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Christian pop artist performs in Whitchurch-Stouffville
Bell tries to present positive face

BY FRANK KING
Staff Writer

One of Canada's most successful Christian pop artists admits he's often embarrassed by the antics of his faith's evangelical members.

"The Christian church has so much intellectual wealth, but spends most of its time acting like politicians — slamming each other," says Steve Bell, a 40-year-old, Juno Award-winning singer/songwriter/guitarist. "I want the Christian faith to grow up and tell the world what we're good for."

Bell will have a chance to tell Whitchurch-Stouffville residents when he performs a solo concert 6 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 26 at Springvale Baptist Church, 3885 Stouffville Road. There is no admission charge, though there will be a free-will offering.

The show won't be all serious and issues-oriented. While Bell's concerts concentrate on his folk-pop arrangements, exquisite acoustic guitar work and Dan Fogelberg-like voice, they also feature him telling hilarious stories and one-liners that keep audiences laughing.

It's a winning formula. Since releasing his first Christian pop album in 1989, he's gone on to quietly become one of the country's most consistent and successful artists.

His catalogue — released through his own, Winnipeg-based Signpost Communications label — now includes five studio discs (including 1997's *Romantics & Mystics*, which earned a Juno as best gospel recording), a best-of compilation, a live album and two videos.

In total Bell has sold 160,000 CDs.



Singer/guitarist/songwriter Steve Bell

Now that's microscopic in the mainstream world, but in gospel music it's huge — especially in Canada, where there are very few opportunities to get played on radio, and very few mainstream music stores stock the albums. (They're mostly available at Christian book/music stores or through Bell's Web site, www.steve-bell.com).

"I'm surprised a major label hasn't shown interest," he says. "In prayer time I say to God 'don't you like me?' But the more I see of the industry, the more I think God's protected me. We've just been blessed to have been rejected by the major labels."

For his newest recording, *Simple Songs*, Bell set aside his pop sensibilities and returned to a stripped-down, acoustic approach that features only him, a guitar and a mandolin. In other words, it's an attempt to present Bell as he sounds on the stage. And that's not necessarily what his small U.S. label wants.

"My American label would like me to do more for its agenda," he admits. "But I want to be happy with my work. My manager and I have had long talks about where to put our energy, and most of the things we've done for the industry haven't been very successful."

"Plus, people have asked me for years to make a record like my concerts, and here it is."

Simple Songs not only highlights Bell's intricate guitar playing (he's as talented a picker as Bruce Cockburn, one of his musical idols), it also puts the spotlight on his songwriting technique.

"There are a lot of songwriters out there writing great stuff, but they're hampered by technology," he maintains.

"Albums like this don't have to be big sellers (since the recording cost is relatively low), and I can go to bed thinking I'm contributing to my country's culture."

Bell intends the album to be part of a series which highlights other worthy artists (like Canadians Jon Buller and Carolyn Arends) in an unplugged setting.

He also intends it to show people that there's plenty of good thinking in evangelical circles, as well as the Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

This can leave him open to criticism from those previously-mentioned churches who like to slam other denominations, but Bell's not worried. In fact, despite some of his comments he has a sense of optimism.

"I don't go into a conservative church with guns blazing. I'd rather go in with good songs and good humour. The church has changed a lot in the past 20 years. I'm finding it's less sectarian."

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