

## Tribute to Collier Rawls By Bill Cassels

This is a personal tribute to Collier Rawls -- a friend, a long time member of the Huntsville Traditional Music Association (HTMA) and a gifted musician who delighted in sharing his extraordinary talent with others.



I admired Collier from the very first time I met him, which I believe was at the Saturday HTMA jam at Early Works in January 2006. I wasn't participating in the jam, I was just watching and listening – interested in traditional music after I retired, but had never touched a fiddle. Also there at the jam were Jack Ellis and Lou Beasley. Back then, whenever I attended an HTMA jam or meeting, I would make notes of what songs were played, in what key (and sometimes who led the song) so that I could begin learning these traditional tunes.



According to one of my notes, in September 2006, Collier led the song *Anytime* at an HTMA evening concert at the library, and *Turkey in the Straw* at an HTMA meeting/jam later that month. At a later HTMA meeting Collier sang *Peach Pickin' Time in Georgia*, a great

tune, and I believe one of Collier's favorite songs. I heard him play it on the guitar and sing it many times.

Over the years I was fortunate to get to know Collier better, and to hear him play fairly often – at nursing home gigs led by Bill McCampbell and later Jim England; at HTMA jams at Early Works

Museum and Constitution Village led by James Smith; at HTMA monthly meetings jams and concerts, and at the Green Mountain jams led by Brian Curtis. Collier helped with many gigs – including Folkfests at Constitution Village and one at Huntsville Botanical Garden in June 2014.

Collier was such a kind and grateful man. He loved life and appreciated even small things. For example, I sometimes took photos



of the musicians at the nursing home gigs, and then emailed copies to the musicians and the HTMA. He repeatedly thanked me, and told me how much he enjoyed forwarding them on to delight his music friends.

When Collier played music, he would typically have at his feet his small bag of

harmonicas – it looked like a small cooler with a blue canvas cover and strap. As a jam song started, if the key of the song was not identified, Collier would pull out harmonica's one by one, play a couple of notes, and return them to the bag, repeating the process until he found the right harmonica for the song. Once he had the right harmonica, he would add beautiful fills whenever there was a gap in the singing.



Some songs, like *Under the Double Eagle* – changed keys mid song, so he would have two harmonicas at the ready and switch them as he played, which was impressive, and a “trip” to watch.

When Collier took a break on a song, it was beautiful to hear -- never a wrong note. And his timing was always perfect. Sometimes he

would unexpectedly continue his break beyond the verse, into the chorus; which was OK with everyone because he played so beautifully.

I never saw Collier stumped by a song. It amazed me how he could just listen quietly, and when it was time for him to take a break on the song, he could



play it error-free – as if he had played the song many times before. The only other person that I’ve known personally who could do that was Dan Charles, who we lost earlier this year.

One of my memories of Collier is his playing “Over The Waves”, making his harmonica sound like a calliope on a merry-go-round. He would play the melody, while simultaneously playing the bass notes (sort of “oompahpah,”



waltz time). At a jam when it was my turn to pick a song, I would often pick that song and ask him to lead it so I could see him perform what seemed impossible – it was as if there was someone else inside the harmonica playing the bass notes while he played the melody.



Probably my most vivid memory of Collier is of his kindness and supportiveness. After every jam, as we were packing up our



instruments, he would come over and tell me “You sounded good.” The fact that he was such an outstanding musician made this meaningful, even though I realized

that he was saying the same thing to everyone else as well.

Collier was a truly wonderful, kind, sweet and gifted man. I miss him dearly.

*[Last photo, above, from May 4, 2019 performance at Elmcroft Assisted Living facility]*

(10/30/2019)