

Colorado jamgrass legends Leftover Salmon to play sold-out TACAW

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Leftover Salmon plays The Arts Campus at Willits first sold-out show

Leftover Salmon has played just about every venue in ski country over the past 32 years.

So, of course, they're among the first major acts to hit the stage at the new Arts Campus at Willits in the midvalley. They're due to play a sold-out concert there on Friday night.

The show was set to launch a 16-date midwinter tour that included ski country stops in Crested Butte and Steamboat Springs along with Wyoming and Montana. They canceled all but the Colorado shows on Thursday, citing the pandemic. The jam band also postponed a run of New Year's Eve shows in Lake Tahoe due to the surge in coronavirus infections there. But they're sticking to the Colorado dates.

In the beginning, all this scrappy Boulder-based outfit aimed to do was barnstorm Colorado's ski towns with their freewheeling take on string music.

"We just wanted a way that we could go play ski towns in the wintertime," founding member Drew Emmitt recalled in a 2019 phone interview from home in Crested Butte. "Our original fan base was the ski towns — Aspen, Vail, Steamboat, Crested Butte, Durango, Telluride. ... That was our original circuit. We enjoyed playing Boulder and Denver, but what this band was really about was the ski towns."

Ironically, focusing early efforts



The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW) will host several indoor events this month. Leftover Salmon will headline TACAW on Friday night. (Courtesy photo)

on the small but lively venues of hard-partying ski towns helped raise Leftover Salmon's national profile before they began hitting the festival scene in the 1990s.

"So many people come through ski towns from all over the country," Emmitt said. "It was a great way to get our name out."

The band was birthed in 1989 with the merger of the Salmon Heads and the Left Hand String Band at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Leftover Salmon has been a staple in the Aspen area since the beginning, playing regular shows at the Double Diamond and later the Belly Up and the Wheeler Opera House, festivals large and small.

The last time they came through the valley was on its memorable 30th anniversary "Stories from the Living Room" tour, which brought an austere storytelling show to the Wheeler

Opera House.

"We were on the road in a school bus — a bunch of kids not knowing what we were doing and playing music and this is what's happened," Emmitt said of that retrospective tour. "So it's a good feeling. It's definitely a milestone for us."

The current tour promises a more rollicking and unhinged set like the ones that have epitomized Leftover Salmon, with Emmitt mostly playing mandolin, keys player Erik Deutsch on grand piano and Greg Garrison on an upright bass.

Their groundbreaking approach has helped shape a generation of bluegrass, acoustic and jam bands.

Music critic Tim Newby, in his book "Leftover Salmon: Thirty Years of Festival!" placed the band in a lineage that began with bluegrass great Bill Monroe and that evolved

with the Grateful Dead, Hot Rize and New Grass Revival. Leftover's progressive bluegrass style added (gasp!) drums to traditional bluegrass instrumentation and tossed in elements of Cajun, rock and whatever sounded right to them. The genre-bending result made them a staple of the jam band scene and pioneers of what became known as "jamgrass."

"Leftover Salmon has been a crucial link in keeping alive the traditional music of the past while at the same time pushing the music forward with their own weirdly unique style," Newby wrote.

Friday's concert marks the first sold-out show at TACAWE, which has opened in fits and starts since last year under the clouds of the pandemic.

Executive director Ryan Honey said that the much-anticipated show and the venue's biggest-so-far booking offer a taste of what's to come once TACAWE is able to operate without the many complications and restrictions that the pandemic has necessitated.

"Leftover is definitely a big one," Honey said. "It's more like what you're going to see coming down the road."

Regional up-and-comers will be always be a staple of TACAWE's music programming, Honey said, but big-name bands like Leftover Salmon will also have a place in the lineup.

"We're still going to do a lot of artist discovery and Colorado acts," Honey said of the future of the TACAWE stage. "But we do have this beautiful venue that can accommodate some of these larger artists. So we're going to try to continue to pursue them."

As elder statesmen of the jamgrass scene and legends in Colorado, Leftover Salmon is still striving to embolden those emerging musicians to challenge orthodoxy and taboos and keep breaking and remaking string music.

"I hope we can inspire other bands to do the same," Emmitt said. "The music business is very competitive, it's



Leftover Salmon's dedication and longevity — 30 years, that is — have given them the title of one of Colorado's favorite bands. (Courtesy photo)

very uncertain. But if you follow your dream and keep at it, you can make it happen. And this band has proven that."