

Listening to Randy

Randy Rutherford says he has found tremendous satisfaction in telling autobiographical stories to audiences. His latest work, *My Brother Sang Like Roy Orbison*, opens this weekend in San Francisco.

Randy Rutherford discovered that it is increasingly difficult to be a folk-singing storyteller when your hearing is slowly but surely leaving the building. Living in Alaska in his early 20s, Rutherford says he planned to be the next Gordon Lightfoot. "I sang songs, told stories, bantered with the audience," Rutherford explains from his home in Oakland. "I remember thinking how lucky I was because I was doing something I was passionate about. Then there was this ringing in my ears." As a performer, I started having trouble hearing people in the audience. "I was diagnosed with having a degenerative hearing disorder and was told that because it involved nerve damage, there was nothing to be done," He says. "My hearing loss would get progressively worse, and it has."

Now 56, Rutherford can still hear mostly men's voices and cello music, which means he can still enjoy listening to Gordon Lightfoot and YO'Yo Ma CDs. But if someone's whistling or if a baby's crying, he doesn't hear a thing. As his hearing loss accelerated, Rutherford says he went through about eight months of what he describes as a "deep, dark depression". Then his girlfriend at the time gave him a set of watercolors, and he started painting. At first he copied animals out of National Geographic, and then he started doing his own thing. Eventually he made a name for himself as an artist. "I decided that if I couldn't make music on instruments, I'd make music visually," Rutherford says. "I chose watercolors because to me, that's like acoustic guitar."

His deepening interest in art led Rutherford to Oakland and to the California College of Arts and Crafts, where he received his master's degree in painting. He ran a frame shop in Oakland for a while but began to miss performing. The painting was going well, but Rutherford found it to be lonely. "Painting was as isolating as being hearing impaired," he says. "I did some soul searching and found I really wanted to connect with people." That need led him back to his guitar and to the coffee house circuit and even, for a while, to the San Francisco stand-up comedy circuit. "At home, in my living room, with no background noise, I could hear the guitar," he says. "But out in the real world, I couldn't tell where my voice was in comparison to the music, and it was hard to hear the audience." So Rutherford turned to storytelling, and the stories he chose to tell were culled from his childhood and young adult life. He started putting the stories together and creating one-man shows.

The first part of what he envisions as a trilogy; was "Weaverville Waltz," which recounted how, as a boy, he wanted to rescue his mother from his hard-drinking stepfather. The second part has been in development for about three years and opens this weekend at the Bannam Place Theatre in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood. The show, called "My Brother Sang Like Roy Orbison," takes Rutherford's story into his teens and early 20s and concentrates on his relationship with his stepbrother Denny. "It can be terrifying to tell these stories in front of strangers, but as one of my early teachers, David Ford, told me, I'm creating a new way for me to be in the world, and it's true. Maybe it can encourage other people to find the courage to tell their stories too."

Freddie Long, an actor and director, has been working with Rutherford for some time now, and she says that he has a quality of being "present, vulnerable and authentic." "Randy is very adept at all the technical aspects of the performance," Long says, "but he never ceases to maintain a very grounded, conversational, personable relationship with his listeners." Trying to direct a hearing-impaired performer has its challenges and frustrations, but Long says the experience has made her a better communicator. "I have to be much clearer than I usually am," she says, "and that's a good thing. I speak more slowly and try to keep my voice in its lower register."

Both Long and Rutherford teach and help people turn their life stories into performance pieces. Rutherford just completed a workshop in Berkeley in which he guided a group through a writing process that culminated in an evening of performance. "Most of the people in the class did not have any theatrical experience," he says. "So we had to create a safe, trusting atmosphere. To watch them jump over their fears and make these huge leaps was just amazing. The night of the performances was just magical. There are huge differences between art and therapy, but I think sometimes you benefit equally from both."

Since his mother died in 1986, Rutherford, who is divorced, has been on his own. He has never known his father and has only recently mended fences with his stepbrother. Still, he does not consider himself alone: "I guess you could say these stories are sort of my family."