

Musicians honor elder farmers in song

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Mark Brown and Jack Schoonmaker are among the musician/farmer pairs that will participate in the "Unsung Heroes: Songs of Our Elder Farmers" concert on April 24. Photo by Maria Reidelbach

By Deborah J. Botti
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Jack told it to me

Now I'm telling you

You take care of the soil

It'll take care of you

What: "Unsung Heroes: Songs of Our Elder Farmers"

When: 3-6 p.m. April 24

Where: Rondout High School auditorium, 122 Kyserike Road, Accord

Mark Brown of Kingston, a carpenter by profession and a songwriter by passion, grew up with dirt under his fingernails. "I worked on farms for years when I was in high school and college ... my grandparents had a farm, with outhouses," he says.

Perhaps that's why much of the music he writes has a rural flavor, which is what resonated with Maria Reidelbach, who's on the board of directors of the Rondout Valley Growers Association. Reidelbach is also a friend of Colette M. Ruoff, founder of the nonprofit organization SageArts,

which is dedicated to honoring elders in an artistic manner. SageArts began pairing elders and songwriters more than a year ago. The songwriters are charged with unearthing the nuances that define their elders so as to capture in song the recurring themes of their lives.

And rather than a circle around a fire, pearls of wisdom are passed down from the elders during a concert to which the community is invited.

"Unsung Heroes: Songs of Our Elder Farmers" will be presented from 3-6 p.m. April 24 in the Rondout High School auditorium.

"We've been working with the Rondout Valley Growers Association," says Ruoff of the project that celebrates farming, farmers and its rich history, as does the Growers Association. "Maria gave me Mark's CD. He's an incredible poet. I had to work hard to get him."

"I said no a few times. I knew in my heart this was a good thing, but I'm self-employed and have three kids," says Brown. However, he followed his heart and was ultimately paired with Jack Schoonmaker. Ruoff says Schoonmaker, a 10th-generation farmer, is regarded as the father of the farmers and a symbol of the farming tradition in the Rondout Valley.

"I've been driving by his farm in Accord for the past 30 years. His family has owned this piece of land since 1680. They bought it from the Esopus people of the Lenape," says Brown. "There are 326 acres, and the stone house dates to 1720. ... I couldn't help thinking about all the people who have slept there, were born there, died there."

And every generation stayed. "I believe it's the second-oldest family-owned farm in the country," Brown says. "And Jack, who's 82, still works all day. This winter, he was by the smokehouse, standing outside in his socks and a T-shirt. He's made of solid farmer stock."

The songwriting process began with conversations. They exchanged stories about the many farmers they knew in common, most now deceased, including the corn farmer/carpenter from whom Brown learned his carpentry trade. And it was four such meetings before Brown had a sense of the song.

"What began to stick out was, what is it that keeps a family for so many generations on the same piece of land? There are good times, bad times, changes in the market ... But this idea kept coming back: the bond between the family and land."

Also featured in Sunday's concert are songwriters Heather Masse, Kelleigh McKenzie, Tom Holland and Vickie Russell, who have collaborated with elder farmers Jackie Brooks, Eddie Cantine, Frank Coddington, Wayne Kelder, Rima Nickell, Abe Warush and Bill Wiklow. Ruoff says musicians Molly Mason, Jay Ungar, Eric Parker and Ralph Legnini will be backing up the songwriters, plus Happy Traum will make a guest appearance.

Legnini is also the concert director for this and the June 5 concert at the Bearsville Theater, which will feature songs that will honor Woodstock elders of diverse backgrounds as a way to thank that community for its support of SageArts.

"This (the Woodstock) project was launched about the same time," says Ruoff. The farmers' concert scheduled first so as to kick off the growing season.

Ruoff says sponsors are covering about 45 percent of the costs. "We're hoping to break even. And once we recoup costs, we can look ahead.

"On the horizon, we want to reach out to elders in senior housing and adult-care facilities," she says, indicating that an important strategy down the road will be the inclusion of other art forms.