



G.E.F. Hosts Fred Wilhelm Songwriting Workshop

by Dennis Moon

Ten years ago there were over one thousand songwriters professionally employed in Nashville, one of the world's holy cities of song writing. Today there are only 300. Fred Wilhelm, born and raised in Granby, is one of them.

The Granby Education Foundation brought him back home for a songwriting workshop in the Media Room at Wells Road Elementary School. Over 40 enthusiasts, from 12 year olds to retirees, had gathered awaiting the one whose music has been recorded by Faith Hill, Rascal Flats, The Oak Ridge Boys and others. Some were songwriting enthusiasts hoping Fred would drop some bread crumbs that would lead them through the forest of the music industry into the open meadow of a record deal. Others were Fred Wilhelm enthusiasts, having grown up with him here in Granby, wanting to see if the high production glitz of Nashville has eclipsed the manure shoveling boy of Wilhelm farm.

We got bread crumbs aplenty. Fred, having just gotten off a plane, had a sense of urgency about him hoping to be able to get through his material in the appointed two hours. "I stir a lot of pots to make a living." He said, referring to the fact that he teaches songwriting, performs, records his own music and writes for others. He was implying that we better be ready to do the same if we're going to follow in his footsteps. "Like gardening," which he grew up doing on a large scale, "songwriting takes a life time to master...a songwriter is a lifelong learner." How do we learn? We "listen hard to music," not relegating it to the background soundtrack of our days. We "learn the songs," the bass lines, the beats, the melodies, the harmonies, the structure. We "read the lyrics," discovering the rhythm, internal rhymes, and images, which ultimately tell a story and make us a part of it. And we have to "learn songs across genres." Country, rock, jazz, R& B, pop, all have their unique styles that have to be learned and mastered in order to write in them. And then what this writer considered the tastiest breadcrumb of all: "You have to allow yourself to be stupid," he said, "which is why I am good at this."

"I have the best job ever," he said. "I sit around in a room with a couple of other people every day for 6-8 hours and think up musical and lyrical ideas for songs." He writes every day and in a year composes from 80 to 130 songs. "They are not all good," he said.

What does one do to become a published songwriter? Write: for yourself, your family, your friends. Go to songwriting workshops and conferences. Get criticism and accept it. Get your music up on the Internet. Enter song writing contests. Perform anywhere you can anytime you can.

Fred infected us all with the joy he has for songwriting. His openness opened us. His honesty about his craft and its business evaporated any fantasies of easy fame and fortune, but engendered a deep appreciation for the work. He left us with two basic rules for songwriting:

1. Don't be an @#&%*. "If you are difficult to work with, there is a line of 50 people behind you."
2. Perseverance is everything. "If you want to do this, you can, but you can't give up."

Those rules convinced me that the Nashville glitz has not eclipsed the manure shoveling boy of Wilhelm farm.