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COVER STORY

Michael Gabriel will perform with a three-part string section and pianist at the Aeolian Hall on April 16.

Where/Who: Aeolian Hall. Michael Gabriel performs on Saturday, April 16, 8:00 p.m. Phone (519) 672-7950 for tickets and info.

~ Bob Klanac

Michael Gabriel develops a feel for the orchestra

London, ON -- It's not easy being Michael Gabriel. He likens himself a pop singer-songwriter but he's really much more interesting than that. Proof of how interesting Gabriel is will be seen on the stage of the Aeolian Hall as he kicks off his tour with Strings Attached, an evening he's dubbed an 'orchestral premier.'

A classically trained singer who taught himself drums and guitar, Gabriel criss-crossed this country for the past decade mostly with just his guitar in tow and now wants the music he plays to be heard the way he envisioned it.

"I'm playing primarily original stuff with a three-part string section, violin, viola, cello and piano and I play classical guitar and sing," he explains. "It's very much singer-songwriter but it has an orchestral feel to it."

Gabriel knows that adding strings to a musical backdrop is nothing new and says that this concert will see the strings acting as more than a sawing orchestra.

"These strings really have a predominant role, they're not just sitting in the back offering an ambient sound," he insists. "They're very harmonic and there's a lot of movement going on."

Gabriel hasn't arrived at this unique vision without a lot of hard slogging as a musician. Born and raised in New Westminster, B.C. he studied in Vancouver as a classical singer when he picked up the guitar and made a crucial decision.

"I was learning Italian songs and just dabbling in opera and it was at that point when I thought 'do I really want to get into opera or do I want to give pop music a shot?" he recalls. "That was really the fork in the road."

He moved to Toronto and after gigging around ended up in an L.A.-based band for three years back when the dream of making it in music was much different than the realities of the music business today.

"When I was in L.A. all we talked about was getting a record deal," he chuckles. "That seems like a hundred years ago - now no one talks about getting a record deal. Now anyone can record something and get it out there."

After L.A. Gabriel moved back to Toronto and started work on the music that has led him to the orchestral work he's currently bringing to fruition. He also did some serious roadwork playing far and wide with his unique finger-picking classical guitar style, his voice and little else. While travelling the country with his first solo disc he combined the tour with his personal passion for awareness about the plight of children in developing countries.

"I would do a presentation of facts about children in developing countries, play a montage and do an original song about developing countries," he says, adding that other artists involved with the issue through the work of World Vision included Jann Arden and Jesse Book. "I still do it but it's just that on that 2007 tour it was literally everywhere we went."

For now, however, Gabriel's focus is on this elaborate series of orchestra shows, a project that he admits has proven to be more daunting than he had initially conceived.

"Honestly, this project is bigger than I thought it would be but in a good way," he says. "All I'm doing right now is focus on this Aeolian Hall concert, then I've got one at this great venue in Kitchener and then another in Hamilton. That will take me to the end of the summer."

As for the Aeolian show, he can barely hold his excitement at the artistic challenge.

"I'm still blown away by how much depth can come from a three-part string section and a piano and a guitar," he says excitedly. "It allows me to take the listener somewhere with that kind of arrangement."

When prompted about where that might lead, Gabriel chuckles and adds, "Maybe down the road we'll have a 24-piece orchestra. I don't know…"

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