

By Cindy Hardy

WITH A HAMMER AND A SONG

TWO GREAT, RELATED THEMES IN AMERICAN MYTHMAKING ARE CREATION AND REINVENTION — OF COMMUNITIES, THINGS, EVEN OURSELVES. THE PROTEST SONG “IF I HAD A HAMMER” URGED LISTENERS TO CREATE A NEW SOCIETY WITH HAMMERS, BELLS AND SONGS. MUSICIAN AND TEACHER STEVE BROWN ISN’T OUT TO OVERHAUL THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE, BUT HE DID REINVENT HIMSELF, USING A HAMMER, A SONG AND, YES, A (SCHOOL) BELL.





"Well, this old gravel road used to greet me with a smile..."

Last summer, UAF's Davis Auditorium filled with fans of National Public Radio's live music program, *Mountain Stage*, for the taping of the second show in its two-day run. My friends and I found a few seats together in the back of the auditorium among a typical Fairbanks summer crowd — Hawaiian shirts and gray ponytails, younger folks in jeans and Carhartt cut-offs, little kids skipping down the aisles to their seats.

The lights dimmed and the familiar theme music — "There's a song" — came on. Larry Groce, the host, a bit smaller and balder than I had imagined, walked across the stage, microphone in hand, and welcomed the first local band, Steve Brown and the Bailers.

Steve Brown was the one I had come to see. He strolled out, guitar in his hands, wearing a black Western shirt with big blue and cream flowers on the yoke, a faded red ball cap shading his eyes. He bent over his guitar with a tall guy's slouch, tuning as the other musicians took their places. They began to play:

"Well, this old gravel road used to greet me with a smile

I've traveled it for years

Used to walk its many miles

But, oh, things change when you're not looking."

The music had a touch of country, a bit of jazz, a hint of folk, and the lyrics had a tough, heartbroken sound. This aw-shucks-looking guy, bent over his guitar, flashy but humble, got right to the heart of the matter.

I first met Brown in 2005 when he came to my office at UAF, looking for an advisor. He had sawdust on his ball cap and paint on his jeans. This was a guy who worked with his hands for a living, but he had intensity and, best of all as far as I was concerned, he wanted to be an English major.

"What do you see yourself doing with an English degree?" I asked.

"Well, I'm a carpenter now, but I'd like to be a high school English teacher," he told me. "And I write songs."

He knew what he wanted. He had a plan.

He signed up for 21 credits his first semester, and I was willing to help him puzzle together the pieces of a degree from a batch of transfer credits. When I tried to talk him out of taking so many credits, he insisted he could pull it off.

"Going for an English degree and figuring out all the credits were horrifying to someone who had been taking community college business classes," Brown later said. "I knew it would be intense, but I had a good work ethic. I was determined."

His first day of classes, he had the same professor for the first and last class of the day. The professor looked at him and said, "Didn't I have you in class this morning? How many credits are you taking?"

When Brown told him, the professor replied that he'd never make it. But he didn't know Brown.

Over the next two years, he would drop in every semester to talk to me. We'd talk about poetry and home remodeling and the music scene in Fairbanks. Then Brown graduated with his English degree and got his master's in education. Soon after, he was hired to teach English at Lathrop High School in Fairbanks.

Brown began writing songs when he was 15. He had been a Guns N' Roses fan, but

Tom Petty's focus on song rather than image impressed him.

"I knew that girls liked boys to sing a song over the phone," he says, "and Tom Petty was writing catchy songs."

Later, he heard an interview with Petty, describing how he wrote songs.

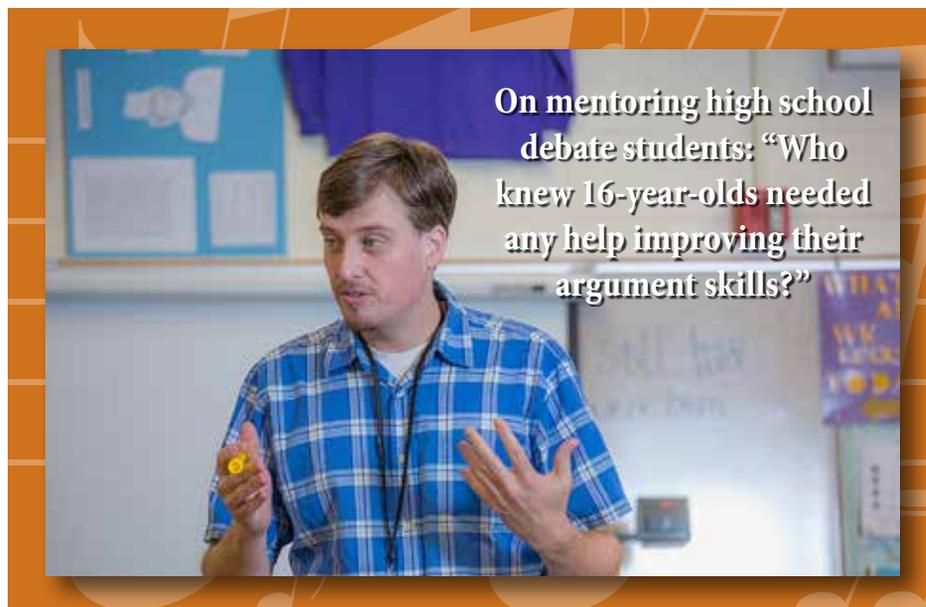
"He said that the best songs are where you're just sitting around minding your own business and the whole song comes to you," Brown says.

And that's how Brown writes. Songs come to him at night when he's trying to sleep, or a catchy phrase or guitar riff gets caught in his head.

"It doesn't always have to do with people I know or something that happens to me," he says.

Born in Oregon City, Ore., Brown grew up in the family home-remodeling business. His parents owned rental houses on the coast, and on weekends as a kid, he would go with them to work on the houses. In high school, remodeling became his job every afternoon after school.

"I always had the crappy jobs," he says. "I hated it. I never realized that I was learning something or that I'd use those skills to pay for college."



On mentoring high school debate students: "Who knew 16-year-olds needed any help improving their argument skills?"

When he started to take the work seriously, he renegotiated his job with his brothers. He thought he'd stay in the family business in Oregon, that it would be his life.

After high school, he went to Marylhurst College, outside Portland, taking classes toward an associate degree in business.

"It was a school for people usually later in life," he says, "but an early scholars program took in a small group of high school graduates. I had to write letters to get accepted on scholarship."

Brown left school every day at noon to work on remodeling projects, the only person in his classes to do this, or, as he put it, "the only person from a working-class background." He thought his life was set out for him — bathrooms and kitchens stretching into the future, just waiting for him to remodel.

One day, he was driving down a back road and saw his favorite high school English teacher jogging. They started talking.

"She asked me, 'What are you doing with your life?' I said that I dreamed of going to Alaska, where my brother had gone, but I was stuck in this family business."

She asked him what he imagined himself doing instead, and he said, "You've done so much for me in high school. I'd like to do that."

That was the first time Brown had spoken to anyone about being a teacher, and, with his teacher's help, he began making a road map to get to his goal. It was a map with a few detours, of course.

"I was 19. I'd been in a difficult relationship — the English teacher helped me out with that — and I came to Alaska for a change of scene," Brown says. He got a job working for his brother's carpentry business. He bought five acres of land in Cripple Creek, outside Fairbanks, and began playing guitar with his friends there.

Picking strings turned into songwriting, and eventually to a songwriter showcase at Davis Concert Hall. After that, Brown began to make more contacts in the Fairbanks music scene. He went to the Juneau Folk Festival.

"People kept saying, 'Nice music. We should play together,'" Brown says. "I got on the radar."

But Brown was torn between Fairbanks and his family. Until 2005, he spent his winters in Portland, working in the family business and taking what he describes as "random classes" at the community college.

"I was working for my family to earn enough money to buy materials to build a house in Fairbanks," Brown says, "but they kept putting pressure on me to sell my Cripple Creek property and become a partner in the business."

But Brown had his own plans.

He returned to Fairbanks to go to school as an English major, following the plan his teacher friend had helped him lay out.

He joined the Carpenters union and began to save for school.

Brown's musical life never went on hold, even during the 21-credit semesters.

"In 2005, I was sitting at Old U Park, and I saw a girl with a water bottle that said 'Hot Club of Cowtown.' It was Robin Feinman. We became study buddies with guitars," says Brown.

Feinman sang bluegrass, something Brown hadn't tried before. She taught him how to harmonize and how to sing with volume. They began singing at a local coffeehouse and at parties. A party host introduced them to Todd Denick, a bass player, and they began playing bluegrass tunes together. After a year, Denick bought an upright bass, and they became Steve Brown and the Bailers. "We always had some guest artist who might or might not show up to the gig, so we made a joke out of it."

In 2008, drummer Kliff Hopson joined them, and they played more gigs.

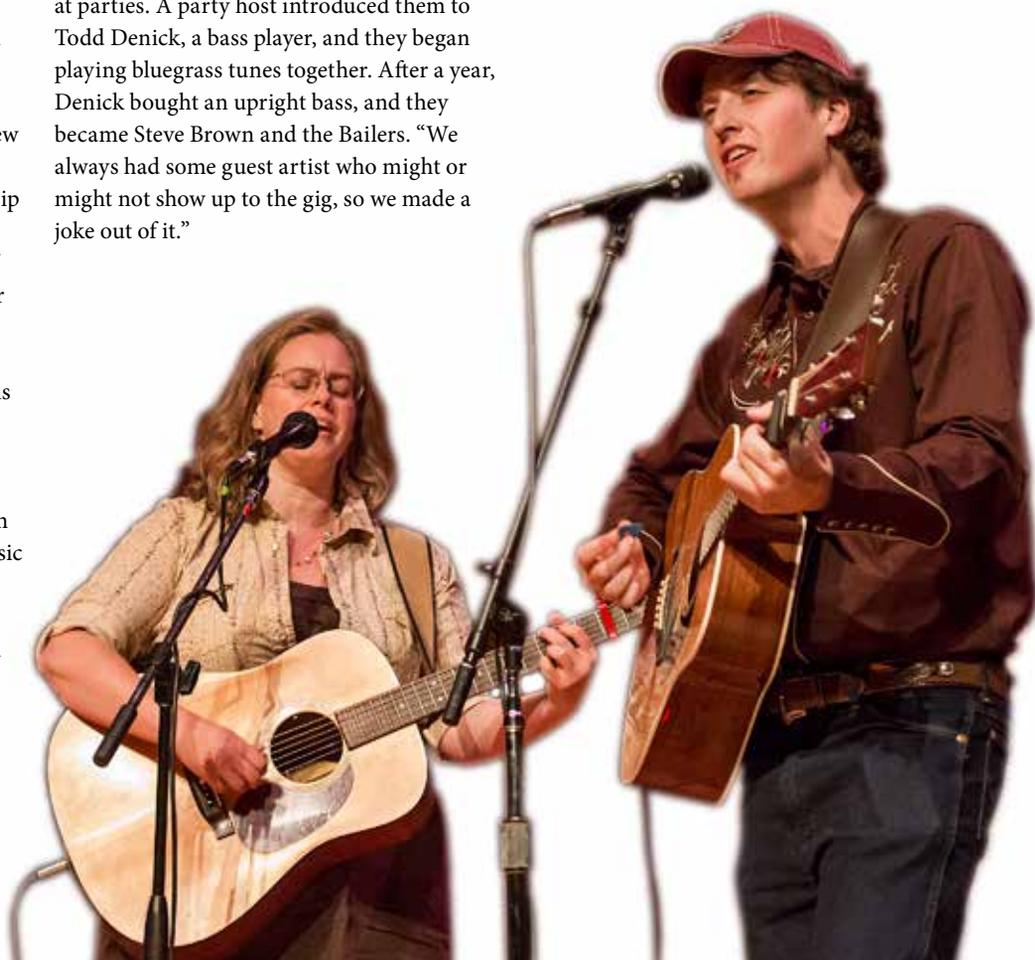
"Now people weren't just listening," Brown says, "they were tapping their feet."

The band decided it was time to lock down their membership and learn some songs: bluegrass, some cover tunes, and Brown's own songs. After a few more band members came and went, they stayed with the band they have now: Brown, Feinman, Denick, Josh Costello, Dave Parks and Alex Clarke, '87, — a mix of younger players and a couple of veterans of Fairbanks bands.

The band began to get some notice, especially after public radio's *The Folk Sampler* featured the Bailers on a national broadcast. The exposure eventually led to a 2009 spot on *Whad'Ya Know?*, another nationally syndicated radio program that would be taping its hybrid comedy/music/quiz show at UAF.

Brown enjoyed the rehearsal but was so nervous before the show that he didn't eat.

"I don't usually meet celebrities," Brown says, "but [host] Michael Feldman ... made it easy. When Feldman announced the band, the audience response was so positive, and they let us plug our music."





What really surprised Brown was the letters he got after the show.

“I got 10 handwritten letters from around the country, asking for CDs,” Brown says. “Who wrote letters in 2009? I wrote every one of those people back. How could it get better for a Fairbanks band?”

By the time Steve Brown and the Bailers appeared on *Mountain Stage* in 2012, their music had already seen a fair bit of national airplay. But *Mountain Stage* is a show that promotes singer-songwriters to a knowledgeable public radio audience. This was Brown’s big break.

The Bailers were the lead-off band for the second show, and they were the last band to sound

check. When they walked on the stage, Brown was nervous.

“There were three different sound guys talking to us through the speakers,” Brown later told me. “We had to cut half of our songs. Then we had to leave the stage for the opening of the show, and I left my guitar on the stage. When I went back out on stage, it was out of tune.”

But from where we were sitting at the back of the concert hall, we saw a guy cool as cool, walking around in the bright stage lights as the band played, singing his heartbreak songs, and, between sets, fiddling with his guitar, tuning it like a pro.

When the show was over, I waited to greet Brown outside. Musicians and their friends and

fans milled around, greeting each other. Finally Brown came out.

He looked a bit dazed but grinned big. And even though it was just my imagination, his hat looked like it still had a bit of sawdust on it.

But, oh, things change when you’re not looking. 🎸

Cindy Hardy, ’86, is a professor of developmental English at UAF. Her other life involves writing poetry, blogging, riding horses, dancing and gardening. She advises her students to do what they love best, whether it’s playing in a rock band or underwater research diving.

The band started out as Steve Brown and the Dwellers, as in cabin dwellers, but some members kept bailing out before gigs. Now with a more reliable lineup, Steve Brown and the Bailers consists of Alex Clarke, Todd Denick, Robin Feinman, Brown, Dave Parks and Josh Costello (not pictured).