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Music for art's sake

RageJax Foundation plants 'seeds of inspiration' in effort to honor the memory and dreams of sisters

By **Jeremy Pollack, Correspondent**
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More than 2,000 people gathered in a mix of tie-dyed shirts, reggae hats and hemp jewelry. A cloud of smoke seemed to hover above the heads of the crowd, jostled together in an outdoor amphitheater. Music was everywhere.

It was déjà vu at Ojai's Libbey Bowl last weekend, as peace, love and incense infused the air. On stage, a long-haired man who looked like Jim Morrison shouted out against war: "We're not gonna win this war! Bring 'em back!" he yelled as the band went into a pristine rendition of "The Unknown Soldier."

Wait a minute. Was this really The Doors? What year is it?

Actually, the band is Peace Frog, led by frontman Tony Fernandez, who sings and dances and even looks fairly similar to the late rock singer.



Joseph A. Garcia / Star staff

Hanna Duff, right, of Ojai and Scott Lewis of Canoga Park dance to the music of The Almost Brothers Band at the Ojai Classic Rock Festival on April 1. There are five more RageJax benefit concerts planned at Libbey Bowl this year.

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Courtesy of Carol Houck

Jacqueline, left, and Raechel Houck were killed in a car accident in 2004. Their mother created RageJax in their memory.

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Peace Frog was among the many tribute bands performing last weekend as part of the second Ojai Classic Rock Festival, a benefit concert put on to support the Ventura County-based RageJax Foundation, which aims to bring art and music to underprivileged children.

"That's the reason we're out here," Fernandez said.

RageJax was founded a year and a half ago by Ojai resident Carol "Cally" Houck after her two daughters, Raechel and Jacqueline, lost their lives in a car accident.

For Rage and Jax

Fundraising was the goal of the daylong rock fest — the first in a series scheduled in the coming months in Ojai — but the day really was all about honoring the past.

The music of the '60s was celebrated, and so were the lives of two sisters.

On Oct. 7, 2004, Raechel "Rage" Houck, 24, and Jacqueline "Jax" Houck, 20, were returning from their mother's house in Ojai to their home in Santa Cruz. About 5 p.m., Raechel apparently lost control of her new car and slammed head-on into an 18-wheel big rig.

According to the California Highway Patrol report, both girls died instantly.

Raechel and Jackie were best friends and traveling companions, their mother said. "They were wanderers," Cally said. "Wherever they went, they just immersed themselves in the culture. The girls weren't tourists. They really became part of the communities they stayed in."

Their dedication to art lives on in RageJax.

"All of the bands tonight are performing at a small fraction of their regular cost to come out, just to support the foundation," said Al Westcott, who is a member of the RageJax Foundation and one of the festival performers, as Maggie's Pa, a Bob Dylan tribute.

"In the spirit of Jim Morrison," Fernandez said, "if you get greedy, it'll bite you right in the (butt). We're here to support Cally, regardless of the money."

Promoted by Howard Freiberg Presents, the festival began at noon and lasted until 10 p.m.

Following The Doors act was a band called Led Zeppagain, a tribute to Led Zeppelin, fronted by a Robert Plant impersonator.

"These are the absolute top of the tribute acts on the West Coast," said Westcott.

When darkness rolled in, the psychedelic lights began to twirl, as the band Which One's Pink performed a Pink Floyd set.

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The final act of the night was headliner Cubensis, a Grateful Dead tribute band, which certainly brought out the modern-day hippies, both young and old.

If you closed your eyes and just listened, you'd swear you had been transported back in time.

About the girls

The Houck sisters also were gifted artists.

Raechel was a painter and sketch-artist. In October 2004, she had just returned from living in Italy and was planning to enter the Italian Institute in San Francisco to be certified in translation.

"She thought it would be a great way to travel and maintain her language skills," said her mother.

Jackie was a musician and a creative writer.

"It was Jackie's dream to teach impoverished kids in Costa Rica how to write, play music and inspire art," Cally said. Jackie was set to leave for Costa Rica in November 2004.

"It's really hard when your children die before you," Houck said. "But my girls left a library of creative ideas. They left a legacy. They had so many plans, so many dreams, that we didn't want that all to pass. Because the whole thing happened so fast, I think this is how I keep them with me. Once the dream dies, they die."

The RageJax organization began very shortly after the accident in 2004.

"We started really as a peer group for grieving," said Houck.

Soon enough, however, the grieving turned into activism, as Cally and other family members and friends decided to put Raechel and Jackie's plans into action. Their application to become a nonprofit organization moved swiftly through the IRS bureaucracy.

"All these forces just started working together," Houck said. "It was meant to be."

Now, just over a year later, RageJax already has raised enough money through benefit concerts to purchase a stretch of land in Colon, Nicaragua, where it will begin building an infrastructure to house teachers and students.

"Because of Jackie, we knew there was a need in Central America," said Houck. "But we discovered that Costa Rica is actually about 25 years ahead of Nicaragua in terms of infrastructure and social services, so we decided to start there, where the greatest need is."

"The goal for 2006 is to break ground in Colon and bring down some teachers," she said, "in order to provide an opportunity for the street

kids, who out of the creative process can develop the skills to give back to their community."

Westcott added: "The kids down there would never get exposure to art, if it weren't for groups like ours. It's like Raechel and Jackie used to say: For every lack of a crayon or an instrument, there could be one less artist or musician."

Globally, locally

In addition to its efforts abroad, RageJax also has begun developing art-enrichment programs here in Ventura County. It has established a \$500 creative writing scholarship at Nordhoff High School and a \$500 art scholarship at Chaparral High School, both in Ojai.

The organization is also putting together a group of local artists and musicians to volunteer time and teach some of the less-privileged children in Ventura County, at schools that do not currently offer any art programs for kids.

"It's just a start," said Houck. "We just want to start planting little seeds of inspiration and kindness. It's amazing the ripple effect that these things create."

This sentiment has been the driving force for both the foundation and the concerts, which are the main sources of fundraising for the RageJax Foundation.

Last year, the foundation put on five concerts, raising a total of only \$7,000. However, the festivals are growing rapidly.

The April 1 festival was the first this year and, selling out to a capacity crowd of more than 2,500 ticketed attendees, the foundation made over \$17,000, more than double the combined profits from festivals the year before.

"The success of the festival is really due to Howard (Freiberg)," Houck said. "It's his planning and drive and collaboration that make this all possible."

Freiberg and RageJax have five more festivals planned this year alone.

"My daughters expect me to go forward where they cannot," said Houck. "As a grieving parent, I can either choose to move forward and honor their memory, or I could stay bitter and angry and keep asking, 'Why?' without ever getting an answer. You just have to make a choice."

With the success of RageJax's latest festival and the goals of Houck's growing foundation, her choice is clear — and she proves one of her deeply held beliefs: "Music really can help heal."

— For more information on the RageJax foundation, visit <http://www.ragejaxfoundation.org>.

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