

A SUMMER FULL OF STARS

Biloxi — If the economy keeps people close to home for vacation this year, they'll be in good company with the stars on tour and coming to the Coast to add dazzle to summer.

The small venues give Coast residents and those driving and flying in practically a private concert with Pat Benatar and Blondie, and they will be among just over 1,000 people in the audience to hear Joan Rivers joke about being the 2009 Celebrity Apprentice.

"I think it's going to be a hot summer," said Duncan McKenzie, general manager of Hard Rock Casino Biloxi, highlighted by Melissa Etheridge's "Live & Alone" concert at the Hard Rock in August. With more than 500 seats already sold, "ticket sales are very brisk," McKenzie said.

The stars bring a buzz, and their loyal fans, to the Coast. Taylor Swift sold out in 10 minutes, and when she played the Mississippi Coast Coliseum in May she and her crew arrived with 13 semi-trailers of equipment and 14 tour busses. Her father also came for the show, said Coliseum Executive Director Bill Holmes. The mostly young girls and their moms in the audience spent an average of \$15 per person on merchandise.

Fans follow the stars to whatever venues they play. "It really does help build business," said Bradley Rhines, vice president of marketing and player development at IP Casino Resort in Biloxi. The resort has added thousands of new guests because of the entertainment, which he said opens a whole new niche and entices people to take a look at a new destination and a new resort.

"We're drawing more people here this year than last year," he said, and summer got off to a great start at the IP and other Coast casinos with a busy Memorial Day weekend. "We had a great one," he said.

Island View Casino in Gulfport hasn't booked a summer concert series this year. But the Isle Casino in Biloxi has picked it up and put together a series of concerts — all free.

“We did a little bit of rock’n’roll, a little bit of country,” said Kim Goetz, the Isle’s senior director of marketing, mixed with grass-roots entertainers. “Some of the acts will be inside in our atrium,” she said, and other concerts will be open-air seating in the parking lot.

“The stay-cation is the big thing now,” and Goetz expects the concerts to draw both locals and regional guests. “We’ve got some big acts coming,” starting June 7 with Jimi Jamison, former lead singer of Survivor, on the outdoor stage. Others such as Cowboy Mouth are local favorites, and Goetz said they looked to see who was routing through the area and would appeal to their customers. The standard draw for casino guests across the industry is the 45-to-65 age group, she said.

“It’s a great escape. Everybody loves music,” said McKenzie. “We are certainly rock’n’roll based,” he said, but Hard Rock books entertainers to appeal to all ages. Air Supply sold out last year and is back for two shows in July, and McKenzie said Hard Rock brings newer acts to Biloxi, including the Eli Young Band, which will perform July 17 at the Hard Rock Road House.

The same is true at IP Resort, where Rhines said Eddie Murphy’s brother, Charlie Murphy, has about 2 million hits on YouTube and is gaining a huge amount of momentum.

“We’re doing a lot more with Twitter and Facebook and social media,” said Mary Cracchiolo-Spain, spokeswoman for the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino. “People really enjoy coming to the Coast,” and she said they want lots to do. “They love to be dancing. They come to have fun.”

This year the Beau has a variety of edgier acts, classic performers and comedians, and fewer production shows. Guests have several entertainment options, she said, including the new dueling pianos and Club Tiki, where the first event June 18 will bring Tiffany and Vanilla Ice to the poolside party.

“We take really good care of entertainers. They like coming back,” said Cracchiolo-Spain. The casinos dedicate staff to making sure the celebrities enjoy their stay.

Hard Rock has a suite built for the entertainers with, and a piano on a balcony overlooking the pool and McKenzie said Bret Michaels, lead singer of Poison, came out on the balcony to entertain the guests at the pool.

Kenny Chesney first performed on the Coast as the headliner for the Crawfish Festival at the Coast Coliseum and Matt McDonnell, who books the acts at the Coliseum said, "We're very fortunate to get him back."

The Coliseum gets the biggest talent in the country to the televised wrestling matches, he said. "The production for wrestling is tremendous," he said. "It gives you the big effect right from the start."

Even Elvis will be on the Coast this summer when Silver Slipper Casino hosts a preliminary competition for the Ultimate Elvis® Tribute Artist contest, July 17 and 18. David Hilbert, events and promotions manager for Silver Slipper, said last year's national champion was Brandon Bennett of Ponchatoula. The top Elvis from among 15 contestants at the Silver Slipper will represent the Coast in qualifying rounds during Elvis Week 2009 in August.

Summer doesn't end until Cruisin' The Coast comes to town, and Rhines said this will be one of the best ever. "I think that will be just an outstanding week," he said, with Ronnie McDowell and Larry the Cable Guy.

The entertainment calendar is already pretty full at the IP, but Rhines said even more stars could be bound for the Coast. "We have lots of offers out there still."