

Legendary bluegrass musician returns to Sisters Folk Festival

By Ceili Cornelius
Correspondent

Legendary bluegrass singer-songwriter, Peter Rowan is one of this year's headliners at the 2019 Sisters Folk Festival.

Rowan has a career spanning over five decades, after falling in love with music at a young age.

He has worked with a number of well-known artists and musicians over the years. His most influential early music memory comes from his uncle when he was just six years old. When his family would visit his World War II veteran uncle, they would pass the time in Hawaii playing music. He learned to play the ukulele with his uncle as his first musical instrument at six years old.

Later, his best friend that lived down the street from him in Massachusetts where he grew up started playing and singing duets with him around their neighborhood. Around the time they were young boys, the image of Elvis was beginning to come on the mainstream media, young Rowan seeing flashes of performances and magazine covers as he walked the streets of his hometown near Boston. One day, Rowan and his friend saw an image of Elvis with a Martin D18 guitar over his shoulder, and Rowan thought that he wanted to have the same guitar.

"After that is when I started pursuing guitar more and played in a rock 'n' roll band called Cupids, with a six-string electric, while I was still in high school," he said.

During his youth he saw Joan Baez perform at Harvard Square and found the folk scene of the time.

"I was hanging out with these folk and country bands when I was only 17 years old, and knew that it is what I wanted to do," he said.

After his stint in academia with three years of college,

Rowan fell in love with the music of bluegrass legend Bill Monroe. A few months later, with the help of banjo-player Bill Keith, he was invited to Nashville to audition for Monroe. In 1963, he was hired as rhythm guitarist, lead vocalist and songwriter for Monroe's band, The Bluegrass Boys.

"He (Monroe) was such a leader and individual, and as a musician he paid attention to every detail and told you exactly how he wanted the music to be and its specific form," said Rowan.

One of Rowan's favorite parts of his experience was learning about his own creative powers at a young age while also learning the science behind music.

"I had to find my own ground and creative mind in working with Bill Monroe; some of it was kind of a test all the time so I had to find myself and find my own voice as well," said Rowan.

Monroe is known for his classic bluegrass sound and autobiographical songs. Rowan and Monroe wrote a song together entitled, "The

Walls of Time."

"That song was about the idea of love beyond death and how bluegrass, contrary to popular belief can tell the story of tragic love," said Rowan.

"One thing I started to like about the Monroe style was that there was a lot more blues in it than other styles of bluegrass," Rowan reflected. "It was darker. It had more of an edge to it. And yet it still had the ballad tradition in it, and I loved that."


After his experiences working with Bill Monroe and The Bluegrass Boys into his 20s, Rowan had a wanderlust to travel across the country. During his travels, he was exposed to various styles of music and other musicians.

His travels landed him in various parts of the country, including in the South, where he met and worked

leading up to the work with Garcia so I had a lot of stuff recorded and ready for use on my own. So, working with Garcia and the rest of the bands was just another way to learn better musicianship and have more experiences out in the world," he said.

Now his musical journey has led him back to Sisters next weekend.

Tickets and day passes are still available at www.sistersfolkfestival.org.





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