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Features

John Tesh Primed To Weave Music, Stories For Norwalk Audience

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NORWALK — To some fans, John Tesh will always be the friendly guy next door who hosted Entertainment Tonight for more than a decade. To others, he served as a dynamic television investigative reporter on the trail of the "Son of Sam" killer. Then there are the millions who get pumped up on Tesh's NBA theme anthem.

A global following regards Tesh among one of the more dynamic contemporary symphonic songwriters and arrangers, while others still look to his syndicated broadcasts providing anecdotes and insights to help improve their lives — especially now that he has apparently beat a terminal cancer diagnosis.

Those who head out to witness Tesh when he appears at Norwalk's Wall Street Theater September 13 will likely get a sampling of all that and more. The six-time Emmy and two-time Grammy nominee recently called in to The Newtown Bee to chat up his upcoming Songs and Stories from the Grand Piano tour.

With three gold records and eight million records sold, Tesh says he has crafted this special concert to give fans an up close and personal experience as he weaves his award-winning music and inspiring story into an experience he pledges will be unforgettable.

Tesh's ability to create a unique journey for concert fans with music and storytelling has taken him from the Red Rocks Amphitheater and the Coliseum in Rome to Carnegie Hall and The Kennedy Center. His live television concerts, including the seminal Live at Red Rocks, have raised more than \$20 million for Public Television.

Tesh's consistent popularity as a TV and radio broadcaster has only amplified the personal connection with his loyal tribe of fans who get to listen to him six days a week on the Intelligence For Your Life radio and television programs. And his numbers are impressive — if not inspiring.

The radio show alone amasses 34 million gross impressions/per week. John's Facebook page has a weekly reach of 15-20 million engagements/week. The weekly TV program adds another 2 million impressions.

Twenty five years and 50-plus recordings into his multi-faceted, ever-evolving musical and broadcast career, Tesh's highly successful and varied career path also includes a string of #1 radio hits, a Keyboard Magazine Performance award, 12 years as an investigative journalist for the CBS TV Network. It was on that job that Tesh said he experienced one of the most defining incidents of his journalism career reporting on the ".44 Caliber Killer."

Tesh became a household name to millions during his ten-year run as anchor on Entertainment Tonight and generated inspiring soundscapes as music composer for the Barcelona and Atlanta Olympic Games. He also has the unique distinction of composing what critics hail as "The greatest sports theme song in television history" — the NBC Sports "NBA Basketball Theme."

More recently, Tesh has experienced an intense deepening of his faith after he said prayer and putting his life into the hands of a higher power delivered him from a terminal cancer diagnosis, a later chapter in his life that will be among the stories in his show and soon-to-be-released biography.

A self-proclaimed school "band geek" playing trumpet in marching and jazz bands in junior high and high school, Tesh was proficient on the trumpet and piano from the age of six. He studied privately with teachers from The Julliard School and was named to the New York State Symphonic Orchestra in high school while also playing Hammond B3 in three Long Island rock bands.

That's where our conversation started...

The Newtown Bee: After pouring through your bio, I couldn't help noticing you and I seem to have a lot of crossover points - journalist, broadcaster, cancer survivor, high school band geek...

John Tesh: What did you play?

The Bee: Drums and percussion in pep band for the football and basketball teams, and I did a bunch of other band and theater stuff as well. So, I imagine so much of what you've done in your career has all sprung from a solid foundation of music. Do you ever find yourself consciously tapping into your musical DNA when you're challenged in other facets of your work?

Tesh: You know I can't have this conversation with everybody — and I have tried — but I'm three or four days from turning in what's grown into an 80,000 word memoir to my buddies at Harper Collins. And one of my favorite chapters is titled "Dr. Wagner" — a guy who I grew up with. From when I was seven, he was my band teacher, and Dr Tom Wagner taught me through a process you're probably familiar with of learning and risking and challenging. And I make a point to include in that chapter that everything I learned from him in school and in music, I apply today. He was one of those people who would run around yelling "...ok people, let's make some mistakes!" When I look back at that time — in what was a performing arts school — everybody had to either play an instrument or sing or both. So when I got there I had to put down the three instruments I wanted to play, and I put down drums, drums, and guitar. I ended up with trumpet, by the way. But all that I learned about blending and socializing, risk taking, all that stuff came from my time with Dr. Wagner.

The Bee: So does that mean when you're out promoting the book and you're sitting there with Ellen or Jimmy Kimmel and they reach back and pull out a trumpet, you'll be able to knock one out of the park?

Tesh: Yeah, I could probably play "Reveille." We have grandkids living with us, and some mornings I'll wake them up with the trumpet...in fact, I'm going to do that tomorrow now that we're talking about it.

The Bee: So you're blessed with one of the best voices in broadcasting. And at the same time, you always had such a natural, kind of buddy-next-door style on camera. Were you always comfortable in front of the camera lens?

Tesh: What a great question. But no, I had terrible stage fright. When I was a little kid, my mom decided I was going to be a piano player and sent me to that Steward School for performing arts, where I ended up playing trumpet. But there was a piano teacher I had there from Julliard who made us memorize these complex pieces, and every six months, there would be a recital. So I would just freeze up; it was so terrible, I'd call in sick. That stage fright followed me into college. But when I started playing in rock and roll bands, and later when I was on Entertainment Tonight I had to learn how to deal with it. I met a therapist who helped many famous opera singers and musicians get over their stage fright, and he showed me a few techniques that eventually flipped me to the other side — now you can't get me off the stage (laughing). But I have to say, with TV, it wasn't as much of a problem for me because you were mostly just in the room with one person, the camera operator, who you knew. But I think if there had been even a few people in the room, and later when I started being on talk shows with an audience, for a long time that was daunting for me. Television and radio were never a problem because there was never an audience.

The Bee: For me, the promise of good news stories keeps me coming to work every day. Do you remember one of the earliest stories you covered that made you feel you were really making a positive difference in this crazy world?

Tesh: There are actually two stories — one that made me want to quit. But when I was working in Nashville, Oprah was on Channel 4, I was on Channel 5 with Pat Sajack doing weather. It was really a great time to be doing live local news. And I did a story on these condo fires that kept breaking out — and that reporting ended up causing the Nashville Fire Marshal to step down and the re-writing of fire codes. There was some money under the table, and the marshal was signing off on building designs that were contributing to these fires. So the station and I ended up with an AP award for investigative journalism, and that award at age 21 helped launch me into WCBS in New York.

The Bee: So what made you want to quit?

Tesh: In 1977, I was in New York, and the whole world was falling apart. New York was on the verge of bankruptcy, there was a terrible blackout, it was brutally hot that summer, and I was in the middle of Harlem. And I was one of the first reporters on the Son of Sam story, which at the time was the .44 Caliber Killer. And there was a guy named John Diehl, and his girlfriend was one of the murder victims — and he was in the car. So I was in a minicam truck and heard the call on the radio and rushed to the scene. So Diehl is sitting on a stoop watching the cops unload his girlfriend from their car. So as a young, naive reporter, I told my camera guy to switch on, and I went running over. So he's of course covered with blood, and I'm peppering him with questions about what happened and how does he feel. Then he breaks into tears, and I continued asking questions. Suddenly the camera light goes out, and I turned around and the camera man — Dennis — says, "we're not doing this." And I was furious. Then a female detective walks up to me shaking her head and asks, "what do you think you're doing right now?" And she went over and put a blanket around John and starts comforting him. That changed me forever. That was the last time I went in rolling. It was a revelation for me, and I learned there was a way to do what I had to do well while doing it with compassion.

The Bee: So in a lot of ways, you've been mixing songs and stories together for a long time.

Tesh: What's interesting, John, is the show we're bringing to Norwalk is a lot like this — mixing music and stories about seminal moments in my life and how I dealt with them.

The Bee: Do you find it's a lot harder to be an intimate storyteller in a massive coliseum, or when you're much more up close in an intimate club or venue like the Wall Street Theatre?

Tesh: It's all different. We'll play a 5,000-seat venue, then a place like Red Rocks in Colorado, and then the next night, we'll be in a small hall or church with 500 people. But I'll tell you what, I can do this show if I had to in front of 10,000 people. I just find that you need to adjust the timing and delivery of the stories to match the size and acoustics of the room, along with how many sound absorbing bodies are in the seats. It's a fascinating study in human reaction and acoustic science. That's when an astute sound mixer really plays a role - but timing of audience reaction is not part of their job. I do prefer the more intimate rooms. I think it works for this type of show that we're doing. When a venue is so big you can't see the back row, it doesn't really work when you're trying to have an intimate conversation with the audience.

The Bee: Tell me more about this tour.

Tesh: Well, I've seen a lot of live music and concerts but I've seen a lot of motivational speakers and pastors, too. So my show isn't just a music show. Like you, I'm on the other side. But in my case, my diagnosis was terminal. So I tell that story at the end of the show. And my testimony talks about divine healing techniques. See, I think if you haven't actually applied that kind of thing yourself, people aren't

necessarily interested in hearing a Bible message. But I would not go out and do 15 music shows on a tour anymore. These days, when I wake up in the morning, my 'why' is encouraging somebody out there to get on the other side of their depression or showing them a divine pathway to getting healed or how I found my purpose and mission in life. The music is a pallet cleanser - I'm really out there to tell you about what I've been through so maybe you can apply that to turning your life around. But there will also be an original song written that night with the audience's help.

Tickets for John Tesh's September 13 Norwalk show are available online at teshmusic.com, via phone at 203-831-5004, or at the Wall Street Theater Box Office — for details, visit wallstreettheater.com

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