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Folk music legend John McCutcheon loves performing live

He'll lead worship and play a concert Saturday at church in Defiance, Ohio

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Folk singer, songwriter and storyteller John McCutcheon, who will perform live Saturday at Zion's Lutheran Church in Defiance, Ohio, has written and recorded a wide range of songs in his more than 40 years as a performer. But what he enjoys most is writing songs and seeing them come to life during live performances.

"To me, a song is never alive until I play it for a live audience," McCutcheon said during a telephone interview.

McCutcheon has recorded and released more than 30 albums, which have earned him critical acclaim and seven Grammy nominations. His music has bridged several musical genres, including folk, children's and contemporary music.

He is not only a talented songwriter but also an author, activist, archivist (he has worked in Woody Guthrie's archive and helped complete some of Guthrie's unfinished songs), producer, and talented musician who plays guitar, piano, mandolin and fiddle, among other instruments. He is also considered a master of the hammered dulcimer.

"I do all these different things, whether it be acting or writing or whatever, but I feel the most like I'm doing my job when I'm doing what I'm coming to Defiance (Ohio) to do," he said.

"I learned about it (songwriting) from Woody Guthrie," McCutcheon added. "He wrote love songs and children's songs and historical songs and topical songs.

"Just really every kind of song and, as a nascent songwriter myself, it was a big lesson in that you can write for lots of different audiences and you can write about everything."

McCutcheon's love of songwriting has also spilled over to a songwriting camp and master class that he holds at the historic Highlander Center in east Tennessee.

The second annual John McCutcheon Songwriting Camp will be held in two sessions: May 17-21 and June 28-July 2.

"This is a place that goes back well over 80 years, and it's the place where Rosa Parks got her training before she sat down and refused to get up on that Montgomery bus," McCutcheon said of the Highlander Center.

"It's where the song 'We Shall Overcome' gestated," he said. "It's where blacks and whites first met to plot the civil rights movement back in the 1940s when it was illegal at that time for black and whites to meet."

"It's a pretty intense workshop," he added. "I love teaching, and I love particularly this songwriting camp."

McCutcheon's concert at Zion's Lutheran Church will feature not only his prowess on various instruments but also feature several songs written by Joe Hill, a songwriter and labor activist from the early 1900s, who will be featured on an album McCutcheon is working on.

"I first heard about Joe Hill 40 or almost 50 years ago," McCutcheon said of why he was drawn to Hill's songs. "And the thing that was clear to me is that he was a satirist.



More Information

Folk legend

WHAT: Folk singer, author and activist John McCutcheon will perform in concert.

WHEN: Saturday — McCutcheon will lead the worship service at 5 p.m. (free event); a supper begins at 6 p.m. (free will donation); and concert starts at 7:30 p.m. (tickets required).

WHERE: Zion's Lutheran Church, 1801 E. 2nd Street, Defiance, Ohio, off U.S. 24 about an hour northeast of Fort Wayne.

COST: Concert is \$20 per adult; \$10 for students and ages 66 and older; and \$50 per family. The church office is not selling tickets. Call 1-419-782-9102 if you plan to purchase tickets at the door, or go to www.brownpapertickets.com.

INFORMATION: www.folkmusic.com, www.zionslutheranchurch.com or 1-419-782-9102

NOTE: All proceeds benefit the Zion's Lutheran Church Innkeepers' soup kitchen and food pantry.



The News-Sentinel
John McCutcheon Interview

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“He was someone who took the popular music of the day and wrote new words to them; words that made more sense to people who were living through some of the issues that were going on at that particular time,” he said.

“I figured, you know, 36 albums in a 40-plus year career, I could take some time to devote one of my albums to this guy who I just thought people ought to know more about,” McCutcheon said.

McCutcheon is grateful he's able to sustain a career that allows him to stay connected to audiences in places like Defiance, Ohio, versus playing to faceless crowds in stadiums. He loves being able to play small venues, create relationships with people by playing the same locations numerous times and feel he's at the peak of his performing career.

From a professional standpoint, McCutcheon said, it feels like “I'm doing the best concerts of my life. I'm lucky enough to be involved in a craft and in a trade in which you can get better your whole life.

“From a nonprofessional standpoint, I became a grandfather almost five years ago, and it became clear to me that both my grandchildren love music — they love having me sing them to sleep at night. Their mothers love to have me sing them into submission for their naps and at night.

“And every time I do it, I just think this is why I'm on earth to do this,” McCutcheon added. “It's not to become famous, it's not to make money, it's not to even have a job. It's to do this, right here.

“This little audience of one is my favorite audience of all.”