

Chandler will host inaugural Arizona Bluegrass Film Fest

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Special for The Republic

A first-person account of the creation of a musical genre is a rare thing to come across.

Bluegrass often elicits images of flannel shirts and overalls, steam locomotives and white liquor in mason jars, but Litchfield Park musician and documentarian James Reams has been able to trace its origins to a select few and has captured first-person stories from bluegrass originators in his film "Making History With Pioneers of Bluegrass: Tales of the Early Days in Their Own Words."

"There are generally 232 people that are associated with creating this musical form," Reams said by telephone. "A lot of people don't realize bluegrass is relatively new."

"A lot of people think of it as old-fashioned, but it just took older musical types and incorporated it into more modern types," he said. "It took things like gospel and country and added it to rockabilly, so it was really sort of fusion music."

Reams began filming his movie in 2002 after visiting the bluegrass museum in Owensboro, Ky., and finished production in 2011. The film was finally released last year.

To mark the occasion and promote bluegrass in the Phoenix area, Reams and Ned Robbins, president of the Arizona Bluegrass Association helped organize the inaugural Arizona Film Festival in Chandler on Saturday, Aug. 2.

The festival will feature Reams' film and Rick Bowman's "Herschel Sizemore: Mandolin in B — A Tribute to a Bluegrass Legend." Both filmmakers will be on hand for a Q&A session after the free screenings.

We recently spoke with Reams, who was born in Kentucky and formed the Barnstormers in 1993.

Question: What was the journey like making this film?

Answer: I finished the film in 2011 after a lot of concentration and problems, but after I released it I got invited to some film festivals.

While in San Francisco for a festival, I

ARIZONA BLUEGRASS FILM FESTIVAL

When: 5 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 2.

Where: American Legion Post 35, 2240 W. Chandler Blvd., Chandler.

Admission: Free.

Details: 718-374-1086, arizonabluegrass.com.

met a number of other bluegrass filmmakers and, all of a sudden I realized there was a big interest in documenting bluegrass music.

I've been playing bluegrass music for most of my life, and I was recently elected to the Arizona Bluegrass Association when I moved here. That's when I thought, "What a wonderful thing to educate people in Arizona and bring in a bigger audience."

That's how Ned Robbins and I created this first film festival.

Q: How would you describe the bluegrass scene in Arizona?

A: I see Phoenix as an untapped market. Bluegrass music is family-oriented, it's multigenerational, and it allows for participation from anyone.

As a matter of fact, the father of bluegrass music, Bill Monroe, tried to start a bluegrass festival in Payson, Arizona.

So I think that bluegrass is definitely growing in the desert. It's going to need a lot of watering, but it is growing.

Some people have preconceived notions about it. They think of it as old-music, but like rock and roll, bluegrass has all sorts of variations, and it has engrained itself in popular culture, thanks to groups like Mumford and Sons.

Since its creation in 1946 by Bill Monroe, bluegrass music has continued spreading around the world.

Q: Why do you think people continue to embrace bluegrass today?

A: It's sort of like the fine wine you find in the small mom-and-pop store. It has some quirky elements to it that I think appeals to people when they do find it. Some people become addicted to it.