



Santa Cruz icon and musical ambassador Bob Brozman died at age 59 last week, leaving a legacy of incredible skill and intellect—and a human side, too **BY STEVE PALOPOLI**

Comedian Martin Mull once said that talking about music is like dancing about architecture. Over the years, the quote has been misattributed to at least a dozen people—Frank Zappa, Steve Martin, Laurie Anderson, Thelonious Monk, John Cage, George Carlin, Elvis Costello (who did at least repeat it once, several years later), William S. Burroughs and many more.

The reason those words keep getting put into so many smart and famous people's mouths is that they're so infuriatingly true. They simply and elegantly sum up the futility of trying to capture with nouns and adjectives something as intuitive and soulful as music.

And yet, we keep trying. I have written countless sentences describing music by now, and absorbed exponentially more. And yet for all the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of things I've read and heard people say about music, only one of them ever shook my understanding of the art form to its core.

The man who said it was Bob Brozman.

At one of his shows, the world-renowned Santa Cruz guitarist went on an extended tangent between songs about time signatures. My attention started to drift a little as he started talking about the technicalities of various beats and measures. Then, out of nowhere, he declared that in reality, there are *no* time signatures. No 4/4 beat, no 3/4, no 6/8, he said.

"It's all just 1, 1, 1, 1."

It's difficult to describe the effect this statement had

on my brain; like some kind of volatile super drug, it both expanded it and melted it at the same time. It so revolutionized my thinking about music that to this day, I still don't believe I've fully wrapped my mind around it.

After hearing him say the same thing at a few shows after that, I finally asked him about it. I told him that even though I understood the words, I didn't feel like I could even begin to understand the implications. Could he possibly explain it to me?

He took a couple of seconds, as if struggling to grasp what it could be that I didn't grasp. Then he gave me a look I'll never forget—part encouragement, part pity. He tapped his index finger on the open palm of his other hand slowly, and simply said, "1, 1, 1, 1."



Musical Mind

Brozman was like that. His thinking about music was so advanced, so much closer to its true nature, that he must have struggled sometimes to explain it to the rest of us.

But he never gave up on talking about music, either. Instead, the ideas just poured out of him, both on record and in conversation. He never lost the intellectual and musical curiosity that stretched back to the 1960s New York cultural explosion he grew up in. And when he took in new ideas via his famous collaborations with players from a wide range of cultures, he would process them, and then pour those out, too.

By the time he died on April 23, he had said and taught so much, both as a guitarist and an ethnomusicologist. With his sharp wit, his trademark National steel sound, his global sonic vision and an approach to his instruments that balanced wild-man blues with methodical logic, he transformed so many people's thinking about music, just as he did mine.

"Everybody's one of a kind, but Bob took it to another level," says his

longtime friend John Sandidge of Snazzy Productions, who has booked live performances by Brozman since the early '80s. "You can talk about talent all you want, but he's somebody where it goes far beyond how well he could play guitar."

It's so true, and maybe that's the easiest thing to forget. Because *goddamn*, he could play it.

"Bob was a force of nature when he performed, with an energy, focus and musicality that few musicians ever achieve," says multi-instrumentalist David Lindley, who collaborated with Brozman and shared his eclectic musical sensibility. "We have all lost a great talent and a great human being."

Brozman's steel-trap personality, bold style and easy wit masked some things, in particular the chronic and debilitating pain he suffered from a 1980 car accident on Highway 9, after which he had to re-teach himself how to use his fingers.

That is the tragic side to this story, which ultimately led him to take his own life at his home in Ben Lomond last week.

This first full understanding of how much he struggled just to keep



CULTURE MASH LEFT: Brozman with Austin country icon Junior Brown (center) and Hawaiian slack-key guitarist Lewward Kaapana. Right: Kaapana and Brozman jam at the Strawberry Music Festival.

playing has done nothing to blemish his memory among the legions of fans and friends who have extended their support and love to his family. On the contrary, many seemed relieved to know the whole story.

"I can now realize there was a lot of pain for many years that he never talked about," says George Winston, the acclaimed Santa Cruz pianist who put out Brozman's collaborations with Hawaiian artists on his Dancing Cat label. "He had a great will, and he could make it seem like nothing was happening, to the outside world."

Of course, that does little to ease the shock that so many have expressed over losing a musical genius and true Santa Cruz icon, who seems to have left his mark on everyone he encountered. Brozman was only 59.

There are still a lot of people like Winston, who says Brozman's death doesn't yet seem real: "Every day, I wake up and think 'what a weird dream that was.'"

Better Days

Santa Cruz musician Rick Walker remembers way back before this weird dream, when he first experienced

Brozman at the height of his powers. Walker was doing a lot of session drummer work in 1983, when Brozman hired him to play at one of the two dozen or so recording studios that then dotted the Santa Cruz landscape. Though Brozman had recorded some unreleased material in the '70s, his debut album *Blue Hula Stomp*—a Hawaiian-infused album of pre-World War II blues on which he first showed the world his incredible skill on the National Resophonic steel guitar—had just come out two years earlier.

When the musicians were assembled in the studio, Brozman played them pre-magnetic-tape wire recordings from the 1920s, and told them he wanted to duplicate their sound. This proved to be particularly tricky with the drums, and the two of them experimented with every possibility, at Brozman's insistence.

"Finally, I had to hold sticks in my mouth, hold the cymbals in my hand, and play an African bass drum," Walker says. "I was going 'this guy's nuts.' But when we were done, it sounded just like the '20s recordings. We got it exactly."

If he thought that was crazy, he

hadn't seen anything yet. They didn't play together again until the mid-'90s, when Brozman's passion for ska collided with Walker's expertise as a ska drummer in his band Tao Rhythmical, an offshoot of the legendary Santa Cruz band Tao Chemical.

At this point in his career, Brozman's reputation as the man who restored the reputation of the National guitar was well established, as was his passion for ethnomusicology, which he had studied at Washington University. Walker fed Brozman's voracious appetite for new sounds with African and Middle Eastern records from his own collection, and they began recording together again.

Touring internationally, Walker saw firsthand how Brozman's stature as a global artist had exploded since they'd last worked together. Brozman was a bona fide star in Europe—especially France, where his ability to tear through the history of American roots music in his own unique style was looked upon with reverence. In one stretch of a European tour, they backed nine different artists in nine days—after which, they would play for three hours to sold-out nightclub audiences, with absolutely no planning before the sets.

One show was in front of a sold-out crowd of 700 in a nearly snowed-in club in France.

"Bob was playing a National steel ukulele," says Walker. "He went out and started playing behind his back, like Hendrix. I've never seen anyone just command this huge group of people like that, with sheer will and talent."

After the show, the township put on a fireworks display to honor Brozman and the band.

"It was amazing," Walker says. "I thought, 'nobody treats musicians' like this in America.'"

"There were a lot of moments like that with Bob."

From the Streets

Many Santa Cruz fans came to know Brozman's music through his close association with KPIG, and before that, KHIP. To locals, one of the most fascinating aspects of his rise has always been the idea that

a world-famous player could have gotten his start as a street musician on Pacific Avenue. So long after the fact, it starts to sound like one of those urban legends that has been grossly exaggerated to make it seem like any busker can make it big.

But in Brozman's case, it's absolutely true. Nashville singer-songwriter Fred Koller remembers when he met him in the mid-'70s at Club Zayante, the beginning of a long friendship.

"The first time I met Bob Brozman, he was wearing shorts and a loud Hawaiian shirt," says Koller. "The last time I saw him, he was wearing shorts and a loud Hawaiian shirt."

Wardrobe notwithstanding, there was a lot that changed over time. But even in the Pacific Avenue days, Brozman stood out.

"When Brozman arrived, he only had one National," says Koller. "But he just amazed everybody."

Koller was playing in a bluegrass band outside Bookshop Santa Cruz that summer, and Brozman had a spot further down the street. He'd stop by and sit in with them, and the busking got all of them gigs at weddings, backyard parties and eventually Tom Louagie's Club Zayante—or "Club Z," as it was known. Santa Cruz was teeming with talent in the mid-to-late '70s—musical-saw legend and statue model Tom Scribner might be playing on the corner between Brozman and Koller's blocks, while Neil Young and the Ducks were playing the Catalyst.

"He was playing obscure Hawaiian songs from the '20s and '30s, at breakneck speed," Koller remembers of Brozman's Pacific Ave. repertoire. "I kept saying, 'Bob, don't you want to slow it down, so people can hear it?' But he stayed true to it, and loved discovering more and more obscure people."

As much as he's known for his mastery of the steel guitar, that might be an equally important piece of Brozman's legacy.

"This whole ukulele craze," Koller says, "Bob was the first guy who could *really* play the ukulele, who wasn't Hawaiian."

In 1975, Koller opened the Words and Music Bookstore in Capitola, and Brozman often came in for hard-to-find Hawaiian sheet music, which Koller would procure for him whenever he could.

Courtesy of Candye Kane



TWO FOR BLUES Brozman with blues singer-songwriter Candye Kane.

This paid off for Koller in a rather strange way, after Brozman gave him a cassette tape of his favorite 78RPM records—"I about wore that tape out," he says. Years later, Koller was writing a song with John Prine. He had the "Let's Talk Dirty" part worked out, when he remembered the distinctive Hawaiian sounds on the cassette Brozman had given him. The resulting song, "Let's Talk Dirty in Hawaiian," became a Prine classic, and is probably Koller's best-known song.

"Brozman was definitely on my mind during the entire process," he says.

Church of Bob

It's probably impossible to document the scope of Brozman's influence. From his distinctive vocal growl to his unmistakable playing, he left a lasting impression on audiences. But to Brozman, that was incidental, says British singer-songwriter Jon Gomm.

"Bob was a true musical pioneer, except his mission wasn't to make his mark in every place, his mission was to let each place make its mark on him," says Gomm.

Gomm, who put out his first album in 2003, and now plays on Preston Reed's "Guitar Masters" tour, first saw Brozman play when he was 10 years old.

"When he came to my hometown on

tour, he would usually stay at my dad's house. I'd hassle him to teach me his riffs over breakfast, and show me how to play drums on the guitar, which is now a big part of my style. But he always made sure I knew where every riff and trick originated from," says Gomm. "Even more than that, he really wanted to impress upon me that you don't need to be on MTV to be a successful musician—you can just stick to what you believe in, irrespective of image and sales figures."

That subversive side of Brozman's personality will be a part of his legacy, too. Blues singer-songwriter Candye Kane, a longtime friend, says she always felt a kinship with him in how their music could raise the eyebrows of purists despite the fact they were both rooted in the oldest of blues traditions.

"Real blues historians knew that I was not as controversial as people were making me out to be, and Bob was the same," says Kane. "He played things his own way, and was as political and fiery as they come. But at the root of his playing was a respect and love for traditionalism, and Bob just made it his own. While doing so, he taught us about ethnic origins and rhythms and so many other profound concepts."

Kane remembers taking Thomas Ruf, owner of Ruf Records, to see Brozman in Copenhagen, when they happened to be

on tour there at the same time.

"I knew Ruf would love Bob because at that time, Bush was president, and Bob's show was rife with so many sarcastic and brilliant comments about our political system, and our involvement in wars around the world that were not any of our business," she says.

In fact, Ruf did end up signing Brozman, which led to Brozman's first nomination for a National Blues Award.

"I was on Ruf Records, too, so I was happy that Bob and I were label mates," she says. "Mostly I was happy to see Bob getting some recognition in his own country for a change."

Show of Hands

By the world at large, of course, Brozman will be most remembered for his superlative technique. He first picked up the guitar at age six, and found his inspiration in antiquarian blues—nothing later than Charley Patton. Keep in mind that many histories *start* with Patton, which is why he's called "the father of the Delta blues."

Brozman's musical universe would eventually expand to include nearly every corner of the globe—Hawaii, Africa, the Caribbean, India, Okinawa, Japan and countless other spots—and he seemed to get a special thrill from mashing up musical traditions.

Cyril Pahinui was one of several Hawaiian slack-key masters with whom he collaborated. The last time they saw each other, at the Southern California Slack Key Festival, they talked about working together again. "The love of music is a bond we both shared, and talked about whenever we met up," says Pahinui. "It is hard for me to put into words the feeling of loss and sadness."

Brozman was also the world's foremost expert on National guitars. He literally wrote the book on them—1993's *The History and Artistry of National Resonator Instruments*. Incredibly, he is credited with both driving the prices of original National instruments through the roof (he often joked that if he had to buy the guitars in his collection again now, he couldn't afford them), and making the National sound more accessible, by inspiring and working with other National aficionados who began producing less expensive but

technically sound reproductions.

Michael Dunn met Brozman 25 years ago, and toured with him three times through France. A guitar maker out of Vancouver, Dunn crafted a handful of guitars for him over the years, and owns a square neck National Style 4 guitar from Brozman's legendary collection. Early in their friendship, Dunn would often jam on a kabosy while Brozman played slide guitar, and Dunn came to believe his friend's secret was his unshakable confidence with his instrument.

"He always knew exactly where the bar was going to land," says Dunn. "He didn't have any doubts whatsoever about this, he just did it. He didn't worry about it. He just knew. It was like that when we tried out new and outrageous things—there was never any hesitation or doubt."

"Whatever he was playing flowed out of him, and the Earth," says Winston. "I get close, but I never quite get to where he was at. I'll never get there, but I'll be better for trying."

Human Heart

Perhaps here is where it's important to remember that Brozman's story goes far beyond how well he could play guitar. He dearly loved the family that survives him, especially his wife Haley and daughter Zoe.

He met Haley at a Dancing Cat party, eventually marrying her at a wedding that drew musicians from all over the world.

"One thing he always said was 'I'll always love Dancing Cat, because that's how I met Haley,'" says Gail Korich, contract administrator for the label.

Korich met Brozman long before that—30 years ago, while she was doing merch for a Snazzy show he performed at. He gave her a rough time about the merch receipts after the show, and then apologized profusely, giving her a sweatshirt she still wears to this day.

"He could be such a grouchy crab, but he had a real sweetness to him, too," she says. "He had a soft spot for Haley. He worshipped the ground she walked on."

Perhaps his personal life wasn't so different from his music—not just a collection of nouns and adjectives, not just dancing about architecture, but something intuitive and true.

"It was never just purely intellectual," says Winston. "It was always with heart and soul." 🐾