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Music Review: Where, indeed, is Aubrey?

By: Bob Sherwood
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Guitar strings were breaking, the fiddle's bow was shredding. The music was vigorous, inventive and fresh, with touches of poetry tossed in for spice. The audience loved it. The musicians loved it. It was another great evening last Saturday in the intimate setting of the Sounds of Grace Coffeehouse series.

Gary McGraw plays fiddle with extreme energy and ingenuity. Rhine Singleton sings with raw exuberance, playing his guitar with imagination and skill. Together, they produce original, highly crafted quality music. Some singer-song writers crank out songs that all seem much the same. These two guys, who call themselves "Where's Aubrey," relish making each song a separate event, a nugget of insight, a perspective on life as we know it in America today.

The advance flyer told us we'd hear old time folk, country, blues and modern jazz. What it didn't warn us about was that these guys would often mix some or all of these genres into a single number. We also got a charming dose of their "swamp rock" and a great little song, "A Quarter for your Smile," written for Rhine's son on his graduation from eighth grade. Rhine did most of the singing, with Gary doing harmony on some tunes and singing solo on a few.

Some of their pieces would fall under the general heading of "protest" songs or "on the road" songs. They were "headin' down the river" or "leavin' town" for some better place. This is a rich vein in American thinking, but they modulate the theme by proclaiming gratitude for exactly where they are or where they've been, or explain that they're moving on for "one more chance to see you smile." Protest doesn't ring with great conviction, coming from two guys who appear to be quite gainfully employed. So these songs came across as samples of stuff they just like to do, and they furnish rich entertainment.

It's been noted that in small string groups, the fiddle rules. Its sound is more forceful than that of the guitar. In most of their songs Rhine takes the lead, singing the tune over his guitar. What does this leave for Gary's fiddle? Here's where Gary's genius shines. He doesn't play with Rhine. He plays around him, over him, near him. He finds ways to elaborate, counter, underscore, augment and jazz up what Rhine is playing. As the flyer said, Rhine would be "cloaked and hooded" by Gary. This makes their pieces more complex, more richly textured and more interesting than other folk music duos. This is not music a composer could write. It is far more spontaneous. It would probably be a disaster for two less capable musicians to try this, but Gary and Rhine have played together for 20 years, and it works! It makes them an outstanding musical treat.

Gary broke his leg on the ice a week before the concert. He was in pain. Yet he insisted the show go on. He played seated in a large orange armchair and made fun of his predicament. The stage was set to look like his room at home, complete with the armchair, fringed lamp shade, hat rack and pillows. In a way, the stage - with its microphones, laptop, wires, sound boards, cables, and speakers - gave the impression of a radio stage show. Somehow this visual effect intensified the music. After all, they were singing about common, familiar things and the stage setting gave just the right context.

Rhine has a great deal of talent as a writer. "Holes in my Pride" is a quietly reflective number, introspective, tender and brave. Another, identified as Eli's song, derived from a current best seller with a few added characters.

I liked two numbers in particular. In the middle of the first set they did a piece they described as weird. The fiddle screamed, things were off-key, parts were atonal, yet it held together. It had structure, coherence, a journey and resolution. The other piece was their finale, "One More Roadhouse." The song tells of being afflicted by the mud in Mobile, the rain in Memphis, the dust in Texas, and on across the country, all for "one more chance to see you smile." So much of their music is just simple things done right.

Another thing they did right was to donate their performance to benefit the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank. Nearly \$700 was raised for this charity.



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The next concert at Grace will be a Roots of American Music concert on March 10 at 7:30 p.m. Madeline MacNeil and Ralph Lee Smith, two premier mountain dulcimer players, will present a program of Appalachian songs and stories. A candlelight dinner will precede the concert at 6:30 p.m. For dinner reservations, please phone 540-955-1610.

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