

Mad Folk News

Robert Jones and Matt Watroba Benefit Concert for the Wil-Mar Center

By Darlene Buhler

On Friday, March 12th, The Madison Folk Music Society and The Wild Hog in the Woods Coffeehouse will co-present Robert Jones and Matt Watroba in this special streamed concert live.

Ever since their first meeting over thirty years ago Jones and Watroba have been musical partners. Their relationship started when they hosted back-to-back radio shows at WDET-FM in Detroit. Later on they started performing together and in doing so, they discovered a friendship based

in mutual respect and a love for traditional American music. They have travelled the nation extolling the value of "Music That Matters".

For Matt and Robert, American Roots Music (Folk, Blues, Spirituals, Work Songs, Chants, etc.) is music that matters. This is the music that America and the world have in common. It is music that reflects history, social change, migration, hopes and dreams. It is music that is rich and diverse, direct and powerful. As talented as they are individually, singing

and playing guitar, banjo and fiddle, together they form a synergy that is hard to describe. They formed a non-profit called Common Chords to connect communities through music and the arts.

Please watch our website and Facebook page for additional details and a link to watch the show. There will be no tickets sold in advance, just a donation of your choice that fits your budget. The donation will be split between the performers and the Wil-Mar Neighborhood Center.



My Highway Home

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Transcending and Embracing the Zeitgeist Art & Tech

In the fall of 2019, I was making plans to record my next project. As I have with most of my albums in the last 15 years, I called my friend and Local 1000 AFM union-brother, Charlie Pilzer (Co-founder of Air-Show Mastering and founder/owner of Tonal Park Studios). He has had a hand in recording, mixing, or mastering nearly every record I have made since 2004. As we talked about what my vision was for making the next CD he said, "You know... You should really be doing more of your own recording. We can mix together if you want here at my studio. But much of what you want to do, you could accomplish on your own. And in the long run, the quality would be solid, and you would save a fair amount of money. You have been making records for nearly three decades. Do yourself a favor and buy some nice gear. One solid channel will do."

I love it when colleagues and friends transcend their own potential for profit, and see what is best for their client or colleague or friend. Charlie was 100% right. I needed to build a remedial recording space, acquire even one top-notch Class-A channel's worth of recording gear, and start recording. Charlie and a few other friends graciously consulted with me in my process.

In early December of 2019, I went to Sweetwater Inc. (a professional audio distributor and retailer in Ft. Wayne, IN) and I spent most of a day there. I tried out 27 different large diaphragm vocal mics in what we call a "Mic Shoot-Out." I compared the sound of my voice on the recordings of each microphone through an otherwise identical signal chain. I wanted to compare my dream mic with many others in the field, by many manufacturers. In the end, I bought the dream machine: a high-end Neumann tube-mic (M149) that I have been in love with for more than a decade. Charlie and I discussed which Tube Preamp-Compressor combo would best serve my needs. And I settled on the Universal Audio LA-610 MK-II. I bought a pair of Neumann pencil-condenser mics as well. And with that I was set for recording most of what I would need to record on my end, for a long time to come. These are powerful, versatile, well-made tools. Any crafts-person will tell you, always buy good tools.

I took an 8' x 12' space in my basement that was concrete on 3-sides and open on the 4th, and I framed it in. I custom framed the door jam, and built a door from scratch. It swings true – and I am proud of that. Most of my carpentry skills come from building sets for theater in high school and at university. So... Function over form is my motto when it comes to basic carpentry. I insulated between the studs with R-11 and R-13 rolled insulation, and covered all 4 walls and the door with 1" sheet foam. I then covered the inside of all of that with additional custom cut 4x8 sheets of OSB construction board, and then I carpeted the inside of the space as well. It is not as sound-isolated as I wish it was, but it does fine.

Note to would-be builders: I did not account for proper ventilation. This basement like a cave, remains fairly temperature stable throughout the year. But then you put me inside of that little box (now more like 7' x 11' and just under 7' tall) and add track lighting, a Fender tub-amp and microphone tube pre-amps, add other rack-mount audio gear that all emit BTUs... Now you have a lot of heat in a small and reasonably well insulated space. I'll work on ventilation for the next studio. This time around though, I built a functional space. And I can open the door between takes for air.

In the 2nd week of January, 2020 I hit the road for some tour dates, Folk Alliance, et cetera. I took ill in February in the wake of the Folk Alliance Conference for a few weeks. Then I was back on the road the rest of February and into early March. Then Covid-19 hit in full force. I was still mid-tour in upstate NY and staying with a friend. As the world got stranger by the day, I decided to stay put for most of 8 weeks. And then, it was time to go back home to Illinois and start my Covid-Era music career in earnest.

Much to my surprise and gratitude, I had unconsciously perceived of the need for an Ark before I knew there was going to be a flood. I went from zero to highway speeds on technology very quickly once I got home. And I transformed what was intended to be a recording space into a broadcast space. I still have some kinks to work out of the system, and one is always

trying to improve one's knowledge and capacity. But the heart of the work was done, and it was a gift I had given to my future self, without having any idea of how important that space would become to me. It has become my creative home and my refuge.

The next step was getting up to speed on various live-streaming platforms such as YouTube Live, Face Book Live, Twitch, Stream Yard, etc. And then I learned about broadcast software that helps one's quality by imbedding digital timecode into one's signal – so that the signal is on a calculated delay and the receiving device (the listener's computer, tablet, TV, or phone) can reassemble it all in proper order. And then there were hundreds of test recordings and broadcasts trials measuring the parameters on sound, lighting, what color shirts worked in the space on camera, decorations in the space – set dressing. Dozens of conversations and "online sound-checks" with colleagues and friends. We all helped each other out as we reached for the best possible quality we could in a new and unknowable reality, that seemed to change on a daily basis.

With each broadcast, I got better at doing what I was trying to do. With each concert, each online event, church services via Zoom for Unitarians, virtual song-swaps

Column continued on next page

*Joe Jencks is 20-year veteran of the international Folk scene, an award winning songwriter and vocalist, and a contributing writer to numerous publications. His column **My Highway Home** is a recent addition to the Mad-Folk newsletter. For more information please visit: www.joejencks.com.*

*Joe Jencks continues to host a monthly radio show called **My Highway Home** on the new Folk Music network – **Folk Music Notebook**. This show features interviews with people Joe meets in his extensive travels along with music by many artists from the big tent that is Folk Music. Tune in on the first Monday of the month at 9:00 PM ET/ 8:00 PM CT. And rebroadcast on the following Sundays at 1:00 PM ET/ 12-Noon CT. Several past episodes are archived through **Folk Music Notebook** including shows about the Kerrville Folk Festival, Old Songs Festival, The Great Labor Arts Exchange, Ireland, and an interview with Sonny Ochs.*

Listen in online via:
www.folkmusicnotebook.com

and circles, teaching and leading workshops online – all of it became familiar in some fashion. Sadly, even online funerals are now commonplace. But the learning continues. Every day brings a new opportunity. Every performance teaches me something. Because once we transcend the technology, we get back into the art and craft of performing. We get better at trusting that the audience is out there listening – even if we can't see them. And we learn how to relax into the new paradigm. We learn to transcend the zeitgeist and work in partnership with it at the same time. In short, we learn to use the new tools and tech, just like we first learned stage-craft and mic technique. And then the art begins anew, with all available means.

After more than a year since I built the space, I still have not started working on my own new CD. I have recorded "keeper" tracks on albums for several friends and colleagues in the last year. I've produced monthly radio shows. I've recorded lectures and presentations. I've worked in partnership with dozens of communities and presenters across the US and Canada to keep "touring" from my basement studio. But I have not yet begun recording the new album.

I have material for a few albums in the stable waiting to go. But as Bob Dylan wrote so eloquently, "The times, they are a changin'." I am still unclear as a producer which sub-set of that repertoire to focus on

first. What serves the moment best? What serves the hearts and spirits of my listeners and community best? What do I feel called to sing about right now?

I hope to make a go of it this winter and spring with regards to the recording. I am eager to share the new music, and I genuinely LOVE the creative process of making a new album, once I am "in" it. I am eager to begin using the space and gear for its original intended purpose.

And... Holy cow am I glad that I took a few weeks last winter and framed in that nook in the basement. And I am incredibly grateful that a dear friend, colleague, mentor and brother in music - Charlie Pilzer - invited me to trust my own knowledge and capacity to learn. If not for his input and encouragement, I would not have ordered the gear that I did, when I did. And I would not have turned into the wind when Covid-19 wiped out my 22-year touring career and confined me to the house. But in the company of friends, we keep putting one foot in front of the other.

There have been many other colleagues and friends along the way this past year that have been invaluable to me in supporting my efforts to grow, learn, and keep the music flowing. And I freely pass on what I have learned and continue to learn in the same spirit. I do my best to be useful and share what I learn with others. I pay it forward as best I can.

Last but certainly not least, I want to say that there are many, many WAY less expensive means to arrive at the capacity to participate in the musical activities of this era. There are USB microphones, USB audio interfaces, simple USB cameras and small all-in-one devices that can bring you close to digital highway speeds fairly quickly. All of these devices will accomplish much of what I am doing for a fraction of the cost, and allow you to join in online song circles, offer your own live-stream performances, and keep being a part of the community of musicians and listeners in important ways. If you have a quiet space, even just a corner of your living room or bedroom or office – you can make a go of this. And I am happy to help offer ideas and input. Send an email to me (joe@joejencks.com). The point is, start with what you already have and buy only what is needed to fill the gaps. For me, that was a \$160 Focusrite USB audio interface. I had all of the other stuff already. If you want to be making more music online, if you were already making more music before this era, you probably already have much of the gear you need to make it all work.

Hang in there! And don't be afraid to ask for help. We will get through this era as we have gotten through so many things, together!

~ Joe Jencks 2-1-21

On the Air

Simply Folk on Wisconsin Public Radio w/ Dan Robinson, Host



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J.T. - STEVE EARLE & THE DUKES
NEW WEST RECORDS - 2021



Review by Kiki Schueler

It's safe to say J.T. is the record Steve Earle never wanted to make. After losing his son Justin Townes Earle to an accidental fentanyl/cocaine overdose on August 20, 2020, the elder Earle found the only way he could say goodbye was to head to the studio with his son's catalog. Hearing these songs, which originated over the course of eight albums and a dozen years, grouped together makes for a great equalizer. The collection demonstrates a remarkable continuity of quality songwriting from the earliest, "I Don't Care" off the 2007 EP Yuma, to the most recent, the title track off *The Saint of Lost Causes* from 2019. J.T. dipped into many styles, country, blues, rock and folk, but the songs here are all rendered in Steve Earle's unmistakable, singular, style. Earle, who plays guitar and mandolin, is backed by his long-time band the Dukes, the current line-up of which includes Chris Masterson on guitar, Eleanor Whitmore on fiddle & vocals, Ricky Ray Jackson on pedal steel, guitar & dobro, Brad Pemberton on drums, and Jeff Hill on bass. The eye-catching cover art was created by Tony Fitzpatrick, whose work has graced every Steve Earle record since 1996's *I Feel Alright*, blending J.T. seamlessly into his catalog.

Somewhat surprisingly, the selections are not evenly distributed, four of the album's ten songs come from J.T.'s second record *The Good Life*. A well-received record that owes more to Hank Sr, than to

his father or his namesake (Townes Van Zandt), the record revels in the sounds of classic country and honest songwriting. The spare arrangements of the originals leave ample room for new interpretations, and Steve & the Dukes use it to put their own spin on "Ain't Glad I'm Leaving," "Faraway in Another Town," "Turn Out My Lights" and the dark "Lone Pine Hill." The band seems to having the most fun on "They Killed John Henry," the only entry from *Midnight at the Movies*. A tale of survival, the song lists folk heroes John Henry and Joe Hill, as well as his granddaddy, as men who fell victim to the man, before making the now paradoxical declaration, "They won't kill me." Whitmore's enthusiastic fiddle and backing vocals give the song a glorious hoedown feel. It's no surprise the song made the cut, Steve has admitted he was jealous that his kid had written a John Henry song before he did. J.T.'s lighthearted "Champagne Corolla" from *Kids in the Street* feels like a revved-up 60's twister, here it's seat-leaned-back rockabilly cruiser. Though admittedly, it still has me doing the twist. J.T. live favorite "Harlem River Blues," from the album of the same name, sounds the most like a Steve original, and makes the most the Dukes. The propulsive pedal steel and fiddle that lead into the acapella singalong on the final chorus make for an emphatic celebration.

The final track is a new composition written by Steve following J.T.'s death. While no parent should ever have to outlive a child, "Last Words" is a song with remarkably few regrets. From the day he was born till the end of his life, J.T. and Steve had a fairly typical father/son relationship, "You made me laugh, you made me cry, showed me truth, you told me lies. Tore my heart apart and then you brought me back the piece again." With touring shut down and both musicians off the road, the two talk-

ed frequently and he spoke to his son on the day he died. "Last thing I said was, 'I love you,' and your last words to me were, 'I love you too.'" It has to be immensely gratifying to have actually said the thing you wish you had. Not many can say that. The digital version of the record was released on January 4, which would have been J.T.'s 39th birthday, while CDs and vinyl will be available March 19th. According to Earle's website, all proceeds from the album will go into a trust fund for Justin's three-year-old daughter, Etta St. James Earle. Go in peace J.T.

Mad Folk News is published monthly by the Madison Folk Music Society, a non-profit, volunteer-led society dedicated to fostering folk music in the Madison area. Contact us at madfolk@charter.net. Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at www.madfolk.org. www.facebook.com/pages/Madison-Folk-Music-Society/34497984835

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Book Review

Brother Robert: Growing Up with Robert Johnson

by Annye C. Anderson with Preston Lauterbach
Hachette Books, New York, 2020

No doubt everyone who digs the blues has heard the wild theories of blues legend Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for his abilities. Strange that even if this were true, Robert would be given only 27 years of life, little financial success, and, while living, a relatively small audience. If this deal indeed took place, Robert signed without a good lawyer.

"I felt that I had to protect the real Brother Robert that I knew. He didn't get his abilities from God or the Devil. He made himself. People have stuck Brother Robert's family off to the side, because it makes him more interesting to be a vagabond or a phantom. And it makes him easier for someone else to make money off of if we're out of the picture."

And with that as her mission, in 2018, at the age of 91, Mrs. Annye C. Anderson sought someone who could help put together a book of her memories of her adored stepbrother Robert Johnson, who died in 1938 when she was only twelve years old. She was fortunate to find Preston Lauterbach to help with her project. Mrs. Anderson wanted to find someone familiar with the Memphis of 1930s, and her daughter Hughia knew of the books by Mr. Lauterbach --[Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis](#), and [The Chitlin' Circuit And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll](#)-- and thought he would be a good candidate. The connection was made, and through a number of recorded conversations over the following months, this book took shape.

Mr. Lauterbach wisely stands back and lets Mrs. Anderson tell her story in her own words: *"It's been my top priority to share her lovely figures of speech, witty turns of phrase, and warm, charming diction, along with biting commentary on race in America."* The result is a vivid picture of black life in Memphis of the 20s and 30s, with enchanting glimpses of the warm and very human facets of Robert Johnson.

The complicated family relationships are made more clear by a convenient chart in the front of the book. I had to keep flipping back to this chart and even then I got lost sometimes, though I'm bad with names to begin with. Mrs. Anderson technically was not Robert Johnson's sister, but his step-sister, with no blood relationship. Her mother and Johnson's mother had both been married to Charles Dodd, but he was not Robert's father who, according to other biographies, was someone named Noah Johnson, with whom Julia had a brief relationship after Charles Dodd had to leave town because of a fight with a white landowner. Julia and Charles eventually reconnected, by then Charles having changed his name to Charles Spencer. And on and on. I hope I have that straight. Anyway, Robert and Annye did end up living together or near one another as brother and sister, until Robert died when she was twelve years old.

The first section of the book deals with Mrs. Anderson's young life and touches frequently on her impressions of and love for Robert. It was fascinating to read of the breadth of Robert's influences:

"Sister Carrie would sing Bing Crosby songs and Brother Robert would strum 'Did You Ever See a Dream Walking,' and 'Pennies from Heaven.' She loved blues, and he played for her while she sang, 'You've Been a Good Old Wagon' like Bessie Smith, and 'Am I Blue?' like Ethel Waters... He played nursery rhymes [for children]: 'Little Sally Walker,' 'Mary Had a Little Lamb...' 'She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain...' We didn't miss Grand Ole Opry... I remember my father, an old fiddler, saying that Uncle Dave Macon was the best... My father and Brother Robert were very friendly with each other, crowding around and listening to the radio... Brother Robert and my favorite was Jimmie Rodgers... Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Jimmie Lunceford, and Duke Ellington were household words."

It's a captivating education to read Mrs. Anderson's descriptions of the moods of the times, the poverty of the depression and beyond, the racism, the food, the family joys and sorrows, the crazy mixed up family relationships, the generousities of everyone concerned. And the sense of place is powerful, with the railroad tracks, bridges, actual street addresses, the Mississippi, the descriptions of buildings inside and

out, the swimming holes and fishing spots... This all in the first half of the book, which takes us up to Robert's death. The second half of the book is focused on the heartbreaking and eventually futile efforts made first by Mrs. Anderson's sister Carrie then carried on by Annye to claim for the family the rightful ownership of Robert's songs.

Annye moved north in 1947, to eventually marry, have children, earn a teaching degree, and teach in Boston area schools for many years. She was surprised to find racism everywhere. *"In our nation's capital, it took me my entire first lunch hour to find someplace to serve me a meal. It must be known that there is only one region in the United States, you're either up South or down South."*

She fought desperately against such horrific scoundrels as a man named Steve LaVere, who, along with a few other white opportunists, cheated the legitimate heirs of Robert Johnson out of the hundreds of thousands of dollars, owed for royalties, as his songs became mainstays of world famous rock bands and blues artists everywhere. This half of the book is as marvelously told as the first half, but it's a heartbreaking tale.

A personal note: My music partner Lou and I, early in our career, had a scoundrel experience, which put us so far behind that we had to accept gigs in noon-hour college cafeterias and the like for a couple years to recuperate. It is indescribably frustrating to be screwed like that, and I can barely imagine the extra outrage when you are black and the swindlers are all white.

The book ends with the transcript of a great discussion featuring Mrs. Anderson and this book's Peter Lauterbach, along with Peter Guralnick, author of [Searching for Robert Johnson](#), and Elijah Wald, author of [Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues](#). Wald also wrote the book's perfect introduction.

I know I'll read this book again. I adore this Studs Terkel style of interview, which isn't really an interview but the establishment of such an atmosphere of respect that the narrator feels comfortable telling their story. And Mrs. Anderson is a magnificent storyteller, and a courageous and tireless defender of her [Brother Robert](#).

--WZ for Feb. 2021

"WHEN IS MY RENEWAL DUE?"

(Hint: It is NOT the date on the mailing label!)

The date shown on the mailing label is NOT your membership expiration date! There has been some confusion lately, and we apologize for that. The date is just the date the labels were printed, as new cost-saving postal procedures do not allow us to include expiration dates there anymore. When it is time to renew, we will send you a personal notice by mail or email. At that point you will be able to either mail a check or renew online at www.madfolk.org. If you have questions about your membership in the meantime, send email to info@madfolk.org. Thanks for your membership and support of Mad Folk!

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