



**B**ill Harley combines the gifts of a storyteller with the vision of a singer/songwriter. Through 11 albums of yarn-spinning tales, an equal number of musical releases, and six picture books, Harley has aimed his imagination and passion for entertainment at audiences of all ages. Capable of eliciting a smile in a four-year-old, he's as effective delivering his message to an older brother or sister and parents.

"My image of the shows that I like to do," said Harley by telephone, "is that notion of when you were a kid and heard grownups talking. You could understand what was going on and you felt happy to be a part of it. That's the way that traditional songs and stories were passed on. I want to talk to the adults, but I want the kids to be there, too."

Touching a nerve in audiences that range from toddlers to grandparents has been Harley's greatest challenge. "A four-year-old's world is pretty self-absorbed," he explained. "The world is an extension of them. If you use complex language, there's got to be enough repetition that

they can get the gist of what's going on. Nine- or ten-year-olds begin to appreciate the dynamics of interacting with siblings or parents. For adults, there has to be some sense of irony and perspective, some depth. Putting all of those things together is not the easiest thing in the world to do, to entertain everybody at the same time."

Harley's success at reaching diverse audiences is reflected in the live-in-concert *Yes to Running!*, available as a CD or DVD that includes a bonus documentary and behind-the-scenes interview. Filmed/recorded during two June 2007 concerts at the University of Montana in Missoula, *Yes to Running!* was produced by Montana's public radio station, KUFM-FM, and PBS affiliate, KUFM-TV. "(KUFM-FM) has a family radio hour everyday," said Harley, "and it's the one place in the country where I get airplay. It's unbelievable. We took a look at some of the longer stories and tried to figure out which ones would go with songs."

Opening with an uplifting singalong, "I Like to Sing," from his 2008 Grammy-nominated album, *I Wanna Play*, Harley lures his listeners in from the start. "I look

for a low entry level of participation from the audience," he said, "and that song fits the bill really well." Harley keeps the audience involved on other tunes, including "Is Not Is Too" and "You're in Trouble."

"Some of this hearkens back to what Pete Seeger, and some other people, tried to do," he explained. "A performance is when people come to see you. They may not have much in common, but there's some kind of community there. In that hour show, I try to make everybody aware of being in the room together. I want them to do something that acknowledges that we're all experiencing something together."

With his stories, Harley recaptures the humor and joy of childhood. The struggles between parent and child during "Mom and the Radio," the mysteries behind the door of "The Teachers' Lounge," and the youthful recklessness of "The Great Sled Race" are experiences that are easy to relate to.

"There's no doubt that people listen with different parts of their brains to music than they do to language," said Harley.

“As a performer, it’s a good idea to do both in the context of a show. There’s a kind of a rest when people listen to a song and then tell a story. I see people relax more when I get into a story. Then, at the end of the story, especially one of those long ones, when I go back into a song, there’s another release.”

One of the funniest pieces on *Yes to Running!* is an adaptation of a poem, “Dirty Joe the Pirate,” initially showcased in a picture book version published by Harper Collins. “That story has an interesting history to it,” recalled Harley. “A number of years ago, I said to myself that, for one month, I was going to write a poem a day. That was one of the ones that came out during that month. I tried to sell it as part of a book of poetry, but I was never able to do that. When Harper Collins was looking for other things that I had written, I sent my editor a bunch of my stuff. She said, ‘Let’s do this one.’” “By the time that the piece was published, Harley had begun presenting it during his concerts. “It took me a long time to learn how to do it,” he said. “The language is so rich in that poem that you’ve got to do it really slowly. Otherwise, people can’t keep up with it.”

While his concerts combine stories and songs, Harley has mostly kept the two sides separate on his recordings. “Kids will listen to the spoken-word stuff over and over again,” he said, “but adults won’t. Most of us, when we get a spoken-word album, we’ll listen to it a couple of times and, if we love it, pass it on to our friends. But with the music albums, adults will listen to them over and over again. I get emails from people saying, ‘The kids are out of the car, and I’m listening to your songs.’ With the way that we use music today, this notion of recorded music, which is different from the community expression that happens in a performance, there is some sense of separating songs from stories, although almost all of my stories have music as a part of them. I’m still trying to figure that out.”

With his latest spoken-word collection, *Blah Blah Blah: Stories About Clams, Swamp Monsters, Pirates and Dogs*, which received a Grammy in 2007, Harley attempted to blend music and storytelling. “There’s a story song, ‘Bow, Wow, Wow,’” he said, “which has music underscored all the way through. I sing verses, and the spoken word is in iambic pentameter.”

Born in Ohio in 1953, Harley spent his own childhood in Indianapolis, where he

moved at the age of seven, and Connecticut, where he moved a few years later. After living in Providence, Rhode Island, for a little more than a quarter of a century, he and his wife relocated to southern Massachusetts.

Having studied piano as a youngster and played keyboards with a series of rock bands during his teenage years, Harley was inspired by Pete Seeger and the folk revival to play guitar while attending Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. “My roommate, Phil Jamison, started playing banjo,” he remembered. “We played in a string band together. I was learning a lot about traditional music. Phil went on to direct the summer music program at the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina. He’s the director of the traditional music program at Appalachian State [in Boone, North Carolina].” Harley continued to develop his performance skills at a day camp that he ran with friends during the summer. “I had 10 to 12 songs that I had learned and two or three stories, including ‘Abiyoyo’, which I learned from the Pete Seeger recording.”

After college, Harley worked with youngsters on conflict resolution and continued to live a parallel life as a performer. “I’ve always operated on the side of the mainstream,” he said. “I performed in bars, tried to get gigs in coffeehouses at night, and found work in libraries.”

He moved to Providence, Rhode Island, shortly after his marriage in 1980, and was instrumental in the launch of a folk music coffeehouse, Stone Soup, which is still thriving today. “I did all of the booking for the first three or four years,” he said.

As he soon discovered, schools in the Northeast offered a supportive forum for Harley’s stories and songs. “There was enough work in the schools to keep busy,” he remembered. “There was federal money, emergency school act money, CETA (Changing Education Through the Arts) money. It didn’t pay a lot but artists don’t need a lot to nurse their dreams. We didn’t have kids yet and didn’t need much to live.”

While he’s come a long way since those humble beginnings, Harley has remained firmly embedded in traditional folk music. “More people will listen to folk music in the context of a family show than otherwise,” he said. “That’s not to say that there aren’t folk artists that are better known than I am. But there are lots of people who will come to my shows that won’t go to a coffeehouse or a folk

festival. They go because their kids wanted to go or because I’m more like Bill Cosby than I am like Raffi. I’m conscious of that.

“Another thing that I think about is that with folk music — and I’m in the tradition that came out of the Almanac Singers and the Weavers — there’s a connection between progressive politics and traditional music. The audiences that I see are not a typical folk audience in terms of politics. I see a much broader range of people. I’m always pushing myself about how I address issues with an audience, especially with kids. I don’t feel like hitting anyone over the head, least of all children.”

While he’s built his career on his interaction with families and children, Harley has not forsaken more mature issues. “I’ve always done work with adult audiences,” he said, “And I’m working on an adult recording of songs that I’ve accumulated over the past five or six years. Some of the songs are more political. There are songs about being an adult in a world that doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Harley continues to find new outlets for his creativity. His first novel, *The Amazing Flight of Darius Frobisher*, aimed at fourth-to-sixth graders, was published in 2006. His latest effort, *Night of the Spadefoot Toad*, a novel with an environmental theme, is scheduled for publication in fall 2008. “It’s about a kid who discovers an endangered critter near where he lives,” said Harley.

Another forum for Harley’s views has been the National Public Radio show “All Things Considered,” to which he’s contributed pieces since 1991. “One of the producers, Art Silverman, was driving in his car,” he said, “and listening to [my story-song] ‘Zanzibar.’ He called me out of the blue and said, ‘Would you be interested in doing some things for “All Things Considered”?’ They played ‘Zanzibar’ one Labor Day and the phones rang off the hook.”

Future plans call for a collaborative album with musicians and storytellers combining stories and songs, and a book about what Harley calls “the culture of schools.” “I’ve probably been in 1,500 elementary schools over my career,” he said, “and I’m interested in how stories and songs are used, how food is approached. If people are cared for and they’re bathed in language and culture, they’re going to learn.”