Steve Goldberger and local musicians have new venue

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The Local

Local duo Taylor Hulley and Laurel Minnes will appear on stage with Steve Goldberger in Niagara Falls. *(Photo supplied)*

This Sunday afternoon the Old Winos play their first gig in a summer series that will see that group and the Niagara Rhythm Section (NRS) each play at Camp Cataract in Niagara Falls once a month.

Though band leader Steve Goldberger is happy to get back to the stage with his best friends, he is also lamenting the end of an era at the Old Winery Restaurant in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

"It's disappointing," Goldberg says from his Old Town studio. "I really feel Rob (Glatt) would have us back if he could manage it. He just told me it doesn't look like they'll be able to do any live music this year."

Glatt, co-owner with his wife Monique of the Old Winery, broke the news to Goldberger of their decision last month.

"At the present time it is impossible," Glatt confirms. "It may happen again in the future, but it's just not feasible right now. It's partly staffing issues, and partly that it's tough to make money with live entertainment."

It's always challenging to turn a sizable profit with live music, but Glatt and Goldberger had worked together since 2012 to maintain the popular Friday and Saturday residency of both collectives at the Niagara Stone Road venue.

"When COVID hit we shut down the business," explains Glatt. "And then we had to tighten up to keep it going. We went through a couple of rough years. Business is not bouncing back completely. It's like starting all over. We've just gone back to our roots of running a good restaurant."

In recent months, Goldberger has arranged a few smaller duo gigs across the region with guitarists Andrew Aldridge, Mike Lynch and Andy Griffiths, and booked his larger ensembles, including the Gentle Spirits and the Niagara Reefer Band, for some future special performances. But Goldberger and friends will miss the residency they long held at the Old Winery.

"We love that place," the bassist says. "We feel comfortable, and they treated us well. At the same time, it's exciting to try out a new home."

Goldberger is approaching the six Sunday afternoon sessions (plus one Saturday evening album release show) at the Queen Street, Niagara Falls venue as a litmus test of sorts.

"We want to do well," he says, "and it's a bit intimidating. But it all depends on if we get people out to the shows. I know musically we are going to be great, but we're a bit worried that people aren't going to come."

It's suggested to Goldberger that over a period of almost 20 years of playing in NOTL that he has to have built up a following that will translate into bums in the seats at Camp Cataract.

"Yeah, people have come from all over to see us," he admits, "and many of them have been from Niagara Falls. They should be happy that we're in their 'hood. And I'm hoping that the Sunday afternoon slot works better for people, rather than having to come late at night. Especially for our older demographic. And maybe we'll attract some of the younger generation, too."

Camp Cataract has become a centrepiece of a hip Queen Street scene in the Honeymoon City. It has a unique, kitschy atmosphere and features table tennis, crokinole and pinball machines for an authentic retro feel. Recent weeks have seen the venue hosting comedy nights, rock and roll swap meets and a number of shows featuring local musicians.

With a time slot of 2:30 to 5 p.m., the NRS and Old Winos incarnations of Goldberger's acts, along with special guests, should be able to draw a decent Sunday afternoon crowd. Some of those special guests have become familiar with the venue, too.

"That's one of the reasons I asked Laurel and Hulley (local duo Laurel Minnes and Taylor Hulley) to be our first guests. They've played here many times and they have their own audience. It will be a good melding together of two generational bands."

The Old Winos will also play Sunday, July 17 with Australian native and Hamilton resident Chris Altmann, a multi-instrumentalist and member of St. Catharines country artist Tim Hicks' band. They'll be back on Aug. 7 with multiple Canadian Country Music Association (CCMA) Guitar Player of the Year award-winner Wendell Ferguson.

"He's won that award so many times that they retired him and put him in the hall of fame," laughs Goldberger. "They got sick of him winning it every year, he's that good. And he's so funny. On stage he'll have a song list and a joke list."

The Niagara Rhythm Section also has three gigs coming up at Camp Cataract. June 26 will see them collaborating with legendary guitarist Paul Martin, a former member of premier Rolling Stones cover band the Blushing Brides. Goldberger is still working on nailing down a guest for the July 24 NRS show, while Ridgeway-based blues guitarist, singer and songwriter Spencer Mackenzie, just 22 years old and fresh off the release of his new album *Preach to My Soul*, will sit in.

There's also an Aug. 6 evening performance by Goldberger's Gentle Spirits band, to celebrate the release earlier this year of their album *All Roads Lead to You*. Ticket prices for all seven shows are $10 each and can be purchased in advance through eventbrite.ca.

Goldberger is hoping that all goes well for both the bands and Camp Cataract's management this summer, leading to an extension of their residency into the winter. But he still holds out hope for a return to his NOTL home.

And Glatt doesn't rule that return out.

"We're going to slowly add more events and opportunities as time goes on," Glatt says. "We want to have live music again, but it may not be every week. Steve and I will talk about it in the future."

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