

# BRANSONFEST WRAPS UP THREE-DAY RUN AT THE CASABLANCA EVENT CENTER

By Mike Henle

BRANSONFEST OUT WEST 2011 wrapped up its second annual gathering during a three-day extravaganza in the CasaBlanca Event Center attracting visitors from several states and Canada.

With three nights of good old-fashioned wholesome entertainment Monday through Wednesday, the extravaganza was the brainchild of Phoenix promoter Sue Arko of Free Spirit Vacations and Promotions. It wasn't hard finding visitors who loved the gathering.

"This is my first time and it has been wonderful," said Mary Hebert, a resident of Edmonton Alberta Canada who spends her winters in Phoenix. "It was a seven-hour bus ride and we had a great time."

Hebert also lauded the Mesquite gathering which included a tour of Zion National Park in Southern Utah early Wednesday morning.

"It's so clean here," she said. "I love the casinos and just like the entire atmosphere."

Jack and Rochelle Silas of Sun City Anthem in Henderson rallied the owners of 28 RVs for the trek to Mesquite. The group parked their RVs on the grounds of the CasaBlanca.

"This is a phenomenal event," said Silas, who turns 74 in August. "Of the ones Sue has put on, it's the best that we have attended. We have a great time at these gatherings."

Mr. Silas said the group of about 100 also included Dennis and Sandy Lavey of Anchorage, Alaska. The Laveys leave their motor home in Southern Nevada throughout the year so that they can enjoy the winters away from Alaska.

Arko, who also spearheads Elvis Rocks Mesquite for the second year June 23-26, was happy with this year's BransonFest Out West.

"I think we were very successful in bringing everyone back to the old days," said Arko, who puts together four events each year. "We brought Apple here this year to attract the younger retirees."

"The second night with Matt Joyce and Erock and their Best of Elvis absolutely blew everyone away. With Mesquite's own Claude Nielson opening the show, I think we had the perfect package."

Arko said plans are already underway for next year when BransonFest is set for Feb. 6-9. A veteran of the tour business, she has been coming to Mesquite for 30 years back when the Oasis was the Peppermill.

"The entire team involved in putting on BransonFest Out West is awesome," Arko said adding that attendance was up 33 percent over 2010. "From the CasaBlanca to all of our volunteers and everyone in Mesquite, this has become a wonderful event. It takes an entire team to accomplish something like BransonFest. There are so many people behind the scenes."

Arko orchestrated a busy schedule to keep her visitors active from the time they arrived until their final day. The Event Center played host to Apple - A Tribute to the Beatles on Monday night before taking another look back at yesteryear with The Best of Elvis Tuesday and wrapping up the schedule Wednesday with The Cats Pajamas.

Milwaukee, Wis., resident Joe Salamone, who plays base for Apple, loved performing at BransonFest.

"It's like the childhood dream playing music like this," he said. "Everyone you see in the industry right now is able to trace their roots back to seeing the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. When you look into the crowd, you can see everyone is singing with you and that's really a blast. We have done this for so many years and it's always fun. People come up to the stage and tell us they don't ever want us to quit playing the music of the Beatles."

Cats Pajamas, a five-person group that has been traveling all over the world prior to coming to Mesquite, wrapped up BransonFest with songs like Duke of Earl, Blue Moon, Pretty Woman and Stand By Me, to name a few.

The entertainment drew a total of slightly less than 3,000 while generating a total of about six hours of hand clapping, singing and smiles from one end of the Event Center to the other.

Black Gaming Sales Manager Petra Jones also lauded BransonFest.

"BransonFest is my baby," said Jones. "I love this show. All of the performers are so personal with our fans. This has been one of the cleanest and healthiest shows you will find anywhere in the country and I'm proud to be part of it."

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*Cats Pajamas, one of three groups that performed at BransonFest Out West, is shown back stage prior to their performance at the Event Center of the CasaBlanca.*