

THE IDLE AMERICAN

A Queen Like None Other....

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

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Many tourist destinations claim to be “all things to all people,” but compared to Branson, MO, the rest of them miss the mark by a country mile. Nestled in the Ozark Mountains, the laid-back community not only survived the pandemic, but has roared back with numerous new attractions to strengthen its vows to be “number one” in tourism.

Since 2008, the “Branson buzz” has centered on the 2,000-seat Sight and Sound Theatre, where sold-out crowds are common for live performances of Bible figures. Queen Esther is the current attraction; it plays through October 5.

The theatre dazzles, as does the work of some 400 people who have added production of movies, streaming and other types of electronic delivery, evidence that not everything associated with the pandemic is bad. “Thanks to these expanded efforts, we are making a far greater Christian impact than with live performances alone,” a spokesman said....

Sight and Sound’s 50th anniversary of its founding in Lancaster, PA, looms in 2026. At the home base there, more than 800 employees set highest professional standards, as do counterparts in Branson.

We’ve been privileged to see several productions, and still “ooh and ahh” on the lavish grounds leading to the magnificent venue.

The productions have the grandeur of Broadway’s best, and with admission prices that are fractional by comparison. But wait, there’s more....

Every Branson visit provides great memories. We expect “God and country” tributes at all the shows, and undergirding most of them are intentional emphasis to the importance of family.

A great example is Clay Cooper, who also serves as an elected city government official.

He has his own theater, where he is joined in song by his wife and two sons.

He loves his community, his work and his family, pointing with pride to his youngest son who set a record last year for the Branson HS basketball team. “He took more charges than any player in our school’s history,” Clay boasted....

We also took in shows featuring the Dutton, Haygood and Petersen families. The Petersens, known for bluegrass music, are anchored by the four kids’ mom, Karren, who plays the bass fiddle. Their rendition of “Sweet Beulah Land” is a treasure.

The Haygoods--five brothers and a sister, now in their 32nd year--are known for their variety show that has achieved more than 2,000 sold-out performances. And the ever-popular Duttons span three generations.

Another "must see" is Pierce Arrow, which features Michael Cole, an amazing vocalist who came to the fore on America's Got Talent. Their best joke? We learned that alphabet soup might be even better if the letters were in cursive!....

Dean Z truly is the "ultimate Elvis" and illusionist Rick Thomas is world-class--carrying on brilliantly despite his being "under the weather" during our visit. Jay Osmond, best known for years with the Osmond Brothers, is an outstanding soloist. Now 69 years of age, he's new at "going it alone." He claims memories that go way, way back.

"Even as a seven-year-old, I knew about ESP," he said. "Eat/Sleep/Practice."

Our memory chest runneth over. We learned that Branson now has a world-class aquarium, an attraction opening at the onset of COVID. It is remarkable....

As we wound up five days in Branson, we wished for more time to visit the more than 100 attractions, as well as The College of the Ozarks, aka, "Hard Work University." It has much to teach all of us.

It, too, is world class.

We marvel that so much has been invested in Branson, and there's no end in sight. Who could imagine, a couple of decades ago, that there would ever be a 482-room hotel in Branson? Well, there is, the Thousand Hills Resort Hotel. And there are more to come in this magical place where more than 10 million visitors showed up in 2023, with even more expected this year. The world needs more Bransons....

Dr. Newbury is a longtime public speaker and former university president who is Texas' longest-running columnist, now in 23rd year.