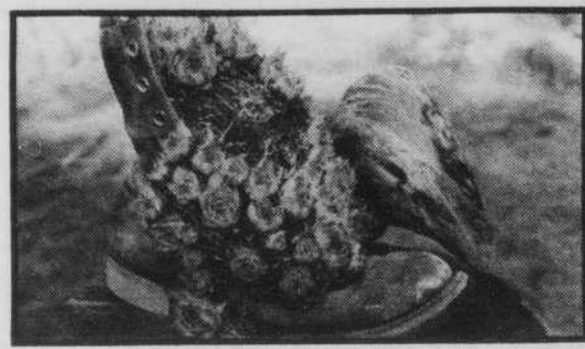




Simplicity runs like a river through Mason Williams' life.

Ever since he handed his see-through plexiglass guitar over to John Hayward and returned to the hills of Oakridge six years ago, he's been looking for a way to communicate the spirit of the wilderness through his music.

He says he's found it through a novel alchemy; the union of the blue-blooded orchestra with a down-home bluegrass band.

"I feel like a mad scientist working on a really weird equation," Mason says.

"It's been hard to find roles for each. I want the bluegrass band to play bluegrass and the orchestra to play orchestra." Mason says those two musical worlds don't come together naturally. He became interested in blending them about the time that "Classical Gas" evolved.

"The guitar is an orchestra and what you play on it implies that it could be played by an orchestra," Mason observes. "When the writing is good... boy... the orchestra is an incredible instrument."

Mason hopes to share the feeling of the place he lives — "the wilderness" — in his music. "That's got a special character to it. When you come out to do something like this, you have a genuine good time."

But Mason doesn't really consider himself to be a performer, though back in the days of Classical Gas he was often seen clad in suede tuxes and sporting a natty beard while stroking the plexiglass guitar.

"The real stars of the show for me are the musicians. I want to play with my friends and I believe that I live in a unique place, by this river. What I want to communicate to people is the feeling of this river."

The train rumbles by across Mason's chattering river, the constant water's refrain

What 'Classical Gas' hath wrought

soothing as an unceasing neckrub. We're raiding the stash of fresh-frozen trout, supplemented by the efforts of guitarist Rick Cunha.

"The first thing I do when I get in from L.A. is just spend a couple days fishing," Rick sighs. He cleans fish while Mason readys a mixture of blue cornbread to dip them in. "That's the secret: blue cornbread."

Mason's stockpiled trout is destined to feed a hungry band of musicians, who are rehearsing for this weekend's Murieta Music Festival concert in Sacramento. Williams and the Sante Fe Recital will perform his symphonic works, including "Train Ride in G," for the sixth time since their conception.

The open-air concert will be the culmination of all Mason's performances to date, the result of countless hours spent listening to each performance and rewriting the scores.

"The whole thing has evolved into what it is now through trial and error, and it's been like a folk process, each player, each orchestra, each conductor, each audience and place has contributed immeasurably to it," Mason says.

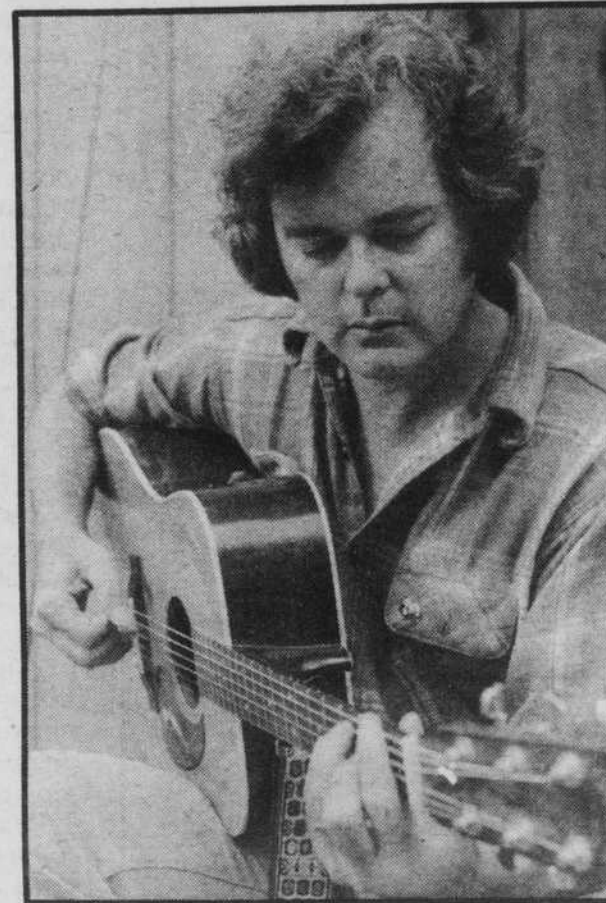
"I guess when I started out I wanted to see myself as a symphonic composer or something grand like that, but I feel more like a mid-wife, or maybe it's more like an accountant, making sure all the notes add up."

The symphony has yet to be recorded, mainly because Mason isn't through refining it yet. But he does have a sample of things to come, the recently released album "Fresh Fish," which offers lively, simplified versions of his orchestrated pieces.

Mason says much of his music has divine images.

"You're not totally consumed with it, but it's pretty evident in tunes like the "Devil's Dream." I imagined this fiddle tune floating through hell and the devil trying to screw it up. Any good dream for the devil would have to be a nightmare... to be caught up in the power of his

own instrument, the fiddle, and to lose to man because of it, would be a fine nightmare," Mason says of his arrangement. "I guess the only real nightmare for the devil to dream would be of Heaven. I'll bet that wakes him up!"



The bluegrass concoction isn't the only long-term project that's been stewing since Mason left Hollywood. He's written the script for a fully-animated, feature-length film, "The Oregon Kid," a team effort with filmmaker Bob Gardner.

"I like having several things going at once," he says. "That way, when you come to an impasse on one, you can just sort of drop it and go on to something else for a while."

After a year's production, the film is nearly finished. But Mason isn't eager to hurry it, just as

he isn't overly concerned about getting to a studio to record the bluegrass symphony.

"I'll size up who I think will be interested in it. The main thing is not to waste someone's time. It's just like the orchestra thing. I wouldn't do too much with it until I was sure it was finished. You can ruin things by showing them to people too early."

His house wears a garden hose belt, draped around the front. It's festooned with several pairs of wet jeans, flung as if from an army of fishers. The hose links the laundry room tap with an old-fashioned iron bathtub, freshly scrubbed and nestled beneath the eaves of an unused garage that is open on three sides.

"When I get tired of showers, I like to take baths."

Some people only know Mason for his poems. Perhaps that is because he tends to keep his words and his music somewhat separated. "The Mason Williams Reading Matter," published in 1964, "Flavors" and "The Mason Williams FCC Rapport" all offer brilliant flashes of humor and sensitive reflection. "Rivers" was published in the Reading Matter.

Mason received an Emmy award as head writer for the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, and continues to write for television — in Canada and most recently, for Rolling Stone Magazine's 10th Anniversary Special.

His TV writing seems to come out of what can only be described as a love/hate relationship. He appeared before the Federal Communications Commission in the late Sixties to testify against censorship and other problems he'd wrangled with while creating for major networks.

"I suppose you learn from being censored, but what you really learn is to do what they want," Mason says. "Now it's 'Do you want to work for

our corporation or don't you?' What I like about TV is the fact that its got a history, it's always been entertaining."

But he terms American television a traitor. "The reason is that the whole concept of democracy is founded on the principle that you are able to think for yourselves. Anytime you undermine the chance to do that, then you undermine democracy."

Entertainment's impact on people first impressed Mason while he was writing for the Smothers Brothers.

"People are real careful about what they eat and yet they'll read or watch practically anything," he observes. "But what people are subjected to in entertainment determines to a large part their quality of life. I sort of picked up this good guy attitude toward things. It's a false sense of morality, but it is morality."

"I think I live the life of an artist, which means that I use everything in my life to add up the best way it can," Mason reflects. "What I object to is the lack of entertainment alternatives to us as a country. Charlie's Angels doesn't do me any good here on the river. I'd like to see Charlie's Angels fix a water pump."

Mason started as a folk singer while studying mathematics in Oklahoma. Among the artists he worked with then were the Smothers Brothers, the Kingston Trio and Roger McGuinn, of the Byrds.

"In the folk era, everyone felt a kinship to the music. People encouraged you whether you were any good or not. The thing that screwed folk music up was that when it got popular it became sort of intellectual and pendantic."

"I survived a long time as a folksinger. It was good training ground. You could be timid and awkward. Now you get a hit together before you even do it, rather than just let it evolve."

By Melody Ward
Photos by Erich Boekelheide

River

*I am born in the sky
The silent snow is my seed
In the season of the sun
My crystal blood runs
Over the earth
Gathering unto itself
Godspeed.
Whispering in the beginning
I uncover brown and gold
Yellow red and green
From under the whiteness of my mother
Until I have voice enough
To carry leaves
And roll little stones . . .
In pools where garlands of grass and leaves have fallen
I have fishes and tiny miracles
Some drink of me
And I sustain them
Reflecting their images in my lifeblood
Like shadows in a swift mirror
I bear the colors of the sky for my banner
And make a path for the wind
And fog for the night
And mist for the morning's meadows
And rainbows when I soar in cataracts . . .*

Mason Williams



The Pauper Gourmet



Beer Cheese Soup

Provided your beer can opener is still in working order after post-registration celebration, this amazing brew can be accomplished by the most inexperienced of women (AND men...) although the "show-off" gourmet may want to jazz it up with additional mystery ingredients.

- 1 cup beer (any brand)
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup (10 oz.)
- 1 can cream of celery soup (10 oz.)
- 1 can cream of shrimp soup (10 oz.)
- ½ cup grated or cubed cheddar cheese
- 2 cups buttermilk
- ½ cup sour cream

Optional ingredients:
½ cup shrimp (fresh or canned) - whole or pieces
½ cup mushrooms (fresh or canned) - diced or sliced

Simply measure all ingredients (except shrimp and mushrooms) into large cooking vessel (crock pot is great) and simmer over low heat, stirring occasionally for as long as your patience allows (a few hours while studying, if possible, but 30 minutes will do). Add shrimp and mushrooms last half-hour if simmering over one hour.

Should the adventurous spirit possess you or, more likely, should you have other bargain cream soups on the shelf, feel free to substitute.

Nutritionally speaking, one cup will provide 140 calories and about seven grams of protein. Adding the options of shrimp and mushrooms will elevate the calories to 155 with an additional gram of protein. The cheese, sour cream and shrimp contribute significantly to the cholesterol content.

Good luck... The Pauper Gourmet

A service of the Student Health Center. Call Willette Rude, nutritionist, 686-4441, ext. 22, for more information. Monday-Friday 8:30-10:30 a.m.

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