

Who Fly-Fishes?

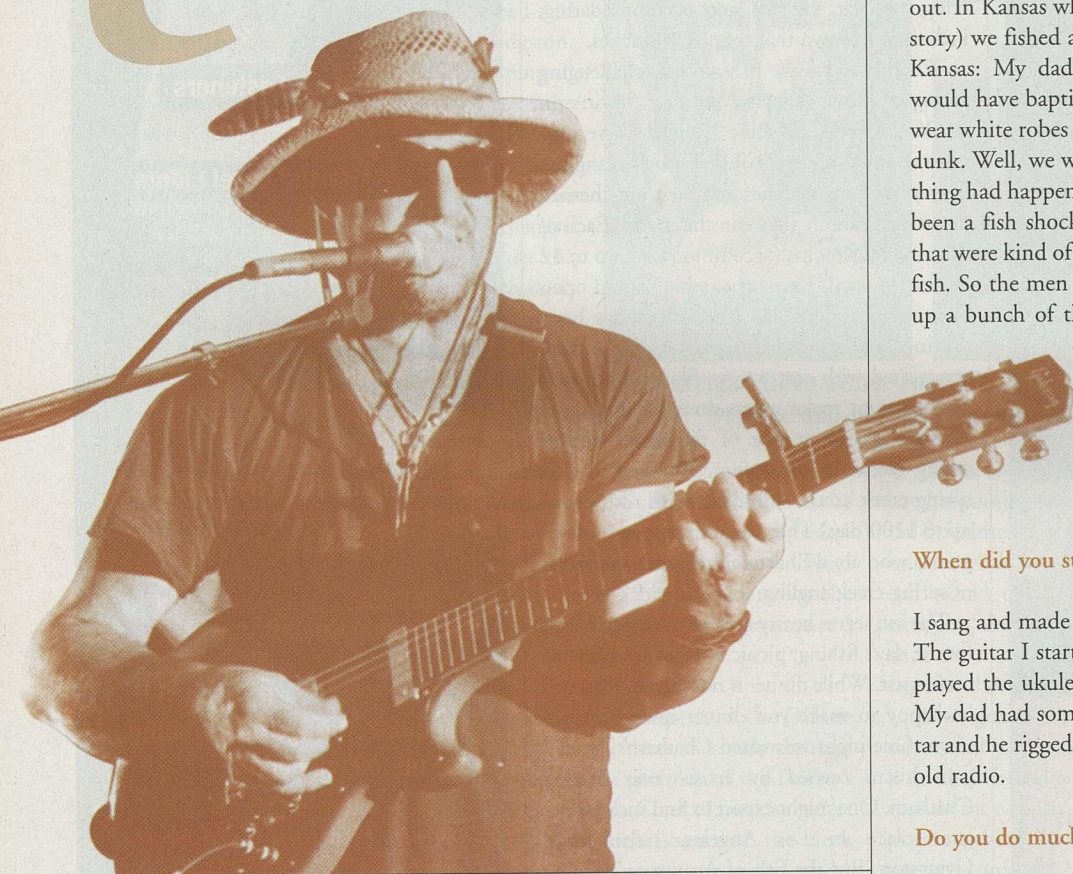
JOHN GIERACH

greg brown

'There's a similarity between bamboo rods and acoustic guitars'

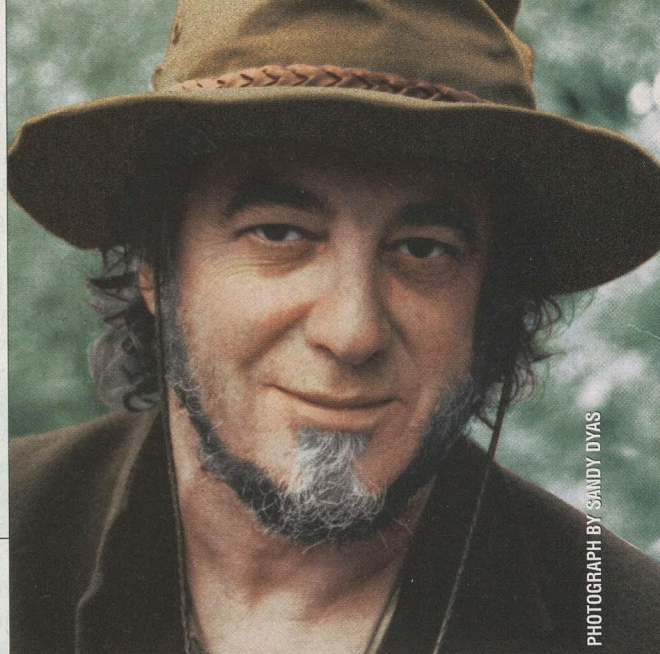
Two-time Grammy nominated folk singer Greg Brown has been writing, playing and singing his own songs for most of his adult life. He tours widely, and over the past 20 years he has released 18 albums, each marked by what have been called his "organic lyrics and fog-cutting voice." His 2000 release, "Covenant," won the Association for Independent Music's award for Best Contemporary Folk Album for the year.

Greg, whom the Washington Post has called, "one of the best singer-songwriters in America," wrote his first song at age 13, but can't remember when he started fishing.



'In a mucked-up lovely river, I cast my little fly.
I look at that river and smell it, and it makes me wanna cry.
Oh, to clean our dirty planet, now there's a noble wish,
and I'm putting my shoulder to the wheel,
'cause I wanna catch some fish.'

From "Spring Wind," by Greg Brown



PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY DYAS

JOHN GIERACH: So, when did you start fishing?

GREG BROWN: I really have no memory of that. I think I just loved to fish pretty much since I popped out. In Kansas when I was little (I guess this is a fishing story) we fished a lot of rivers. I remember one time in Kansas: My dad was a Pentecostal preacher and we would have baptisms out in the river and people would wear white robes and wade into the river and do the full dunk. Well, we went out there for a baptism and something had happened upstream—I think there must have been a fish shocking or something—and all these fish that were kind of dazed were floating by, a lot of big catfish. So the men waded out into the river and gathered up a bunch of these catfish. We decided we'd baptize later and it turned into a fish fry.

But just in general, I think because my dad grew up fishing and hunting, that from the time I could follow him around I generally had a fishing pole.

When did you start playing the guitar and singing?

I sang and made up songs since before I can remember. The guitar I started when I was about 12. Before that I played the ukulele, and also the Hawaiian slide guitar. My dad had somehow gotten ahold of an old slide guitar and he rigged it up so I could play it through this big old radio.

Do you do much fishing between gigs?

I used to do that but it's a little frustrating. A lot of times I just don't take fishing stuff with me because just about when it's time for a sound check is about when there'll be an evening rise. Even if I could fish, a lot of times it would just be between 10 and 2, which isn't the

best time of day. Now occasionally I'll do something like Alaska or Montana where I'll do a little run of gigs and then I'll book two or three days afterwards so I can stay and fish.

I also thought there was a kind of luck factor there, or a juju thing, because a couple times a promoter who knew I liked to fish said, "come out to Whitefish, Montana, we've got two guys who know every little stream around here. We'll take you fishing and we'll have a great time." I probably did that three or four times and invariably we'd all get skunked (not just me). It just seemed to me the luck factor didn't work out when you tried to do that. Now I pretty much separate the two except in a few cases where I can do some gigs and then do some fishing.

Actually, I did quite a few gigs with wet feet and soaked up to my knees where I'd get back to town just in time to get in and do it.

Where do you do most of your fishing now?

Well, this last year I got to fish up on the Brule River up in Wisconsin. I did quite a bit of trout fishing in Wisconsin and also in Michigan, and then I fish around here [southern Iowa] some. I'm turning into more of a bass fisherman. There are farm ponds and a little hand-made lake about 10 miles south of here that have a lot of bass and bluegills. So I hit those local things.

Trout fishing has gotten to be a little more of a problem since I moved down here. When I was living in Iowa City, I could get up to those trout streams in northeast Iowa and southeast Wisconsin in a few hours.

I've noticed when we've been fishing together that you sometimes sing quietly to yourself. Do you ever compose songs while you're fishing?

I have actually, and it's funny you say that because I don't remember what stream I was on (and I know I do walk around hummin' and singin' a lot) but one day I was hummin' and singin' along and I started making up a little song about the fish, and I was singing it to them, and *boom, boom, boom*, I really started catching fish. I've tried that a few times since and it didn't work.

I think the feeling of fishing—of being on a beautiful stream—is very much like I feel when I get into the songwriting place. You're not really thinking, you're just kind of going along with what's going on and they do feel similar. I think there's a number of times when I've come off a stream and gone back to my room and written part of a song that came out of that.

I think there's something about the place you get to when you're walking along a stream that's very conducive to that sort of thing. When I am writing, when I get into the zone—whatever it is—of song writing, it feels a lot like it does when you're fishing.

You started fishing with bamboo rods and stuck with them, didn't you?

Well, I had a bamboo rod when I was a kid and then during my late teens and early twenties I was bopping all over the country and I really didn't fish a lot during that time. But when I did start fishing again, I fished graphite rods for several years. Then in some junk shop somewhere I came across this bamboo rod and I remembered that it just suits me a lot better. Just the way a bamboo rods works; the comparative slowness of it and the fact of it being a little heavier just feels right to me. It's like some guitars just feel right and sound right. Bamboo rods are that way for me.

I think there's a similarity between bamboo rods and acoustic guitars because you're

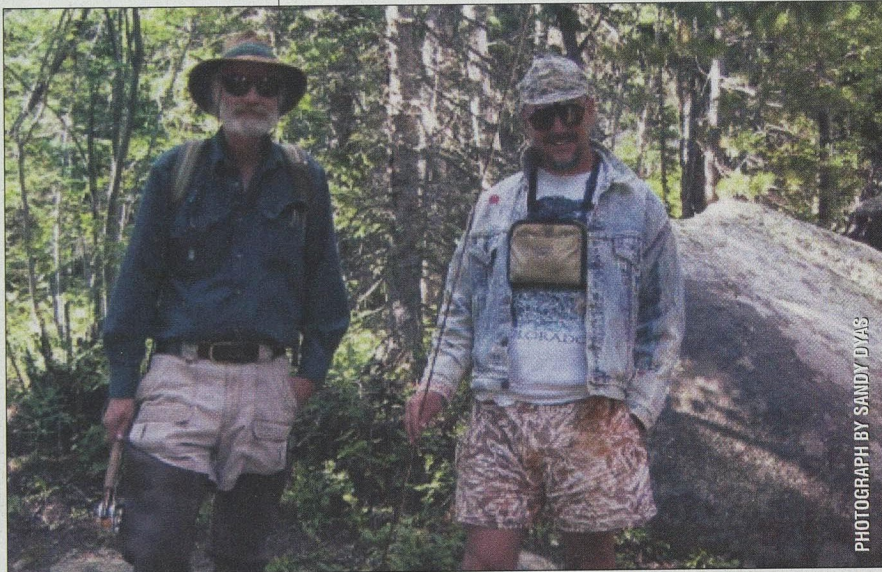
dealing with similar kinds of materials that have been put together with a lot of skill and a lot of thought. I don't know about bamboo rods, but I'd suspect it's like with a good guitar that's got some age on it: just the aging—and because it's well-made—it gets better, and I suspect that bamboo rods do that, too.

Do you have a favorite place to fish?

The first thing that pops into my mind is the little Yellow Dog River up in the UP [Upper Peninsula of Michigan] but there's also a little stream—I don't even know the name of it—up in the wild country in Wyoming that's kind of a similar stream in a way, although it tumbles down through the mountains, but the feel of it was about the same as the Yellow Dog. Any little brook trout stream that's not completely accessible: I'll take it.

Do you tie flies?

I tried it a little bit a few winters ago and I really got into it. It's something that I look forward to doing more of. I'd like to learn to tie, say, 10 or 12 patterns that I really use a lot. I have caught a few fish on my own flies



Fans of each other's work, John Gierach (left) and Greg met one summer several years ago at Mike Clark's rod shop when Greg was in Lyons, Colorado, for a folk festival.

that proves . . . I don't know what: Presentation over pattern, or maybe that trout aren't that bright. I don't know what they prove, but they were pretty pitiful looking things. It is a good feeling, though.

Do you feel that you do enough fishing?

No.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY D'AS