

A new stage

Former Attorney General Grant Woods shares his musical side

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For eight years in the 1990s, Grant Woods served the state as attorney general, prosecuting crime by day and often checking out a Pistoleros show at night.

After devoting so much of his life to the law, Woods decided he wanted to go in a different direction.

"I see these guys, they spend their entire lives consumed by politics," he says. "And there are a lot of good people in politics. I still support and try to help the people that I think are trying to do a good job. But there's just more to life than politics. And I've already done that. I'm not going to just do that or just do law when I'm so interested in all these other areas."

And so, like very few attorneys general before him, Woods set out to learn enough guitar chords to start writing songs.

"Writing in general is something that I used to do and set aside," Woods says. "I was writing fiction. And then, when I got out of college, I was either going to try to be a writer or go to law school. And I kind of took the easy way out."

Then, with a laugh, he adds, "I went to law school."

At the time, he says, he thought he could do both.

"But that just didn't work," he says. "So probably about 10 years ago, I decided I was going to continue to practice law but I had time now to write if I wanted to write. Or at least I could try. And I didn't want to put limits on myself in terms of what I feel like writing. It might be a script. It might be a novel. It might be a play. Or

... why not songwriting? Music had always been a big part of my life. And so I learned to play guitar just for that reason, just so I could write. Not because I would want to perform. I've never had any interest in performing."

That's why he rounded up a cast of Valley all-stars to do the performing when he thought he had enough material

Benefit concert

Grant Woods' commitment to the arts in Arizona has inspired him to celebrate the release of "Grant Woods' The Project" with a benefit concert in September. Proceeds will go to the Arizona School for the Arts.

"I might have gone in a whole different direction if I had that kind of education in my background," Woods says. "It's a college-prep type of education, but everybody plays the piano and does another art."

The show will feature many of the artists who took part in "The Project."

Details: 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 8. Orpheum Theatre, Phoenix. \$22. phoenix.ticketforce.com.

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Former Arizona Attorney General Grant Woods works on one of his songs at 3 Leaf Recording in Phoenix recently.

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Woods

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to cut an album. The just-released "Grant Woods' The Project" features Lawrence Zubia of the Pistoleros, Scotty Johnson of the Gin Blossoms, Michael Nitro, Walt Richardson, Francine Reed, Hans Olson and Nils Lofgren of the E Street Band, to name a few.

One name you won't find is the one at the beginning of the album's title.

"Some of those guys were saying, 'You've got to at least play some,'" Woods says. "Of course, I know they would have buried it in the mix. But honestly, what would be the point of me playing guitar with Al Ortiz or Nils Lofgren or Scotty Johnson? The same with singing. I want the spotlight to be on these other musicians because I think they're great. And that's kind of the point for me, is to focus on Arizona and Arizona music. And for myself, as the songwriter, I want the songs to be shown in the best light. And that's certainly these other artists singing them, not me."

Woods likes to joke about how well he's learned to play guitar these past 10 years or so. One time in Nashville, a producer suggested he grab a guitar and play some songs he'd written. So he picked up a random guitar and was told that

George Harrison and Eric Clapton had used it.

"And I said, 'I'm sure it's never been played like you're gonna hear it now,'" Woods recalls with a hearty laugh.

Zubia, whose lead vocal on "Mexican Dreams" is a soulful highlight, backs up Woods' assessment of his chops.

"It's a pretty good effort for a guy who doesn't know how to play the guitar very well," he says. "And I say that with all due respect. His knowledge of guitar playing is very limited. But he just has this thing that has to come."

When he made the decision to set aside time for writing, Woods says, "The songwriting thing, I thought would be down the list of what I'd end up doing a lot of, but it quickly moved to the top of the list. It just happened. That's what I like."

At 60, Woods is the age to have had his sensibilities shaped by the singer-songwriter scene that blossomed in the early '70s. Among the inspirations cited: Jackson Browne, Bruce Springsteen, Kris Kristofferson, John Prine and Bob Dylan.

"Some of these guys, I feel, were the poets of my generation," he says. "And just like poets in centuries gone by had a big influence on people's lives, they had an influence on my life. It's been important to me. So that's why it was a natural thing for me to see if I could do it. I wouldn't have gone for-

ward if I didn't think I was getting better and achieving something. I know the craft. I understand the craft."

Michael Nitro, who sings on the opening track, was impressed by Woods' understanding of the craft when he first heard a demo of "Ride Out the Storm."

"I was like, 'Wow, what a song,'" Nitro says. "I really like that song a lot. It had that classic almost Bad Company kind of blues-rock feel that I love. But the words gave me the chills. And one day, we were driving down the road, my wife and I, and it came on my iPod. I had forgotten I'd done it and we were listening to it and both got goosebumps at the same time. We were like, 'Holy cow, we can't believe that just did that to us and it's me,' you know?"

Nitro got in on the ground floor of the project with a late-night phone call from a former bandmate, Sean Cooney, who engineered the album.

"He called me in the middle of the night and said, 'Some guy has written some music and we want you to come down and maybe demo a vocal,'" Nitro says. "And they played the track, gave me the words and said, 'Sing what you feel.' So I did. And they liked it. I got there at midnight, recorded the part and they kept it. A couple days later, Sean called and said, 'Grant Woods wants to meet you.' I was like, 'What?,' thinking, 'What did I do?' He said,



MICHAEL SCHENNUM / THE REPUBLIC

Former Arizona attorney general Grant Woods, left, jams along to a song with studio owner/engineer Sean Cooney at 3 Leaf Recording in Phoenix on Tuesday, May 19, 2015.

"That's the guy whose song you sang on and he really likes what you did."

Woods knows his best shot at drawing attention to "The Project" is the old "attorney general makes album" angle. But he'd rather it be about the music and the local scene in general.

"I wanted to do something positive for Arizona to maybe combat the negative image we have had at times," he says. "We all live here by choice, and the Arizona some people imagine, that it's a real redneck place or however you want to describe it, that just isn't our experience. If it was, we

wouldn't live here.

"We live here because in reality Arizona is very diverse. And inclusive. I spent a portion of my life trying to accomplish change through government, but I find that less interesting and less effective than it's ever been, whereas I find that the opposite is true now with the arts. If you're looking for answers, music and the arts can supply them perhaps a lot better than government can."

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