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A conversation with local luthier, Bill Burke.

by Rusty Tweed

As I arrived at Bill Burke's house on a brisk, November Friday evening, his wife Pat greeted me at the front door and then directed me around the side of the house to Bill's shop. There I found Bill hunched over his equipment installing a new saw blade that will enable him to sculpt a curved cut into a decorative molding for a piece of furniture on which he is currently working. He showed me a picture of a similar piece, already completed and magnificent, to get an idea of what it will soon look like. Over there is the rest of it. That pile of wood is going to be a desk. And this will be Lloyd's (Holdeman) new mandolin" explained Bill, as he removed some wood clamps from the infant F-style.

"He'll have his choice between this new one, and the one that I currently play;" a choice that is offered to any of Bill's customers. Bill figures that it's the mandolin he plays when he's performing that arouses peoples' interests. So if the mandolin that they pay him to make doesn't sound like the one that he plays, he offers them his instead. So far no one has opted for his mandolin; nor are they likely to in the future, as the archeologist-turned-luthier gets better with each instrument.

"My level of perfectionism is creeping up. I have more patience, and I approach each project with greater skill and experience. The refinements are progressing and each successive instrument gets better and better. I would love to make instruments year-round" Bill says. He gets custom orders for about four or five each year, but that's not quite enough business to keep him occupied. So he

also makes beautiful furniture, the orders for which come from around the world. "I make about 10-15 pieces of furniture each year as well."

I asked Bill if he handled custom orders, and he explained that custom orders are the core of his business. "If someone comes to me and says 'I want a guitar that sounds like a D-28', then I tell them to go buy a D-28. But if someone comes to me with a request for something peculiar -- a thin neck, or special

type of wood for example, then I get excited; so custom work really is my business." Another example is the guitar he built for himself. Occasional discomfort caused by carpal tunnel syndrome has forced Bill to change his left-hand technique. He built a guitar with a thin neck so that he can wrap his thumb around it to bar some of the low strings.

"I'd like to get to a point where I am making a surplus of instruments that aren't custom orders so that I can take them to shows and festivals to sell, but time has not permitted me to do that just yet." Bill has displayed work at the Trappings of the American West show, through which he currently has a guitar on display at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix.

"People find out about me by word of mouth, and by my own performances; though being displayed in a show like the Trappings is certainly great exposure as well."

Bill gave me a quick tour of current projects in his shop. As he pulled out his favorite instrument, a mandola, I briefly fantasized about nestling it under my arm and placing an order for my own custom Burke mandola. Bill

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Bill Burke

A Setlist from the Heart

By Ken Clemmer, *The Back Porch Bandits*

(NOTE: For clarity, the Back Porch Bandits are Josh Tharp, banjo; Karl Maerz, dobro; Billy Parker, mandolin; Joel Dowling, bass; and my ownself on guitar)

When we perform, there is always a setlist, a testament to my own poor memory and evidence of our efforts toward a smooth show. Here's how some specific tunes land on our list and sometimes remain as standards.

Spirited instrumentals are Bandit staples, as I like to showcase the pickers while stirring up the audience. Our performances often include three solo instruments. While each instrument usually gets a piece of each tune, the featured picker kicks off and ends his featured song.

My favorite instrumentals? Hard to say, but among them are Josh's "Earl's Breakdown" for the adjustable tuner work; Karl's dobro-kicked "Long Road to Aspen", a departure from standard 1-4-5 chord patterns; and Billy's "Soldier's Joy". Like Sara Lee, NObody doesn't like "Soldier's Joy", and our frisky version includes features like Billy's short vocal and Josh's change to frailing banjo style.

And since I ain't happy 'til everybody's happy, we do the venerable "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" with some vigor, pleasing audiences and giving me a chance to mention each soloist – even our bass player – one more time at the end of a show.

Some songs are for general amusement. Karl does a version of "Amelia Earhart" with an instrumental sounding out of poor Amelia's crash, and Joel pauses the "Salty Dog Blues" vocal a bit for Karl's dobro mimic of canine squealing. "Auctioneer" and "Mountain Dew" are other examples of pure-fun tunes.

The frisky nature of some vocals belies the lyrics. "White Freightliner Blues" (with a keen rhythm part) and

Billy's "I Know What It Means to be Lonesome" are up-tempo deliveries of sorta-blue lyrics. Those we do for their drive more than for their lyrical message.

There are songs whose lyrics and melody complement one another in telling the story. I like our versions of "Lonesome Feeling" and "Thirty-Two Acres" as examples. These tunes are meaningful enough, and pretty enough, to do repetitively.

Then there are songs that hit my heart, which I add to setlists only after serious consideration. We'll do them well or not at all. Stephen Foster's "Hard Times, Come Again No More" is such a tune, with its empathetic lyrics, and there are lots more.

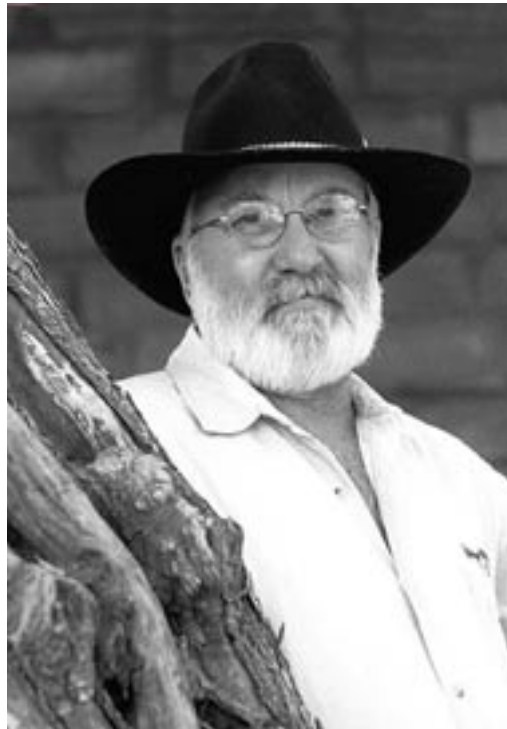
I'm unrepentantly sappy. My newest setlist feature – and hopefully fixture – is Ola Belle Reed's "I've Endured" (a la Tim O'Brien's version). "Barefoot in the summer, on into fall...too many mouths to feed, they could not clothe us all...Sent to church on Sunday to learn the Golden Rule...So I've endured, I've endured...etc."

The day before this writing was my 41st wedding anniversary, and Thanksgiving – my favorite holiday – lands in a couple of days.

Not long ago, my wife pulled a pair of baby shoes out of the trunk to give to our "baby" son, now 31 years old with a child of his own. The shoes were expertly home-made – by her, for him – from leather from a "farmer's bundle" of scraps and sewn together with dental floss. It is what we could do at the time.

Much has transpired since those times – easy, hard, sad, happy – and we've endured, with some fierce pride, to enjoy the people and things that make up this current part of our lives.

That's how Ola Belle and Tim combined to land a tune on the Bandits' setlist. Pick it like you mean it, boys...



played a few measures of a Celtic-flavored tune that he has developed in conjunction with a handful of performances with poet Ann Walka. "This instrument lends itself well to delicate phrasing around her recited poetry." Recently the duo performed at the Bluff Arts Festival in southern Utah. He also showed me a guitar whose body is made of mesquite wood. Though in its infancy, the guitar produced a warm sustained tone as Bill gently knocked on its sides. We stood in extended silence, listening, to see how long we could hear the fading tones.

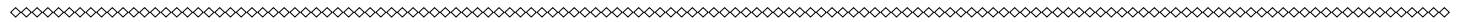
Regarding performances, Bill does not have too many commitments coming up, though performing used to be a mainstay of his existence. He reminisces about playing banjo several nights a week with the Northland String Band at virtually every downtown bar in Flagstaff. "But that was in the 70s; there weren't as many bars back then. Being a full time musician in Flagstaff is very difficult, perhaps impossible if you're not willing to play the bars. And many of us get to a point where we no longer want to do that." It's easy to see why. The kind of music Bill enjoys the most requires that he, as well as the audience, be able to hear the subtleties of the different tones created in a stringed wood instrument. Bill claims he's not a technical player, but rather is always in search of the tones in each of the instruments he plays, and figuring out ways to play them that bring out that special sound. "Each instrument is unique. Not only do I enjoy playing an instrument, like a guitar or mandolin, but I also enjoy learning to play a specific guitar or mandolin, and knowing how to get the rich tones out of that particular instrument."

"Playing for the tones requires a fair bit of practice, since you need to play cleanly to get them. When I have a gig coming up I practice much more." Although Bill seems to enjoy performing, he's uncertain about why he does it. "Knowing who I am, why I even get up and in front of people and play is unknown; it's strange. I guess it's just what I do; whether there are people there or not is irrelevant."

Bill spoke fondly of the original FFOTM crowd and the time that they spent together. "It was really free-form back then; there wasn't even a board. Things have changed, but that's OK; that's what makes it special. The organization has the flexibility to be what its participants want it to be. We're now on the third or fourth generation of people taking over the lead. I really appreciate that. It pleases me to know that the organization and the music that we all love will continue. With each new board comes new energy and new ideas that suit the needs of that particular group. It's fascinating to see the changes, but in the end the group continues to sustain itself with that new energy and focus; it gives it a real organic quality. The community of musicians in Flagstaff is really unique. This kind of environment doesn't happen everywhere."

It was in 1969 when Bill first embarked on a periodic career of making instruments with his first creation – a dulcimer. He is currently working on his 18th mandolin, and 12th guitar. Including dulcimers and banjos, he figures he has made hundreds of instruments altogether. He used an F-style mandolin as an example of the time needed to complete an instrument. "One of these requires about 40 hours of wood work, and another 40 hours of set up and detail work, not including ornamentation. But it's spread over several months. Just by the nature of the task, you can't get one done too much faster since certain stages of assembly require doing a little bit of work and then letting it sit. For example, today I worked on Lloyd's mandolin for only about 40 minutes, and that was all I could do until the glue dried."

I asked him if it's hard to part with something to which he has devoted so much time and energy, perhaps like saying goodbye to an adolescent child when he sets out on his own. But contrary to what I expected him to say, he explained that there is really is no greater feeling than turning one loose into the hands of someone that will pour a little bit of them self into it. "Once it's done and you string it up, you realize it has a unique voice and will soon have a life of its own, in someone else's hands. Sometimes people



FFOTM MEMBERSHIP FORM

Date: _____ new _____ renewal _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone - Home: _____ Work: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Individual Membership - \$12.00 per year

Family Membership - \$15.00 per year

_____ Individual Membership \$12

_____ Family Membership \$15

Make checks payable to FFOTM and mail to:

FFOTM
P.O. Box 23366
Flagstaff, AZ 86002
FFOTM Membership Form

The Granite Peak Folk Sessions

A Special "Peace on Earth" Holiday Concert with the Granite Peak Folk Sessions family featuring Tom Agostino, Jan Alexander, Billy Bond, Dennis Garvey, Kent Gugler and Alexa MacDonald, and Special Guest Scott Beck, Sedona's Peace Troubadour.

The Granite Peak Folk Sessions celebrates the season with a special holiday concert on Friday, December 16. With a theme of Peace On Earth, the show will feature Scott Beck, the Peace Troubadour from Sedona, and a round-robin Folk Sessions with Tom Agostino, Alexa MacDonald, Dennis Garvey, Kent Gugler, Jan Alexander, and Billy Bond.

To celebrate the season and reflect on the year gone by, we offer an evening of peace, an evening of joy, an evening of song and an evening of real fine music.

Since the Granite Peak Folk Sessions' series began last March, a small group of musicians have been instrumental (pun intended) in presenting the monthly concerts. Included in this group are songwriters, lots of singers and guitarists, and players of such stringed-instruments as mandolin, fiddle, bass and dobro. Alexa, Billy, Dennis, Jan, Kent, and Tom will perform together and in different pair-



Scott Beck

ings a set of songs of peace and good will to all.

Scott Beck is a peace activist at heart. A modern-day troubadour, Scott writes and performs songs that truly connect with the audience on a heart and soul level, bringing them a sense of peace and comfort and a feeling that they're not alone in this world. His song themes vary from spiritual wisdom to political, social and environmental issues. Scott's debut CD, released in January 2004, is titled "Between Heaven And Earth,"²

Every month we bring together great music, good people, tasty treats, and lots of community spirit in a warm, welcoming environment. We kick off the 2006 season on

Friday January 13th with a concert by the Blues masters Shri and the folk-americana sound of Doug & Kenny.

*Friday, December 16, 7pm \$5.00
Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Hall
882 Sunset Drive, Prescott off Whipple,
behind True Value Hardware
For more info: call Alexa 541-0736
info@folksessions.com*

Membership Update

by Laura Shearin

We had 3 new and 20 renewing memberships last month, bringing our total membership to 270. Welcome to our new members! Please take the time to check your mailing label to see if you need to renew your membership; you can use the form below or look for the letter inside. Thanks to those supporting Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music by keeping their membership up to date. If you want more information about Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music, you can always contact me at 526-6757 or e-mail to laurashearin@hotmail.com.

New Members:

*The Hive
Matt and Hadassah Ziegler
Bill Bowker*

Renewing Members:

*Derrick Beracy
Susan and George Billingsley
Todd Brown
Bill Burke and Pat Stein
Fran Joseph
Karen Mattingly and George Breed
Karl and Susan Mineo
Richard Moore and Lucille Welch
Tony and Sue Norris
Leo and Madeline Parent
Bob Parker
Jessica Pope
Pat Rogers
Gary and Becky Simpkins
Erin and Helen Stalnaker
Mike Thompson and
Karen Whitten and Parker
David and Teresa Wayne
Bernadette Whistler
Steve and Rachel Wilson
Joan Wyatt*

Wickenburg Bluegrass Festival

The 2005 Wickenburg Bluegrass Festival was a ton of fun for the several FFOTM members who attended and participated. Held at the rodeo grounds in Wickenburg Arizona on November 11th – 13th the festival featured fine traditional bluegrass performances by High Plains Tradition, the James King Band and the Dry Creek Band. Interspersed with the band performances were multiple contests featuring several members of FFOTM.

Bill Vernieu took center stage competing in the Specialty Vocals and Specialty Instruments contests as a soloist, Specialty Duets with Joanna Joseph, the Old Time Band competition with Desperate Measures and backing up

Erin Brown in the Mandolin Contest. The highlight for the Flagstaff folks was our own Erin Brown's performance in the Mandolin contest. Erin spent the summer immersing herself in festivals across Colorado learning to play her mandolin. Her efforts paid off, she is a talented musician. She took 7th out of 12 with a flawless performance of Brilliancy and Woody's Rag competing for the first time ever.

Evening brought endless campfires, potlucks, picking sessions, laughter and hijinks. Rumor has it a sleeping bag was found sewn shut and a few cans of exploding pig fat lit the late night sky. If you missed this year's festival we missed you. Put it on your calendar for November 2006!



Joanna Joseph and Bill Vernieu take first place in the Specialty Duets competition singing The Lord Came Unto Me



Erin Brown performs flawless renditions of Brilliancy and Woody's Rag in the mandolin Contest. Backing her up is Bill Vernieu on guitar.



Desperate Measures featuring Charlie Frost on mandolin, Bob Miner on banjo, Bill Vernieu on guitar and Joanna Joseph on bass took second place in the Old Time Band competition performing Lula Walls and One Time Charlie's Railroad Blues

Local and Regional Events

December 7

Texas Singer Songwriting Legend Robert Earl Keen with very special guests Hot Buttered Rum String Band Orpheum Theater Flagstaff, AZ Doors at 7 Show at 8

DECEMBER 9

Between 5:30pm and 8:30pm
The Acker Musical Showcase - Local Prescott, AZ merchants open their doors for more than 100 musical groups for this favorite downtown open house. 928-776-4456

December 10, 6pm

Orpheum Theater Flagstaff
Benefit Concert and Silent Auction for Steve and Denise Garro featuring Dave Insely's Careless Smokers

December 10, 8pm

Campus Coffee Bean, Flagstaff, Saturday Folk night featuring Joseph Langham of each others legend

December 10, 4:00pm

The Great Christmas Variety Show - Prescott, AZ. A cast of musicians, comedians and dancers take the stage to benefit the American Cancer

Society. Elks Opera House. Tickets \$5.00 at the door. For more information call 928-443-8541.

December 15th and December 19th, 8pm

Campus Coffee Bean Flagstaff AZ, Chuck Cheesman singer/songwriter & traditional folk music

January 16, 2006, 7:30pm

Matt Buttermann's Jazz Sextet
\$14 Advance • \$17 DAY OF SHOW Former Arizona resident Matt Buttermann (KJZZ's "Best Jazz Guitarist" in Arizona 2004) now residing in New York City returns to Future Studios along with 5 other outstanding jazz musicians from around the country. Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni Drive, Sedona. www.futurestudios.org (928) 282-9139.

January 27, 2006

Unitarian Universalist Church

UU Coffee House featuring Joan Wyatt and Friend and Mike Jones

February 19, 2006

Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys
Orpheum Theater, Flagstaff Doors at 6:30, Show at 7:30pm \$27/\$30/\$35

Contra Dancing in your Neighborhood

by Kari Usher

In case you missed the costumed contra dance in November - we had mad hatters, amazing square dancing folks, ghosts, a circus ringmaster for a caller, a Shiek, witches, an escaped convict, wonderful hats, glasses and vampire teeth. A great amount of fun and silly energy while dancing to Loose Ends made the evening very enjoyable.

Coming up we have:

December 3rd - Archie Maclellan from Prescott calling and our own Just Deserts playing.

Dancing in Cottonwood at the community Center December 17th to Peg Hesley calling to Hot Dish. There will be guest appearances by Contra Claus and Vixen Dancer. Wear you holiday wear. You may get a door prize. For more info about dancing in Cottonwood call 928-774-5936 or 602-564-6620.



Kari Usher and Glo Edwards liven up the costumed Contra Dance held November 5, 2005

January 7th - Lausanne hailing from parts of New Mexico & Colorado and Bristol Vermont will call the evening to Loose Ends.

Lausanne has been calling all over the country since the late 80's. She has been a musician, caller and dance organizer. Definitely has calling fever and will be happy to get us moving that evening.

February 4th is our WinterFest dance. This is always a big hit with a big crowd.

Mark you calendars. Don't forget - you don't need a partner, all the dances are taught and called, live music in a beautiful hall, dancing with a wonderful group of folks. For more info call Laura 526-6757 or Kris at 526-3020. See you on the dance floor.

Ongoing Events

Every Monday - 7:00 pm:

FFOTM Fiddle Tunes Jam Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 510 N. Leroux. Host Larry Peterson 699-7068.

Every first Tuesday – 6:00-9:00 pm: FFOTM jam session at the Coconino Center for the Arts.

Every Tuesday, Friday & Saturday night -7:00 pm: The Collins Irish Band plays at Collins Irish Pub in downtown Flagstaff.

Every Thursday – 7:00 pm:

FFOTM Just Desserts contra dance band rehearsal. Open to anyone who wants to play or listen to contra dance music. Any instrument and playing ability is welcome. Rehearsal starts at 7:00pm at the home of Deb Comly and Mike Reddig, 1457 W. Meade. For more information call 774-5936.

Every second Friday – 7:00-9:00 pm:

FFOTM jam session at Bookman's Used Books. For information, call Christina Boyd at 928-522-9269.

Every last Friday – 7:30 pm: UU Coffee House Night at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, located at 510 N. Leroux Flagstaff, AZ. Call Mark Alexander at 527-4759 for more information. No events in November or December due to holidays.

Every first Saturday – 7:30 pm: FFOTM Contra Dance at Ashurst Hall on the NAU campus. Come on out for the 7:30 pre-dance lesson. For more information call Laura at 526-6757 or email her at: laurashearin@hotmail.com

Radio Programs

Saturday Folk hosted by Barry Harrison Four-hour show, Saturday mornings 6-10am on KVNA AM 600. A wide range of folk, blues, Celtic and bluegrass.

Thistle and Shamrock, National Public Radio's Celtic music show, hosted by Fiona Richie Saturday evenings at 8:00pm on KNAU, 88.7/91.7 FM. 523-2334.

Celtic Connection, featuring music from the evolving traditions of Ireland, Scotland, North America, and beyond Saturday evenings on KNAU, FM 88.7/91.7 FM. 523-2334.

Under Western Skies, a radio program about Western music and cowboy poetry hosted by Peter Bruce every Sunday morning at 7:00 am on 92.9 KAFF FM and AM 930 Country Classics. For more information contact Peter at 773-1346.

The Folk Sessions, Live!

Saturdays, 7-9pm, repeated at midnight. 89.5 fm KJZA hosted by Tom Agostino & Alexa MacDonald For more info: info@folksessions.com or call Tom Agostino at 778-1213.

We celebrate the 3rd Anniversary of the Folk Sessions Live on our December 17th show. We thank all our listeners, underwriters, KJZA, the press, who've been so kind in listing our events, and especially all the musicians who come on our show each week. It's been great fun and a real honor to host the Folk Sessions every week.

Sat, December 3: Jennifer Yeung / Pat Beary

Pianist Jennifer Yeung travels from Phoenix for a return to the Folk Sessions studio. A multi-talented artist/composer Jennifer's music is thoughtful and compelling. A guest on the very first show, Prescott singer-songwriter Pat Beary returns for a visit to the Folk Sessions.

Sat, December 10: Iona / Mike Lewis

Prescott musicians Jan Alexander and Yvonne Holland are but two of the four very talented women who comprise Iona, beautiful Celtic music played on flute, fiddle, guitar, mandolin, voice, and drum. A Folk Sessions regular, songwriter Mike Lewis returns to share his always interesting songs and stories.

Sat. December 17: Folk Sessions 3rd Anniversary

Our 3rd Anniversary Show will include live performances from some of the artists appearing at the previous night's Granite Peak "Peace on Earth" Concert, which features Scott Beck, Dennis Garvey, Billy Bond, Jan Alexander, Kent Gugler, Alexa MacDonald and Tom Agostino.

Sat. December 24: Folk Sessions Christmas Eve Alexa MacDonald will be your host for a night of beautiful holiday folk music.

Sat. December 31: Best of Folk Sessions

It's a gig night for musicians, so we'll play a "Best of" Show and wish everyone a Very Happy New Year from The Folk Sessions.

This month the Granite Peak Folk Sessions celebrates the season with a special holiday concert on Friday, December 16. With a theme of Peace On Earth, the show will feature Scott Beck, the Peace Troubadour from Sedona, and a round-robin Folk Sessions with Tom Agostino, Alexa MacDonald, Dennis Garvey, Kent Gugler, Jan Alexander, and Billy Bond. The concert takes place at the Granite Peak Universalist United Hall at 882 Sunset Drive, off Whipple behind True Value Hardware, in Prescott. Admission is \$5.00.

Bill Burke Interview, continued from page 3

come back to me with their instrument and apologize about the big gouge, the scratch, or the wear marks in the finish; but to me it's a reward. I get a real kick out of seeing them played, and those are the signs that they are being used and enjoyed. It gives me great satisfaction and makes it all worthwhile. So to answer your question, no it's not hard to say goodbye. I like to put them into peoples' hands and let them do what they were made to do."

Benefit Concert

Steve Garro was seriously injured when he was struck (while riding his bike) by a motor vehicle. He's a terrific guy and a serious athlete, and he's fighting a long battle of recovery from his injuries. He and his wife Denise have accumulated a mountain of bills as a result. A benefit concert has been organized to assist the Garros on Saturday, December 10th at the Orpheum Theater in Flagstaff. The show starts at 6 pm, with live music, silent auctions and fun for the whole family. Several cool bands will play, including Dave Insley's Careless Smokers! Please mark your calendars for December 10th!

Garro-palooze, Saturday December 10th at 6 pm
Orpheum Theater, Flagstaff, Arizona.
Dave Insley's Careless Smokers and more!



Happy Holidays!
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