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Music Feature: Harmonica great Norton Buffalo at home in Paradise; Steve Miller sidekick to host benefit in Paradise on Saturday



PARADISE -- For about 35 years now, whenever a musician -- or Hollywood for that matter -- has needed a harmonica player, Norton Buffalo has been the man to call. He's played on a remarkable 125 albums to date.

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Longtime Steve Miller sidekick Norton Buffalo (left), poses with his wife and musical collaborator Lisa Flores in their Paradise home. (Alan Sheckter/The Buzz)



Paradise resident and nationally renowned multi-instrumentalist Norton Buffalo accompanies a recording of one of his own songs with live keyboards at his home-studio. (Alan Sheckter/The Buzz)



Is it a buffalo skull? We're not sure, but Norton Buffalo is certainly standing in front of an interesting wall hanging at his home-studio in Paradise. (Alan Sheckter/The Buzz)



This case contains just a few unusual harmonicas from Norton Buffalo's vast collection. (Alan Sheckter/The Buzz)

By BRUCE SMITH-PETERS - The Buzz
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PARADISE -- For about 35 years now, whenever a musician -- or Hollywood for that matter -- has needed a harmonica player, Norton Buffalo has been the man to call. He's played on a remarkable 125 albums to date. He sang the theme song, played harmonica and added sound effects on "Garfield and Friends," as well as on the soundtracks for other "Garfield" and "Peanuts" projects in the 1990s. He's composed and produced the scores for television shows ("Unsolved Mysteries," "The Twilight Zone") and films and even acted in a few, including Bette Midler's "The Rose."

But Buffalo's perhaps most recognized for playing and touring with the Steve Miller Band, since the "Book of Dreams" album in the group's heyday of the late 1970s. More recent audiences know his harmonica and vocals from his current duo with slide guitarist Roy Rogers (who'll be at the Big Room with his Delta Rhythm Kings on May 1). If that's not enough, his band, Norton Buffalo and the Knockouts provides an outlet for his rhythm-and-blues laced rockin' blues, while Norton Buffalo and Friends (wife Lisa Flores and David Aguilar) offers more folk-based, rootsy, acoustic tunes.

Buffalo's own musical and Hollywood roots run deep. His father was a harmonica player and his mother sang in San Francisco nightclubs before he was born. His great-uncle, Herbert Stothart was one of MGM's principal composers during the golden age of musicals in the 1930s and '40s. He also won an Academy Award for his contributions to "The Wizard of Oz."

This was one of many things Buffalo was happy to talk about at the "Buffalo Ranch," the cozy Paradise home and studios (music for him, dance and pilates for her) he and his wife share. Standing outside his studio, Buffalo looked up at the blue sky framed by the tops of towering pine trees in the crisp April air and exclaimed, "You asked, 'Why Paradise?' This is why we moved to Paradise."

Even though no further convincing was needed, Buffalo explained that he left California's wine country in 2005 after 32 years because "the Valley of the Moon was full of two-lane roads and traffic jams." And besides, they "wanted to be in a place with more pickup trucks than SUVs and BMWs." In his studio, Buffalo played some of his newest music, including some fresh tunes recorded just three days earlier with the great Hawaiian slack key guitarist, George Kahumoku, Jr. They stayed up

late into the night, recording 18 songs, including a rousing version of "Hawaiian War Chant," (which he had first heard as a Spike Jones recording.)

The two also captured a touching tribute to a friend who had just passed away days earlier. "She's the closest friend I ever lost and I wanted to honor her" with a song, he said, still mourning. So beautiful, poetic and moving a tribute it was, and so recent the loss, he couldn't help but turn to a nearby keyboard and play along.

Above all, what these and other songs showed was how truly talented Buffalo is as a vocalist. He gets his props in concerts as Steve Miller introduces him as "my partner in harmony." But it's much more than that. "I do a lot of crooning," he admitted. And he's got the rich, dynamic voice for it. Yet, his vocals are supple and flexible enough to sound like a gospel quartet as in "Help Me, Help Me," the song he wrote after Hurricane Katrina.

Animated with feeling no matter the style, his voice is as versatile as his playing is eclectic. This assorted nature to his "mutt music," as he calls it, was on display with his two albums for Capital Records in the late '70s that were perhaps too varied for the times, but might be perfect in today's world. Accordingly, he's recently received the rights to those albums and looks to re-release them soon, along with a forthcoming Norton Buffalo and Friends CD as well as a new recording from The Knockouts.

He's a busy guy. Four bands, numerous side projects, and he's a long time volunteer providing harmonica workshops in California prisons. It's part of an ethic of giving.

Along these lines, on Saturday at the Paradise Performing Arts Center, The Rotary Club of Paradise is sponsoring "An Evening with Norton Buffalo," featuring Norton and Friends, Norton and the Knockouts, and special guest, the astounding Cajun fiddler Tom Rigney, who'll be sitting in on a number of tunes with both bands.

Best of all, proceeds will go directly to some worthy local organizations: the Paradise Performing Arts Center, KZFR community radio, Youth for Change and Rotary International's Water for Life program, which provides potable water to villages in Central America.

"The show is all about doing for the community," Buffalo explained. "We've been here two years now and haven't really done much here before. This is our introduction to the community and a chance to support good causes."

"An Evening With Norton Buffalo," featuring live music by Norton and the Knockouts, Norton and Friends, and Tom Rigney will be presented at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Paradise Performing Arts Center, 777 Nunneley Road, Paradise. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Tickets, \$25-\$55, are available at the box office, The Country Touch, Fir Street Gallery and the Paradise Ridge Senior Center in Paradise, Whisker Pines in Magalia, Music Connection in Chico. (The \$55 tickets include an after-show meet and greet.) Call 872-8454.