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NEWS

Danny Crowder: 50 years in music

Staff Writer The Progress-Index

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COLONIAL HEIGHTS - If you ask Robert "Danny" Crowder about Aug. 15, 1960, he'll tell you two things that happened that day.

He caught his first fish, and he got his first guitar.

"I was 10 years old," he says. "I was so excited about that fish! And then later that afternoon, I went to my aunt's house."

That's when his aunt, a longtime music lover, gave him the gift that changed his life.

"I loved that guitar," he says. "I played it every day until I fell asleep. I never wanted to put it down."

And he never has.

That first guitar is long gone, replaced by higher-end Fenders and Gibsons over the years, but Crowder has never stopped playing. This past summer, the Colonial Heights native celebrated 50 years of playing music. It's been a journey that his 10-year-old self could never have imagined.

His first paying gig came just three or four years after that first guitar. Crowder and three friends had formed a band, and were hired by another teenaged friend's mother to play at a birthday party.

"We got \$30 to stand there for two hours and play," he says. "That was \$7.50 for me, just for doing what I'd be doing at home anyway. I thought, 'This is a pretty good deal!'"

Realizing that there was money to be made in music, Crowder says he set his sights on the music stores he already knew well.

"I hung around one until they gave me a job," he says. "That was 1964. I started teaching music lessons and playing in bands, and that's what I've done ever since."

One of his earliest official gigs was a twice-monthly performance at a Ruritan Club in Carson, where he played with the Dynamic Delinquents at a dance for area teenagers. Crowder quickly learned that being in a band involved more than a few fun hours on stage.

"The four hours of playing music, that was the gravy part," he says. "The rest of it was loading and unloading, setting up, getting organized. It was really work!"

Before Crowder was out of high school, he had his first brush with musical celebrity. In 1968, while playing with a band called Freddie and the Runaways, he landed a gig at the Marine base in Quantico. "This was a big deal," he said. "The headlining act was The Temptations. Big time."

When The Temptations arrived, they discovered that their backup band (which traveled in a separate vehicle) had broken down en route to Quantico. So the four famous singers began their rehearsals with the musicians on hand, including a completely star-struck Crowder.

Over the following years, Crowder played with a number of groups, from simple four-piece setups to elaborate 10-piece bands with multi-player horn and rhythm sections. He played music by his own favorites, including Jimi Hendrix, Santana and The Beatles, as well as hits throughout the years by Chicago, James Brown, and Blood Sweat and Tears. They played Moose lodges from South Carolina to Virginia, as well as local haunts like the French Betsy in Old Towne Petersburg.

"I never was one to go out and drink, cuss or smoke," he says. "I just wanted to play music, and that's what I did."

Keeping a cool head helped him through some interesting situations - dealing with drunken audience members, for example, and seeing two horn players resort to fisticuffs over a microphone.

"We once fired six band members in one night," Crowder says. "It helps to work in a music store, when you have to replace six people before the next gig."

He had more brushes with celebrity, including occasional gigs with the band Alabama. But by 2006, Crowder was tired and ready to kiss regular gigs goodbye.

But he's not done with music. Crowder still works in a music store, Musician's Dream in Colonial Heights, where he gives lessons and advice to kids just starting out as he did 50

years ago.

"I tell them that it's good fun, but hard work," he says. "I tell them, 'I can teach you enough in half an hour to keep you confused all week!'"