

ROGER HALE: FOUR STRINGS OF HAPPINESS

IN PERSON

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COEUR d'ALENE — For nearly six decades, Roger Hale has enjoyed the sound, the feeling and the camaraderie of living a life filled with banjos.

If those decades had a soundtrack, Dixieland would be what has filled Hale's years, and ears, with happiness.

"I love hearing Dixieland," Hale said in his gentle Oklahoma accent. "I love playing Dixieland. It's fun to play and it's fun to listen to. It's frustrating to be someplace and I can't play with the group."

The soft-spoken 77-year-old musician loves the banjo and the jazzy sound of Dixieland so much, he even helped found the American Banjo Museum in 1998 so others can appreciate and enjoy the history and the music of the banjo.

"It was about '57 or '58 when the Kingston Trio came on the scene," he said, starting to grin. "I was hooked. I followed their music for a long time, played their music and that's where I got started."

Hale is a member of the museum's board, but he no longer attends meetings in person because it's located in "Bricktown," Oklahoma City and he has been in Coeur d'Alene now for three years.

"We have meetings once every quarter. I'm there by sound only," he said, explaining that he now phone conferences with his colleagues.

The self-taught musician admits that he can't read music, but "I play by ear, and that's a blessing in one way and it's a scourge in another way. But if somebody's playing a song and I know the tune, I can play it."

Born and raised in Tulsa, Hale has played banjo with people from all across the country through the years. He was in the Green Country Trio in Oklahoma for several years, with whom he was inducted into the American Banjo Museum's Wall of Honor, and he now plays with the Coeur d'Alene Trio, a newly formed group that is primed and ready to perform for North Idaho audiences. The Trio has played for fundraisers for organizations such as Children's Village and the Coeur d'Alene Opera.

"Have banjo, will travel," he said.

Hale also plays for retirement homes throughout town, bringing the joy of the banjo to the community's elderly.

"They know all these old songs that I do, and it's kind of neat to see them," he said. "I went to one the other day that was a memory unit and there was a concern about it because you never know what to expect. And those



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cotton-picking people never stopped singing, the whole time I was there, it was unbelievable. I thought it would be quiet. But it's great therapy."

Hale has been a life insurance agent since 1960 and still has clients in the Sooner State. Insurance may pay the bills, but nothing makes his heart sing quite like a Dixieland tune on his four-string banjo.

"I haven't had a musical career, I've just had a musical hobby that really is a most relaxing thing for me to do," he said. "I get nervous before I play before a crowd, but if I probably didn't get nervous, I probably wouldn't be able to hit nothing."

When did you join your first band?

"I was just a hacker at first, I just beat on the banjo and tried to fit in with everybody else. Back in those days the big thing was the hootenanny. You'd go to a shop on Saturday and they'd have a flatbed trailer and everybody'd get up one at a time or in a group and play and just knock yourself out ... Right after the Kingston Trio came along, I was introduced to a guy by the name of Eddie Peabody, and Eddie Peabody was the world's best banjo player, Dixieland and that sort of music. I met him one night in a place where he was playing and I followed him into the dressing room and he befriended me. He gave me strings and picks, and I thought, 'Oh my God this guy is amazing,'" so I followed him and had him in my home three or four different times and bought one of his banjos. My wife and I were with him two weeks before he passed away. Guys like that are my heroes, I guess, Eddie Peabody being the predominant one and the other one being a guy by the name of Smokey Montgomery, out of Dallas, Texas, with the Light Crust Doughboys. That was their group originally."

Do you know how many bands you've been involved with through the years?

"I played the trombone in junior high school and then my junior year I got involved in athletics and dropped the trombone. I couldn't read music then either. I had one group, all of them were attorneys but me. We called ourselves the Executioners. I played in a group with the Rotary Club in Tulsa, we called ourselves the Rotary Rooters, and they took us to Calgary one year for the big blowout and we were the popular group, we played day and night. I've played with a lot of people. I played with a group when I was on vacation. We stayed the night at Yellowstone, my wife and I and my daughter. I found a group of Nashville guys that were coming through and putting on a show that night. I talked them into letting me play with them and they offered me a job. I said, 'I wish my mother-in-law would have been here, because she never thought I'd amount to anything.' I didn't go because of my family, but I've played with a lot of people."

What do you love about the banjo, about Dixieland, about the music and the culture of it?

"The banjo is like any other instrument. Every instrument relates to certain people — the violin to certain people, the guitar, violin, whatever. I like all of them, but the banjo has a unique sound. In my opinion, it's the greatest tranquilizer. I'm not smart enough to think about two things at one time, and if I pick up that banjo and I play for five minutes, I'm just totally exhausted, I mean I'm really tired unless we're playing someplace. It's also a great common denominator. Everyone like the banjo. It's just a friendly venue."

Tell me a bit about your banjo.

"I've had it for 20 years. I bought it in a parking lot at 2 o'clock in the morning from a guy who had a truckload of instruments. He'd been to a string show in Dallas and he had my name from a friend of mine. I'd been looking for one of these banjos and it's a one-of-a-kind ... I have two banjos, one was born in '26, one was born in '28 ... the sound is just absolutely mesmerizing. Not the way I play it, necessarily, but the sound when you touch each string and play it with a proper stroke, is unusual, just very, very good. "They're both a Vega ... My love for the Vega banjo was because of Eddie Peabody, that's what he played. I loved the sound. When he played that banjo, man, I'd follow him around the world."

You're a founding member and on the board of the American Banjo Museum. Were you just all sitting around one day and thought, 'We should do this'?

"A guy that founded and started it played the banjo, he was an attorney and he and I were friends and he lived in Oklahoma City and there's a little town just north of Oklahoma City called Guthrie, which was originally the state capital of Oklahoma, until some guys came in one night and stole the charter, true Oklahomans. But anyway, he said, 'I'm going to start this banjo museum, would you help me do it?' and I said, 'Sure, I'd be glad to help do whatever I can.' So basically, what I did was talk to people to get them signed up to become a member of the museum and then we hand-picked some people. We have a nice board now, a lot bigger than it was. And the most beautiful banjos in the world, all four-string and five-string banjos. We just recently inducted Steve Martin in September, and I don't know if you're familiar with Bela Fleck; Bela Fleck's a monster with the banjo. At our grand opening (in Oklahoma City) two and a half years ago ... our first induction at that building was Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, he was our first inductee. We've had a few since then. Mostly, ones that we've inducted were four-string players because that's all we had initially was four-string players, and we realized that we were digging a hole for ourselves if we didn't bring the five strings in. So we now have done that and we've added a collection."

What was it like to induct the famous comedian Steve Martin into the Hall of Fame at the museum? Did you or your colleagues get to meet him?

"I didn't go. I know they had some jam sessions and he was invited to go but whether or not he did, I don't know ... He has a motor home and an airplane that when he goes someplace, he tells that motor home where he's going to be and they head out so that they can be where he's going to be when he flies in. He's got his clothes and his dog in his motor home. It's like his home. When he first started acting like he could play the banjo, he couldn't hit his with both hands but he certainly is now very accomplished."

What do you enjoy about performing? "It's a high. I get a lot of satisfaction. I told my wife, 'I said I'm a ham, so what else do you expect?'

Looking back on your musical career, is there any one moment or thought that you have that makes you feel happy or pleased with the way things have turned out, or one big accomplishment?

"The biggest pleasant thing is that God gave me the talent to do what I've done, and I'm very thankful that he allowed me to do that. I was always a clown in school, and wanted to be the center of everything, and I finally got to do it with his blessing. I'm just thankful for what I have and what I've been able to do. To me, it was fun, it was easy, and I don't mean to say that braggadociously, but it always came naturally to me to tune a guitar. I

could tune it but I couldn't do anything with it, then came the banjo and I started learning. I learned three chords, and when I got my first job in a pizza parlor that's all I knew, so I told the piano player that we had to play the same key."