

NOTES FOR STEVE'S CORNER

Ramblings and actual stories

When asked by Vince, our banjo player and website designer, to contribute some writings to the All-Digital String Band home page, I hesitantly said, "Sure... but what is this stuff supposed to be about?" "Oh, that's entirely up to you- it can be about anything, you know, music, fantasies, movie reviews, other people, even just stream of consciousness stuff." A classic Non-Answer from Vince, whose favorite way of avoiding specifics is to say, "I'm just a Concept Guy".

Having made my living as a writer for Walt Disney Imagineering, I have always said that I can write about anything- if you tell me basically what it is, what its purpose is, and who is the audience for my paper. Sorry... none of that is available for this project, so what follows may or may not make sense, have any value, or entertain or enlighten in any way. So we are just wingin' it from here on out, folks. Good luck to both of us!

I actually do like to tell stories- often about people and things I heard or saw or experienced in some way- I just never wrote these down. Maybe the way to start is just to make a few notes "identifying" those stories or snippets of memory that I should try to expand upon. This may even be good for me, since some things are starting to fade into the musty recesses of my memory, and this will force me to THINK. So here goes:

Hold it- back up for a little disclaimer first: Music became a big part of my life back some 50 years ago... so much of this comes from a different world and a different perspective. Young folks (if any would even bother to read this) may find some corny and even unbelievable

stuff to follow. That's OK- with apologies to Bob Seger, "Call me a relic call me what you will, say I'm old-fashioned say I'm over the hill, today's music ain't got the same soul, I like that old-time... etc."

MUSIC-RELATED STUFF

1. Why folk music... How did that all get started?
2. How I got my first "real" guitar
3. How I got my beloved Martin D-28
4. Earliest folk music influences from the Ice House
5. Friends from college who taught me folk music and guitar playing
6. College friend Roy Noble builds guitars
7. My college American Folk Music class
8. My earliest music groups
9. My experiences at the Ash Grove
10. Kentucky Colonels and Clarence White at the Ash Grove
11. The Army years- Music-making in Vietnam and Japan
12. Learning to "perform" on stage from Bruce Farwell
13. Great books written by and/or about my favorite musicians
14. Quotes from and about musicians/music
15. Meeting music people from afar- Bob Jones, Jan Johansson
16. Friends who became music pros (and other accomplished friends)- Herb Steiner, John Gorton, etc.

#3 (HOW I GOT MY BELOVED D-28)

NOTE that this was never used by CF- they only wanted stuff about NEW Martin guitars, I guess.

July 25, 1998

C.F. Martin & Co.

510 Sycamore Street

Nazareth, PA 18064

Dear C.F. Martin & Co.,

I just saw your "Living a dream with a Martin" ad, and it's a great idea. There must be so many wonderful stories out there, and so many guitar players eager to tell them, that the format could go on for years and years. Here is mine (which I always refer to as the "ultimate guitarist's dream"):

Around the years 1964-1966, some of my college buddies and I would earn pocket money by cleaning out people's garages and hauling away all their unwanted items in our home-made trailer. Yard sales were not a big thing then yet, so people just gave us lots of their old stuff, which we would take down to sell at the Rodium Drive-in Theater Swap Meet each Sunday. The whole process served a dual purpose for us, because we were budding young Bluegrassers, and we would set a hat out in front of our junk display and "entertain" all of our shoppers.

We saw this as a "paid" practice session (although our junk sales paid off a great deal better than our music).

I met a number of interesting music enthusiasts during these sessions (including Hoyt Axton, and an old guy who told me stories that sounded quite genuine of riding trains and singing songs with Jimmie Rodgers). My guitar at the time was an early '60s 000-18...I loved it, but it was nothing special in the sound department. Anyway, one afternoon a middle-aged Latino man stood and listened to us for quite a while, and then came over to me and said, "I have a guitar just like that". Thinking I was meeting a player, I asked if he played a lot, and what kind of music he liked. He said, "Oh, no...I tried to play it five years ago, but I broke one of the 'chords', so I just put it back in the closet". I showed him my 000-18 up close, and asked him a number of questions about his guitar...does the name on the peghead look like this? Does it have a scratch plate shaped like this? Does it have any serial numbers inside? Joe was not sure about a lot, but he really thought that the guitar at home was the same kind of guitar I was showing him. I said, "I might be willing to buy it from you, if it's actually the kind you say it is", and he gave me his address so I could come down the following day.

After school the next day I drove some 40 miles down to Joe's house in Orange County, and he dug way back into a garage closet and fished out a guitar case. "A black hard-shell case...it's a good sign", I thought to myself. After brushing off some dust we opened the case, which revealed a gorgeous D-28. The back had some only finish-deep scratches, obviously from some big belt buckle, but it was otherwise perfect. I looked inside, and the serial number had one digit less than

my guitar. "Joe," I said, "I think I'd like to buy this from you...how much do you want for it?" "Well, I bought it from a neighbor who had to go back to Tennessee real fast, and I gave him \$20 for it." My heart began to fibrillate. I took a deep breath and asked, "I sure would be willing to give you some profit on that amount...what do you think you'd take?" Joe said, "Oh, I don't know...I'd better ask my brother-in-law, because he knows all about guitars. You call me tomorrow, after I talk to him."

I drove home with a heavy heart. The jig was up. As soon as he had talked to his brother-in-law, I would not be able to afford this beautiful gem, on my gas station attendant's income. I got about an hour's sleep, and stumbled through classes until I could call Joe the following afternoon.

At 4:00 pm I called Joe, and asked, in my most casual voice, "Well, what did you find out?" Somewhat apologetically, Joe said, "Oh, my brother-in-law says that's a very good guitar....he says I'm going to have to get at least \$60 for it." "Stay right where you are- I'll be down as soon as I can get there!"

I put together all the money I had, borrowed \$20 more from my boss, and drove like the wind. Being a person of some scruples, I had to justify this transaction in my mind as I was driving, and I did. Joe was never going to use this instrument, I would use it and love it, and besides, I was giving him a 200% profit!

Joe wrote out a receipt, we shook hands, and I drove directly to a music store for new strings. At home that night I strung it up and heard the rich and strikingly distinct tones of my new, 1948 D-28 for the first time. Believe me, I was completely blown away. This guitar has been my pride and joy for all these years, and every person who

has played it has said it is the best sounding D-28 they've ever heard.
You talk about living a dream...there it is!

Sincerely, Steve

#9 (CLARENCE AND THE ASH GROVE)

May 12, 1998

Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers,

Editor

Acoustic Guitar

PO Box 767

San Anselmo, CA 94979

Dear Jeffrey,

Thank you, thank you, and thanks to Scott Nygaard for the wonderful article on Clarence White!! It is beautifully written, covering the various "eras" of Clarence's musical career, as well as describing his tremendous creativity and overall approach to the guitar, something that cannot really be put into music notes or tablature. I have always believed (as Scott indicated) that his incredible solo style grew directly from his being a *group musician*, one whose every effort was to make the best music, not to stand out from the group as a "star".

Yep, you guessed it...I'm one of the cult. As a shy, beginner guitarist, I spent most of my college years going to the Ash Grove,

McCabe's, the Ice House, and the Troubador, (and occasionally going to classes and studying). The Ash Grove was the *real thing* then (the other places paled in comparison), and the Kentucky Colonels were almost like the "house band". From the time my music-playing buddies and I found them, we almost never missed a performance. I am in the audience on all the recordings made at the Ash Grove, and when I listen today I can still remember what it felt like- magic! When Roger would say, "Clarence has to get his other guitar for this one..." the audience would holler, and then quickly hush. Even then, we knew this was about as good as it gets.

This was a very special time for folk music and acoustic music, as we all know, and I have marvelous memories- too many to share with you here. I recall priceless moments spent in spontaneous jam sessions in the front room, a sort of guitar shop called "Eagle Music Exchange" run by Al Ross (I would stand on the fringes of the group, clutching my guitar, watching the real players trade licks). A favorite of the players was to take turns playing extended "end licks", multiple variations and extensions of the Lester Flatt run (each one different), in an effort to make Clarence play himself into a corner that he couldn't get out of on the right note or right beat. These games would go on for half an hour at a time, and I never heard him get stuck. Among these pickers were locals like David Cohen, Pat Cloud, Steve Mann, Bill Vanaver, Ry Cooder, and David Lindley- guess why I was standing quietly to the side?!

Folks in this crowd would sit around having endless discussions on everything music related, and I remember a heated discussion on flat-picks. Clarence liked thick, stiff picks, but claimed that he could pretty much play with anything. The challengers, of course, passed him over various sizes and types of picks, folded matchbook covers, cardboard, etc., all of which he used effortlessly, finally "winning" the

discussion in a flourish by playing *Billy in the Low Ground* with a 50-cent piece!

One of my fondest memories of later years is seeing the Muleskinner group's (then called the 'Bluegrass Drop-outs') "debut" at the Ash Grove. The group blew everyone away, and I instantly became a lifelong devotee of all group members (it was actually the first I had even heard of Peter Rowan!). Little did I know it would be one of the last times I would see and hear Clarence play. What an incalculable loss we experienced 25 years ago.

Thanks again, Scott, for a wonderfully written tribute to a true musical giant.

Sincerely, Steve

p.s. By the way, I was at Roy Noble's house when he had almost completed Clarence's new guitar. He strung it up, totally un-finished, and we all played it for a while. It sounded good enough to be worthy of its new owner!

#6 (College friend Roy Noble builds guitars)

Oct. 24, 2003

Scott Nygaard, Editor

Acoustic Guitar

PO Box 767

San Anselmo, CA 94979

Dear Scott,

Thank you, and thanks to Ben Elder for the very fine profile of a wonderful luthier, Roy Noble. I went to college with Roy, and got to know him a little when he built his first steel-string instruments for my guitar-playing schoolmates. His first two were twelve strings, as I recall, one for Jamie Hooper and one for Ron Baskins. As a classical player himself, Roy wasn't too sure about steel-string contraptions, and began spending long hours in the library researching these instruments, as well as experimenting at home. When completed, these two guitars were quite different from each other, and both looked and sounded beautiful. Roy was, and is, a truly great artist and craftsman.

I am a little mystified about the statement that Roy's dreadnought wound up in Clarence White's hands "in a trade for a

Fender Telecaster". I was at Roy's house in Van Nuys when he brought out the guitar he had just finished for Clarence, assembled and strung up but without any finish. We played the guitar, which had sound worthy of its soon-to-be owner, and it was quite a thrill. I never heard anything about a "trade" involved, so I'm confused.

It is sad to hear that the man who ended up with this guitar, Harry Hopkins, sold it to a Japanese collector. The instrument that Clarence used to channel his unmatched creativity, power, and finesse now hangs inside a glass case.

Sincerely,

Steve Noceti