



Pete Seeger, left, and Lorre Wyatt of Greenfield, right, have been friends for about 50 years. Here they work on songs at Seeger's home in New York, part of a two-year songwriting collaboration that led to the release of a new CD titled "A More Perfect Union: New Songs by Old Friends."

Old apples

Lorre Wyatt's road to recovery from a cruelly debilitating stroke included a collaboration with his old friend Pete Seeger. Together, they rediscovered songwriting

Story by Richie Davis

When Pete Seeger, at age 93, made his umpteenth recording last fall, capping a career as the granddaddy of American folk musicians, he was surrounded by a bevy of "glitterati" — Bruce Springsteen, Emmylou Harris, Dar Williams and others. But it was Greenfield folk musician Lorre Wyatt who shares top billing on the recent CD, "A More Perfect Union." Seeger and Wyatt co-wrote these "new songs by old friends," as the album is subtitled.

For Wyatt, who's never sought the spotlight as a singer-songwriter but has been Seeger's close friend for about 50 years, the two-year songwriting collaboration represents as much a milestone as it does for Seeger, the legendary father figure to a generation of folkies. It's the first recording for the somewhat reclusive Greenfield musician since his 1996 stroke that left him unable to speak, much less play music — although singing helped him on the long road back.

The songs emphasize Seeger's and Wyatt's optimistic, activist outlook, as expressed in "God's Counting on Me," the opening selection:

*"When we look around and we see, things are not what they should be,
God's counting on me,
God's counting on you
Time to turn things around,
Trickle up, not trickle down
God's counting on me,
God's counting on you.
Don't give up, don't give in,
Working together, we all can win ...
God's counting on me,
God's counting on you."*

Seeger, who turned 94 on Friday, described the collaboration at a July 2010 benefit appearance in New York City, as reported by Rolling Stone Magazine:

"I have a friend who's a good songwriter, but he had a stroke and had to fight his way back so he could talk and walk and drive a car again. Lorre Wyatt is his name. He lives up in Massachusetts. He wrote some of (Hudson River Sloop) Clearwater's best songs. And he called me up and said 'Pete, I have some song ideas, but I can't seem to finish them. Can I come down and visit you?' For two days, we tried this and that."

That's essentially how Wyatt and Seeger came together in 2011 and 2012 for the song writing and recording, after a series of phone calls in

the years after the stroke that left Wyatt unable to perform. Wyatt, who had met Seeger at civil-rights rallies and anti-war protests in the 1960s and at fundraisers for the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater in the 1970s, talked with him by phone about unfinished songs they'd written together.

"When I was recuperating, Pete sent me a tape of just melodies and said 'Fill in the blanks,'" says Wyatt, a tall, curly gray-haired New Jersey native who moved to Franklin County in 1977. In 2008, when the Connecticut River Watershed Council sponsored its first songwriting contest, Wyatt tried submitting a river-related song he and Seeger had worked on together. "Don't tell them I had anything to do with it," Seeger advised Wyatt before submitting their entry.

The collaboration, which evolved into the song "Bountiful River" that closes the album, didn't even come close to winning the contest. "Pete said this is one of the favorite songs he's written, so it's good enough for me," Wyatt said.

At one point, Seeger, who lives in Beacon, N.Y., told Wyatt "If you can get down here, why don't you bring some of those songs we can work on?"

"You can imagine how many

Wyatt continues to battle the effects of the stroke that damaged his brain 17 years ago. At the time, it left him unable to speak, much less access skills developed over decades of playing instruments and writing songs. "I remember a lot of stuff vanished and I knew there were a lot of things I couldn't do. I didn't know what were the words I wanted to say."

things I brought with me," said Wyatt. "One of the things I brought was the bare bones of what turned into 'God's Counting on Me.' It was quite different, but it was something I'd started."

Seeger, a Harvard dropout who met, traveled and performed with Woody Guthrie in 1940 and wrote songs emphasizing the power of common people against political oppression and environmental degradation, spent two days with Wyatt sharing stories, songs and stray musical and poetic ideas. For Seeger, who's won a Grammy

Lifetime Achievement Award, three album Grammys, a Harvard Arts Medal, Kennedy Center Award, Presidential Medal of the Arts, Library of Congress Lifetime Legends medal and even a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame enshrinement, the time spent hanging out "to be just who you are" was special.

Wyatt, 67, who moved to Greenfield in 1979, two years after moving from New York City to an apartment at Whately's Quunquot Farm, began writing songs while still in high school. At the time, Seeger was already legendary for his own songs, including "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" "If I Had a Hammer," and "Turn, Turn, Turn."

"He was always this magical figure," Wyatt says of Seeger. "It's rare you find someone who, when you know them offstage, lives up to everything you'd hope they'd be. I've wished more people realized again about Pete, how creative he is, how much he's been a part of American society, getting people involved in the music, getting them harmonizing and singing."

Hashing over material old and new around Seeger's kitchen table, in his barn and on the porch, the two old friends compared notes on aging

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and their human frailties.

"Once we did 'God's Counting on Me,' we knew that was a keeper and something magical was happening with that," recalls Wyatt. "At first, we went through a batch of old songs we might do from ones we had started, and we went through a couple of other things. And we said we'll get together on the porch another time. We were thinking a half a year or something, but we got excited."

After Seeger played "God's Counting on Me" for audiences, he phoned Wyatt enthused about the results.

"I think we wrought better than we thought," he told Wyatt. "You know, we really have to write more songs. Bring that batch that we did."

So the two songwriters started with material they'd already worked on — including Wyatt's "Somos El Barco (We are the Boat, We are the Sea)" and "Bountiful River." Then, says Wyatt, "Little by little, we realized we were writing new things."

Midnight Special

One night, as they sat out on the patio outside the kitchen singing "God's Counting on Me" until just before midnight, says Wyatt, they heard the N.Y. Central Railroad whistling in the distance.

"Pete broke right into 'The Midnight Special.' It was a real heart-pounder," says Wyatt of hearing their own tune flow spontaneously into Huddie Ledbetter's song.

"Pete talked about how he first heard 'Leadbelly' sing it when he went with (folk song researchers) John and Alan Lomax to record him in prison. And there we were on the balcony at midnight, singing, 'Let the midnight special shine its ever-lovin' light on me.'"

It was a give-and-take time that the old friends spent together, with a pad of paper always at hand and the tape recorder usually running to collect the threads of thoughts of melodies and counter melodies that sprang up spontaneously.

"All of sudden, I'd hear him starting to hum something, or we would know when something 'happened' just from a conversation," says Wyatt. "We didn't say, 'Let's talk and we'll find something to write about.' He'd say, 'I was just thinking, and I'd say, 'Me, too.' A lot of things came just from reminiscing or the conversations we had. And then these songs popped up."

The popping came at strange times, like when the two were at the kitchen table.

"It was just us and the cats and the dog, and they were howling to get fed," recalls Wyatt. Seeger was playing on the recorder a tune that he'd woken up with the night before.

"He said, 'I don't know what can be done with it,'" Wyatt recalls, "and I said, 'I think they're giving us the words right now! Let's see if we can translate what they're saying.' And Pete said, 'It's difficult to get lyrics out of quadrupeds!'"

As Seeger and Wyatt wrote, "Howling for Our Supper," the pets kept howling, "and you know how cats are — they were knocking things off the counter, rubbing against things and they knocked down one of Pete's favorite mugs, the dog going, 'Oooo!' And it was so much fun that we sang it to them."

Old apples

At another point, toward the end of their efforts last May, Wyatt returned to Beacon and they'd been working for a while when they decided it was time for a break. Scrounging for something to eat, they turned up the remains of a bushel of Franklin County apples Wyatt had brought months earlier.

"There were these apples, old and wrinkly and stuff, and I said, 'Why don't we try making some applesauce?' So we boiled them down and Pete said, 'I don't think this is going to taste so good because they're all wrinkly.'"

Then Seeger took a taste, and he said, "Pretty good." He looked at it and took another taste and said, "Not bad ... I guess old apples still can make good sauce."

"Pete, I think we've got another song."

Wyatt began writing, "Autumn apples, juicy and crisp," and then, he recalls, "somehow we got a line 'Sweet as a kiss. ... Something is lost ... But I guess old apples still can make good sauce.'"

Seeger was already humming a



Singing with others is still a struggle but, thanks to Seeger's encouragement, the two friends are planning for a June 16 performance for hundreds at the Hudson River Revival, at which Wyatt performed years ago.

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Wyatt, shown in his Greenfield home, relearned guitar, in part because of help from Greenfield guitarist Michael Nix. "I admire Lorre's tenacity and his sense of self-hope. I don't think he sat around feeling sorry for himself. Somehow or another, he just picked himself up and said 'I'm going to do this,'" Nix said.

Recorder/Paul Franz

tune, repeated over and over.

He was still repeating it as the two of them got in the car and drove into town, where the recording studio had some open time, and Wyatt — though recovering from a bad case of laryngitis that had left nodules on his throat — decided they needed to hurry to record the tune before Seeger forgot it.

Pete sang, 'Something is lost' and I could see he was thinking about how his voice had been lost, and a lot of his friends were gone, but there was the wonderful resolve, 'I guess old apples still can make good sauce.'"

"I started to work out other verses, but Pete said, 'It's all the verses right here. Let's just sing it again,'" Wyatt said.

In the studio, Seeger loved repeating the descending chorus line over and over: "I guess old apples still can make good sauce."

"It was very special for me, very light-hearted, but with deep meaning and, in a certain way, a great, positive way to view one's life. They wanted to change it and call it 'Applesauce.' Pete said, 'No. It's 'Old Apples.'"

The stroke

The fall of 1996 had been a tense time for Lorre Wyatt as he prepared to move with his son, Benjamin, from their Amherst apartment back to Greenfield so it would be easier for the teen to attend Northfield Mount Hermon School.

Wyatt hadn't been getting much sleep, as he tried packing up his collection of long-playing record albums, tapes, books and musical instruments. Tension mounted as moving day approached and he began having headaches.

He awoke the morning of Oct. 6 unable to speak. He could hardly move his mouth as he wanted, so that the water ran uncontrollably

down his shirt when he tried brushing his teeth. He chose to take a nap — in hindsight, an awful mistake now that he looks back on the inability of doctors to intervene in the stroke that caused him to lose much of his recent memory as well as his ability to speak and play music.

"I should have gone right to the hospital," said Wyatt. "My mouth was garbled. I didn't pass out, but I could have just not remembered it. I remember a lot of stuff vanished and I knew there were a lot of things I couldn't do. I didn't know what were the words I wanted to say."

Wyatt was suffering from apraxia and aphasia — not just an inability to physically speak, but also an inability to even know what the words were he wanted to say. He was able to point to a photo of a friend who'd suffered a stroke. Benjamin phoned the friend, who urged them to get to the hospital. By then, it was too late.

In the weeks and months that followed, Wyatt got help from occupational therapists, speech therapists and physical therapists. Benjamin helped him relearn words with the same picture books Wyatt had used to teach words to his son years before.

Wyatt loved language, as exhibited in his song lyrics and word play with friends. Now, he struggled to remember common words and still struggles with retrieving words.

"If I saw a chair, I'd think 'acorn,'" says Wyatt, who describes the experience of learning words with his son from books as "deja vu through a fog: I knew something was vaguely familiar. I could almost remember something happening that was familiar from the sounds. And he'd laugh, remembering me reading to him from those same books."

Wyatt recalls spending a lot of time just getting his mouth moving properly and he began attending English as a Second Language

classes to practice learning to speak again.

Like language, Wyatt heard music as "a jumble. It didn't have a linear way, it was almost like splashing a lot of sounds. I couldn't follow what they were, but I knew I would love this thing. I would hear something, maybe a chord, and it would move me. I didn't know how to identify any of those things."

Singing came first

Gradually, he began examining videos about the workings of the brain and stumbled upon research that had been done about stuttering that showed how different parts of the brain were involved in speaking and singing. He reached back into distant memories that were most intact, to songs like "Frere Jacques ('Are You Sleeping?') and began singing with "oohs" and "aahs" instead of words. And, he discovered that he was able to sing to get around his own stuttering of words.

Still unable to speak in sentences, Wyatt even turned to singing when it came to something as basic as arguing with his teenage son, who sang back his own side of the arguments, until they both broke down laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

The songs he'd known from childhood were most firmly rooted in the recesses of his memory, but even those, and the songs he'd written long ago, had to be relearned.

"It was continual deja vu," Wyatt recalls. "Someone would be singing me a song and, I'd say, 'I know that song!' And she'd say, 'You wrote that song!' But even when I was doing it, I was learning it. It was like synapses were forming and I could feel something clicking and I'd know that I knew this. It was a special feeling of re-acquainting, almost like getting together with an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time. I would try to get this stuff out as soon as I could.

Once in a while, I'd remember all of a sudden how to play something. I just tried it, I could do it, but if I tried an hour later, I'd forget it. So I'd immediately record it and painstakingly notate it."

Wyatt had help in relearning how to play guitar from Greenfield guitarist Michael Nix. "It was great, because even though I couldn't speak, I could communicate with him musically." Wyatt had neuropathy in his fingers and he lost both sensitivity and fine-motor control but, remembers Nix, Wyatt didn't lose his cognitive ability or his muscle memory.

"We started taking snippets of his songs, which he initially couldn't remember cognitively," Nix says. "But, if you put the guitar in his hands and say, 'Start playing' whatever song it was, he'd find that just cutting the cognitive brain off, the muscle memory would remember the chords, the finger-picking patterns."

Wyatt, who communicated with Nix at first by writing notes, wasn't able to play and sing at the same time during lessons, which ended about two years ago. They also worked on reading and notating music.

(Nix has set up a "Stroke Disability Education Fund" at Greenfield Savings Bank in order to raise money to purchase a guitar for Wyatt, and says it is nearly halfway to the \$1,000 goal for a steel-string instrument.)

Tenacity

Coordinating singing and playing, or singing from written music and words while being able to juxtapose what each hand should be doing took some additional pluck.

"It was like learning to do stuff over where you'd focus on one place and then another, and then seeing where the integration happens. But there was also a lot of relying on previous skills he didn't remember that he had," says Nix. "I admire Lorre's tenacity and his sense of self-hope. I don't think he sat around feeling sorry for himself. Somehow or another, he just picked himself up and said 'I'm going to do this.'"

Wyatt recalls, "I'd ask people to bring me song books. When I listened to something, I'd ask Benjamin to turn to that page, so I could see what the words and the melody roughly looked like, so I could associate it."

Because of the brain damage caused by the stroke, it was hard to keep strumming and picking in synch with what his left hand was doing Wyatt devised a way to cut the music in half with a divider to help him look at just one hand at a time, then slide it along.

"It was like life was a constant calypso. I always found that I was a measure or two behind myself," like a movie where the soundtrack is slightly off. I would read what I wanted the right hand to do first, and set a metronome, so if it got slow enough, I could get it exactly," says Wyatt, who tape recorded each part separately so that he could play along with that as a guide. "I had to segment it, just use my left hand, then just my right, then sing something."

As he taped each new self-lesson, concentrating on one hand at a time, he built on his ability to play and sing the songs, beginning with nonsense syllables "because I didn't know what I was singing about."

"I'd have to constantly, as I was rediscovering music, see what I could do, (and say) 'Let's just figure this out. I'm going to get these pieces closer together little by little.' I just kept at it. It was slow going, but it's going."

Wyatt also had the benefit of a library of taped lessons he'd routinely made for his guitar students, which he used to teach himself. Looking back now, he says working with those tapes gave him insight into difficulties those students had in learning and he expects to have more patience when he returns to teaching.

And because of Wyatt's meticulous effort at documentation — like the loose-leaf binder he maintains as he perfects playing each of the collaborated songs with Seeger, and the tape recordings to "actually document the creative process" of songwriting — he can trace each step of his progress along the way.

Wyatt, who'd grown up playing violin and had also learned to play viola, clarinet and banjo, also had to relearn how to read music. "I looked at it and remember being startled, because I knew I knew See APPLES Page D3

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these things.”

While he's concentrated on relearning guitar — using a child's guitar until he could get his fingers stretched out around the neck — he's given up on violin and clarinet. As for banjo, he says, “I'm lucky I've got a great teacher” — the man who literally wrote the instruction book he used to learn in the first place: Seeger.

Taking the stage again

Another challenge for Wyatt, who's always struggled with concentrating against background noise, has been learning to sing with other people.

“I'm learning how to not get lost or thrown off if people are singing with me. Playing with other people was the hardest thing, because I didn't have a steady sense of rhythm. Pete has his own sense of rhythm and he's absorbed so much of traditional music that he can sing rhythmically free.”

Now, with the encouragement of Seeger himself, the two musicians are planning for a June 16 performance for hundreds of faithful folkies at the Hudson River Revival, at which Wyatt performed years ago.

“I used to improvise a lot and I love to do that. But it's harder for me to take a chance,” says Wyatt, who hopes to work up to that reunion appearance by experimenting with a few house concerts and other small group settings.

Wyatt's ordeal gives him something else in common with Seeger as the master folksinger heads toward his mid-90s.

“Pete's been concerned because his memory's been going and now I've been through that,” Wyatt said.

And yet despite his age, Seeger has kept busy, particularly when it comes to benefits for the environmental and social justice causes he believes in.

Seeger's songwriting abilities are also fully intact, as is his zeal for involving the entire audience in singing, says Wyatt, describing the elder musician humming a counter melody to himself, “like a Bach cello part,” as he played a descending line on the 12-string while they were collaborating on “Bountiful River.”

“Often when I'm songwriting, I'm concentrating on getting the lyrics and getting the song done,” said Wyatt. “Pete's already thinking about teaching to the audience and how that would affect harmonies. We'd be in middle of something and he'd say, ‘No, that will affect the range,’ or ‘That will be hard if people are hearing it one time, so we're going to need to have more choruses in that one.’”

“He was already hearing that and how he could get people to learn the words. I'd say, ‘Pete, I'm about three or four streets behind you.’”

“He's honing the melody, finding something very lyrical, asking, ‘How are people going to pick this up’ without dumbing down? How do you get the essence where words and music are really hugging each other tight?’ It's so wondrous.”

Because of both their difficulties with memory, Wyatt said, they tried to get the songs recorded soon after they wrote and honed them.

“At one point, Pete had a great tune for something, but he said, ‘I can't remember the tune.’ So, I spent weeks at home trying to re-learn it. I went back down there and made up a tune as best I could remember what he had done. And I started to play and he said, ‘No, no, no. That's not it. And he sang the tune straight through.’”

The time spent together was fun layered with meaning for the long-time friends as they shared their common efforts to “keep the flame alive” — as one song title says.

“Through each others' forgettings, we'd piece a ballad together; ‘Barbara Allen’ or something else,” said Wyatt. “I loved that fact that he knew all these old songs, things that

I'd learned from his old records ... Sometimes, even if we only knew a verse or two of something, we'd sing it over and over until another verse came out.”

Wyatt's ability to simplify intricate techniques he's heard on his old tapes has not only helped his playing, he says. It's also helped Seeger overcome some of the difficulties he's found in “keeping the fire and the joy in the playing.”

Wyatt believes his post-stroke work has also helped his lyric writing.

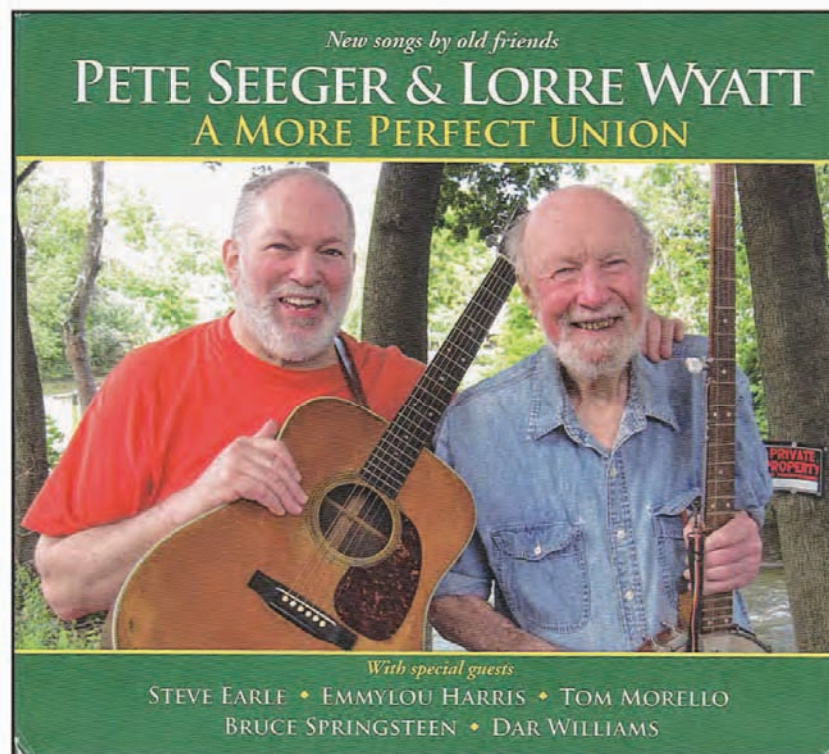
“I think I have a whole new approach to the lyrics, not just in the meaning of the words, but by listening to their sounds and their percussive nature. To say something like ‘peanut butter,’ I had to work so long and I had to pay attention” to the mesmerizing power of the sounds themselves.

“There's the wonder of the music, the melody, the rhythm, the chorus and the sounds,” he says. “I'm trusting the sounds more, knowing that sometimes you can use a less precise word, but emotionally it comes off because of the combination of the word, the music and the singing to communicate.”

The collaboration has also worked well for Seeger, who used to tell Wyatt he didn't think he could write songs anymore. The give-and-take between the two resulted in songs that Seeger confided “stand shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the best I've written.”

Wyatt says, “I always knew there was more there.” At one point, Seeger, told him, “I was saying to you over and over that I can't write, but at some point I was forced to realize that my pen still had some ink in it.”

As the two old friends discovered they had even more in common than they knew, they stumbled on a deeper connection, rooted in a dream Wyatt had while asleep in Seeger's barn one night. The words he jotted down on a pad next to his bed were noticed by Seeger, who



Released in 2012, “A More Perfect Union,” which is an Appleseed Recordings release, includes special guests Steve Earle, Emmylou Harris, Tom Morello, Bruce Springsteen and Dar Williams. Ways to purchase the CD include going online to iTunes and to the label's website: www.appleseedmusic.com.

almost immediately began imagining a melody for what became their song “Fields of Harmony.”

Playing with a melody line here, an image there, Wyatt recalls, “We found these strange puzzle pieces fitting together. Pete said, ‘It's part dream and part waking. You know there's a lot of my life in these words:”

“Through the fire and the flood I have come ...

From the whirlwind came the words for a song ...

All our years become a tale that is told ...”

Wyatt has learned, over the past 17 years since his stroke, that

there's even more to his own life than he knew.

“I've learned to just take where you are and be grateful for it, almost like if you shed your skin, knowing a new skin will form,” Wyatt says. “In life, the meanings keep changing.”

On the Web:

For information on the CD:

www.appleseedmusic.com/peteseeger/moreperfectunion.html

To see Seeger and Wyatt performing together: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvnsB_kVNYI

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