

Concert Review

Music Taps a Wellspring of Spirituality

By Jerry Johnston

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In the 1960s, I was what people called a "folkie." I strummed my guitar and sang about love and peace. I'm surprised at how many young people still do that today.

In fact, a group of young singer-songwriters out there have won my heart. They are inspirational singers - many of them Christian - who are trying to get beyond differences and deepen our universal spiritual connection. Singers such as David Wilcox, Patty Larkin and Michael Kelly Blanchard don't promote a particular brand of religion, they promote "religiousness," along with all the sweet and tender things that entails. They are "spiritual without borders." I think a seldom-used word applies. They're modern "illuminists." And locally, the little Holladay United Church of Christ has been bringing them in one by one to perform in its Thayne Stark Memorial Concert Series.

Not long ago about a hundred of us showed up at the Holladay chapel to hear David Wilcox. There were Mormons there, Methodists, Evangelicals - maybe even a Buddhist or two. I ended up sitting with Michael McLean, the LDS songwriter whose songs are filled with enough faith to move mountain men. McLean and Peter Breinholt, in fact, are part of the LDS contribution to this new bunch.

Toward the end of the concert, Wilcox played a piece by Peter Mayer called "Holy Now."

Michael nodded. "You're going to love this," he said.

I listened. And I did. In fact, it left Michael with tears in his eyes.

So, needless to say, when the church announced Peter Mayer himself would be in from Minnesota to play, I was among the first to get there. Michael McLean - with his mother and sister - was not far behind.

I learned a lot about spirituality as I listened to Mayer. But more, I learned a lot about myself. I noticed when Mayer sang about spiritual matters, the songs resonated inside of me like a church bell. But when he changed the mood with comic and novelty songs - things got precious and cute in a hurry. That church bell became a jingling sleigh bell. To give his writing depth, Mayer needed to tap into the reservoir of religion.

And I realized it was the same with me. When I move away from spiritual topics, what I have to say gets pretty thin and tinny - like "tinkling brass." But when I'm able to poke that vein of spirituality - like a nurse with an IV - I find something full and flowing.

I spoke with Michael about that at intermission. He said it was the same with him. In fact, I decided, it was probably the same with most people in the room - maybe with most people everywhere. We're pretty simplistic and shallow on our own.

I had always known that, of course. It's an old lesson. That notion was there in the children's hymns I sang 50 years ago. And it was there again at the Holladay United Church of Christ, when Peter Mayer's sang his song, "Holy Now":

When holy water was rare at best,

it barely wet my fingertips,
but now I have to hold my breath,
like I'm swimming in a sea of it.
It used to be a world half there,
Heaven's second-rate hand-me-down,
but I walk it with a reverent air,
cause everything is holy now.