

Review - The Wheat In The Barley.

Friday May 1 at the KCT presented by Kelowna Community Concert Association.

The Wheat in the Barley, as the name might suggest, is a folk music band. What exactly is folk music, you ask? Good question. The term once described the kind of music that is passed down orally from generation to generation. But the definition of folk musician seems to be steadily expanding – and now includes everyone from those troubadours of old to modern ‘indie-folk’ and even chart-topping folk-pop bands like Mumford and Sons. But when we hear the term ‘folk music’, most of us think immediately of Celtic music, or Appalachian or Yiddish or Cajun OR the great ‘Folk Scare’ of the 60’s..... The term also brings to mind political subject matter through songs of working people and songs of protest.

The Wheat in the Barley combined elements of all these traditions and styles in their Friday night concert. The five-member group is based in Vancouver BC, and consists of Steve Gidora (vocals, mandolin, guitars), Victor Smith (accordion, whistles, violin, flutes, guitar, bodhran), Mark Dowding (flutes, whistles, saxophones and harmonicas), Nicole Scoffield (vocals, violin), and Mickey Hovan (bass, guitar).

The audience was taken on a whirlwind musical vacation to a variety of cultures; from the British Isles to Eastern Europe to French Canada to the Southern States to South America and back home again to Western Canada. With remarkable skill on a wide variety of instruments, the group is able to explore and faithfully express the sounds from all these folk music traditions. A highlight of the show was a beautiful 300 year old Irish tune by Turlough O'Carolan featuring the flute mastery of Mark Dowding. As he said in the introduction, "it is a testament to the staying power of a good melody". Another audience favourite was an original Cajun song called Crawdad Fiasco, written by accordion player and percussionist Victor Smith. He called it a 'folkadian' song - explaining that Cajun music in Louisiana has a Canadian connection from the displaced Acadian people. Ironically, the least compelling parts of the show were when the band "moved up a few centuries" and performed some Canadian folk music pieces - a Blue Rodeo song and an original tune in particular. Still, what is perhaps most surprising about The Wheat in the Barley is that all the eclectic musical dabbling comes together in a coherent and satisfying concert experience.

People who are not familiar with the current folk music scene sometimes have the impression that musicianship is not a high priority in the genre. And it is true that in some folk music circles, musicianship plays ‘second fiddle’ to the story-telling, the poetry and/or the activist’s message, so the music is kept purposefully simple. But that certainly does not describe all folk music, and the stellar musicianship in this band is proof. Improvisational solos came from all band members - on violin, whistles (Mr Dowding plays two harmonizing penny whistles at the same time!) guitars, accordion, flute, sax and mandolins - and rarely failed to lift the appreciative audience to a new level of enthusiasm. Founding member Steve Gidora commanded the stage with a quiet authority earned by experience, as band members took their turn in the soloing spotlight. Nicole Scoffield (the bands fashion maven) provided excellent violin soloing and also stepped up to deliver an occasional lead vocal.

As a folk musician myself, I’m happy to see that accomplished folk bands like The Wheat In The Barley are out there representing for the great folk music traditions - and opening minds and hearts to the wealth of down-to-earth artistry within the many folk cultures. Raise a pint (or a wee dram of scotch) with me, won’t you, to the joy of folk music and to The Wheat in the Barley.

Andrew Smith is a Kelowna-based musician, song-writer and music producer.