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German-American Brass Band to sound the horn during Oktoberfest



Ernie Star, Kapellmeister, leads the The German-American Brass Band at the Old World Oktoberfest in Huntington Beach CA Sunday September 15, 2013. (Photo by Thomas R. Cordova/Daily Breeze)

By **Michelle Mills**, San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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As autumn slides in, many Southern Californians are German — if only for a day.

The tradition of Oktoberfest has become a popular celebration filled with music, dancing, food and beer.

“The idea of Oktoberfest and the celebration of Oktoberfest has really grown in the Southern California area. There’s more and more places doing it now,” said Ernie Star of Chatsworth. “It’s a fun thing for people just to get together and celebrate. I think in our modern culture we miss getting together and sitting around a glass of beer and talking or having fun and singing or getting up and dancing.”

Star is the conductor of the German-American Brass Band (www.germanband.us), which has been a staple at many Oktoberfests since it was founded in 1962 by Hans Schmelzer.

The origin of Oktoberfest dates back to the October 1810 wedding of Prince Ludwig (later King Ludwig I) and Princess Therese, who invited the citizens of Munich to a celebration of their betrothal in the fields in front of the city gates.

“They thought it was such a good idea they started doing it every year,” Star said. “They also started selling food. People said this is the place to sell food and drink.”

Horse racing put on by the military was added in 1811 along with an agricultural show. As years passed, Oktoberfest slowly evolved into a large country fair akin to a harvest festival.



Scott Wilsterman, of Las Vegas, plays the tuba with The German-American Brass Band at the Old World Oktoberfest in Huntington Beach CA Sunday September 15, 2013. (Photo by Thomas R. Cordova/Daily Breeze)

“October is the time the farmers have all cashed out their crops, so they have a lot of money in their pockets. They started betting on the horses and it became a betting extravaganza,” Star said.

The racing events were cut in 1860, but the agricultural show continues to this day.

Because of the weather in Germany, Oktoberfest starts in mid-September and ends the first week of October, when the days and nights aren’t too cold; this year the 11-day celebration begins Saturday In Southern California, Oktoberfest is celebrated from mid-September through the end of October. There will be events in Big Bear Lake, Pomona, Palm Springs, Torrance, Lake Arrowhead, Chatsworth, Los Angeles, Redlands, Yucca Valley and more.

Star has never been to Oktoberfest in Germany, but definitely enjoys the SoCal version of the event.

“My favorite part of it is the crowds, the camaraderie; it’s the community celebrating together. It’s the time of year before winter comes,” Star said. “The music is a big part of it. Without music, Oktoberfest really wouldn’t be anything.”

It is common in Bavaria, Austria and Switzerland for each town to have its own band. In the past there wasn’t amplification, but a brass band could be easily heard even in a crowded tent. Star explained that the idea is similar to after the Civil War in America, where Sousa bands would play brass music on a Sunday afternoon in the park.

“In the United States, we associate brass music with Oktoberfest because that’s the kind of music we have during Oktoberfest. Over there (in Europe), brass music is used for a lot of occasions. Just about every celebration you’ll find the brass bands and the beer tents,” Star said.

Today, in addition to brass bands, you will find other kinds of music, such as pop and rock, at celebrations in Germany.

Star began playing trumpet in the German-American band at age 8. His father was one of the group’s original members. Star’s grandfather also played music and Star’s three children currently play in the band.

Star took a brief hiatus from the German-American Brass Band when he played in high school band and in a group in college. He has been conducting for 10 years.

The German-American band boasts professional and semi-professional members — both men and women — ages 14 through late 80s.

The band’s repertoire includes traditional pieces, marches, polkas, waltzes and other dance music, as well as Broadway tunes, pop numbers and newer brass music from Europe.

Oktoberfest is busiest time of the year for the German-American Brass Band, but it also plays for church functions, the German League’s annual festival and other events throughout the year.

“It’s happy music. It’s music you can sing to, it’s music you dance to, it’s something you don’t hear every day. It will put you in a good mood,” Star said. “Oktoberfest is a real celebration of what God has given us and of our harvest. It’s what we really need to celebrate. Come and celebrate the good things that we’ve got and enjoy friends and beer.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reach the author at Michelle.Mills@sgvn.com or follow Michelle on Twitter: [@mickieszoo](https://twitter.com/mickieszoo).



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