

You say you want a revelation?

Kate Grigg, Special to the Packet & Times
Thursday, January 21, 2016



SUBMITTED PHOTO Awesome Revelation, a local praise band with a warm, authentic sound, has released a CD called His Holy Word.

Awesome. That's what Rev. Ann of Westmount United Church said; they sounded awesome. If you need a name for the band, why not call it just that -- "Awesome."

But they couldn't call their praise band Awesome, not that one word on its own. It would sound like they were praising themselves when they wanted to do just the opposite. It was meant to be a ministry, the music they made, to draw the young as well as the old to church. Because if the band could incorporate all ages (the youngest, Jennie Davis, now 14, was seven at the time), if people could see them making music together, maybe they would see church differently, too.

It was true, things were changing: the family dynamic, technology, attending church on Sundays. But then things have always changed, things have gone in and out of style since time began, social customs, ways of life. Only human nature remains the same. People still need a reason to live and something to connect to and a way to face death.

And everything changing isn't such a big deal because the only change that matters is the kind that happens inside a person, for good or for bad. Whether people let life get them down, let their spirit fade or whether they renew themselves, find a new way of looking at the world. Which is what the band is all about, because hadn't Shelley Davis, band director and manager - Shell, as her friends call her -- herself had a change of outlook.

Not that she isn't still the girl she was. The girl who once took piano lessons with Mr. Death, so scary to a five-year-old, formal and imposing, strict about practising, intolerant of impudence. Although Shelley hadn't meant any offence, just told him one day (when she was nine) he shouldn't smoke; it wasn't good for him. And Mr. Death's answer had been, cool customer that he was, to suck deeply on his cigar and blow smoke across her face.

A character, Mr. Death, as was Court Stone, the composer with whom Shelley later took lessons and discovered a new side to music, a land of expression, not just discipline, to explore. She placed first at the Kiwanis Music Festival playing his Ottawa Valley Song. And although she later got tired of the rigours of advanced piano (by then with a different teacher), although she rebelled as a teenager and took up the drums -- playing with a kiltie band and later with the Orillia Concert Band, playing swing, playing with Jazzmatazz -- although she got an education and got married and got busy with work and kids, she never forgot the transformative power of music, the way it could open up paths in a person's heart and head.

As church later did. Shelley wanted to know what it was all about after she was married. Never paid much attention as a child, but now that she was attending church with her husband and his family, she wanted to know why they said Jesus died for our sins, what it all meant. And that's how she came to have a revelation, as Shelley describes it, after taking an Alpha course: that Jesus still mattered, he was real, not just a story.

And then it came to her, the idea of a praise band, using her musical ability for God's glory. Not that it was an instant success; she struggled to find the way at first. Concentrated on getting the right musicians instead of working with the people around her, embracing what she had. A thought a friend (Bob Hawkins) put in her head, and which turned out to be the key to the whole thing.

Because once Shelley (harmony vocals, piano, Rhodes keyboard, congas and tambourine) started looking in her own backyard, everything fell into place. Once she rounded up her son, Jeff (12 at the time), to play mandolin, acoustic and electric guitar, and her daughter, Jennie (bass guitar). Once she coaxed her friend, Heather McBride (lead vocals), to join; Heather, who had one of those lovely, genuine voices but who was shy; who had sung gospel with her aunt as a child and dreamed of becoming a singer one day but who got so nervous, she couldn't

even sing a Christmas carol in front of her co-workers without turning her back and facing the wall. Once Shelley had secured the versatile Ted "Teddy Bear" Godfrey to play drums and guitar and washboard. And urged Sandy Patrick, who was having such a difficult time, on sick leave from her job as a critical-care nurse, classically trained in piano and ill at ease with improvisation, who hadn't played for years, to give it a go. Once Sandy's two sons agreed to participate, Sean Patrick (banjo, acoustic guitar, vocals), the graphic designer who loves heavy metal and appeared at the Mariposa Folk Festival with the Griddle Pickers, and Dale Patrick (mandolin, acoustic guitar), a natural talent who plans on joining the police one day.

Once they all got together, something special did happen: an honest, warm sound, an aliveness and realness largely forgotten in a world of calculated, overproduced entertainment. A sound they took to other churches, to the band shell in the park (It's Friday, Thank God) and Elim Lodge in Peterborough. And recently put down on a CD called His Holy Word. Not for profit, not a penny in their pockets; for praise. Twelve songs (including one original) to touch all generations, Shelley says, blending all the different sounds in their hearts and natures into gospel and bluegrass, contemporary and rock, traditional hymns.

All those different ages and ways of being working in sync: moms in a band with their kids, one player Royal Conservatory-trained, another into heavy metal, a teenager who dreams of leaving behind her small town, a would-be cop, women of a certain age. Making something true, something genuine because they've forgotten themselves while gazing at a shared vision. One unlikely local band living proof the whole world could get along if it wanted to -- Awesome Revelation.

Copies of His Holy Word by Awesome Revelation are available from band members, at Tiffin's Creative Centre, Perfect Timing or by calling Westmount United Church at 705-326-9252.