

Music collaboration giant Bob Brozman dies at age 59



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

Bob Brozman at home in July 1992. Brozman died Tuesday at 59.

Santa Cruz musician toured the world, wrote the book on National steel guitars

By WALLACE BAINE

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SANTA CRUZ — Guitarist and ethnomusicologist Bob Brozman, one of the most internationally prominent musicians to come out of Santa Cruz County, was found dead Tuesday in his home. He was 59.

Brozman had built a career as a guitarist and ethnomusicologist, moving from an early fascination with the delta blues of the South to a consuming passion for the traditional music of Hawaii. He was also one

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of the world's leading authorities on the National steel guitar.

THE EARLY YEARS

Brozman emerged in Santa Cruz in the 1970s as a street musician, playing a decidedly uncontemporary American roots style of music. Known for playing anything from obscure jazz tunes to Hawaiian chanties, often dressed in a white suit, Brozman was one of Santa Cruz's most familiar faces in clubs before launching a recording career that took him around the world.

In recent years, Brozman traveled extensively, performing in Europe, Asia, the Americas and the South Pacific. He often said that his work as a musician was a form of anthropology. His love for early jazz, blues and Hawaiian, as well as Caribbean, Okinawan and Afro-Latin forms, may have been seen as a form of eclecticism, but, he said, each musical tradition was linked.

"I play music that is the accidental result of colonial exploitation," he once said in an interview.

Brozman discovered the National steel guitar at the age of 13. It was, he said, a turning point in his life.

"At the very beginning," said his longtime friend, collaborator and producer Daniel Thomas, "Bob was fascinated with the bottle-neck. He told me once that to find a style, you have to find all the things you don't like. He didn't like things plugged in. So that led him to the acoustic guitar. But he didn't think it was loud enough, so that led him to the lap steel, then the bottle-neck."

From there, Brozman developed an obsession with 78-rpm recordings of early American music, which led him to his first exposure to Hawaiian and Calypso. He studied ethnomusicology at

BIOGRAPHY

BOB BROZMAN

BORN: March 8, 1954,

New York City

DIED: April 23, 2013,
Santa Cruz

SURVIVORS: Wife Haley S. Robertson; daughter Zoe Brozman

EDUCATION: Washington University in St. Louis

CAREER: First emerged as a street and club musician in Santa Cruz before becoming a recording artist and world-touring musician. Released his first solo album in 1981, 'Blue Hula Stomp,' and released about 30 albums after, including many collaborations with musicians from all over the world. Authored the definitive work on National steel guitars 'The History and Artistry of National Resonator Instruments.'

SERVICES: Pending

Washington University in St. Louis, and, while in college, he would often travel throughout the South to play with and learn from jazz and blues musicians who started playing in the 1920s and '30s.

MIXED WITH CULTURE

Anthropological understanding was always a feature of Brozman's music. While he was popular in Europe early in his career for his rakish image, often interpreted by the media as part Leon Redbone, part Frank Zappa, he never pursued wide commercial success in the U.S. He was intent on documenting and eventually actively participating in all the ways the guitar interacted with local cultural traditions.

"He was always interested," said Thomas, "in what happens when a guitar is left behind in some culture or on some island with no instructions on how to use it, and how it adapts to what that culture feels is consonant.



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Bob Brozman at home in July 1992. Brozman died Tuesday at 59.

He told me, 'I just feel like I'm here to follow the guitar to all the places it finds a home.'

Brozman was one of American music's greatest collaborators, having recorded albums with musicians in a dizzying number of cultures, including Indian master Debashish Bhattacharya, American mandolin master David Grisman and even local string bands from Papua New Guinea in a release designed to benefit local music in that nation.

TOUR MEMORIES

Thomas remembered a Canadian tour in which Brozman led a huge collaboration between musicians from India, South America, Europe and Japan.

"We had 16 musicians who had mostly never met," he said. "We had a Greek speaker with no translator, a Japanese musician with no translator, and others from India, South America, all over the place. We had one day to rehearse, and without exception every one of these virtuoso musicians were terror-struck, except for Bob. He just said, 'Don't worry, I'm the hub here, plug your spokes in and here's what we're going to do.'"

"The very next day we were in front of 20,000 people at the Winnipeg Folk Festival, with a 16-man band, and one day of rehearsal. I don't know any other musicians who had cajones like

that."

The secret to his collaborative success, he told the Sentinel in 2000, was a deeply thought-out approach that involved educating himself about a given culture, understanding music's place in that culture, figuring out the body language of how musicians communicate comfort or discomfort, and anthropological cues — "observing pupil diameter, facial movement, respiration and fine muscle movement so that I'm as empathetic as possible toward how a person approaches their music and their instrument."

Brozman was severely injured in a car accident in 1980, and carried pain with him the rest of his life. Still, he kept up a prodigious traveling schedule that brought him to almost every corner of the globe.

He had been popular in Germany, France and the U.K. for years, and had played to sold-out audiences in Spain, Italy and Australia. He played widely in Japan, and was known to perform in unusual places such as Singapore.

NEWS TRAVELS FAST

Thomas, who has been Brozman's closest musical ally for the past 20 years, said he spent much of the day on Thursday calling people all over the world with the news of Brozman's passing. Soon, his email folders began filling up.

"It's astonishing to me," said Thomas, "how many people I don't know who know Bob's work and who managed to find me online to express their grief. I've received about a thousand messages in the past six hours, from people I don't even know who have the albums and getting the albums out and thinking, 'Who can I say this to? Who can I tell how important he was to me, even though I never knew him.'"

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