

Kurt Stevens adds to the fireworks

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Seated in his living room, musician Kurt Stevens tickled the ivories and tried out his newfound singing voice. He was 14 years old and on an Elton John kick with his only audience being his family and his mother's close friend, Terry. She truly believed in Stevens, and though he was doubtful in his singing, she gave him hope that someday more people might want to hear him perform. One day, during one of his many four-hour practices, he was called into the kitchen to find his mother in tears and Terry asking him for a favor.

Terry's cancer had returned with a bad prognosis, and she asked him to honor her by singing at her service. Given the gravity of the request, Stevens was confused when Terry added it would be the greatest gift he'd ever give her. He set to the task, rewriting the words to "Candle in the Wind" and preparing "Imagine" by John Lennon.

A couple weeks later, he arrived at her funeral alongside what seemed like the entire town with at least a thousand people in attendance. Stevens was called to the stage where he cried and shook along with a tearful crowd, but didn't falter on a single note.

"When family and friends asked afterward how I maintained my composure, it hit me," recalls Stevens. "I'd never be nervous again. It turned out that the greatest gift she ever gave me was a clear drive because after that day I knew playing music was exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

The rush of confidence came at a pivotal time as Stevens perfected intricate classical music on the piano and overcame his fear of forgetting notes. At a young age he would fiddle with the keys every time he walked by a piano, and his father took notice.

Stevens was enrolled in lessons at 4 years old and studied under Maestro Harold Brown. He participated in classical piano competitions at the school and state levels, winning national awards for his performances.

Entering high school, he found the guitar and taught himself to play, figuring it was a more mobile instrument to take to a friend's house or party. He debuted his skills at one high school talent show with "Old Red" by Blake Shelton, and won another playing "You" by Chris Young. Getting away from classical melodies and into more pop, American country, and blues music, he shared a love for Southern rock 'n' roll

IF YOU GO

What: City of Tallahassee presents "Celebrate America"

When: 5-11 p.m. Monday (Kurt Stevens at 8:30 p.m.)

Where: Tom Brown Park, 501 Easterwood Drive

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-891-3866 or visit www.talgov.com.



NATHANIEL HARRINGTON

Kurt Stevens takes the stage at 8:30 p.m. Monday at Tom Brown Park.



with his dad. Together, they listened to the likes of the Eagles and Johnny Cash, and Stevens learned to sing by belting out Elvis tunes.

"He was an incredible singer so he was a good person to try and emulate," says Stevens, who as a kid, even dressed up as Elvis on Halloween. "I think it was the emotion that he put into his songs that really got me. Whether he was singing a sad song, a love song, or a fun song, he sang it like he was singing his own story."

Stevens, now 22, is starting a new chapter as an independent singer and songwriter. His dad helped him to get his start, managing, suggesting set lists, recording shows, and motivating him to work hard while he completed college. In May, he graduated from Florida State University with his degree in marketing and is moving out to Nashville where he will network and learn more about the industry. Stevens has already connected with Jake Owen, a country singer from his hometown of Vero Beach who also played venues like Potbellies while going to school in Talla-

hassee.

Owen gave him good advice and the hope that his aspirations can become actualities. The duo has shared the stage a few times, and Owens introduced Stevens to producer Eric Durrance. Their collaboration resulted in Stevens recording his first five-song EP in Durrance's Havana home. Rolling hills and cows surrounded the small recording studio on a plot of farmland, getting Stevens into the right mindset to record.

"We'd just go in there all day long like mad scientists," says Stevens. "I'm lucky I did all that classical training for 12 years because it's kind of like I got brainwashed with the greatest melodies of all time. There are still some things I wish I would have changed but I'm pretty proud of the EP, and having [Durrance's] musical knowledge helped me the whole way through."

Many of the songs on the album were conceived while sitting in class at Florida State. Stevens admits to day-dreaming between taking notes as a Dean's List student. He was inspired to write "Take Me Home" when his thoughts transported him back to his south Florida town where he grew up fishing and surfing.

As a regular act at the Riverside Café in Vero Beach, his favorite venue

is just three blocks from his house, where his boat is docked out back and a sunset serves as the usual backdrop. The first line muses, "I close my eyes and hit the gas, never seen a man move so fast as me when I leave this class."

Steven says some songwriting ideas come from bits of conversation or song titles that are notated in his phone. He's gotten a good response from crowds on songs like "Makin' Moves and Movin' On" which has been featured on CMT artist's website and is getting airtime on the Heartland Television Network, and has opened for headliners like The Band Perry and Dustin Lynch. He and his band mates feel honored to perform for Tallahassee's Celebrate America event on the Fourth of July in Tom Brown Park, and may even debut a few new songs.

"Connecting with people on an emotional level is my big thing, whether it's a song that makes people jump up and have fun or a serious song that people can relate to," says Stevens. "I'm constantly listening to music all day every day. It's a soundtrack to your life."

His own music library is an indiscriminate variety of genres including reggae, steel pulse, ska, old school rap, classic rock, and country. He has an appreciation for live music as well, fostered by his dad's musical verve, and was able to see ACDC live at Madison Square Garden. As the most powerful, loudest rock and roll band ever in Stevens' opinion, it was an incredible experience.

Eager to push his limits by listening to different styles translates into Stevens' restlessness in his burgeoning career. He believes that if you have a passion for something, from a sport to an art form, it's important to at least give it a shot and do something that makes you happy. As an artist, he wishes to always write, play, and sing better, and feels every show is an accomplishment in itself, never losing that initial sense of wonder he felt in his first performance.

"I saw that through music you could change somebody's day or month by just singing them a song that hits them the right way," states Stevens. "There's times when you might be having a bad day or someone passed away and there's a song that would seem like it's written for you. I think that's the most magical part about it."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).