

## Jeff Phillips' Musical Spiritual Journey - 5 minutes

A red brick building on Detroit's west side. Onion shaped wooden steeple. Eight steps up to a tiny Narthex, smells greet me first: beeswax votive candles, frankincense and myrrh. Incomers kiss paintings of saints with gilded halos and then cross themselves, right-to-left, of course. Holy water is there for the dipping. Into the sanctuary the incense becomes intense. There is no doubt we're in church now, as if the gold *iconostas* screens weren't clue enough.

Everyone is standing. No chairs. Men and boys on the right side, women and girls on the left. I'm only three feet tall, so mostly what I see is... well... you can imagine I get only glimpses of Father Kirchoff in his swirling gold robes. Everything is in Macedonian, and I don't understand.

Mostly, the service is mesmerizing chanting between Father and the Cantor, whose half-octave vibrato pulses with rich with weighty meaning... although I'm not sure *what* it means. At times, the whole congregation falls into song, slow and imprecise... melody, with bass and alto parts... no instruments. Ever. "God gave each of us the most beautiful instrument, and He expects us to use it for his glory," was the explanation from my mom.

When I was 6, my parents moved to Westland, MI, and the "convenient" parish of Mom's faith was the new suburban Our Lady of Perpetual Help Ukrainian Catholic Church. Light woods, modern lam-beam construction, pews with kneelers, modern angular central crucifix. I could see now... at least when people sat or kneeled! Incense in this larger space was not so oppressive. No cantor, but a formal choir singing 4-part a-capella, with my mom's clear soprano floating on the top. Mass was always in Ukrainian, another foreign tongue to me. Every week, the same words from the same book. By this point, I hadn't learned much about spirituality, but I knew what it sounded like!

Fifth grade band brought me an understanding of how music works, and I found I could sing. A chance to break from the boredom of the pews... I became the new tenor in the choir!

Mrs. Yotskiew, the choir's matron, privately pronounced me the *next* choirmaster, *Pan Director*. She thought the current director was a poser. Your heart **is** music. You would be thousand times better." She beamed confidence at me. Hmmm.... maybe music is my gift to offer... my spirituality.

My High School days were crammed with choir, band, orchestra, jazz band,... and The Christian Club, which hooked me with their folksy hootenannies. I learned to strum chords on a guitar and sing pop music. In this club, I was first asked, "are you born again?" My instant, unrehearsed answer: "I'm Catholic. I was born right the first time!"

Off I went to Universities of Michigan and Miami to study music. No formal religion, but plenty of religious experience. Jewish roommate, first Passover service, Episcopalians, Rastafarians, Voodoo, Missionary Baptist, Muslim, Hindu, Daoist... I stumbled into a charismatic Christian group, arms reaching to the heavens and tongues speaking some sort of babble. Although not particularly spirit-inspired, I tried babbling too--just for the sound of it. It turns out to be rather easy, and it got me lots of attention that day.

Graduation, first job. Northern California. Marriage. Montreal. Miracles of birth, spiritual joys of parenting Clay and Carly. Move to Southern California. Search for a church. Crystal Cathedral: too big, impersonal and creepy; Neighborhood Catholic Parish: Friendly but too much dogma. Surprise... new job in Chicago.

In Illinois, church found *me*. and I'm playing bass in a praise band at Immanuel Lutheran Church. Moving Christian Praise music... drawing on all the power and glory of popular music instrumentation... guitar, bass, drums, keys, more guitars... rich musical fulfillment for me.

Then one day, Clay asks, "Dad, they told us in Sunday School that Jews like grandpa are damned, and will go to hell. Is that true?" Gay bashing and war rhetoric from the pulpit. Time to go!

We'd spotted Countryside, and gave it a try. I was handed the seven principles. Hmmm. I can say AMEN to ALL of these statements! And the music! Janice played some beautiful piano piece, then accompanied Dan Wiseman, who played a baritone solo. And the choir was lovely... a little weak in the tenors!

Week two I joined the choir. Week four we signed the book.

And that's where you'll still find me most Sunday mornings. The music here feeds me. You've seen me contribute in the choir, on guitar, bass, various brass instruments and drums. Oh yeah... I'm into it! This choir is where I found Lois, and most of you know what joy she's brought to my life, musical and otherwise.

Music is my spirituality... my way of connecting with a power larger than me. This power enveloped me in Macedonian chant, it showed me how to sing and play the guitar. Music is my constant delight, and sharing it with you at Countryside, this thoughtful, inclusive, open-minded, sacred place is my continuing honor.