By Blair Dahl

Jimmy Buffett sings that ‘Stars Fell On Alabama.’ Driving through the state, you’ll notice that they’ve adopted the song and proudly display the title on their license plates. One star fell, bounced, and landed right here in Acadiana. Robert Baxter, a star in the world of artists, calls Louisiana home and we reap the shine.

It would take a book to list all of Robert’s accomplishments. We’d have to go into the music industry and we’d have to enter the world of “The Young and the Restless,” and we’d even have to jump into Blaine Kern’s Mardi Gras World... all to get a complete picture of Robert’s life. But trust me readers, this artist has worked all over the world; he has met some of the biggest, richest, most influential people in the world. And he didn’t come to us because he was down on his luck or his art was no longer sought-after. Robert Baxter is actually a gift from the hurricane season of 2005.

When this star bounced from his birthplace of Mobile, Alabama to New Orleans to make his way into the art world, he didn’t realize the impact he would eventually have on the art of rural Acadiana. He simply got cancer, decided to relax during his treatment and found a farm in Duson. His artist’s eye fell in love with the quiet beauty of our swamps and prairies, bayous and crawfish ponds. He also recognized true artistic talent amongst the people in Acadiana. He met artists, craftsmen, and artisans in many different fields. And when he was settled in this area, he decided to show them off to the world.

His childhood held artistic promise. At age five, he was drawing, and by nine, he was painting flowers onto china. I asked him if his parents or grandparents had artistic talent, and Robert told me no, that no one in his family tree showed an affinity for painting.....until you go back to the age of Queen Elizabeth I. There, on Robert’s family tree sits a painter for the Royal Queen of England who was deported to America for his religious beliefs. It appears that it is from this distant relative that Robert inherits his gift.

After high school, Robert’s artistic talent swept him into ‘life in the fast lane’ as a multimedia artist for Record Bar, (a company devoted to the artwork you see on CDs, music videos, promotions, etc.) and the bright lights of Los Angeles and Hollywood. His art graced the promotions surrounding acts like Kenny Rogers, Sting, Bon Jovi, Alabama, and Bonnie Raitt.

During his eleven years with Record Bar, his work appeared in Billboard and Rolling Stone magazines, earning him five NARM awards. NARM is short for National Association of Recording Merchandisers, and this group receives awards every year from the Grammys and the CMAs. Robert received two NARM awards from the Grammys and three from the CMAs; this distinguished Robert as a top artist in the music industry.

It was only natural that Robert continue to spread his art further and he did so by moving on to Robert at the Crowley Arts Institute with his adult class and their collaborative example of secondary cubism. Photo by Blair Dahl
Denny Manufacturing. These guys are the ‘big dogs’ of hand-painted backgrounds. When you see backgrounds on TV and on stage, chances are high that it was painted by an artist from Denny Manufacturing. And as a senior artist there, Robert painted the background for the CBS Christmas Special with Reba McEntire and completed work for Olam Mills, the CBS American Tennis Tournament, and the Canadian National Baseball Theme Park.

After rubbing elbows with celebrities, and even venturing out on his own with Baxter Backgrounds, Robert felt the need to return to his roots. A Southerner by birth, and a naturalist at heart, Robert headed to New Orleans for his first one-man show at Sutton Fine Arts Gallery. At the famous art gallery on Royal Street, Robert’s paintings of the island of Hawaii introduced him into the art world as an individual painter. One of his best is of the Hilo Bell Tower. And, it is also where this story gets interesting.

Robert’s goal in his Hawaii series was, he says, “to tell the truth about how Hawaii became a state.” And alas, good readers, the story is not a pretty one. It is a long tale of taking without asking, breaking promises, and reparations too little too late. So, he painted the place where Native Hawaiians were forced to dive for food after access to their own supply was denied. He painted the beach where the Navy practices bombing maneuvers, much to the delight of a group of Native Hawaiians who hate the maneuvers and were campaigning to save the beach (he was even mistakenly arrested for being there). Robert did ring the Hilo Bell Tower not once, but three times, never reading the sign that said (basically) “Do not ring unless the sky is falling!”

Robert’s resulting work was powerful, moving, and beautiful. Back in New Orleans, locals of Hawaiian descent fell in love with the show. Robert had moved from making others look better in the spotlight to filling up the spotlight with art that was not only pleasing to the eye but held meaning.

From then on, Robert’s body of work would expand in all directions. New Orleans held tightly to its prize and Robert flourished with commissions, Bayou Bandanna’s for the yearly Jazz and Heritage Festival, and paintings done for local charitable organizations. Big collectors were buying his work. He told me this story about one of his more famous customers, Dorian Bennett (yes, of the realty company). Mr. Bennett wanted a picture of his young daughter Delia. Robert relates, “Well, Delia came in with her cat, and I am highly allergic to cats, so I had to get her out of there quickly! So, I had to put a lot of thought into how to paint her. I decided to paint her doing something I knew she would never do-chores! I put her on a farm, outside the chicken house, holding up her cat, etc.” When Robert finished the painting, his agent was horrified; she knew Mr. Bennett would be insulted by Robert’s attempt to make his only child appear normal, not exceptional, a child instead of an heiress. So you can imagine the gallery, the painting sitting on its easel in the back, the agent pacing, biting her nails, and thinking up all the things to say to quell the approaching storm.

Yet, Mr. Bennett walked in with his family right on time. Delia immediately recognized herself and her cat. The room was quiet except for Delia. Mr. Bennett was in tears... of joy. He told Robert ‘Delia’s Dream,’ as the painting was called, was beautiful because it was set on a farm. Mr. Bennett himself was raised on a farm, and it was a secret he had kept most of his life. Later, the world would know Mr. Bennett was raised on a farm because Robert was interviewed about it. Today, from what others told Robert, ‘Delia’s Dream’ hangs at the end of a draped hallway- a focal point under a spotlight. And certain heart attack was averted for Robert’s agent!

After his highly successful show, he was honored by being asked to paint the Mardi Gras float for the Krewe of Carrollton, something that had not been allowed in seventeen years! By this time, he was with Blain Kern’s Mardi Gras World adding his magic as a muralist as well as continuing his other art.

And even then, his art was reflective of the man. He donated a painting to Meals-on-Wheels and attended the evening events with Jeanne Cooper (Katherine Chancellor of the Young and the Restless). He was also, yearly, designing and donating his art at
the Jazz and Heritage Festival in the form of Bayou Bandannas. The art on the bandanas held special meaning to festival-goers. One year, the bandanas were a protest against the community forces who were trying to get rid of the Jazz and Heritage Festival. Another year, the bandanas reflected the country's pain after 9-11. And one year, the bandanas showed the music community's sorrow over losing one of their own, a young fiddle player.

Yet this gifted and giving artist would face cancer in 2000-2001. It was cancer of the mouth and the surgery (even though you wouldn't know it now) left his face disfigured for a while. As a result, his work and livelihood came to a standstill. And his chemotherapy would only promise good days and bad days. In describing his ordeal, Robert could only look at the positive, "I am eternally grateful to Robert Dafford, a muralist who was painting large murals all over the country. He hired me knowing some days I could work, but some days I couldn't." He also spent a lot of time with his friend Mack, fishing, and this is where he praises the Cajun people he has come so to love. "When I was out fishing, Mack and I would always talk to other fishermen and never once did anyone stare, gawk, or turn away from my then swollen face. It truly touched me."

Painting murals led him to buy a farm in Duson, and from there, the art began to flow. When Katrina hit in 2005, Robert and Mack's home became the refuge for many of their friends from New Orleans. Robert himself lost his studio (which he still used in New Orleans at the time). It was at this point that he began to paint his Butterflies. This is the story that Robert tells, "I was sitting in my living room which had these huge glass windows. I was in tears because of the devastation of Katrina, for myself and our friends who had lost everything. Outside, in the field, were these beautiful butterflies...lots of them. Later that day, I returned to the window to find them gone. In my anguish, they had somehow brought me comfort, and I worried I'd never see them again. So, I began to paint my own." Robert adds with his classic laugh, "I found out later that those particular butterflies feed on urine....so how appropriate that something so beautiful could be nurtured with, you know, "#$@!" His story inspires us all to make something beautiful out of the 'urine' that life sometimes throws at us. Since then, Robert has created over 60 butterflies. He is currently showing most of them at the Opelousas Museum in Opelousas.

After having two one-man shows in Rayne and New Iberia, Robert began working for the Gueydan Museum. In his two years as Projects Director, Robert organized four to six shows per year. He made the Gueydan Museum famous by creating "Swamp Spirits," an annual event in which ten artists are shown the same photograph and interpret, through their art, what they see. This is what Tony Mayard, Director of the Vermillion Parish Arts Council, had to say about the talented Robert Baxter.

"When anyone says the name Robert Baxter to me, first I smile, then I grin as my brain goes on a splintered, fanciful journey down the many avenues of art began by Robert Baxter here in Vermilion Parish. Our current exhibit is Swamp Spirits 08, an exhibit that began its first existence under the creative direction of Robert Baxter. Robert at the time was the artistic director for the awakening Gueydan Museum. Vermilion Parish is composed of several rural communities each having their own Museum. Robert thought that each museum could benefit from hosting exhibits that would travel throughout the parish. So began the creation of Swamp Spirits, selecting one photo of a "swamp" scene and asking 10 artists to create their own interpretation of that image. The results were spectacular as Robert invited both local and regional artists to participate in this project. This exhibit began to breathe fresh and exciting ideas into our rural museums. Each of our small town museums began to feel that we could develop our own unique, exceptional exhibit that would broaden our horizons as museums as well as broaden the field of artists breathing the much needed life back into our communities. Robert was like that magical wizard that moved through our parish opening our eyes to the possibilities; he dared us to try things beyond our comfort zones and some of us along the way grew to be better artists and art lovers. As a curator, he challenged me to be better and learn how to work some of his magic in creating exhibits that would delight our locals and visitors, expanding tourism in this rural parish. As an artist he helped me to see beyond my horizons and to explore the magic of my gifts; he helped me to discover the magic of generosity. It is with this generosity that I am able to create better and make more happen. All of our Vermilion Parish museums and many of our local artists have grown in positive ways as a direct result of the wizardry that I have known as Robert Baxter."

"The Caring Reef" presented to Mark Richard, Volunteer of the Year for Goodwill Industries, 2008 submitted photo
After the Gueydan Museum, Robert went on to the Kaplan Museum, giving back to the community once again by helping toorganize the "New Harmonies" exhibit done in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution. An exhibit of Smithsonian caliber will bring visitors from all corners of the world. This exhibit is currently at the Jeanerette Museum and will begin in September at Le Musee de la Ville de Kaplan, and we have Robert to thank for getting the project off the ground.

He and Mack left the farm in Duson and came to Crowley where Robert joined the Crowley Arts Association. He has transformed the CAA Gallery into an exquisite showplace. And he has returned to an old love...teaching. In Crowley, he teaches art classes to adults and children. The 'teaching' part of painting is imprinted on Robert's soul. Being self-taught, he has made it his life's work to teach others. Sometimes the 'teaching' is simply in his art, like the series on Hawaii where Robert tried to express the heartache for Native Hawaiians as they were brutally colonized. Sometimes it's in the beauty of butterflies and how they inspire hope in all of us. But included in that is real teaching. Robert, throughout his career, has been teaching others how to paint.

For my interview, I showed up before his adult class was over. That day, he was demonstrating secondary cubism (hang on, I'll explain). He had asked each member of the class to name an object. One person said a cross, another said a cell phone, another said a whale, and yet another said a flower. Robert then painted each object on one canvas and taught his class the cubist style by connecting all the images into one spectacular piece. I observed his students. Their eyes shone with the new knowledge they had acquired. They waited expectantly to see if I could see all the images in the piece. The air in the room was alive with the energy of creation, and I couldn't help but be sucked right in.

Robert describes his teaching style this way, "Well, on the first day I hand out these huge packets of information on composition. I feel I must do that so the students can be informed. Then, I tell them to put away their 'sheets of hell' and let's paint!" Robert's focus is to move his students out of their...
comfort zones. In his first class, you'll usually do a lot of work with your eyes closed!

I'll tell you a story about his latest class which truly illustrates Robert's gift and his love for his students. In every class (as every teacher knows), there is always a student who is a challenge, and Robert, who teases and jokes with his students, can be said to encourage it! Well, he had teased a student about wearing a dunce cap because she was so 'bad.' So, Robert made a dunce cap and set it in the class so everyone could see it the next day. He also put beside the cap a beautiful pair of earrings, which the class couldn't see. The next day, students' mouths dropped open as they noticed the cap and couldn't believe Robert had been serious! When the 'troublesome' student entered (and noticed the cap), Robert said, "Ma'am, I have something for you." He reached for the cap, but, of course, picked up the earrings and presented them to her. As her eyes got wide and she began to smile, Robert asked her, "Do you know why I gave you those?" To her dumbfounded 'no,' Robert replied, "Because you asked about the most important part of any art...integrity."

He went on to explain to me how this student, in asking, "What makes a piece 'art?'" helped him to explain to the class about integrity, the vital component of art. For Robert, integrity puts the art in museums. It's what sells art to collectors for high prices; and in the end, it is what makes anyone's art, from the art student to the famous artist, good art. "It is why you paint that gives your art integrity," Robert teaches. "It's not something you do for someone else; it's something you do for yourself." Robert continues by explaining how the 'tricks' (as he calls them) that he uses in his classes help students get past their inhibitions to create art that represents who they are. He says it this way, "You have to have drive to get where you are."

Since 2005, Robert has worked so hard in Acadia; his resume needs to be in book form! He's completed work for Travis Matte and the Zydeco Kingpins. Travis Matte says, "Robert has done several pieces for the Kingpins including Zydeco Train cover, Ho, Ho, Ho cover and our Booty Zydeco cover. In addition to those pieces he has also done an accordion, which was painted to resemble the Woodstock era and very similar to the Jimmy Hendrix psychedelic guitar painting. The

Robert in Crowley visiting with friends Harrel Hoffpauir, and Bill Henderson. photo by Dawna Waterbury

Robert as a child with his twin sister, Gennie, and cherished Uncle Bubba. submitted photo

Robert in Crowley visiting with friends Harrel Hoffpauir, and Bill Henderson. photo by Dawna Waterbury

Robert and class, still teaching kids how to make a Mardi Gras mask. photo by Blair Dahl

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painted four cabins the night before the show. They finished building the set at about 3:30 AM. They all went to the Heymann Center at 7:00 to rebuild the cabins for the show. He built it so this stage can be used year after year. He also donates his time every year to help rebuild this stage. I needed a backdrop for a television show that I produced, and Robert stepped up and designed the backdrop.

Robert is also involved in several other community projects. When there is a need, he tries to resolve it whether he has time to or not. The best way I can describe Robert is he is the type of person, if you were picking teams, you would want him on your side.

On the lighter side, he dreamed up a theme and designed an outfit so I could enter a womanless beauty pageant. Another benefit he couldn’t say no to and asked me if I would enter the contest if he could figure out how to make me look good. He did not have much to work with, excuse me; he had plenty to work with, standing 6’5” and the width to match. I finished first runner up and have retired as a “beauty contestant.” This was my way of paying him back for all of his good deeds. He understands that this also covered any future “debt.”

This giving spirit is not only for organizations that need help. Harrell Hoffpauer’s story is special, but not unique. His gift from Robert graces the cover of this issue. Harrell is remodeling the building that houses the Crowley Arts Council, and he specializes in preserving the rich history of our area. Harrell and Robert had become friends through the CAA. He knew Robert liked to fish and had previously brought him some to enjoy. He told Robert one day about how his 10-year-old had found a cocoon. Harrell had built it a cage, and the kids had hung it up in there and watched it grow. It eventually hatched into a beautiful Luna moth. Harrell was tickled that his kids had witnessed such a beautiful thing in nature. Inspired, Robert painted a beautiful Luna moth and hung it in the gallery. On the card beside the painting, the one that tells you how much the piece will cost, Robert put “Price: fish.” Harrell loves to fish, and knows Robert does too, and was overwhelmed when Robert presented him with such a gift so beautiful in itself, but truly celebrated Harrell’s children.

As for the Crowley Arts Association, they couldn’t be happier to have Robert in their fold. Becky Faulk, vice president of the CAA, says, “Robert has changed Crowley totally.”

Mary Suire, the treasurer, adds, “Anything that needs to be done, Robert takes it beyond what is asked…he works morning ’til night. We feel so blessed to have him in the CAA. We really have a good time. [Having Robert here] is beyond anything we expected.”

Robert serves as the secretary as well as being responsible for
Robert shows he can take the simplest of items and turn them into Art!!! submitted photo

the displays, a job he heartily shares with Delana Rouse.

Shirley Griffin has been president of the CAA for two years and was so proud to show me the gallery, complimenting Robert's work as well as his pieces in the gallery. On prominent display is Robert's First Place Landscape from the Capitol City Juried Art Competition of 2008.

I'll close my profile with another story but not before adding...

Robert is currently working with UL-Lafayette on a Museum for the Blind, working for other charitable events, and he is continuing to bring the CAA into the national spotlight. He puts it like this, “If you’re doing something good, I’ll help you with it.”

We’ll go back a little for our story. Robert and Claire Decker, who’ve been friends for years, were asked to create a piece of art to complement a film series by Charles Larroque called Acadia: North and South. It starred Jimmy Mo and Carol Fran and was hosted by Zachary Richard. Well, the entire movie was in French. Robert and Claire first tried an interpreter, which only proved to be distracting. So, they just watched it, not understanding a word. Their creation was called “New Day” and spanned sixteen feet of the wall at Cite des Arts. Claire’s part showed the landscape of the rising sun; Robert’s portion was a menagerie of the colors of stained glass; and on both, they painted gravestones. Sacred under the sun, their shadows stretched long behind them over the landscape, over the stained glass, towards us, really.

Later, Robert and Claire would discover why the audience had tears in their eyes when the painting was unveiled. Throughout the film, Jimmy Mo kept singing, “Bury me under an oak tree in Louisiana.” The sentiment was too strong to bear for most people of this region as we all feel the same as Jimmy. But for these two artists to get that from watching a film they could not understand speaks to us of Robert’s heart; his genius and talent, his willingness to give it all freely to any of us, his ability to pull the art out of any of us (as artist or appreciator). These are the things that make Robert dear to all of us. And for any Louisianian, if a person is in your heart, they are in your family. No, Mobile can’t have their star back; we love him too much here.

Just call the folks at the Crowley Arts Association at 337-783-3747, and they will happily introduce you to Robert, show you his work, guide you to see other exhibitions, and tell you how to sign up for his classes.

If you would like to see Robert’s art, his website is www.robertbaxter4t.com.
Tucked away among the giant rice mills in Crowley lies one of the town’s best kept secrets, Old Tyme Cafe’. As you’re approaching the restaurant from West Oak St., don’t let the façade of the metal building that houses this Acadiana jewel fool you. Once you step into the café you’ll be over taken by the warmth of the décor and the tantalizing smells wafting from the kitchen. The feel of the interior is a little reminiscent of what you would imagine the “Whistle Stop Café” from the movie Fried Green Tomatoes might be like and the breakfast and lunch only menu of the café is one of the best around.

Owner Laura Benoit and her open-arm welcoming staff have been delighting locals since 2000 with authentic, Cajun, home-cooking. As I listen to Laura, I begin to understand not only her passion, but one of the secrets to her success. “I grew up on a rice farm and, of course, cooking was a huge part of growing up; preparing meals with my Mom and packing them up to take to the fields to the workers during planting and harvest time was just a way of life... just such a big part of our culture... so, owning a café just felt natural to me.” And, if you’re familiar with meals that get “sent out to the fields” in Acadiana, you know they just don’t consist of a cold-cut sandwich! Yes, Laura’s authentic cooking expertise is grounded in her true understanding of Cajun heritage and it is apparent in the café’s irresistible offerings, especially the weekday plate lunches. Plate lunch specials can range from sumptuous shrimp stew over rice topped with fried catfish to baked brisket with all the fresh sides like black eye peas, green beans and rice dressing. The portions of these daily home-cooked meals are enough to satisfy the biggest of appetites!

You’ll also delight in the regular menu items at Old Tyme Café’. Breakfast is served the entire time the restaurant is open (Monday – Friday 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.) and includes everything from hot, healthy oatmeal to the famous “Meat Lover’s Omelet” that is brimming with ham, bacon, sausage and cheese. Don’t forget to try the homemade hash browns! Lunch items, along with the daily lunch specials include “to die for” sandwiches, burgers, salads, soups, and regular entrées like a pork chop dinner for $9.50 that can be ordered grilled or fried. When asked about one of the café’s most popular items Laura paused and...