

Catskill Cultural Center Saved, and Renewed, Thanks to a Fiddler's Tune

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Photo: Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

OLIVEBRIDGE, N.Y. — On a spring Sunday in the Catskill Mountains, Jay Ungar, a fiddler wearing a black vest and hiking boots, and his wife, Molly Mason, playing guitar, stood on a stage in a barnlike performance hall that did not exist a year ago. “Can you stand to hear this tune one more time?” he asked the audience.

Those gathered knew the tune — and the answer. With a quilt behind them on a wall wainscoted with locally cut pine, Mr. Ungar closed his eyes and pulled his bow to sound the three ascending notes — an A, a C-sharp and a D — that have moved him since the day he wrote them.

The tune is “Ashokan Farewell,” the bittersweet lament familiar to millions as the theme song that the filmmaker Ken used for the emotional crescendos of his Civil War series. But most do not know that Mr. Ungar’s moving hymn helped save the Catskill place that inspired the song, resulting in the Ashokan Center, a \$7.25 million campus here dedicated to traditional music, Catskill history, environmental education, and local arts and crafts.

“The tune was born in this place and opened up opportunities,” Mr. Ungar said. “And I feel the duty to give back, and that’s what we’re doing here.”

This recent event, held as a thank-you to all who supported the campus’s creation, was a preview of what the 374-acre center will provide: hikes along the 350-million-year-old Cathedral Gorge; an art show called “Catskill Water-scapes”; and a few impromptu performances by Mr. Ungar and Ms. Mason, with family and friends, playing songs like Bob Nolan’s “Cool Water” and Guy Clark’s “Homegrown Tomatoes.”

Many still assume that Mr. Ungar wrote “Ashokan Farewell” with the Civil War in mind. But he wrote it on a September morning in 1982, after the end of his third Ashokan summer music and dance camp on this property, which the State University of New York at New Paltz owned and had used since 1967 as a field campus for environmental education.

“I left on a cloud of utopian euphoria,” Mr. Ungar said of that summer. “You try to keep it alive, but it evaporates.”

The song rose from his melancholy. “With the first three notes I would start crying,” he said. “I was afraid to play it for people because I didn’t know what was going on.”

The next year, Fiddle Fever, the band he and Ms. Mason belonged to at the time, needed one more song for its second release. Russ Barenberg, the band’s guitarist, suggested that Mr. Ungar “try that new waltz of yours,” Ms. Mason recalled. She provided the bass line and the title (Ashokan, according to Mr. Ungar’s research, is an Algonquin word), and the couple has played the lament as the last waltz at their music and dance camp ever since.

The song has been good to them. In 2006, the couple joined the renowned flutist Sir James Galway for a performance at the White House, and the three played “Ashokan Farewell” in the East Room. As Ms. Mason remembers it, President George W. Bush shook her hand and joked, “I hope this doesn’t damage your careers.”

Soon after, Mr. Ungar read a headline in a local paper, The Kingston Daily Freeman, that startled him: “Ashokan Field Campus Sold.” Mr. Ungar then heard rumors that a local logger was about to buy the land. Both stories proved untrue, but prompted Mr. Ungar to write a letter, with the White House program attached, to Gov. George E. Pataki, reminding him of a meeting between them in 1999.

Mr. Pataki remembered. He had been invited to speak at Gettysburg for a commemoration of Abraham Lincoln’s address. Mr. Pataki knew “Ashokan Farewell” from the Civil War series, and when he heard Mr. Ungar play the tune at the cemetery that day, “it choked me up,” Mr. Pataki recalled in a telephone interview. He also knew that Mr. Ungar had written the song in the Hudson Valley, which, he said, “isn’t just the mountains and landscape, it’s culture.”

Two days after Mr. Ungar sent his letter, he got a call from Glen T. Bruening, the governor’s deputy secretary for energy and the environment, whom Mr. Pataki had instructed to do what he could to help. Mr. Bruening learned that New York City was poised to buy the campus as a spillway to help prevent flooding and preserve water purity for the nearby Ashokan Reservoir, which provides much of New York City’s drinking water. But that plan would not have preserved the cultural activities on the land, including the music and dance camp.

Mr. Bruening asked officials at SUNY New Paltz to hold off on the sale, and he contacted Joe Martens, who was then president of the Open Space Institute. Mr. Martens, who is now the commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said he knew that Mr. Ungar had written the song, but assumed it paid homage to the people displaced in a handful of villages, including Ashokan, submerged under the reservoir in 1917.

The institute brokered a deal that sold most of the land to New York City for its spillway, but granted the remaining forest, farmland and streams to the Ashokan Center. The deal also paid for four new buildings on the property, which is protected from development. The rejuvenated complex hosts weddings, retreats, school visits, performances, camps and environmental education classes.

Mr. Ungar has come to believe that his song, like a traditional hymn, evokes much more than loss. In the mid-1990s, he got an e-mail from a man in Africa who said he was driving in his car when he heard “Ashokan Farewell” on the radio. “He started crying uncontrollably and he had to pull off the road,” Mr. Ungar recalled. “He said that in his culture, after the age of 10, men don’t cry, but he needed to cry.” It is a common reaction. “I’ve gotten hundreds of letters and e-mails from people saying the song figured in a transitional moment in their lives,” he says. “It’s a healing experience.”

That is also what Mr. Ungar hopes the new center will provide. “If you have a great experience here, you take that out with you,” he told the crowd shortly before he offered up his song. “It’s kind of a Ponzi scheme for good.”

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