



## Danny Wright, Jerry Lee headline National Piano Conference at Raue Center

By JAMI KUNZER – [jkunzer@shawmedia.com](mailto:jkunzer@shawmedia.com) | June 26, 2013

From the rockabilly music of Jerry Lee Lewis to the classical hits of famed pianist Danny Wright, the best in piano playing comes to the Raue Center for the Arts this weekend.

The four-day National Piano Conference begins June 27 with the area's top young players taking the stage at the Raue, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

The performances that follow celebrate artists who were born to play.

"It sounds corny, but it's true," said Lance Lipinsky, who plays Jerry Lee Lewis in the Chicago cast of "Million Dollar Quartet." "It's the role I was supposed to play. Who'd ever think something like that would actually exist."

The long-running musical is inspired by the famed Sun Record recording session that brought together icons Lewis, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins.

Lipinsky will perform Saturday in "Jerry Lee & Friends: An Evening with The King, The Killer and Cash." Joining him are Cody Slaughter as Elvis and Adam Lee as Johnny Cash. Slaughter has performed as part of the national touring cast of "Million Dollar Quartet," while Lee will be joining the Chicago cast of the musical. He makes his Illinois premiere at the Raue.

"They're just like icing on the cake," Lipinsky said.

A Texas native, Lipinsky grew up studying his father's record collection of Lewis, Elvis and Roy Orbison. Originally a guitar player, he borrowed a friend's keyboard at age 13 and taught himself to play.

He said he didn't really learn properly, but learned his own way.

"I play it like a guitar almost," he said of the piano. "I do a lot of little simple repetitive things that are easy to do, but stick out in people's minds more. It's similar to Jerry Lee, the wildness and the energy."

As part of the show, he said he hopes to interact with the audience, take questions and talk about piano playing, amid performances of Lewis' hits as the icon himself.

"There's no script here," he said. "It's all just pure music. The cool thing with this is they do want me to talk as much as I can about the piano because that's what the theme is. If they allow me the freedom, I'll talk up a storm."

The performance will showcase the roots of rockabilly, which evolved into rock 'n' roll.

On the more classical, New Age side, pianist and composer Danny Wright will tell another story through his music June 30.

His is the story of the way in which music heals. Along with many of the hits featured in the 6 million albums he's sold in his 30-year career, Wright will perform songs from his new double album, "Reflections."

Aside from a dedicated cover of "Moonlight in Vermont," the album features original songs written specifically by request for fans in honor of loved ones. The names of the people the songs were written for are included in the CD jacket.

"For years, I've been asked to write these special compositions," Wright said. "It just came out really, really beautiful. It's probably my finest work in my 30-year career."

Wright said he receives daily messages from fans who've been inspired, even healed by his music, as they face life struggles, such as alcoholism and other ailments. Other songs reflect celebrations, such as weddings or anniversaries.

Those messages, as well as some of his own personal struggles, inspired the latest album. No personal tale is too small, he said, and his songs reflect real-life experiences.

"I just think all of life's experiences from the beginning to now have really taught me what it's like to be the best person I can be," he said. "This is probably the best place I've ever been in my life, and it's really reflected in my music."

Wright started playing piano by ear at age 4, playing the theme from "Dr. Zhivago" in the family's living room.

He rose to fame in the late-1980s with his "Black and White" series, but faced some ups and downs through the years.

After the 1990s, he said he had to learn how to get his music out into modern media, such as iTunes and Amazon, as more record stores folded.

In the past year, he's started his own Las Vegas-based independent record label and has worked to rerelease a catalog of songs previously recorded, some of which were never released.

Naïve at a young age, he said he learned how important it is to trust the people working with you.

"I was young, and I didn't know it, and they were taking 40 percent of everything I was making and hiding it and confiscating it," he said.

Later, the loss of both of his parents deeply affected him, leading to depression. He turned to faith, and now knows his parents are watching over him and very proud, he said.

"In my life, I have become a very spiritual person," he said. "Through my spirituality, this beautiful music is flowing out of me."

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