

REMEMBERING MICHAEL & BARARA

8.16.20

8.19.20

Last June word was going around that Michael Smith was in the hospital. Only when I came across his FaceBook post did I learn that indeed Mr. Michael was not in a good place. His message was a lot like most everything else he wrote, clear, dark, truthful, literary and dare I say, kind of funny too.

“Please, PLEASE,” he wrote. “No expressions of concern, I’m sure you are or aren’t, and t’will be tedious beyond measure if I get well and have to click all of those likes. I been a good ole wagon, and if I’ve done broke down they’ll fix me up if they possibly can. Old man, everybody dies. Whatever happens, for God’s sake get Joe in there. He’s our own damn St. George. God’s will and all that s**t. OK, bye.”

By the time I joined the faculty at the Old Town School of Folk Music, in the late 1980s Michael Smith and Barbara Barrow were already living in Chicago. Barbara was a mainstay at the school teaching voice, piano and guitar. Michael taught at the school off and on, mostly off, but he was comfortable for a time hanging out with we on the local Chicago scene.

I had been playing a long-neck Vega banjo and at an Old Town School event one evening, I led the audience and players on stage in Lead Belly’s great “Bourgeois Blues.” The key was a little too high for me, actually way too

high, but I hitched it up and belted my way through the verses, with everyone joining in on the refrain:

It's a bourgeois town, it's a bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues, spread the news all around.

Afterwards, Barbara came up to me and said a nice thing, "I've never heard you sing like that before." To be honest, neither had I.

It couldn't have been more than a day later when the phone rang in my apartment, "Hello?"

"Mark, Michael Smith. I hear you have a long-neck banjo."

"I do," I said.

"Like the one Pete Seeger played?"

"Not exactly like the one Pete Seeger played, but it's a good one."

He went on to explain a project he and Barbara had been developing for a number of years. They wanted to write a show for theatre featuring the music of The Weavers, calling it *WeaverMania!* I think their original concept fell somewhere between *Forever Plaid* (which ran in Chicago for years) and *BeatleMania*.

“Our situation is this,” Michael said in his rumbling, smoky baritone.

“Barbara and I would like you to come over to sing a few Weavers songs just to see how it will work. We’d like you sing Pete’s vocal part.”

So in late September 1999, *WeaverMania!* began a pretty intense rehearsal schedule. The late Tom Dundee was back in town, and completed our quartet. We got together three times a a week, sometimes two. Sometimes four. We spent lots of time listening to vintage recordings of The Weavers, working out harmony parts, arguing about keys and just about everything else. The vocal blend was pretty incredible actually. We wound up by necessity abandoning the idea of singing everything in its original key. But just like The Weavers’ our blend was authentic, and powerful. Four very different singers, and very different people finding a place to agree, and a place where these great arrangements might find new life.

It was through *WeaverMania!* that Michael and Barbara and I became friends. Their tiny apartment on the north side where we rehearsed was a trip. A very small foyer, a front room filled with plants, art, and a baby grand piano. Books upon books on this shelf and that, still other books behind the piano. The kitchen table was the place we rehearsed and spread out all our notes and lyric sheets. As I remember the walls were purple with dashes of red and green, with more artwork hanging in every corner. At the ceiling line on the west wall of the kitchen hung a series of photos and posters celebrating Roy

Rogers, Dale Evans and the Sons of the Pioneers. Among the display was a photo of Roy, Dale and Barbara's mother. It turned out Barbara's mother was a pretty close friend of Dale Evans.

Michael wasn't the kind of guy you'd call up to see if he wanted to toddle down to the corner bar to watch the ball game. He always reserved space for himself, and I always tried to respect that. Our rehearsal schedule typically called for us to meet at ten or eleven in the morning. Tom was still working as a subcontractor, so he got there when he could. We'd go until late afternoon, when I had to be off to my classes at the Old Town School, a couple miles north on Lincoln Avenue. I always felt welcome in their home, I always felt a warmth in their presence. The hard thing was Tom and I had to learn the instrumental parts, he on guitar, and me on banjo, as well as our complex vocal assignments. Let's just say I grew a whole lot working with Michael, Barbara, Tom and later Chris Walz in the ten-plus years of *WeaverMania's* run.

Michael was often socially distant and could be difficult. Rehearsals were going well and *WeaverMania!* was starting to land some bookings across the Midwest and points east. Barbara grew up in Florida and Southern hospitality was part of her very makeup. She invited the band members, which now included Al Ehrich on standup bass, and their spouses to dinner one beautiful

summer evening. We all found seats on the back porch and at the table below on the grassless Chicago bricked-in back yard.

“Where’s Michael?” I asked. “Oh he’s in there writing, of course,” said Barbara. Drinks were served, some were smoking. Pretty soon Michael appeared sporting green aviator sunglasses. He sat next to me at the small table on the back porch where we ate chips and salsa, without a word. Pretty soon Barbara asked him to come into the kitchen to cut the pineapple and carve the ham. I peeked through the window and Michael carried out both tasks admirably, all the while sporting his green aviators. Not long after dinner, the party was in full swing, but Michael had disappeared again. “Oh,” said Barbara, “he’s back in there writing.”

At some point, we realized *WeaverMania!* was beginning to happen. We landed an agent and felt we might actually begin touring, and the matter of legalities and considering a more long-term plan was the topic over Barbara’s coffee one morning.

“The situation is,” said Michael, “can we legally use ‘Weaver’ as we go forward? What if Harold Leventhal (former manager of The Weavers) hears about us and feels we’ve infringed on his groups’ copyright? Will he be able to shut us down?”

One suggestion was for us to do our thing and deal with it if Leventhal had a problem. Michael wasn’t satisfied with that. I’ve always sort of hated this

stuff, but if Michael was thinking in these terms, it signaled me that our group sound had crossed a threshold. He was looking forward.

Some time ago I looked up Pete Seeger's number in a New York City phone book. Right there was Seeger, Peter and the 845 area code and number. This was years ago. A group of friends and I were finishing up our jam session in the little house where I lived at the time, and we figured Pete was probably jamming too, so we called him up.

"Michael," I said. I tried to call Pete one evening a long time ago and the number in the phone book was actually the number to Harold Leventhal's office. Why don't you call directory assistance and ask for Leventhal in New York."

Michael wandered from the kitchen into the front room where the phone was, and Barbara refreshed our coffee. After a time he got Leventhal's number and left a voice mail. Not a half-hour later, the phone rang again and Michael sprung from his chair at the kitchen table.

I heard things like, "So good to talk to you sir," and "thank you sir," and yes sir." Then a long silence. Michael was mumbling through the phone receiver as if the conversation needed to be private. Perhaps it did. "Thank you, sir! I will. Thank you!" Michael came dancing an Irish jig back into the kitchen happier than I had seen him at any rehearsal.

"What happened?" "What did he say?"

“Harold has given his blessing to *WeaverMania!*,” Michael reported. “He has no problem with us using the name of the group and our adaptations of the arrangements. If we record them we of course have to pay the usual mechanical licensing fee.”

The sun poured through the kitchen window for the first time that day but could not match the jubilation around that table.

“Harold asked me,” said Michael, “what do you intend to do with these arrangements of The Weavers’ songs?”

“I told him we were hoping to tour around the Midwest and perhaps at folk clubs around the country.” After a silence Harold asked, ‘There are FOLK CLUBS around the country?’”

When it came to music Michael had an extra gear to work with. Probably two. I was scheduled for a recording session one afternoon and things were going well. The phone rang and it was Michael, who was also recording at that particular studio at the time, asking if he could come by to review a track.

“I’m with Mark right now,” said Bruce the engineer. Bruce asked me if it was okay for Michael drop by. Michael had a session scheduled with a cello player for the next day and needed to write out the part. “It’ll only take a few minutes,” said Bruce.

Before long we heard a knock at the door. Bruce had already loaded Michael's track onto the computer. Michael apologized again for interruption. "I'll be as quick as I can," he said.

"No problem, Michael. Of course," I said

Those on the session watched Michael as the track played. There was bass, guitar, piano and whatever else I no longer remember coming through the monitors. The vocal would be added later, but it was the cello part he was after. He held a music notation pad and listened to his track. In a single pass Michael notated the cello part, usually split between bass and treble clef, writing in what wasn't being played by any of the other instruments. The track ended and he closed his book. He looked me straight in the eye, said "Thank you," and walked out as if he had somewhere else to go.

By 2001 rehearsing with *WeaverMania!* had become almost a full-time job. We kept up our usual weekly schedule, and I spent a lot of extra time working out my banjo parts, and restudying the great arrangements that Seeger, and Erik Darling had recorded with the group. I arrived to rehearsal one afternoon and Barbara invited me in for coffee. "Tom is going to be late," she said. "Michael's in the other room writing. We sat in their cozy front room and chatted for a while. After a time Tom arrived and we all filed into the kitchen. Tom and I tuned and we got out our notes and we three began polishing our newest vocal arrangement. Barbara called to Michael in the other room.

He appeared without a word wearing a crisp blue work shirt, unbuttoned over a black tee. On his head a ribbed knit cap was smartly tilted to one side. We started the arrangement again, Tom and Barbara on melody, me on tenor and Michael on bass. Before long Michael had produced a slip of paper and a pen. At first I thought he was making notes regarding our arrangement. He was writing, all the while singing his part. We retuned and started the next song. Around the second verse he began making notes again. Next song, same thing. After some time we took a break and Michael drifted off, back into the other room. I was wondering when he might lay his notes on us, and share all the things he thought needed further attention. I thought we were sounding pretty good.

I looked across the table and glimpsed his slip of paper. And his notes weren't about our arrangements at all. While rehearsing our arrangements, Michael was writing lyrics to *another* song.

On the doorstep for a rare evening rehearsal, I heard piano chords floating from Michael and Barbara's front room window. Barbara answered the door and whispered, "Come on in." She was wearing a long comfortable robe and her hair was swept up in a bun. Candle light from the front room flickered across her face. I made way through the tiny foyer. For some reason it seemed that not making too much noise was the thing to do on this particular

night. There was Michael at the piano, sounding soft, random chords that in the candlelight were simply stunning.

“Tom’s going to be a little late,” Barbara whispered.

I was about to say hello to Michael, but stopped short. Tears were streaming down his face. I leaned my instruments in the corner, next to the giant potted tropical tree that spanned the entire south wall of their living room. I took a seat with my back to the piano on the short sofa upholstered in imitation leopard skin. Barbara headed toward the kitchen and squeezed both of Michael’s shoulders as she passed. I sat there wondering what in the world was going on. The part of me that was Michael’s friend wanted to ask him if he was all right, but the response was already there. Beautiful, colorful chords all bathed in candlelight, played in half time.

Barbara returned to the front room and asked, “Would you like to smoke?” “No, I’m good,” I said. Barbara and I sat for a long time waiting for Tom, not saying anything. We just listened again to the lovely and mysterious art of Michael Smith.

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