

A Maker of Songs

Nothing ruffled her serenity except the slow arrival of a recording session. Then she would get a little catch in her throat, a cough that she'd try to wash down with herbal tea. But it was just prerecording jitters, nothing unusual.

Other than that catch, Kate Wolf struck me as the most serene person I'd ever met. She was a Northern California singer-songwriter, and I had the pleasure of meeting Kate, getting to know her some, and playing on a couple of her albums in the late 1970s and early '80s.

Songwriters such as Kate are always asked, "Which comes first, the music or the lyrics?" With Kate, as far as I can tell, writing the lyric came first; then she'd compose the music. Spoken or recited, her lyrics sounded like poetry to me, and to me she always seemed to be a poet.

Her images are vivid. Her lyrics ride on the rhythm and lope on the line. Her rhymes tweak the ear, making her lyrics easy to remember. Folksinger Tom Paxton said, "With

Kate, the message was always — always — love.” Yes, Kate, both as a lyricist and as a human being, was always about love.

She called one afternoon in 1981 and said, “Bill, I have a lyric that needs music. Would you like to collaborate with me?” I said Of course, and she came over to my digs in Mill Valley. Kate said she was looking for a country sound. Then she read me her poem.

*Gray-haired and flint-eyed,
His sunburned face lined,
Grandpa was a man of few words.
He had a way of not wanting to say,
Any more than he thought could be heard.*

*The long years of living
And day-to-day giving
Had carved a map on his face.
With little to lose, he'd learned how to choose,
And his choices were easy to trace.*

Then the chorus came in:

*He had the eyes of a painter,
The heart of a maker of songs, a maker of songs.
And his words fell like rain
On the dry desert plain,
Precious and so quickly gone.*

A tune crept up on me. It was in waltz time, with what I thought was a progressive country feel. The melody of the verse was fairly simple, and the progression was expressed with the basic I, IV, and V chords of American roots music. Together, I felt they let the verses' lyrics be heard clearly.

The music of the chorus was a dollop more complex and

pushed the traditional country envelope. One of the chords was a half-diminished seventh chord — a minor seventh chord with a flatted 5th — something you don't hear all that often in country music. It added torque to the line, "And his words fell like rain," and twisted an otherwise fairly straightforward chord progression. To me, it was the pivotal chord in the music. The next stanzas read:

*From a long line of teachers,
And white Baptist preachers,
He was born with an Indian will.
His quiet dark eyes, reading the light
As he rode in the low Osage hills.*

*His school was the prairie, the sage, the wild berry,
The quail, the wide open sky,
The cottonwood thicket by the slow rolling river;
The Redbud and the hot cattle drive.*

*He had the eyes of a painter,
The heart of a maker of songs, a maker of songs.
And his words fell like rain
On the dry desert plain,
Precious and so quickly gone.*

She told me that the lyric was about her ex-husband's father. "Grandpa," as the song called him, lived in Hogshooter, Oklahoma, and was the son of Baptist teachers and preachers on one side and Cherokees on the other. He had blue, deep-blue eyes. Electric, she said.

Kate had an insight into him one afternoon. They were sitting in his kitchen, talking. She was about to go out for a ride, so she asked him what to watch for. He said that she should watch the light. That was when she knew he had the eyes of a painter.

*There were days filled with thinking,
Nights with the drinking
For a lost love that raged like a storm.
But how his eyes smiled, when he'd talk to a child,
The rough hands so gentle and warm.*

*His strong arms were brown,
where the long sleeves rolled down,
On his faded blue cotton shirt.
When times got hard, he'd go out in the yard,
And cuss away some of his hurt.*

*He had the eyes of a painter,
The heart of a maker of songs, a maker of songs.
And his words fell like rain
On the dry desert plain,
Precious and so quickly gone.*

Kate called a week later to explain that the ex-husband, about whose father the song had been written, was himself a guitarist. But he couldn't play the half-diminished seventh chord. She wanted to know if I would change it.

I was surprised that she was asking for a change based on ... *on the ex's not being able to play a chord!* The chord is easy to make, actually feels good in the left hand once you learn how to grab it. I told her I'd get back to her. But while I was licking my wounds, figuring out what to do next, Kate sat down and wrote her own music for the lyric.

An old friend, composer Gary Malkin, told me I had done wrong: "Always give the client what she wants," he said. Gary was right. But I'm happy that in the end it helped Kate come up with her own music. The song has been one of her audiences' favorites.

I didn't see Kate much past 1982. We talked on the phone once or twice, but her career was changing. She was on the

road more, recording, writing, meeting new folks. Then, in the spring of 1986, she was diagnosed with leukemia. Within eight months it had called her home. She was forty-four when she died on December 10, 1986.

I remember how Kate could touch an audience. They loved what I loved: her centered calm, her beaming heart. She made them feel they were all in a living room and she was talking with them. She was accessible; she was adored.

It was more than her presence that won an audience; she wrote honestly beautiful songs that singers record to this day, that still touch people. There's an annual folk music festival at a ranch in Laytonville held in her honor: the Kate Wolf Memorial Music Festival. It draws a bigger crowd every year. Her spirit continues to influence even more of us.

I learned much from Kate and have more to learn from her. All who knew her or were touched by her music miss her love.

*Now the garden's grown dusty,
The hand axe lies rusty,
The door's banging hard in the wind.
Grandpa's store is closed down, like most of the town,
And it won't be open again.*

*And the big white car, sits out in the yard
Of the house he built solid and true.
But I see his eyes, burning tonight,
Like the stars in the sky he once knew.*

*He had the eyes of a painter,
The heart of a maker of songs, a maker of songs.
And his words fell like rain
On the dry desert plain,
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