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J. Ralph and musician friends sing the sound of autism in 'Wretches & Jabberers' album

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One of the most immediately striking elements of Gerardine Wurzburg's autism documentary "[Wretches & Jabberers](#)" is the exceptionally poetic terms many of the subjects of her film come up with to express themselves.

That was readily apparent to **J. Ralph**, the composer of the film's original score and songs, which surface in physical form Tuesday on a CD featuring performances by a diverse group of rock, pop, alternative and folk musicians, including Norah Jones, Ben Harper, Scarlett Johansson, Antony Hegarty, Judy Collins, Devendra Banhart, Lila Downs, Nic Jones and Martin Carthy.

For the score itself, "I wanted to use human voices for obvious reasons," said Ralph, whose previous scored films won back-to-back best documentary Academy Awards in 2009 and 2010: James Marsh's "Man on Wire," the story of French aerialist Philippe Petit, and "The Cove," Louie Psihoyos' exposé on the capture and killing of dolphins.

In "Wretches & Jabberers," Wurzburg follows two adult men with autism, Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonnette, as they travel -- with aides -- from their homes in Vermont to Sri Lanka, Amsterdam and Tokyo to lobby for greater public understanding of their challenges -- and their abilities.

"It was important to me to get the human voice into the score in that regard," Ralph said, "just to telegraph some of the problematic issues that they have regarding the lack of having a voice.... When I started going deep into the score, it was evident I really needed to bring words to life as well. The words they use during the journey are so poetic, they provided a great jumping-off point."

Bissonnette, Thresher and several of the others learned to type out words, phrases and sentences, some of them exceptionally eloquent, especially given the widely held notion that autism indicates an inability to communicate.

"More like you than not," Bissonnette says at one point by way of the computer keyboard on which he slowly but steadily types out his thoughts and feelings. Ralph turned it into the song "More Like You," which Harper sings. The film's title comes from a young autistic man in Amsterdam, who explains to Bissonnette and Thresher that he considers people like themselves to be wretches, and the rest of the world to be jabberers.

A young Indonesian man named Chammi, asked how it feels to constantly fight the body that resists conforming to the wishes of his mind, describes it as “killingly hard,” a phrase Ralph used in a song by one of pop music’s celebrated outsiders of recent years, Antony, of Antony and the Johnsons.

“Antony and I were looking at this film, and when we saw that line [on Chammi’s computer screen], it’s something we decided was very profound. We worked on that song together. Watching Chammi, it’s really powerful to see how they describe what they’re going through -- all the guys.

“The other one that really summed up the whole project,” said Ralph, who was invited aboard because Wurzburg had liked what he composed for “Man on Wire” and “The Cove,” “was when Larry says ‘More like you than not.’

“That makes you reevaluate every interaction you’ve ever had with somebody that has a disability,” he said. “Most of the time, we tend to see what’s different rather than what’s similar. It’s really a great reminder how we need as a culture to always try to see what’s similar. It’s going to do everyone a great service to look at the world that way.”

Ralph, who isn’t exactly a Bono in terms of his music industry clout, nonetheless said he had no problem lining up participants once they got a sense of what the film was about. Others on the 20-song soundtrack album include Carly Simon and (separately) her son Ben Taylor, Bob Weir, Stephen Stills, Vincent Gallo, David Garza, Bonnie Bramlett, Paul Brady and Ralph himself.

“It was the craziest thing,” Ralph said from his studio in Manhattan. “Nobody asked about money, nobody asked about contracts or managers. It was like something out of the 1960s, like Max Yasgur’s farm -- people just said, ‘When can I come over?’ ‘How many guitars can I bring?’ ‘Should I bring my friend -- he plays drums?’ Bob Weir said, ‘You can stay at my house.’ There was not one roadblock through the whole thing.”

Johansson, who applies her breathy jazz phrasing to Ralph’s bluesy song “One Whole Hour,” said she came on board because, “We’ve been friends for years and I’ve always been a fan of his sound and aesthetic.What struck me very much about the film was not only the courage and perseverance of the film’s protagonists, but by the affect that Josh’s music had on the project as a conceptual whole.”

One of the ideas that resonated deepest with Johansson was a comment by one of the men who says, “I know what it’s like to wait for a voice inside.” The actress and singer said, “We built the song around that idea: what it must feel like to be a fully conscious and self-aware individual with no means of expressing oneself. A

mind trapped inside a body.”

The music was issued in January as a digital download, but the CD and vinyl versions, originally planned to follow closely in February, were held until April to coincide with National Autism Month activities. The film also is getting screenings in selected cities this month. The CD is being carried exclusively by Barnes & Noble.

Ralph is already earlobe deep in yet another documentary, “Hell and Back,” a look at the emotional price of war paid by soldiers, their families and friends.

In contrast with the 20 songs he wrote or co-wrote for “Wretches & Jabberers,” “Hell and Back” has but one song, the title track, which he got Willie Nelson to record. The film won the grand jury prize at this year’s Sundance Film Festival and is still making its way around the film festival circuit in hopes of finding wider distribution. But that doesn’t mean he’s left “Wretches & Jabberers” behind.

“I maintained throughout whole thing that I was not speaking on their behalf -- they can do that fine themselves,” he said. “The music was simply my mediation on their journey, and wanting to breathe life, and extracting certain phrases that were so eloquent and poetic. They just continue to embody the wit and charm and intelligence of any other creative, intelligent person you were ever inspired by.” He said he got an email about the album from Bissonnette, who provides one of the film’s lighter moments when he asks his Japanese hosts, after a diet of sushi, if they can direct him to “a steak-oriented restaurant.”

“He said that listening to the album took him through a whole range of emotions, and brought him back to what he felt when he was finally able to tell his mother that he loved her for the first time,” he said, referencing a moment that provides one of the film’s most moving sequences.

“What is the measurement for difference? What aspect is different?” Ralph asked rhetorically. “They don’t have the same capacity to communicate as we know how to communicate. But that doesn’t meant they don’t have a complete rich universe of intelligent thought, emotion and poetry.”

-- Randy Lewis

Top photo: J. Ralph (left) and Stephen Stills recording "Low Barefoot Tolerance" for the "Wretches & Jabberers" film and soundtrack album. Credit: J. Ralph.

Second photo: Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonnette, the subjects of "Wretches & Jabberers." Credit: