

Feature

It's the answer to our prayers - live music in a church

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FOR many, Emmanuel Church in Billericay is a place to worship, sing hymns and listen to Paul A Carr's sermons.

For others it's a chance to put on their gig gear, enjoy an evening of live music and sup a pint of local ale.

That's because for the last 13 or so years, Paul has promoted live music - and theatre - in his church in Laindon Road, where he is Team Rector for the Billericay and Little Burstead Team Ministry.

And he's had some chart-topping names on stage too, including Ricky Ross, lead singer of legendary pop rockers Deacon Blue.

Ross will be back later this year and he's also lined up The Lindisfarne Story featuring Ray Laidlaw and Billy Mitchell from Lindisfarne.

What's more, he also puts on smaller events in his garden and even in his lounge at home.

And the rocking reverend doesn't make a penny from his live music promotions, instead choosing to give away all proceeds to charity.

"I've always had an interest in music," he explained. "I was a brass bander for many years, I played bass guitar in a band, I used to do discos when I was younger, so music always played a big part in my life.

"I'd spend a lot of money on gigs and I've got a vast record collection but a few years ago I thought 'I wonder if I could ask this person to come [and play] and would they come?'"

"And secondly would I have enough people interested to cover my costs?"

"I did a few events in my last church in East London but when I came here, Emmanuel Church is a fabulous venue - it's theatre style, it's tiered, the acoustics are great, I've got a great garden which can be used - so it changed the dynamics quite a lot, from just having the odd one or two events to having something hopefully that would be quite significant. And I've been doing it for 13 or 14 years now.

"I have events in my church, I have house gigs where I have around 35 people round in my lounge and then about 150-250 people in my garden for different events so when what was a very small idea 'I wonder if...?'"

PLACE OF WORSHIP IN BILLERICAY DOUBLES UP AS A GIG VENUE THANKS TO THE ROCKING REVEREND

was successful, you ask somebody again and ask somebody else.

"The music industry in many ways is quite small and my specialism, if you want to call it that, is Americana, which is a mixture of folk, blues and rock.

"I'm a member of the Americana UK Association and I'm registered with them as a promoter, and they all know each other.

"We have a kind of reputation that we give good hospitality, we look after them, we attract a good audience, so it sort of snowballed over the years from one or two events a year into, pre-lockdown, an event a month."

Paul's first foray into live music promotion was a show by Christian singer-songwriter Bryn Haworth.

"It was a safe one because it was a Christian coming to play in a church and it was right," he said.

"After the Fire played here. They were a bit of a step-over because they are secular but with a Christian background.

"So I evolved. I thought all the music I listen to isn't Christian music. I like secular music, I go to gigs. So I started to take the plunge.

"But what I did, interestingly, is that if I go to a gig I always listen to the support artist.

"Most people stay in the bar until the big guy comes on but I always listen to the support artist because tomorrow they could be the big stars.

"So if I really enjoyed them, I used to ask them.

"I remember a guy called Robert Vincent. In about 2014 I saw him supporting Paul Carrack in Southend.

"I spoke to him in the break - I said 'hey mate, that was great, will you come and play in Billericay in my garden?' He said 'yeah' and gave me his email."

"I had him in and a few years later



Emmanuel Church, which is also a live music venue



Some people play football, some people play golf, I go to gigs and put on gigs.

The Revd Paul A Carr

he's got two UK Americana awards, he played the last two songs on the 40th anniversary of The Old Grey Whistle Test, Bob Harris became a real big fan of his and promoted him and he became mega."

Part of the reason Paul's live shows have been so successful is because he's so passionate about them.

It's not about booking any old band to make a fast buck, it's about an enjoyable experience for artists and gig goers alike.

"I only book artists who I believe in," he said.

"Part of it is that you can't promote something half-heartedly so

when I say to Ricky Ross 'the first CD I bought was Raintown [by Deacon Blue] in 1988, I've got all your albums' he gets it. People get it. They know it's passionate.

"I'm a fan promoting rather than a promoter in it for money - it's not about that at all."

All shows are promoting independently by himself and not the church - so he happily pays a rental fee on show nights - but the church is trusting and happy for him to use the building.

And he's also committed to only booking artists who will respect their surroundings.

"We're kind of autonomous in many ways with what we do," he said.

"Obviously the church is aware of

what I do and there are no difficulties there. It's about looking after the property that you have.

"I don't have artists come in that would be foul-mouthed or if their songs would be inappropriate. I've not booked artists because of that.

"I'm a great fan of a guy called Sam Outlaw who's an American Americana artist.

"I've seen him a few times and I'm seeing him again in a few weeks at the Omeara and I had the chance to book him a few years ago.

"But he swears like a trooper and he drinks out of a bottle of rosé when he plays - in fact he drinks two or three bottles of rosé.

"I love him but his music is not what you want in a church building.

"There are one or two churches now in Hackney and other places which are being used as venues and the artists show no respect for the venue.

"So sometimes it's about protecting the integrity of the building and I think people trust me with that."

Paul has never had trouble selling enough tickets and all profits are passed on to good causes.

"All the proceeds go to charity," he said. "I've given away about £7-8,000, if not more over the last 10 years and a bit.

"There's one charity I'm particularly supporting at the moment called the Purple Community Fund.

"They're based in the Philippines. I went there a few years ago on sabbatical for a month and basically they support families that live on the largest rubbish dump in the world and who survive by scavenging and live in shanties and shacks.

"It's the most amazing poverty, yet they're the loveliest of people.



Guests enjoy one of the reverend's garden gigs

Ricky Ross performs at Emmanuel Church, Billericay



The Revd Paul A Carr, far right with his family and Ricky Ross of Deacon Blue

"We support them as a church anyway through what we call our Mission Giving but I have chosen them as my main charity over the last few years because I know the work they do, I know people on the ground.

"Most promoters can take 20 per cent off for arrangement fees and what have you but I don't do that. I give it away. It's a hobby for me. I do it in my spare time - some people play football, some people play golf, I go to gigs and put on gigs."

Billericay Brewery will run a bar for the gigs in the church and provide drinks for the garden and house concerts - again with any proceeds going into the charity pot.

The church has a capacity for 300 paying guests and all the necessary equipment is in place as it's already used for more traditional

church events.

"We've got a 24-channel PA desk which pretty much covers everything," explained Paul. "We had a worship band there pre-lockdown, so it was already in and pre-lockdown it would be used regularly.

"No one has never said it isn't adequate. In fact Ricky Ross's sound engineer said 'it's amazing' - he was very taken by it. They thought they were going to have to bring their own PA.

"And the lighting is theatre lighting. The church is 30 years old this year, so fairly modern, and I think when it was being put together they had the imagination to think this could be a community theatre or a place where events could take place.

"So we've got full stage lighting and PA, and a friend of mine, Richard Shipton, is my PA guy.

"He helped set up the PA at church years ago so he knows how it works. He's been a good buddy to do it with and I couldn't have done it without him, I'll be honest."

Using the church as a live music venue means many of those who pass through the doors don't usually set foot inside a holy building.

So it's getting more people inside the church, but that's not the primary reason for Paul's live music promotions. He does it as a hobby and wants to do it to the highest possible standard.

"A lot of people never go over the threshold of a church unless it's a wedding or a funeral or something," he said.

"People often joke 'if I come into the church, will I get struck down?' The idea that God is ready to pounce! 'I often say 'well you're in and

you're still alive!'"

"You could say it gets people over the threshold, which is a good aspect of it - but I think it's just having fun, having an event that's credible.

"What I try to do with the events that I put on is to have a high level and do what we do professionally, the best we can and have good artists and all of that adds to the credibility of what we do.

"Usually I have no problem selling out. When Ricky Ross came a few years ago, we were the first venue to sell out. I could have sold another night but they wouldn't do it.

"But interestingly then and now, I'm the only independent promoter on the tour.

"It was the same with Beth Nielsen Chapman when she came and that says something about the reputation I have developed. That counts for something when you're asking for people.

"Even for Lindisfarne - I could say I'm not just tinpot guy with a rickety church hall. When you're in touch with Ray and he says 'wow, you've had some good artists there' you can obviously do it."

But he joked that being born and bred in Sunderland, one stumbling block might have been trying to book a band from Newcastle to play for him!

"Historically, going back to the 1600s, there's always been a bit of animosity [between the two cities]," he said. "When I was growing up as a teen I would never go to Newcastle to drink."

"It's a bit unusual for a guy from Sunderland to have a Newcastle band playing," he added, "but we're in Billericay so I suppose it's neutral ground!"

Feature

From Wembley Stadium to the reverend's back garden

RISING star Connor Selby, who supported The Who at Wembley Stadium in 2019, will headline the Revd Paul A Carr's annual Gig in the Garden this summer.

The 22-year-old blues artist hails from Billericay and was voted Young Artist of the Year in the 2020 and 2021 UK Blues Awards.

The show takes place in the Rectory Garden on Sunday, July 17 and will be the 11th staging of Gig in the Garden.

Also on the bill are two other up-and-coming stars, Joe Slater from Liverpool, plus Billericay's own Genevieve Johnson.

Because of the unpredictable nature of the British climate, there's always a Plan B - so the show will take place inside the church if the weather is bad.

The next scheduled indoor show at Emmanuel Church is The Lindisfarne Story on Wednesday, April 6.

Ray Laidlaw and Billy Mitchell will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the band's chart-topping album Fog on the Tyne with songs and stories from throughout Lindisfarne's long career.

Deacon Blue singer and songwriter Ricky Ross heads off on his Short Stories Volume 2 tour later this year and will pay another visit when he brings the show to Emmanuel on Tuesday, October 11.

Vibrant and anarchic theatre company The Pantaloons have been regular visitors to the church over the years and they too are coming back.

They perform their own twist on Charles Dickens' masterpiece Great Expectations on Sunday, April 3.

Emmanuel is a 10-minute walk from Billericay station and there is parking for about 70 cars on site - additional parking can be found on the High Street and behind Iceland, which is only a five-minute walk away.

For more details about events at Emmanuel Church, visit revpacman.com

Tickets for all events are available from www.wegotickets.com



Connor Selby AL STUART