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Our song for you

Area musicians write and record Pocono-themed Christmas tune to raise money for Monroe's children in need

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Gary Wehrkamp, producer and co-writer of 'Christmastime in the Poconos,' coaches vocalists Ellen Ryan, center, and Marge Diamond as they rehearse at Wehrkamp's New Horizons Music Studios in Snydersville.

Maria Horn photo

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By **HOWARD FRANK**

Pocono Record Writer
November 16, 2008

A group of local music royalty evoked the healing powers of song recently to help children in need.

Pocono-area artists gathered at New Horizons Music Studios in Snydersville to put the finishing touches on "Christmastime in the Poconos."

The group, who call themselves The Wishmakers, recorded the closing chorus to the new, Pocono-themed Christmas song to benefit Monroe County Children and Youth Services.

The idea started small, according to Gary Wehrkamp, artist, producer and studio owner.

"Bryan Schmidt, a friend and piano student of mine, approached me in early August. He had an idea of writing a song about Christmas and relating it to the Poconos. I was immediately interested.

"My first question to him was, 'Who was producing the song?' He shrugged his shoulders and said, 'How about you?' So I said let's have a meeting and see what we come up with," Wehrkamp said.

Schmidt, Ed Mason and Wehrkamp went over a sketch of the song. Schmidt and Mason began reworking the lyrics. Wehrkamp shaped the music, trying different arrangements over the next three weeks.

The project began to take on a life of its own, according to Wehrkamp.

"It went from something small that would just be fun to something bigger. We started with just a small group of singers, but at subsequent meeting we expanded the roster of vocalists to appear on the song," he said.

Choosing the vocalists wasn't easy. "I made a list of about 60 Pocono people I've worked with or would like to work with. Bryan, Ed and I narrowed the list down to about 11. When I wrote the vocal arrangements, I pictured the individual singers doing their parts," he said.

The three men decided not to contact any artists until they had a very good version of the song. That didn't happen until the second week of September.

"I sent mixes of the song with my vocal to the various singers in an e-mail. We told them we're doing a song for charity. Most people were enthusiastic," Wehrkamp said.

Several singers had already recorded vocals for the main tracks. Oct. 12 was the finale — the session day to record the group vocal that ends the song.

The project brought together individuals with diverse backgrounds.

Wehrkamp owns and operates New Horizon Music Studios. He's a producer, songwriter, engineer and

A CHRISTMAS WISH

Band: The Wishmakers

Song: "Christmastime in the Poconos"

Written by: Gary Wehrkamp, Bryan Schmidt and Ed Mason

Release date: Monday, Nov. 24

Benefits: Monroe County Children and Youth Services Children's Christmas Fund

The song will be available for PayPal downloads or mail order at the Web site www.thewishmakers.org.

Can't wait? You can pick up a copy of the CD at Main Street Jukebox, James Diamond Jewelry, Old Mill Pub, Sarah Street Bar and Grille, and Callie's Kitchen.

"Turning the song into the project that it has become is born from my love of music and my deep appreciation for the musicians around here, like the ones we have singing on the record," Schmidt said.

"I happened to have a good idea that some very intelligent and talented people happened to like, now look where we are."

But still, the motive behind the project was to raise money for a charitable cause.

"Ed, Bryan and I started discussing the possibilities of charities before the song was written. We chose the Monroe County Children and Youth Services Children's Christmas Fund. Originally we were thinking of a national organization, but we chose C&Y because of our local connection to the organization.

"The song is of the Poconos, so why not benefit the Poconos," Wehrkamp said.

The song took a year to come alive, according to guitarist Ed Mason, one of the song's co-writers.

"Bryan Schmidt and I wrote this song about a year ago as a seasonal song. We didn't do anything with it, and then about a year later, we dusted it off and reworked it," he said.

Mason recently had a daughter, and it made him more aware of children's needs. "It's the innocence of children that lets us carry forward with our lives," he said.

Stroudsburg touring and recording artist Jim Roberti was one of the two instrumentalists on the record. "I told Gary I wanted to be involved in any capacity, because it's a good thing. So many people can use help, especially children," he said.

Roberti, a veteran of the music business, acknowledged that despite all the talent involved in the record, ego wasn't a problem. "I just kind of showed up and did what I was asked to do," he added.

Full-time musician and songwriter Gary Dillon from Snydersville had been recording at New Horizons when Wehrkamp approached him to sing on the song, "I have a lot of friends involved in this project. I'm doing it for the cause," he said.

Singer, songwriter and Mount Pocono metalsmith James Diamond was also asked to sing on the tune. "I thought it was a really great concept. We feel that anything that will benefit the children is good. If everyone puts a little bit in, it ends up being a lot," he said.

Ellen Ryan of Ryan's Revenge was one of a few females lending their vocals to the closing chorus.

"What better time of the year to be charitable than at Christmas? I hope it's going to raise a lot of money. I also think it's a great thing for the community to bring these people together," she said.

Seventeen-year-old local touring and recording artist Christian Porter stood out among the veteran musicians. "Gary's was my first place to record, and it's great to come back," he said.

Kristi Bronico, a marketing pro with Invision in New York, was involved with the project from the beginning.

"For obvious reasons, it's really great to be able to offer a part of yourself to help others. We were all fortunate to land where we did in this world. I don't take that for granted and the kids we are trying to help weren't so lucky. I want to do whatever I can to bring as much joy as possible to them this Christmas," she said.

Bronico is responsible for putting together the artwork and logo, photographing the recording sessions, putting T-shirt package together and the assembling of the sponsorship packs.

The group hopes to continue its charitable efforts beyond the Christmas project. "I don't want to stop here," Bronico said. "If we can keep the momentum going, we can do a lot more. I really enjoy working with Gary and Bryan and all the amazing talent in the Pocono area, and I think we can do great things together."

So, what's the tune like? Wehrkamp described it.

"My goal was a pop song that evoked great emotion. One that had a great hook, that stayed in people's hearts, that would become part of this project of giving. The lyrics focus on painting a nice picture of geographic locations in the Poconos," he said.

"Christmastime in the Poconos" will be released Monday, Nov. 24. The song will be for sale on CD at various retailers in the area and at the shows where local musicians are performing. It will also be available via Web download, at www.thewishmakers.org.

Some of the musicians who performed on "Christmastime in the Poconos" will be appearing at a live holiday concert called "Christmas Jam in the Poconos" on Saturday, Dec. 27, at Stroudsburg's Sherman Theater.

The Wishmakers are seeking sponsors to contribute to the project. To learn more about sponsorship opportunities, call Gary Wehrkamp at New Horizon Music: (570) 371-4252, or go to www.thewishmakers.org for information.


THE WISHMAKERS CHRISTMASTIME CHORUS

Bryan Schmidt

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