

Soul man finds paradise

Norton Buffalo can play a mean harmonica, and he does so right up on the ridge

By Jaime O'Neill

"Borne along on the breath, which is his spirit ... which makes the world his apple, and forces him to eat"

--W.S. Merwin, "The Life Cycle of Common Man"

When people think of paradise, thoughts of harps usually come along for the ride, but the harps most people conjure have strings, not little holes, and the paradise they imagine isn't the one in Butte County. Harps with holes and Butte County's Paradise hook up in the person of Norton Buffalo, a Ridge homeboy, musician, songwriter and world-renowned harmonica virtuoso.

You might have stood behind Buffalo in the checkout line at Safeway, or at the bank, without knowing that the man ahead of you has played and sung with many of the major music stars of the past three decades. Commander Cody, the Doobie Brothers, David Grisman, Jerry Garcia, Judy Collins, Olivia Newton-John, Juice Newton, Kenny Loggins, Marshall Tucker, Pablo Cruise, New Riders of the Purple Sage, Jackson Brown, and Vassar Clements are just a few of the musicians who've had their sounds augmented by Buffalo.

As Elvin Bishop, his friend and fellow musician, says: "Anybody who can make a living doing something they enjoy is way ahead of the game."

Buffalo dropped out of college to commit himself to his music, and, for that faith in his dreams, he got the world. So, if you've spent all or part of your life doing something you didn't much care for, there's nothing Buffalo is going to say about his life that's likely to make you feel better about yours.

But the music he plays probably will. And there's a lot of that music. Even in the unlikely event you've never heard of him, it's nearly a sure thing you've heard him play. He's one buffalo that's roamed. He's blown himself around the world, played backup for everyone from Bonnie Raitt to Johnny Cash, and from Steve Miller to Bette Midler. He fronts his own aggregations, too, including his longtime touring and recording band, the Knockouts, along with his acoustic ensemble, a group he calls his "Friends," which includes his wife, Lisa Flores, and guitarist David Aguilar.



PHOTO BY KAREN O'NEILL

Song of Social Responsibility:
Check Norton Buffalo's Web site:
(www.norton-buffalo.com/betterplace.html)
to read his call for public action and suggestions
how to make the planet a more peaceful, sustainable
place.

Related stories this week:
[Buffalo's discography](#)

In the argot of the blues, he's paid his dues, but he's more than a blues man. His enormous body of work busts through nearly every genre of popular music--from country, to rock, to folk, to bluegrass, with side trips into classical, jazz, zydeco, reggae, big band, and romantic ballads. If contemporary music could be compared to a quilt, then there are Buffalo threads all through that coverlet.



PHOTO BY KAREN O'NEILL

This is a 55-year-old man who has not held a day job since 1974, a working musician who has successfully made a living with his musical chops for more than 30 years without a major hit record under his own name. There is a kind of heroism in that. And he's got the miles, and the scars, to show for it. He put more than a million miles on one of the motor homes he used to get to gigs, and in the course of those miles, he was rear-ended three times.

"Having been in three pretty serious car accidents," he said, "my neck is a total disaster. But in all these years, I've only missed one gig, and that was when I couldn't get back to Mill Valley because the snow was too deep over the Sierras. I've played with a broken collarbone, and I've played sick.

"One downside to that 'show-must-go-on' creed is that if you're in court, trying to get a judgment against someone who ran into you, they'll use videos of you playing in concert where it looks like you're having a good time, and like you're not really hurt. So your case gets denied because you work so hard on stage to mask the pain."

He's driven most of the miles himself, while the Knockouts were knocked out sleeping. When the rig has broken down, he's gotten under the hood to fix it, or, on one occasion, roller skated four miles to a freeway exit so he could call his mechanic to ask how to fix what he couldn't.

You can add another million miles to those he's put on his own vehicle if you factor in the additional miles he's ridden with Steve Miller as they've toured together over the past 30 years, and those miles aren't guesses; they're odometer readings run up as Buffalo and the Space Cowboy traversed that long and winding road to spread the good times.

Then you can add the untold roads he's traveled with his other longtime partner, guitar wizard Roy Rogers, producing the searing blues that makes them the amped-up electric white boy version of Sonny Terry and Brown McGee, hauling the blues on over to a new century.

He tells the story of how thrilled he and Rogers were when they got to meet Ray Charles. They went backstage, like a couple of kids basking in the glow of a legend, shaking hands and schmoozing for a few moments, utterly star struck. Rogers' wife took pictures of the big event.

"The next day, Roy called me," Buffalo said, "and he's all bummed. 'Man,' Roy said, 'something went wrong with that roll of film, and not one picture of us with Ray Charles turned out.' And I just laughed and said, 'Hey Roy, if Ray can't see the pictures, then nobody sees the pictures.' "

If you can spend an hour with Buffalo and come away not liking him, that's a pretty good indicator that you just might be a quart low on soul. "He doesn't have a mean bone in his body," said Bishop, who's known him for

decades.

"Norton's one hell of a nice guy," echoed Bob Littell, Chico harp player and impresario of the Sierra Nevada Big Room, the guy in charge of booking the top-flight names that come to town to play that venue.



DYNAMIC DOMESTIC DUO
Norton Buffalo and his musician-
wife, Lisa Flores, have found a
place to call home in Paradise.
PHOTO BY KAREN O'NEILL

"As a harmonica player, Norton gets it," Littell said. "His approach as an accompanist is almost perfect. His early work with Kate Wolf defines the instrument. It is required listening for the next generation of harp players."

And Bishop seconds that emotion, saying: "He's just a beautiful guy. We really have great jam sessions when we get together. He's real sociable. You don't want to call Norton if you want a short conversation. He is such an upright type of fella that I don't have any dirt I can dish on him.

"We've done a couple of tours together--Australia, Hawaii. Lots of harmonica players are limited. It's like going to the average Italian restaurant where there's a set menu with the same predictable choices. With the average harmonica player, you get a certain expected set of tired blues licks, but Norton is way beyond that. All the good things one hears about him are true."

Laurie Lewis, the great Berkeley singer/songwriter/fiddle player, added: "What sets Norton apart from your average harp player is his combination of technical mastery and his strong intuitive sense. Working with Norton in the studio has been a real pleasure --he understood what I needed with almost no discussion, which can so often kill the mood. Aside from that, he's plain got the three T's down: taste, tone, and timing."

For a sample of those "three T's," check out Norton's backup playing on the song "Here Comes the Rain," a track from Lewis' album *True Stories*. Buffalo's harmonica on that cut is the aural equivalent of hawks riding thermals, the licks alternately gliding and swooping in a kind of poetry without words, the perfect supplement to the lyrics Lewis sings on that track.

Though he's known as a non-pareil blues harmonica player, he doesn't really think of himself as a blues man. "I didn't get into the blues until I was 19, and I started playing harp at age 7. When I first started playing blues, I'd get compared to Paul Butterfield, and when I first started playing country, I'd get compared to Charlie McCoy. It's a simple instrument, and there's only so much you can do with it, but you try to find your own sound.

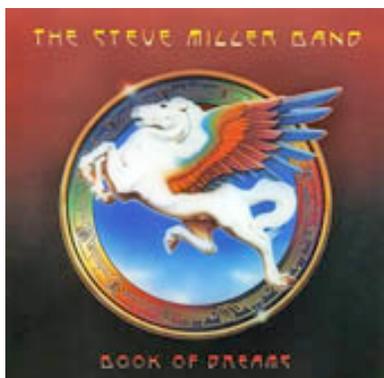
"I've been a sponge my whole life, listening to other players and finding what they can teach me, but I try to take all that and make it my own."

He's written hundreds of songs, but he's especially fond of one called "Ain't No Bread in the Bread Box."

"Back in the early '90s," he said, "Jerry Garcia was on a freeway somewhere when he heard that song on the radio. He pulled off and called the radio station to find out who was doing it, then he contacted me and asked me to write an additional verse for it. He loved that song because it reminded him of the kind of stuff the Golden Gate Quartet does, and that's a group Jerry and I both really liked. I backed him up on *Common Chord*,

the only CD where he played with his daughter, Heather Garcia Katz.

"He didn't take care of his temple, which is why he ain't here no more. I loved that cat and his music so much, so I don't mean any disrespect to his memory. I just wish he'd taken better care of himself so we could still be making music together. He had a musical soul, and I honor him for that."



Buffalo also has a musical soul. He thinks it came with his DNA.

"I'm furthering a family legacy," he said. "My mother sang in a big band, my dad played harmonica, and Herbert Stothart, my mother's uncle, was a composer and arranger who scored lots of movies. Later, when I got to score my first movie [1983's *Stacy's Knights*], I could almost feel his presence. That was a pretty bad movie, but it was still a thrill to do the score. And it felt like part of the family legacy."

He shares that legacy, not just onstage and onscreen (he's had parts in several films, including the notorious *Heaven's Gate*, which destroyed the career of *Deer Hunter* director Michael Cimino), but also by giving lessons to people who want to learn to play harp. Thirty years ago, he taught Naomi Judd, back before that was her name, while little Wynonna and littler Ashley played in the park at their feet. And, through the years, he's done time in prison--on a strictly voluntary basis--doing concerts and teaching harmonica to inmates.

"The thing that comes from playing and teaching in the prisons," he said, "is that I can maybe inspire these guys. I'll kneel down when I'm playing and let them feel my throat muscles, and I tell them, 'Man, when you start to play, you can make these walls go away. For a few moments, you can go wherever your soul and your mind want to take you.'"

When this roaming Buffalo decided to settle down in 2005, he and his wife of six years moved to Paradise for many of the same reasons other people from the Bay Area find their way to Butte County. "There's a community feel on the ridge, and we like that," he said. "We once had that feeling in Sonoma, where I used to live, but it's gotten overrun by people from the city. It just isn't country anymore. I wouldn't mind living on the coast, but it's too expensive, and I like it up here because it's pretty quiet. Life is hectic when I'm on tour, so when I come home, I want peace and quiet."

He loves sharing the music he's made, loves taking little musical tours of his own past, with cuts from his first album, *Lovin' in the Valley of the Moon*, back in the early '70s, to songs he's still putting together whenever he gets off the road and back to Paradise.

There is something almost childlike about the man; the joy he takes in his music--and the pride he has in it--just fills that space where he works to keep the music coming. He remarks often on how blessed he has been, though he's surely seen his share of trouble and strife, with a couple of ex-wives, and more than a few friends dead and gone, victims of the life and times. In another man, Buffalo's enthusiasm might be seen as ego, but there is no brag in his proud display of a life's work.

He loves telling stories, a trait he thinks he got from his grandfather. When he talks about his fellow musicians, he's apt to slip into completely unself-conscious impersonations. When he talks about Tom Waits, he does Tom Waits, and if the lights were off, you'd think that gravel-voiced singer was in the room with you. And when he talks about his friend Maria Muldaur, he'll sing a couple of verses in her voice with the same uncanny precision.

He's not inclined to dish the dirt, though. "I do interviews on drive-time talk radio when I'm on tour," he said, "and you get these DJs with a bug up their ass who want me to say something bad about Steve Miller, or any of the other people I've played with. Sure, in a long career there are stories that could be told that don't reflect well on some people, but those are just moments. There are 365 days a year, and if I pick out the bad days, they're few, and to dwell on those days just doesn't serve anybody. I certainly wouldn't be working with Steve Miller for 32 years if I wasn't having a ball."



PHOTO BY KAREN O'NEILL

Buffalo has viewed the world from stages, watching audiences in bars and concert halls. "From up on stage," he said, "it's entertainment to check out the audience. I wrote a song once from the perspective of a juke box and all it had seen--watching people making up, breaking up, and people meeting in this smoky bar. From the stage, you see people humpin' each other, you see the light in people's eyes, you see those that get it when you're doing a song.

"The audience is a cup that never runs dry. When I'm on stage, I'm putting this energy out, but it always comes back. Even on the worst nights there's someone you connect with.

"Back when I played noisy bars where people were mostly interested in picking each other up, it could be rough sometimes. But even there, I always managed to pick out people in the crowd who were having a good time and I'd focus on them.

"I've seen other performers get really uptight when they hit a bad audience; they get nervous, or frustrated, and then the show gets controlled by those who don't dig the show. I have to seek out those people whose eyes are bright, and it's contagious when I can find that joy, and then build on it."

Bishop agrees: "Even playing songs you've played hundreds of times ... if you get it just right, it feels good every time."

Feeling good on stage and getting it right are what prompted Buffalo to form Norton Buffalo and Friends. That group, along with the Knockouts and Cajun fiddle wizard Tom Rigney will join forces to perform in the benefit show he's bringing to the Paradise Performing Arts Center Saturday night (April 21). He's played there before, and he's impressed by the venue. "It's a wonderful room," he said. "We didn't have anything to compare with it over in Sonoma County. The community is lucky to have such a facility."

In addition to making music, he's also pretty engaged politically.

"I've always wanted to be this guy who uplifted people," he said. "I pay attention to politics, and this planet we're on. I've spoken out, written some songs in those directions. Some have worked, some haven't, but I feel a duty to do something. I do voter registration at my shows because I believe our nation is screwed up and we won't fix it until everyone gets involved.

"After the last election I wrote a song called 'Bamboozled Again,' and I was playing a show in San Francisco and a guy got pissed off and wrote to all my upcoming shows to say that I was saying things that didn't support the troops, etc., etc, trying to get the venues to cancel my shows. It was the same thing that happened to Linda Ronstadt and the Dixie Chicks, and some of the promoters got nervous and wanted to cancel me. That mood is changing, though.

"Even if I wasn't an entertainer, I'd consider it part of my job to stay engaged with what's important. It's all part of passing it on."

Raising one's voice may be just another way of letting the devil know we're here, and God, too, for those inclined to see a deity at work in the doings of men. For Buffalo, his music and his politics link up at the crossroads of the spirit, and that spirit mostly gets expressed through exhalations and inhalations through tiny holes in a simple instrument he cups in the palm of his hand, using it to express joys and sorrows to an audience that has, like the miles he's traveled, come to number in the millions.