Harvest Tunes

BENNET KONESNI BELIEVES in the power of song—and vegetables too. On any given summer’s day, you are likely to find the twenty-eight-year-old musician and farmer and his crew at Sylvester Manor Farm on Shelter Island, New York, knuckle deep in soil and in the midst of a tune. They might be belting out the harmony to “I’ll Fly Away,” the spiritual written by Albert Brumley (and popularized in the movie O Brother, Where Art Thou?) while weeding a row of kale, or working their way through the English folk song, “Two Young Brethren” while digging up sweet potatoes. But chances are, they are singing.

When my husband and I visited Sylvester Manor last summer, we walked into the farmhouse kitchen to find assistant field manager Zoë Wonfor and apprentice Adelaide Corey-Disch baking loaves of squash bread for the farms’ bread CSA and humming along as Konesni and his fiddle-playing fiancé (now wife), Edith Gawler, played through a set list for a concert in town that evening. Musical instruments were strewn around the living room, including two handmade gourd banjos crafted during an instrument-making workshop held at the farm last summer. “I feel so spoiled here,” Wonfor said. “Music is such a huge part of my experience at Sylvester Manor. It is hard to imagine life here without it.”

For Konesni, cultivating this sort of music-focused agricultural community is all part of a grander plan. Sylvester Manor has been in his family since the mid-seventeenth century and boasts an impressive historical and agricultural legacy. So when his uncle and current manor owner, Eben Ostby, gave Konesni his blessing to start an educational program that welcomes the public for a day of music, dance, and food. Last fall’s Plant and Sing event included a garlic shucking and sing-along around a campfire, poetry readings, and a performance by Gawler’s sister, who choreographed a modern dance piece around the 201-year-old windmill that sits on the edge of Sylvester Manor’s fields.

Music, Konesni said, builds community among his staff, and ultimately helps brand the manor as a spirited, welcoming place for neighbors, volunteers and, he hopes, new customers. Still, building an agro-musical utopia takes time, and Konesni stressed that getting the farm up and running has taken precedence over creating a formal music program. Prospective staff members fill out a questionnaire that gauges their interest in the farm’s dual mission. But most arrive with no formal musical training and even some nervousness about the thought of singing in public. That suits Konesni just fine.

“These days, most people think that you have to be a professional to sing—that you have to use vibrato and be good,” Konesni said. In response, he has started describing music on the farm as “songing,” which values the notion of making what he calls “joyful noise” together, in place of singing, which connotes a performance. And when the stars align—the right people in the field, the right early-morning giddiness, the right task, such as picking beans, which requires several farmers working together—he said, “We will rip into a song and just keep going.”
Farmers, it turns out, have been ripping into song for centuries. “As far back as we can trace, the pursuit of farming [has been] linked with music,” writes Ted Gioia in his book Work Songs (Duke University Press, 2006). And, fittingly, virtually every culture that claims an agrarian history—from Egyptian grain growers to the farmers of ancient China and Greece—has a corresponding musical heritage. Like other song traditions that developed over centuries of individual or collective toil—sea shanties, cowboy and lumberjack songs, shepherd calls, threading and weaving songs, and the songs sung by prison chain gangs—music, and especially singing, was once an integral tool of farming, as essential to the farmer’s productivity as his hands or hoe.

Over the centuries, work songs have played many roles in traditional agriculture, from invoking the rain or soil fertility, to soothing a restless animal, expressing joy and thanksgiving for a bountiful season and, as it did for African American slaves in the American South, serving as an expression of sovereignty and social protest. The rhythms of music, Gioia writes, also help set the pace for the physical labor of tilling, seeding, and harvesting. Many work songs are structured around a duple-metered or call-and-response format that mimics agriculture’s back-and-forth movements. Take, for example, this seventeenth-century English butter-churning song:

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Come, butter come / Come butter come
Peter’s standing at the gate / Waiting for a butter cake
Come butter come.
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Even without hearing it sung, it is easy to imagine these words guiding the rhythmic thwack of wooden plunger against barrel as fresh cream slowly turns to butter. “The
emphasis is on sinking into the rhythm and using the song to aid motion,” said Patty Cuyler, a folk music expert and codirector of the music and education nonprofit Village Harmony.

Perhaps most importantly, Gioia writes, song has the power to transform the task at hand, distracting the farmers from—and on some occasions adding meaning and joy to—their labor. Konesni describes music’s transformative power in practical terms: “It’s a very fertile place where you’re enjoying yourself while still getting stuff done.”

While work songs thrived alongside agriculture for centuries, the last 150 years proved unkind to both practices. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, automation quickened the pace of work to previously unimaginable speeds, and human toil increasingly began to be replaced by mechanized proxies. As a result, many cultures’ work-song traditions eroded drastically over the last century—literally drowned out by the techno-strength whirl of machines. In some cases, the songs shifted into a performance context—alive, but divorced from their original setting. Cuyler, for example, leads classes featuring work songs from the Republic of Georgia, and in Germany and Holland, shanty choirs and festivals have helped preserve the songs of the sea. In other cases, these vibrant traditions have faded to almost nothing.

Still, music continues to be an integral part of today’s workplace. “The difference is, the music more often comes from iTunes rather than directly from us,” Cuyler said. She’s right. We wear headphones while typing at the office and harmonize with the car radio while driving. When I make dinner, Paul Simon and Queen (or, when I’m lucky, my husband’s guitar playing) provide a lively soundtrack for my chopping and stirring. Our modern definition of labor might be less physical, and the music itself may be canned and disconnected from the activity—but our urge to bolster movement with melody and rhythm remains as strong as ever.

Erwin Bennett Konesni was born in Asheville, North Carolina, and grew up in coastal Maine, where he was exposed to what he calls a “participatory music-making culture.” His family attended fiddle festivals and the occasional contra dance where his uncle called the dance formations. From a young age, he says he “couldn’t walk past a piano without at least making some noise.”

At Middlebury College in Vermont (where Konesni and I were in the same graduating class), he hosted the program “Songs to Clean Your Room By” on the college’s radio station—inspired by his family’s Saturday morning ritual of cranking up-tempo jazz on the stereo while they tidied up the house. Konesni also sang and played guitar in Middlebury’s resident bluegrass band, Erwin Allen and The Route 7 Ramblers. The Ramblers were a common presence on campus—igniting late-night dance parties, infusing official school events with a bit of New England charm, and busking on the quad. At the center of every show stood Konesni, playing his guitar and beaming. He claims that he never figured music would amount to more than a hobby. But from the outside perspective, it would be hard to imagine him doing anything else.

In 2005 Konesni was awarded a Watson Fellowship, which allowed him to explore the intersection of music and work firsthand. During the year-long fellowship, entitled “Haul Away Joe: Exploring the Musical Labor of the Land and Sea,” he traveled to The Netherlands, Germany, Ghana, Tanzania, Viet Nam, Switzerland, and Mongolia to live and work among communities that have a significant work-song heritage. (“Haul Away Joe,” not coincidentally, is the title of a nineteenth-century sea shanty.)

Along the way he observed Mongolian herdsmen use kholmei (a type of throat singing) to coax a mother camel to nurse an orphaned calf. He sweated beside a group of Tanzanian farmers belting out a call-and-response song as they sped down a row of cassava—“[their hoes],” he wrote on the blog he kept during the year, “all rising and falling in unison.” Whenever possible, he plucked or sang along, picking up new songs and melodies as he went. And while there was no one aha moment, Konesni said he experienced a series of minor epiphanies about how music and farming should fit into his life. “I realized that this is how I want to live,” he said. “This [music and farming] is at the core of my being, and everything else is periphery.”

Shortly after returning, Konesni realized that his family’s historic farm could provide the fertile ground he needed to carry out this newly formed vision. When his ancestor Nathaniel Sylvester founded Sylvester Manor on Shelter Island in 1652, the area was already rich with agricultural cultivation by the Native American Manhasset tribe. A sugar trader with two family plantations in Barbados, Sylvester took ownership of Shelter Island’s entire eight thousand acres, transforming them into a support system for his sugar production. The island produced grain, livestock and, most importantly, oak sugar barrels, which got shipped down the Atlantic in an early act of globalization.

Over the centuries, Sylvester Manor underwent several reincarnations. By the 1730s, the manor had shrunk in acreage and shifted from global to regional production as then-resident Brinley Sylvester and his wife Mary produced tallow candles and cheese for the New England market. After the revolutionary war, Enlightenment farmers Thomas
Dering and his son Sylvester Dering introduced a variety of new crops and merino sheep to the farm. It was during this period that the manor’s wind-powered gristmill was constructed, and the manor house, a gracious, seven-bedroom, Georgian-style home that now houses Konesni and his fellow farmers, was built.

At times over its nearly four-hundred-year history, Sylvester Manor lay fallow. In the twentieth century, for example, the manor was dominated by industry and invention, not agriculture. Part-time resident Eben Norton Horsford, a polymath, Harvard professor, and Konesni’s great-great-great grandfather, never actively farmed at Sylvester Manor, but is credited with developing the modern version of baking powder. (The can of Rumford baking powder in your pantry links directly back to Horsford.) “If you look at every epoch of Sylvester Manor, each one made its money on the basis of something totally typical of its time,” said historian Mac Griswold, author of the forthcoming book Slaves in the Attic: The Sylvester Family and Their Long Island Plantation (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). Today is no different. Konesni and his fellow farmers at Sylvester Manor are among the generation of young, college-educated people choosing to forego the traditional white-collar career track to work the land.

Along with his uncle, Konesni aims to honor the farm’s past while cultivating the joyful, music-influenced farming that will shepherd it into the next generation. Konesni also does his best to spread the notion of participatory music-making beyond the farm gate, leading workshops about his Watson research and work-song history at conferences across the region. “I want to help American farmers sing again,” Konesni said. “Not just as a recreational pursuit, but as a part of their livelihood.” So far, so good. Creek Iversen, a former music teacher and field manager at Common Ground Farm in Beacon, New York, said a workshop he took with Konesni inspired him to weave his own love of music into the farm’s daily rhythms.

At another event—the Young Farmers Conference at the Stone Barns Center for Food & Agriculture in Tarrytown, New York—Konesni led a group of about twenty participants in pulling carrots while singing the words to Bring a Little Water Sylvie, a song composed by the American blues legend Lead Belly, who remembered his uncle calling for a drink while working the fields. If the scene seemed a little cheesy or complicated by cultural appropriation, it was also sweet and joyful. Konesni, for his part, is both earnest in his passion and honest in his intentions. If he appropriates, he does so evenhandedly, calling upon a global mix of songs that suit and inspire the mood—everything from blues and bluegrass tunes to yutz calls (the Swiss predecessor to yodeling), and even the occasional Top 40 hit. “Just as heirloom vegetables depend on the people who eat them, these songs need to be sung in order to survive,” Konesni said.

He has also added to the work-song tradition by composing his own tunes. A poem called “God Speed the Plough” printed on a coffee mug at his grandmother’s house inspired him to write a sentimental melody that celebrates love and the agrarian life:

Of all that I love under heaven above / These things are the best of them all-o / It’s the smell of the land and the touch of your hand / How it grips soft and warm close to mine-o / So Jolly boys now / Here’s God speed the plough / Long life and success to the farmer.

With just three years of farming at Sylvester Manor under his belt, Konesni has years to go before claiming “long life and success” as a farmer. But as long as each season promises a field to tend, and each day brings a new song to sing, the journey is destined to be sweet.