

Meet David Harsh



Innovative, entertaining, engaging – these are all words that you could use to describe singer/songwriter, David Harsh. Based in Seattle, David has performed in sixteen states across the country in churches, at youth conferences and for various camp settings. On a blustery evening in December, I sat down with David to talk to him about his life, ministry and calling.

There are many Christian musicians out there, what is it that makes you unique?

I use song forms that people will recognize, but I do things on stage and sometimes in my recording that people have probably never seen or heard anyone do in quite the same way. Perhaps the most famous thing that I do right now is to play two guitars at the same time. This is for only one song called “Four Limbs.” I play one guitar with my hands and one guitar with my feet and to my knowledge, there is nobody out there who does that. I also use a loop station, which is a device that records sound and by virtue of what it is able to do, there are literally infinite possibilities of what I can do. I can record layers of sound, not just with my guitar, but also with my voice, with my hands and with any instrument that I can get my hands on.

When you open a show how do you introduce yourself to the audience?

I consider my concerts an opportunity for them to get to know me and for me to get to know them. So, I always begin with a song even before I say anything. After I’ve shared a song, I give them a chance to respond. It’s always been positive in the form of applause, whether it’s excited applause or polite applause. And then we’ve each introduced ourselves. After that, I take a brief moment to talk a little bit about who I am and where I’ve come from



musically. I usually give them a sample of my operatic training, tell them they’re in for a treat and that this concert is a chance for me to share my story. We all have a story, I just happen to sing mine.

You mentioned that you’ve been operatically trained. Elaborate on your training.

I sang classically for several years in six languages. English was one of them, but I also sang in French, Italian, German, Spanish and Russian. My favorite language to sing in, in terms of the classical style is Italian. English is actually quite difficult to sing in. But somewhere along the line I felt compelled to contribute something original to the vast landscape of music and I wanted it to have eternal implications. So I began to sing about my faith and play the guitar. Pretty soon I was writing, performing and recording original music that was a reflection of my testimony. The more I wrote, the more creative I got. I’m just delighted now to see myself in the center of the Lord’s will, singing about him to his children.

What do you hope to accomplish during the course of a concert?

To let God speak and move and for me to stay out of the way. I also desire to entertain; I believe that a concert is a great chance for people to enjoy themselves. I also desire to encourage, inspire and challenge people. So ultimately, I want to create an environment that is conducive to change. I don’t believe that it is my job to change people, but I can create an environment at my concert that allows them to feel safe enough to

listen for the Lord’s voice, that could promote a change in their life. I don’t even need to know about it, but if God can use me to speak to someone at my concert, whether through my spoken words or a song, and that can transform them in some way, then I was supposed to be there.

Why do you feel it is important to engage the audience?

I believe the message that I bear is very important and without sugarcoating it or without having any kind of manipulative agenda, I believe that it is important to meet the audience culturally. I attempt to accomplish that through humor or through a compelling story or through something that is relevant to their daily lives. If the audience is not engaged, no matter how important the message may be, they will not hear what I believe God is trying to say through me. So if I can entertain them, allow the music to make them laugh or to cry, that allows them to be invested emotionally in the experience and that creates a perfect opportunity for a message to be transferred because they are in “receive mode.”

You’ve studied with quite a few well-known musicians. Who stands out in your mind as the most influential to your ministry?

I appreciate Chris Rice, for multiple reasons. He writes excellent lyrics, and he is a late bloomer, like myself. I also appreciate Bebo Norman and some of Jars of Clay’s material. There are many secular artists I’ve recently been enjoying like Nickel Creek, John Mayer, and Vertical Horizon. I try to keep my ears open for new sounds, but there comes a time when I need to close my ears so that I can create my own sounds.

In terms of technical influences, an American guitarist by the name of Alex





DeGrassi has influenced much of my finger-style guitar playing. There's a performance coach from Nashville, TN. His name is Tom Jackson. His perspective on Christian music has influenced me deeply – not just in my performance, but also in my mindset. When I think about what a performance can do and what Tom Jackson has taught, my eyes have really been opened to taking my ability to the next level. Whereas some musicians may feel compelled to do what I call, "park and honk," I much prefer to sit down or stand up or use different microphones or different instrumentation, not for the sake of variety, but to allow people to transition with me. His mindset about how your chance to sing to them is a chance to get to know them, and also how not all of your songs should look the same has really affected

the way I look at a performance.

What else do you do?

I've devised several different guitar seminars that I teach – either at churches or at conferences. The most popular equips the contemporary rhythm worship guitar player who assists with worship or who even desires to write and perform songs on a guitar. I also have a seminar called, "Breaking the Mold: Creativity on the Acoustic Guitar", which features the use of a loop station, alternate tunings, two hand tapping and multiple customized capos. In addition to teaching, I've been invited to be a guest speaker at family camps, chapels and schools. I've also been entrusted with the privilege of leading worship. Performing and leading worship are not at all the same thing. I believe that when

one is performing, he is central and very visible. I also believe that when one is leading worship, he can still be visible, but the Lord must be central and the worship leader must be peripheral.

Do you feel it is important to have a strong foundation of support to make your dreams come true?

I believe that the Body of Christ is a biblical thing. Yes, it is important to have people who can help me achieve my dreams. The greatest champion of this ministry is my wife because she is also reality based and she is the most supportive person in my life. To say that I could do this ministry entirely by myself would be foolish. I would be fatigued; I would burn out too quickly. I also have a team of people who pray for this ministry on a regular basis. I call them my prayer warriors.

Would you say that you're successful?

Yes, but I don't believe that the world would say that I am successful. I do not desire national distribution with a major record label. I believe that an artist like myself can write, arrange, record, perform and distribute his own music to the glory of God and the encouragement of God's children. Success to me is not household name recognition.

I describe my ministry with the phrase, "Below the radar." In the scope of eternity, if God can use me in ways that he might not necessarily use an artist with national distribution and his kingdom can be furthered all in the path that he leads me, so be it.

Do you ever find yourself fighting fear? What might some of those fears be?

More often than you think. I struggle with doubt even in the face of affirmation. I struggle with peripheral vision, by that I mean looking to the side and seeing other artists further along the path that God has chosen for them than I might be on mine. I sometimes wonder if my songwriting is as good as other



people's. I know that God is shaping and molding each of his children and for me to complain about the stage where I am is to insult the Lord. But I still fear that I might not be good enough. I also fear that people might not like me. The Lord brings me back around to realize that he's the only one I should really be pleasing anyway. There are some expenses in recording an album and keeping functioning music gear. I sometimes worry that I might not be able to afford these things. But the Lord has always provided. I'm blessed by a quote I read in a church that said, "God's work done in God's way for God's glory never lacks God's provision." I don't believe that he would call me to a ministry and set me up for failure. He may only provide just enough at the last moment but I believe that he will provide as long as it is his will.

How did you know your calling?

I believe that my first calling is to love and serve God and his children, but I believe that my specific calling is one of a musician. I wouldn't have chosen it.

When I finished college and Bible school I didn't know what I was going to be doing, so I began to wait tables and teach a few guitar students. Pretty soon the Lord called me to cast my net on the other side, just like in the book of John, and teach guitar students full time. I had to let go of what I knew to be secure income and went into the unknown teaching guitar students.

I also began to write and perform music on a limited basis. Again, the Lord asked me to cast my net on the other side. I let all fifty of my students go and

went full time as a performer.

If that weren't enough, at the beginning of 2006, the Lord asked my wife to help me reel in the net by having her let go of her job so that she could work with me full time as my booking and promotions manager. This has been an ongoing trust, fall and faith walk, but I have never felt more of an affirmation from the Lord. It has never been easy, but it has been very, very satisfying.

When I was performing classically, although I respected the classical music, I was doing little more than entertaining. Here, the message is of an eternal value. I can confidently say that when I meet the Lord face to face I can tell him that I used my musical gifts for his glory. There were times when I was just doing music for music's sake. I could see that as wasted time, but I believe the Lord was allowing the soil to lie fallow so that he could plant seeds to prepare me to be a Christian musician. I believe he uses every moment for his glory—even the moments we waste. So, I think it's fair to say that this is my calling and as long as I am physically able to do it, I will.

There are a lot of places, people and things to entice young people today. What advice would you give them?

Be careful who you listen to. The world is very loud; technology is at a fever pitch with iPods and MySpace and all these things vying for our attention. There's very little time left for us to listen to the still, small voice of God and that's the first place we should listen—myself included. Also, remember that God has created you for a purpose and that you are his child. The world may have an expectation of what you should do, but the world's expectations are always changing. God does not change. I believe that it is better to listen for the

guidance of the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever rather than to try to please, to subscribe or to believe in an ever changing, fallen world.

Can you share one last piece of advice with the budding musician reading this?

People will sometimes tell me that I am very musically gifted. While I may have some inherent musical gifts, I believe that the best gift that the Lord has given me is the desire to cultivate my gifts. I believe that if you work hard to develop your gifts, you will appreciate them far more. I also believe that it is important to persevere and to remain dedicated. There is an unwritten message in the quality of your work. If it is poor, the unwritten message is, "I don't take the Lord very seriously." If it is an



excellent offering, the unwritten message is, "I believe that God is worthy of my best efforts." Don't let criticism deter you. When I first began playing the guitar, someone told me, point blank, that I had no business doing what I was doing. If I had listened to that person, I would not be here today. God gave me a calling, he supplied the need for that calling and he continues to affirm that calling. Glory to God!

—Captain Rob Reardon
DYCS, Northwest Division

Check out David's website at: www.david-harsh.com.