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## Famed pop songsmith Five For Fighting coming to the Marshall Artists Series

By DAVE LAVENDER The Herald-Dispatch  
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The Associated Press Singer and songwriter John Ondrasik, best known by his stage name Five for Fighting, performs at the NASCAR Busch Series auto racing awards banquet in Orlando, Fla., in this Dec. 7, 2007, photo. Ondrasik brings an intimate of his hits to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Reinhold Matay



HUNTINGTON — John Ondrasik, a rabid hockey fan who took his artistic name — "Five For Fighting" — from penalty box time, has put his stamp all over the charts, TV and film with his piano and voice.

Ondrasik, whose early hit "Superman (It's Not Easy)" became an anthem after 9/11, has sold more 2.5 million albums on the strength of such hits as "100 Years," "The Riddle" and "What If;" has penned songs for everyone from Josh Groban to The Backstreet Boys; and has had songs featured in 350 TV shows, ads and films — including his song "Chances" in the 2009 Academy Award-winning film "The Blind Side."



Courtesy of the Marshall Artists Series Acclaimed singer/songwriter John Ondrasik, best known by his stage name Five for Fighting, brings hits like "Superman" and "100 Years" to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 18, 2016, as part of the Marshall Artists Series.  
Jeremy Cowart

Ondrasik kicks off a 10-date intimate tour of theaters with a string quartet as well as up-and-coming songwriter Marie Miller at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 8, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Tickets are \$32, \$43 and \$54 by calling the Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656 or online at Ticketmaster.com. You can also visit the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse box office on campus from noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Here's five questions with Five For Fighting:

LAVENDER: "I always love when artists put a twist onto their songs, and certainly adding a string quartet to your tunes seems like a pretty natural thing to do ... Are you picking up a string quartet in each city or traveling with one? Are you all working on a project of new works?"

ONDRASIK: "It started about five years ago doing symphony shows, and they are so inspiring to me - to have a 30-piece orchestra behind you. My audience has changed, and those days of the rock clubs were a lot of fun, but I think our audience wanted a more intimate experience. We decided **+**

break it down and to play smaller markets and theater venues, and we started doing it two or three years ago. I probably do about 90 percent of my shows now with this string quartet, and it is so great. I am so fortunate to be able to work with some of the best - Juilliard, Yale and NYU graduate string players. They are amazing and that allows me to pull some things out that I wouldn't do with a band - songs that were really good but that I didn't do early in my career, and put in some compositions from world-class composers I have worked with and then present it with this storyteller's vibe. I certainly play songs that people know and people who have seen us know it adds a new window into songs like '100 Years' and 'Superman,' and then some of the songs are fairly obscure. I'll pull out a cover or two, and I will let them do their thing too and just blow away the audience with their talent."

LAVENDER: "You've definitely got one of those distinct voices in pop music, tell us about developing it. How young were you when you were like, 'Yep I can sing falsetto and then go smoothly into a raspy, textured kind of bluesy voice

... that ain't easy.

ONDRASIK: Thank you. Yeah, I was a big fan of Freddie Mercury and Steve Perry and all of those great rock singers. I tried to find Steve Perry's voice teacher, and I did. I then started studying opera because a lot of my favorite rock singers were trained classical, and so I sang classical for a few years as a rock songwriter and that gave me the fundamentals of being a good singer and that has carried me through. For 10 years I did voice lessons every day and put in the time to get that sound. I think the neat thing about voices is that a lot of people focus on, 'Can you hit that high note?' but for me it is, 'Give me three or four seconds and can you identify who is singing that record?' Like you know when it is James Taylor or Axl Rose or Prince or Stevie Wonder. I think the key to being a great singer is being someone who is a stylist and who is not just an executioner of theory.

LAVENDER: "You've written so many songs, like 'Superman,' that people literally cling onto for hope and meaning. What, to you, makes a great song, what is inspiring you these days, and what is your routine as a writer?

ONDRASIK: I wish I had a more romantic answer, but it is just work ethic and working on it every day and writing lots of songs and continuing to hone your craft. I would say that it depends on what makes a great song, because if I am writing for myself - for Five for Fighting songs - I am writing from experiences, and those emotions that tend to come from a more personal space, whereas writing for film and TV is like a homework assignment, which is refreshing. You are given a theme or



a script, and you're not just working from a blank slate. I enjoy both, and if I did just one I think it would tedious. I like putting on different hats. We just did the Christmas special for BYU, and I was just a singer, and we did do a couple of original Christmas songs, but for the most part we sang Christmas carols, and I got to focus on just being a singer which was fun too. I tell kids that songwriting is really about work ethic and writing lots of songs, and that a good song will stand the test of time. I feel like there was a golden age of singer/songwriters who still have their music heard today, and I am trying to follow in their footsteps."

LAVENDER: "I really enjoyed your TED Talk on 'What Kind of World Do You Want?' and about how you must be dedicated to the craft and how you spent 45,000 hours before you actually could make a living in this industry. This concert will have a lot of Marshall University students. What's some advice you can give young people thinking about getting into the business?"

ONDRASIK: "When I talk to kids - especially that are trying to pursue the arts - I say we live in this Kardashian age when everybody wants it now and wants that fame and success at 20. I didn't have success until my early 30s, which is crazy for any artist to have any career. I say my wish for you is to not have a No. 1 hit, and my wish for you is to not be on the cover of People magazine - which is great if that happens - but my wish is that when you are 50 years old, someone will want to buy a ticket to your show and that means you have a career and you pursued your craft for decades and are good at it. It takes work and perseverance and reality checks and all of those things we don't want to do because it sucks. There's a lot of rejection. Nobody wants to write 100 songs to get 10. It's hard, but if you love what you do and if it doesn't work out you don't have any regrets. I feel for young writers coming up now it is a lot different. I caught that last big radio wave, and now the conditions have completely changed with social media. You don't need record companies. You can make a living and have a great career. There is opportunity. You can make a record in your living room."

Ondrasik has given away five volumes of compilation albums he created featuring not just himself but the likes of Billy Joel and Melissa Etheridge to United States troops. More than one million albums have been distributed to troops worldwide. Additionally, a charity site, [www.whatkindofworldyouwant.com](http://www.whatkindofworldyouwant.com), was created off of his song "World," which saw fans uploading videos showing their respective interpretations of a better world. That initiative raised more than \$250,000 for five designated charities - Augie's Quest, Autism Speaks, Fisher House Foundation, Save the Children and Operation Homefront.



LAVENDER: "You've always had a big heart for helping ... tell us about using your gift of singing to give back - because you have done it in so many solid and creative ways, like giving one million albums to U.S. troops."

ONDRASIK: I think when I did the Concert for New York and did 'Superman,' I started to understand how music makes a difference in healing and how it can make a difference in people's lives, and I try to help out when I can and wherever I can. I have a big passion for our troops and do projects with them, and the nice thing about music is that it can provide an emotional release so much more than words and a chicken dinner and a fundraiser. That's why I think it is our gift to give back. I have been blessed to have had this career ... and I can go out and help. When the Iraq war started, I started getting emails from the troops saying they were using my music to pump themselves up or to come down, or to come home and to escape. They were using the same song in different ways. People take music and use it as they need it. I try to do that and let folks tell me how they want to use it and how it can impact their causes."

If you go

WHAT: Five For Fighting (John Ondrasik), accompanied by piano and string quartet, will perform hit songs such as "Superman (It's Not Easy)," "The Riddle," "100 Years" and "What If."

WHERE: The Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, 925 4th Ave, Huntington.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 8.

THE OPENING ACT: Curb Records folk pop artist Marie Miller opens. Musically, she is perhaps best known for getting a single, "6'2" onto "Dancing With the Stars," and last year opened for American Idol winner Kris Allen and Carbon Leaf. Her debut record "Letterbox" was released last April.

GET TICKETS: \$54.21/\$43.30/\$32.39. Contact the Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656 or order tickets online at Ticketmaster.com. You can also visit the box office located in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse from noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

SPONSORS: Five for Fighting is sponsored by Cabell Huntington Hospital, I Heart Radio, The Herald-Dispatch, WSAZ and Marshall University.

Welcome to the discussion.



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