

It's about time I said this

Written by Verne Bullock
Wednesday, 14 March 2012 11:02 -

It was just another day, I thought, when I walked into my math class in the spring of 1959, knowing we were all going to take a test that day.

Mr. Downing passed out the tests and sat down behind his desk, reached back and pulled his old D-28 Martin out of its beat up hard-shell case, leaned back in his swivel chair, propped his feet up on his desk and began Travis pickin' and singing ... "It's a long dusty road, it's a hot and a heavy load, and the people that I meet ain't always kind ..."

I could not keep my mind on the test questions before me. I had been transported to another place, another time, another adventure, and I was completely captivated and totally intrigued! Nothing in my 12 years of living had ever taken me away so completely, and the feelings, the pleasure, the possibilities that filled my mind whisked me away on a dreamy ... "If only I could play and sing like him!"

Not ever being a shy kid, almost to my doom, brazenly, after handing in my test, I asked Mr. Downing, "Would you teach me to play the guitar and sing that song?"

Without a moment's hesitation, I watched as his lips formed the word "sure" and my dreams were coming true.

The next afternoon, after school, I was at his house with his old D-28 on my knee, and his arm and hand were guiding my fingers over the strings, and the sound was everywhere and AWESOME! I could feel the vibrations from the strings against my shirt, and it was like a part of myself was coming alive with new sensations and sounds and feelings I had heretofore never thought existed.

Every other night I was back, and soon I was begging mom and dad for a guitar of my own. But, I had to become OK with the one they had gotten my older brother, and he never really played. It was his, but I got to use it, and soon Mr. Downing was showing me around the Denver Folklore Center and introduced me to the owner, Harry Tufts. Amazing place and amazing people and amazing instruments and amazing music!

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Under his ever encouraging guidance, within a matter of months, I had learned to play “I Can’t Help But Wonder Where I Am Bound,” that great Tom Paxton song that snagged me in math class, and I had added several other folk songs to my growing repertoire, and soon I was performing for my family and friends. A Folk Singer was born, and I knew it was going to be my life or a huge part of my life forever.



After decades of entertaining and sharing his love for music, Verne Bullock takes time to share his powerful story of just how he got started singing and playing the guitar.

—Enterprise photo

Forty-eight years later, I am demonstrating food at a local King Soopers in Littleton, and I see my seventh-grade basketball coach, Don Medsker, limp around the corner and head down the aisle.

His 6-foot, 7-inch height and the limp that resulted from an automobile accident after he had

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graduated from Iowa State University were unmistakable! He was the only player to hold Wilt Chamberlain to under 13 points during a game in college.

Mr. Medsker became a teacher and was the head basketball coach at Sinclair Junior High, and I was one of his players. I ran up to him and asked if he was Don Medsker. He confirmed he was, and I said, "I'm Verne; I played basketball for you in seventh grade."

"Verne!" he shouts, and we had a great mini reunion in the aisle, one I will never forget. Today he is retired and still a totally great guy.

He could stand on the half court line and shoot his "set shot" to the basket half a court away ... swoosh ... nothin' but net, and he rarely ever missed. It also didn't take long to find out that his shortened leg didn't make him an easy mark for fast-dribbling, athletic young guys to get around or keep him from stealing the ball from us!!! A pro then and still a pro in my book any day!!

After catching up with each other's last 40 years, I asked him if he knew where George Downing was these days. "Silverplume," he said. "I think he hosts a melodrama up there every year or something." I was thrilled and we hugged and he was off, but I did get his business card!

Two weeks later, my wife and I were headed to the Vail area for another food demo, and when I saw the Silverplume exit off of I-70 just above Georgetown, off I went, and at the stop sign, I looked across the road and saw Grumpies Road House.

If George Downing was in this town, this place would know him, and I was determined to find him. Sure nuf, I found out he hosted a jam session there every Sunday night at 7 p.m. It was Monday, and my plan was set to be at Grumpies with my guitar the next Sunday night and see what was going on.

Walking through the door with my wife Valerie by my side, guitar in hand, 7 p.m., it was a full house, and at the big oblong table in front of the bar were 16 musicians, players of all ages and instruments, and at the head of the table, recognizable to me even with his oxygen thing in his nose, and playing the same old D-28 Martin, sat George Downing, my seventh-grade math

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teacher and the man who I owed my career and the travels and stories of my life to!

This man was and is "Legend" in my eyes, and I got out my guitar and took the empty chair right next to him, and he didn't have a clue who I was ... which was totally understandable ... he hadn't changed hardly at all ... tall, slender, artistic, good looking and totally humble.

I had become overweight, lost most of my hair, thought I was really somebody ... and so when I got a chance to butt in, I did, and when asked what song I wanted to play, I said, "I had a math teacher in seventh grade that taught me this one ... let's do 'Can't Help But Wonder,'" and in a moment we were off, and all of the people at the table were playing along, and a better performance of that song had never been done before and never would be done again! HAA HA HAHHA ...

BUT, the most remarkable thing happened then. Mr. Downing turned to me and said, "Wait a minute! Did you fly model airplanes when you were a kid?"

"Well, I tried to fly them but mostly crashed them!!"

"Are your parents Mormons or something like that?"

"Yep," I said.

He said, "Do you know that to this day, I still sleep in the bed your mom and dad gave me for teaching you to play the guitar 46 years ago?!!"

I was blown away, having never known mom and dad did that, but more so, I was so thankful to have found him, and to thank him for all he had done for me ... and to let him know that his teaching was not in vain as I had played and sung for audiences in 13 countries of the world and including most of the United States, and I had stayed true to the music he had richly shared with me ... and had done my best to perform every time as though he were sitting in the

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audience, because I always wanted to hear him say, "Well done, Verne!" which he sometimes told me when he was teaching me ... as did Don Metzger, never critical or condemning, but always encouraging.

Encouraging words from two respected teachers in my early years kept me from the path of self destruction and taught me to give the talents and gifts I have been given away, to benefit others and to hopefully touch lives in ways I never need to know about.

Just to know what I have been given, and to gratefully give away what I have received, is all I need to keep me singing and telling this story to the city where it all began. Denver is a great city and has been an important part of my life and career, and I want to say thanks. To all of you great people along the way, I say Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!

Now, do you have a favorite song I could play for you? What would you like to hear?

This story was published in a special 2012 edition of Pieces of Denver magazine. Bullock is a singer and entertainer who has traveled all over the world.

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