

Music & Memories

Wartrace's Walking Horse Hotel reborn as intimate concert venue

Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover

To say that the refurbishment and transformation of the old Walking Horse Hotel in downtown Wartrace into Chais Music Hall has been a labor of love for Joe Peters would be an understatement. Not only does Peters cherish the building's character and rich history, but the fledgling music hall bears the name of his late wife, Chais, who succumbed to cancer in March 2007.

The Peters family moved to Christiana in August 2004 from south Florida. Soon, Joe and his best friend, Leroy Wells, formed The Midnight Special Band, which made its debut at Wartrace's Whistle Stop Cafe. Chais became

enamored of the old Walking Horse Hotel and wanted to see beyond its locked doors. Unfortunately, she passed away before having the opportunity. But before she died, Joe had told her that he was going to create a music venue in her honor.

He just didn't know where.

Four months after her death, Peters "purchased the hotel with a vision of bringing it back to life using her spirit as my guide," he says.

Renovation on the three-story, circa-1917 structure began in earnest in August 2007.



Originally built in 1917, the doors of the Walking Horse Hotel were closed for some time. Much in need of renovation when Joe Peters purchased it in 2007, the project has become his labor of love.

“We had no photographs of the inside of the hotel, except for one of the lobby from the 1950s, so we went by people’s memories and how we thought it should look,” Peters says.

The building’s important historical significance was foremost in Peters’ mind as he planned and executed the renovations. It was here that the Tennessee Walking Horse industry was born in the 1920s when a group of breeders and trainers met about the future of the breed.

Peters also opened the Strolling Jim Restaurant inside the hotel, named for the first World Grand Champion Tennessee Walking Horse. The restaurant served only fresh food and was growing in popularity when the economy collapsed — the death knell for not only the restaurant but the continuing renovation of the hotel’s

upper floors. While six hotel rooms are available for rent and guests enjoy staying there, Peters says he looks forward to being able to finish the renovations on the upper two floors to match the vision he started on the lower level.

Something that may be of interest to guests, even before further renovations, is the idea that the hotel is haunted. Peters says several paranormal research groups have visited the hotel and are convinced that spirits are present — not malevolent ones but perhaps curious. Just like people who have been around a long time, Peters says old buildings have a lot of stories to tell. He’s quick to point out that the tales people can find online about the hotel’s haunted component are total fabrications, however.

What used to be the restaurant is now available as a private dining room and meeting space for corporate meetings, reunions, weddings and other gatherings.

But what Peters is most proud of is the music hall, where a growing number of world-class musicians and singers have been performing for audiences ranging in size from 17 to 90. Acts such as Duffy Jackson, Alice Vestal, the John Jorgenson Quintet, the Joe Davidian Trio, Annie Sellick, Jim Hurst, Julie Adams and Peters’ own Midnight Special Band have taken the stage in the 2,900-square-foot



entertainment venue with a rosewood floor perfect for dancing, world-class lighting, rich acoustics and a wonderful feeling of intimacy. The types of music that fill the hall range widely from country to bluegrass to jazz to gospel to classic and Southern rock.

“We have had a tremendous response so far,” Peters says. “People are coming from Nashville, Murfreesboro, Shelbyville, Fayetteville, even Huntsville. They are seeking a safe, clean, healthy escape, a place to dance, laugh, catch their breath.”

Word is spreading among musicians, too. Peters says each time a musician plays the Chais Music Hall, he or she is amazed at the wonderful experience from the musician’s perspective and is quick to tell his or her musician friends that they have to

play there, too.

“Playing here is literally a treat,” Peters says.

And the positive experience of the musicians is felt by the audience as well. People who come, maybe even to hear a type of music they don’t typically listen to, leave smiling and saying they’ll definitely be back.

“You don’t hear music at Chais Music Hall,” Peters says. “You feel it.”

The Walking Horse Hotel and Chais Music Hall are experiencing the same tough times that other businesses are battling through, however. Things are so tight that Peters sold his house in Christiana and moved into the hotel.

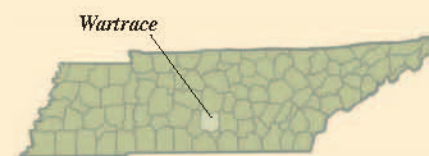
“We operate on a shoestring,” he says. “To me, a shoestring looks like a telephone pole.”

It’s a constant battle to pay the bills as word begins to spread about the quality of the performances, but Peters is determined to keep going not only because of his emotional attachment to the place and what it offers visitors but also because he feels he only needs a bit more time to really get the word out and grow the audiences. Already beginning to see it happen, he credits previous guests and the musicians who have played there for helping him along. Many of the acts have played

For more information about the Walking Horse Hotel and Chais Music Hall, including more details of upcoming performances, please contact:

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for reduced fees or even for free because they believe so strongly in the venue and what Peters is trying to accomplish.

“I will never forget the artists who are with us now,” he says.

Peters believes in the hotel and music hall so much that he hasn’t stopped planning what he wants to do in the future. In addition to renovating the two hotel guest floors, he has some plans to increase the floor space in the music hall by taking out a couple of structures that aren’t needed anymore.

Asked what he thinks Chais would say about what he’s accomplished, Peters says he believes she’d be thrilled.

“Chais is part of this building, part of why it’s so inviting,” he says.

It makes sense when you spot her photograph at the back of the music hall — a beautiful blonde with a big, friendly smile. Peters says he’s been asked why he didn’t put her photograph at the front of the music hall or on the side walls where more people would perhaps notice it. His response is that he placed it where he can see it when he’s on the stage with his band. Dur-

As the economy improves and customers return to the hotel, owner Joe Peters hopes to reopen the restaurant and several more guest rooms, above and left. Peters plans to finish each guest room with period furnishings. The music venue, Chais Music Hall, is named in honor of his wife. Open primarily on weekends, the music hall hosts some world-class musicians of genres ranging from country to jazz. Photographs by Nancy Reed

ing each of the band’s performances there, they play Eric Clapton’s “Tears of Heaven” in her honor.

All through the hotel tour, Peters turns out the lights as we leave rooms, a reminder that he needs to keep the bills as low as possible. But there is one light that is never extinguished — the one above Chais’s photo in the music hall.

“She was afraid of the dark,” he says simply.

I like to imagine that the smile on her face is there not only for her husband but also because she gets to watch all the people his efforts are making happy. 🍷

