

2006 New England Newspaper of the Year

Seekonk storyteller wins Grammy for children's album

Bill Harley becomes the first performer from the Rhode Island area to win a Grammy since Tavares in 1978.

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The morning after winning his first Grammy award, children's entertainer Bill Harley, of Seekonk, celebrated in true rock-star style: doing a show for second-graders in Utah.

"This is ... how glamorous the whole thing is," Harley said. "I said I want the [brown] M&Ms out or I'm not performing. And the kids aren't allowed to have any candy while I'm eating it."

Harley won the award Sunday night for Best Spoken-Word Children's Album for *Blah Blah Blah: Stories About Clams, Swamp Monsters, Pirates and Dogs*.

Sunday night? Actually, Harley won the award at about 2:30 in the afternoon at the Los Angeles Convention Center in a ceremony before the televised bash.

"I didn't expect to win," Harley says; when his name was called, "I was speechless, which is not a good thing for a storyteller to be."

Well, not completely speechless, but his orations on the Grammy podium were short and sweet.

"I said I wanted to thank four people: my manager, Debbie Block; the president of my record label, Debbie Block; my friend, Debbie Block; and my wife, Debbie Block."

He also thanked Dave Correia of Celebration Sounds, where the disc was recorded, and "acknowledged that I was one of a group of people who called themselves storytellers. And I wanted to thank the million kids I've seen over the past 25 years in schools and libraries and hospitals who have told me whether my work is any good almost immediately."

But he did get to sit in the Staples Center for the televised bash; he said of the spectacle "the bombast is unbelievable," but was more impressed by the performance of Chaka Khan at the after-party.

Mingling among the swells was a culture shock as well: "The silicone and the cleavage was incredible."

Harley had been nominated twice before, and in the weeks between the nomination and the ceremony, he said, "I tried not to pay attention to it and failed, I think."

He was getting support, however. "In the past couple of weeks, all these people were calling and e-mailing me, saying, 'We're rooting for you' or 'We voted for you,' and I was really humbled by that."

Harley has just 24 hours' experience as a Grammy winner, but he said that the imprimatur of a nomination has been of some help in the past. "It doesn't increase sales. ... It makes people pay attention to you a little bit more. People say, 'Oh gosh, this guy's not chopped liver.' So it helps a little bit."

"If you're working with kids, you're working with kids because you can't work with adults. That's what some people think."

Harley may have been speechless at the time, but he was proud of what his victory represented. Along with singing and songwriting, he writes his own stories, which is rarely true of nominees in his category. "I'm a spoken-word artist. I tell stories. I don't read stories. I mean, they're written down, but — everyone else, it was books being read. So it was apples and oranges."

"I think I was the first person who's won a Grammy in that category who's really a spoken-word artist, and wasn't just handed a book to read."

The other nominees were *Christmas in the Trenches*, by John McCutcheon, an audio recording of a book based on McCutcheon's song; *Disney's Little Einsteins Musical Missions*, a various-artists disc produced by Ted Kryczko & Ed Mitchell; *Peter Pan*, read by Jim Dale; and *The Witches*, read by Vanessa Redgrave.

Reminded that in 2004, he said,



Bill Harley, before a 2004 show at Trinity Repertory Company, wins the Grammy for Best Spoken-Word Children's Album.

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / GRETCHEN ERTL

"The thing about the Grammys is, it's just a beauty contest when you get down to it," Harley laughed and said. "It is, but it's really good to win a beauty contest."

Harley, a former Providence resident, is the first performer from the Rhode Island area to win a Grammy since Tavares in 1978 for its presence on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. Rhode Island guitarist Duke Robillard was also nominated Sunday night for *Guitar Groove-A-Rama*, but the Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album went to *Risin' With the Blues* by Ike Turner.

Harley, 52, and Block live in Seekonk. They have two children — Noah, 23, and Dylan, 19. Harley and Block run Round River Records out of their home and are two of the founders of Stone Soup Coffeehouse, the Providence folk-music institution now based in Pawtucket.

Harley's been called "the Mark Twain of children's music" by Entertainment Weekly; Billboard magazine said, "If Calvin of Calvin and Hobbes fame were to grow up, he'd be Bill Harley." Along with his recordings, he's had five books published and hosts *Camel's Hump Radio*, a show devoted to children's literature, on Vermont Public Radio.