

Students 'do interfaith' through universal language of music

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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DURHAM, N.C. (RNS) Say the word "interfaith" and the next word to roll off the tongue is probably "dialogue." It's hard to think of one without the other. But college students know there are other ways to communicate, and music may be chief among them.

Students from three North Carolina universities -- Duke, North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill -- on Wednesday (Nov. 16) hosted an interfaith concert they dubbed "Abraham Jam" in an attempt to "do interfaith" in a novel way.

The two-hour concert at Duke featured three singer-songwriters -- a Jew, a Muslim and a Christian -- plucking their guitar strings onstage and crooning their way toward a new spirit of understanding.

The concert was held as a sort of opening act for Thursday's fifth annual Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogue Day, a nationwide effort to break down barriers between people of different religions around a shared vegetarian meal.

Started by the Boniuk Center for Religious Tolerance at Rice University in Houston, the dinner drew an estimated 500 people to dialogue around dinner tables in Houston. Similar dinners were held around the Raleigh/Durham area, in Greenville, S.C.; Wichita, Kansas; and Chicago.

The North Carolina students' initiative was their own attempt at talking across boundaries -- only this time using the universal language of music.

The three invited musicians were no amateurs. Dan Nichols is one of the nation's most beloved Jewish rockers; Dawud Wharnsby, is a Canadian troubadour living in Pakistan; David LaMotte is a singer-songwriter and peacenik in the old folk tradition.

The three had never met until this week, but at LaMotte's instigation, and with the help of funding from area churches, synagogues and Muslim civic groups, the event helped create an aura of goodwill and reconciliation.

"Having a large interfaith event based around music is unique," said Matthew Stevens, president of the Muslim Students Association at UNC Chapel Hill. "It allows people to reach out to one another in a new way. I haven't seen it done in the area."

A committee of students from each of the three schools picked the musicians. Four performance poets and a dancer were added to the lineup, lending the event an edgier, hipper, more updated feel.

The songs ranged from Wharnsby's "The People of the Boxes," ("We've got to tip the lid and let some sunlight in") to Nichols' "All This Rain," about the biblical Noah ("Why was I the one and only?")

LaMotte, in addition to singing, strumming a guitar, and beating a drum, had the trickiest role -- as emcee.

"What we're trying to say here tonight is not that we agree about everything," he told the several hundred attendees. "It's so much better to know each other."

Jewish and Muslim students, who gathered for pre-concert pizza in Chapel Hill, said that if nothing else, the event was an occasion to bring disparate groups together.

"As a student, you spend a lot of time with people who share your interests," said Davina Ramdharri, a Muslim student at UNC. "Interfaith programs like this bring us together."

But if the event was at all awkward -- three musicians, trying to model peace and understanding -- performance poet Chayla Hart summed it up in her poem "Children of the Promise."

"What could we possibly be afraid of?" she asked. "Being sincere?"