

Now We're Talkin

By Helen Marketti

We remember: songs of survivors

WE REMEMBER: SONGS OF SURVIVORS follows four working singer-songwriters (Michael Veitch, Elizabeth Clark, Kelleigh McKenzie, Jude Roberts) hired by the community arts organization SageArts in New York's Hudson Valley. Through a program offered by Jewish Family Service of Orange County, they visited local Holocaust survivors to create original songs based on their conversations. The film documents the relationships that develop, and the songwriting process, over many months, culminating in an emotional live concert where the survivors and songwriters are celebrated by friends, family, and the community. The first PBS special originally aired in May. There will be another showing of the documentary on PBS in the fall of 2022.

The following is an interview with singer-songwriter-musician Jude Roberts. He reflects on his formative years and being privileged to work on a project of great historical significance and emotional impact. Jude spent time getting to know Holocaust survivor Tommy Wald. What evolved was a uniquely special relationship and a beautiful song written about his wife, Suzanne.

(HM) When you were growing up, what kind of music did you listen to? Were there any bands or musicians you were inspired by?

(JR) My father played classical piano, and from him I learned all the classical music greats: Brahms, Mozart, Beethoven, Puccini, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, and a whole host of others. My mother played Joan Baez and Bob Dylan records and sang me folk songs on the guitar. She let me listen to her Beatles records - something I chose to do in chronological order. I studied classical voice and went to

Boston Conservatory of Music for two years before eventually switching to SUNY Purchase and finishing my BA in Studio Composition. This degree encompassed songwriting and studio recording engineering. Classical music and European folk have influenced me to a great degree: Brahms, Mozart, Edith Piaf, Child Ballads, and English, Scottish, and Irish traditional music. My more contemporary influences include Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Phil Ochs, Leonard Cohen, and everything from swing to rock and roll to the Ramones and the Clash. This list is woefully incomplete, but if I mentioned everyone who's influenced me it would take a book.

(HM) I read in your bio that you have a picture magnet of Leonard Cohen on your fridge.

What is it about him that speaks to you?

(JR) Leonard Cohen was a consummate lyricist and could make any story sound interesting. He pulled imagery from every religion, metaphor from every faith. No subject was off limits and he was never afraid to take the listener out of their comfort zone. Take a song like "Everybody Knows" (which he co-wrote with collaborator Sharon Robinson). He lays bare every dark truth of humanity in the most honest and uncomfortable way. This is the job of the true songwriter.

As dark as it is, there is a sliver of hope embedded in the song, as if to say, "the sooner we admit the existence of the darkness, the easier it will be to find the light." If you watch Cohen's performances - especially the London shows in 2008 - you can see what a gracious, humble man he was. It seems to me that all the years of confronting his dark side enabled him to achieve that kind of lightness and gratitude. As a songwriter, I strive for this type of honesty and humility in my work.

(HM) When did you start playing guitar? What is it about the guitar that appeals to you more so than another instrument?

(JR) My mother let me play her Martin New Yorker guitar when I was ten years old. I studied a chord chart and taught myself how to play. Eventually I learned to Travis pick from listening to "Freewheelin' Bob Dylan". Travis picking is the style of fingerpicking that is the essence of folk music. The appeal of guitar - in particular acoustic guitar - is the natural sound it creates. It is descended from ancient instruments. Stringed instruments made of wood are born of the earth and they sound like the earth. Additionally, guitars are highly portable and provide versatile accompaniment to almost any style of music.

(HM) Please share how the documentary project first began and how you were chosen to be involved.

(JR) I had worked with SageArts on an earlier project (2017) with an elder in the Woodstock, NY community. SageArts director Colette Ruoff asked if I was interested in working with a new project involving Holocaust survivors, and I said yes. I was somewhat reticent to take



on the work, since I knew it would be such an emotional and intellectual challenge, but I also recognized the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet someone with such an important story. I knew I had to try. It was just before my first meeting with Tommy Wald that I was told about the film project. I was unaware at the time that a full-length documentary would come out of it, but I felt that there was a real importance to documenting the process.

(HM) Each musician was paired with a Holocaust survivor. How was it determined who you would learn more about?

(JR) I was not a part of the process of matching survivors with songwriters, so I can't say for certain. My guess is that my colleagues were familiar with the fact that my father (who passed in 2015) struggled with dementia in the years leading up to his death. Tommy's wife suffered with dementia and it was heartbreaking for him; he also had some memory loss himself. I think it was a good connection because I was already tuned in to this issue and I had the empathy and sensitivity to understand it.

(HM) Regarding Tommy Wald and the song "Suzanne", please share some insight about Tommy, the significance of "Suzanne" and how you were able to put pen to paper after hearing his profound life experiences.

(JR) Tommy Wald was an infant when he experienced his trauma. He and his parents were spared from being taken to a concentration camp because, seemingly, someone in the French gestapo felt empathy and let them remain behind while all his other relatives - aunts and uncles - disappeared and were never heard from again. He and his immediate family were able to leave Europe and come to the US before the war ended. There was a profound sense of disconnection and grief for the unknown in Tommy's story. His trauma was less direct than that of some Holocaust survivors, but also deep and difficult to access. I also sensed some survivor's guilt there. He would show me pictures and say, "These people are all my family, but I have no idea who's who." His unique sense of humor - self-deprecating and dry - struck me as an essential coping mechanism to make sense of something otherwise unfathomable.

Tommy's wife, Suzanne, was the love of his life and a healing balm to him. He told me that the worst day of his life was the day that she stopped recognizing him and her dementia became evident. I realized fairly early on that the story would be told through the lens of Tommy's love for Suzanne. I latched on to the idea of memories, lost and found, and how cruel it is that some of us have terrible memories we can't lose, and others have wonderful memories we can't keep.

That was when I was able to sketch the initial

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 draft of the song.

(HM) How long was the period of time between first starting the project, meeting Tommy and composing the song? What did he think of it?

(JR) It was just about a year from start to finish. He and Suzanne heard the beginnings of the song, but it changed quite a bit from that point.

Sadly, Tommy died unexpectedly in April 2019, before the song was finished and before the concert. In an unprecedented turn of events, I was asked to sing the completed song at his burial and the family was given permission by the rabbi to do so. This is, I understand, a very uncommon situation in the Jewish tradition. The song was received with gratitude by his family, and I trust that Tommy heard it and received it as well.

(HM) What is the impactful significance of Tommy sharing his story?

(JR) The sharing each of these stories is significant on many levels. On one level, there is the overall reminder of the human capacity for cruelty and scapegoating; the need for control and domination. Unfortunately, that story needs retelling because it is all around us in ways that many of us don't even want to acknowledge. Only by questioning what we are taught, by understanding our deepest history, can we have a hope of not repeating it. Information suppression is a red flag and our obsession with political identity is toxic. No group of people should be excluded from society or outcast for their existence, or for their choices. This type of othering is a slippery slope to fascism, and to the atrocities that humans have visited on one another throughout time.

On another level, this is proof positive of the human capacity for love and healing. It is a testament to the power of music to transcend pain and suffering. Not only were each of the survivors in this work healed in some way, but each of the songwriters was also changed and touched in the process. I believe music is the most powerful force of truth-telling and healing that humans have.

On yet a third level, Tommy's tale is important because it was important to him. Here is someone who had a beautiful story, which is just one drop in a sea of stories. It might have well gone unheard if we hadn't been brought together. Now, the world gets to hear his story and it won't be easily forgotten. There is something so profoundly beautiful to that.

(HM) What have you learned about yourself during this project?

(JR) I learned that I can push myself to do difficult tasks, and that I can rise to challenges.



This is how you grow as an artist and as a human being. I learned that I can get outside myself and listen without judgment. I learned deep listening without the need to respond. And I learned that I can be a good biographical songwriter, who can bring someone else's story to song.

(HM) Do you keep in touch with Tommy's family?

(JD) I am still in touch with Tommy's daughter, Michele. She watched the documentary when it first aired live, and texted me to let me know how much she loved it. She has told me that I will always be welcome at her family's table, and I'm grateful for that.

(HM) Do you know when the documentary will be shown again?

(JR) It will be re-aired sometime around the Jewish High Holidays. Although, I am not sure if the exact date has been decided. Rosh Hashanah is September 5th, so I would say sometime during that week or between then and Yom Kippur (October 4th).

(HM) Is there anything else you wanted to mention or discuss?

I had worked on a SageArts project several years earlier, paired with another elder who was not a survivor of the Holocaust. Like Tommy, that elder (Stuart Maurer) also passed away toward the end of the project. It's very difficult to forge deep friendships with people and lose them in a short span of time. Yet, we enter into this type of agreement knowing that it's always a possibility. It's a lesson in letting go. You can't go into it with a fragile ego- or any ego, really. You become the vessel in which the story is carried. You hope very much that you did the person's story justice. I am very grateful to have known Tommy and help him on his healing journey, which is now linked to my own healing journey.

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