

THE RIVERTOWNS Enterprise

The Hometown Newspaper
of Hastings-on-Hudson,
Dobbs Ferry, Ardsley
and Irvington

VOLUME 41, NUMBER 34 • NOVEMBER 18, 2016

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Couple spreads harmony as Old Dogs New Tricks

By Denise Woodin

HASTINGS — The late folksinger and activist Pete Seeger inspired countless people to sing — at festivals, on boats, in coffeehouses and churches. When he performed at South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry in December 2009, Jim Howe and Mark Davis were struck by Seeger's charge to sing out and sing in community.

At the time, the couple had “no thought of singing or performing together, at all,” Howe remarked during a recent conversation at their northwest Yonkers home. “We just liked listening and going to hear music.”

“We were not active participants in music,” Davis added. “We became active participants after going to hear Pete Seeger.”

Tomorrow night (Nov. 19), Howe and Davis, a.k.a. Old Dogs New Tricks, will open for the Atlanta-based band Mouths of Babes at Common Ground Coffeehouse in Hastings. Invited to perform by Carter Smith, producer of the Common Ground concert series, Howe and Davis jumped at the chance to share the stage with Mouths of Babes.

“This is thrilling for us... for a number of reasons,” Davis noted. “Ingrid Elizabeth and Ty Greenstein [Mouths of Babes] are both musical heroes of ours. And then there's the aspect of them [also] being a gay married couple. That makes it very special for us. As well as the fact that they've become friends of ours.”

While it won't be the first time that husband and husband perform as Old Dogs New Tricks, it will be their first time opening for professional musicians in a concert setting. With guitar (Davis) and cello (Howe) accompaniment, the duo will sing original compositions written over the past three years. They'll also be joined on a few numbers by Hastings resident and flutist Paul Harris.

Davis and Howe met in 2001, introduced by mutual friends. Howe was a longtime Hastings resident, active in the Rivertowns Arts Council (now RiverArts) and well-known as the author of the children's classic “Bunnacula,” “The Misfits,” and dozens of picture books, middle grade and young adult novels. Davis lived in Brooklyn, practicing law with his friend John Engel, who happened to be one of the instigators of the blind date that led to the Howe-Davis union.

Relaxing on the couch, their dog Lily curled up by Howe's side, Davis recalled, “It was love at first sight. Within three or four months, I was moving up to Westchester. I didn't even know what Westchester was. And it was the easiest thing I've ever done in my life.” The couple were married in



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Mark Davis, Jim Howe and their dog Lily sit on the front porch of their Yonkers home.

Vermont in 2011.

When they started dating, the men discovered that they shared a love of music, though not necessarily the same music. But they both loved folk songs and were big fans of the singer-songwriter Dar Williams.

Although Davis first picked up the guitar as a 10-year-old, his commitment waxed and waned. Around the time of the Seeger concert, Howe suggested Davis might want to get his old instrument out of storage. They were further inspired after taking their goddaughter to a family camp in the Adirondacks, where they discovered the joy of sing-alongs.

“We brought home the songbook from the camp,” Howe said. “And we began to sing together but also to bring friends together to have little sing-alongs. It became, ‘Oh, we're going to have dinner with Mark and Jim, I guess we're going to be singing!’”

Howe and Davis also found opportunities to perform during lay-led Sunday services at the First Unitarian Society of Westchester, their faith community. “It's kind of fun to think we're doing this performance at the FUSW, which is probably where we first got up in front of an audience,” Howe noted.

After a few years of singing with friends, Howe and Davis decided to “up the ante a little bit.” They sought out the Hastings-based voice and music coach Adam Hart and started learning how to arrange songs and harmonies. After a while, Hart encouraged the couple to perform at local open mic nights. He also invited Howe and Davis to perform during his own gigs.

“And then a little over two years ago,” Davis recalled, “I came home

from work and Jim said, ‘I just got this mailer from the Garrison Institute that Dar Williams — the Dar Williams — our musical hero — is doing a five-day songwriting retreat and we're going.’ And I said, ‘You have absolutely lost your mind. I am not going to make a fool of myself in front of my idol.’ First of all, we don't know anything about writing songs — we've never written a song.”

However, they talked it over and decided that if a song were required, they would write one. “We looked at other songs, brought out books of poetry, lyrics of songs we admired, and looked at how verses and choruses fit together,” Davis explained.

“The first couple days [of the retreat] people were presenting their songs and they were all so good,” he continued. “And we thought, ‘Oh my gosh, what have we done? Can we sneak out in the middle of the night and maybe no one will miss us?’”

Needless to say, Howe and Davis didn't sneak out in the night. They performed the first song they had ever written and were warmly received. Encouraged by the experience, they continued to write songs and perform. Locally, they've played at Purpl in Hastings, and the Black Cat in Irvington. In June 2015, they did a 40-minute set at the first RiverArts Music Tour. And they've returned to Williams' songwriting retreat two more times.

Three years ago, at the age of 67, Howe decided to that he wanted to “contribute something instrumentally.” He thought about the sound he wanted to make. He had played the cello briefly in seventh grade, abandoning the instrument when his family moved. The cello

seemed to Howe like the sound “I want to put out there. That I want to hear myself.” He now takes lessons once a week.

“It's also a great thing, as you get older, to learn something new,” Howe observed. “They say that music uses more parts of your brain than any other activity. Even listening to it, but certainly playing and learning. So it's a good thing to take up at a certain age, at a certain time in life. It's hard, and I like that... to do something where I really have to learn, where I'm starting from scratch. It's very stimulating. We're called Old Dogs New Tricks, and this is why.”

“We come at this with different brains,” Davis added. “Jim is a rightbrained... creative person, a writer for the past 35 years. And I am a trusts and estates lawyer. This has been such a great experience for me. It's helped me feel like a fuller person because it's tapped into the other side of myself.”

After an initial period of wondering if their upcoming performance mattered in the face of overwhelming postelection realities, Howe felt a shift. “It's important to be together in community, to sing, to bear witness to the importance of music and songs and words and community to help lift us all up. Which is really where we started with Pete Seeger saying ‘This is why we do this.’ It was a thought that lifted me up.”

Old Dogs New Tricks and Mouths of Babes will perform tomorrow (Nov. 19) at 7:30 p.m. at the First Unitarian Society of Westchester's Common Ground Coffeehouse, 25 Old Jackson Ave., Hastings. For ticket information, visit <https://commongroundfusw.com>.