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News Release

The New Christy Minstrels® 50th Anniversary Concert: A Grand Edition of “Sparks in the in Park”

Randy Sparks—founder of The New Christy Minstrels®—and fellow musicians have for years performed an annual “Sparks in the Park” concert benefiting the San Joaquin County Historical Society and the Micke Grove Zoological Society. This year the concert will celebrate both Randy’s 78th birthday and the 50-year anniversary of the world-famous group. While past concerts have presented mostly local members of Randy’s musical family, this concert will feature all eight members of The New Christy Minstrels® under the direction of Randy Sparks. The event will be on the grounds of the Historical Museum (in Micke Grove Regional Park) on Friday, July 29, beginning at 6:00 p.m. A donation of \$70 per person includes a New York steak dinner and the concert. Tickets are available at the Music Box stores (4653 Pacific Ave., Stockton 95207 and 101 E. Lodi Ave., Lodi 95240) and at the Museum office. See www.SanJoaquinHistory.org or call (209) 331-2055 or (209) 953-3460.

Randy Sparks got his start in show business in 1954 at the famous Purple Onion in San Francisco. Then he took a bus to Los Angeles, arriving with \$6 in his pocket. When he left L.A. some 15 years later he had a Grammy, several Gold Records, and money enough to live wherever he wanted. He chose to raise his young family in nearby Calaveras County.

In 1961 Sparks was a struggling songwriter. And like Stephen Foster more than 100 years earlier, Sparks lacked a way to deliver his songs to a larger audience. Foster solved the problem by leaning on the most popular group of his day, The Christy Minstrels. Sparks recalls thinking, “If it worked for him, maybe the same formula can work for me.”

That’s how Sparks came to create The New Christy Minstrels®, the first “big folk group.” “My dream group would have the brash, imperfect excitement of the Kingston Trio, but with enough good singers to rival the Norman Luboff Choir” he

said. It worked. It was a groundbreaking ensemble that had a major influence on folk and popular music in the 1960s. The group's first signed concert contract was for The Greek Theater in L.A. and they played around the world, including Carnegie Hall. They were signed to appear weekly on *The Andy Williams Show*, a television variety show, for the entire 1962-63 season.

The New Christy Minstrels® debut album, *Presenting the New Christy Minstrels*, won a Grammy Award and was on the *Billboard* charts for two years. Their song *Green, Green* (written by Sparks and the lead singer on the song, Barry McGuire) moved up the charts to number three on the Adult Contemporary Charts. *Green, Green* sold more than one million copies and was awarded a gold record.

The group had other top forty hits such as *Saturday Night, Today, This Land is Your Land, Denver*, and *Chim Chim Cher-ee* (which they performed on The Academy Awards show the evening the song was awarded the 1964 Oscar for Best Song). They eventually recorded more than 20 albums.

Sparks also worked with groups and artists other than The New Christy Minstrels® and he recalls fondly that “Some of my best efforts generated the least amount of personal gain. I worked with Burl Ives for more than 30 years—I was his writer and opening act—and we had great fun, all for worthwhile causes.”

Randy Sparks was a mentor to many performers, including John Denver, whose youngest uncle, Dave Deutchendorf, is now a member of The New Christy Minstrels®. “Are you going to change my name, too?” Dave asked Randy, referring to Sparks' role in the 1964 transformation of Little Johnny Deutchendorf to John Denver. Sparks replied that “Performers don't have to do that anymore; that was before the time of Arnold Schwarzenegger.”

Today the restored, eight-member The New Christy Minstrels® includes three members of the original group from the early 1960s. With a gleam in his eye Sparks says, “That's three more than the Kingston Trio has nowadays. It's also three more than The Limelickers can throw at an audience.”

Randy Sparks loves old stuff. In 1968 he purchased the earliest “high-rise” building in interior California, the three-story 1854 Adams Express Building in Mokelumne Hill, a wonderful example of Gold Rush architecture. Because of these roots in the region, he was invited by Claude Brown—current president of the San Joaquin County Historical Society and former president of the Micken Grove Zoological Society—to begin doing annual concerts to benefit the two nonprofit organizations.

For more information on The New Christy Minstrels®, see www.thenewchristyminstrels.com. To learn of their efforts for charity through The New Christy Minstrels Foundation, see www.newchristyminstrelsfoundation.org.

The Micke Grove Zoological Society supports the programs of the zoo in Micke Grove Regional Park. The zoo is open daily and provides educational programs including live animal encounters and hands-on bio facts presentations. For more information see www.mgzoo.com.

The San Joaquin County Historical Society operates the Historical Museum in Micke Grove Regional Park. The Society provides education programs for school groups such as “Valley Days” and “Pioneer School Day” (in the 1866 Calaveras School). The Museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums. For more information see www.SanJoaquinHistory.org.

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