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FEATURED

Traveling troubadour David Wilcox is playing a Birmingham theater Friday

By Larry May, Special to The Star

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Traveling troubadour and songwriter extraordinaire David Wilcox is playing at Birmingham's Woodlawn Theater on Friday, April 12.

Courtesy photo

Traveling troubadour and songwriter extraordinaire David Wilcox is playing at Birmingham's Woodlawn Theater on Friday, April 12. There is quite a bit of heft in that sentence. Wilcox has been crafting well written songs for decades while also bringing them to life on stage. His visage and career brings to mind the nomadic, road weary singer with a lightweight suitcase and a guitar that could be best described as feathery in both appearance and actual pounds.

His latest album *My Good Friends* is a perfect snapshot of the deft writing style and largesse he bestows upon listeners when he composes new lyrics. I spoke with him about a couple of the tunes on the new record and was mildly taken aback by his inspiration for writing them.

Wilcox and I talked about his creative background, life on the road and his offer to author specific songs related to the person that requests them through his website. This is quite the gift; no longer does one relate their own story to existing song lyrics. These songs are definitely about them.

Question: I've carried your CD's here in the past, and I was telling a friend of mine about talking with you today and we both agreed that the thing that sticks out from your profile the best is that you're an extraordinary song writer.

Answer: Thanks!

Q: What in your background helped foment that growth and that aspect of your artistry to stick out?

A: First of all, let me say that's a great question. Now, let me see if I have an answer worthy of that question. Wow! I think for me the thing that was most influential that made me a songwriter was that there were songs I heard as a kid that gave me a window into how to see the world, how to understand my place in this life. There were songs that changed my heart and that's a powerful thing and you know, I have walked through the greatest art museums in the world, and there is some nice looking stuff, but nothing that changed my life. But there have been songs that I hear and I'm just not the same afterwards. And it gives me a window into how to appreciate this life and how to really live it fully. And so, because of songwriting, because my experience of good songs is so powerful, I don't take song writing lightly. I hold it as a sacred thing and I am just wanting to abide in that place of respect and the dignity and power of a good song. It's been a lifelong quest.

Q: You mentioned songs that were really well written and maybe changed your life. What's an example that you could give of a really well-written song that you didn't write?

A: Oh, there's so many, where do I start? Um, there is a song called "Stone Mason" by Niall McCabe. This song is on his album *Rituals* and it's a fantastic song, it's so beautiful. There's a character that you meet in the song that really comes to life and you get the feeling like this must've really happened. So that's either a life well lived or a really good song props man or both! Um, I would say that the whole record is spectacular to me. Another song is "November Swell."

Q: At what point did you actually decide to say 'I'm gonna make this a career?'

A: I don't think I ever decided that. I think what happened was that I knew I wanted to have music in my life for my whole life, and I knew that I needed to nurture the experience and bliss of it. And I spent a lot of time, you know, emerging in music. Gradually, my music got me invited to places. I would follow those invitations, and my regular job working at the bike shop, my very kind boss said to me, 'So David, do you want to keep working here?' And I said, 'Yeah, yeah, I love working here.' She said, 'Well you know your music career is just really taking off and at first, it was just on weekends and now it's Monday-Thursday, and now you're just working Wednesdays and not even all Wednesdays, and I think you're a musician now.' And I said, 'No, no, I wanna keep my job, but the music thing, I just.' She said, 'Dave, you're a musician.' And I said, 'Uh oh.'

Q: I was on your website and something I found super interesting was "custom built songs," that's pretty cool. Can you explain how that works?

A: There are people that call me and say that they need a song to honor a moment or person or refrain from some issue in their life and it's been a fascinating thing and I love it. And I've done a lot of them by now and keep really enjoying it.

Q: Were you ever tempted to keep one for yourself?

A: There are a lot of them that are just private and a lot of them I do play when I get their permission. You know, the way it works is that it's their story, but it's still my song so if it applies to more than just them, I can, you know, play it live. But a lot of times, they have a song that is not one size fits all, it's a very custom song to them and it's their story.

Q: Let's talk about "My Good Friends." I listen to the song over and over in the store, and the best description I can give is that it feels kind of cozy and lived in. What made that song the title track for the record?

A: I guess just the way that that title, not only referred to that song, but the relationship that gets built through a lifetime of music. You know, there's this friend of mine who sometimes comes and travels with me, and opens the show, and he is amazed at the places I stay. Nowadays, I don't stay in hotels, I stay with friends because I have friends all over the country. It's ridiculous. You know, they are happy to see me and we play songs and talk about what's new. And he sees that as something that isn't just 'they heard my music and liked it. It's like they got to know me through the songs because the songs are really personal.' And so putting your soul out there in the universe has its advantages. It starts these lovely friendships and that has been a really great benefit of having a life in music.

Q: Let's talk about another song on *My Good Friends*, "Dead Man's Phone."

A: Well, the song came from two different true stories that I combined and I think the way that I combined different stories into the same song. It's kind of like the thing in film called "created geography," where you know there will be an establishing shot of people walking up the stairs at the courthouse from the outside and then the next shot (is) them coming in the door and they are already in the building. And the question is: Is it the same building? But in terms of the movie/story, of course it's the same building. But in terms of how they film it, it's never the same building. And so it's the same way in the way stories and songs work. There might be two, three or four different experiences that have this common emotional thread, and the song gets this steel out of all of those different stories but becomes one. It's a combination of a lot of different things. It's always been this way. Years ago, I had this song called "Hurricane," again, a combination of different true stories and the fact that the song wound up being about a woman was an interesting twist because the person who got killed on the motorcycle was not a woman and the story just kind of involved into this thing where I took the anguish of one image of the other and kind of combined them into this interesting character. I also did this thing with "Dead Man's Phone" with two different stories, one being I found a phone and that whole thing returning it and the whole wonder of this tense connection with strangers.

Q: What do you miss most about home when you're touring?

A: I think for me the odd thing about the way that I have planned my life is that when I'm traveling, I'm completely satisfied and happy to be traveling. I love it, and when I'm home, I'm completely happy and satisfied to be home. It's a weird switch. Like on this trip, I had an

early morning flight. I woke up at 4 a.m. and I clicked on my little belt pouch, and there's this kind of switch that goes off in my head and everything is different and it's great. I don't miss home at all when I'm traveling, it's weird!

Q: Last question, what have you learned that you can pass on to a younger artist just starting out?

A: I think the most important thing is that (if) you're going to get good at your craft is (if) you spend a lot of time at it, but the way to spend a lot of time at it is to enjoy the process. And to enjoy the process, you can't be sort of trying to justify your misery by imagining some eventual success.

It has to find a way to enjoy the hard, rage gears, and to get yourself to be able to enjoy the adversity. That is what will make your life beautiful. It's not the success, it's enjoying the adversity. And in order to do that, you have to read really good books, you have to really cancel your emotional equilibrium.

You have to basically kind of become optimistic and learn how to draw meaning out of a long arc of a story, you have to learn how to really enjoy the character development. And if you are writing a movie, screenplay or a book, you have to know that the tough times can be the best times. So for me, the thing that I appreciate most is what music taught me about how to enjoy life and it's not that music is easy, no, it's that we choose this path because our souls want the deep lessons, and that's really the payoff.

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