

From Pew to Pub

Worship leader Godfrey Birtill, the charismatic composer behind songs such as “Outrageous Grace,” is taking praise music from the pew to the pub. The results have been striking, as pub-goers sing gospel songs about Christ.

“I see people come with a heavy heart, and they leave smiling,” says Birtill, 59. “People’s eyes light up. They suddenly realize their inclusion in this wonderful Good News! We’re seeing people being free.”

The size of the crowd varies with each event, but numbers can range from 30 to 150. The blend is churchgoers, pub regulars and even a pub landlady who at first resisted the gospel music.

“She had her hands in the air, saying, ‘I’m in, I’m in Christ Jesus,’” Birtill explains. “To see that, it makes you think, ‘Wow, it’s really good to go to these places.’”

This unusual journey started four years ago when Birtill wrote a rock song called “Are You Ready?” His friend was fascinated by one of the lines, which says, “It’s glory in the restaurant, glory in the pub.” He contacted Birtill and asked him to have a “glory in the pub” meeting.

“The place was rammed full,” Birtill recalls. “People came from all over. In fact, initially [we] had to almost ward people off from coming. You get all kinds of people—people who probably wouldn’t go in a church.”

Birtill decided to start a regular event nearer to his home in the historic city of Lincoln. Also taking part was Dave Bainbridge, guitarist and founding member of the Celtic rock band Iona.

“My autistic son, Luca, would often say how he felt God’s

presence during the evenings and how he wished everywhere could be like this and that everyone could know Jesus," Bainbridge says. "Bar staff at the events have been impacted too and could often be seen singing along. It was great to bring trade to pubs—which are otherwise struggling to stay open these days—and to bless people in that way."

The songs might be rough and ready, but they have positive, uplifting messages about the spiritual life, with such titles as "The Wine Is Alive," "It's a Wonderful Dance" and even "Hijacked Into Paradise."

Perhaps it's not surprising that Birtill's music affects people so deeply. Some time ago, he discovered his family had links with the Moravians, a prayer movement that influenced John Wesley and modern missions. Birtill also found a family connection with hymnwriter James Montgomery, who wrote such compositions as "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," "Prayer Is the Soul's Sincere Desire" and "Angels From the Realms of Glory."

Another Christian singer-songwriter, Rob Newey, attended a recent "Glory in the Pub" event on the south coast of England. He was particularly encouraged, since he also has started to play music in such venues.

"Godfrey didn't disappoint," Newey says. "There's a rawness to his performance and presentation that immediately endears you to him and draws you in."

Newey's approach is different, mixing Christian with secular songs in his gigs. "However, our motivation is the same—to take something of faith, God and kingdom and allow it to be expressed outside the four church walls," he says.

Professional psychologist Sharman Jeffries organized a recent mini-tour for Birtill in southern England. She points to studies that show music can be therapeutic and says, "Knowing that Godfrey has 'done his homework' for the scriptural basis for his songs gives them an echo of Charles Wesley, who helped

many illiterate people to understand and remember their basis for faith."