

Sofas and spotlights

In Upper Jay, on the bank of the notoriously moody East Branch of the Ausable River where it bends east on its way to Lake Champlain, sits a three-story building bearing a sign that reads Upper Jay Upholstery.

On this January Sunday the river is placid and low within its banks, flowing darkly between sheets of snow-covered ice. The sun is weak, and the temperature by midafternoon has already begun its fall to a below-zero night.

Inside the building the first-floor has been transformed. Dozens of people fill the open space. Some sit on old sofas and chairs gathered in front of an ad hoc stage. Others keep arriving, pausing to get their bearings as they enter the warm, dusty room, then work their way around the standing guests, the refreshment area, and the sound man standing in front of his console. Chairs run short, and people stand in back or perch on steps.

This is a January Jam at the Recovery Lounge, and by all accounts it's the biggest turnout yet. The jam sessions were the brainchild of Byron Renderer and his brother Scott, who operate the upholstery business and who have nurtured a blossoming community-arts scene in the drafty edifice that started life in 1920 as a Ford Model T assembly plant.

The jam began nearly ten years ago as a way for musicians to sit in with friends and entertain whatever local residents wandered in. They've become a midwinter cultural staple in a tiny hamlet that's distant in miles and character from the resort village of Lake Placid or the city of Plattsburgh. The number of players and the size of the audience have grown as the Recovery Lounge has evolved from a personal labor of love into a regional resource with nonprofit status and broader financial support.

Musicality varies from earnest and unsteady to professional and polished. But this is no American Idol. There's no competition. The crowd lifts all performers with its encouragement. The biggest applause of the day will go to Phoebe Amirault, a young girl who sings "Castle on a Cloud" from *Les Miserables* with a strong, pure voice but who gets a little lost and falters at the end. They love her.

In the audience, two gray-haired women sit with ski parkas draped over their chairs and bags of yarn at their feet, knitting as the acts take their turns on the stage. Some of the living-room furniture that fills the room is awaiting reupholstering. Byron points out that customers don't mind since the reupholstery will undo any spills that might occur.

Young children dart through the audience, exploring the corners. Everywhere there are guitar cases, fiddles resting on laps, and sheet music being consulted. Many of those in the audience, from preteen to sixties-era retirees, are musicians waiting their turn. They live in Upper Jay or drive from as far as Malone, Paul Smiths, or Schroon Lake. Normally they can perform three songs. With others streaming in through the afternoon, many limit themselves to two songs to make way for others.

The Recovery Lounge has the official identity of the Upper Jay Arts Center. And with a \$50,000 state grant it received over the holidays the nonprofit has been able to employ Scott as a full-time artistic director. He says the paid position is a sign that the organization is sustainable and no longer is an idiosyncratic personal dream. He's not starry-eyed about the title, though.

"I'm more like the caretaker," he says. "I do a lot of fixing up."



Photos by Mike Lynch

ABOVE: Scott Renderer helps Phoebe Amirault with a sound check at January Jams.

LEFT: Byron Renderer performs with Jeremiah Weed and the Wildeflowers.



Caretaker doesn't begin to describe Scott's contribution to the theater or the community. A professional actor who worked with the avant-garde Wooster Group in downtown New York City, he moved with his family to Upper Jay in 1996 when he decided he didn't want to raise his son in the city. He had his eye on the old Ford plant from the start and eventually purchased it. Byron, a furniture upholsterer, musician, and artist, joined him, and together they grew the furniture business and theater side by side.

Scott will admit that directing, producing, and acting in plays are still his main thing, though music, art exhibits, and poetry readings are all part of the Lounge's calendar.

Larger audiences and successful fund-raising create their own challenges, says Scott.

"One of the things about growth that makes me nervous is the whole Recovery Lounge concept was very personal and it still is. But as any organization grows business starts to seep in. It takes an effort to keep it intimate and to keep the artistic director's personality and concepts intact. Part of that is presenting music and arts that aren't just run-of-the-mill stuff. Theater that's more challenging, sometimes more dangerous than you might expect."

The arts center's first theater production was a dark David Mamet play called *American Buffalo*. Another was Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*, which Scott describes as "psychologically disturbing," and which includes a home invasion and torture.

"It confused a lot of people about what it was about," says Scott. "What was Pinter trying to say? That generated so much conversation that it was actually a really positive experience. That's challenging when people come back to the shop when I'm doing upholstery and say, 'Listen. What was that about?'"

The January Jams don't share that sense of artistic danger. They are a warm, welcoming event in a cold month. There still is a sense of mischief, though, when Scott describes the way the event has grown.

"The origin of it is like two brothers building their tree house in the woods and they invite their friends over to smoke cigarettes, to steal beer from their parents, and to listen to music. To have some good honest fun and get in a little bit of trouble. That's kind of the premise."

Now there are so many musicians that there is little time for the spontaneous sitting in and jamming that started the tradition. And the families and kids are in some ways the driving force now.

Phoebe's experience isn't unique. And it embodies Scott's vision of art as a transforming power in a community and in young lives.

"For a kid to hear a hundred people cheering them on is something they will always remember," he says. "It's such affirmation it could change their life."