

Song-catching up with Derek Piotr

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ELK PARK – *The AJT* reported in October 2020 of musician and historian Derek Piotr, who was working on solidifying and grasping the folklore, music and oral tradition of Appalachian culture.

New England-based musician Piotr was writing music for a solo album when he came across a collection of traditional Appalachian ballads from the Library of Congress. An aficionado of the human voice, Piotr's highly trained ear immediately recognized the archaic resonance of one tune whose sound was so authentic that it interested him to no end. This interest brought him to Elk Park.

Piotr describes songcatching as, "Searching for the oral traditions of families, the lives that people have lived and how they made their way in this world while illuminating the people who sing these songs." He has worked in oral tradition for 15 years and has honed in on Appalachian cultural heritage for the past three years.

Piotr's own relationship with his grandmother and the yearning to document her stories, jokes, songs and information led to his preparing in taking on further folklore works.

Piotr has recently uploaded a pair of new compilation albums from the Library of Congress, featuring folk traditions and life documentation of the Appalachian world.

"I am really interested in a non-singer, people who have not been on stage," Piotr said. "Memories of folk songs with historical significance."

Piotr encompasses the entire humanity into his recordings, taking the initiative to show someone's life through speech and song.

"What your family learned over the years is important," said Piotr. "Your voice deserves to be documented."

This is his intention when compiling these recordings, a substantial documentation of what has never been documented.

"It means more when coming from family, not simply media, movies or TV," Piotr explained. "They are sometimes forgotten."

With plans to move to Bakersville in the spring, Piotr wishes to saturate himself in the heritage and tradition of family beginnings, middles and ends.

"What would my folklore be?" Piotr asked. "A wide range of child songs, old ballads, folk songs and tales."

There exists some active cultural forgetfulness when it comes to family and oral traditions, as Piotr noted, "There is a generation of people who don't want to do what their parents did."

When asked why Appalachian heritage is his focus, Piotr explained from a holistic standpoint.

“I studied folk music from all around the world. American speaks to me the most. I connected with local families,” Piotr noted. “This is the area that has given the most to me. Elk Park is my favorite place. I want to be more immersed.”

Piotr, who recently visited the Library of Congress, uses ancestry tools to reach out to families in order to conduct research.

“Some people have not heard their grandmother’s voice in 60 years,” he said, “It’s not just about music, but about people worthy of celebrating.”

Piotr takes the approach that everything is meant to be out in the world, to be celebrated and voiced in all capacities.

“It’s a shame that some recordings are just sitting on a shelf for 80 years. I want to give someone the feeling of being understood,” Piotr added.

Piotr will make his way South in the spring. For more information on Piotr and his work, or interest in the historical significance of oral tradition, call (203) 460-0576.