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Local music scene: Liplless Fish performs acoustic set at Hilltop Tavern & Inn Apple Valley



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An intimate crowd gathered at Apple Valley's Hilltop Tavern & Inn for the acoustic set of Liplless Fish. The venue was fronted by a table of the musician's family at stage right, some members of which he addressed from time to time.

Liplless Fish founder and vocalist Damien Riley dedicated a song to his daughter in a Stevie Wonder "Isn't She Lovely" fashion, or perhaps it was more like Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable."

He also broke the fourth wall on several occasions, telling his son to take notes during a fight narrative song and explaining to the crowd why the head of his guitar was taped at the tuning keys.

From Coldplay to John Denver, Neil Young to Kenny Rogers, easy-listening rock covers were on Riley's mind for his late Friday evening set. A man from a two-person table finished the lyrics to "The Gambler," much to the enthusiasm of Riley.

Pleased that the scant crowd was interacting with the music, Riley shared a tinge of intimacy with the listeners. "I always say whenever I play, that if only one person gets it, it was a good night."

Although the singer-songwriter has over 100 original songs, Liplless Fish chose to gate keep all but one. He might have played more but the second set came as unpredictable as a George Gershwin rhythm change.

Riley plugged his ol' guitar into an amp for an electric second set but before he could get into the musical groove of the whammy bar, under the influence "fans" stumbled into the bar and

up the stage, stealing the one-man-show for themselves.

They mistook words to Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" and settled on an early August slurred rendition of "Jingle Bells" with Riley backing them on guitar until his amp cord got unplugged with a clumsy stumble. Why the Fish didn't kick them off the stage sooner I cannot understand.

In a confusing post-show YouTube video, Riley posted a short clip of one of the stage crashers, titled "This young lady is beautiful and yes it is real life. Get a better attitude or go home. Thx." Whether he was intending to defend the crasher or slash her character is unclear in the wording.

A later blog post on his website would reveal his satisfaction with the overall performance, reflecting "What a wonderful week it was. My gig was everything that I planned it would be and so much more."

Riley is sometimes backed by a band but it's hard to get them all in one place, he told the crowd. Hopefully next time it'll be a full-out rock performance, only falling slightly short of the Newport Folk Festival. He ended the night with "Rockin' in the Free World," a Neil Young cover requested by yours truly.

The old one-man-bander ended his set early with "If I knew more songs, I could play longer." It appears that the Lipless Fish quite literally gave it all he had.

The self-proclaimed "author/ English professor/ guitarist/ songwriter/ podcaster" got in a bad, black eye-producing car crash just before his performance in Apple Valley. It's possible that the crash fogged his cover recalling memory. Or maybe he just wasn't ready to lay his originals on the general public yet.

Whatever the reason for calling it quits before the clock struck midnight, the older crowd didn't seem to mind. The belligerents were tucked in the backroom trying to remember how to play pool and no encore was requested after the last E-chord strum.

The night views of an entire ocean of Apple Valley lights coupled with the free pool table at Hilltop Tavern make any show at the venue worth it, regardless of how homemade or professional the artist sounds.

Is there a specific band or show you want McKenna to review? Email her at mmobley@gannett.com.

