

Arts & LIFE

Acoustic Blend Café brews up support for local musicians

By Julie Slack
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

A new opportunity for aspiring musicians who want to perform has arrived in Milton.

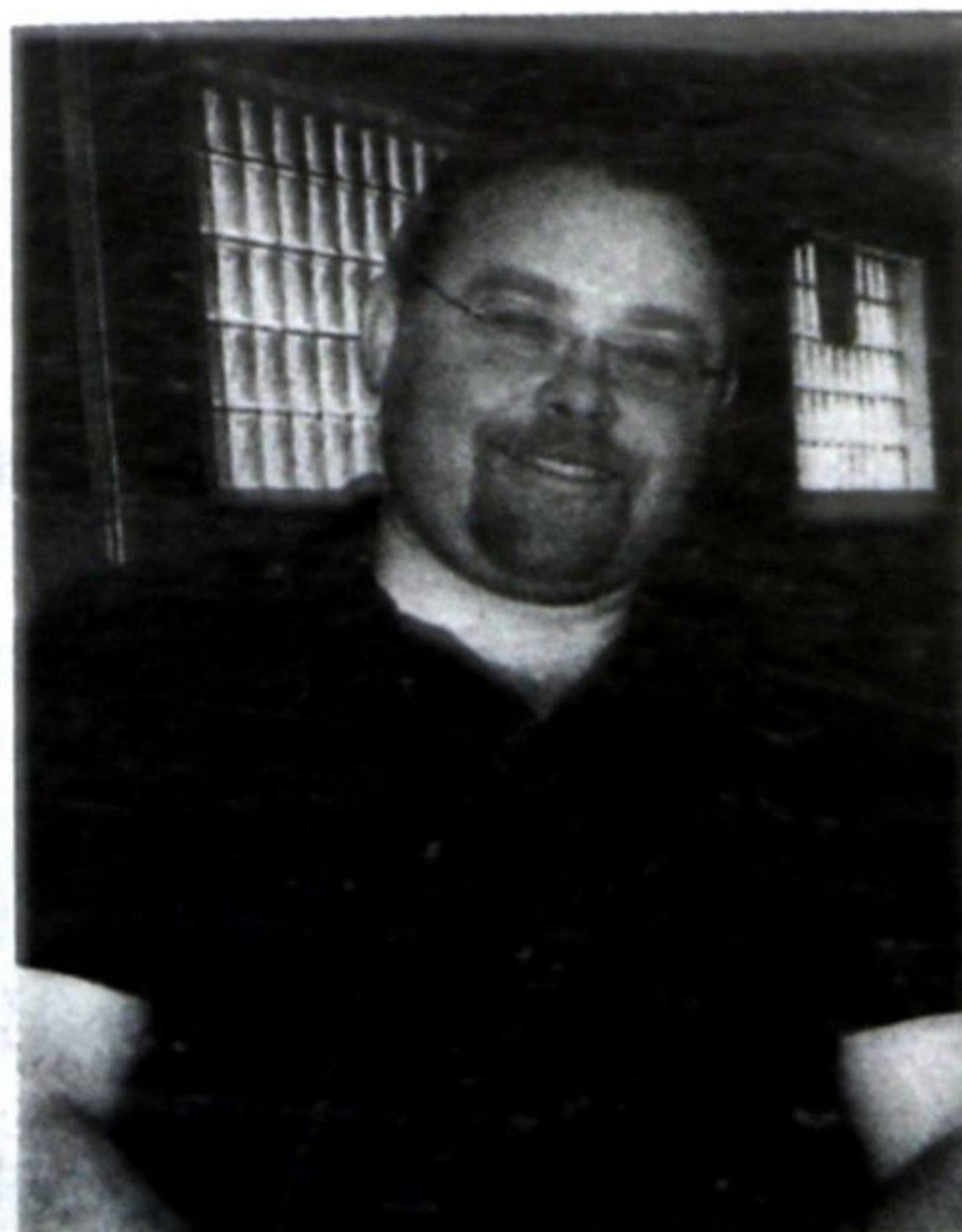
Acoustic Blend Café promotes local performers and businesses.

Jason Hales is the mastermind behind the concerts. A long-time musician/teacher at Long and McQuade in Burlington, he said he wanted to give young Canadians a chance to perform in an intimate setting and meet other like-minded musicians.

His first Acoustic Blend Café, which holds concerts in the Parlour at Melrose United Church in Hamilton, started small with only about 10 people, but within a year, it grew to need more space in the church's auditorium. Now it's celebrating eight successful seasons.

"I wanted to provide an opportunity for emerging artist to be in the spotlight," he said. "Give them a chance up front — not as background music at a bar or a pub, so that the audience can sit and focus on what they do."

The format of the evening is cozy and comfortable, with a coffee-table type set up for three or four people per table, with candle-lit (non-flame) tea-lights, and intimate room lighting in a small area. There are coffee house-style refreshments and coffee and tea. The Legion pro-



Jason Hales is the man behind Acoustic Blend Café, which offers stage-time to up-and-coming as well as professional musicians and performers. At right, Mia and Ben Hackett, of Azalea, rehearse at the Milton Legion Hall, where they'll be performing Saturday.

Julie Slack / Canadian Champion



vides a cash bar.

The first portion of the evening is an open mic for those performing for the first time and the pros. Hales has invited some of his own music students to come out to do their songs. They can choose to bring their own instrument if they prefer. Four performances are permitted each night to give them a chance to perform in front of an audience, learn and grow.

"It doesn't matter if they can do *Twinkle Twinkle* or play like Eric

Clapton, everyone is welcome," said Hales. "Over the years in Hamilton we have had eight-year-olds playing piano, pros doing a movement from the Bach cello suites, comedians, poets, and various singer/songwriters."

"I encourage other teachers to bring their students out so they have a chance to work through their nerves and work out their kinks before exams and recitals."

As the name suggests, all shows are acoustic in nature, so no elec-

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fourth full-length album as Azalea, with Mia on piano and vocals and Ben on guitar and vocals.

The pair met through music and began writing their own together shortly thereafter. Both had given writing a shot, but until they joined forces, they had been unable to complete a song they were happy with. That is many years ago.

Fast forward to today, and they're performing regularly at venues in Hamilton and beyond. They also perform house concerts — bringing the party right to people's living room. People can sell tickets and Azalea will perform.

And you'll quickly see how they win you over with their unique style of music that evokes romance and feeling, both with the lyrics and the way they interact on stage. Azalea's like a love story through music — something beautiful to experience. Mia says they've met many friends through the intimate setting that is well-received by all who've had a chance to experience it.

The next show at the Milton Legion Hall, 21 Charles St. on Saturday, Nov. 19, begins at 8 p.m. The cost is \$15. Upcoming shows include Aubrey Wilson Quartet on Jan. 21; Piper Hayes on March 4, Matt Zaddy on April 1 and Stuart Laughton's Radio Dial on May 6.

To learn more, go to www.acousticblendcafe.ca or for more on Azalea, go to <http://azaleamusic.net>.

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