

Kenny James: Playin' in the band

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Les Stukenberg/The Daily Courier



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The Daily Courier

When he was a young boy in the Bay Area, it was clear that Kenny James' relationship with music would be kind of complicated. For starters, he had to listen to his first records by pressing his eager but unwelcome ear against his sister's closed bedroom door.

But by the time he got his first guitar, a Yairi Y1-100 (the first of the first hundred in a series, with spruce top, mahogany sides and neck, and real wood end pins), it was evident his dedication to eavesdropping was paying off. At 5, he had blown past the standard A-D-E progression and learned the Beatles' "Blackbird;" a droning G featuring downward strums, upward sweeps and advanced finger picking techniques.

Later as a teen he says he "wasn't that inspired to play the guitar," and as an adult he once put his guitar down (literally) for years. He picked it up again, then put it down for another two years. Today, James plays professionally almost seven days a week, performs around 125 live shows a year, and is in the ring of Coyote Joe's unofficial house bands downtown, along with The CheekTones and, of late, an emerging Spafford.

Kenny plays Joe's patio solo every weekend, usually Fridays, as he will tonight at 7. He and his band Filabusta (with Lorin McLain on bass and Mike Kreidel on drums) play the Spirit Room in Jerome on Dec. 4. "It takes a lot of pain and suffering on these old fingers to learn how to play," said James, 48. "There's no silver bullet; you got to put in the work. Nobody just picks up the guitar or the bass or banjo or piano and just starts playing. There's a fair amount of work involved."

He grew up in Cupertino, an hour south of San Francisco, best known as world headquarters for Apple Computers. His mom was a singer, his first real exposure to live music was in church, and he continues to sing in church today at Emmanuel Lutheran in Prescott Valley. Mostly, with his Aaron Neville-like falsetto and endless songbook, James is the go-to guitarist in Prescott, whether in an ensemble, a trio or solo.

James - who also plays drums, piano, Native American flute, banjo and bass - moved to the Prescott area about 10 years ago. At the time, his guitar playing was on hiatus after playing seven to eight gigs a week in the Bay Area. He broke from performing in order to teach college music in Lake Powell, before he settled in Prescott where it was love at first sight - and sound.

"I think a lot of people take it for granted. The Prescott music scene is really amazing right now," James said, during a recent conversation on the courthouse plaza. "I mean there are so many good musicians here, and everybody on some level or another is writing and recording their own material as well. ...Learning to play together and learning other people's material to learn how to play with one another, and then developing your own sound and your own material. There's a lot of bands doing that.

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Kenny James' top 4 guitarists of all time:

Eric Clapton. *"Clapton kind of got me going. I was like 'I can play like that. I like Clapton.'"*

Jerry Garcia. *"Still to this day I don't really listen to a lot of music, but I'll listen to Jerry almost any time. I can listen to the Jerry Garcia Band. I love the Dead but I was not really a Deadhead. I saw the Jerry Garcia Band dozens of times. ...But I saw what he was doing. Not really a jazz approach but using the relative minor almost exclusively. It kind of has that sound and really caught my ear. I was like, 'What is that?' Clapton never plays a wrong note. Jerry taught me it was OK to play a wrong note."*

Jimmy Page. *"You had Page who could do it all. Page did acoustic, electric, slide, metal, hard rock, different tunings. You name it, Jimmy Page can do it. Blues - awesome blues player. Awesome metal player. Just flat-out heavy metal. And the thing I always liked about Page is he was an accomplished musician. He could read music. He knows music."*

Jeff Beck. "When I heard 'Led Boots', that was like one of the first Beck songs I heard, and 'Three Way Jam,' and those instrumentals was his ability to bend a guitar note or use his tremolo bar just so out of tune and out there but in a really emotional, cool way."

Eventually, James found his way to Coyote Joe's, which was at that time early into incubating a setting that has established itself as a premier site for live local music in Prescott. He started playing for tips here and playing singer-songwriter stuff there, but again hung up his axe, this time in pain. His tinnitus - the same constant ear ringing suffered famously by The Who's Pete Townshend - flared up. He finally picked up his guitar again, this time for good. "I think for a while there I was kind of running away from music," said James, who has a daughter Dylan, 12, and son Jackson, 8. "When you're doing it so much, and I was out on the road a lot, all I wanted to do was anything but music for a while."

The guitar has been in his hands ever since, to say the least. He plays on stage Fridays and Saturdays, gigs on Sunday, he instructs at his Prescott Valley shop, Victory Music Center, all day Monday and all day Tuesday, he takes Wednesday nights off, and on Thursday nights he contributes music to church functions. Then the Friday gigs start the whole thing all over again. "Um ... it's pretty great" he grinned, a few hours before hitting the stage at Joe's.

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