

Robots invade Midcoast

Music video by Kallet and Larsen

By Dagny C. Ernest | Dec 22, 2010

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Old world meets new in the video for "Back When We Were All Machines."

CAMDEN — In October, when the Midcoast was abuzz about country music star Kenny Chesney's visit to film a music video, folk singer/songwriter Cindy Kallet had to chuckle.

The longtime Camden resident has re-located to Indiana but keeps up with Midcoast doings on villagesoup.com. When she read about Chesney's big-budget film shoot — including a dawn segment on

the Rockland Breakwater, where the singer had portable heaters to keep him warm — she thought back to the summer day in Camden when she and partner Grey Larsen shot THEIR music video.

"The budget was somewhere in the vicinity of \$74, and I think that includes giving our filmmaker, Mehdi Saidi, and production assistant, Eliza Squibb, some money for a nice dinner out," she said.

Kallet and Larsen, who began as musical colleagues and have since merged both their professional and personal lives, had already put together a video of sorts using still photographs. The images, taken in Maine and all around the country during tours, are of people using cell phones and iPods and other personal digital devices. They seemed a good fit for their collaborative song "Back When We Were All Machines," but when they showed it to Larsen's son Robin Tala, he was blunt in his reaction.

"No one's going to forward this, he said. You



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have to do something a little unusual," Kallet said.

The song itself is already unusual for Kallet and Larsen, each of whom have enjoyed respected careers in different folk/traditional music niches and whose joint work is headed into a second album ... an album that will not include "Back When We Were All Machines."

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Kallet has been playing what she plays for years. She is a respected songwriter, singer and multi-instrumentalist who has appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion" and recorded many a solo and collaboration album (including one with Gordon Bok). She also is a gifted teacher who has published a popular songbook and teaches both privately and in residency/camp settings.

Larsen is equally a musical force, a proponent of traditional music and one of the country's leading Irish flute players, although he plays a number of other instruments as well and has devoted a great deal of his musical life to the old-time fiddle music of his native southern Midwest, situated in the northern fringe of the Appalachian cultural region. He has performed and recorded widely and also as appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion." An articulate teacher, Larsen is the author of two books including "The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle," considered the most comprehensive book yet written on Irish flute and tin whistle.

"Back When We Were All Machines" was inspired by a morning in March when the power couple were slowly waking up to National Public Radio's "Morning Edition."

"There was a brief musical interlude, sandwiched between program segments, which basically assaulted our ears. Grey, who is very slow to wake up in the morning, half-opened his eyes and mumbled 'That makes me feel my robot roots ... back when we were all machines,' " said Kallet, who was awake enough to know a good line when she heard one and wrote it down.

The song Kallet wrote from Larsen's sleepy comment strings together a litany of digital-era trade names with subtle social commentary via the refrain "I'll never be alone again." It's a fun tune, and the video ups the amusement ante, but it's thought-provoking too. Kallet said several teacher friends have used the video in classes to spark discussion about the pros and cons of digital connectivity.

"I think we're losing the ability to pay attention to each other, to interact in a real fundamental way with others and with our environment," she said.

Kallet admits she falls under the digital spell herself. And creating the video involved learning how to use iMovie, so she is not of the Luddite persuasion. When it came to creating a video for the song, however, the approach was decidedly analog. The couple asked Squibb, daughter of a longtime friend and a

student at the Rhode Island School of Design, for help in designing their robot costumes. She didn't have much to work with, mostly materials from a dollar store; wood stove piping from a local hardware store, the shoot's biggest expense; and a fortuitous find at the Midcoast Solid Waste — a turquoise Lady Schick Consolette Vintage Bubble Top Portable Hair Dryer that provided both their headpieces.

Squibb; her boyfriend Saidi, who used the video setting on Kallet's digital camera; and Kallet and Larsen had a three-hour window of opportunity in late August to get the robot footage. Locations include Main Street, Laite Beach, Harbor Park and the schooner *Olad*, whose Captain, Aaron Lincoln gave permission for the robots to come aboard. Squibb suggested things for the robots to do and dealt with costume malfunctions.

"My badminton birdie mammaries kept falling off," said Kallet.

Back in Bloomington, Kallet got to work with iMovie. Footage of the couple singing the song was filmed in their home by Larsen's son; and Izzy Maxwell, son of Kallet's musical colleague Ellen Epstein, manipulated some of the sound to futuristic effect. Also included in the video are some wonderful robot toys from the collection of Daniel Steinberg of Mountain View, Calif.

"We had done a house concert at his home, and he has an antique robot collection," said Kallet.

"Back When We Were All Machines" was released as a CD single last month, in part due to the positive response to the video. Five percent of sales for the CD single is going to Partners in Health and the Center for Biological Diversity, both of which have links on the couple's website, kalletlarsen.com.

"We've also heard from a number of teachers and professors who have told us that they're showing the movie to their classes to spark discussion about issues of cyberbullying and connection/disconnection to each other and the natural world, use and misuse of technology," said Kallet.

In addition to raising consciousness about these concerns, Kallet said they hope "Back When We Were All Machines" also introduces a new generation to their "regular" music. The video is part of their YouTube channel and it seems many who go to see it also watch one titled "Meet Cindy Kallet and Grey Larsen." Whether that leads to a 20-something fan club remains to be seen, but their afternoon tooling around Camden in sheet metal and duct tape was well spent.

"We had a delightfully funny couple of hours on the afternoon of Aug. 28th, turning ourselves into robots and amusing the visiting and native throngs," she said.

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'Back When We Were All Machines" video



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