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An acclaimed songwriter gets his due – on film

June 13, 2004 Page: G1

By Richard Duckett

Roger Salloom did get out of Worcester. But for 15 years he had pretty much gotten out of music. However, the 58-year-old singer-songwriter, perhaps best known in these parts for his song “Out of Worcester” with its surprisingly cheerful-sounding refrain of “I’ve got to get out of Worcester,” is back performing again.

And he’s coming back to Worcester.

Well, at least he’ll be at the Bijou Community Cinema in Worcester on Friday when a new documentary film about Salloom titled “So Glad I Made It” will be screened at 7 p.m. After the movie is shown, Salloom will sing a few songs for the audience.

How about “Out of Worcester”?

“If people want me to, sure,” Salloom said good-naturedly during an interview out of Northampton, where Salloom has made his home for many years. “In some circles I’m known for that song.”

Chris Sautter, who made the documentary, knows quite a few other Salloom songs, and is obviously a great admirer. His film is subtitled “The Saga of Roger Salloom, America’s best unknown songwriter.”

Sautter is a true believer.

“There’s no doubt in my mind, I think his song writing is up there with a lot of people who are up there and well known,” Sautter said from Washington, D.C., where he works as a political consultant and runs Sautter Films.

How does Salloom feel about Sautter’s appraisal?

“I was flattered by what he said,” Salloom replied. “I think I’m a pretty good songwriter. I know I’m better than a lot of people who are famous.” He paused. You can tell that Salloom – by his own admission – is shy and a little uncomfortable talking about himself. “But there are a lot of good songwriters out there. I don’t know where I stand. But I’m deeply flattered. But I know I’m a good songwriter.”

And yet Sautter said the commercial success that many thought Salloom would enjoy somehow eluded him. His film traces Salloom’s early career, and also catches up to the present. Sautter said Salloom refuses to give up on a dream, even if that dream changes as you get older.

Salloom was born and raised in Worcester, and first got out of town as a student at Indiana University in



Singer-songwriter Roger Salloom, center, chats with WRSI disc jockey Johnny Memphis at the radio station's studio. At left is guitarist Hal Benoit.

Bloomington, Ind. He had already established a reputation as a talented acoustic folk/blues singer-songwriter. Sautter was a couple of years behind Salloom at Indiana University.

In 1968 Salloom signed with the legendary Chess Records and organized a psychedelic band, Salloom, Sinclair, and the Mother Bear that plunged into the San Francisco music scene and released an album which received critical acclaim.

“His signing with Chess Records in 1968 was really major news on the campus of Indiana University,” Sautter said.

“I had his records, and when he signed with Chess I had assumed, and most people who followed his music assumed, we would be hearing and enjoying his music for years and years to come. But it didn’t quite turn out that way.”

Sautter had never met Salloom, but always had the name and music in the back

of his mind. “I had always wondered what happened to Roger Salloom. Around 2001 I began to hear from people I know that he was starting to write and perform again.”

Sautter decided to do a computer Google search for Salloom, and in short order they were corresponding by e-mail. Salloom sent Sautter a demo tape of new songs he had recorded.

Sautter, who is originally from Wheaton, Ill., was political director of former Senator Bob Kerrey’s 1992 presidential campaign. He has also kept in the back of his mind that he loves movies and wants to make films. As a young lawyer in the 1970s he attempted to make a documentary about a blues singer named Yank Rachell. The project stalled, but in 2002 he finally made a full length documentary, “The King of Steeltown” about Chicago-style machine politics in the rust-belt city of East Chicago. It won Best Political Documentary at the New York International Independent Film and Festival.

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An acclaimed songwriter gets his due – on film *continued*

June 13, 2004

“I thought one successful film warrants another try,” Sautter said.

How about a film on Roger Salloom?

Sautter recalled that Salloom said to him his response “without thinking was yes, then after careful thought it’s yes, yes...”

“But I think as the day approached he became nervous about it.”

Salloom said, “We didn’t know what to expect. We were sitting in our little house, my wife and I, and up pulls this big truck.”

He writes his songs in what he called a small room in his little house. Now Salloom had some company in the small room. “There were six people and a dolly.”

Sautter said the filming worked out well and the two got along fine. They went to Worcester together to shoot footage for a sequence based on “Out of Worcester.” Salloom was also writing new material, and one song, “So Glad I Made It,” became the title of the documentary. “It really encapsulated the theme of the film,” Sautter said.

“The songs he’s written recently are as good as anything he’s written. And he always was a good songwriter.”

Indeed, the songs on his recent CD “Eventually” and

on the soundtrack for “So Glad I Made It” can be haunting as well as catchy and instantly likable. And Salloom’s singing voice is both smooth and straightforward and perfectly able to capture the mood of a given piece.

Asked about his perception of how Salloom regards the elusive fame and fortune, Sautter said, “he’s perfectly willing to accept if this is all there is, he’s perfectly willing to accept that. But the feeling that there’s unfulfilled promise continues to gnaw at him.”

What had happened to Salloom?

He had shared the stage at the legendary Fillmore West with now famous acts such as Santana and Van Morrison. But then he returned to Worcester to work at his uncle’s clothing store and finish his degree at Worcester State College. He then moved to Nashville, found he wasn’t a country singer, and came back to Worcester again for a while before leaving for Western Massachusetts. It was during his last tenure in the city that he wrote and recorded “Out of Worcester” in 1975.

The movie addresses the issue of Salloom’s struggles, and several theories and opinions are offered as to why he is not a household word among music fans.

“I think it is a combination of things,” Sautter said.

“One is timing. When he went to san Francisco, I think he came almost a year too late. ... The record label did not put out a 45. ... They were called ‘album rock’ - but FM for album rock was still in its infancy. ... They never did some of the things that other groups did to get a huge fan base.”

In short, Sautter said, “There’s a moment in the music business that you have to break through, and if it doesn’t happen – it doesn’t happen.”

Salloom said, “I think success is sort of a sucker punch. It doesn’t mean happiness, it doesn’t mean contentment. I don’t perform for money, I don’t perform for sex, I don’t perform for drugs. I just do it for a little recognition.”

On the other hand, as he acknowledges on his own Web site, www.rogersalloom.com, he hasn’t always helped himself.

“I have been my own worst enemy for years,” he writes. “At times, I have tried to ignore my music because it brought me pain and exposure, and I thought it was hopeless anyway. But deep in my thoughts I always had the fantasy that I would do one more tour. But first I realized I had to go back to that gorilla in the middle of my living room and have a face-to-face friendly talk ... maybe not so friendly.”

As for the 15 year-hiatus, “I would play a little bit, but I was terrified of performing. I was really despondent,” Salloom said.

He worked as a booking agent for other musical acts, and also co-authored with his son a comic strip called “Leold.”

What brought him back to music?

“My wife (Donna),” he said. “A very sweet, kind wife. And she said ‘You should play again. You’re very good.’”

That was four years ago.

“In just four years I have a CD, I have a manager, and now I have a film. Most people would give their eye teeth for that,” Salloom said.

So maybe Salloom will become famous after all.

“I’m basically shy. I don’t think I crave it,” he said. “But I want to show I’m good.”

As for “Out of Worcester,” Salloom wanted to explain.

“I wrote it at a time in the ’70s when Worcester was a pretty tough place to live. If you were creative, artistic, there was not a lot of support. But it’s changed a lot. It’s definitely a different place.”