

Singing Peace into the World: The Mindful Music of Joe Reilly



“I have always been called to connect with kids and youth and to share with them my talents and interests. I believe that, just as music is a continuation of my parent's talents and gifts, so is education.”

**By Rachel Pastiva
Photography by Doug Russell**

Ann Arbor is lucky to have Joe Reilly. It's true. I challenge you to spend an hour outside on a sunny Saturday morning at one of his children's concerts, and come to a different conclusion. More so, I challenge you to spend one hour at his show and not be moved to turn into a tree and sway along to the breeze of his music.

Like an invigorating hike through the woods, Joe Reilly's music reminds us of the magnitude of life that goes on around us and our deep and unending connection to it. From the life cycle of a tomato to the family life of a mosquito, his lyrics celebrate the intricacies of our natural world and teach us the responsibility we

have in protecting it. Couple his thoughtful lyrics with catchy tunes, and it's easy to see how the environmental messages in this young man's music can inspire children young and old to be more mindful of their impact on our living planet. And to actively improve the ways we choose to live upon it.

The song “Little Tomato” from Joe's recent album, *Touch the Earth*, is a perfect example of how he inspires us to take a closer look at the world we are so deeply connected to, and honor our relationships to it. This particular song, which Joe dedicates to “all the tomatoes--in gardens, in soups, salads, and sauces,” is a celebration of the relationship we share with the food we eat. In it, he sings to the tomato in his bean stew and thanks it, along with the gardener, the harvester, the soil and sunshine for allowing the tomato's energy to flow into him. As if this isn't enough to make us more grateful for our food, the tomato responds with his own feelings, giving us a deeper understanding:

“...sittin' in your
bean stew you might think I'm
depressed
but I'm quite content
to become part of you, your
thoughts and your body
it's like one big
energy exchange party.
And what you ask,
started all of this? It was the
sun and photosynthesis.”

These smart lyrics, the inflection in Joe's voice, and the rhythm of his guitar generate feelings of joy and gratitude that result in a powerful sense of enlightenment. *This* is the stuff Joe Reilly's music is made of—*this* is how his music transforms us.

In his early thirties, Joe's long dark hair, olive skin and brown doe-like eyes bespeak his Cherokee heritage. Soft spoken with a kind smile, he radiates a sense of peace that draws you towards him. Joe has been working with kids as an environmental educator at the Leslie Science Center for the last six years, but his work with children began long ago, as did his music.

Joe Reilly was raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and grew up surrounded by music. Both of his parents are singers and play guitar and his dad also plays the upright bass. Joe's parents played contemporary Catholic folk music at church services. “Music was always a part of our household. I didn't really appreciate it as much as a kid growing up...but realized later that it was a gift being passed along-- even if I wasn't conscious of it.”

Music wasn't the only gift passed down to Joe. “I have always been called to connect with kids and youth and to share with them my talents and interests. I believe that, just as music is a continuation of my parent's talents and gifts, so is education. My mom is a teacher and her mother was a teacher as well.” He first began working with kids in high school when he started volunteering at the Kalamazoo Nature Center. This experience sparked an interest in Joe that has inspired him to work with kids in a variety of ways. “As my passion for [working with kids] grew I continued as an environmental educator, youth prevention specialist, and mentor through college and beyond. I have worked with the youth alcohol, tobacco, and other prevention programs at American Indian Health and Family Services in Detroit since I was a college student—for about twelve years now—in addition to working at the Leslie Science Center.”

It was during his summers at the Kalamazoo Nature Center that Joe came to love and understand



“Even when I was in elementary school, I became very concerned about environmental issues like the ozone layer, pollution and other large issues of human impact. Then, when I was in high school, being at the nature center opened me up to the real ecology of the world around me—recognizing how beautiful and wonderful it is, and what a gift it is.”



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At Leslie Science and Nature Center, kids are prepped before recording their parts on songs to appear on Joe's upcoming album *Let's Go Outside*.

nature, but his concerns about the environment started when he was much younger. “Even when I was in elementary school, I became very concerned about environmental issues like the ozone layer, pollution and other large issues of human impact. Then, when I was in high school, being at the nature center opened me up to the real ecology of the world around me—recognizing how beautiful and wonderful it is, and what a gift it is.”

High school was also the time when Joe began to explore his native roots. Part Irish and part Cherokee, Joe's family didn't have a direct connection to the native community, but an Indian education program in the schools allowed him to explore it. In his own exploration of his roots Joe began attending pow-wows, where he was introduced to drumming, but only as a listener. Later, when he moved to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan, he became actively involved in it. “When I came here to college at U of M, I was really introduced to the drum. There was a group of students and community members and they sang at a reception for incoming Native students and I was really inspired by that.” Joe asked if he could join the group and soon was attending practices and drumming along.

Playing with the group and building a relationship with drumming taught him a great deal about music. “It taught me a lot about opening up my voice and really putting my voice out to share it. It taught me about having a role as a singer—a role that is greater than just myself as an individual—one that serves something in the community... It taught me to take it seriously. There's a responsibility to being a singer.” He began to understand its role in an even deeper sense. “[Music is] also a part of ceremony. Music can be prayer and music can be healing. It can be part of a spiritual expression, which is a continuation of what my parents taught me.”

Joe graduated from the University of Michigan in the summer of 2000 with a degree in Environmental Justice and began working on his first album, *Mothers & Daughters*, which came out in the spring of 2001. The fall and winter after college, he also worked two jobs to save up money for what he refers to as his “Greyhound Bus Tour” which he embarked on in the summer of 2001. For \$500, Joe purchased a sixty-day Greyhound AmeriPass that would allow to him travel anywhere in the country. Having no scheduled shows, he visited places he had friends he could stay with: New York City, Washington D.C., Texas, San Diego, San Francisco, British Columbia, Seattle and Chicago. He spent about a week at each location, and while there, he played in parks, on street corners and at open mics. “It was basically a dare to myself to see if I can do this and also, I think, kind of asking the universe for help, too. Saying, ‘Hey, this is

Teenager Ryan Shea on Joe Reilly

(Fifteen-year-old Ryan Shea plays guitar on some songs on Joe Reilly's upcoming album, *Let's Go Outside*. This fall he will be a junior at Community High School and plans to pursue an education in music technology, law or musicology upon graduation.)

Rachel Pastiva: How long have you known Joe Reilly? When, and under what circumstances, did you meet?

Ryan Shea: I have been a regular at the Leslie Science and Nature Center since I was five, so I met Joe when he started working as a camp counselor there (maybe 4 or 5 years ago).

Rachel Pastiva: Do you remember what you thought of his music the first time you heard him perform?

Ryan Shea: I had actually heard him perform before he worked at Leslie, with a group called the Longhairz Collective. I enjoyed his music with that group so much that I still listen to the old CDs occasionally.

RP: In what ways has his music changed your perspective on nature and the environment?

Ryan Shea: One of my favorite aspects of his music is that there is a lot of input from kids in many of his songs. Often, at Leslie, he will take a group of kids and write a song with them. This makes them (and made me when I was that age) look more closely into a certain aspect of nature (the topic of the specific song they are writing) and explore it more in depth.

RP: Has Joe's music inspired you to change the way you live at all?

Ryan Shea: I'm sure it has, subconsciously, over the years. It is very infectious music, and it promotes a positive message, so the ideas are pretty firmly engrained in the young minds that enjoy it.

RP: Joe mentioned that you play guitar on some songs on his upcoming album. How long have you been playing guitar? Has his music inspired you in any way to make music yourself?

Ryan Shea: I have been playing guitar for five years. His music has shown me that you can use music to help others improve their lives. Many of his songs are aimed at reinforcing good, healthy habits and I aim to incorporate some of this style into my own music.

RP: What was it like to play music with Joe?

Ryan Shea: It's always a joy to play with Joe. His style is simple but infectious, and lots of fun to play.

RP: How would you describe Joe and his music to someone who doesn't know him?

Ryan Shea: Singer-songwriter folk-rock with a positive message.

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“[Meditation] gives me an anchor in love and compassion rather than anger or despair. This peace is also the source of my music, and I love to share that with others in a way that can communicate some of that loving energy.”

what I'm going to put out, how is it going to fit in? Is there support for this?”

Joe's Greyhound Bus Tour gave him a better sense of what music is about. “It was a huge experience and I learned a lot as I went around. I learned that doing music is about relationships. That was the real value [of the trip]. The friends I stayed with and times with them and their support and help and encouragement--that's really what it's about. In music there can be this tendency to feel like 'I need to be noticed, I need to be recognized, I need to have some kind of fame...' There's a real hollowness to that, a real emptiness. The real richness is in the relationships with people.”

Shortly upon returning home from his tour, the tragedy of September 11th happened, and it changed Joe's outlook on life. “[9/11] really was a big opening moment for everybody. But the way I experienced it was feeling very vulnerable and really knowing in my heart that this was a moment in our history where we need to remain open to compassion and understanding and peace. But I was so discouraged then when our country took the other way, which was vengeance, war, consumerism... and more violence in response to the terrible violence that had happened. That is

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Sitting on the rock wall under the walnut tree featured in the "LSNC Summer Camp Song" on Joe Reilly's upcoming album, Joe and the kids make deer ears for the camera. From left: Lily Gray Wright, Grace Thomas, Olivia Lyle, Maya Baum Ferrise, Carmen Quinn, Gabi Teodoru, Maya Vijan, Anya Dembitskaya, Joe Reilly, Bryce Minock, Jasmine Lowenstein, Kristen Umbriac, Kelman Wolfkostin

“The practice of mindfulness and meditation has given me such growth and such fertile soil for my music and spirit to grow in.”

when I started to be more conscious. My work in the world, be it music or whatever, needs to be aligned with peace somehow.”

In response to his feelings about September 11th, Joe picked up a book by Thich Nhat Hanh called *Being Peace*, which was his first introduction to Buddhist teachings and the work of Thich Nhat Hanh. Joe was transformed by the concept of looking within to find the peace we want to see in the world. “That planted a seed for me, which has taken a long time to cultivate: how do I find peace in myself?” Joe began meditating and continued studying Buddhism and the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. “The practice of mindfulness and meditation has given me such growth and such fertile soil for my music and spirit to grow in.”

Since his introduction to Thich Nhat Hanh, Joe has visited Plum Village three times, the Buddhist monastery and meditation center in Southern France, and home of Thich Nhat Hanh. He visits Plum Village in January when it is more of a monastic retreat, which allows him more space and time to write. “Every time I go to Plum Village, I write many songs. That's a combination of all the conditions there...the support of the community, the Sangha, is really strong. The teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh are very heart opening and inspiring, and then the space and time to write. I bring a journal and fill it up. All those things together have made it a really wonderful way for me to not only just write songs, but for me to have a solid spiritual foundation for my music. It's like the soil; I really think that's true. And every time I go, my roots grow a little deeper in it and I can reach a little more into the world by just doing the work.”

Joe found that his spiritual work reaches the space inside him where his music also lives. “[Meditation] gives me an anchor in love and compassion rather than anger or despair. This peace is also the source of my music, and I love to share that with others in a way that can communicate some of that loving energy.” Joe's music is clearly infused with

the intention of mindfulness, which he credits to his life experiences. “Somehow it's all connected. The Greyhound Tour, September 11th and then reading the book by Thich Nhat Hanh. It's all part of the same path of trying to sing peace into the world.”

Like his meditation practice, working with kids has taught Joe some valuable lessons that he can apply outside of his work with them. “Kids have taught me the importance of play—of doing things just for fun and not necessarily trying to get something out of it...they've taught me about honesty too. It's better to be honest

about where I'm at then to try to put on a front or a mask. I think as a performer that can be an easy thing to fall into: 'Okay, I have to be like this...' But I think with kids they help give me that because they are [honest]. If they're not into it their response is going to show you. It's not a personal attack, it's just the honest truth.”

Watching Joe perform kids' shows, it's evident that he's embraced the lessons that he's learned from working with them. He relates to them easily and encourages their participation through direct communication with audience members and lots of movement during songs. “What I love about working with kids [is] they help me get out of my own self. I can start to imagine what it's like to be them---How do I connect with them? Well, let me imagine what it's like to be them. Let me put myself in their shoes. Let me recognize their selves within me. And then ultimately that's what the music has to become. It has to become this way to transcend our separateness. It's a way to connect.”

Today, Joe Reilly has no reason to play his music on random street corners across the country. He put himself out there and asked the universe if there is support for what he does, and the universe

“[Drumming] taught me a lot about opening up my voice and really putting my voice out to share it. It taught me about having a role as a singer—a role that is greater than just myself as an individual—one that serves something in the community.”

**Little Tomato
(from Touch the Earth, released 2009)**

This one goes out to all the tomatoes, in gardens, in soups, salads, and sauces. This is for you...

**Well, hello, little tomato, can you tell me all the secrets of this life that you know?
In what type of environment did you grow, have you ever seen the city streets of Bordeaux?
Hello, little tomato, I'm happy to have you as part of my bean stew
Again let me ask you do you remember last September growing together with the cucumber
in the fall slumber, sometimes I wonder if it felt a little edgy to be a young veggie before the harvest time**

**Well I started out as just a seed, and when I germinated I was just a weed
I grew up strong, my branches crept along, I always hoped that someday I'd be in a song
but alas! I know I've digressed, sittin' in your stew you might think I'm depressed
but I'm quite content and will not prevent you from eating me, no I'm so happy
to become part of you, your thoughts and your body
it's like one big energy exchange party
and what you ask, started all of this, it was the sun and photosynthesis
I'm a producer, you're a consumer,
I'll say it again I was fed by the rain and received the most from the compost,
decomposing matter helped me grow fatter
more red and juicy now won't you excuse me it's time for you to stop talking and consume me**

**Well thank you, little tomato, there's so many more things that I can say oh but it's enough to say I'm grateful
for all the stuff that you're made of
the water, the soil and the sunshine, the gardener who staked out your vine
the harvester who picked you at the right time
I even have to acknowledge the energy divine that is in you and flows from you to me
I will do my very best to live and to be worthy of your time and your energy
I will eat you happily, mindfully
come rest for a while with me in my belly then return to the earth for another
rebirth
I'll see you again my vegetable friend, I'll see you again my little
veggie friend, I'll see you again...**



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Patiently waiting for a chance to talk about Joe Reilly, from left: Anya Dembitskaya, Samantha Marchand, Hayley Marchand, Lily Gray Wright, Grace Thomas, Olivia Lyle

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responded with a resounding “YES!” In 2007, Joe released his first children's album, *Children of the Earth*, and he is currently working on his second. He also has four albums geared towards an adult audience, but he's come to understand that the separation is unnecessary. “Over the past few years I have realized more of an ability to share music with people of all ages, and have appreciated that versatility, rather than limiting myself to being only a children's singer or only a singer songwriter for an adult audience.” This past spring Joe completed his third West Coast tour and does shows year-round all over southern Michigan at a variety of venues, including community centers, schools and churches.

It turns out Ann Arbor isn't the only place lucky enough to have Joe Reilly. And that's a good thing. His messages of love, compassion and mindfulness transcend all boundaries and are important lessons for us all. Just as drawing our awareness to them can change the trees, water, and soil, we can be changed by the words of his songs. We can choose how we live upon the earth. We can also stop sometimes to sway in the breeze with the tree branches to remind ourselves that we are all one.

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How Kids Feel about Joe Reilly's Music

*(On a beautiful and hot July Saturday this past summer, Joe Reilly invited kids to the Leslie Science and Nature Center to help record songs for his upcoming album, **Let's Go Outside**. I had the great pleasure of watching the recording process and got a chance to speak with some of the kids after the recording session to find out how they feel about Joe's music.)*

Rachel Pastiva: *What is your favorite Joe Reilly song?*

Carmen Quinn (age 8): The Leslie Nature Center song because they sing all funny.

Olivia Lyle (age 8): Summer Camp song because it's really good.

Grace Thomas (age 7): Summer Camp song because it's fun.

Maya Baum Ferrise (age 6): Amphibian song because it's the danciest.

Hayley Marchand (age 6): At the rock wall under the walnut tree song. It just has a lot of my attention and I want to sing along with it.

Kristen Umbriac (age 8): The Summer Camp song because the hand motions are really fun to do.

Jasmine Lowenstein (age 6): I like them all.

Rachel Pastiva: *What makes Joe Reilly's music so much fun?*

Gabi Teodoru (age 8): He always sings about nature and his songs are so easy to memorize because the chorus is really often.

Olivia Lyle: Because the music is not all played in one beat.

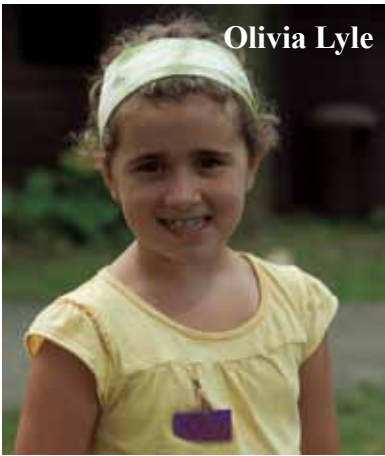
Anya Dembitskaya (age 9): It's kids songs but adults can listen to it too. It's fun for kids.



Kristen Umbriac: He lets kids help record it.

Maya Baum Ferrise: It's so fun but I wish it was outside more.

RP: *What have you learned from listening to Joe Reilly's music?*



Olivia Lyle

Carmen Quinn: That we need to clean up nature more...

Gabi Teodoru: I want to go to summer camp because I never did it before and I want to do more of the performances.

Olivia Lyle: About nature in an outside way.

Anya Dembitskaya: That you should respect nature no matter how much it annoys you. But I'm kind of against the

Mosquito song where Joe says you're supposed to NOT kill mosquitoes and you're supposed to let them sit there and drink your blood.

Kristen Umbriac: It really matters if you litter and don't do bad things to the earth.

Lily Gray Wright (age 6): To respect nature.

Maya Baum Ferrise: I've learned more about nature like what things are called, like what amphibians are.

Hayley Marchand: Respect nature. Instead of throwing away your paper you can recycle it so you can use that and you can save more trees.

Samantha Marchand (age 8): To play outside more instead of staying inside.



Hayley Marchand

RP: *Has Joe Reilly's music changed the way you live?*

Kristen Umbriac: I like to use recycled things to make toys.

Olivia Lyle: To not throw compost away, put it in your compost can instead.

RP: *How would you describe Joe Reilly's music to someone who hasn't heard it before, so that they would want to listen to it?*

Gabi Teodoru: You should listen to it because it's all about nature and it makes you feel confident in yourself and it's really easy to memorize and you can get it stuck in your head easily.

Carmen Quinn: It's really cool and really fun and you should try it.



Lily Gray Wright

Maya Baum Ferrise: It's dancing music. Come on, let's go listen to it!

Hayley Marchand: His music is really good and he's really good at it.

Anya Dembitskaya: It's just really good and it can be good for anybody. It doesn't matter how old you are.

Kristen Umbriac: It's fun and lively.

Jasmine Lowenstein: It's about the Earth and plants and animals and trees.

(Let's Go Outside will be released sometime during the 2010-2011 school year. Be on the look out for it at Crazy Wisdom!)

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