
Dale Parent's "Day Brightener" on Joanne Hammil

January 11, 2021

We moved to the Boston area in 1984, and bought a home in Wayland, Massachusetts, about 5 miles from Brandeis University, where I worked. Our son, Greg, had a natural talent for singing, so after our move, we enrolled him in *The Choral Connection*, a children's chorus founded and directed by Joanne Hammil. Greg sang in her chorus for about 4 years. Greg continued choral singing through high school and college, where he was a member of Lehigh University's wonderful choral program for five years, and took Spring choir performance tours to Russia, Eastern Europe, and Germany.

Joanne had two children, Adam, who was 2 years older than Greg, and Lisa, who was the same age as Greg. One day I was walking through the main aisle of a big hardware store, and I saw Lisa emerge from a side aisle about 20 feet ahead of me. I recognized her from *The Choral Connection* rehearsals and said "Hi, Lisa. How are you doing?" She spun on her heel, and fled. A moment later she returned, towing her mother by the hand. Lisa pointed at me and said "HIM!" Joanne and I shared a good laugh, and I recalled the song "Talking Candy Bar Blues" sung [here](#) by Peter Stookey, of Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Over the years, Joanne and I became friends. We shared a common love of folk music, and we both played guitar. Once, I found a lovely Alvarez-Yairi guitar at a "surplus" store. The store had purchased a "salvage" lot from a music store in the deep South that had been badly damaged in a hurricane. The guitar and many other instruments and supplies were included in the salvage lot.

It was like finding a Picasso at a garage sale--that particular guitar was (still is) a "world-class" instrument. I already owned a similar Alvarez-Yairi, and couldn't justify having two! But it was in perfect condition, and available "dirt cheap". So I bought it, just to make sure it found a good home. I offered it to Joanne, and she snapped it up. Over the years Joanne played it in performances and during recording sessions.

Joanne was raised in New Jersey, and graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts, with a degree in Music. She has written, recorded and released five CDs of her original children's songs and adult songs. She started *The Choral Connection*, which included several choruses for children and directed it for over 30 years. More recently, she organized and directed *The Greater Boston Intergenerational Chorus* consisting of 85 voices, with singers ranging in age from grade school to grandparents. She taught music in public schools, and has given hundreds of workshops and performed many hundreds of concerts all around the country.

Here is her son, Adam, then age 10, singing *Pizza Boogie*, a song Joanne wrote. It is from a CD of her children's songs, also entitled *Pizza Boogie*.

Joanne is recognized as perhaps the leading contemporary composer of “rounds”. She has recorded and released 2 CDs containing 53 of her unique rounds, and is about to release 2 additional CDs containing 58 more.

Here is a quote from Joanne during a recent interview:

“My passion for the genre of rounds (I’ve written over 140 sophisticated rounds) stems from my love of polyphonic music that I was exposed to through piano lessons, studying music, and singing in choruses throughout my life. The creation of harmony through the dove-tailing of parts – all equal in importance – is a constant thrill to me and represents my social and political philosophies as well as musical ones.”

Joanne asked me to sing in a chorus during two recording sessions for her first two CDs of her rounds, and in some of her live concerts in the Boston area I sang in a small group performing her rounds.

Here is one of Joanne’s best (in my opinion) songs—Time’s Soft Wisdom. It begins with a profound and moving message, as well a beautiful lyrical melody. As it progresses it gradually morphs into a wonderful 5-part round.

Here is a link to one of Joanne’s recent and more complex rounds, entitled *Dance with My Desire*.

In the late 1980’s Joanne began attending weekend conferences of the People’s Music Network for Songs of Freedom and Struggle, a vibrant network of like-minded progressive musicians. Pete Seeger often attended himself, was very impressed with the songs that Joanne presented there, and asked her to come to his home in Beacon, New York to help him finish writing some songs he was stuck on.

Here is a photo of Pete and Joanne playing at a workshop....and, yes, she is playing the Alvarez-Yarii I found that day in the surplus store.



This marked the beginning of a collaboration between Joanne and Pete that continued for the last 22 years of Pete's life. Here is a quote by Joanne from a recent article published in the *Boston Voyager*:

"I was extremely fortunate to work closely with Pete Seeger for many years. He admired my harmony writing and first asked me to help him complete songs in a specific African form of group singing. We eventually gave workshops together on African-style cyclical songs, Woody Guthrie, and rounds singing at various conferences from California to New England. His orientation of getting everyone singing, honoring others' cultures through music, and working with an underlying goal of social justice for all – all were inspirational to my own beliefs and practices".

In August 2013, just 5 months before he died, Pete came to Boston to sing with a small youth chorus Joanne compiled for the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the 1963 March on Washington. When he arrived, his voice was too fragile to sing, but he wanted to play guitar to accompany the song Joanne directed. Here is a short video of that piece, "Siyahamba"--their last performance together.

Here is an African-style cyclical song Joanne wrote entitled ***One Family***—it conveys a message we all desperately need to hear these days. In this style of cyclical song, several different singers sing different lyrics and rhythms, but all come together on a common phrase—in this song, the common phrase is "One Family".

Remember ***Pizza Boogie***? Well, Adam is now 44 and has a successful folk-rock ensemble called The Adam Ezra Group. Here they are singing an a cappella version of a song Adam wrote entitled ***Find a Way***, with Adam singing the lead.

Remember my encounter with Lisa in the hardware store? Well, Lisa got her PhD in chemistry from M.I.T. and is now a professor teaching and doing research at the University of Illinois.

Fruit don't fall far from the tree.

If you want to hear more of Joanne's amazing music, visit her website [here](#).

Remember--We **ARE** one family--we gotta hold on to each other--find a way.

Dale
