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FEBRUARY 6, 2003

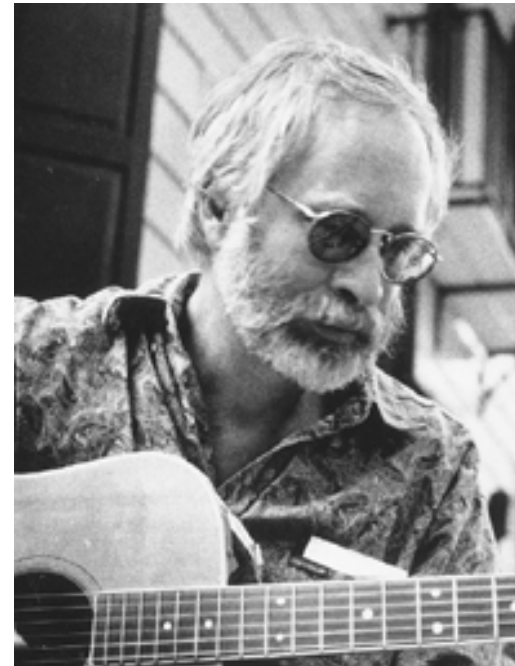
Music Musings


Notes from the Tidal Pool

BY [DAVID DOWLING](#)

I woke up this morning with the creepy feeling that something was gnawing at the backside of my consciousness way back where I store the guilt and stuff like that. About an hour after the dawning of the day, it dawned on me that roughly two weeks had passed since I last tapped out a diversion for my favorite little arts, entertainment, culture, news, and views publication.

I therefore made the decision to briefly return to sleep in hopes that I would be mystically visited by an inspirational journalistic dream. That didn't exactly happen, although I did manage a brief re-entry to Dreamland. The vision I had was actually along the lines of a dastardly recurring nightmare I've suffered off and on for years: *I'm back in school somewhere. I'm sitting in class and everyone but myself is enthusiastically taking a test. But while they're all busily writing away, I'm totally clueless as to what to say. In this morning's dream, I've just arrived at some sort of patio café where I'm expected to play guitar and sing. But I'm late. And I've forgotten my PA*



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*system. I somehow convince the owner that I don't need one, then when I try to reach into my pocket for my guitar pick. I'm unable to get my hand in there. The pocket is stitched shut! I struggle for what seems like a very long time and get nowhere. The owner frowns and says that my performance time is almost up & then suddenly a mysterious banjo player materializes. He gives me a disdainful look and starts plucking away at something vaguely Celtic. As I walk towards him, his banjo morphs into some sort of prehistoric organ in an ancient wooden box. Mercifully, I awake and leap out of bed. While I'm grabbing around for the coffee things I recall that it's Saturday and I've been asked to visit my longtime friend Allan Block, The Dean of the New England Fiddlers. Aha! If anyone deserves to be written about, it's him! I quickly email a plea to the editor, promising something by tomorrow and make a mental note to quit putting these little columns off until the last minute.*

I could hear Allan from a distance before I first saw him that spring day in 1980. It was my first day in St. Augustine. He was sitting on a bench scratching out Irish and Appalachian fiddle tunes while north and southbound tourists ambled past. His style was authentic and his approach was impassioned. I dropped some money into his straw basket. I was transfixed, and stood watching and listening for what I considered the proper passage of time before speaking. When we did speak, I found him to be most gregarious - and honestly delighted that someone in this street had some idea about what he was up to. I remember asking for, and jotting down, the names of the more obscure tunes *Morpeth Rant*, *Staten Island Hornpipe*, and *Barlow Knife*, to name just a few. Within a few days I was a new resident and began hanging out with Allan whenever I could. It's now 2003 and I've played with him every single year. So have many of my musical friends, including Beaufortonian Beek Webb in homes, clubs, and in the street, and we are

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all the better for it.

Shortly after meeting Allan, his whole history started tumbling out. And what a story it is! After a Wisconsin childhood that included the study of classical violin, he wound up in New York City in the late forties. It was here that he discovered Old-Timey fiddle styles, informed his family that he was no longer a violinist, but a fiddler and firmly ensconced himself in the burgeoning New York folk-revival adventure. He made his living as a cobbler, operating the Allan Block Sandal Shop in the West Village. Due in large part to the proximity of Washington Square Park, his leather shop became an important part of the scene in those days. By the early sixties, his Saturday afternoon jam sessions were attracting many of the NYC folk and blues musicians of that time. Allan, with a chuckle, recalls the young Bob Dylan sitting on his floor and presenting his new songs. There were many others. Smitten with the music of the Mississippi Delta, the Carolina Piedmont, and the Smokey Mountains, they had wound up in this bohemian metropolis. What stories there are!

Allan eventually moved to southern New Hampshire, where he still resides on his small farm for nine months of the year. As predictable as the timing of an Irish reel, he has spent early January to mid-April (tax time) in historic St. Augustine for at least twenty-five years. Wearing what I consider to be the world's most lived-in corduroy trousers and flannel shirts, he has entertained hundreds of thousands (millions?) of strollers with his traditional and pop tunes. (A pop tune to Allan Block is most likely to be from the twenties or thirties.) Those of us who can recognize such otherwise invisible culture consider him a local treasure and an unforgettable mentor.

There is so much to know about this friend of mine. His daughter Rory Block is an astounding (and world-renowned) blues guitar player and singer. Growing up at her dad's leather shop at West 4th St. did her no harm, and she eventually had the opportunity to learn from South Carolina's Reverend Gary Davis, Son House, and many others. It certainly shows. Rory is now 53 years old and touring vigorously as a solo act. Allan tells me they hope to record a dad/daughter album before too long.

Besides playing for New England dances, doing concerts in Washington D.C. and North Carolina, fiddling away in the streets and rooms of St. Augustine, and continuing to make his famous sandals, Allan has long been a published poet in such publications as *The Georgia Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Nation*. In 1972 he published his first book of poetry, *In Noah's Wake*. Although out-of-print, the publisher is William L. Bauhan. In 2001 he published *Unopened Mail, poems 1980-2001*. The publisher is Flatiron Press, Franconia, N.H. To me, Allan's poems are as adventurous as his songs are traditional. These two sensitivities are crucial in my world, and now, after having spent a couple of hours with him tonight catching up, sharing drink, and playing some favorite old tunes with this bright-eyed and wispy-haired New England gentleman it was my pleasure to part saying, Allan, see you later. You're my hero and you know that.

One of my fondest memories of Allan is watching him play *Pop Goes the Weasel* for a fascinated little girl, then putting aside his bow and asking, And what's your name? Tonight Allan proudly told me he has recently become a great-grandfather. I pray that we can enjoy his visits for many more winters.

It's now late, but as I contemplate Allan's long history of merrily informing himself and influencing so many others, I find it appropriate to include one of his recently published poems I assume with his permission:

***Child's Drawing***

*A road is a crayon line. One bus*

*humps along it like a caterpillar.*

*A mountain sharp as an icepick*

*props up the sun, which ignites*

*three strenuous sunflowers.*

*A fish swims uphill. Those*

*V s trailing after him are not birds,  
but his fins, an afterthought.*

*A small stick figure, triangle for dress,  
is signed in fervent yellow: JENNIFER*

*Green grass grows  
where the paper was too white.*

I suppose that I can be considered Allan s Down-South agent, so feel free to contact me if you would like to have his recordings or his book.

-- David Dowling is a born-and-bred Beaufortonian living in St. Augustine, Florida. He may be reached at the link below.

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