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Healing Blues project: Suffering expressed through songs

By Dawn DeCwikiel-Kane/News & Record dawn.kane@news-record.com Apr 27, 2014



Songwriters Terry Vuncannon and Janice Hamby Vuncannon listen to Interactive Resource Center client Shannon Stewart at the IRC in Greensboro, N.C. on April 21, 2014.

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GREENSBORO -- Shannon Stewart tapped his feet to the music, nodding his head and smiling with recognition.

At moments, he appeared to fight back tears, then quickly recover.

Terry VunCannon played his Dobro guitar as Steve Headen sang:

“I hit the streets

At 10 years old.

‘Go with your daddy’

Is what I was told.

He lost our home,

My path was clear.

You’re a walking man,

You can’t stay here.”

They were singing Stewart’s life story.

Terry VunCannon and his wife, Janice Gatton-VunCannon, became songwriting partners with Stewart through The Healing Blues project.

Ted Efremoff and Dave Fox created this effort to turn stories of the struggling into blues songs.

Efremoff found inspiration when the local Open Art Society announced plans to fill empty downtown storefronts with art installations that celebrate the blues, in a city that hosts the annual Carolina Blues Festival on May 17.

“I started thinking, ‘What are the blues about?’” said Efremoff, who teaches art at Greensboro College. “They are a way to deal with your suffering. How do we help people do that?”

His answer: Set up a cafe where musicians could gather with those experiencing homelessness, post-traumatic stress disorder, abuse and other troubles and trauma, so that they could create songs together.

“It’s a therapeutic way to expose their problems, but also memorialize their problems by putting them into music,” Efremoff said. “That’s the root of the blues.”

Efremoff shared his idea with Fox, a Greensboro College colleague and musician. Fox recruited local blues musicians.

“We are finding a way for blues musicians to help and serve their community, by using their art,” Fox said.

Efremoff asked college art majors Julia Fergus and Gabrielle Harvin to help with the artistic side.

He and Fergus created an art installation at Mosaic Piano Service, 612 S. Elm St., where storytellers could drop off their prose and poetry. About 30 people responded.

He contacted the Interactive Resource Center, a day center for the homeless that hosts writing workshops where storytellers could meet with songwriters.

Elsewhere, the downtown thrift store turned living history museum at 606 S. Elm St., agreed to host gatherings.

So far, three teams have produced songs: songwriter Kristy Jackson and storyteller Isiahm Wardlow, songwriter Mike “Wezo” Wesolowski and storyteller Anita Gilmore, the VunCannons and storyteller Shannon Stewart.

“It was the coolest thing we have done in a long time,” Janice Gatton-VunCannon said.

Efremoff and Fox expect seven to nine more.

Those songs will be recorded on “The Healing Blues” CD. Storytellers and songwriters will share credit.

They hope to finish songs by late spring, record them by late fall and release the CD next spring.

Producing the CD likely will cost less than \$10,000, Efremoff said. They plan to conduct an online fundraising campaign to finance it, with help from the Piedmont Blues Preservation Society.

A fundraising concert and CD proceeds will benefit the IRC.

“I hope it opens up a dialogue on the plight of the homeless,” Headen said of the project.

On a rainy April Saturday, local storytellers gathered at Elsewhere with songwriters — musicians Fox, Wesolowski, Jackson and Sam Frazier. Terry VunCannon and Headen of the group Lawyers, Guns & Money. Doug Mokaren of the Piedmont Blues Preservation Society.

Wesolowski performed “I Come From a Place,” based on a poem that Gilmore published in the Greensboro Voice.

Jackson took the prose of Isiahm Wardlow to compose “So I Write.”

She played keyboard as she began:

“Sometimes my voice isn’t strong enough to share how I really feel

So I write.

Sometimes I feel invisible, but my words prove I exist

So I write.”

Jackson has quite a songwriting career. Reba McIntire scored a hit with Jackson’s “Take It Back.”

Another of Jackson’s songs, “Little Did She Know (She’d Kissed a Hero),” became the most requested song on major New York radio stations after 9/11.

She found common ground with Wardlow, who loves “So I Write.”

“Even though this was born out of Isiahm’s words, it completely related to me,” Jackson said. “We both have this common thread of why we write.”

Stewart couldn’t be there to hear his song. So the VunCannons and Headen brought their song to him.

Two days later, they met at the IRC.

People who are homeless gather here during the day to take showers, do laundry, write and create art, and get help finding jobs, housing and medical care.

Stewart, 42, is among them.

For two hours in March, he had shared his story with the VunCannons.

He described how his parents split up, how his father ended up homeless, how he spent his teen years in foster homes.

Now, Stewart lives in a tent near the IRC.

A cross, reminiscent of one his mother gave him, hangs around his neck. He carries his late father’s worn ID, the only picture that Stewart has of him. They are his prized possessions.

He fears telling his own two sons that he is homeless. He hopes that will change by next year, when one graduates from college. He wants to be there.

“I sit in that tent nights and think, ‘How did I get myself in this situation?’ ” he said. “And the biggest question: ‘How you getting out?’ ”

At the IRC, he displays his talent for art. He helped create the giant cast-aluminum spoons that serve as its front door handles.

When he’s not in the IRC or his tent, he gets around town on his bike and his legs. Hot or cold, dry or rain, he walks.

The VunCannons contemplated that life as they wrote “I’m Walking.” They worried about Stewart’s reaction.

“We carried the responsibility of telling someone else’s story,” Terry VunCannon said.

Eyes were on Stewart as Headen sang:

“A halfway house, picture ID

Is all my daddy could leave to me

I’m walking

A homemade cross hanging ’round my neck,

The things you save, when your life’s a wreck

I’m walking

I’m a man of peace, just let me be

It’s hell or jail if you mess with me

I’m walking.”

As the last guitar notes sounded, the room erupted in applause.

“Oh, I love it, I love it,” Stewart said.

He’s pleased that Terry VunCannon, Headen and Mike Thomas — as Lawyers, Guns & Money — will perform the song at the Carolina Blues Festival on May 17.

Like the door handles at the IRC, the song is part of Stewart’s legacy.

“I refuse to go through this homeless thing without leaving something behind,” Stewart said. “When I come up out of it, they are going to know I have been here.”

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Listen to "So I Write"



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Apr 27, 2014

Want to know more?

To learn more about The Healing Blues project, contact Ted Efremoff at ted.efremoff@greensboro.edu.

Want to go?

What: The Healing Blues songwriter/storyteller session

When: 1-4 p.m. May 10

Where: Elsewhere, 606 S. Elm St.

Information: ted.efremoff@greensboro.edu.

More online:

Find The Healing Blues on Facebook.