

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

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Saints' Rest

It was a frigid Saturday morning—so cold I hated to take the instruments out of the house. But our little band had a 'gig' at Saints' Rest, the local coffee shop, and we were packing up the car.

We've been playing, on and off, at Saints' Rest for—who knows—nearly 40 years. We've seen it through a couple of owners, and now it's in the strong and capable hands of Sam (a woman, not a man), who hates decaf and takes no lip from anybody. Happily, Sam does seem to like The Too Many String Band, all five or six of us, depending on the day, and acts glad to have us perform on her narrow stage whenever our energies and schedules allowed.

I imagined we'd be playing to the staff and the very loud coffee grinder on this terrifically cold day, but when we hauled our first load of equipment inside, I was delighted to see the place packed: mothers with their children (clever Sam keeps toys and coloring books of the table by the sofa), a cluster of college kids, a couple of tables of townies. I figured they'd all come in to get warm, but—Good! An audience!

While we were arranging chairs and setting up mic stands, a tall, slender, youngish man I didn't recognize came up to the foot of the stage.

"Excuse me," he said. "You're obviously busy, but I just wonder...."

We indicated we were listening, and he went on. "My daughter—" he nodded toward a tiny girl, maybe 5 years old, making herself even smaller by pulling her knees up to her chest and huddling in the corner of the sofa. She had the kind of skin you could almost see through, her temples and eyelids a pale slivery blue. "My daughter," her father continued, and the girl dropped her head on her knees, "is very shy [who'd have guessed!?] but she has a sweet little voice and her favorite song is 'You Are My Sunshine.' If you could play it, I think she might sit in my lap and sing very softly. She wouldn't bother you."

"Course we can," said Hugh, with a flourish on his bongos. "Key of D," Sig announced, with a chord on his Martin.

"Thank you so much," the man said, and went back to join his daughter.

In a few minutes, we'd finished tuning the guitars and the mandolin, testing the sound level on the speakers, and checking the balance of the electric bass and the saxophone. We'd nodded and waved at faithful friends in the audience who knew most of our songs by heart. When we did a quick run-through of the first verse of 'Wagon Wheel,' three of the mothers and their kids started to dance. "Yes!!" we told them. And then we were ready.

"Ok, we open with....," said Sandy, his Angel mandolin at the ready.

"'You Are My Sunshine!'" Hugh shouted. "We open with 'You Are My Sunshine.'"

And we began: "You are my sunshine, my only...." Then, like one of

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those flowers that bloom once a year—Night Blooming Cereus, or something like that—that little girl pushed herself out of her daddy's lap and stood up straight, her cheeks now pink, her eyes wide. And she walked up to the stage, climbed the three steps to the platform, took the mic Sandy offered her and sang----

“... Sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray.

You'll never know, dear, how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away.”

And then the verse, and then EVERYBODY joined in on a repeat of the chorus.

There was one of those silent, full-to-bursting moments, and then—Applause! People stood up. I saw no-nonsense Sam clapping with her hands above her head. I looked at the daddy, who had proud tears all over his face.

That kid didn't have a 'sweet little' voice. She had a darn good voice—true and clear. And she knew it. She acknowledged her new fans with a smile and a small nod, then rejoined her father on the sofa, now a seasoned, confident performer.

In the four or so decades the Too Many String Band has been together (several fiddle players—a flighty breed--and a just-right banjo guy have come and gone, but the core has been constant) we've played at weddings, political rallies, church services, the State Fair, on the steps of the capital. But *this* day, *this* time....

As we were packing up to leave, one of the college students came up to say she'd sung along on all our songs, and she thought we were wonderful, “ALL of you, including that Sunshine girl.” Talk about icing on a double-rich chocolate cake.

On his way out, the daddy, holding his now-famous daughter's hand, stopped to say, “Thank you. So much. I sent the video to her mother, who can't believe it! And next time,” he added, wiping away one last tear, “next time, she wants to do 'Remember Me.' Do you know that one?”

No, but we can learn it. We may have a new band member. And maybe a manager....