

Abandoned church becomes a place to worship the arts

By Chuck Myers

MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The former Delaware Asbury Methodist Church has never looked so good — or conveyed clear, crisp sound so well.

That's no small achievement, considering the 19th century Gothic Revival-style church and Buffalo landmark narrowly averted a date with the wrecking ball a little more than a decade ago.

As the fate of the abandoned church hung in the balance during the mid-1990s, folk-rock musician and Buffalo native Ani DiFranco and her longtime manager and president of Righteous Babe Records, Scot Fisher, stepped forward to rescue the dilapidated structure, and transform it into a remarkable venue for the performing and visual arts.

Today, the church, since re-dubbed Babeville, serves as the new base for DiFranco's independent label, Righteous Babe, and an exhibition gallery for Buffalo's Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center.

"Initially when we walked in the

building, I don't know what we thought," DiFranco says. "If we had understood how large this project was going to become, and how many people and organizations it would involve, and the kind of money and crazy strategy and negotiating it was going to take to realize it, I don't think we would have touched it."

"But we just thought 'Yeah, it's a sturdy building with a couple of leaks in the roof, and we'll move the offices in there and have shows in here and it would be simple.' And the next thing you know the north tower is twisted and has to be taken down and reassembled, and the main stained glass is rotted and needs to be taken down and remade. It was just like everything snowballed."

Designed by architect William Selkirk in 1871, and constructed in 1876, the church sits in the heart of Buffalo at the corner of Delaware Avenue and Tupper Street. After a gradual decline in congregation, Delaware Asbury Methodist Church closed its doors in the early 1980s, and soon fell into disrepair. In

1995, DiFranco and Fisher initiated a grassroots effort to prevent the edifice's destruction, and then give it new life with a major overhaul.

A \$10 million renovation transformed the sanctuary into a bright and airy space, replaced the building's grand stained glass windows and added a new glass-covered staircase to the backside exterior. A new bar area also went in below the church, while a new energy-efficient geothermal cooling and heating system was installed.

DiFranco notes that, while she envisioned the historic church as a new arts and events facility, the renovation never would have materialized without the enthusiasm and dedication of Fisher.

"He's been important to the process of my life for 20 years now or something," DiFranco says. "Righteous Babe records wouldn't exist without him. I have these grand ideas, but not the skills to realize them. He was the one that translated them along the way. ... It's his passion, I think too, that drove this

and others projects that we've done in Buffalo."

Although houses of worship typically are designed to carry a pastor's sermon to the back of the room, changing the sanctuary into a multi-purpose venue required a more versatile sound system.

"We hired all kind of consultants and we hung baffling that you could see around the place, and we have the in-house PA that was designed specifically for the room," DiFranco says. "We're going to tweak it a little further, but we're about 90 percent there in terms of having a room you can rock in. But still, of course, it has the character of the space — that beautiful verve without being mush."

Babeville has hosted a wide range of events since it went live in early 2006, including community fundraisers, chorus shows, a visit by former President Bill Clinton and DiFranco's first concert performances at the location in September. In addition, DiFranco and Fisher are exploring further creative uses for

the main performance room in the future.

"One of the things that we have thought about so far, that sort of maybe will be a phase-three plan for this facility, is to have an audio-visual production facility here so that people can come and make videos, have a live concert film or video, or recording in this room when we get the acoustics dialed in," DiFranco says.

On a more symbolic level, DiFranco feels Babeville and the effort to bring the site back to life provides a strong reminder of how civic preservation can reconnect a community with its heritage and cultural identity.

"There's just so many levels at which it is essential that we're preservationists in a sense, because the character of a city — that is our wealth. It enriches our lives. It makes people want to be here, stay here and come from somewhere else. ... If you destroy the architecture, we lose a sense of our own soul and our connections to history."

Police recover Da Vinci painting stolen from Scottish castle in 2003

LONDON (AP) — Detectives on Thursday recovered a Leonardo da Vinci painting that was stolen from a Scottish castle in a daring daylight raid four years ago.

Officers raided an address in Glasgow and seized "Madonna with the Yarnwinder," Scotland's Dumfries and Galloway police said. Three men from England and one man from Scotland were arrested.

The painting appeared on the FBI's 10 most-wanted list of stolen art and on the Art Loss Register's list of stolen masterpieces, where it was

valued at \$65 million.

Police said art experts had confirmed the recovered painting was the Leonardo masterpiece, stolen from Drumlanrig Castle in southern Scotland in August 2003.

The lead investigator, Detective Chief Inspector Mickey Dagleish, said the painting had been tracked down in a combined operation by Scottish police and national crime agencies, with help from the public.

"We are extremely pleased to recover the 'Madonna with the Yarnwinder' painting," he said.



The Madonna With The Yarnwinder, by Leonardo da Vinci is shown in this undated file photo.

PRETENTIOUS EARS: CD REVIEWS

The Darbuki Kings "Doumtekan"

The music that unfolds in "Doumtekan" moves right for your mind. Mystic music from the realm of Central Asia reaches out its tendrils and hypnotizes your spirit. The music is sensual, alluring, psychedelic — in a very, very classic way (and I don't mean classic rock, though these kinds of sounds were frequently exploited in Eastern-tinged classic psyche rock). The instrumental abilities of The Darbuki Kings are indisputable. This is high caliber world music and anyone with a fetish for beautiful, seductive, transcendent music should check this out. Details: www.robinanders.com.

Israel Unleashed (Jewish Music Group)

Subtitled "The Very Best Metal and Rock from the Holy Land," "Israel Unleashed" is a surprisingly good compilation of, well, metal and rock bands. The CD has a broad scope. While those looking for a streamlined approach might not dig the jumping around stylistically, the purpose of this disc demands it and the songs here are all good enough to keep you listening. Some are downright excellent while the less inspired ones are at least catchy enough to make you dig it. On the rock side, alt-rock, gothic, emo and modern rock make appearances while the metal also gives you different flavors to sample — everything from death metal to progressive death metal to gothic and power metal influences. There's even a track with bagpipes and operatic female vocals!!!

Oblivion Sun (Prophase Music)

Oblivion Sun bravely takes the torch from classic progressive rock bands, offering up guitars, keyboards, sax, moog, bass, percussion and vocals (on some songs) in a prog rock ecstasy. Oblivion Sun has obviously studied the icons of the genre and is now offering its own take on it, not bowing to the demands of modern pop culture, instead reveling in a sound many would now consider outmoded, naive and/or irrelevant and which even many back in the day

just didn't understand. One difference with Oblivion Sun, though; if you look at the song running times, you won't find the extended lengths typical of progressive music. It says something that Oblivion Sun could capture the glory of prog rock in a smaller time container without diluting or unnaturally condensing the sound.

Al Di Meola "Diabolic Inventions and Seduction for Solo Guitar" (Inakustik)

This is an acoustic album, featuring Al Di Meola's guitar work backed by perfectly balanced percussion rhythms. Rooted in Tango but anything but traditional, "Diabolic Inventions ..." highlights the music of composer Astor Piazzolla, a longtime associate of Di Meola's. Piazzolla apparently earned some notoriety in Argentina, where a fiercely traditionalist tango culture rejected his post-modern reinvention of the style. It wasn't until much later that his work was accepted and even praised there. Here, Di Meola puts his own spin on Piazzolla's reinterpretation of tango. Juxtaposing often straightforward percussion grooves with the offbeat jazz rhythms of Di Meola's Spanish-spiced guitar work, this disc takes the tango to some delightful, soothing places.

Rick Wakeman "Fields of Green" (Music Fusion)

"Fields of Green" is a densely melodic soundscape of keyboard energy, bright and gorgeous and perhaps even overly optimistic. There's a naivety of sorts to the happy fire of Wakeman's fingers on the keys, but that also brings out some innocent prog rock charm. You could say Wakeman is keeping the conceit of old school progressive rock alive with his nimble keyboard playing. It also feels classic in that I was reminded of the work of Jean Michel Jarre, another keyboardist, one whose popularity surged in the 1970s. Cynical listeners will find this trite, perhaps, but it's a hasty judgment by those too caught up in their own artistic pessimism to appreciate something grand, majestic and classic. (Available through Music Video Dis-

tributors.)

Moros Eros "Jealous Me Was Killed By Curiosity" (Victory)

I found myself pulled in but also pushed away by "Jealous Me Was Killed By Curiosity." There's a dash of retro nu wave rock (though without Franz Ferdinand's too-hip self-consciousness), a bracing tinge of raw indie, and a pug-nacious sense of melody, big, muscled and gritty but with songwriting flair. There's a catchy quality to Moros Eros' big sound but it also makes you kind of squint too. It can't be denied that this is a talented band with a somewhat distinct artistic voice, but for every person who gets hot over this album will be someone left cold. It's a good band, though not one everybody will appreciate its music. It's best quality is its way of keeping its thumb on the pulse of modern music but making its own pulse beat to the heart of a different drummer ... or something like that.

Man "Diamonds and Coal" (Point)

These classic blues jammers reinvigorate the past but also take a good, hard look at today. Sure, it's not difficult to tell that this is a band that stepped out of the Wayback Machine. But unlike a reawakened Austin Powers, Man is ready to roll. Bringing back the hooks that made Man the man in its time, "Diamonds and Coal" finds the group sending those sounds through a filter that demonstrates some contemporary consciousness. Yet the band isn't a slave to keeping up with the Joneses. Man does what Man does and its sound still may leave nu rock youngsters' clucking in oh-so-hip disapproval, but what the heck do they know? (Available through Music Video Distributors.)

Al Di Meola "Speak a Volcano: Return to Electric Guitar" DVD (Inakustik)

"Speak a Volcano" puts Al Di Meola on stage with a group of skilled musicians, among them longtime collaborator, percussionist Gumbi Ortiz. If I was pressuring you to watch this and you were resisting and I could talk you

into watching just 20 minutes worth of tracks out of a two-hour running time ... Well, let's just say I could tell you, "I told you so." Al di Meola works his way through an astounding concert of guitar playing, delighting the viewer with an ecstatic performance of progressive jazz with Spanish flourishes. It's gripping. If you have never heard of him, you can change that now.

Voodoo Glow Skulls "Southern California Street Music" (Victory)

This doesn't sound like punk rock with horns or horns with punk rock or horns and punk rock with metallic flourishes. The musical flavors are so integrated that the sound is whole and organic. It's a flowing, heavy ska sound. It's streamlined, an energetic blend of rawness and skilled musicianship. Old school yelling style hardcore vocals, dirty punk drive, some metallic crunch and a slick horns section come together for a mean, muscled musical assault. The Voodoo Glow Skulls have a sort of direct sound that hits right between the eyes. If it doesn't nab you immediately, maybe you need to knuckle down and ride it out for a moment. You may find out you like it.

Gentle Giant "Live in New York 1a1975" (Glasshouse)

This classic, though arguably lesser known, group found a way to make prog its own. It has all the enthusiastic conceit of prog rock. But the band crafts it with its own distinct personality. This concert performance finds the band excelling in a non-studio setting. The music sways from what is best described as folk prog to medieval flavored prog to keyboard-drenched progressive rock that's more modernized (for 1975, anyway). The rustic side of Gentle Giant is its definitive personality trait, I'd say, but the keyboard waves up the eclecticism and also give the band a chance to show off with more "conventional" progressive flavors. (Available through Music Video Distributors.)

—Reviews by Kristofer Upjohn

THE NEXT 7 DAYS

By Stewart Fuell
OF THE COMMERCIAL STAFF

The coming week is full of opportunities to take in some good local entertainment.

■ The ever changing rock band 13x is set to open for Drowning Pool at Juanita's on Main Street in Little Rock Tuesday night at 9 p.m. \$1 of the \$17 cover will reportedly go to a charity that helps fund mental health services for soldiers returning from the war.

■ Pine Bluff-based metal group Drop Dead Syndicate will join Sychosis at Juanita's to get things rolling for Powerman 5000 starting at 9 p.m. Thursday. A \$17 cover will get you in the door for this all-ages show to show some love for the hometown guys.

■ It's not exactly local, but since Pine Bluff is a ghost town for entertainment this week, the 60th annual Ozark Folk Festival

may be worth the drive to Eureka Springs. Starting Wednesday and ending Sunday, the folk festival is the kind of good, clean family fun that is sometimes lacking around these parts. The headlining musical act is Trout Fishing In America, and kids might enjoy the parade on Saturday afternoon.

■ Neither clean nor family, but certainly fun, is comedian Carlos Mencia, who will be performing at Robinson Center Music Hall in Little Rock Friday night. Tickets start at \$35, but this guy is worth it.

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