

Music appreciation

Summer shows attract people of all ages **Post-Tribune**

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VALPARAISO — Zac Sewell, 6, was helping his parents pack up after the last Concerts in the Park summer program at Butterfield Pavilion here.

He had just listened to crooner Peter Oprisko sing tunes that Frank Sinatra and others from that era made famous. Unlike most who filled the pavilion at Old Fairgrounds Park, Zac had no memories of the radio shows, the big band era or the Broadway shows that introduced millions to the songs.

"It was pretty cool; I bet I'll come next year," Zac said.

Concerts in the park are not new to Valparaiso, but they are part of the ambiance of a city or town, Nancy Kohlhoff reminded the audience as she introduced Oprisko. Kohlhoff, one of many who sponsored the park department's 2005 Concerts in the Park series, recalled programs in her own small Indiana hometown, where life slowed down for a brief moment of outdoor enjoyment. "There was no TV back then, you know," she said.

Most of the audience did know. Many had come straight from a day of festivities at Banta Activity Center, where the park department conducted a luau for senior citizens. Wearing Hawaiian prints and tropical garlands, they nodded at her comment and later at Oprisko's historical introductions to each songwriter and song.

Oprisko said he was delighted to return to Valparaiso, where he was first invited to perform last season. The Whiting native, now living in Orland Hills, Ill., has been touring the country full time for four years. Once the host of two top-rated radio shows at WAIT in Chicago — "Exclusively Sinatra" and "Remember When" — he started in 1998, crooning part time in Chicago.

"By 2001, I was earning more than my day job and having a lot more fun," he said.



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The last of the Concerts in the Park series draws almost a full house to the Butterfield Pavilion at Old Fairgrounds Park in Valparaiso.

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Lucky for Oprisko, because in 2001, WAIT joined the "all-talk" craze, leaving fans of Sinatra-era music stranded.

"It was the end of my radio career," said Oprisko, 37, who wasn't alive when many of the songs he sings were popular.

Jordan Williams, a former Valparaiso High School jazz trombonist and now a lawyer in Elkhart, caught one of Oprisko's 300-plus annual shows and called his grandmother, Avone Werskey, 84, of Valparaiso.

"He gave me the CD and said it would be good for the parks," Werskey said. "I took the CD to Carol (Costakis) to see if we could afford him."

Recreation coordinator Amy Dale handles that function for the Valparaiso Department of Parks and Recreation.



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Whiting native and national touring musician Peter Oprisko performs at Butterfield Pavilion at Old Fairgrounds Park in Valparaiso. He does popular songs from the 1940s to the '70s.