

Recovering addict promotes sobriety through his music

Ranger-Review, 8/31/06

When Michael Purington and his band the Messengers play for audiences made up of long-term recovery people it's like playing with a built-in laugh track.

They recognize the situations depicted in the songs. They know the language. They've been there and done it, Purington explained.

Michael and the Messengers were in Glendive Monday for performances at WATCH East in the morning and at Dawson Community College in the evening. The DCC performance was part of the freshman orientation program and was a new experience for the band which has performed on "sobriety cruises" and for many groups of recovering alcoholics.

"Our aim is to bring recovery music into schools, clinics, rehabs, jails and any other facilities where alcoholics suffer from their disease. We also hope to help educate potential alcoholics about the pitfalls that lie in wait," Purington said.

Most country musicians write and sing about drinking. Purington writes and sings about not drinking. When he recorded his first CD in 2001, he could find only one other CD with recovery music. Now an Internet search for alcoholism recovery music returns over one million links.

According to his Web site, www.QuitDrinkin.com, "The message is simple; quit drinking and learn to live sober. Often life is at stake. Alcoholism is a fatal disease, and the message saves lives."

Purington has been sober since 1993, but he labels himself a "multi-retread." He quit drinking numerous times before finally becoming involved in a recovery program, starting to attend meetings regularly and working with other recovering alcoholics to maintain his sobriety.

Music was always an important part of his life. At 19 he began playing professionally and started The Lost Highway Band in 1974. The band toured the western United States and Canada and performed with musicians such as Bruce Springsteen, Willie Nelson, B.B. King and George Thorogood.

When the band broke up, Purington quit writing music and began drinking heavily until a girlfriend encouraged him to get into a recovery program. He stayed sober for four-and-a-half years. He was not drinking but also not going to meetings, not talking to anyone about his alcoholism and not dealing with issues, he said

He started drinking again – trying to escape the reality of life – until he finally reached the point where he started asking for help and began the journey back to sobriety. When he was nine months sober he wrote his first sobriety song but didn't write another for five years when he wrote, "I think I'll Quit Drinkin' Today" and "Gloom, Doom, 7-Up & Jesus." He showed them to a good friend who asked him to put them on a cassette for him. Soon he found himself writing more tunes.

"They were piling up, like waifs at the door saying, 'Hi. We've come to stay at your house.' I had nothing to feed them, but I didn't mind them hanging around. They were pleasant little things," he said.

Two of his friends agreed to finance a full-band, 12-song CD so he pulled some of his musician friends together and went to work. People in his home town of Missoula bought it, but he didn't know how to find a larger market until he discovered a woman who also had a recovery CD. With her help he went online with his music.

Now he has placed his CDs in recovery stores in 30 states but has been told they are actually available in all 50 states. He has received orders from Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Scotland, Denmark and Canada.

His first CD, "I Think I'll Quit Drinkin' Today" was all about "The Guy," a character who finally decides maybe he's got a drinking problem and needs to take action about his situation. The second, "People With No Last Names" is about all those who are there waiting when The Guy decides to get sober. Each song represents a different character. Together they form a whole picture of G.O.D. - The Group of Drunks, he explained.

For his latest CD, "Promises: Demons and Redemption in Alcoholism Recovery," Purington wrote over 300 songs exploring specific problems and solutions in sobriety. "Most of these songs sort of wrote themselves; I just tried to keep a good pen handy," he said.

Ordering information from the CDs and more information about recovery music is available at the Web site: www.QuitDrinkin.com.