

Delta Sources and Resources

Depot Days Newport, Arkansas by LaDawn Lee Fuhr

Depot Days is an annual two-day heritage music festival in Newport, Arkansas. Held each fall, the free event is sponsored by the Newport Chamber of Commerce. The weekend long

House Bill 479 in March 2009 formally naming the corridor “Rock and Roll Highway 67.” The music was made in the Memphis studios, but it journeyed down Highway 67 to come alive. Depot Days reinforces this history while keeping the music vital and providing a myriad of activities, drawing attendees from around the corner and around the world.



The Newport Depot provides a historic backdrop for Depot Days.
Photograph by author.

event celebrates and spotlights the rich musical culture of Jackson County, Newport, and Highway 67. The officially named “Rock and Roll Highway 67” is the thoroughfare that links the town to the rest of the state, and at the dawn of the rock and roll era musical artists traveling that road to perform in the region included Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Newport’s own Sonny Burgess and Billy Lee Riley. The importance of the area was solidified when the Arkansas State Legislature passed

“If Memphis is the birthplace of rock and roll, then Jackson County and Highway 67 are the nurseries,” said Henry H. Boyce, founder and organizer of Depot Days. Boyce is a lifelong resident of Newport, Arkansas and Jackson County, with stints away from the area for college and law school. Boyce came back home to practice law and currently serves as the Prosecuting Attorney for Jackson County, a position once held by his father. His Depot Days role is one that is close to his heart. A musicphile and avid concert goer, Depot Days is a labor of love



Depot Days founder and organizer Henry Boyce in the Rock and Roll Highway 67 Museum.
Photograph by author.

for Boyce because he believes “there is no better way to enjoy music than to experience it live and feel the hairs on your neck stand up.” And, Boyce brings this musical experience home for all to appreciate every fall.

When the festival was first conceived as Depot Days in 2000, it was born from a hometown picnic and took place in front of the historic Newport Depot on Front Street with the stage area consisting of a flatbed trailer. The inaugural Depot Days bill starred Sun Recording artists, music legends, and area locals Sonny Burgess, along with his band The Legendary Pacers, and Billy Lee Riley. Originally held as a one-day event in April, the first Depot Days garnered a respectable crowd of around 300 festival goers. Because of the new festival occurring quite close to several other citywide events, Boyce opted for a move to early fall beginning with the second year for Depot Days. Depot Days continued to grow from that point, including a professional staging area, additional activities, and growing sponsor support.

Since its inception, Depot Days has hosted a cavalcade of national, regional and local mu-

sical talent. Depot Days performers have included Narvel Felts, Ace Cannon, Sleepy LeBeef, Jason D. Williams, Charlie Rich, Jr., Stan Perkins, John McEuen, The Derailers, The Zyndall Wayne Raney Band, and many more. The line-up at Depot Days celebrates the historic roots rock and roll with performances by both the legends that made it famous and the newer generations who are inspired by them. In addition to music, Depot Days has other activities, including a BBQ contest, food vendors, crafts, and activities for children.

In 2016, Depot Days became a two-day festival when a blues night was added as a Friday event. The musical artists performing that year included the Deltatones and the Memphis All-Stars. The 2017 roster saw their return along with the additions of Larry McCray, Charlotte Gray, and the North Mississippi-All Stars to the Friday night blues bill. On Saturday, Depot Days 2017 welcomed local favorite The Jimmy Dunham Band, JR Rogers and the All-Stars,



Historic drummer WS "Fluke" Holland waits to take the stage with his band during Depot Days 2017.
Photograph by author.

The Zyndall Raney Band, Ace Cannon, The Legendary Pacers, The WS “Fluke” Holland Band, The Matte Gray Band, and Travis Wammack. Depot Days 2017 marked the first year the event was held on the new stage in Newport’s newly opened Veteran’s Park, still adjacent to the historic Newport Depot.

Depot Days 2017 also served as a tribute to the late Sonny Burgess, honoring the music icon, pioneer, and International Godfather of Rockabilly. A Newport native who resided there when he wasn’t traveling the world performing, Burgess is as beloved in the music world as in his own community. Sonny and his



Depot Days 2017 premiered in a new home and staging area.

Photograph by author.

band, The Legendary Pacers, played every Depot Days festival from the beginning. His death on August 18th, 2017 left family, friends, and fans bereft. He and his band were Sun Records artists, suggested to Sam Phillips by Elvis Presley. Some of their biggest hits included “My Bucket’s Got a Hole in It,” and “We Wanna Boogie,” which also served as the name of his long running Sunday night radio show on KASU, broadcasting from the Arkansas State University campus in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Prior to the now named The Pacers performing for the first time at Depot Days without Sonny, close friends paid tribute to a man larger than life, but who was known around his own hometown as “Mr. Sonny,” and around the world as a musical pioneer.

Depot Days is a perfect destination to enjoy the tremendous cultural heritage of the Delta.



The first performance at Depot Days by the Pacers without the late Sonny Burgess.

Photograph by author.

The music that took flight here still lives here, and in the rest of the world. Depot Days provides the real time, real life heritage music experience. Follow Depot Days on Facebook to receive up to the minute information, or the website www.depotdays.org. The address for Depot Days headquarters is 201 Hazel Street, Newport, Arkansas. Their phone number is 870-523-3618. Admission to Depot Days is free.



The late Sonny Burgess photographed in the KASU Studios on the Arkansas State University Campus, April 6, 2017.

Photograph by author.