

# INSIDE THE KINGDOM

August 9, 2017

the Chronicle

Section B – 20 Pages

## New release, *Desert Suite*, is a labor of love

by Elizabeth Trail

The *Desert Suite*, with Ben and Janice Luce. Composed by Ben Luce, guitar and percussion by Ben Luce, keyboards by Janice Luce, mixing by Brian Warwick. Compact disc \$12.99, digital download \$9.99 at [benjaniceluce.com](http://benjaniceluce.com).

There was a time when Ben Luce thought he might compose music for movies, but he became a physicist instead.

The years that he worked at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, he walked the lonely desert canyons and plateaus with his guitar in his arms, playing softly to himself.

Weekends, he might hike as far as 20 miles, playing the songs that the desert inspired even while climbing up narrow canyons in search of rock art and cave dwellings.

He composed and played while he watched sunrises, sunsets, and even the stars at night. The guitar picked out the melody to the steady rhythm of his steps. The magnificent landscape was the harmony. It was like a musical soundtrack to his life.

Eventually he wrote down the guitar parts.

But it wasn't until Mr. Luce moved to Vermont and reunited with a love he thought was long lost that the harmonies he heard in his head found a tangible voice.

On August 19, a week after their fourth anniversary, Ben and Janice Luce will be releasing an album called *The Desert Suite*.

The couple drew on their combined musical training to create the background music that underpins Mr. Luce's guitar solos.

Ms. Luce is a classically trained pianist with a degree in performance.

As Janice Gluck, she's been a fixture for years in local theater and musical circles, both as an accompanist and as a performer in her own right.

She's also what her husband calls a talented and intuitive player on the synthesizer — the electronic keyboard that can add rhythm and instrumental voices.

But their collaboration is a story actually began half a lifetime ago.

The Luces met when both of them were in the music recording program at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Officially they were just friends. Janice Wittig was dating someone else at the time. And Mr. Luce was silent about his feelings for her.

A couple of years after graduation he sent her a letter telling her how he felt. She didn't answer, but she kept the letter.

She married, had a family, and taught piano. He earned a PhD in physics and launched himself into his career. He had relationships over the years, but nothing that lasted.

Years later, when a career change brought him to the Northeast Kingdom to teach at Lyndon State College, she saw his name on a flyer for a talk on wind energy.

Single again, she sent an e-mail asking if he was the Ben Luce she'd known at Fredonia.

He was, and they agreed to meet for lunch.

"I saw her again, and that was it," Mr. Luce says. "I'm a scientist, I don't believe in fate, but it's hard not to see some kind of plan here."

The couple has been married for four years



Ben and Janice Luce's new album, *The Desert Suite*, is the result of a unique musical collaboration — and a special love story. The kickoff party for the CD will be held at the MAC gallery in Newport on Saturday, August 19, at 5 p.m. Photo courtesy of Ben and Janice Luce

now, and they still radiate an aura of happiness that stops people on the street.

"People will ask to take our picture to keep, just because we look so happy," Mr. Luce said.

Sitting side by side, they fit into each other's curves like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. People even tell them they look a lot alike.

Mr. Luce was performing sixties and seventies folk music on acoustic guitar. Ms. Luce was playing classical piano and accompanying other musicians around the area. It was inevitable that the two would go back to playing music together.

For several years they've been performing here and there around the Kingdom.

And somewhere along the line they began collaborating to create harmonies for Mr. Luce's desert compositions.

"Janice has a knack for different voicings on the synthesizer," he said. "From my background, she's very skilled player."

It needs to be said that Mr. Luce's father, David A. Luce, invented the Polymoog, the first of an earlier generation of synthesizers that could play chords and multiple note combinations. A physicist and engineer, he eventually became the president and co-owner of the Moog synthesizer company.

So Ben Luce grew up with synthesizers and

synthesizer players.

He calls his wife's contribution "sensitive and sophisticated."

"It comes from years of accompanying all kinds of people in all kinds of situations," he said.

Ms. Luce put in a low drone underneath the music to represent the earth. The deep notes swell and recede like the changing terrain, but are always there.

High strings represent clouds, she said. Piano and percussion give voice to other aspects of the natural world.

"What I play is the landscape and the earth," she said.

Mr. Luce's guitar, tuned so that the two bottom strings are set down a whole step lower than usual, is the human presence in that landscape.

The guitar parts were written down, but the accompaniment was suggested only by jottings that tried to recapture the sweeping New Mexico vistas, the rocky canyons and rugged mesas that Mr. Luce hiked and climbed.

As Ms. Luce started to try to interpret those jottings, the couple worked together, phrase by phrase, to bring to life what Mr. Luce saw in his mind's eye.

(Continued on page 7B.)

# Music reflects the mood of the Southwest

(Continued from page 1B.)

Once they started adding the *Desert Suite* pieces to their performances, they knew they had something.

"People started requesting it," Mr. Luce said.

The Luce's music has been described as ambient, new age, soundscape, and melodic.

"Though not all of it is melodic, by any means," Ms. Luce said.

In places, there's dissonance, the rock is broken, thunder rumbles, lightning strikes. There are hints of folk, jazz, rock, and other contemporary influences.

In places the music is restful, in places it's energizing. This is music both for active listening and for leaving on the stereo while going about other activities.

"I never tire of listening to my own music," Mr. Luce said. "It's the backdrop to my life."

Each piece in *The Desert Suite* captures a particular place and mood of the New Mexico landscape: "Sunrise on Pajarito Plateau," "Deer Trap Mesa," "Song of the Jemez."

That landscape is changing now, Mr. Luce said.

Climate change has caused the death of almost 90 percent of the pinyon pines that once anchored the natural ecosystem on the mesas and higher mountain elevations. And fire has laid

stretches of the land bare.

The drought in the American Southwest is now close to 20 years old. And summer temperatures are rising.

So Mr. Luce's music is an ode, too, to a vanishing landscape.

When it came to recording the CD, the couple spent a lot of time reading and watching videos to update the skills they'd learned in Fredonia's recording program.

"We're still newbies at digital recording," Mr. Luce said.

They got professional help for the mixing from Brian Warwick at Lyndon State College.

"That also gave us another layer of feedback," Mr. Luce said. "It was good to have another set of ears."

The switch to digital recording has made musical production accessible to everyone, he said.

That makes it hard to get music heard. In addition to playing live around the area, the couple is also working to learn about marketing and social media.

But Mr. Luce believes there is still plenty of room for good composers.

The music on *The Desert Suite* album is only a small amount of what he wrote during his New Mexico years and earlier.

"There's ten times as much waiting in the wings," he said.


The couple is also doing new music from scratch.

"What's so great is the synergy between us," Mr. Luce said.

The CD party will feature southwestern style food and a multimedia presentation of the music playing with a backdrop of the dramatic New Mexico landscapes that inspired it. Autographed CDs will be available for sale. The party kicks off at 5 p.m. on Saturday, August 19, at the MAC gallery on Main Street in Newport.

The CD or digital download can also be purchased online at benjaniceluce.com

contact Elizabeth Trail at [elizabeth@bartonchronicle.com](mailto:elizabeth@bartonchronicle.com)

Don't forget...  
**the Chronicle**  
 has a drop-off basket   
 for announcements, payments, letters to the editor, etc., at THE FRONT DESK on East Main Street in Newport.

## Westfield meal site menu for August

All are invited to enjoy a community lunch every Thursday at noon at the Westfield Community Center located at the corner of North Hill Road and School Street in Westfield. A donation of \$4 per person is requested with the second Thursday of the month free.

August 10 (Free, no donation requested) — Juice, Swiss hamburger steak, new potatoes, corn on the cob, whole wheat bread, and berry dessert.

August 17 — Juice, baked chicken, mashed potatoes, carrots and green beans, whole grain bread, and melon mélange.

August 24 — Juice, meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, zucchini with tomatoes, whole grain bread, and ice cream sundaes.

August 31 — Juice, baked ham, oven roasted potatoes, carrots and green beans, rolls, and dump cake.

A free RSVP Bone Builders balancing and strengthening class meets weekly before the meal from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Feel free to stay for bingo and card games after lunch. — submitted by LaDonna Dunn.



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**REAL ESTATE and YOU**

by Jim Campbell, Principal Broker

**Buying a Home in a Tight Market**

There are several ways to increase your chances of getting your dream house in a competitive housing market. **The first step would be to get prequalified for a mortgage.** You'll be able to make a firm commitment to buy and your offer will be more desirable to the seller. **You will want to stay in close contact with your real estate agent.** Your agent will be on the lookout for the newest listings that meet your criteria. Be ready to see a house as soon as it goes on the market — if it's a great home, it will go fast.

**Keep in mind that you can scout out new listings yourself.** Browse sources such as [realtor.com](http://realtor.com), [Zillow.com](http://Zillow.com) and other local real estate listing sites. Set up alerts for the neighborhoods and characteristics you're looking for. Drive through your target neighborhoods, and if you see a home you like for sale, send the address and listing agent's name to your agent, who can schedule a showing for you.

**Be ready to make a decision.** Spend plenty of time in advance deciding what you can afford and must have in a home so you won't hesitate when you have the chance to make an offer.

**Make sure to make a competitive bid.** Your first inclination may be to start out offering something less than the absolute highest price you can afford, but if you go too low in a tight market, you will likely lose out.

**Keep contingencies to a minimum.** Restrictions such as needing to sell your home before you move can make your offer unappealing. Remember that, if the market is tight, you'll probably be able to sell your house rapidly. You can also talk to your lender about getting a bridge loan to cover both mortgages for a short period.

**Don't get caught in a buying frenzy.** Just because there's competition for a home doesn't mean you should buy it. And even though you want to make your offer attractive, don't neglect inspections that help ensure the house is a sound investment.

For some solid advice on buying and selling real estate, consult me at Jim Campbell Real Estate. Please call 802-334-3400, or visit my office at 601 East Main Street in Newport, VT. Visit us on line at [www.JimCampbellRealEstate.com](http://www.JimCampbellRealEstate.com).

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