

# DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

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BEN MILLER

Roger Salloom and his band, the Stragglers, will offer their 19th free summer concert in Northampton today at 6 p.m. in the Pines Theater at Look Park.

## Salloom's in bloom: 19th free Pines concert, new CD, documentary

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Staff Writer

**NORTHAMPTON** — Musician Roger Salloom stages his 19th free summer concert in Northampton tonight. He's finished a new album — his first since CDs arrived on the scene back in the 1980s — and is being tailed by a Washington, D.C., filmmaker intent on capturing how music threads through this unusual life.

In honor of tonight's "Splendor in the Grass" concert, which starts at 6 p.m. in Look Park, here are 19 things to

■ See **SALLOOM**/Page A4

A4 DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

## Salloom's in bloom, concert tonight

■ Continued from Page A1

know about the 56-year-old Salloom:

**1. Humility, like beauty, may only be skin deep:** Salloom claims to be as surprised as anyone that Chris Sautter, a lawyer and independent filmmaker, is spending thousands of dollars a day to keep a six-member crew in the field on this project. "I wonder, how can I be that interesting?" Salloom says. But after years on stage, he knows that people are touched by music, including his own, and do funny things as a result. "He's a fan who happens to be a filmmaker," Salloom said.

**2. Music inspires the timid soul:** Salloom, who grew up in Worcester, dates his career in music to the lessons he started at the age of 12, at his mother's insistence. "She said it would draw me out, which it did." He played the banjo at his first real gig, a charity show for children that he tackled at age 14, plucking out early folk at the end of the Eisenhower era.

After decades fronting a band, he's feeling more and more retiring, once again: "I'm so happy to step back and let other people sing the songs. If I had my druthers, I'd be just as happy playing behind a rice-paper screen."

**3. Being a musician, for Salloom, means being a filter for one's times:** In the '60s, life in the United States — and contemporary music — was roiled by war and the struggle for civil rights, among other things. "All that filtered through me. All that stuff was coursing through me like juice," he says. "I was living every moment and was totally spontaneous. I was happy to die in a few years. I was wired. It was cathartic. You felt stuff that wasn't quite there yet, as a performer, but you could feel it, and see it."

**4. Today, he detects currents of anxiety:** Since Sept. 11, a performer attuned to his or her culture can't avoid filtering that sense of unease, he says. He is drawn to all things American and grieves for the civilians killed in the attacks.

**5. The '60s soured him on the idea of playing for pay:** He says he long resisted being part of the "music business." Yes, that sounds like something said by a person who failed to crack into the business, but Salloom may have been too free a spirit to knuckle down in the industry. He says he can't even estimate what he took home as pay from music, after all his band's expenses were

accounted for. He admits he has lacked ambition, unlike others in the business intent on striking pay dirt. "They'd bite right through the mic stand to get to the other side of it. ... I just didn't think money and music should mix."

**6. Even so, friendships in the cutthroat music business have enriched him:** In the years before he came to Northampton, Salloom was taken under the wing, financially, of a successful American rock band, Creedence Clearwater Revival. In 1978 through 1980, the band sponsored his work. "They gave me money and kept me alive for a while."

**7. So with children to help support, he looked for other ways to earn money:** A few years after settling down in to Northampton (on the advice of a friend, Elliott Sherman, who played with the band Clean Living) Salloom started Eastern Entertainment, a booking service for musicians. He started out by helping friends land gigs, but saw the business grow. Though he's phasing the business out, he handled bookings for last month's one-day blues festival at the Three-County Fairgrounds in Northampton.

# Salloom's in bloom, concert tonight

■ Continued from Page A1

**8. Why the Band and Bob Dylan mean so much to him:** The Band because Salloom played with them a half dozen times (he remains friends with Levon Helm) and Dylan for reasons that obvious to anyone reading a story about an American musician.

**9. Though he wore pleated slacks and a short-sleeved dress shirt to a photo shoot, he has not always passed for an adult:** Back at Indiana University, the undergrad and aspiring musician painted his boots green and twisted his hair into curls that he crowned with bits of tin foil. "I had never seen it before," he said of that look. "It was just who I thought I should be." He adds with a smile, "At 20, I was at the vortex of many personality disorders."

**10. More on that look:** "On stage, I used to look like an organ grinder. I could get you a photo that would knock your socks off. My vision was of an organ grinder-Woody Guthrie type guy. That was my vision for years."

**11. Those 50 and over, for all their aches and complaints,**

can take pleasure in understanding those days: Looking back on an insane time, Salloom recalls the undercurrent of wonder about who was sane. He cites the Beatles' song, "Fool on the Hill" and mentions the movie "King of Hearts," about an insane asylum. Back then, people had trouble lining it all up. "Is the insane man really the wise one?" he asks.

**12. Playing nationally, giving locally:** Salloom says he began the free concert series, in 1983, because he'd been traveling with his music and wasn't well known in the Valley. "I wanted to do something for my home community. I wanted it to be like it was in the parks of San Francisco. That was the concept."

**13. Life on stage with Salloom must not be so bad, for there's been scant turnover within his band, The Stragglers:** Salloom recently parted company with his drummer, Jeff Hinrichs, after 17 years. Otherwise, the faces have remained the same. The band's personnel now includes Billy Klock on drums, Hal Benoit on guitar and Jeff Dostal on bass.

**14. In his forthcoming CD, which includes songs pulled from his songwriting career, the young Salloom and the musician he is today reconcile:** That's the case, especially, on "Delicatessen II," a song he wrote 36 or so years ago. For the CD, called "If This Is It, I'm Ready," he added a chorus. "This song needed something to make all these ideas come together and gel."

**15. Playing with what's ridiculous about life, but**

leveling in the end: While some of Salloom's songs retain the sensibility of the college kid who painted his boots green, he says he's learned that absurdism and parody aren't enough. "You're there as a musician to use your technique to seduce the listener. But you've got to say something at the end that's universally true — or you've used technique for nothing."

**16. As he gets older, he's less willing to suffer failed experiments, his or anyone's:** "I respect the good song. And get impatient about the bad song."

**17. After decades in this business, Salloom knows his way around both guitar strings and heartstrings:** Salloom's wife, Donna, has told him that the new CD conveys a lot of sadness. He says he respects the role emotion plays in music, though it can go too far. "Sentimentality is the greatest enemy of the artist," he said "Have I avoided that? No, I fall into it."

**18. A song only brings out what lies inside a listener:** "Some people have a resonating sadness that resides in them. It's a tenant. When a sound comes along that has that pain, they grab onto it because it represents their feelings."

**19. So how do you catch this guy in action?** Admission to the outdoor Pines Theater at Look Park is free. There is a \$4 special-event entry fee for cars. People can bring blankets, chairs, picnics and beverages — but no glass bottles. No pets are allowed. Joining Salloom will be singer Janet Ryan and the band The Memphis Flyers. The rain date is July 24.