

Musician from Medina

Joe Schmidt, Medina, records a music video for his song "My Field of Dreams." Proceeds for the song will benefit the nonprofit organization, Farm Rescue.



BY KATIE RYAN-ANDERSON
KatieA@nplains.com

If Joe Schmidt's life was a song, it'd be a ballad. The lyrics aren't complete, but this story already has a happy ending.

Emerging on the country and Christian music scenes is an up-and-comer from this town of 300 people 30 miles west of Jamestown. Joe's first single, "Jesus Loves Me," already has more than 78,000 views on YouTube.

And while top country hits and performing on big stages are a possibility – they aren't exactly a goal.

"My goal was to have my family love me. What greater goal is that?"

Basic beginnings

The son of cattle ranchers, this Northern Plains Electric Cooperative member grew up 10 miles southwest of Medina on his family farm. The third of four children, Schmidt's mother, Sourey, pushed her children to sing. She'd sign Joe and his siblings up for local talent shows and other minor performances. His dad, Arlyn, however, was the enforcer.

"I like to say 'My mom taught us to sing. My dad made us sing,'" Schmidt said.

As he aged, Schmidt limited his performances to tractor cabs, baby cradles and spontaneous onstage

appearances at the Stutsman County Fair. In 2001, he married his wife, Sherry, his biggest supporter. Together, they have four children: Kaden, Kane, Katie and Karson.

His family was both his reason for hesitation -- and his impetus to record. While raising a family, cattle, wheat and soybeans, a music career seemed as likely as 90-bushel beans.

But a chance meeting created a partnership that changed everything.

Sick with strep throat, Schmidt said he wanted to skip Alabama's WE

Fest performance, but forced himself out of bed at the request of his wife. Alabama is Sherry's favorite, he said, and she wanted to enjoy the concert with her husband.

So while Sherry hung out at the concert, Joe rested in the hotel room until later in the evening, before Alabama's set. When Joe exited the elevator, he saw a familiar face in the lobby – Jeff Cook.

Cook, one of Alabama's founding members, offered Joe a ride. Feeling terrible (because of the strep and

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- Joe Schmidt, recording artist from Medina. His first single, "Jesus Loves Me," already has more than 78,000 views on YouTube

because his wife, the die-hard fan, was in the audience while he got to go backstage) Joe expressed his feelings to Jeff's wife.

A few months later, Joe and Sherry

attended a party at the Cooks' Alabama home. There, they met Nashville musicians, producers, engineers and performers. Among them was Bobby Cyrus.

Without an interest in a recording contract, Joe asked Cyrus (a cousin to Billy Ray) to help him record a few George Strait covers. He wanted a CD for his children – something they could listen to as a keepsake and also as a reminder that there's more to life than material things.

"I thought, 'they're not going to care how bad I sound,' so I recorded it for them," he said.

Fast-forward to 2014.

Among Joe's Nashville connections is Mark Burch. Burch plays piano for Billy Currington ("People are Crazy," "Hey Girl," "Must Be Doing Something Right.") His resume also includes writing and producing for various country artists including Joe Nichols, Tanya Tucker and John Michael Montgomery.

"Joe is a lot more talented than he even realizes," Burch said. "Among all the great singers I've worked with, he stands right up there as far as his voice."

Burch worked with Schmidt and formed a friendship quickly.

"Joe offered to take the whole band out to dinner, which nobody does. Nobody cares about the band as long as they play they right chord for you," Burch said, jokingly.

Generosity is not uncommon for the North Dakota farmer, Burch said. For example, Schmidt doesn't just seek names and handshakes from higher-ups in the music business. He greets everyone.

"After a night out in Nashville, sometimes we stop at McDonalds," Burch said. "I've seen him buy food for all the homeless guys there. Some of them, Joe specifically looks for because he remembers their names."

Today, Burch and Schmidt continue to connect over the phone and also in Nashville a few times a year. Burch even traveled to North Dakota to film the "Jesus Loves Me," music video. The story of "Jesus Loves Me"

PHOTO BY GABE FROBENIUS



PHOTO BY MARK BURCH

Singing was always a dream for **Joe Schmidt**, Medina. Today, his first single, "Jesus Loves Me," is No. 203 on Music Row's Break Out Chart. The "Jesus Loves Me" music video has more than 78,000 views on YouTube.

begins where one may not expect – a Tennessee bar.

After a night of hanging out and listening to other musicians, Burch offered to lay down a track for Schmidt.

"It was late at night and just for fun," Burch said. "Joe had a couple ideas for the song so I said, 'let's go for it.' Listening to it a couple days later, I thought 'We've really captured something here.'"

Schmidt credits the late night for the song's captivating tone.

"At that hour in the morning, you're lonely, you're vulnerable. And that really came out in 'Jesus Loves Me,'" Schmidt said.

Burch filmed the video in front of the Schmidts' Medina home as well as other North Dakota locations like Interstate 94 and the Jamestown Regional Medical Center. Today, the video has more than 78,000 views on YouTube.

Schmidt said he chose that as his first single, despite experts recommending something more secular.

"I've never been afraid to wear Jesus on my sleeve," he said. "And this song has touched people. It's helped them grieve. It's helped them forgive. It's brought them back to church."

"Jesus Loves Me" plays on more than 20 country and Christian stations nationwide. Soon, it will play on more than 1,000 Christian stations, said Jim Prater, a friend of Joe's. Prater managed various country artists including Mel Street, Charley Pride and Earl Thomas Conley.

"After nearly 70 years in the business, it's hard to excite me. I think 'Jesus Loves Me' plus Joe's voice has me hooked," Prater said.

"Jesus Loves Me" is one of the few songs that engages Radio Renegade Nashville listeners, said owner "Captain" Jack Aponte.

Radio Renegade Nashville plays a mix of mainstream country as well as work from emerging artists, Aponte said. RRN is an Internet-based station with listeners in 143 countries and all 50 states. The station earned the Independent Country Music Association award for "Best Radio

Station 2013."

With more than 43 years in radio, including four years as owner of Radio Renegade, Aponte says he receives 500-700 submissions a week from people hoping to get discovered.

"This guy's got an incredible voice. Great. Gritty. It's a traditional sound which is lacking in country today," Aponte said. "When we play the song on the radio, people always tweet (via the social media messaging site Twitter) us saying 'I love this song!'"

Aponte said Schmidt's character and work ethic stood out from the hundreds of submissions he gets each week.

"You put a farmer and an artist together, in my book, that's a homerun every time," Aponte said.

And while Schmidt's voice may hit it out of the park – he envisions victory of a different kind. Already, he's working with North Dakota musicians, connecting local artists to his contacts in Nashville.

Among them is Alexis Barnick of Jamestown. Since childhood, Barnick has studied singing, guitar and piano. In 2012, she made local headlines for making it to the Hollywood round of "American Idol."

"I learned so, so much from that trip with Joe. I also learned how much it takes to be down there. You see people living in their cars for a dream of a music career in Nashville," she said.

Dreams are important to Schmidt, who said in addition to helping emerging artists, he also wants to help struggling farmers. This year, he partnered with the nonprofit group Farm Rescue. Together, they filmed a music video to the song, "My Field of Dreams."

"I love what Farm Rescue stands for," Schmidt said. So he offered to donate part of any proceeds he receives from the song.

For 10 years, Farm Rescue has



aided families struggling with injury, illness or disaster. The organization plants, harvests and hays. No money ever exchanges hands, said Founder and Executive Director Bill Gross.

"I appreciate Joe's generosity and

"After a night out in Nashville, sometimes we stop at McDonalds. I've seen him (Joe) buy food for all the homeless guys there."

- Mark Burch, pianist for Billy Currington. Burch also worked with Joe Schmidt on the 'Jesus Loves Me' track

compassionate heart," Gross said. "This video will help Farm Rescue help more farm families."

What's next?

As far as what money Joe has made or how many CDs he's sold, Schmidt says he has "no idea."

"This whole thing is not for Joe Schmidt," he said. "It's for my kids."

For now, he's looking to market "Jesus Loves Me," in non-traditional ways. He's not in it for the commercial success; he does it because he keeps hearing how the song helps people.

"They played my song at Stutsman

County Relay for Life," he said. "And people kept coming up to me, telling me how much it helped them. I want that song to help more people."

In the future, Schmidt said he's looking for new songs and possibly even working on a Christmas album with his children. He wants to write more and to always learn, grow, meet new people and have fun.

"If it stops today, I am the happiest man on this Earth. And I've been saying that since day one."

For more information on Joe Schmidt, visit his website at www.JoeSchmidtMusic.net. ■

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