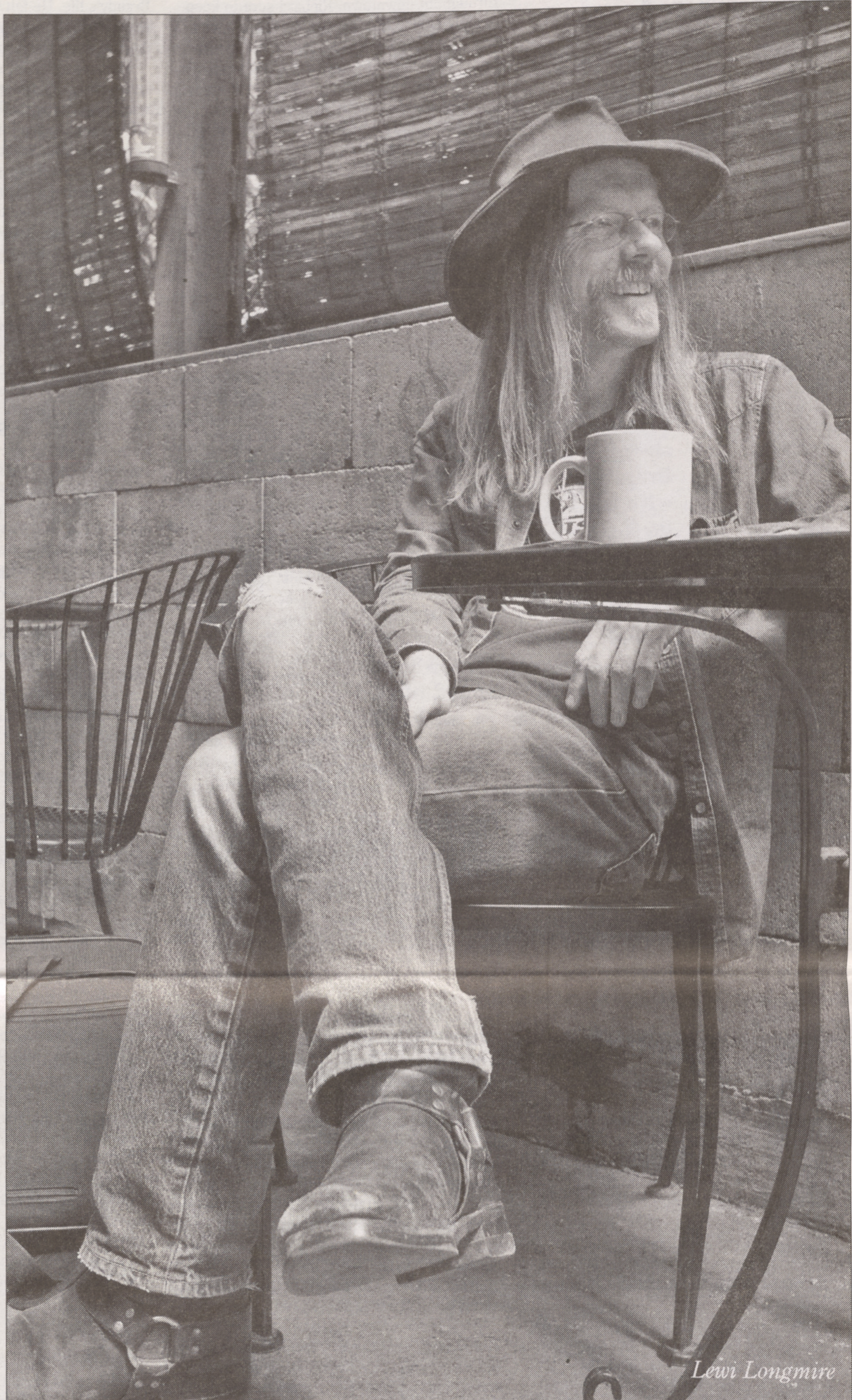
Sue Zalokar: *How would you describe your music to someone who has never heard you play?*

Lewi Longmire: That's the question that everyone wants to know of all musicians. It's difficult to quantify in that sort of way. I personally am not into these descriptions of music that are a mish mosh of a person's influences. Our music is like Frank Zappa has a baby with Courtney Love and they all go out to coffee. My music is rock 'n' roll music played with the spirit of late 60s, early 70s. I like it kind of rough and ready. I like more modern music, but I can't say that a lot of that influence has seeped into my music. I tell people the music is along the lines of Neil Young and Crazy Horse — loud, electric rock 'n' roll, but with folk songwriting at its heart.

S.Z.: *You currently have, not one or two, but seven (or more) active music projects: Lewi Longmire Band, Portland Country Underground, Michael Hurley and the Croakers, Lewi Longmire James Low Duo, Denver, Fernando and Ducky Pig. How do you manage all of that?*

L.L.: Through the miracle of calendars and datebooks. Really, the Lewi Longmire Band and maybe to a lesser extent, the Lewi Longmire James Low Duo are the only projects that I am actively in control of any major portion of the creative aspect. I've pared down in recent years from what I used to do. I've been learning how to manage my time better — to make sure that I'm doing the things that nurture my creativity and actual allow me to be truly creative, like writing songs. I do this for my living, primarily, so there is an impetus to keep playing live a lot because it's the only way I can make rent.

S.Z.: *I have heard you described as Portland's hired gun.*



Lewi Longmire

PHOTO BY
KRISTINA WRIGHT

L.L.: Really, a strong point in whatever skill set I have developed as a musician is that I do a lot of improvisation work. You could hire me as your lead guitarist, and I may have never heard the songs. And if you're confident enough that I'm gonna do a good enough job, I have no problem with going and playing an entire set of music that I've never heard before. With that said, my learning curve is pretty high. I get a lot of session work and to do a lot of live shows because I'm pretty quick at sussing out a song.

S.Z.: *Did you start on guitar?*

L.L.: I started on trumpet actually.

S.Z.: *In school?*

L.L.: In the fourth grade. I transferred to French horn at some point in high school and played into college. But I started playing guitar concurrently as a teenager. The wind instruments were always just reading music and playing notes on paper, and I was honestly never very good. My lung capacity was not great. My embouchure — I have bad teeth — it didn't work with the mouthpiece, or something like that. It was only in playing

guitar that somehow I learned that you can improvise and you can just make it up.

S.Z.: *On your latest and the third release for the Lewi Longmire Band, "Tales of the Left Coast Roasters" you tell a compelling story in "Vanport 1948." What was the motivation for this song?*

L.L.: I was lucky on that one as a songwriter. The song just came to me. I often will take my dog for walks out at the dog park near the Portland International Speedway, which is on the site where Vanport used to be. So, this complete verse came into my head, and it just kept spinning around. As I was lying in bed that night, this verse just kept spinning around in my head, and other verses came and would attach themselves to it. More words kept coming. It was driving me crazy. My mind wouldn't be quiet, and I really just wanted to sleep. Finally I got out of bed and went downstairs, and I wrote down everything I had and then I was able to go to sleep. In the morning, I looked at what I had and kind of moved things around so that it had a more chronological feel, that the story made

See JOURNEYMAN, page 11