

Profile in Music: Cripple Creek

On April 24, 2004, downtown Manitou Springs came alive with the music of *Cripple Creek*. Broadcast from Sugar Magnolia's, their encore album release show could be heard up and down Manitou Avenue. The unique sounds of the dulcimer, the vocal harmonies and rhythms, and the blend of classic American sounds from "pop-folk" to gospel, drew people in to listen and to enjoy ice cream as well.

Cripple Creek's music, and the music from their first album Muddy Water, has been categorized as folk - but it so much more than that! Their roots date back to 1984 and the fourth Manitou Mountain Music Festival. Tom Ivey, their lead guitarist and arranger, asked Bud and Donna Ford to accompany him on stage for the Sunday morning "gospel hour." While already veteran performers, they "had their doubts" having never worked with him.

The music worked its magic. Their voices harmonized as if they had been performing together their entire lives. Bud's dulcimer playing added a unique touch to Tom's guitar playing and styles. In fact, everything worked and they knew, then and there, that they had something very special. Now, over 20 years later, they still perform some of those same gospel songs, such as *Ezekiel* and *Rock Me Sweet Jesus*, both of which appear on their album.

"Vocals are really our main instrument," says Bud, "and play the most important part of our music."

The rich combination of Bud's deep voice and Donna's beautiful tenor have always allowed them to perform splendid acappella arrangements, that is "without instrumental accompaniment." This type of vocal harmony - often associated with the barbershop quartet - is one of the most difficult styles to perform. When done well, something they make seem almost effortless, it can be the most spectacular. Ivey's voice and range complements that of the Fords, filling in some songs and leading the way in others. Together they form the long-term base of the group *Cripple Creek*

Over the years Tom has been their main arranger and has also written some songs that have been incorporated into the act. Most of their recent songs can best be described as political satire or humor.

Although they remind (and caution) the crowd, "While we are fully in support of our troops, we are not always happy with some of the politicians that put them at risk," they still have had jaws drop and aghast stares from their parody of the "Fixin' to Die Rag" (by Country Joe and the Fish). Originally written about the Viet Nam War, the words are updated for the current set of international crises. Sharpened, honed, and wrapped in barbed wire, the songs has been known to make politicians cringe and duck and almost hope for "friendly fire."

Cripple Creek has also added a few "adult-oriented" songs into their repertoire. Two of these songs, Older Women and Vasectomy appear on their album. The first is a somewhat loving reminder to life-long partners that women, like good wine and cheese, get better as they get older. The second tells of the bad, and good, of a couple of "painful little cuts" that can make all the difference in a man's relationships. Rappers of today should take some lessons on dealing with "delicate" subjects - and how to do so without once using words that would be inappropriate around a child.

The band has changed over the years, as most do. While Bud, Donna, and Tom have always been the mainstay of *Cripple Creek*, it has varied from as few as the three, to as many as six. In the last two years, it has added three new members - all of which have been acquired along the way from the Manitou Mountain Music Festivals.

Terry Smith plays bass, usually an acoustic-electric, but sometimes a real "stand up." This instrument blends well with Bud's voice and adds a nice full sound to the band. Susie Lewis plays fiddle on their album and some of their songs, adding more of a blue-grass and folk sound.

Their newest addition is Sandy Kressner. She is primarily a vocalist, and provides an almost Celtic touch. She also plays hand rhythm instruments and whistles, rounding out the band's sound. Sandy played with the band five years ago and recently rejoined after the album had been recorded.

To use a line from Harry Chapin, "music is their life, but it is not their livelihood."

Tom Ivey is an executive at the Nation Education Association. He helps school teachers who have been "let go", discriminated against, and otherwise unreasonably denied their rights. He moved to Wisconsin about three years ago to further his career, but his heart is still here in Manitou Springs and he frequently flies back to visit it, as well as for concerts and rehearsals.

Tom primarily sings and plays guitar, and can also now be heard playing banjo on the album as well as at their concerts.

Donna Ford (a current Manitou Springs City Councilperson) and Bud Ford (a former Mayor of Manitou Springs) are the proprietors of The Dulcimer Shop (Cripple Creek Dulcimers) in Manitou Springs. They have been playing instruments for nearly 50 years.

Bud now plays "as many as 20 different instruments." Whether playing solo or with other musicians, Bud plays woodwinds - everything from flute to clarinet and tin whistle to recorder - as well dulcimer, guitar, and mandolin. Donna plays guitar at some of their performances. While she also plays both hammered and mountain dulcimers and at one time played clarinet, she still primarily "plays her voice."

Bud and Donna also hand make custom dulcimers, guitars and mandolins (**note to editor** See story on page XX). Many of these instruments, although not their personal ones, can be found for sale at The Dulcimer Shop.

Cripple Creek, as a group, gives a great deal of credit to its folk and Americana roots. Their song list includes many old popular hits and some "not as well known" music by such greats as Tom Paxton (*If You Love That Politician* - a small town that votes by "flushing"), Tom Lehrer (*Poisoning Pigeons in the Park* - about, well, uh...), The Limelighters, The Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and many more. When you add in the dynamic gospel vocals, well-timed stage patter, and the overall musicianship acquired from their many years of public performance, individually and collectively, *Cripple Creek* presents a energetic stage presence without the usual hectic "look at me" demands of today's rock performers. Background music, though, it is not!

Cripple Creek will be playing at the Manitou Celebration of the Arts, Days of '59, and Mountain Music Festivals. You can also catch them playing around town during the summer. Contact them for their current performances and be sure to watch for, and listen to, the band and their Muddy Water CD - your ears will be glad you did!

Cripple Creek's CD, Muddy Water, was recorded in Boulder at Residential Zone Studio by Doug Pintar, well-known for his sound work on many of Manitou's music and arts festivals and last year's "Indy X" event in Colorado Springs. It was engineered by Tom Ivey and Doug Pintar.

The CD, as well as the Ford's "Mel Bay" instructional dulcimer books and CD, is for sale at The Dulcimer Shop (740 Manitou Avenue - 719-685-9655) and is also available via mail order or the Internet (<http://Dulcimer.Net> - <mailto:Dulcimer@Dulcimer.Net>).