



Where Musicians Make Hay

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"Grassy Hill" PRETTY much describes the site here where Tom Neff decided to build an acoustical oasis for folk music. It's also the name of a series of "house concerts" he holds at the new barn once a month at 3 p.m. Sunday, attracting the likes of performer Bethany Yarrow, daughter of Peter Yarrow of "Peter, Paul and Mary" fame, whose scheduled appearance just this week was canceled after the attacks on New York City and Washington D.C.

Built by DeCiantis Construction Co. of Stonington, the 28- by 38-foot barn came together after these concerts outgrew a small space that seated up to 20 people in the Neff's; 18th century house. The new 75-person-capacity building, the result of two years of planning, combines a rustic sensibility with high-tech ability. It's a combination that reflects the owner, who works on computer systems at a New York financial services company during the week and retreats to his Lyme home on weekends to enjoy the wilds and the folk music he loves.

"I drew the plans," says John DeCiantis, president of the Stonington construction firm, "but the design was a collaborative effort between Tom and myself."

DeCiantis did working drawings on a computer program, and he and Tom went back and forth on them for about a year before the building began. In the meantime, the whole site had to be regraded to accommodate a pool and poolhouse that were built about the same time.

That done, work started on the barn, a beautiful post-and-beam structure done in white oak and fabricated and erected by South County Post and Beam in Kingston, R.I.

"It was framed in the winter," DeCiantis recalls. "The structure went up with snow on the ground. I remember our carpenter shoveling off the roof."

That finished, it was up to DeCiantis working from plans done by an acoustical engineer in Oregon, to make sure the building became a musical barn-burner.

"Folk music sounds best in an old barn with a dirt floor," DeCiantis says. "We were trying to replicate the sound with a modern building."

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DeCiantis oversaw the installation of 4-inch stress-skin panels clad with cedar siding on the outside of the barn. On the inside, he used 2-by-4s placed horizontally between the white oak framing and then filled the cavities with Fiberglass insulation, covering that with acoustical screening (to hide the pink fiberglass) and then putting sound dampening strips on top of that, with antique barn board as the final touch.

The red boards, attached so none of them touch each other, add the perfect rustic touch on the inside.

“There’s no wood-to-wood contact in here, other than the structure itself,” DeCiantis says with a smile. “We couldn’t evenly space the cracks in the boards. Everything had to be random. Even the boards vary in the thickness. Sound doesn’t like consistency; sound likes randomness.”

Neff originally was going to use white pine on the walls but turned to 100-to-150 year-old barn boards when he found them to be not only less expensive but better acoustically.

“The porosity of old barn boards absorbs the sound,” says DeCiantis, whose firm was named just this year as winner of Remodeling Magazine’s Big 50 Award, honoring top contractors from across the country.

On the floor, rather than bringing in dirt, DeCiantis had a concrete slab poured and then adhered tar board on top of that, with 2-by-4s providing the framework and wall wool and sound dampening strips in between to improve acoustics. Pine floorboards finished the aesthetic.

Throughout the barn, special woodwork touches were done by Eric Weirs, lead carpenter and project manager.

“Because of the tightness of the building, it’s very easy to heat,” says DeCiantis. “It also stays cool. Even in the heat of July or August, we found the temperature to be 10 to 15 degrees cooler than outside.”

Ventilation is aided by a cupola and a pulley system devised by DeCiantis that opens a flap in the roof of the barn. Small windows also tilt out to let the room breath, and big barn doors open in the back.

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The building, which includes a bathroom for guests and changing room for the performers, also features a 10-foot-wide movie screen that can be lowered electronically to turn the barn into a home theater.

Lighting was added later, but DeCiantis wired the place for sound, did all the piping and made room for the communication and data lines.

“The three buildings (barn, house and poolhouse) are all connected with miles and miles of underground conduit,” DeCiantis says. “The pool has data terminals around the perimeter. He (Neff) could work on his computer by the side of the pool if he wanted.”

The poolhouse, a post-and-beam like the barn, looks like a miniature home and reflects many of the details of the two-century-plus Colonial farmhouse that sits at the front of the property. Included in the poolhouse are exercise equipment, a Jacuzzi, refrigerator, television monitor, changing rooms and French doors to the pool. Outside, an old-fashioned pull down shower can be used to clean off. The beautiful 50-foot-long pool is built with recessed planters and underground sprinklers and is surrounded by an impressive stonewall done by Kevin Classey of Westerly.

“We’ve been working for the Neff’s for seven years, and this is our fifth project in that time,” says DeCiantis, who finished work in June. “Two years ago, we put in an award-winning kitchen, and we’ve also put a sunroom addition onto the house and done extensive work on the house.

“This wasn’t your usual project. It was very demanding.”

On the Net: www.grassyhill.org.

Call: 434-8208 and press 3

Lyme barn a place where folk aficionados flock

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