

Notes from Heaven

By Lynn Nickles

Photography by
Allen Anderson

From opposite sides of the Midlands, two musicians write songs that unite worshippers and change lives. Jeremiah Jones and Sharon Von Fange are among the growing number of Christian musicians integrating contemporary praise-and-worship music into church services.

“We still do hymns,” says Jeremiah Jones, worship arts pastor at Radius Church in Lexington. “We just do them in a style we like to play.”

Sharon Von Fange, a member of Northeast Presbyterian Church, says, “I love anything that draws the body together and gets people on the same page, and has them worshipping God and taking it into the week with them.” She adds, “These songs are...very accessible to the common man, and that’s what Martin Luther did for the Bible.”

Jeremiah says that at Radius, his praise band plays the kind of music you’d hear on the radio, but based on Scripture. “I realize that not all styles of music resonate with all people,” he says. “For someone who is even resistant to [praise-and-worship music], I would say, as long as it’s coming from an authentic place in the believer’s heart, and they are able to sing to God, sing about God, and engage with other people...then that’s church music... whether you are playing electric guitars or you’re playing organ.”

*He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God. Many
will see and fear and put their trust
in the Lord (Psalm 40:3).*

Jeremiah’s Radius band recently released a CD called *Let It All Be for You*, featuring ten of Jeremiah’s original compositions. Most of these songs were written for whole congregations to sing during Sunday services and for individual worshippers to carry throughout the week. With the title track of the CD, the Radius band recently won the WMHK Radio contest, My Church Band Really Rocks.

The CD jacket reads, “It is our prayer that the songs on this disc serve as a vehicle on the winding road toward God. They are not an end, merely a means to inspire you to keep moving forward.” The last track, “Blessed Redeemer,” is a soothing, acoustic worship song based on Isaiah 53. Because his church has communion every Sunday, Jeremiah says he is always looking for songs about the cross and the sacrifice Jesus made on it.

Instrumental in planting new churches in Clemson, Greenville, Atlanta, Athens and Lexington, Jeremiah believes that music helps draw people to a church. “People who are not churched come in [to Radius] and say, ‘I really like the music.’” Jeremiah believes that captures their attention and makes them want to return.

The oldest of eleven children and a Clemson graduate, Jeremiah learned to play the guitar as a young teen, influ-

enced by singer James Taylor and some obscure Christian “tooth and nail” bands from California, he says. Being home-schooled from fourth through ninth grades gave him “more time to learn how to play and to really learn how to worship, to dig into Scripture even as a young kid and find a way to express myself to God through music.” Now, he and wife Becca can teach their children — Lila, one, and Jackson, three — to do the same thing.

Jeremiah further cultivated his musical gifts at Ocean Drive Presbyterian Church in North Myrtle Beach, where the youth director encouraged him to lead worship. Jeremiah found that he was able to engage people and help them learn to “worship God in a real way.”

Even before he went to college, Jeremiah performed opening acts for Third Day, Sixpence None the Richer, and Andrew Peterson. The Radius CD reflects that level of performance and is available from several different outlets, including iTunes, Rhapsody, CD Baby, and Amazon.com.

“My life goal is to write songs that cross denominational lines and will be more universal,” Jeremiah says. “But I write what I write.” And what he writes comes from his understanding of the Scriptures. Besides the melody, he needs the theology to be right, he says. “You want to be saying something that is relevant to where the church is and where you are.”

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12).

Sharon Von Fange believes that praise-and-worship music often emanates from “a very powerful sort of Ebenezer stone in somebody’s life...remembering our past victories.

“A lot of songs that really seem to penetrate a lot of hearts and cross denominational lines are songs that have come out of an experience in someone’s life,” she says. Many of her own compositions are narratives that are personal to her and those close to her. They are created mainly for solo performance. “I can lead people to worship corporately,” Sharon says, “but that is not really where God has gifted me, and I know that.”

At Northeast Presbyterian Church, the winsome musician is known to play a wide variety of instruments — guitar, keyboard, melodica (a type of harmonica) and penny whistle. Her bass guitar was a gift from her husband, Steve, and three sons — Joshua, twenty; Jesse, eighteen; and Brian, seventeen.

Sharon delights in spending time with other musicians, particularly through the Musicians & Songwriters Guild of South Carolina. “I just love musicians in general,” Sharon says. “I’ve always had a heart for them. I know how insecure most of us really are deep down, how fragile a lot of

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Listen to songs by Sharon Von Fange at
www.myspace.com/sharonvonfange;

by Jeremiah Jones at
www.myspace.com/jeremiahjonesmusic.com.

us are, if truth be known. I love to encourage musicians. And [being in the Guild] gives me the opportunity to do that, in some really unusual arenas, too. I get to pray with people in bars sometimes.”

The Guild has produced two CD’s that feature Sharon’s work. A gospel CD, available in the gift shop at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, in-



cludes Sharon’s bluesy song, “Where Can I Go?” Bolstered by Dan Gibbs’ electric guitar, Sharon sings soulful lyrics based on Psalm 139.

Sharon also wrote a ballad for the title track of *A Place for Us*, a commemorative CD produced by the Guild for Palmetto Health Children’s Hospital. It is available at www.aplaceforuscd.com.

She is slated to play one of her songs during the offertory at Northeast Presbyterian’s morning worship services on September 13, a day the church has set apart to focus on missions. Written after a recent trip to visit her son Joshua in Shanghai, the song, “Salt,” is based on the verse, “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:5-6).

God has put all his people in places, both near and far, where they can have a positive impact on others, Sharon believes. “It starts by just noticing them, seeing them, looking them in the eye. You know, your smile might be the only one they’ve seen all day long.”

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and, most importantly, show your teen your own heart of love for God. Practice what you know to be right as taught in Scrip-

ture. “Bring up your child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).

The world and its allurements make our teens vulnerable. New technologies bring them closer to all manner of temptation and push them farther away from your values. Through cell phones, computers, television, radio, peers and school, your child receives a lot of input from others. They are vulnerable in the fight against the flesh. They discover their powers of intellect and personality. These years reveal the raw self — physical and emotional changes plus untamed thoughts and emotions that focus on pleasing self. Your job is to train and redirect your teens toward humility for the honor and glory of God.

As with Adam and Eve, your teen’s choice is instant gratification or patiently trusting God for what He has in store. Given increasing powers of reason, your teen will be tempted to “see that it is good to the eyes” or to trust the opinion of another who declares that God only wants to prevent us from being like Him. The temptation is always to believe that God is not good after all.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, a series of events were set in motion. God did not ignore the behavior and hope they would do better later. He did not go back on His promise: if they ate of the tree, they would surely die. This was a severe consequence, and one that God implemented without waffling. Adam and Eve no longer would enjoy the garden of God’s favor, fellowshiping directly with Him. They were separated from God and cast out of the garden. God set the clear limit and implemented the promised consequence. But that did not conclude His heart of love toward His children.

Instead, from the garden until now, God has demonstrated His love toward His children through the promise and then the fulfillment of the gospel. That is, the birth, obedient life, death and resurrection of Christ — the complete restoration of God’s fatherly relationship with those who call upon His name.

God has loved us when we were still sinners and hated Him; was not embarrassed by our bad behavior; did not compare us to others in His family who were better behaved; did not shame us and tell others about our sins; still does not ask why we can’t do things the right way, though we fail repeatedly. And most important of all, He continues to pursue a relationship with us in spite of how we have rebelled against him through the ages. The Maker of Heaven and Earth seeks *us* out. He produces such love and thankfulness in our hearts that, at last, we seek Him. This is the pattern for parenting teens.

By the power and control of the Holy Spirit in your lives, you can extend to your children the same steadfast love and discipline God demonstrated toward you. The healing is in the relationship.

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