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Drop the Knife: A Memoir in Song

Musician & Peace Activist Jeanne Mackey Returns to the Small Town of Her Youth to Sing Her Life Song



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Bringing It All Back Home

An Ann Arbor Songwriter, Musician, and Community-Builder Returns to the Small Town of Her Youth to Sing Her Life Song

By Jeanne Mackey

This is how it feels when worlds collide. I'm in Oxford, Ohio, my hometown, rolling down High Street in a minivan with my life partner, Pattie, my 91-year-old mother, Marge, and three intrepid Ann Arbor musicians — Laz Slomovits, Lori Fithian, and her brother Eric. We picked up Mom from the assisted living apartment where she has lived since Dad died in 2002 and are headed for dinner at Kona's, the only restaurant in town that serves fresh, local cuisine. Mom's in the front seat chatting with Pattie, her walker stashed in the back of the van.

During dinner Marge is uncharacteristically quiet. Her aging brain, slowed by the progression of dementia, can't track the lively conversation. Afterward, she confides to Pattie about the band — "I don't know who those people are, but they're really nice." Pattie gently reminds her that we're all in town for my performance the next day. We pick up a copy of *The Oxford Press* to see their write-up of the show. *Oxford Press* articles from years past flash through my mind. Me with my brownie troop roasting a marshmallow over a fake campfire. Mom on the front page as Citizen of the Year. Brother Dave marching in the high school band. My toothy smile when I sold enough newspaper subscriptions to win a transistor radio. Actually, Mom sold most of the subs, secretly hoping that owning a radio would make me appear to be a normal teen.

In Stacie's *What's the Story* workshop, she managed to shake something loose by challenging me to go off and "write a bad song." I came back with a doozy and shared it with the story circle — a process that somehow opened my secret passageway to songwriting.

I decided a few years ago that I needed to create a performance piece to usher me through the threshold of turning 60 in 2010. I've got a good track record for dreaming up events and making them happen — benefit concerts, rites of passage



ceremonies, creative play days, workshops. This 60th birthday big idea was a little riskier than most, however, because I had declared to friends and family that it would be a performance of all-original songs and stories. In the 50+ years I'd been playing music, I had written maybe two songs that I'd ever want to hear again. When I tried to write, I'd just hear snippets of other people's songs and would quickly get disgusted with myself and give up.

The songwriting block is just a variation on a lifelong theme. I'm prone to lose touch with my own true impulses and ideas. I got the message early on that it was safer to let the grown-ups tell me how I should be feeling and acting. It was the 50s, after all. I really wanted to be a good girl — it felt like a matter of survival. And I had a primal yearning to be true to myself. My unsuccessful efforts to do both resulted in an awkward, tense, and timid demeanor in social settings. When I look at photos of my mom around the same age, she looks pretty gawky and shy herself — which is probably what made her so determined to have a socially successful daughter. But her efforts tended to backfire. I felt her lack of confidence in me (and herself) long before I could put it into words.



Photo by Rachael Waring



Photo by Rachael Waring

Drop the Knife

Once a young woman asked the 14th century Sufi mystic and poet, Hafiz, "What is the sign of someone knowing God?" Hafiz remained silent for a few moments and looked deep into the young person's eyes, then said, "Dear, they have dropped the knife. They have dropped the cruel knife so often used upon their tender self and others."

I had to leave home to find my own way. And when I did, it was in the context of the social justice movements of the 60s and 70s. My friends and I were the good guys, fighting the evil establishment. It was glorious! Mom took it even harder than Dad when I revealed my disdain for their basic values. I tried to engage her in principled debates, but she was crafty when threatened. If I started to win the argument, she'd inevitably burst into tears, and that was the end of the conversation.

But I was wrong about my parents' values. Turns out they cared more about staying connected than being right. Both raised as conservative Republicans, they were willing to re-examine their beliefs, given half a chance. My dad, a Miami University professor, became an advocate for affirmative action and women's equality on campus. Mom joined Planned Parenthood and began speaking in college dorms, gleefully passing around multi-colored birth control devices (she has always enjoyed shocking people). An avid miniaturist, she coped with her kids' lifestyle choices by creating a tiny hippie pad, complete with bong, a waterbed, beaded curtains, and Nixon's picture on the little toilet seat. Her resilience was impressive — and she would need it even more in a few years when I started seeing a psychotherapist and decided that all my insecurities were Mom's fault. When she found out I was a lesbian, she told me tearfully, "If you have decided that you hate men, I don't even want to hear it!" But I hadn't. And in 1990 when I married Pattie, my soul mate, Mom and Dad wholeheartedly welcomed her into the family.

"But I was wrong about my parents' values. Turns out they cared more about staying connected than being right."

After dinner, we drop Mom off at her apartment and prepare to rehearse for the next evening's show at the Oxford Community Arts Center. I have successfully created a performance piece of original songs and stories, expertly coached throughout the process by my old friend Stacie Chaiken, an actor, playwright, and teacher who lived in a feminist group house with me back in college. In Stacie's *What's the Story* workshop, she managed to shake something loose by challenging me to go off and "write a bad song." I came back with a doozy and shared it with the story circle — a process that somehow opened my secret passageway to songwriting. The song arrangements blossomed in collaboration with Laz, Lori, and Eric. I recorded most of the tunes in Eric's Electric Farm Studio in Dexter (complete with crowing rooster on the final track) and released a CD. After we premiered the show in Ann Arbor last November, I knew the next stop would be the old hometown.

But now that the show is only a day away, I'm feeling queasy. "You'll pull it off just fine," Pattie reassures me. "You've never been one to sabotage yourself." But she didn't know me when I lived in this town. The many times I backed myself into a corner. The social situations where I tried to converse with somebody who intimidated me — which included almost everyone — and watched their facial expression morph from confusion to disinterest. I know myself to be capable of clutching on stage.

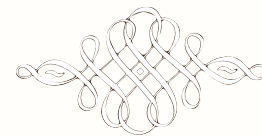
That evening, I peek from behind the curtains as the audience members come into the theatre and take their seats: Jan, my best friend from high school; the Trumps, our across-the-street neighbors of fifty years; another friend of the family whom I last saw at one of my parents' bridge parties in the 70s. Mom rolls in with her walker, accompanied by my brother, sister-in-law, niece, and nephew.

The lights go down, Pattie introduces me, and I walk out on stage. My frightened 14-year-old self is whispering frantically, "You can't do this; you don't know how!" But I know something that she, frozen in time, will never learn. I've grown up! I have the chops, the will, the heart, and the inner resources to deliver the goods, to put the show across and make it sing. And I do: "There's no time to hesitate, contemplate, meditate. Tell my tale, it's getting late!"

Jeanne Mackey and her band — Laz Slomovits, Lori Fithian, and Eric Fithian — will perform Drop the Knife: A Memoir-in-Song at Washtenaw Community College's College Theatre in Ann Arbor at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, April 21, 2012.

Afterward, people line up to hug and congratulate me and the band. Mom comes wheeling up from behind. "I'm so proud of you!" she says. "You made me laugh and cry. That was just terrific!" She delivers the punch line with a grin: "I didn't know you had it in you." So quintessentially Marge, with a level of honesty made possible only by her current level of dementia. "I know you didn't, Mom." I feel her fragility as we embrace. The old lady is loath to get sentimental, but there's a catch in her voice as she tells me, "I'm glad I lived to see this."

Jeanne Mackey is a lifelong musician, community-builder, and change-maker. The CD of Drop the Knife is available at Crazy Wisdom Bookstore. For more information, or to reach Jeanne, email jmackey50@gmail.com or visit www.umich.edu/~mackeyj.



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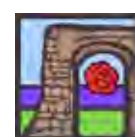
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GATEWAYS WELLNESS

Three Ann Arbor Musicians — Laz Slomovits, Lori Fithian, and Eric Fithian— on Collaborating with Jeanne Mackey and What It Means to “Come Home”

Laz Slomovits Reflects on his Early Years in Hungary, and the Meaning of “Coming Home”

As a collaborating musician on Jeanne Mackey’s performance piece “Drop the Knife,” you’ve had to consider what it means to “come home.” What speaks to you in this piece and in Jeanne Mackey’s “Bringing It All Back Home” essay? As you’ve been working with Jeanne on “Drop the Knife,” what’s been stirred up for you?

Laz Slomovits: There is a story in "Drop the Knife" where Jeanne tells of burying a hatchet on her ancestral land in Ireland, as a way of lifting a curse and making peace in her family. This is something she actually did a number of years ago, and she told me about it just before I was about to take a trip to my ancestral home in Hungary. I found the image very powerful, and though I did not use that specific way of resolving old issues in my ancestry, it helped me find my own way. In general, I've long admired Jeanne's courage in looking to find a way to live a meaningful, conscious life — and "Drop the Knife," and the insights into her life which she talks about in her essay, feel like she's reached a new high point in honesty, clarity, and self-acceptance. Working with her on the performance piece has inspired me to continue going deeper in my understanding of my own life.

Where were you raised? Did you like being raised in that town or city? Do you remember your childhood fondly? Do you ever go back to that place?

Laz Slomovits: I was born in Budapest, Hungary, to parents who had both been through the Holocaust, had lost many family members, met after the war and tried to start a new life. When my twin brother and I were eight years old, we left Hungary with our parents during the 1956 Revolution. This was just 11 years after World War II, and they saw more of the same coming. I have mostly pleasant memories of growing up in Budapest, and even the Revolution, terrifying to my parents, seemed like some kind of war game to my brother and me.

What was not pleasant was the day a Russian official came into our 2nd grade classroom and asked the teacher "Who are those monkeys with the beanies?" (My brother and I wore yarmulkes, skull caps, to school — our father was a Cantor in several Budapest synagogues.) The teacher answered, "They are among my best students." The official responded, "Flunk them." (To her credit, our teacher did not do that — she gave us B's and tearfully told our mother that she was very sorry she had to do that.) In addition to this, my father saw not only his livelihood, but his whole way of life threatened once again, and so our family left with two suitcases. Looking back, and how my life has been able to unfold in America, I feel that was a bargain.

My brother and I didn't go back to Budapest until both our parents had passed away, just a few years ago, more than 50 years after we left Hungary. We found the apartment complex where we'd lived as children, went to the synagogues where our father had sung (one of them, the Dohány Templom, is the largest synagogue in Europe, where we remember playing in the organ loft while our father sang below), visited some of my mother's favorite places (she'd grown up in Budapest, and the week before we left, she took us to these places saying, "I want you to remember these because we may not be back for a long time."), the cemeteries where my mother's parents were buried, and the small town where my father lived with his first family before the war. It was obviously a very emotional visit on many levels — I wanted to find a way to connect to my family roots, but also to make peace within myself with the Hungarians who had stood by or actively helped the Nazis during the war. This is where having the image and ritual of Jeanne "burying the hatchet" was very helpful. I knew my way would have something to do with music, but I didn't know how.

We realized we were within a few blocks, on the same street, where our mother had been held in the ghetto before being deported to Ravensbruck, the concentration camp where she spent the rest of the war.



Photo by Rachael Waring

My father saw not only his livelihood, but his whole way of life threatened once again, and so our family left with two suitcases. Looking back, and how my life has been able to unfold in America, I feel that was a bargain.

My brother and I had made our hotel reservation based on two factors: that it'd be near the heart of Budapest (so we wouldn't have to spend a lot of time traveling to visit sites important to our family) and that it'd be very affordable. Later we realized that the hotel we were staying in was in the old Jewish Quarter of the city, which had been turned into the Jewish ghetto during the war. Part way into our visit, looking at maps of the city as it had been during the war, we realized we were within a few blocks, on the same street, where our mother had been held in the ghetto before being deported to Ravensbruck, the concentration camp where she spent the rest of the war. In fact, that street marked the edge of the ghetto — barricaded, with signs saying that no one could enter or leave on pain of death. I stood on this street and thought about my mother held captive in that building, while across the street people were free to come and go as they pleased. I tasted the bitterness of that in my mouth — and knew that I did not want to hold on to that any longer — not for myself, not for my mother, not for anyone on either side of that street, living or dead.

The only instrument I had brought with me on the trip was a small wooden flute, a Hungarian *furulya*. On the day before we were to return from Budapest, I stood in a corner of the building, with traffic flowing by me on the street and on the sidewalk, and started to play a tune that I made up as I went along. I tried to allow all the feelings that were welling up to come into the melody — the terror, the rage, the hatred, the grief — and to ask that they be transformed into forgiveness and peace. I can't explain what happened as I played, but I knew as I started to cry that somehow, somewhere, this tiny offering was being heard and accepted.

I have since found that what happened in those few minutes was a beginning. I am still learning to release old grievances and fears. But it was a beginning. And I'm committed to continuing.

Do you go to high school reunions? How have they been for you? Have you been surprised in any way by encountering your past? If you haven't gone, why not?

Laz Slomovits: After we left Hungary in early 1957, we lived in Israel for three years before we moved to the United States. I grew up in Kingston, New York, went to school at the University of Rochester in upstate New York, met Helen who was to become my wife when I was a senior, and a year later we moved to Ann Arbor so Helen could go to graduate school here. We thought we'd be here a year or two — and have never left. In a very real sense, I feel like my life started when I met Helen and I found home and community when we moved to Ann Arbor.

So, this may seem like a long preamble to answering the question, but no, I have not been to either high school or college reunions. Although I had a few good friends in both high school and college, I feel like I did not really start waking up and living the life I felt was mine until I after I left those places — and the connections to the old friendships did not feel possible to maintain in any deep way.

Are you at all in touch with people from the part of your childhood that you spent in the United States, and if so, do you like that sense of connection with your roots?

Laz Slomovits: I have some wonderful memories and a great deal of gratitude for some of my teachers and coaches, both in high school and in college, almost all of whom have passed away, as have most of the members of my childhood family. There is one quite elderly Hungarian couple who still lives in Kingston who became my parents' best friends when we arrived in this country. They were very helpful and kind to us then, and we've maintained a sweet phone connection on a regular basis. In a sense, they are my only link to my "old life" and I enjoy talking to them as I might to the grandparents I never knew.

I can't explain what happened as I played, but I knew as I started to cry that somehow, somewhere, this tiny offering was being heard and accepted.



Photo by Rachael Waring

What does it mean to you to "come home"?

Laz Slomovits: I am very grateful to Ann Arbor — the various communities I am part of, and everything the city has to offer. This has been home for most of my adult life, where I've been supported, nourished, and stimulated in my work and in my spiritual seeking. I have a dear wife and son that I cherish, a brother with whom I've played music all these years and still consider my best friend, his wife and daughter who I feel closer to than I felt to my blood family growing up — I couldn't possibly ask for more from a family. I have some wonderful friends, especially in music (like Jeanne, Lori, and Eric) that I feel close to. To me, all of this adds up to "coming home."

And yet, in a very real sense, all of this means "home" because of what I started to glimpse in my early twenties — that there was a "home" that was within me — and everything else on the "outside" followed from that. I am still learning what it means to come home — but I know more and more that for me it happens on the inside, and then is reflected in the place where I live, the people I connect to, the work that I do. And while it's not always easy — the distractions and wanderings are many — I can come back to this true home any time, all the time.

Laz Slomovits is one of the twin brothers in Ann Arbor's nationally known family folk music duo, Gemini. In addition to his award-winning music for children, Laz has also set to music and recorded the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz, 13th and 14th century Sufi mystics, in translations by Coleman Barks and Daniel Ladinsky. For more information, visit PoetryIntoSong.com and GeminiChildrensMusic.com.



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Three Ann Arbor Musicians — Laz Slomovits, Lori Fithian, and Eric Fithian — on Collaborating with Jeanne Mackey and What It Means to “Come Home”

Drummer Lori Fithian

As a collaborating musician on Jeanne Mackey’s performance piece “Drop the Knife,” you’ve had to consider what it means to “come home.” What speaks to you in this piece and in Jeanne Mackey’s “Bringing It All Back Home” essay? As you’ve been working with Jeanne on “Drop the Knife,” what’s been stirred up for you?

Lori Fithian: I’m really impressed with Jeanne’s creativity. The songs are just amazing — I keep wanting to ask her “how did you come up with that tune?” Her clever lyrics and the amazing storytelling really make for a wonderful musical evening — a deep personal journey woven together with great music that’s fun to play. It’s been great to see and hear the audience reacting. The process of shaping the raw songs with “the band” was also lots of fun, and a good challenge. I thought it would be like painting on somebody else’s painting, but Jeanne welcomed our ideas, suggestions, and changes, and it was truly a collaborative process with all four of us contributing. I think it’s stirred up a little more creative juice in me — she is very inspiring!

Where were you raised? Did you like being raised in that town? Do you remember your childhood fondly? Do you ever go back to that place?

Lori Fithian: I was actually born here in A2, in what’s now called the North Ingalls Building — it’s the old “St. Joe’s” hospital, so I’m definitely a native and a townie. Ann Arbor is a great place to grow up, and, yes, I have lots of fond memories. We lived on the edge of Thurston Pond, on the north end of town, and we often go over there to take a walk in the woods, see how the pond has changed, peer over the fence at the pool where we spent most of our summer days, and swing in the old swing set at the school.

Do you go to high school reunions? If you haven’t gone, why not?

Lori Fithian: Haven’t been to any of those. I’m pretty out of touch with anyone from high school, even though I was pretty involved in the band/orchestra community. I was actually pretty shy and awkward back then, probably a bit like Jeanne.

Are you at all in touch with people from your childhood — your childhood friends, your close relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches — and if so, do you like that sense of connection with your roots — your childhood and young adulthood?

Lori Fithian: Well, since I live here, I do run into folks from the old neighborhood, especially during art fair. But I wouldn’t say I’m close to anyone from back then. My one friend who goes back to 2nd grade, Vera, lives out in Oregon now, and I keep in touch with her over email and visit with her



Photo by Rachael Waring

I thought it would be like painting on somebody else’s painting, but Jeanne welcomed our ideas, suggestions, and changes – Lori Fithian on contributing to “Drop the Knife”

I think I feel most like I’ve “come home” when I’m with my chosen and original family, when we have reunions, just being in that “nest” of people who love me.

when she comes back. I have more a sense of connection with the “place,” not so much the people. I suppose if I was on Facebook I might know more about all those high school people.

It’s been great to see and hear the audience reacting.

What does it mean to you to “come home”?

Lori Fithian: I think I feel most like I’ve “come home” when I’m with my chosen and original family, when we have reunions, just being in that “nest” of people who love me. It doesn’t really matter where we are. It seems pretty different from most of the folks I know, who’ve left their hometowns and still have a place to go back to, like Jeanne.

Lori Fithian has been facilitating drum circles and rhythm workshops since 1998 and offers her “Drumcommunity” program all over the Great Lakes region. Lori is a full time freelance musician, leading programs and workshops, teaching lessons, as well as accompanying singer-songwriters on stage and in the recording studio. Her website is www.drumcommunity.com.




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Musician Eric Fithian

As a collaborating musician on Jeanne Mackey's performance piece "Drop the Knife," you've had to consider what it means to "come home." What speaks to you in this piece and in Jeanne Mackey's "Bringing It All Back Home" essay? As you've been working with Jeanne on "Drop the Knife," what's been stirred up for you?

Eric Fithian: I have only known Jeanne for the past few years, having been introduced at one of my sister Lori's house jams. In that time I have come to really admire her for her talent and determination in doing all this. It's one thing to write a couple of songs about some personal history, but this show! This show really takes the audience (including the band members!) on an amazing trip through life as seen through Jeanne's eyes and heart. What speaks to me, in particular, is Jeanne's writing: very literal verses and choruses, put together, not simply poetically for the sake of the song, but also in a way that really explains things clearly. The story pieces are particularly engaging. While the band is working on the "mood" and setting the scenes with music, she sets a visual scene in the imagination.

Having worked with Jeanne on the CD production, learning how to get the best from each other, good days and not so good, pulling and pushing for just the right sound and mood, we got to know each other better and were able to really work together creatively to put these wonderful show pieces into an arrangement that could be enjoyed whenever, not just on the stage.

What was "stirred up" is a realization that life can be so much more than we usually make it. Sometimes getting caught up in day-to-day survival, we lose some perspective. Jeanne's words and music about her searches for who she is reminds us that it is a big world out there, full of answers to our questions of who we are individually, historically, socially, and so on. Her stories tell us to get out there and find them.

Where were you raised? Did you like being raised in that town? Do you remember your childhood fondly? Do you ever go back to that place?

Eric Fithian: My family finally settled in 1964 at the northeast corner of Ann Arbor, in a newly developed subdivision. I could not have imagined a better childhood for anyone! We had free rein of the whole area; things seemed so safe and free. A big pond with tons of frogs, turtles, and fish, with a large wooded area right in our back yard! And, of course, many new construction sites to go to and get into trouble with our friends. I go back and visit "the woods" when I can, venturing around the pond, trying to remember our trails and landmarks from 40+ years ago! A lot has evolved since that simple time.

Do you go to high school reunions? How have they been for you? If you have gone, what has been most meaningful for you about being there? What has been hardest? Have you been surprised in any way by encountering your past? If you haven't gone, why not?

What was most meaningful was seeing people that I did not really hang with back in high school and being able to strike up new connections...just enjoying them as peers, not worrying about cliques or other factors that used to block me from engaging socially. Eric Fithian on high school reunions

Eric Fithian: I went to the 20, 25 and 30th Huron High School class reunions for the Class of '78. Had a blast, laughed a lot, caught up a bit, then went home. There are some special friends I like to see at the events, but we don't really stay in contact. What was most meaningful was seeing people that I did not really hang with back in high school and being able to strike up new connections, reminiscing, getting little bits of gossip here and there, but mostly just enjoying them as peers, not worrying about cliques or other factors that used to block me from engaging socially.

Seeing those that seemed to have it all back then now struggling with serious issues like addiction, illnesses, and so on, is the hardest part of going.

I'm not so surprised at encountering my past, but I enjoy the surprise of how many people from that past remember me so well!

I go back and visit "the woods" when I can, venturing around the pond, trying to remember our trails and landmarks from 40+ years ago!



Photo by Rachael Waring

What speaks to me, in particular, is Jeanne's writing: very literal verses and choruses, put together, not simply poetically for the sake of the song, but also in a way that really explains things clearly. The story pieces are particularly engaging.

Are you at all in touch with people from your childhood — your childhood friends, your close relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches — and if so, do you like that sense of connection with your roots — your childhood and young adulthood?

Eric Fithian: Actually, not so much. I often think about my friends growing up on Bluett Road, or former band mates and musician friends, but have never really tried to get together or really communicate. Maybe sometime, when the 'day-to-day' slows down a bit!

What does it mean to you to "come home"?

Eric Fithian: I think just what Jeanne said, to bring your accomplishments and successes, struggles, trials and tribulations, back to the place and people who knew you "when." Maybe they had an idea of who you were, what you could do. Maybe they thought you couldn't, who knows? But you bring it back to show 'em: "You had it in you." Know what I mean, Jeanne?!!

Eric Fithian lives north of Dexter with his family on a small farm with mules, donkeys, goats and a bunch of other critters. Electric Farm Studio is his studio where he works with area musicians on various projects from songwriting collaboration to demo and CD production. He has been in the Ann Arbor area for all but his first year.

