



Photo by Genevieve Fridley

Space & Sound

By Benjamin Pomerance

THE LEGEND stared in silence. Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers matched him eyeball for eyeball. He had been warned of moments like this, the uncomfortable pauses as Paul Simon gathered his thoughts. *Don't fill in the space*, he had been cautioned. *Let him brew*. The admonitions thudded like a heartbeat as he waited, staying on his side of the line like a tackle listening to the center bark out a long snap count, itching to say how *Bridge Over Troubled Water* was the first album he had ever memorized but forcing his tongue to stay mute.

And eventually, the answers came. Careful and crisp, Simon spoke of why he wrote for percussion rhythms beyond a simple trap set, and how the structure of his thinking changed when he composed *Graceland*, and whether it was possible to write a character with feelings that he did not understand. Eventually, there was even an offering: a chance for *Acoustic Guitar* magazine to be the first to publish the new acoustic guitar arrangement that Simon had worked out for *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. The encounter, silences included, had been a success.

Between the two men in that hotel suite, a bond had stretched. They knew what it meant to confront the blank page with a germ of a song scratching to get out, what toil it could be to flip conflicting thoughts into coherent lines and what indecision could linger even after the ideas finally made it into the sunlight. Together, they could speak not merely as reporter to subject, but as craftsmen who grasped the words each other spoke and the things

left unsaid.

There are books of stories like this one. Some involve the intersections between Rodgers and others in the vineyard: Jerry Garcia, Joni Mitchell, Ani DiFranco and legions more. Others are tales of Rodgers himself, trying to unravel how, in solitary rigor, he could birth music that earned the grand prize of the John Lennon Songwriting Contest. On the night of May 19, he will share a sample of these in Plattsburgh, playing on the Wood, Wire and Voice Coffee House stage with his frequent partner, Wendy Sassafras Ramsay. It would take a decade to share them all.

A shade of mystery clouds any music, an unwritten ending about what brought this work into being. Even the most well-documented origin story can never fill every corner of that canvas. Plenty of creators don't really even bother to try, pinning the success on some nebulous board of fortunate inspiration. Rodgers is the opposite of this. For decades now, he has tracked his life's work, addressing queries of why. He has written about others who write songs, the process of writing songs and the things that are solid amid this mist.

The fruits of this search are complex. Music piquing his early curiosities ranged from Simon and Garfunkel to Stevie Wonder to the Grateful Dead to the soundtrack from the boundary-smashing musical *Hair*. When his parents bought his first guitar, all of this and more already rolled around in his soul. His older brother, Dru, already had a guitar, an instrument in which he had seemed to

lose interest — until his younger sibling started to play. “That brought him right back to it,” Rodgers laughs. “Then he got competitive.”

From day one, the competition bore benefits. The brothers filled their family's New Jersey household with music, blessed with what Rodgers remembers as “intuitive sibling harmonies.” By their early teens, they were adept enough to display those harmonies on local stages. Lenny Kaye, the guitarist for Patti Smith's band, heard them and, impressed by their skills, issued a warning: *Don't get pigeonholed as folkies*.

The caution flag was irrelevant. At the time, neither Rodgers brother really even knew what a folkie was. “We grew up on all kinds of music: pop, soul, folk, rock, plenty of acoustic singer-songwriters,” Rodgers explains. “The question of what to call the music we were playing was really more of an afterthought for us. And that's really still how it is for me. It's pretty much always been about following the sounds I want to hear.”

Before long, they were thinking of bringing their curiosity to places beyond the Garden State Parkway. Dru moved to Utah. Jeffrey chased his interests in music and writing in college, then took off on a backpacking trip with his girlfriend throughout India and Nepal, allowing the sonorities of tabla virtuosos demolish his prior beliefs about musical architecture. Stateside once more, he reached out to his brother. *Time for a change*, they decided. *Let's try California*.

As children, they had visited the West Coast with their family. Now, feeling like adults, they arrived in San Francisco on their own. Before long, they had joined a circle of fellow musical travelers, formed an acoustic rock band that they dubbed “Heavy Wood” and lined up a set of recurring gigs at Mill Valley’s Sweetwater Music Hall. “It was during this period of time,” Rodgers remembers, “that I realized that playing this type of music was what I wanted to do more than anything.”

Yet Kaye’s fears of folkie pigeonholing never had a chance to emerge. The sounds of the Dead, Stevie Wonder and *Hair* still urged him to remember that acoustic tunes could still bite back. “I love music with a strong drive in it, though people think of folk as being a certain gentle traditional rhythm,” Rodgers says. “It’s a big obsession for me to get a band’s worth of sound out of a guitar, including creating grooves that feel complete. I’m not talking about anything crazy or weird — just something with hopefully more strongly rhythmic playing than people expect.”

With this mindset, he sought homes on pages, as well as stages. His byline appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where he won a battle with his editor to be listed with his full name of “Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers” rather than the more off-the-cuff “Jeff Rodgers.” Still, his resume was relatively light when he got the call from David Lusterman, a Bay Area publisher who wanted to launch a new endeavor. It was the late-1980s, and *Frets* magazine had just shut down, a once-prominent acoustic music publication drowned in a sea of synthesized pop.

“And it was terrible timing for doing that,” Rodgers recalls, “because acoustic music was just about to explode in popularity.” In a couple of years, Eric Clapton’s *Unplugged* would fan the flames of a folk-rock revival. Songwriters like Suzanne Vega would remind the mainstream pop world that amplified effects were not the only pathway to the heart. *MTV Unplugged* would become one of the most popular musical programs on Earth. Yet when Lusterman approached Rodgers, the old walls still stood. Acoustic music still languished in the public’s second tier.

Still, Lusterman — already the publisher of *Strings*, a periodical focused on bowed instruments and predominantly covering classical music — somehow sensed that a change was coming. Rodgers simply wanted to write prose about the art form in which he had immersed his life. This offer felt as good as any and perhaps better than most. From this

symbiosis of interests came the formation of *Acoustic Guitar* magazine, with Rodgers’ name atop the masthead as the publication’s founding editor.

The title sounded glorious. The reality was starker. In those natal days, Rodgers was the magazine’s entire editorial staff. Five employees comprised the entire company. Then there was another dilemma: the editor of San Francisco’s newest guitar magazine rarely spent any time reading guitar magazines. “They got so into the gear and the technique that they lost sight of the music,” Rodgers recalls of the other guitar-focused trade publications that he would pick up and rapidly put down. “And they lost my interest as a result.”

His magazine, he resolved, would be different. “A huge part of my mission to begin with was to get at the heart of the music a little bit more,” he declares. “The songwriting, for instance. The inspiration side of it and the process side of it.” He pauses. “But at the same time, there were people who wanted this very particular information about a particular artist who they loved. So, I found contributors who were more gear-oriented than I was to cover those things. And I focused on getting to the heart of what makes that artist tick as a creator of music.”

There was plenty of questions, he acknowledges, about whether he was finessing the right balance. Success answered his doubts. *Acoustic Guitar* caught the wave of acoustic music’s revival and rode it like a champion, spreading rapidly from the Bay Area to the entire West Coast to both coasts and beyond. Within a decade, the five-person company had grown to a staff of forty people. One day, *All Things Considered* director Bob Boilen called and invited Rodgers to become a contributor to National Public Radio in the few spare hours that remained in his day.

And with those press cards in hand, he dove into the intangibles. He hung out with Jerry Garcia and David Grisman as the bandmates jammed on *Jack-a-Roe* with the fresh excitement of adolescents. He spoke with Chris Whitley when the bluesman had just wrapped up recording his *Dirt Floor* album in a single day at a Vermont barn. In one 24-hour stretch, he spoke with Dave Grohl at his studio in the morning, interviewed Brad Paisley by phone around midday and talked shop with John Fogerty at his house in the afternoon.

The more he probed about songwriting, the more he wanted to craft new works for his own on-stage appearances. A common thread, he realized, connected

Simon with Garcia, Whitley with Fogerty and everyone with everyone else who spun music out of the air. “It all comes down to learning always,” he states. “That’s really the main thing I noticed. Paul Simon was a great example of that. He wasn’t afraid to have a new album come out that was unlike anything he’d done before.”

As if to test his own commitment to that principle, life heaved around him. Life seemed worthy of Eden in the Bay Area, but challenges percolated. A cross-country move shook him away from that life, away from the hub of his work, and away from all that he had spent years constructing in that zone. “I came eastward with my then-wife and kids,” he says. “We were trying to make the family and everybody’s job work.” Eventually, they landed in Syracuse, a city that outwardly felt nothing like San Francisco, confronted with the prospects of rebuilding.

Yet in those foreign upstate New York lodgings, a tune came back to him for no reason in particular: a simple old-time mountain special called *Sally Goodin* that he had learned at a farmer’s market in Goshen, Ind., approximately one year earlier. Now, casually playing the guitar groove from that time-honored fiddle tune, words snuck into his mouth: “*Fly away/Drop what you’re doing/Gray skies will soon be bluing/No doubt am I entertaining/No reason for explaining.*” He brought the sudden fragments to a local songwriter’s circle. More words flowed.

A year or two later, on a Syracuse winter night that would make any reasonable human long to return to California, he attended an open mic at an establishment called the Lucky Moon. The host, Lisa Gentile, spurred something within him: *Here’s the right person to sing that song with me, the song that I never quite finished.* That night, he went home and withdrew the three-quarters-done music from its resting place. With Gentile’s voice still resonating in his ears, he completed the rest of the song, titling it *Fly*.

For the first time in his life, he entered a competition: the John Lennon Songwriting Contest. To his genuine astonishment, *Fly* captured the grand prize. The song became the centerpiece of his 2008 album *Humming My Way Back Home*. And by that time, central New York had indeed become his home, unexpectedly imbued with some of the same characteristics that had sold him on the West Coast. “The talent level, it’s pretty remarkable who’s here

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Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers and Wendy Sassafras Ramsay. Photo by Genevieve Fridley

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and how much give and take there is," he says. "People here are really welcoming."

He has repaid the welcome in kind. In the honors program at Syracuse University, he teaches courses on songwriting and creative non-fiction. He leads Dead to the Core, a collective of acoustic musicians enamored as he is with the Grateful Dead's eclectic virtuosity. For a locally based Beatles tribute known as "BeatleCuse," he drew upon his prior studies of Indian music to set up a performance of *Within You Without You*. The duo that he formed with Ramsay, billed as "Pepper and Sassafras," was a finalist for Best Duo at the FreshGrass festival.

For *Acoustic Guitar* magazine, he continues his wanderings, too, serving as editor-at-large. Multiple books bear his name on the cover today, including *The Complete Singer-Songwriter*, interspersing his own lessons about the elusive marriage of lyrics and notes with pearls from several of his interviews. *Beyond Strumming*, a multimedia guide of his own design, focuses on helping guitarists break the box of rote patterns on their instrument. In Plattsburgh, one day after the Pepper and Sassafras show, he will lead a workshop on this subject.

Even Heavy Wood, the band that he formed with his brother in those tender San Francisco days, finally received its spotlight with a release of their debut album — 18 years after they had recorded it. By that time, Dru had gone on to play with the world-rock group Kazamoz and release the solo album *Stone from the Sky*, and Jeffrey had set up shop with his varied ventures in Syracuse, but the closeness had remained. In those sibling harmonies from long ago, across the span of geography and time, the thrill of what they had done continued.

It is that surge, that nerve-flaring adventure, that

never grows careworn. After so many years with fingers in so many pots, Rodgers still dashes after more. The pursuit, he has learned, forms communities faster than any other. "There's a kind of connection that happens around songs and music," he says. "There was no better lesson than the pandemic, when we didn't have the ability to be in a room and gather around a song in that way. We all felt that absence."

Abruptly, he stops, a Paul Simon-esque gap. In the following stillness, thoughts flip back to his story about that interview with Simon, the interchange of introspective words and truth-gathering periods of quiet — space and sound, the rudimentary ingredients of a song, and of life itself. Sometimes, the pauses are long. The fortitude to sing the earnest verse takes time to muster. At times, skepticism surfaces about whether another stanza will ever make it to daylight.

"To me, good songwriting is not, 'Let me tell you about my life,'" Rodgers says, his voice entering again with assurance. "It's, 'Let me play a song that creates a space where me and the people listening can meet in the middle and share something.' That is a powerful human experience. People need it. They want it. I think they will always come back to it." He stops there, and the words hang like a benediction over a sanctuary. The spaces of silence may be long, even uncomfortable. For those who know how to wait, though, the right sound can resume.

Wood, Wire and Voice Coffeehouse will present Pepper and Sassafras — Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers and Wendy Sassafras Ramsay — on May 19 at 7 p.m. in Plattsburgh's United Methodist Church. On May 20 at 11 a.m., Rodgers will lead his "Beyond Strumming" guitar workshop in the same venue. For more information, call 518-569-2188 or email woodwireandvoice@gmail.com.