

The Kentucky Colonel: Eric Lewis

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by Emerald Butler

Eric Lewis spent his life preserving the music he believes made his life well lived. He has hosted television and radio shows, recorded numerous albums, founded a historical foundation, became a Kentucky Colonel, and ...we're just getting started. Surrounded by his family, we checked in with Eric on his 77th birthday to talk about his many projects and awards.

"It's my birthday today, and I've got a bunch of kids up here," Eric chuckled searching for a quiet place to talk. "I've been in this business for 64 years; I started when I was 15 in about 1957," Eric began as he settled into his quiet spot. "I was born in my grandparent's log house about 25 miles west of where I live. I live in West Plains, Missouri. That's Porter Wagoner's hometown."

Eric's musical journey began with him playing jam sessions and parties before he played in a band, but it didn't take him long to get started. "In the early '60s there was a group of us that formed a bluegrass country group and we had a regular show every Saturday morning. Then later on in 1981 there were three other guys and me that formed a group called Southern Grass, but we heard that name popping up everywhere, so we changed that name to Southern Missouri Bluegrass. We toured across the country to festivals, fairs, and every kind of event. In 1990, I partnered with a man named Kirby Clark, and we booked as Lewis & Clark Bluegrass Expedition for 10 years." Kirby Clark later retired from the band to take care of his father who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but Eric continued

the expedition to a place even closer to the roots of bluegrass.

“In 2006, the governor of Kentucky commissioned me a Kentucky Colonel. I’ve played in Kentucky on many occasions, and I had another Kentucky Colonel that’s originally from Kentucky and he’s the one that recommended me. Because I promoted the music and the commonwealth of Kentucky, I had one of the qualifications and that’s the reason the Governor gave me that title you know.”

The honor of Kentucky Colonel began in 1813 when Governor Isaac Shelby returned from a successful campaign after the War of 1812. Shelby gave one of his officers the rank of Colonel after naming him an “aid-de-camp”. According to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the Governor and Secretary of State commission these honors today in recognition of noteworthy accomplishments and outstanding service to a community, state, or nation. Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan, and English Prime Minister Winston Churchill have also received this honor.

Colonel Lewis has promoted the interests of the Kentucky commonwealth, and the interests of bluegrass and country music fans by preserving the building where the conception of the Grand Ole Opry took place. “In 2007, I formed the George D. Hay Society. He was the founder of the Grand Ole Opry. He got his inspiration in 1919 in a cabin hoo down about 25 miles south from where I live. We’re trying to preserve that history, and the cabin still stands there.” Before the pandemic, the society’s members would meet monthly for jamming and historical discussions.

“Those Golden Years”



Eric Lewis & The New Kentucky Colonels

The George D. Hay Society has awarded many honorary memberships and awards to artists and entities that have helped preserve the music shared by the original barn dance.

Among all of these things, Eric has written many songs and stayed active in the recording business. In 2016, Eric tore a tendon in his left wrist disabling him from playing guitar, but he still performs with his band The New Kentucky Colonels as often as he can. No matter which part of the business he is currently working on, Eric always shares his passion for preserving bluegrass and country music and the historic places and stories that formed it.

“In order to preserve anything, you’ve got to love it and you’ve got to want to do it,” Eric advises.

