

Mike and Val James – From “As Time Goes By” to “The Galveston Flood” disaster: songs to bring you joy and tweak your memories.
By Harry Babad and Val James.

From the time I first heard them play at a TMF gig, Mike and Val James became favorites. Although I’m not into children’s music, having outlived all but Woody Guthrie’s songs in this genre by the time my grandsons came of school age, I still occasionally play their *Carry Your Own Rainbow* album. Maybe it is the kid in me, even though all of the lullabies I heard as a child were in either Yiddish or Polish.

Be that as it may. Whether it is playing and personalizing folk standards, their newly released *Mixed Bag* album, or better yet enjoying their renditions of Jazz standards (e.g., *Back to Back - Ballads from the Heart*); I’m hooked. It was a delight on the later album to hear Val’s interpretations of “Our Love is Here to Stay” and “Teach Me Tonight”. I wonder whether for “Teach Me Tonight” Val was influenced by Sara Vaughan’s 1987 version on the *How Long Has this Been Going On* Album (Pablo Records)?

Although I’m not nautically inclined, I am somewhat partial to both the Music of Pint and Dale, and the Hank Cramer led USS Constellation’s Crew albums, as well as Victory Music’s Victory at Sea collections on which they perform.

As always for these articles, I mailed Mike and Val a list of questions, which they kindly answered. So some of this article will be in interview format while the rest of the article contains the snippets about them I found on the Internet.

Introduction

Mike and Val James, both retired teachers, have performed to a variety of audiences in concerts, festivals, and private venues in the northwest and beyond for about 20 years. Mike and Val often perform as a duo in local clubs and restaurants, doing a mix of popular ballads, classic show tunes and American folk music. They accompany themselves on six and twelve-string guitars, or enjoy performing with a jazz trio when doing a full evening of jazz or pop oriented “chestnuts.” Their broad musical styles range from the traditional folk, to 1940s, and the more contemporary blues-jazz sounds of the 1970s. Mike is particularly partial to traditional folk music whether it be of the sea, the mountains, Appalachian and English/Irish ballads or the taming of America.



Much of their *club* music has a jazz or “bluesy” influence. Val, whose mother sang with Bing Crosby on the radio and in films, loves jazz standards. She has written and recorded several songs, most with a jazz flavor. Mike actually began singing jazz standards and show tunes as a child for “Show and Tell” in kindergarten. Then the folk revival of the 60s hit and voila, a new source of joy!

One may ask, why such broad brush of musical offerings? It all boils down to the wide range of musical interests that each has, and the desire to share their musical interpretations with a listening, and sometimes surprised, audience.

Mike tells the story of an 80s performance at the Lido, a small room in Port Townsend, Washington. The evening was coming to a close and a Tom Paxton tune, “One Time Only”, had been chosen to close the evening and eventually be winnowed from the repertoire. In a back corner of the room sat a young woman, listening with her sweetie. When the song ended she came up to the bandstand, tears in her eyes, and said thanks for the song. She went on to state that she

hadn’t heard the song since she was a little girl when her dad would sing it to her mom. The song is still in their repertoire.



Now that they’re retired from the public schools, Mike and Val are spending more time performing and writing, primarily in the Port Townsend area. They may be doing Broadway, jazz, originals, folk, maritime, kids’ songs, or whatever they fancy that you’ll enjoy. If you’re in town, check out places like The Upstage, The Public House, Jodie’s On Madison, Bread and Roses, or the festivals. And, yes. It’s OK to sing along!

The Interview

What are your post-retirement music plans? — We moved to Port Townsend when we retired. We’d had property here for almost 20 years, anticipating our retirement. PT is a Mecca for culture. All kinds of music, art, and cultural activities take place here throughout the year. But any place we travel has its own culture. Even though we may not perform all types, we love to listen to all of it.

We plan to visit the British Isles next fall, spending time in Scotland with the “Constellation’s Crew.” Both of us have Scottish and Irish ancestry and love to be part of the music. For a writer, any experience can be inspiration for a song.

That's why retirement can finally allow us to "run" with those ideas. It goes without saying, we would much rather write, arrange and play music than spend our time grading papers and sitting through boring meetings.

How do you {individually or as a team} pick the new songs you're going to learn, when they're not things you've personally written? — We are constantly listening to music on the radio, digging out old LPs and cassettes, and taking that trip down "Memory Lane." We both have a collective memory of so many songs especially from the 60s. In those days, we both performed, Mike as a solo act, Val singing with duos or trios. When one of us mentions a song, the other says, "Yeah, I used to sing that with..." So, we decide to work up a new rendition that fits our duo style. Whoever gets around to the arrangement first usually ends up doing the lead.



How did your teaching experiences and the lives of your students out of school; the anguish and joys of the world around you affect your music? — Mike worked as an elementary school teacher and counselor for many years.

Those experiences were the influence for writing most of the songs on *Carry Your Own Rainbow*. Another example of that influence was Mike's version of "All The Things You Are" which he sang for his last high school graduating class before he retired. Val's original song "Growing Up" was actually written for her two granddaughters. But, as anyone who has worked in the school system knows, music gives people hope, spirit, and balance to life even during the most difficult of times. For some students, music is the thing that keeps them in school.

Although neither of us taught music, it was still a part of our work with students. Music is universal. It speaks to people in any generation, in any language. It is interesting to see what happens when a guitar enters the classroom!

Are you into teaching about your musicality, either at workshops or more professionally? — We have conducted songwriting workshops at Tumbleweed, and will probably be spending more time performing for the elderly at retirement communities and rest homes. What is fascinating about those venues is that many of the seniors used to play instruments, or sang with groups. They love music, and it still brings joy to their lives.

Who are your influences and your idols or heroes, in music or the world? — Diana Krall; Leon Bibb; Travis Edmondson; Chad Mitchell; Nat Cole; Ella Fitzgerald; Harry Belafonte; Les Paul & Mary Ford; Peter, Paul & Mary have all been great influences in our music. And of course, Val's parents: a mother who sang with Bing Crosby and a father who grew up in vaudeville as a singer/dancer, have certainly influenced her love of jazz standards. Mike grew up watching the wonderful movies of the 30s, 40s and 50s, and also tuned into the folk revival. He vowed to re-create and personalize some of those wonderful songs, and of course we both did.

Are there themes for what kinds of music you chase and react to, or is this a matter of the heart? Everyone loves LOVE songs. We do so many of those, especially for our jazz gigs. Many jazz standards are LOVE songs from WW II. But, many of what Val looks for are the songs with interesting chord changes, unexpected intervals, and tunes that seem to "tweak" everyone's heart. As they tell it — Val loves the Gershwins, and Mike loves Cole Porter.

Doc wonders whether they've tuned into songs like Only a Rose from the Vagabond King or the other great love songs from the "operetta era" – Stuff I listened while growing to on our old AM radio. Only time or their next "jazz" album will tell.

How did you get comfortable performing jazz standards, the traditional folk songs and the cabaret songs that are sufficiently different to provide an eclectic mix, not usual among our folk music performers? — We have found that our listeners love the folk genre with political and social meaning, the standards, especially with reference to WW II, but most of all, the songs that take them back to the times that mean the most to them.

Music has meaning to all who perform or listen. We never know when a song will touch the heart of a listener. We try to cover a variety of music and eras, and add our original tunes that offer a new perspective. It would be easy to hire a jazz guitarist to accompany us, and sing all the standards we love. But there is more to

the musical picture than that. Our love of music includes folk, jazz, traditional, and cultural. And we are compelled to do it all!

In Closing

One thing surprised me in this interview. As a jazz enthusiast, no let's be honest, addict, I thought Val would mention many of my favorite female vocalists, Nancy Wilson, Ella Fitzgerald, Sara Vaughan, and Dinah Washington. Certainly some of the songs these, the great ladies of jazz, so lovingly sing are in their song books. Val replied "Yes, I mentioned Ella, but none of these greats sang in my key, so I didn't do much sing-along with their records and tapes until I started listening to Mary Ford and Diana Krall."

Be that as it may, I look forward both to hearing them sing again at a solo gig, or at TMF, and to listening to any new music they record.

More next month...

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