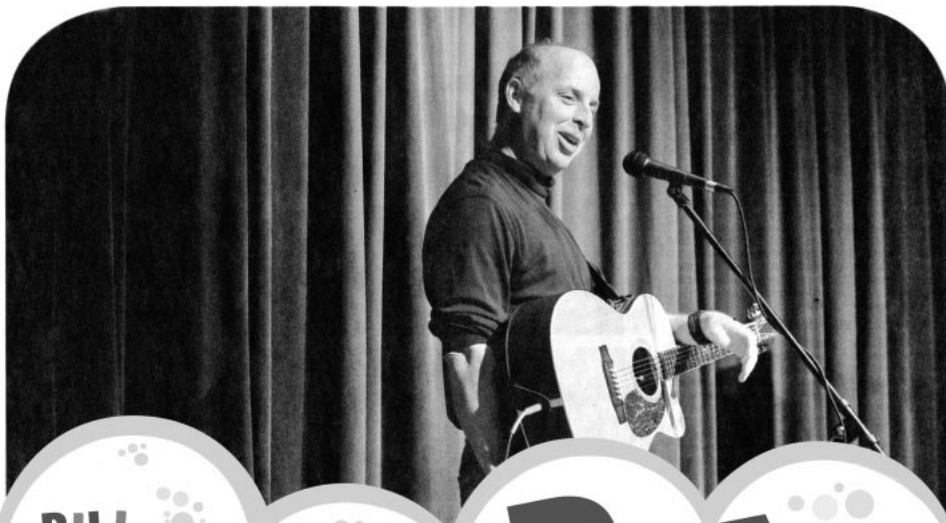


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ERIK JACOBS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



BILL HARLEY WANTS TO

PLAY

**NOW HE'S A GRAMMY WINNER,
BUT THE LOCAL PERFORMER'S
IN IT FOR THE STORIES**

By Sarah Rodman
GLOBE STAFF

DUDLEY — Bill Harley is onstage making things disappear, yet he is not a magician. He's also got several balls in the air, but he's not a juggler. He's making people laugh and strumming his acoustic guitar, but he's neither stand-up comic nor rock star.

The 53-year-old performer uses verbal sleight of hand to get rid of menacing characters, transforming them into sympathetic ones. He juggles not balls or bowling pins but recurring motifs. And he combines wry observation with well-crafted folk, pop, and rock music to tell tales that tickle the funny bone and tease the brain. Harley is, among other things, a children's entertainer. And, ultimately, he is a storyteller: more Mark Twain than the Wiggles, more Cosby than the Teletubbies.

He has the gift to turn a fight with his (now grown) kids over control of the car radio into an uproarious tale; to weave recurring comic motifs into what on the surface seems like a simple tale about bullies, kid sisters, and brainy friends but is really about problem solving and compassion; or to write an ingeniously witty little ditty called "Barbie's Head Is Missing."

Or, in the case of the last, to not mess it up, because, as Harley points out, "only a horrible songwriter could ruin that title."

And though he may now have a shiny little trophy proving that he is anything but — his album "Blah, Blah, Blah . . . Stories About Clams, Swamp Monsters, Pirates and Dogs" recently won the Grammy for best spoken word album for children — he doesn't really need it. One only has to survey the auditorium full of rapt sixth-graders at the Dudley Middle School earlier this week to know that

he is among the very best at the many things he does.

Back when he was a religion major at Hamilton College, in Clinton, N.Y., Harley — an Indianapolis native who has made his home in Seekonk for more than 20 years — didn't know that this was the path he would take. "I thought I would be a community organizer," he says by phone prior to his Dudley appearance.

And for a time he was. Following graduation in 1977 he worked on nonviolence issues with the American Friends Service Committee in upstate New York. A move to Providence in the early '80s led to Harley's cofounding the fabled folk venue the Stone Soup Coffeehouse and, later, with wife and manager Debbie Block, the New School-style adult education program The Learning Center.

But it was an even earlier job that synthesized Harley's love of music, family, and education and gave him an inkling that storytelling would be his destiny. "In college I worked at a day camp. I was the guy in charge of the kids at the end of the day, and I had a guitar and a handful of songs and some stories, and when everybody else was sick of the kids they'd say 'Go see Bill,' " he says. "So kid wrangler was my job." In 1984, a call from a school on the Cape looking to hire an entertainer set his career in motion.

Nearly a quarter-century later, Harley now does community organizing of a different kind. He creates kinship with his live performances, recordings (26 to date), work in schools, commentary on NPR, and writing (five children's books, including the recent "The Amazing Flight of Darius Frobisher," and one very serious play about the Bosnian conflict called "My Sarajevo" that had a reading at Trinity Rep in 2000).

"It's a function of my brain chemistry that I've got my hands on a half-dozen different things because I'm interested," says Harley of a schedule that has him zigging and zagging from audiences who need their mittens pinned to their coats to those who listen to "All Things Considered." "Early on I said I'm going to be a generalist in this. I'm going to take as broad an approach as possible. Also, I felt like if I was going to make a living at it, I had to have a number of different things that I could do."

But his education served him well. "I got a good foundation in myth and story, and that kind of structure is something that still, even today, underlies a lot of the writing I do," he says. "I do feel like I'm not just trying to entertain. I want to do that — the first thing you have to do is entertain so they pay attention — but I don't want to lecture."

There is certainly nothing didactic about Harley's approach. But the lessons — about kindness, sharing, responsibility, ingenuity, and, sometimes, giant clams that have the power to climb up the sides of houses — are in there. "I don't want to beat people over the head," he says. "But I think every piece of art that you do has got some particular worldview, there's an aesthetic, so I'm really conscious of that. And just because I've ended up working with kids and family so much, you tend to look at what their plight is. I'm more interested in being descriptive to them than I am in being prescriptive, assuming the intelligence of the audience."

Whether that audience is kindergartners, who will undoubtedly love the bouncy rhymes of "I Wanna Play," from his forthcoming album of the same name; the sixth-graders of Dudley Middle School, groaning appreciatively at the image of moldy tuna in the older tune "Backpack"; or adults, who enjoy his more mature work at the annual National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn., he treats them with respect.

"He is a fan favorite without a doubt," says Susan O'Connor, director of programs at the International Storytelling Center, which mounts the festival at which Harley has been appearing since 1988.

"What I think is great about Bill is that his talent really appeals to all generations. I think it's because even though he's a deep thinker he's very laid back and accessible, because his original works come out of his own experience and people can really relate to that."

David Bourns, head of the Paul Cuffee School in Providence, where Harley visits weekly, says he can't quantify the impact of the raconteur's presence but knows it is crucial to the charter school's atmosphere. "Kids are helping to create songs together, they're beginning to imbibe the richness of storytelling, so it's a huge addition to the depth of the culture here," he says.

As for the Grammy, his first win after two previous nominations, Harley is pleased about the effect it might have in terms of exposure but is wryly circumspect about what it means.

"I hope I have some perspective on that," he says with a laugh. "The second-graders I see don't really care."