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Teachers, illustrator combine talents to create new children's book, CD

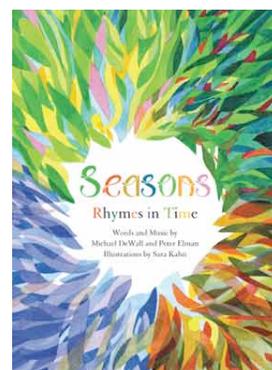
By Mike McGreehan Correspondent

OAKLAND -- Given his cosmopolitan background, Michael DeWall has enjoyed a lifelong linguistic and musical journey. Fluent in English and Spanish, the Richmond resident and son of a noted jazz singer writes and records songs in both languages.



Several miles away, longtime Rockridge resident Peter Elman boasts impressive musical and writing credentials, too (his freelance stories have appeared in this newspaper chain). As an Oakland Athletics die-hard, and his "Elman Swings" column ran as a regular feature of the Oakland A's Fan Coalition website from 2000 to 2005.

Recently, DeWall and Elman combined their musical and literary talents with the visual artistry of illustrator Sara Kahn to produce a children's book and accompanying CD. Available in selected bookstores and for order online, "Seasons: Rhymes in Time" uses poetry and vivid watercolor art to take young readers (ages 4-9) through winter, spring, summer and fall.



The greens, blues, browns, reds, yellows and wintry whites of Kahn's illustrations grab instant attention. Elman and DeWall provide the narrative: a collection of nine original poems set to music and brought to life on the CD.

"It's an all-purpose book -- Michael and I made sure the music was refreshing, that it had a nice variety of styles," said Elman, whose broad range of influences include George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, the Beatles and James Brown. "When you listen to the music, there's a cross-section ... this tune's a little reggae, this is a little country, this is a little jazzy, this is a little pop."

As such, young readers, parents and teachers will find "Seasons" a far cry from the usual run-of-the-mill children's books and CDs.

"Our songs are not your (typical) kids songs, unlike 'The Wheels on the Bus' and 'Old McDonald,'" DeWall said. "The poetry is the lyrics to the songs. I think what we came up with is a unique product, with poetry, good art and music."

Elman and DeWall first crossed paths in their roles as educators for the Albany Unified School District, for which Elman serves as a substitute teacher and DeWall as a Spanish teacher at

Albany Middle School. But they soon discovered one another's deep musical roots and mutual passion for making songs.

DeWall and Elman first got the idea for writing a book with an accompanying CD in 2010 and had a great time coming up with songs and recording them in Elman's home studio. But their project took unexpected twists and turns. And it ran into one major roadblock.

"We spent a year looking for an artist to illustrate the book," said Elman, who along with DeWall, interviewed many local artists and viewed hundreds of online portfolios before meeting San Francisco-based watercolor artist Kahn. For the singers and authors, their choice had an impact beyond anything they initially might have imagined.

"We started out writing songs for a novel about a kid growing up," DeWall said. "We would write a song about every month in a year of his life (a song for each of the 12 chapters and months). But Sara threw out some of the songs, saying they were unfocused."

"She said, 'Why don't you write about the seasons and nature?' -- the original songs were about food, like on Halloween," Elman said. "She was instrumental in steering us in a more commercial direction."

Suddenly, a novel and songs Elman and DeWall had envisioned for students ages 9-12 evolved into a book and music for younger readers. And given her input and influence, Kahn became a third partner in the project.

"This woman is very talented ... we got lucky," Elman said. "She drew 240 paintings to come up with these nine (in the book). She's a natural."

Indeed, Kahn has illustrated many children's books, in the United States and in her native Iran. And that impressive resume only adds to the authors' diversity of influences.

DeWall, born in Los Angeles to internationally acclaimed 1950s and 1960s jazz singer Wanda Curtis, lived for seven years (1961-68) in Argentina, where his mother enjoyed immense popularity. There, DeWall absorbed himself in such musical styles as jazz, calypso, bossa nova and Argentine folk.

While DeWall, 65, received much musical exposure from a young age, many might have expected Elman's life to have taken a different turn.

Originally from Bethesda, Md., Elman, 62, took an early interest in music as his father, Philip Elman, earned a great reputation in legal circles for his work in the U.S. Solicitor General's Office and as a member of the Federal Trade Commission.

Pete Elman, meanwhile, listened to various musical styles, including country-and-western, soul and rock-and-roll. Like DeWall, Elman also started to write his own songs.

"Kids' songs are all right, but this is more," DeWall said. "You want to give the kids an advanced musical experience."

Added Elman, "Trends come and go, but our music is sophisticated. When you do that, you have a better chance of the music lasting longer."

Making 'Seasons' truly a team, family effort

DeWall sings and plays guitar. Having previously lived in Argentina while growing up, DeWall counts Argentine folk music as one of his major influences -- "Argentine folk music is very poetic; there have to be about 15 different genres," he said. He also draws on such other influences as the Beatles, James Taylor and Paul Simon.

Elman, in addition to his skills as a songwriter and singer, also has earned much respect as an arranger, record producer and multi-instrumentalist. Through the years, he has developed skills on bass, guitar, trombone, organ and piano. In addition to his own CDs, Elman has played with a diverse cross-section of musicians including Willie Nelson, Clifton Chenier, Flaco Jimenez and Lacy J. Dalton.

But as is the case with many intellectual properties, the featured artists had plenty of help in bringing their songs to life. DeWall and Elman co-wrote all of the songs, with help from David Erdreich on "Raining," and from Elman's wife, Lisa Goulder, on "Somewhere It's Snowing."

As it was, Elman, who also engineered the CD, involved his entire family in the project. Goulder -- a respected singer and songwriter in her own right -- contributed backing vocals and played piano on "Raining." Their son, Willy Elman, did the mixing, and daughter Katie Elman -- then 12 -- provided background vocals on "Pickin' Berries."

Overall, the project came to fruition through a strong team effort that also included additional background vocals on "Pickin' Berries" from Ella Rafael and instrumental contributions from Oakland-based woodwind master Pete Cornell and noted percussionists/conga players John Santos and Kelly Ralston.

Cornell has earned recognition for his work with two Bay Area stalwart Latin ensembles, the Pacific Mambo Orchestra and Mazacote. Santos serves as artistic director of the San Francisco Jazz Center and Ralston has produced instructional drums and percussion videos that enthusiasts can find on YouTube.

Adam Kaye plays harmonica on "I Love Fall."