

Politics, music aren't such strange partners for songwriter Jay Clark

By Steve Wildsmith
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It's kind of puzzling, really — why would someone pay \$20 or more for a concert ticket to see a particular artist and then complain when that artist expresses himself on stage?

Local singer-songwriter Jay Clark, a favorite among fans of singer-songwriter Americana around these parts, wonders that from time to time. Because it happened to him a few years ago, when he opened up for legendary singer-songwriter John Hiatt at "The Shed" at Smoky Mountain Harley-Davidson in Maryville.

He ended his set with the song "I'm Confused," a stinging indictment of right-wing conservatives who push their political agendas in the name of Christianity. He introduced it with as much tact as possible — telling the audience he had no problem with Republicans, but for those far-right wingers who cast votes reflective of their personal condemnation of abortion and homosexuality ... well, he told those in attendance, that last song was for them.

At least one couple wasn't

pleased, and they let him know.

"I got an e-mail a few days later, and the couple told me they had come to see me more than John Hiatt," Clark told *The Daily Times* this week. "They'd heard my music on WDVX-FM and really liked my music until I got to the last song. They said they didn't appreciate coming to a concert and getting a political speech.

"I more or less told them that the same songs they sat there and enjoyed because they really felt like my writing was honest and from the heart — those same songs I wrote about my wife or my papaw — those same kinds of heartfelt feelings came out in those political songs as well."

Which is why an organization like the Citizens Against the Pellissippi Parkway Extension feel Clark — a Rockford resident who's made a name for himself around the Southeast for his homespun charm and vividly written songs about life in the South — is the perfect entertainer for a benefit taking place next week. It's called "Save It, Don't Pave It!," and it's being held at The



Clark

need to be made in advance.

Clark is a former student of Maryville College — he attended from 1992 to 1994 until it became clear that if he wanted to pursue a career as a wildlife biologist, he'd need to transfer to the University of Tennessee. While at UT, he threw his lot in with Blount County's Robinella, and the two went from singing at churches to putting together a band called *The String Beans*.

In 1999, Clark left East Tennessee to obtain his doctorate at Oklahoma State University, migrating to Alabama afterward to work part-time as a wildlife biologist while he worked

on his music career. A little more than a year ago, he and his wife moved back to East Tennessee, settling on a farm in Rockford. He's been an avid supporter of CAPPE even before that, however.

"It's kind of one of those situations where I've been involved since the beginning more as a citizen than a musician, really," he said. "I don't like the way that we tend to develop a lot of things, whether it be roads or private subdivisions. In the past, everybody's been so focused on how much money can be made rather than doing it in a responsible manner. That's why I've been a part of CAPPE for a long time and helped out from a musician standpoint. First for me, I'm opposed to it as a citizen, but if I can use my talents to help them raise money to fight, then I'm going to do it."

From a personal standpoint, Clark points to Sevier County as a warning sign against extending the

parkway through rural, undeveloped parts of Blount County so that it joins up with Lamar Alexander Parkway.

"I don't think anybody who drives down the Parkway in Pigeon Forge looks at everything there and says, 'Wow, this would be awesome in Blount County,'" he said. "I don't care what the politicians say — it's going to end up looking like Pellissippi Parkway down Northshore, and we just don't need that in that part of the county. I just think we're going to screw up some of the best aspects of Blount County that make us different from our neighbors.

"I've had a few people comment negatively in the past when I express myself as an artist, saying I should just play and keep my mouth shut, but I disagree with that. I try not to ram my opinions down anybody's throat, but at the end of the day, if they don't like it, they don't have to come to a show."

IF YOU GO

'Save It, Don't Pave It!' benefit supper and concert

PERFORMERS: Jay Clark, *The Spurgeon Boys*

WHEN: 7 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: The Market at Washington and High, 606 High St., Maryville

HOW MUCH: \$25 (includes dinner; reservations due by noon Monday, Aug. 16)

CALL: 977-7399 or e-mail cappe@discoveret.org for info and reservations

ONLINE: www.jayclarkmusic.com, www.discoveret.org/cappe

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