

Nashville, Stouffville style

Songwriters on their way to country stardom bare their souls and lyrics

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STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

They're getting by with a little help from their friends.

Lyricists, musicians, singers and wannabe stars — all of them songwriters at heart — gather once a month in Stouffville to bare their souls and hone their songwriting craft with the Nashville Songwriters Association.

The aim is to get songs ready for the commercial market while helping the hobby songwriter improve his craft.

"People tend to think because of the name that we only do country, but you'll hear everything from country to pop, folk and blues," said Don Quarles, who started the Stouffville branch of Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI).

Quarles acts as a resource for the group, supplying books and keeping tabs on songwriting Web sites.

At workshops, held at the Stouffville train station on Main Street, he starts by leading the group through songwriting exercises, sharing tips he's picked up from professional songwriters.

The second part of the evening is where fragile egos are exposed. That's when anyone who brings a song is welcome to share it and get feedback from the group.

"Some just bring a verse and a chorus," said Quarles, a Stouffville resident who works as a food and beverage manager at Toronto's Hummingbird Centre, where he gets a behind-the-scenes look at show business.

Others, like songwriter James Norton, who attended his first meeting last month, bring a near-finished product.

"It's great just to get out and be with other songwriters," Norton enthused. "It gets kind of lonely holed up in my studio all the time."

Norton said his song *Crazy Over You* placed in the top four in a recent radio station contest, winning him free studio time to record his song. He's been involved in some way with various rock bands over the years.

"I was a Sunshine Boy in 1984," he boasted. "I was young. I was in a band then — leather pants and everything."

But he has changed. "Now all I want to do is write."

The song Norton brought to the workshop? Quarles said he thought it was repetitive.

"But from a commercial standpoint that's a good thing," he said.

A regular at the workshop, Don Maitland attends to be exposed to other songwriters. He dusted off a song he wrote 22 years ago to perform it for the group recently. He says the hardest part about the workshop is baring your soul. Still, he hopes it'll be worth it some day.

Don Quarles (right) leads the Stouffville songwriters workshop, part of the Nashville Songwriters Association, which meets at the Stouffville train station. From left are Shae Ayerhart, Jeanette Woodley, Don Maitland, James Norton, Paul Aird, Maggie Hanes, Jim Hood and Robert and Ellen Musgrove.

"I want to be a star," he admitted, laughing. "Why not?"

Songwriters are asked to bring about a dozen copies of their lyrics to be pass around, allowing the group to take part in this exercise. Some members bring a recording of their song while others tote their guitars and sing.

Suggestions from fellow songwriters range from advice on which instruments to record with to a critique of the lyrics, melody, chords and rhythm of the song.

"It's done gently," said Marion Drexler, of the local band of the same name.

"It makes you tough," songwriter Ellen Musgrove said. "And you learn something every time you come here."

Ellen and her brother Robert Musgrove come from Toronto for the

workshop, one of two groups meeting in Southern Ontario.

At age 15, Shae Ayerhart is the youngest workshop member and he's not shy about it.

"I get together with some friends to write, but we just never get down to it. Most people my age don't like criticism," he said. "Being with experienced songwriters is a great learning experience."

It was on a recent visit to Nashville for the huge Tin Pan South songwriters festival that Quarles pitched a song to big-time publishers for the first time.

"It was fantastic," he said. "Nashville is a place that respects the songwriter over the artist. I'd like to make Stouffville more like Nashville."

The next NSAI workshop will be held Tuesday, June 13 at 7:30 p.m. at the Stouffville train station. All are welcome.

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