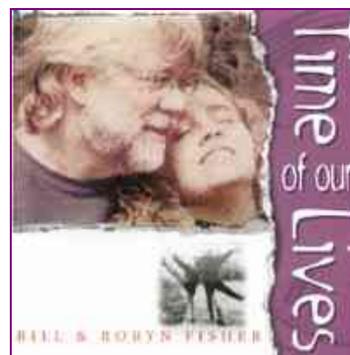


## Doc's Introduction

I became a fan of Bill and Robyn Fisher at one of the TMF events I attended. Even in the role of “Arry the button vampire,” the children’s music charmed me as well as the real *kids* in the audience and as importantly their parents. I caught a bit of their set for grownups hours later and I was hooked.

Although I’ve never had a chance to really get more than casually acquainted with Bill and Robyn, their music struck a chord. Well I’m not doing much traveling these days, but I thought I could better get to know this couple – educators and musicians - by writing about them. No, it doesn’t make up for the distance between the Seattle area (actually Olympia) and the Tri-Cities, but it’s a start.

And lest I get too badly side tracked, at the first *hearing* I went over to the TMF information booth and grabbed a copy of *Times of Our Lives* (1999) and their *Bag full of Beans* children’s songs (2002) albums. Both are available from CD Baby [<http://cdbaby.com/>] or catch Bill and Robyn at a gig and get a copy. Say *Hi* to them both and share your love of their music, and for me, yes I collect where others perform, an autograph. [Hint: visit with them at the TMF, or second best the Yakima Folk-Life Festival.]



I ran across the following quote about *Times of Or Lives* on CD Baby... It does a better job than I in focusing on their music.

“Bill and Robyn's harmonies are heard in schools, coffeehouses, folk festivals, churches and concert halls all over the Northwest. Bill brings a rhythmic approach to the 6- and 12-string guitar, and Robyn -- perhaps the only person Linda Waterfall has ever allowed to sing and play tambourine at the same time while recording in a studio -- is known for her unique and rich work on piano, guitar, harmonic and percussion, and for a richly energetic vocal style.”

Take the time to listen to Bill and Robyn’s music, tune into their warmth and caring-ness about each another, the children of the world and the richness, despite the human condition, of life.

Now if only I could sing outside the key of flat, or write anything that wasn’t either doggerel or in iambic pentameter... Lessons, Bill?

Doc\_Babad

## **The Lives and Music of Bill and Robyn Fisher** – an email interview

By Harry {doc} Babad and Bill Fisher

### When Did Music Start to Fill Your Life?

I started playing guitar when I was about fourteen years old, one of the many thousands who took up the guitar in large part because of the Kingston Trio. (I only took lessons for a short while, but I had the amazing fortune to take lessons from Bud Dashiell, of Bud and Travis fame. He pointed out that the Kingston Trio managed to stay about a page ahead of its audience in the guitar book.)

I played with a friend delightfully named Salty Sutton, and we sang about “The Seine” and “They Call the Wind Mariah” and a few songs we learned from early albums by the Journeymen, a group comprised of John (later Papa John) Phillips, the incredible tenor Scott MacKenzie, and Dick Weissman, who has appeared more than once at the Tumbleweed Festival. Like me, he has aged a bit. {Doc sez, but graciously.}

I went to Stanford University, expecting to be a big hit with my guitar, but was soon humbled. Next door in the dorm, there was a fabulous guitarist, raised on flamenco, capable of playing circles and loop-de-loops around my simple strumming. On the other side was an accomplished cocktail pianist who could play just about anything by ear. I didn’t play my guitar all that much, but I continued to learn and to write.

*Bill, this is a Déjà vu story, that why I became a collector of folk music rather than a performer – my comeuppance was Washington Square Park, Sundays at the edge of Greenwich Village in New York City. I also wondered why no wanted to hear all the verses of great songs like Mattie Grove, or the original Silkie song [not the one Joan Baez made famous] or the long poetic Gypsy Laddie, both of Childe Ballad fame. [Doc]*

### How Did You Merge Your Music Into Your Teaching Career?

After college and graduate school, I taught English in a private girls’ school, and integrated my music into my teaching, bringing the guitar at least once a week. I created settings for poems we were studying, playing my own songs, and playing traditional folk songs that related to what we were studying. I always felt that bringing and playing the guitar and singing were a way of demonstrating the joy of being more than a mere observer in the parade of creativity all around us.

I encouraged my students to learn to play—and many of them already had; their biggest influence was Joni Mitchell, the Kingston Trio having grown passé.

*Read on there’s more about music and Bill and Robyn’s careers later in this interview. Doc.*

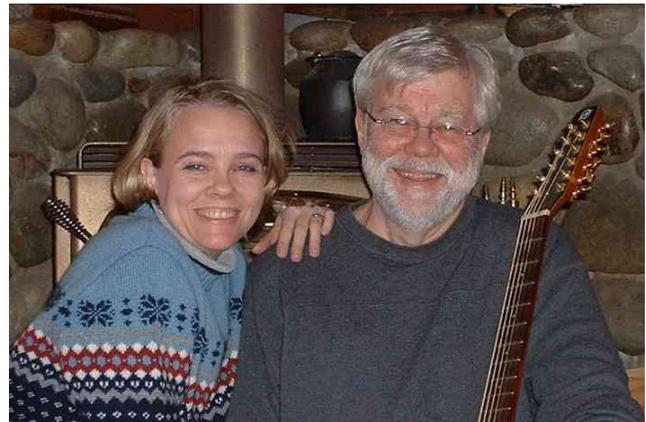
### How Did Your and Robyn's Lives Cross?

Jump shift forward many years. I was then married to a wonderful woman (with what would soon prove to be a fatal heart condition).

I was then playing the “special music” in the very small Unity Church in Lakewood, WA. A pretty young woman came up to me as I put my guitar back into its case after the service and poked me in the back. “Does this church have a folk choir?” she asked. I laughed.

“If it did,” I said, “there would be no one left in the church to listen to it. The minister would want to sing, too.”

I talked her into singing at a coming service, but she was nervous and wanted someone to back her up, and I offered to do that. When the time came around for us to rehearse a few songs together, my parents were going through a crisis. So I had to ask Robyn if we could meet an hour before the service, instead. I suggested that each of us bring two songs we thought we could get down pretty quickly and perform passably.



When we sat down in a room adjacent to the hall in which the church met, I pulled out two songs. The first one I suggested was, “*Today, While the Blossoms Still Cling to the Vine*”—the old New Christy Minstrels chestnut. I’d never sung it in public before, but I thought it might be easy.

At the same moment, Robyn pulled out the same song. A warning light went off in my head. (Stay very alert here, Bill.) We sang the song and it went well.

Remember that line from “Today”? “You’ll know who I am by the song that I sing”?

Robyn and I became good friends and we joined together in a lot of creative projects, from producing and performing in a concert to the creation of a magazine called *Open* (which enterprise was, frankly, open and shut within four issues, but was nonetheless an enjoyable piece of work. One of our issues, it turned out, was a memorial to my wife, Beverly, who had died in open-heart surgery).

Robyn, who is roughly 20 years younger than I, remained one of my best friends for six years, though it was obvious that—against all rational analysis—we were in love with each other. Now, a deep friendship is the very best foundation for a rich and empowering marriage, though you can get a lot of support from other friends and family in thinking you’re crazy, wanting to marry a younger woman with her own children.

### Tell us about Robyn

Robyn grew up in Arizona, the daughter of a remarkable, big-hearted, flinty guy who spearheaded many hiking organizations and a mother who, great sport that she was, made the sandwiches and catered their own parties and helped develop a remarkable group of friendships. Robyn learned to play piano at a fairly young age, often entertaining at her parents' parties—especially the annual Christmas Eve bash—and took up guitar, playing a lot in church camps and—yes—folk choirs. It was the age of folk choirs, when church services felt as if Donovan and Cat Stevens had designed them.

Amazingly, when Robyn's youngest child Jamie started playing the guitar not that long ago, one of the first songs she learned was "Stairway to Heaven." It was one of Robyn's first as well, twenty-five years ago or so. Robyn played with a church band, a remarkable group of young egos, and was told to stick to the keyboards and not to sing. In spite of these poor pieces of advice, her abilities and love of music grew rapidly and music remained always a big part of her life.

### Together Writing Music ... a bit of a hesitant start.

Being together, after long years as just special friends and partners in song was quite an artistic transition. When we first came together, Robyn and I discovered that our record collections seemed to complete one another. Another delight was that we had similar repertoires.

More strangely, both of us had developed a simple fantasy when we first got to know one another—we wanted to go to a Jackson Browne concert together. No, not because Browne was our favorite artist in the world, but because we'd never had the experience of going to a concert together. — Or making a meal for one another. — Or going to a movie. For years, we were married to different people. Then, at last, we weren't. ...And yes, we did go to a Jackson Browne concert, then another.

We began to put some serious work into our repertoire. There was something wonderful about singing and playing together, something that seemed to affirm our relationship and all we believed in.

We individually composed and together sang *intelligent* songs about love, songs about the earth and the sense of wonder and awe it inspires. We tried writing together as well, the first collaborating I'd ever attempted. I approached gingerly, it with skepticism and fear. I didn't want to step on Robyn's creativity in any way. So when she handed me a lyric that she couldn't find a melody for, it sat on my desk for several weeks. I was afraid to intrude on her art.

After a week or two more, she asked if I didn't like the lyrics, and I realized I had to get over this hurdle. I fashioned those lyrics *Loud and Clear* into a light, bluegrass-inflected song. People liked it—loved especially its positive lyrics. Then I put together a melody for *My Intention* (Robyn had said that all her initial attempts sounded like a poor imitation of the Indigo Girls. Together ours was better, it was clear that our work was clicking.

Robyn's Voice — What I began hearing at our performances was what a wonderful voice Robyn has. I surrendered immediately to the reality that my voice would back her voice, for the most part; I also started writing songs that would stretch and challenge her sense of what she could do.

Over the years, our music has brought us a tremendous amount of joy. For a couple of years, we experimented with a “yes” phase in which we said “Yes” whenever we were asked to perform, no matter the fee or the venue. This is a certain formula for burnout, but we needed the experience.

### Music Filled and Still Fills Our Lives

Meanwhile, we were running a music program at the local Unity Church, bringing in musicians for Sunday services and producing concerts with many of our favorite artists, getting to know fabulous people in the process—Linda Waterfall, Greg Scott, David Roth, and many others—and getting a huge education in the process.



We also played at festivals every summer. Yakima and Tumbleweed became summer vacations for the family. Seattle's Folklife—which has always been, for us, more fun to attend than to perform in—and a few others were thrown into the gumbo, along with occasional gigs at local venues, notably The Matrix Coffeehouse, run by the legendary Rick Straw, Holly and their son Moon St. Clair.

### The CDs

We recorded two CDs at David Lange's studio, *Times of Our Lives* produced by Linda Waterfall

As Bill Compton noted in THE OLYMPIAN, OLYMPIA, WA, October 1999 “*Time of Our Lives*” is built around the couple's smooth harmonies and guitar playing. Except for two numbers, all of the songs are originals. They speak eloquently to the themes of believing in oneself, living authentically with others and honoring the heartfelt instincts inherent in all of us.”

As you've read about Bill and Robyn, you surely will understand.

And to further pique your interest...

Marilyn O'Malley wrote in VICTORY MUSIC REVIEW, TACOMA, WA, October 1999 – “Joy and warmth abound in this exuberant album featuring

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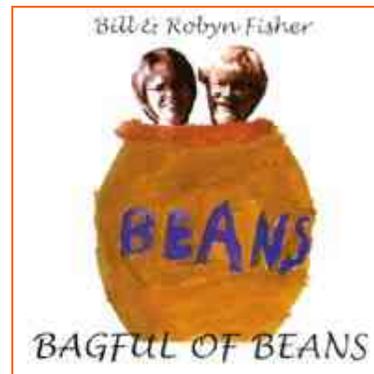
original and versatile songs. Bill and Robyn's humor, love, and spirituality, mix with their fine musicianship and sense of composition to create a unique, well-balanced, and friendly recording. A little mischief is sprinkled here and there to keep things lively, as on "Trying to Memorize Your Butt." Lovely vocal harmonies and some real hot acoustic guitar playing bring sweetness and power to songs that range from folk-rock to country-folk, as well as a torchy soft-rock number called "The Truth Has Set Me Free." Robyn sings and plays guitar, piano, harmonica and tambourine.

“Bill sings and plays 6- and 12-string guitars. They are joined by Cary Black on electric and acoustic double bass, Will Dowd on drums and other percussion, and Linda Waterfall on guitar and vocal back up. Barbara Collins adds her amazing fiddling to "Double-Crossin' Rattlesnake," helping to give it a Cowboy-Cajun kind of feeling, and Tom Moran's mandolin brings a sparkle to "Photographs." They also credit Linda with "empowerment" for encouraging and producing this fun and inspirational album.”

Our second album, a self-produced children's set is called *Bag full of Beans*.

Bill Compton writing for VICTORY MUSIC REVIEW, TACOMA, WA, March 2001 shares-- The Fishers from Olympia, Washington, released a delightful album for adults almost two years ago and now to be fair they've just released a children-oriented set that draws from music from just about everywhere.

They've got that panting paean to canines Wanna Be a Dog and the timeless Riddle Song from the Appalachians. There's the dancey Spanish folk song Cu Cu, a sweet one from France (in French), Sur Le Pont d Avignon, and from Japan, the beautiful Sakura. The West Indian folk song Tingalayo is a great one for clapping out with the kids. Chuck Pyle's song of togetherness, Step by Step, is augmented by a children's chorus.



Robyn's clear soprano carries most of the tunes, and she is careful to sing at a low enough register to allow young ones to sing along. The Fishers world view of spiritual multiculturalism comes through in originals like Bill's Being Like Everyone Else (Is Being No One At All) and the title cut. The pairing of Robyn's Satyagraha with Everybody's Dream, a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. drives it all home, gently.

In the process of making *Times of Our Lives*, Robyn realized how much she could do with her voice. She found that her guitar work was generally right in the *pocket*; her piano playing, whose quality she never acknowledges, added a great richness to a few songs. I meanwhile veered from

mild confidence to radical self-doubt, finally settling on the fact that I have no choice but to go with what I've got and to be relatively satisfied with that.

After creating the first CD, there was an idiotic place in the back of my mind that expected to find a long line of eager buyers formed in front of our house every morning. [We too learned that with the 3RFS *Front Row Seat* album.] No such thing happened, of course.

And we still have numerous boxes of both CDs stored in our garage, with a few selling now and again. The point, in our case, was not to create a big splash or try to create a new career. We just wanted to ride our music wherever it wanted to go. Despite of the lack of name recognition, we've remained fairly involved in the local music community.

*I knew that this was a bad time to ask about a new CD  
so I bit my lip. Doc.*

#### Music for Children

We brought our music to a lot of child-related venues—became an annual favorite in the children's performances at Yakima Folklife (a festival we love dearly)—and it seemed that Robyn's musical interests were determined to a large extent by the ages of her children. When her daughters were in kindergarten, she played for their class weekly. When they moved into slightly higher grades, we did numerous assemblies at their schools. (At one point, I recall asking them if they liked having parents who performed at their schools and other places, and they said, "Well, sort of. We'd actually rather it was someone else's parents.")

Over the past couple of years, the kids have grown a good deal older, Robyn has devoted most of her time to teaching and we've pulled back from music, letting our guitars get far too dusty. Our most recent performance was last year for 3RFS; an evening shared with the wonderful Steve and Shelly Hines. Other than that, our music has mainly found its way into our classrooms.

#### What Occupies Your Lives Today?

Robyn now works full-time at Yelm High, teaching English and journalism. Add to that, getting the yearbook and school newspapers out each year. It all adds up to a huge task, leaving little time even for us to listen to much music, much less make our own—and the time away from something that feeds our souls and our love so importantly is beginning to wear on us.

I am a writer by trade, putting together a phenomenal number of economic newsletters and other projects constantly. I also teach writing courses occasionally, literature as well. And I smuggle my guitar into the classes frequently. Robyn does the same. We both believe that one of the best things we can do is to embody a life full of personal creativity, as well as to relate the music we love to the literature we read and other writing we do.

*Harry doc\_Babad, Editor eMail: [etalkeditor@3RFS.org](mailto:etalkeditor@3RFS.org)*

But music just isn't tangential to our lives. We have a huge music collection. We follow the music of our favorites, and keep finding new favorites, with a deep and wild enthusiasm. And we have a deep love for the power of folk music—to draw people together; to give voice to commonly held feelings of pain and joy, to awaken us to truths of the heart. We've been disappointed that few people have given us songs that speak meaningfully of the anguish over the war in Iraq, and fewer still have brought us together in our sorrowful sense of aloneness. Too many recent songs have come from the left-brain, not from the heart, too often speaking angrily—but not poetically. We believe the time has come to revive what folk music and contemporary folk uniquely can bring, and we want to be a part of that.

Desirous of getting back into our music at a deeper level, if only to sit around the wood stove and play a night or two a week, has taken me back to our CDs. I find I have to relearn songs we used to play constantly. It's a bit sad, but it's also exciting, and we have a long list of songs we want to add to the repertoire—both originals and covers. Hopefully, we'll get it together and wind up back on one of those stages that look out at the Columbia River from Howard Amon Park on a coming September afternoon.



Bill Fisher April 2007.  
Interview, ad libs and editing by Harry (doc) Babad