

Keyboardist adds to U2's sound : Orcutt Children's Arts Foundation to honor Terry Lawless

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You might not see Terry Lawless at a U2 concert, but chances are you'll hear him.

The Orcutt musician is typically there, just below the stage, playing hidden keyboards, synthesizers and the distinct sound of a Hammond organ.

"Most of the time, I'm under stage. I'm the pit orchestra," Mr. Lawless told the News-Press. "I can tell you there's a tremendous amount of energy in the performances. I love all these guys."

Locally, Mr. Lawless stands in the spotlight in his Santa Barbara County bands, including Unfinished Business. He is a lead vocalist and saxophonist for the '60s rock band. Mr. Lawless and his group will perform when the Orcutt Children's Arts Foundation honors him during its seventh annual Winter Gala on Feb. 26 at Radisson Hotel Santa Maria, 3455 Skyway Drive.

The fundraiser, which begins with a reception at 5:30 p.m. and continues with auctions and a dinner, benefits a cause dear to Mr. Lawless -- arts in the Orcutt Union School District. Proceeds pay for bringing music and art teachers into schools, and 25 percent of this year's revenues will go toward building a performing arts center in Orcutt.

The need is critical; the arts help students' overall education, and they could inspire a budding Michelangelo, Mr. Lawless, 56, said by phone from his home. "We all want our children to have a better life than we did."

"For some reason, the state Legislature has not had enough funds for programs to keep arts in schools," said Mr. Lawless, who has been involved with the foundation for six years.

"I owe everything I am to the school system of Iowa," said Mr. Lawless, a Council Bluffs, Iowa, native.

Before coming to U2, Mr. Lawless programmed keyboards for Eagles star Don Henley and Barry Manilow in the late 1980s and '90s. He coordinated sound, lighting and video effects for Paula Abdul during her tours and also played keyboards and did sound design for Janet Jackson and The Doobie Brothers.

He said his work with Bruce Springsteen impressed U2, plus he had a connection. "My friend, Michael McKnight, had another job; he had to leave U2." Mr. McKnight recommended Mr. Lawless to Bono and company.

"Getting a job (in music) is mostly word of mouth," Mr. Lawless said, but added that perseverance also is crucial. "It's so backward to think that people in the industry would want you not to pay your dues. During its original tours, U2 played in little clubs."

Mr. Lawless played synthesizers and was a programmer for David Bowie in the 1990s. "He influenced me enough that I named my son after him," Mr. Lawless said. Bowie Lawless, 11, goes to school in Orcutt. Mr. Lawless lives in Orcutt with his wife, Melinda, and they have three adult daughters -- Hannah, Sarah and Brandi -- in addition to Bowie.

Mr. Lawless is featured as a keyboardist, pianist and Hammond organist on U2's 2009 album, "No Line on the Horizon," and new tracks on the group's "U218 Singles," its 2006 greatest hits albums. When asked how "No Line on the Horizon" compares to U2's Grammy-winning "The Joshua Tree" (1987), he said, "It's like comparing apples and oranges." But he noted U2 breaks new ground as it records new albums.

Mr. Lawless' musical interest began when he played the accordion as a young kid. That led him later to the saxophone. He felt further pulled to music after seeing stars perform.

"I saw Jimi Hendrix live when I was 15. I saw James Brown. I grew up in a time when music was an important thing. It had political messages; it was about romance."

It was an age when stereos mattered more than TVs, and unlike today, music wasn't relegated to just being background noise for working out or walking down the street with an iPod, Mr. Lawless said.

"I've always played in bands since my teens in Iowa," said Mr. Lawless, today one of the members of the Iowa Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.

Mr. Lawless earned a bachelor's degree in music and mathematics at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. After teaching at a high school in Norway, Iowa, he moved to Southern California in 1983.

Between Unfinished Business, with whom he has played for four years, and U2, his life is full of music. He'll be back on tour with U2 from June to December.

"You know, people think you play music because you want to play music," Mr. Lawless said.

"You play music because you have to," he said, referring to the passion inspired by the arts.

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IF YOU GO

Terry Lawless, a keyboardist for U2, will be honored by the Orcutt Children's Arts Foundation during its seventh annual Winter Gala on Feb. 26 at Radisson Hotel Santa Maria, 3455 Skyway Drive. A reception and silent auction will start at 5:30p.m., followed by dinner and a live auction at 7:30. Unfinished Business, in which Mr. Lawless is the lead vocalist and saxophonist, will play 60s rock.

Cost is \$100 per person, with options to give more under other sponsorships.

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