

Telling the story of music in the Texas Hill Country

FULL HOUSE

BY PHIL HOUSEAL



Photos by Phil Houseal

The Celestial Circle: Concert in a Cave

This September you can celebrate a celestial event in an unexpected setting—90 feet underground in total darkness.

That would be inside Cave Without A Name, listening to Celebration Circle perform world music during the Autumnal Equinox.

“It’s awesome—both the acoustics and the music,” said Nancy, one of 200 that heard the Summer Solstice concert in June. She has been attending performances at the cave for three years. “The cave is a beautiful place to have a concert.”

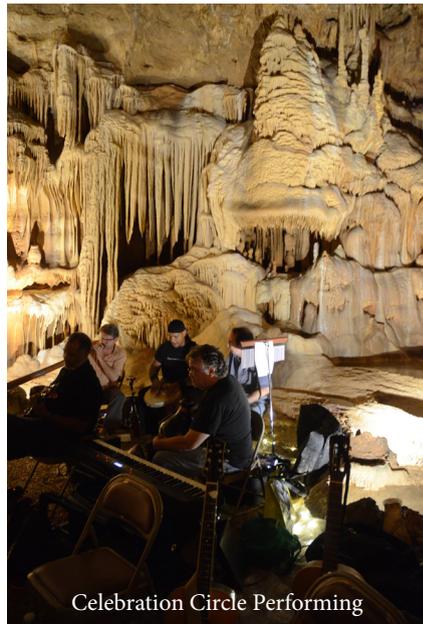
“The Cave” is a gorgeous limestone formation that lies in Kendall County, just north of Boerne. The cave boasts 2.7 miles of passages, with the public area comprising six large “rooms” a quarter of a mile long. The central room is the setting for the music groups, backlit with spectacular stalactites and stalagmites, columns and draperies. The cave is “live” in that it continues to grow from water still feeding its formations.

This unlikely concert hall was discovered in 1935 by three kids searching for a lost sheep. They tied a rope to a tree and shinnied down the hole, finding a moonshiner’s still and then crawling into a wondrous untouched cavern. One of those youngsters—Mary McGrath Curry—remembers the magic moment.

“We saw a massive room with beautiful stalagmites and stalactites,” Curry said, still enthralled 80 years later. “There was an ethereal light there, so it was bright inside the cave. It was a wonderful experience, and one that I remember quite well.”

Cave Without A Name is now owned by Tom Summers. He has improved the roads, added bathrooms, and upgraded the grounds with a pavilion, picnic tables, camping areas, and hiking trails through native-friendly landscaping.

But the most innovative improvement is opening up the cave for live music eight times a year. The public can walk down 126 steps and sit in 66-degree temperature to listen to everything from Bach to Tibetan singing bowls.



Celebration Circle Performing

offer more live music,” he said. “We see this evolving into a music center with top quality classical music. I think there is a need for it, and the people who come truly appreciate it. The acoustics are spectacular.”

Under his ownership, the cave has hosted opera, a woodwind ensemble, a world music group, and string quartet. For musicians, playing in a closed space 90 feet underground is an unexpectedly freeing experience.



Tom Summers greets visitors

“The Throne Room is so resonant, it’s incredible,” said vocalist Sarah Gabriel, who has been performing here with of the Celebration Circle Band for eight years. “It’s amazing to go into this space and celebrate the turning that native people have done for eons before us. To reconnect with the earth; to be in the womb of the earth, it’s a powerful thing.”

Patrick Moore, cellist with Axiom Quartet, describes playing inside the cave as a “blanket of sound.”

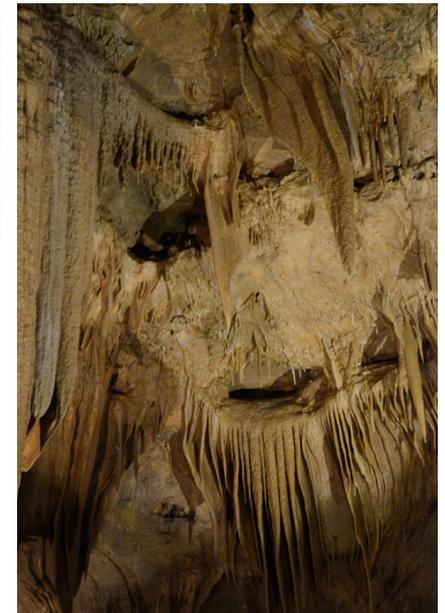
“The best way to describe the total acoustic quality of the cave is that it’s the warmest hug of sound you can ever imagine,” Moore said. “One of the advantages of a string quartet is the ability to go soft as a whisper.

Not every venue allows that. Here, the acoustics are so good, you can hear every single detail.”

Listening to music inside a cave is indeed an immersive experience, especially when the lights are switched off. Sitting in total darkness forces the audience to experience sound patterns in a different way. The power and presence of acoustic instruments—and the human voice—makes sound become a tangible thing as it bounces off the formations and hangs in the echoes of ageless water and stone.

It also impels the audience to become part of the performance.

“It’s just a place like no other,” said Eva, another frequent goer who is also a trained classical musician. “To go into this huge beautiful space underground, and to participate in this amazing sound that comes from any of the groups we’ve heard—I don’t think there is any way to describe it other than to experience it. It is as good as any concert hall you’ll ever play in.”



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