

## Herb Pedersen – California Grown

By Yvonne Tatar

California, world-famous for its vast agriculture, is also known for continually producing a great crop of bluegrass musicians. One pick the bluegrass crop is longtime staple Herb Pedersen. A real musician's musician, his many talents and contributions have helped sow the seed to grow bluegrass and acoustic music into what they are today.

As a child growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, it wasn't until he was a teenager that he first heard bluegrass music. While still in high school, he and his buddies Butch Waller and Rich Connelly attended St. Mary's High School in Berkeley and formed the folk group called Westport Singers. "We wanted to be like the Kingston Trio, I guess, because that's all we heard out here. Then the Cal Berkeley Folk Festival started becoming real popular and a bunch of us attended. That was the first time any of us had heard of Flatt & Scruggs or Bill Monroe, who were the two major, major acts at that time. That's when my interest really piqued."

Herb started out playing just guitar, but that soon changed. "I really fell in love with the banjo after hearing Pete Seeger, the Weavers, and the Kingston Trio. And then I heard Earl Scruggs, and that was it. I just knew my life was going to change drastically at that point. Also, Barry Oliver, who ran the Cal Berkeley Folk Festival, was instrumental in influencing me to bluegrass music, for which I will always be grateful."

While in high school, Herb had briefly considered going into architecture or drafting as a career, but then the music bug bit him. By graduation he, Waller, and Connelly had formed the Pine Valley Boys, one of San Francisco's first bluegrass bands. Soon after, they decided to move to Los Angeles because "that's where the music scene was for what we were doing."

"My parents were great about it, they really were. I think my Mom was a lot more worried about it than my Dad. He kept saying, "This is a really great opportunity.""

So, in 1963, the Pine Valley Boys migrated to Los Angeles and were soon approached to play one of Herb's most memorable gigs. "Hal Zieger, who resided in Los Angeles, had a recording studio and he saw us play at the Troubadour. He came up to after one performance and said, 'Would you kids like to play at this festival I'm putting together in New York City at Carnegie Hall?' We all said, 'Sure!' We were 18 or 19 years old and the event was called Hollywood Hootenanny. Odetta, Bill Harrell and the Virginians, the Pine Valley Boys, a couple of other groups were there. So he flew us back there. That was before jet planes, I think. It might have been a DC-6, and we all flew back to New York."

One of this most influential singing experiences for Herb came soon after in 1964 and 1965, when he played with Vern Williams and Ray Park. "Vern and Ray were both from Arkansas and they were the real deal. After I left the Pine Valley Boys, I started working full time with Vern and Ray. There were just monster singers and I learned a lot of bluegrass harmony ideas from them. They both taught me a lot."

Then in 1967 another memorable gig materialized for Herb. "I worked for Lester Flatt doing some shows in the southeast." Herb played with Lester backstage at the Grand Ole Opry because "Earl brought me down there and introduced me as the substitute that was going to be out on this tour. So Lester wanted to hear me play." (Scruggs was unable to do the tour due to medical reasons and had asked Herb to fill in for him.) "So, we played *Salty Dog Blues* and bunch of other tunes backstage. This was after their performance that day. And then we got on the bus and left for West Virginia. I was 23 years old and had been playing the banjo for about four years or so."

Later that same year, Herb recorded with The Dillards, replacing Doug Dillard on the *Wheatstraw Suite* and *Copperfield* albums. Herb continued working full-time with The Dillards until 1970. Not only was playing with The Dillards memorable, it was "good music, first rate stuff."

In every career, there is always an amount of luck that plays into becoming well known, especially when starting out. Sowing musical seeds while working with The Dillards produced a successful second stage to Herb's career. He readily admits that his playing with The Dillards was one of his luck breaks. "Because that led to me coming back to Los Angeles. We already had a major record deal with Elektra. And it led to my session career via Linda Ronstadt, and all the different singer/songwriters there were in town at that time." The singer/songwriters that Herb worked with was impressive. In addition to Ronstadt, the list included John Prine, Gram Parsons, and Emmylou Harris, among others.

In 1973, Herb toured extensively in Europe with Johnny Rivers, and also worked on other recording projects. In 1975, he toured with Jackson Browne, and from 1977 to 1980 he worked and toured

with John Denver. Reflecting on his time with Denver Herb recall, “He was really great, treated me well as a sideman, and we played some amazing venues.”

It was during his time with Denver that Herb recorded two solo albums on Epic Records; *Southwest* in 1976 and *Sandman* in 1977. Mike Post, his longtime friend, was the producer on both efforts. Post is also a very successful television music composer with such musical theme successes as *Hill Street Blues*, *Rockford Files*, *Law & Order*, and *NYPD Blue*. “Mike is a very talented arranger.” Through his association with Post, another new branch of Herb’s musical career began to emerge. Herb has worked with Post on a number of music for television scores like *Rockford Files*, *Kojak*, *Dukes of Hazard*, and *The A-Team*.

In the 1980’s, Herb was also busy recording more albums; *Here Today* with David Grisman and Vince Gill in 1982; and *Lonesome Feeling* in 1984. The Desert Rose Band was formed in 1986 with Chris Hillman, who Herb had met many years prior at The Troubadour when he first moved to Los Angeles. It was during this time that The Desert Rose Band produced five #1 country rock singles, of which Herb is very proud. These include *He’s Back & I’m Blue*, *One Step Forward*, *Summer Wind*, *I Still Believe in You*, and *She Don’t Love Nobody*.

The decade of the 1990’s was a time of great musical harvest for Pedersen’s recording efforts. The Laurel Canyon Ramblers were formed in ’94. In this next period of ten to twelve years, Herb would be part of over ten albums that included *Bluegrass Reunion* with Grisman and Gill, *Rambler Blues* with the Laurel Canyon Rambler (1995), *True Life Blues* with many bluegrass notable (1996), *Bakersfield Bound* with Chris Hillman (1996), *Out of the Woodwork* with the Rice Brothers and Hillman (1997), *Back on the Street Again* with the Laurel Canyon Ramblers (1998), *Rice, Rice, Hillman & Pedersen* (1999), *Running Wild* with the Rice Brothers and Hillman (2001), *Way Out West* with Hillman(2002) and *Old & in the Gray* with Grisman, Peter Rowan, and Vassar Clements (2002).

Herb is proud of all his works, but particularly of his participation in the Grammy winning *True Life Blues* produced by Todd Phillips. “Pete Rowan and I sang a tune *Travelin’ This Lonesome Road*, singing tenor and playing banjo. The Grammy is hanging up in my office. When there are more than five or six participants on a Grammy winner, they give you a plaque instead of a little gramophone. I’m very proud of that.”

With Herb’s lengthy and diverse recording experience, an impressive fact was discovered and revealed. His recording efforts in total have accumulated to more than 268 individual recorded items over his musical career. This includes CDs, albums, singles, movie and television scores, etc. An amazed “Wow! I didn’t know that,” was Herb’s comment when told of this fact, followed by laughter and smiles. With this memorable recording background and playing both guitar and banjo, Herb was asked if he preferred playing one instrument over the other. “I love them both,” he commented. “It just depends. With the Ramblers, I loved playing the banjo because it gives me an opportunity to do that. With Chris (Hillman), it’s a duet so I play the guitar. It just depends on the musical situation.”

“My harmony singing, banjo playing, and rhythm guitar playing are my strong points as an artist. I’m also very proud that I have a really good sense of time. That’s always been important to me in any group I’ve worked in because, I’m telling you, if its there, boy there’s nothing better. But if it isn’t there’s nothing worse. It’s a long night if you have somebody in the band that doesn’t have a good sense of time.”

Herb’s beautiful tenor singing is legendary and he is known for ability to sing harmony with just about anyone. He commented on his singing talents by saying, “It is totally a gift. I was just born with that ability. I could sing harmony parts when I was seven or eight years old. I would just hear the harmony parts. It’s never been a problem. So, I’ve been truly blessed with that ability. As far as blending with people, that’s just something I learned how to do as a studio player when you work on so many different recordings with so many different types of artists.”

Whether he is playing or singing, Herb is always striving for perfection in his performances. “We’re never going to sound like Flatt & Scruggs did on the Mercury Records, we all know that. That was the best it ever was, I think, that period from 1948 to about 1955. They wrote the book. They had the greatest musicians with them – a tight band sound. It had that *thing* we all strive for.”

“I think my banjo playing is better now that it was when I was in my thirties just because I am playing more attention to tone and note value, that kind of thing. In The Dillards, I had to play a lot of fast stuff when the audience goes. Nuts. With Ramblers, I had a chance to play even slow tunes. One of my heroes for that type of playing is Sonny Osborne. Sonny has a great facility for not only picking great tunes to records but also he has a wonderful dynamic on the banjo that nobody else has. I’ve learned from listening to him.”

Herb explained that his preference between traditional and progressive songs is a mixture of both. “On the last Rambler CD, we did a James Taylor tune called *You Can Close Your Eyes*. It sounds like a bluegrass tune because of the way we play it. It works great and people say, ‘Wow, what a great idea.’ And it was just a fun thing to do. I don’t go too far afield of that, though. I like the traditional stuff and anchor with that more than the progressive.”

Since Herb has been in the bluegrass scene for so many years and worked with such a variety of artists, he’s seen a lot of things happen along the way, both positive and negative. “From the positive standpoint, there’s been a real good bumper crop of great players that have come out in the last 15 years or so. There was a period of time in the 1970s where it got kind of stagnant.”

“Now it’s the children of the guys that I played with that have come into their own. And a lot of them are wonderful players, in no small part because of their fathers’ influence. David Grier, for example, Chris Thile, Tony Rice and his brothers. Their fathers influenced them all. I don’t know if Bryon Sutton’s dad played but there’s another great player.”

“Look at what Bela Fleck done with the banjo. He has taken it to such a new height. There’s a group of new players out there that are embracing the old stuff, which is great to hear. And there’s your solid guys like Sammy Shelor, Terry Baucom, and Terry Eldridge – he’s wonderful singer, player, and multi-instrumentalist. He is with The Grascals. Grisman and I went to the Station Inn in Nashville one night and Mike Compton was playing. David turned to me and said, ‘Not only does he play like Bill Monroe, he thinks like him,’ which I thought was interesting.”

Then there’s stalwarts like Roland White who are still out playing. We were all kids in Los Angeles coming up. There was Clarence White, Billy Ray Latham, Roger Bush and the Kentucky Colonels. Roland is still at it, which is great to see.”

Musician, singer, songwriter, arranger, and record producer, Herb has grown a California bumper crop of his own talents that he brings to whatever area he chooses to work in. “I’m really grateful for the opportunity to be able to go out and play music. And I know my pal Chris Hillman is too. It’s just a delight to be able to do this.”

Herb Pedersen’s contributions to music have helped us all enjoy a cornucopia of great music California-style that has continued to grow stronger as the years have progressed. Keep on playing, Herb!