

“Crossing: A Musical Journey” is a new musical by Maggie’s Guitar songwriters



Thomas Morrison, played by Braiden Sunshine, left, tries to convince his father, George Morrison, played by Mike Bailey, that there is more to life than business during the song “Captain of Industry.” A small stage performance of “Crossing: A Musical Journey” takes place Saturday in New London’s Hygienic Art Park. (Mike Johnson)

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Passing down family stories is part of the privilege of getting older. On the other hand, LISTENING to family stories is one of those fidgety, after-holiday-dinner duties heaped on a kid.

Still, most youngsters grow up to appreciate the anecdotes they once merely endured and, if they're lucky, they'll pass them down to newer generations.

Then there's Mike Bailey.

Was he once mildly indifferent to his grandfather's tale-sharing? Yep. But did he also get older and develop a curiosity about the past? Maybe tell his own kids?

He did more than that.

With his friend and musical collaborator Ron Getherow, Bailey wrote a musical called "Crossing: A Musical Journey."

The 18-song narrative is about a successful Scottish merchant who, disapproving of his son's choice of a bride, has the marriage annulled and the girl sent away. The son flees for America in anger; the daughter-in-law returns, pregnant, and dies shortly after giving birth. The grandfather raises the child as his son and, years later, when the young man learns the true story of his birth, he heads to the U.S. to find his real father. How does it end? No spoiler here. See the musical!

A small stage performance of "Crossing: A Musical Journey" takes place Saturday in New London's Hygienic Art Park. Bailey and Getherow both have parts in the production, as well as one-time "The Voice" semi-finalist Braiden Sunshine. Julia Helal, Galen Donovan and Mike Kickingbear Johnson round out the cast. It will be the fifth time they've staged "Crossing," which Bailey describes as still in a workshoping stage.

"We're getting there," Bailey says, "which is pretty amazing since I'd never have believed we'd do something like this."

A family soundtrack

He says the ancestral story behind "Crossing" was "at first not something I found interesting because I'd heard it from my grandfather so many times." Three years ago, though, Bailey, a longtime member with Getherow of popular local folk band Maggie's Guitar, remembered his grandfather's story in that resonant, "I'm getting older" fashion and was inspired to write a tune about it. It would become the title piece for the musical.

At the next of their regular songwriting sessions at Getherow's house, Bailey played "Crossing." Getherow's wife Meg — the titular "Maggie" in Maggie's Guitar — was intrigued by the lyrics and asked where the song came from.

Bailey says, "I told Meg the story, and she said, 'That's really interesting. You guys should write a musical about it.' Ron and I looked at each other, and I said, 'That's crazy! Who writes a musical except, ah, people who write musicals?!'"

But the pair thought about it and gradually became captivated by the idea. Bailey started to outline the story and, at first, each musician examined his own back catalog for existing songs that might fit the narrative. Bailey also began to write new material to fit plot points.

"It's certainly different than anything we've done before," Getherow says. "We have no experience in musical theater, but it became really interesting because we suddenly had a story and the songs could emerge from that. They virtually wrote themselves."

A former journalist at The Day, Bailey had the basic writing tools and says he was able to nuance his way through the book "in learn-as-you-go fashion." Getherow and Bailey each contributed new songs and, after listening back and forth to the demos and picking the material, Getherow would then provide arrangement and/or the sort of symphonic score associated with musical theater.

"We definitely envisioned a full-production type of sound that would reflect the action onstage," Bailey says. "Some of the story takes place in a mill, so Ron came up with the idea of enumerating a lot of industrial-style percussion sounds and workers doing 'ooh' and 'ahh' sounds that fit rhythmically. It was a lot of fun, but it was also challenging because we were doing and trying things we'd never done or really even thought about."

The project became sort of an unintentional step on their musical evolution because, organically, the songs took on a sophisticated pop sound that shimmers with Moody Blues or Swell Season-style melodies or — perhaps more appropriately — tunes you'd hear from the folks who wrote "Dear Evan Hansen" or "Spring Awakening."

Gletherow says, "Maggie's Guitar has had this folk band reputation for years, and it's odd how it's working out because I always thought we were more of a soft-rock band than pure folk. Maybe we weren't even consciously looking for our niche, but with 'Crossing,' I think we found it."

Gletherow and Bailey recorded the entire 18 songs as a separate CD and under the Maggie's Guitar banner, with veteran session guitarist Jack Moriarty providing solos. The album is available in both CD and digital formats. For onstage productions of "Crossing" — at least, Gletherow laughs, "until we can afford an orchestra" — instrumental backing tracks from the album are used while the actors sing the vocals live.

A cosmic connection

Bailey takes the whole project's momentum and energy a step further.

"Not to be too cosmic, but I suppose that, when I was writing this, I kind of felt like there were certain forces pointing me down a path. Ron and I looked back and thought, well, that came together in a neat way and we're not sure we're clever enough to plan things like that," he says.

Bailey also says that the historical research — trying to supply history and background to the family story — was also a haunting and inspiring project.

"I spent years trying to find any kind of paper trail and found nothing. Shipping manifests and passenger lists and anything you can imagine — nothing," he says.

But then Bailey's mother, going through a stack of old photographs, found his grandfather's obituary — which was doubly odd because the pictures were from his mom's side of the family and the "Crossing" grandfather was from his dad's ancestors. Bailey followed that trail and eventually found the records he needed at Norwich City Hall.

"I don't want to sound maudlin but, truly, that moment was a little emotionally overwhelming," Bailey says. "The basic facts are all there. It's an emotional roller coaster, and I think Ron and I captured that. I hope so."

"Crossing" has been staged sporadically, with time between each to fine-tune.

"We've done five performances," Bailey says, "and it's still very much a work in progress. We're used to constantly adapting (the band's) songs, anyway — that's part of the fun and the process — so it's even more fun with a full cast of actors and singers. You can see the characters evolve onstage as the actors provide their input, and it's the same way with the songs. Some of the best changes have happened through in-performance ad libs. That's so cool."

One problem is that, as challenging as it is to write a musical, it's arguably harder to find somewhere to stage it and hold performances

"Yeah, that's an issue," Bailey laughs. "I mean, we knew we were beginners. We still are. We thought, 'Well, we've got a play and songs, now what do we do? Just send it to someone famous and expect they'll produce it? Nope.'"

Instead, they reached out to local venues and organizations they knew through Maggie's Guitar or through the arts scene in general. They've put on "Crossing" at Friday Night Folk in New London, the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center in Old Saybrook and Lyme Public Hall. After each performance, they talk with the audience and take notes on what worked and what didn't. After Saturday's Hygienic show, "Crossing" will be staged Oct. 3 and 4 at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich.

"The show at The Kate was very different from Lyme Public Hall — and it'll be very different at the Hygienic," Bailey says. "And that's fine. We're committed to this process, and we're enjoying it. Who knows? Maybe in a year or two, it'll be ready for primetime, and someone in the business will see it and say, 'Hey, this is good. Let's take this somewhere!'"