

Old Church Concerts Provide Intimate 'Listening Room' For CT's Musicians



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At a small, unassuming church in Rocky Hill, Mike Wilcox hosts monthly concerts featuring some of Connecticut's greatest musical talent, both known and unknown.

Now in its second full season, the Old Church Concert Series programs two or three artists per bill. The first concert, on Sept. 15, pairs singer-songwriters Shannon Mulready and Em Betts with post-Americana band Lines West.

"The whole concept was straightforward and simple," Wilcox says. "I wanted a place where local musicians of any genre can be heard. It's a listening room."



Mike Wilcox also helps organize Hebron's Podunk festival. (Courtesy of Michael Wilcox)

For 16 years, Wilcox volunteered with Hebron's popular Podunk Bluegrass Festival, serving as both the president and vice president. He's currently the executive director.

Along the way, Wilcox and his wife, Kate Garrahy, fell in love with local music. At Podunk, they created the non-bluegrass Acoustic Stage, giving Connecticut-based artists a chance to perform alongside national acts.

It wasn't enough.

"We'd go to bars, but you can't hear them sing," Wilcox says. "People are gabbing all the time. I wanted to find a way to let them be heard rather than have them fight over the noise."



Post-Americana band Lines West plays this season's first concert on Sept. 15 at the Rocky Hill United Methodist Church. Also on the bill are Shannon Mulready and Em Betts. (Courtesy of Lines West)

Driving down Main Street in Rocky Hill one day, Wilcox and Garrahy spotted a sign at the United Methodist Church that said "rent us."

"I approached them, and they said, 'yep,'" Wilcox says.

First-year performers in the series, which ran from January to May of 2017, included Robert Fullerton, Richard Neal, Kenn Morr, the honeycreepers, Kierstin Sieser, Seth Adam, Julia Russo, Podunk Throwback, Lys Guillorn, Andrea Paquin, the Ebin-Rose Trio, Eric Lichter, Ponybird and Them Damn Hamiltons.



Kathy Muir plays with Rivers and Seat Of Our Pants on Oct. 13. (Courtesy of Kathy Muir)

Feedback from the performers and audience has been overwhelmingly positive. Soups, pies and cups of coffee, prepared by congregation members, are for sale and disappear in minutes. The church seats 100 but feels slightly crowded at that number.

"It's a really good environment for audience," Wilcox says. "Where else can you hear three performers, have some soup and pies and for \$20?"

Wilcox welcomes donations from the audience; some attendees, Wilcox says, give way more than the \$5 he asks for. He also sells program ads to local businesses. Donations go to the musicians.



Connecticut State Troubadour Kate Callahan performs Nov. 17 with Shannon McMahon and The Sawtelles. (Courtesy Kate Callahan)

Alan Venitosh, director of operations at TELEFUNKEN Elektroakustik, a South Windsor microphone manufacturer, is a fan and series benefactor.

"Alan gives me the microphones, and then, on occasion, he comes over and he runs the sound and records it, and I just get to sit back and watch," Wilcox says.

Also booked for Season Two: Kathy Muir, Rivers and Seat Of Our Pants (Oct. 13); Shannon McMahon, Kate Callahan and The Sawtelles (Nov. 17); and Among the Acres and Rebecca Kessler (Dec. 15).



Among the Acres plays with Rebecca Kessler in the season's final concert on Dec. 15. (Courtesy of Among The Acres)

Wilcox, who worked in IT for over 30 years and has plans for a third season, refers to his new duties as his "retirement job."

"I'm out there soliciting people to take out ads," he says. "I live on Social Security. I paid for most of last year's series. If I can get enough companies to take out an ad, boom, I'm done. Then I can just make it happen. It's my passion."

THE OLD CHURCH CONCERT SERIES presents *Shannon Mulready, Em Betts and Lines West on Sept. 15 at 7 p.m. at the Rocky Hill United Methodist Church. Donations taken at the door.* oldchurchconcerts.com



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