

Band tunes up for Christian rock fest

Seven-hour Rock the River West event will be staged next weekend at Telus Field

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Mario Toneguzzi

Over the years, music has played an important role in shaping people's lives, particularly youth.

No one can deny the influence music, for instance, had during the 1960s, when the world was turned upside down in many ways. Lives changed. Ways of thinking changed.

Tim Neufeld, lead singer of Christian rock band Starfield, has experienced the impact of music on his own life since the Winnipeg group was formed in 1999 out of the Riverwood Church Community. He grew up in the church and his first encounter with music was through the church. So the formation of the band came naturally: from who they were as people, what they believed and how they were brought up.

"It's the expression of our hearts and it's something we're pretty passionate about," Neufeld said in a recent interview.

The band's passion will be on display Saturday, Aug. 28 at Edmonton's Telus Field as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association of Canada puts on the Rock the River West music festival, featuring Starfield, other Christian bands and sermons from world-renowned preacher Franklin Graham.

"First and foremost, it's a medium for us to just honestly communicate our faith journey through music," said Neufeld. "It's maybe a little different than some of the other Christian musicians out there in that I feel I need to be honest about struggles and not just about the kind of running through the fields of daisies with Jesus.

"I think it's an inaccurate one-dimensional representation of what Christianity is about if it's just all happy, happy, joy, joy all the time, because it's certainly not my experience.

"And it's certainly not the experience of the biblical characters that we herald; of those after the heart of God. The people that we look to as the heroes of the faith are the ones that were usually the most mixed up and I think sometimes in watered down western 21st-century Christianity we tend to forget that. It's typical of our society wanting to make everything simple and easy."

The first Rock the River tour attracted tens of thousands of people last year with a series of daylong concerts along the Mississippi River.

"For so many young people, their lives are upside down and in a mess and they don't even know why," said Franklin Graham, president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and international relief organization Samaritan's Purse.

"That's why I'm so excited to have this opportunity to share the message of God's love with all of these young people. It's a chance to change thousands of lives."

Graham, son of world-renowned evangelist Billy Graham, is a controversial figure for his passionate defence and straightforward message of the Christian faith. The younger Graham has made comments about other religions such as Islam that have landed him in hot water. Earlier this year, the Pentagon rescinded an invitation for Franklin Graham to attend the National Day of Prayer event because of those past comments.

The Edmonton event is scheduled for 2:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Other bands include Flyleaf, Skillet, Hawk Nelson, LeCrae and Downhere. Cost is \$10 at the gate or online at RocktheRiverTour.com.

The tour stops in Calgary today at Canada Olympic Park and took place earlier this month in B.C.'s Fraser Valley.

Neufeld said Christian music is maturing in that it's willing to take a few more risks about the topics it tackles in songs. He says it is better and more culturally relevant.

"Christian music is a niche. And it's not ever going to be accepted as the cool, contemporary kind of voice for the majority of the population, but I think it can do a great job at what it is," he said.

"It's never going to be the cool, accepted music of the culture. It shouldn't be, I don't think. It's not designed to be. The Gospel is supposed to be offensive and it's supposed to dig (at) and annoy people. And if it's not doing that, then it's probably not truly Christian music.

"My hope always is that Jesus is the star and that it's an event that points people toward Him and mentors people in that relationship. I think the Billy Graham Association has done a great job of that over the years. And if that's what's happening and people are coming to Christ and lives are being changed because they were able to come to this event, I'm all for it."

Neufeld said the tour is helping bring churches together.

"Any time that happens, I think it's a good thing because churches traditionally don't get along all that well," he said.

Fred Weiss, executive director of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association of Canada, said the organization excited about involvement of local churches in the Christian rock event. More than 170 churches have participated in some fashion.

"That's one of our goals: to help the church work together to impact a community. We see that has taken place," said Weiss, adding the event has also involves youth community action projects where young people have come together to improve different communities in different ways.

Weiss is confident the artists performing in Rock the River will resonate with youth.

"These are people who are very well known in music circles both in the secular world and also in the Christian music world. They've all been affected by the message of the Gospel. Kids look up to musicians. They appreciate where they're coming from and will listen to them because these people can relate what they've experienced in their relationship with God."

Tianna Heltman, a 17-year-old Rock the River volunteer from Sherwood Park, agreed.

"So many of my friends at school don't know who God really is and this is a way for them to come and listen to music and hear more about God," said Heltman, who is going into Grade 12 at Bev Facey Community High School.

"It would be sweet to get them turned on to who God is."

Volunteer Randy Young, youth pastor at The Park Church in Sherwood Park, hopes the festival changes lives: "This isn't just a one-day festival where kids come and go. Rock the River Tour could be an experience that could impact young people in Edmonton for the rest of their lives."

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