

Autoharp Clearinghouse July 1993 – Roz Brown

This issue of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is offered in honor of **Roz Brown**. Although we have only met via correspondence and telephone, I have nearly worn out his three recordings and, therefore, am extremely familiar with this gentleman's music. In addition, Kathy Ferguson, who took the photographs that accompany this article, has attended a number of performances by Roz both in Denver and at Winfield and was able to give me some pretty thorough eye (and ear) witness accounts. Roz seems capable of putting on a superb show whether it be 1960s folk music, turn-of-the-century tunes, railroad songs, sea chanteys or cowboy songs and recitations. His treatment of these pieces of music gives them back the life that some of the usual folkie approaches strangle. By and large, Roz seeks out songs to sing that reflect a reverence for yesterday. Speaking of which, let us take a look at those events and circumstances leading up to his present full-time career in music.

Roz played trumpet all through high school and while he was in the Navy. Then, like so many others, he got caught up in the music of groups such as Peter, Paul and Mary, and The Kingston Trio in the early 1960s. In particular, Roz was attracted to the story songs and intrigued by the personality of the songs about people. Folk music is largely a vocal art form and, since it is not possible to sing while playing a trumpet (unless you are a **very** good ventriloquist!), Roz began to survey instrumental options. In 1967, he purchased a Gibson guitar on the installment plan after being inspired by a visit to the Folklore Center in Denver.

His efforts were not at all appreciated or supported by his family, and Roz admits that he never progressed far beyond the boom-chukka stage. Undaunted, he sang at open stages in the area, playing enough rhythm to accompany himself. Having joined the Denver Friends of Folk Music, he served as their membership chairman for a period of time. Roz also lived in Minneapolis for a while, and helped rebuild a popular folk music venue in that city known as the Riverside Café.

In 1972, Roz returned to Colorado, on his own this time, and slept on a friend's floor until he was able to find a job. He says that he continued with his musical efforts, but wasn't really getting anywhere. Around 1975, Roz met Bryan Bowers, who was entertaining at the Oxford Hotel. After the show, Roz and Bryan stayed up all night talking music in general and autoharps in particular. Roz was able to talk Bryan out of a couple of his "second string" instruments and, since he was already familiar with chord progressions from "playing at" the guitar, learning the ins and outs of the autoharp came easily to him.

Not long after his meeting with Bryan, Roz injured his knee in a skiing mishap which resulted in an extended hospital stay. Being of a restless nature, lying in bed and staring at the ceiling nearly drove him crazy. Roz vowed that, following his recovery, he would use whatever talents he could develop to entertain patients in hospitals and other health care institutions. As soon as his injury was sufficiently healed, Roz started going to a pediatric ward once a week to perform for the children. Before long, that was expanded to include the cancer unit at a Presbyterian hospital as well as a number of senior centers. By that time, Roz had banished the guitar to the cellar and was playing his autoharps exclusively. At last, it appeared that he had found his niche in the world of folk music.

Other autoharpists who had an early influence on Roz were Bonnie Phipps and Michael Stanwood, both of whom he met through the Swallow Hill Music Association in Denver.

For seventeen years, beginning in 1972, Roz was employed in security management at a firm called Cobe Laboratories in Lakewood. Rather than listening to the car radio on his 27-mile commute, he taped songsheets to the dashboard or steering wheel and memorized the lyrics to over 200 songs (don't try this on the freeway folks!).

In 1980, Roz went with his boss to lunch at a circa 1893 Denver restaurant known as the Buckhorn Exchange. He was impressed by the western décor of the establishment and inquired as to whether there was any live entertainment offered? When he received a negative reply, Roz asked if he might sing and play his autoharp there, explaining that he knew a lot of ballads of the Old West as well as some that have entered the cowboy song bag by way of present day entertainers such as Michael Martin Murphey. The manager agreed to give it a try, but told Roz that they wouldn't be able to pay him. For the next year and a half, Roz performed there every Friday and Saturday evening, compensated only by tips from appreciative listeners. Roz says that he paid a lot of "dues" playing for free, but was rewarded by perfecting his skills and stage presence in the process. Eventually, the Buckhorn recognized that Roz was an asset to their business and began to give him a salary.

Then, in October of 1990, Roz lost his day job after a Swiss company bought out his place of employment and laid off most of the management-level personnel. It was at that time that Roz made the decision to use his music as the foundation for a new career. His first step on his climb toward a higher artistic wrung was to use his severance pay to finance the recording of the aforementioned three cassette albums. The Buckhorn Exchange gig has continued to serve as home base while Roz has ventured out to explore additional musical territory.

Having been blessed with a creative mind, Roz began to act upon ideas that he had already been contemplating. One of these involved expanding his public service work so that at least a portion of it might put some beans into his pot. He looked into children's music programs and got involved in both the Denver and Jefferson County School Systems. Libraries became another source of income. He took steps for inclusion on the entertainment roster of nearly 300 retirement and nursing homes, and says he has played at the majority of them. (One of his most-treasured memories is that of an elderly lady in a nursing home who gave him five cents and said, "This is all I have, but I want to give it to you for singing for us." Roz still has that nickel.)

From those beginnings, Roz has come to be in demand at festivals and other events across the country. Most recently, he was a featured entertainer for a ten-day music festival at Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri (his third year there). Roz is on the staff, as well as being a perennial performer and emcee at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. In short, he has done everything from singing in exchange for passage on a sailing vessel in the Caribbean to entertaining around the campfire on a City Slickers Cattle Drive to participating in conventions of cowboy poets. Roz relates that he is earning as much as he did at the Cobe Lab...and putting in half as many hours. Nothing wrong with that!

Because of the rustic atmosphere at the Buckhorn Exchange, Roz has adopted a cowboy persona and dresses in **authentic** western attire (as opposed to the “Urban Cowboy: look). A trademark of his act is the different hats that Roz wears in accordance with the mood of the particular song he is about to sing. He’ll don an engineer’s cap for a train song, a flight cap for an aviation number, mariner’s head gear for his songs of the sea, et cetera. Not wanting to risk boring his audiences, Roz keeps his show rolling by offering constant variety. He is also adept at singing in dialects in keeping with the nature of his music. Roz has done considerable research into the history of the songs in his repertoire, and intersperses tidbits of that information throughout his shows. Sing-a-long segments are also very well received. For an occasional change of pace, Roz will incorporate a limberjack into his act or add spoons, sand paper, a kazoo, railroad spikes and such to create certain sound effects.

In respect to the instruments that Roz plays, he eventually had to replace the two that he acquired from Bryan Bowers. Having one of Bryan’s ’harps in my own collection, I can attest to the fact that, when he decides to “hang up” an instrument, it owes him **nothing**. Following our 1992 house fire, someone asked, “Was Bryan’s ’harp damaged...or couldn’t you tell?”

After trying several models, Roz chose a pair of Oscar Schmidt Appalachian ’harps, both of which he modified so that they are diatonically tuned in the keys of C/G and D/A. He installed fine tuners, and claims that he can tune 72 strings in 12 minutes. Roz adds that he breaks far less strings since adding the fine tuning systems. He also feels that the fine tuners have solved, for him at least, the problem of the tuning pegs becoming loose from constant adjustment.

When it comes to playing techniques, Roz Brown’s style stems from the “Carter Lick” for rhythm, with thumb and middle finger pinches catching most of the melody. He wears an over-the-counter thumb pick, a regulation metal pick on his middle finger, and a mizrab (or sitar pick) on the index finger...so defined because it feels miz-ra-ble. (See *Winning Ways on the Autoharp, Volume 2*, page 10 for more on this subject.)

Since there are usually distractions at the various places where he plays, Roz uses a small lavalier microphone from Radio Shack, which he pins onto his shirt, thereby voicing the back of his autoharps. Roz feels that the best sound coming out of our instrument is from its back, in the upper half of the autoharp in the middle. Experience has taught him that this method of amplification results in the least amount of distortion, pick noise, vibration or fuzz. It further enables him to readily change from one ’harp to another.

Prolonged practicing and playing caused Roz to have a bout with the dreaded carpal tunnel syndrome a few years ago. By wearing a wrist splint while he slept, and by ingesting vitamins C and E, Roz was able to avoid surgery for that malady. He now plays a minimum of 12 hours a week and has been able to keep the condition under control.

Aside from his music, Roz is an avid scuba diver, and always takes his autoharps with him on trips to the tropics. In the Caribbean, he has exposed audiences to the instrument who may have previously only heard reggae, calypso and the like. Wherever he travels, Roz is usually able to make arrangements to play in the local schools. He delights in taking a song such as *Puff, the Magic Dragon* and adding another verse to it so that the youngsters are left with a happy ending.

Just recently, he performed for 300 children on the Island of Eluthra in the Bahamas. Next month, Roz will travel to Cayman Brac Island, and anticipates sharing his music there as well.

Roz is also an active volunteer on a mountain rescue team that searches for lost hikers and avalanche victims. Additionally, he is a long-standing member of the Western Music Association, whose goal is to keep alive and promote music such as that of the Sons of the Pioneers. As previously mentioned, Roz attends gatherings of cowboy poets in Nevada, and now adds several poetry readings to his shows.

The charisma of Roz Brown seems to appeal equally to both ends of the age spectrum. He can count among his fans everyone from pre-school children to Centurions. Music unites people from different walks of life as well as frequently transcending multiple generation gaps. Folks tell Roz that they plan their vacations or business trip around being in Denver on a Friday or Saturday evening in order to take in one of his performances. It is apparent that there is something in store for almost everyone when Roz takes the stage. It is his wish to be able to continue earning a living doing the music he loves and enjoys, and he hopes that he will have made a meaningful contribution to society in the process. **ER**

September 2007 Update: I spoke briefly to Roz on the phone before he made a hasty exit to accept another incoming call. However, during our few minutes on the line, I was able to ascertain that Roz has four CDs available for \$12.00 each, plus \$2.00 for shipping. They are:

Rolling Home – Songs of the Sea

Christmas Images

Where I'm Bound – Songs of the 1960s

My Best to You (a double album that includes *Colorado and the West* and *Just Kiddin'*

Around – Songs for Old Goats

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A nice promotional photo of Roz is in the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* album in the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts Yahoo Group homepage.