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Crookston furthers troubadour tradition



by Michael Lello
Weekender Editor

Folk music might sound light and harmless to some, but it has the power to change the world. From Pete Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)" to a contemporary performer like Billy Bragg's "There Is Power in A Union," folk singers continue to put pen to paper, fingers to strings and mouths to microphones to express messages of hope, unrest and civil disobedience.



And sometimes it's just about telling someone's story. That's what Joe Crookston did for Dina Jacobson.

Crookston — the acclaimed singer, songwriter and guitarist who will perform in a show presented by PocoNotes at Scranton's Tripp House this Saturday — interviewed Jacobson, a survivor of Nazi Germany's Auschwitz concentration camp, and set her story to a song he called "Blue Tattoo."

Joe Crookston & The BlueBird Jamboree with Peter Glanville/ John Smith and Pat Flynn, Tripp House (1011 N. Main Ave., Scranton), Sat. March 20, 7 p.m. Tickets: \$20 in advance at Duffy Accessories (218 Linden St., Scranton), www.nepatickets.com, 888.800.POCO; \$25 at door. Includes wine, beer, hors d'oeuvres. Info: www.joecrookston.com, www.poconotes.com,

"It was one of the hardest songs I have ever written, as in I didn't want to screw this up," Crookston says.

A humble comment for sure. But when Crookston writes and sings, listeners rarely find fault. His music has been featured on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," and early last year, the International Folk Alliance deemed his second album "Able Baker Charlie & Dog" its "Album of the Year," indicating that it received more radio plays than any 2008-released folk album.

He'll perform Saturday with guitarist Peter Glanville in a show billed as Joe Crookston & The BlueBird Jamboree with Peter Glanville.

For Crookston, it's been a storyteller's journey, one he was able to take to another level when he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant for the "Songs of the Finger Lakes" project. He spent a year traveling New York state's Finger Lakes region, gathering stories to turn into songs. Crookston included four of those songs — including "Blue Tattoo" — on "Able Baker Charlie & Dog."

After he finished the "Finger Lakes" project songs, Crookston set up concerts in the communities that inspired the individual songs and played them there.

"That, to me, was so awesome," Crookston says. "To have someone there say, 'Yeah, that's my song,' or 'You're singing about Hemlock Lake,' there's this kind of pride that wells up in people."

He performed "Blue Tattoo" for an audience that included Jacobson in Elmira, N.Y., where she lives. Crookston says he spent about eight months crafting the song, which portrays a conversation between Jacobson and her daughter. The daughter asks questions, and "the listeners can fill in the blanks, and you realize at the end she has a tattoo on her arm," Crookston explains.

"I'm not describing the holocaust," he continues. "Through this na♦ive and kind of pureness of this child's questions, the listener is like, 'Wow.' It's a window into this woman's story."

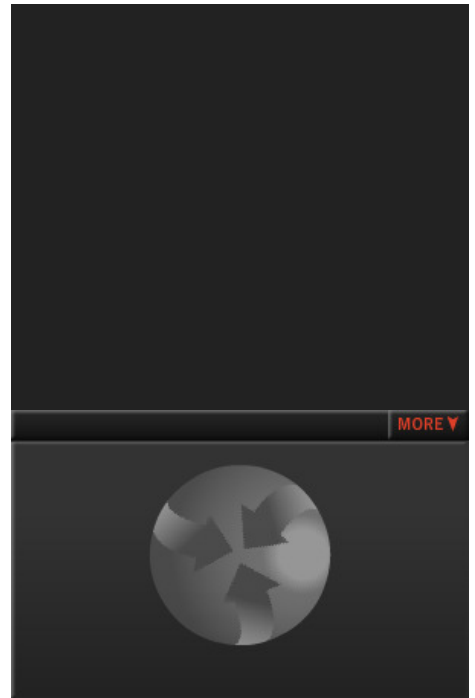
All of this is not to say that Crookston dwells exclusively on serious life issues in his music. For example, "Able Baker Charlie & Dog" also includes a unique cover of Supertramp's hit "The Logical Song." (Do yourself a favor and seek out Crookston's live version on YouTube.)

The musician says he likes to include "The Logical Song" and other covers in his live shows.

"Most people 30 and over know the song," he says. "And there's a sense, when people hear it, it completely comes alive for them in a whole new way. That's what I love about covers. Not 'Here's the Bob Dylan song, and I'm going to try to make it sound just like Bob Dylan.' That's really boring to me."

Crookston is preparing to record new music with Glanville as well as play a bunch of summer festivals, like his not-yet-confirmed performance at the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival in Hillsdale, N.Y., and a main-stage headlining slot at the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas.

For his first performance in Northeastern Pa., he hopes — and expects — open-



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minded listeners to walk away pleased.

Says Crookston: "I often hear this: 'I don't know a lot about folk music or really listen to folk music. But when I come and hear you play, I'm totally into it.'"

Notes: A portion of ticket proceeds will be donated to the St. Francis of Assisi Kitchen, a local food pantry. Also, contributions of canned foods will be accepted at the show. ... There be an after-show event at Trax (Lackawanna Station Hotel, 700 Lackawanna Ave., Scranton), with a meet-and-greet with the artists and an open jam session.

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