



MARK PEARSON
MUSIC

What a Wonderful World

I

*I see trees of green red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world*

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That's a Brothers Four recording of the song "What a Wonderful World." A world of performing opened up for me after I did my first solo concert in nearly ten years in October of 87. I especially liked singing at resorts like Elkhorn near Sun Valley or Sun Mountain Lodge near Winthrop. I would go for two or three weeks hiking or cross-country skiing during the day and then performing at night. People tend to be happy and with their family and friends at those places. Some who were on vacation for a week or more might come back two or three nights in a row. We would start an ongoing musical conversation.

McCoy and I also kept singing but in a more relaxed way. After nearly a decade of feeling I needed him next to me when I performed now we were choosing to sing together and having a lot more fun doing it.

As far as songwriting and trying to get my songs recorded by other artists the small company that came so close to getting Johnny Cash to record "Dear Partner" was lining up investors with plans to become a major player in the music scene in Nashville. They wanted to produce records and develop artists as well as publish songs and pitch songs. They made me feel that I was an important part of their plans. The problem was that they waited every day for more than three years for their investors to come through. Finally everyone realized the money wasn't going to be there. During that time as we waited for it to happen my dreams lived happily inside of their dreams. As a songwriter I spent a lot of time writing songs I thought that they would want to hear. Because I had a publisher who was supportive when I visited Nashville during those years I didn't spend a lot of time developing relationships with other publishers.

In the spring of 89 I presented an idea I had for a double-necked banjo to the Gibson Company in Nashville. I figured with all the possible 5 string banjo tunings as well as the tenor and plectrum four-string styles that having two necks would give

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a banjo player a lot more possibilities on any given song. For a few weeks I had some illusions or more accurately delusions of grandeur. Let's just say that although Gibson talked about creating a prototype that the idea never really flew.

Between the mid to late 80's The Brothers Four performed regularly if sporadically. We did a number of conventions in the Northwest. A few times we were a featured act at a World Folk Music Association or WFMA meetings outside of Washington, DC.

We occasionally toured the US. In August of 88 we sang at the Bangor, Maine State Fair. It was the hottest day on record in the Northeast the only time Harvard was ever closed on account of heat. We performed that afternoon in a portable metal band shell. Barbequed folk music.

That weekend the group had lunch with Dave Guard a founding member of The Kingston Trio who had recently moved to New England. I think I can safely say that he inspired more kids myself included to pick up a five-string banjo than anyone before or since. The only possible rival for that distinction Pete Seeger. Guard always credited Pete's book "How To Play the 5-String Banjo" with giving him inspiration and direction when he was learning to play. There were a few years when I was growing up that I wanted to be Dave Guard. Now here I was sitting next to him and he was asking me to pass him the bread and butter.

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*I see skies of blue clouds of white
Bright blessed day the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world*

Something began to shift for The Brothers Four in 1989. It was as if the group somehow began going from being simply old and from another era to gaining a certain respect and status. The group was inducted into the Northwest Area Music Association Hall of Fame that year. There was a successful 30th Anniversary concert at the Seattle Opera House. The most notable change, however, was in Japan where the group has always had its greatest success.

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There are a lot of explanations and at the same time no explaining the kind of success The Brothers Four had and continue to have in Japan. There's luck of course, right place right time. In 1962 The Brothers Four were the first folk group to tour Japan. Japanese Baby Boomers born not in the shadow of the greatest generation but that of foreign occupation were becoming teenagers and looking for ways to find and define themselves and differentiate themselves from their parents and the recent past a past that included the only war their country ever lost.

At the 2nd Campfire I talk about how music in the US changed on September 9, 1956 when Elvis first appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and then changed again on February 9, 1964 when Sullivan introduced The Beatles. Growing up between those two musical moments one could choose to be a rocker and pledge allegiance to Elvis the King and his many acolytes or perhaps choose to be a folkie and be loyal to those striped shirted prince's The Kingston Trio and groups that followed like Peter, Paul, and Mary and, yes, The Brothers Four. Everything changed when President Kennedy died the Viet Nam War arrived and Bob Dylan blurred the lines in 65 by trading in his Gibson flat-top for a Fender Telecaster.

Kids in Japan created similar folk-rock allegiances and it ironically was two groups from the Pacific Northwest who may have represented the folk-rock lines and alliances best. The Ventures from Tacoma became a face of rock and roll and The Brothers Four from Seattle a face of folk music. Both groups toured Japan for the first time in 1962. Both have returned to Japan regularly for more than fifty years. Fans of both groups found their music of choice on Sony transistor radios while cheering their country's return to the world stage with the lighting of the Olympic torch in Tokyo in the summer of 1964. Without war or assassination to blur lines or alter allegiances the folk-rock divide lasted longer in Japan than it did in the US with The Brothers Four among its beneficiaries.

In Japan the group had guitars named after them. A restaurant was opened with menus in the shape of Brothers Four album covers. The group was invited to the homes of filmmaker Akira Kurasawa and Sony founder Akio Morita so those men's kids could meet the guys and explain to them how they were part of singing groups that had performed Brothers Four music. Some tribute groups that formed 50 years ago still get together to perform Brothers Four songs at the Tokyo folk club Back in Town. The Brothers Four Friends' club, we are not

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fanatics we are your friends they told the group, formed in 1962 is still active with lots of lifetime members attending multiple performances every time the group visits.

A man who came up after a show a few years ago might have said it best. "Because of The Brothers Four I learned English," he began. What he was referring to was how he and so many others his age would listen over and over to Brothers Four songs practicing their English.

"Because I learned English," he continued, "I did well in school. Because I did well in school I went to the University. Because I did well at the university I got a good job. Because I got a good job I met my friends. Because I met my friends I met my wife. Because I met my wife I have my children. Because I have my children I have my life. Because of The Brothers Four."

An amazing legacy for a folk group from Seattle.

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*The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people going by
I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do
They're really saying "I love you"*

While the success of the group in Japan starts with luck and timing and is followed by a willingness to tour Japan often as well as a natural connection and affection between the group and the people of Japan a most important element is the continued dedication and hard work of Bob Flick one of The Brothers Four's founding members. For every tour the group takes Bob makes at least one trip that precedes it to meet and work with venues and sponsors and promoters. In the more than fifty tours the group has made to Japan Bob has taken at least as many additional trips. The group has recorded upwards of thirty album projects exclusively for Japan. Bob has produced most of them written a number of the songs on those albums sometimes working with well-known Japanese songwriters.

One of the best things about being part of The Brothers Four is how much I like the other guys. There are at least two lives in a touring group. There is the life you have together on the stage and then there's all the

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other hours you share traveling and being on the road. There've been some changes in personnel over the years. My strongest bonds are with the guys I started with including Dick Foley and John Paine and those I am singing with now including Karl Olsen and of course Mike McCoy. Bob Flick is the one person who was part of that original group and is part of the current group as well.

With apologies to Mike McCoy Bob remains the most important person in my career. When we first sang together forty-five years ago he was the seasoned vet of thirty and I was the kid of twenty-one. Through the years he has been my mentor believed in me when I didn't have much faith in myself hired me as a session player when he was recording lots of commercials was always generous with his time when I was recording. He produced both the Between Friends albums for McCoy and me. He was always happy to sit in whenever I went into the studio myself. After forty-five years there is a familiarity and a trust and a sense of gratitude. Gratitude in part that Bob has been so willing to work so hard to keep the group's connection with Japan so vital.

IV

*I hear babies cry I watch them grow
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know
And I think to myself what a wonderful world*

In May of 89 The Brothers Four returned to Japan for the first time in more than four years. We traveled to over thirty cities doing six shows a week for six weeks. It was grueling but gratifying and signaled a group renaissance in Japan that continues to this day.

The tour provided me with enough money to begin feeling a little ahead instead of a little behind for the first time in years. I even bought a small apartment on Seattle's Capitol Hill.

On that trip to Japan I also started to realize how much I like to explore new places or sometimes simply wander. As busy as our schedule was most days there was time to fill a backpack with a guidebook, a map, and bottle of water and just meander for a couple of hours. Before long I got comfortable riding the subways and I became almost unstoppable. Because I get anxious easily it was fun to find out that even when I got temporarily lost I simply took that all in stride.

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Of course there was a lot to learn. It was the last time the group flew coach class to Japan. We rode four across in the middle aisle of a 747 and I was in one of the middle seats. A few days before we left I bought a new pair of penny loafers for the trip. I took them off when the plane took off. By the time we landed my feet had swelled so much I almost couldn't get the shoes back on.

At that time Japan appeared to be taking over the world economically. I thought that when we got back to Seattle I would try to meet with someone at the Nordstrom's and explain what a great idea it would be that if instead of selling penny loafers they would sell what I called "yenny loafers." This was only a few months after my double-necked banjo presentation to the Gibson Company so I decided to simply put one yen coins in my own penny loafers and leave it at that.

In the hotels that trip I watched cable or Satellite TV for the first time a concept that inspired Bruce Springsteen to write "57 Channels and Nothin' On." But there was plenty on during the 24 hour news cycles in May and June of 1989 both on BBC and CNN. With a one-hour time difference between Japan and Beijing, China we watched first the protests and then the massacre at Tiananmen Square climaxed by the unforgettable image of a single man standing up to a line of tanks.

The group returned a year later for a month long tour of Japan solidifying our renewed status in the Asian market. Starting with that trip we began flying Business Class across the Pacific. I started wearing lace up shoes instead of loafers. The group recorded a new album exclusively for Japan featuring a song Bob wrote for the Flowers and Green Expo 90 in Osaka. We debuted the song at the Expo. We appeared for the first time in 22 years on the long running TV show Music Fair. The Brothers Four were clearly back in the hearts if not on the charts of the Japanese people.

Since then we've returned nearly every year. We've also made multiple trips to South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, before and after the handover, and even toured Mainland China. Simply put Japan sustained The Brothers Four's career and The Brothers Four sustained mine.

People sometimes ask me if I get tired of the road. First of all we're not on the road that much anymore. I like being with the guys and representing the music I grew up with. And the truth is I like to go to bed after a standing ovation. After saying all that there's something special about coming home. There are some lines in the Robert Frost poem "Birches" that help explain the feelings.

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*"I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better."*

When the plane landed in Seattle and I came back to earth after that tour in 1990 love would be waiting with open arms.

Yes, I think to myself what a wonderful world!



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