

Pat Long and Blue Rose Café Where The Highway Meets The Sky

One day last fall, a CD was quite literally dropped in my lap by a friend who thought it would be something of great interest to me. The title of the CD was "A Reunion and Tribute to Pat Long" by a band called Blue Rose Café. I'd never previously heard of either Pat Long or Blue Rose Café, outside of one of the band's members, namely Kevin Welch. As far as I'm concerned, Kevin's never sung a song, released an album, or has ever been involved in other projects I didn't like, so the thought never entered my mind that this one wouldn't be on par. I was familiar with (and impressed by) the titles of 4 of the disc's songs, Kinky Friedman's "The Silver Eagle Express," Willis Alan Ramsey's "The Ballad Of Spider John" and "Painted Lady," and John Hiatt's "Train To Birmingham." Given that, when I popped in the disc, none of it prepared me for what I was about to hear. As the first song started, it wasn't Kevin's vocals that I heard, but some amazing vocals by another singer. He was singing a captivating song about an outlaw, accompanied by some first-rate musicians, all of which was backed by some incredible harmony. The rest of the CD followed suit, a mix of timeless, up-tempo two-steppers and soulfully bluesy ballads that combined elements of country, blues, folk, bluegrass, rock and even a little jazz, with Kevin and 'that other' singer alternating on lead vocals. I found myself completely hooked on the album, listening to it time and again for weeks on end. This was one of those real true gems that slips out there unnoticed and is typically and unfairly doomed to obscurity. Knowing nothing about the CD except what I heard listening to it, not only was it too good not to mention, but also there was something very different about it. And so I decided it absolutely had to be slipped in among the stack of CDs to be reviewed.

When I started poking around doing some background research on the CD, I found out Blue Rose Café was a band out of Oklahoma that was around from '75-'76 before disbanding, and was fronted by a singer/songwriter named Pat Long, who tragically passed away in 2003 at age 49. The reunion/tribute project was done to raise money for his two daughters, Cassie and Olivia, to whom the proceeds of the project go.

Along the way I'd also gotten to hear a brilliant, young Pat Long singing a few of his own songs, on the Blue Rose Family website. At that point, any other information beyond that was scant. I wrote the review of the album for TCB's website and shortly after the review was posted, I started hearing from people associated with the project, thanking me for the mention. A few e-mails back and forth, and more information came to light. That 'other singer' was John Arnold, who fronts his own band, and who was invited to step in to share some of the lead vocals that were once Pat's. The killer guitarist was Bob French, another long-time Oklahoma based musician who was invited to fill the lead electric guitar spot that was once Kevin's (who no longer even owns an electric guitar). After a few more e-mails, the story of Pat Long and Blue Rose Café was unfolding and my instincts told me there was a story there waiting and needing to be told. It's the story of the mythical/magical point in time of a band called Blue Rose Café, that despite it's relatively brief reign became one of the most influential bands in Oklahoma. It's also the tragic story of an immensely talented singer/songwriter, who despite his talent, wound up one of the unlucky ones and became another Music Row casualty.

Gary Johnson said during a conversation, "Although it is just a little story, about a bunch of musicians no one really knows about, I feel the story resonates. There are so many elements that are timeless, iconographic. In many ways it may be a typical story. Maybe that's what I like about it." Maybe it's because there are so many- too many- similar stories, and that's what makes telling this one so important. So, what follows is the bittersweet story of Pat Long and a little Oklahoma outfit called Blue Rose Café, told through the laughter, tears and many fond memories of Pat's family and friends.

Pat Long was born on March 11, 1954 in Kansas City, the second of Jack and Barbara Long's 4 children. Brother Mike was the oldest, while younger sister, Linda and the youngest brother, Jimmy, followed Pat. Jack moved the family to Tulsa, OK when Pat was 6 months old and although his work would temporarily relocate them from time to time, Tulsa was always their home base.

The Long's were a happy, typical American family, living in a two-story house on a cul-de-sac in a middle class neighborhood teeming with kids. Friends were a constant presence, whether outside climbing on the backyard jungle gym, paying early morning visits via the dog door or conspiring with the Long kids in acts of mischief. Linda (Long) Barton fondly recalls one of those moments. "One of the family stories that has been passed down is the time that our parents were having their friends over to play bridge, leaving us kids to fend for ourselves, the way kids do when the parents are busy socializing. Being the creative children that we were, someone came up with the idea of trying to put as much of the upstairs furniture as we could into the bathroom, which we happily did."

Pat himself was quiet by nature though, but at the same time he was fun-loving with a quick sense of humor and had a way about him that immediately drew people to him. His was the usual all-American boyhood upbringing

that included games of football, baseball and basketball. He was involved in the Boy Scouts while Barbara served as a den mother, his father Jack took his turn as a scoutmaster and the entire family enjoyed the various functions together. The family shared a great love of the outdoors and spent many of their weekends at a nearby lake on the family's houseboat and shared many vacations camping, fishing, and water skiing. Jack also owned a small plane, and Pat loved flying with his dad.

Jack and Barbara enjoyed folk and bluegrass music, and often took their brood along to concerts and festivals. Additionally, Jack learned a little guitar, not much, but it may have been enough to plant the seed. When Pat was 5, he received a little organ for Christmas and instantly fell in love with it. Formal piano lessons soon followed, and according to Barbara, Pat became the teacher's pet. By time junior high rolled around, The Beatles were the favorite of the Long clan and big brother Mike had started playing in rock & roll bands. Besides juggling school and newspaper routes, in a case of either being inspired or not to be outdone, Pat followed suit playing with his own bands, one of his earliest being Velvet Soul. Along the way, in addition to piano, he taught himself to play guitar and banjo. Between the two boys, band rehearsals became commonplace at the Long house. It was during high school that Pat began trying his hand at songwriting and discovered a natural talent for it. The one thing that struck everyone the most about Pat was his voice. Not only was he turning out to be a gifted songwriter, but Barbara sums up everyone's views the best when she says, "he had a pure singing voice, enunciated every word, sang from the heart. That's also how he wrote music— straight from the heart."

After graduating high school, Pat enrolled in Tulsa University, but according to his mom, he soon realized his heart just wasn't in it. Barbara goes on to explain, "One day I found him in his room lying on his bed looking as though he needed to talk. That's when he told me he wasn't interested in college; he knew he wanted music to be his life. He wanted to get started with it as soon as he could and not wait until after a college degree. Since that's what was in his heart, that's what we agreed to."

It was also a turbulent time in the Long household. Jack admits a mid-life crisis hit him hard around this time, causing marital problems that ultimately led to his and Barbara's divorce. Linda was still living at home at the time and goes on to say, "It was a hard thing for everyone, but I had a clue that something wasn't right so it wasn't as big a shock to me as it was to Pat, as he had moved away by then." Jack drifted away from the family for a time.

Pat took the divorce hard. Deciding he needed to take some time to sort things out, he and his friend Chris Whitney headed for Granite City, Illinois. They heard of work there and ended up staying for about a year in 1973. Pat and Chris not only shared a burgeoning sense of adventure but also a love of music. Chris picks up the story.

"We were both 'folkie' pickers and we hit it off right away. The music was early James Taylor, John Denver, Jonathan Edwards, Simon and Garfunkel. We worked on harmony singing; he learned to fingerpick and then taught me. He found an old upright piano, which we moved to his *basement* without ruining it! I remember being astonished at his ability to learn a song from just listening- Elton Johns' "Talking Old Soldiers" on piano, and nearly every song from the Willis Allan Ramsey album on guitar. He eventually learned banjo on the "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" album. While we got together often for music and Firesign Theater, Pat always spent a lot of time alone, learning tunes, and I suspect, starting to write. We traveled a few times. We drove eight hours to get to the Ozark Mountain Folk Fair, where he met the Scruggs's, among others. I think it was a significant event for him. He really took to the bluegrass after that. We were sent to Ohio once, and stuck in a hotel one evening, I wrote a poem for him, as he seemed pretty down. It would be insignificant, except a year or so later, it became what I think was among his first song writing efforts- he'd written more words, and the music for what became "The Poet and the Musicman." When the work in Illinois was done, Pat headed to Norman (OK), and I to Pennsylvania. It wasn't long before he called to say I had to come down; he'd met a guitar player I just had to meet, and was writing a song I had to hear...the guitarist was Kevin (Welch), and the song I previously mentioned."

Pat and Kevin had immediately hit it off when they first met and their relationship grew into a deep, lifelong friendship. "I personally attribute a major part of my life education to Pat," Kevin says as he recalls his friend. "This is not a eulogy; I'm just reporting the facts. Before I met Pat I was one way, after I met Pat I was changed forever. I would not remotely be the man I am now if it weren't for him. All the particulars of those transformations are best left for another day, but I can tell you that not only did he really help steer me onto my true musical path, but he also helped me to be a better human being. Not by preaching, just by being himself."

Their shared love of music cemented that strong bond. Kevin goes on to share he story of how they decided to take the plunge into pursuing a music career seriously.

"When Pat and I were real young, maybe 18 or so, we went on a camping trip to the Arkansas Ozarks with my family, my mom and dad and my brother Dave. We set up camp in the woods and shortly after sundown, as we were sitting around our campfire, we could hear some commotion from somewhere beyond the tree line, faint

music and voices. Pat wanted to check it out, so we crept through the woods as the music and laughter got louder until we came to another camp, a big one. We stayed back so they couldn't see us and observed the strangest assortment of revelers. They were a carnival troupe as near as we could tell, and they were having a party. Pat's reaction to this was to go on in and introduce ourselves. I was a lot shyer than he was, but in those days Pat was the leader, and so I followed."

"We were greeted very warmly by these people and drinks were passed to us straight away. There was a dwarf named Barbara who I'll never forget. There was something about her condition that allowed her to drink as much straight whisky as she wanted. She asked me to pick her up and put her on the hood of a car, and then she proceeded to knock back about a half a bottle of Jack in one go. For two young Okie lads, this was most surreal. Before the night was out, we had been offered jobs with the carnival, leaving in a couple days for somewhere. We agreed to think it over, said our goodnights, and stumbled back to my family through the woods."

When the light of day arrived the next morning, Pat and Kevin considered their options. They had already planned on playing music together as a duo before the offer came to join the carnival troupe. While trying to make a decision on what path to take, Pat made a suggestion that would change both of their lives forever. "Before we joined the carnival he suggested we should go into the closest town with our guitars and see if someone would give us a gig. If we succeeded in getting a gig, then that would be a sign that we should play music. If not, then we should join the carnival and travel with Barbara the dwarf and her friends."

Kevin continues, "The remainder of this story is longer than the first half, and somewhat legendary, and I'll tell it another time. I'll just say that we did, in fact, get a gig that very night, in Fayetteville, at the Swingin' Door on Dixon Street, though by show time we were both way too plowed to actually play. We did however make a lot of new friends, and ended up playing that place a million times over the next few years. It was a sign after all, and Pat was the one who talked me into trying it. In those days, he was the tough one, fearless in fact, and I think a lot of people don't know that. Later, it was Pat who convinced me to join New Rodeo, it was Pat who convinced me to leave that band and form Blue Rose Café. He was the main writer, the lead singer, and always the star of the show."

Their casual performances led to the formation of "Welch and Long" and it evolved into New Rodeo, a widely popular country cover band which opened shows for such names as Willis Alan Ramsey and Asleep At The Wheel. The members of New Rodeo consisted of Pat, Kevin, along with Mike McCarty (drums), Dusty Hamilton (fiddle), Cary Carroll (pedal steel) and Tim Brown (bass).

It was about this time that Pat's father Jack, reconnected with his son. As Jack picks up the story, he shares that the reunion with his son coincided with the decision to make some changes in his life.

"I had opted out of the corporate world in the early 70's, and hadn't really settled on anything else of great interest. I was aware that Pat was playing in a band. So I suggested that maybe I could find work for them."

Jack's suggestion was enthusiastically accepted, and in January of 1975 he set out in his trusty old van, logging tens of thousands of miles across Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and Colorado booking dates for the band. "That move was certainly a challenge for me, since I had no idea what I was doing," he continues. "I just took some demo tapes, printed up some flyers, and went looking. Since I'm not a musician, I found my niche putting together some promo material and hitting the road to find work for the guys. I'm not sure how successful that was, but it was a lot of fun and kept us from starving for a couple of years while everybody got their chops together."

Not only was Jack successful at landing the band dates, he also insured the band got paid by collecting a deposit from owners at the time of the booking (an uncommon 'preventative measure' in those days, to protect the band from 'absentminded' owners when they showed up to perform), made sure they had somewhere to stay and wherever possible, arranged to have their meals included in the booking deal.

This eventually led to Jack juggling the schedules of 8 or 10 other bands in addition to New Rodeo, which went out on the circuit under the umbrella he called Sum Of Us. According to Jack, "My fondest memories are walking unannounced into a club in the middle of the night, somewhere out in the boonies, and hearing someone yell 'Jack's here.' That was all I needed to keep me going, living in that van for two years, my frozen nose sticking out of the down bag on some Colorado mountain road. Nobody was making any money, but I'd go back there in a minute. It was a great time."

Members of the band return those sentiments. Gary Johnson reflects, "Jack was a steadying presence during this era and I think he meant a lot to all of us (I know he did to me, and still does). Sometimes Jack's and the band's paths would coincide for a time, and I especially treasured riding in Jack's van and our heart-to-heart talks on wide-ranging subjects as the miles ticked away. It was the mid-'70s, everyone seemed to be searching for something, therapy and self-help movements were peaking, and I thought of Jack – this cool, languish-haired dad

who traveled around and booked bands – as a kind of combination therapist, guru, friend, and replacement father for the dad I had lost when I was 13.”

“Don’t ever let Jack Long make you think he wasn’t a godsend to us all”, Kevin adds. “Their whole family were a big part of who we were and what we were able to accomplish, and without Jack, I have no idea how we could have done any of it, really. Having Jack out there made the difference in making the whole thing feasible. We never scrounged for gigs, because we had this cool grownup guy out there charming the bookers and working his ass off. I’m not saying we didn’t suffer. It would kill us all now.”

A few months later during a show at The Gables in Colorado Springs, there was a falling out within the band and several members left, leaving only Pat, Kevin and Mike with dates they were still obligated to fill. The call for help went out and bass player Steve Grunder continues the story of the birth of Blue Rose Cafe.

“In the early seventies, I was working at a local watering hole called The Library Bar as a bartender. I had just moved to Norman after the breakup of a band that Mike McCarty and I played in called The Medicine Park All Boy Derelict Band. The bar had live music every night, and we started having New Rodeo play there. Kevin and Pat were members of New Rodeo, and I got to know them from that. A friend of mine, Neil Kingsley, and I started a recording studio called Nightfire Studios and were recording bands. New Rodeo did their only recordings there. In the process, I introduced (songwriter) John Hadley to Pat and Kevin. John, Alan Munde, and I had been doing occasional Friday afternoon gigs at the Library Bar playing John Hadley songs in a quasi-bluegrass style. Pat, Kevin, and John soon became good friends. New Rodeo eventually broke up, and I just remember getting a call to help put together a band with Pat and Kevin to finish out some bookings they had left.”

Keyboard player Gary Johnson was recruited to help out through a somewhat unconventional connection. Gary was introduced to Mike by Gary’s ex-girlfriend, who by that time, was seeing Mike. She’d recommended Gary to Mike to play keyboards in a band Mike was putting together after the breakup of the Medicine Park Band and Gary was hired on. Gary further explains the chain of events that landed him in the band.

“That band lasted about an eyeblink, but not long thereafter Mike came to me with a proposal: He had heard these two young guys, Pat and Kevin, and said they were great, that their band New Rodeo was breaking up, and that they had bookings lined up and all we had to do was put together a few more tunes and we would be working out on the road. He had enlisted Steve Grunder to play bass, and that quintet – Pat, Kevin, Mike, Steve and me – was to be the lineup. I thought about it for about a New York second and said yeah. Actually I may have waited until I heard them, because I distinctly remember hearing New Rodeo once at the High Horse Tavern (later to be Blue Rose’s home gig) and hearing Pat sing ‘Separate Waves.’ It was at that moment, when I heard his expressive, keening voice and that chorus’s lovely descending chord progression, that I knew he was a big talent. And I could immediately tell from the words that he was a sensitive and thoughtful guy, which was a big plus for me, who’s always been uncomfortable in testosterone-charged ‘guy bands.’ Soon I was in Pat and Kevin’s house, met them and sat down at their old upright piano and asked Pat to play ‘Separate Waves.’ I plunked around a little on piano and I think that sealed the deal.”

Kevin shares his feelings about his then-newfound fellow bandmates, “I just remember that me and Pat came into that band with a lot of respect for Mike, Steve and Gary. To us they were sort of stars. Steve and Mike had been in The Medicine Park All Boy Derelict Band, who, it should be said, was a GREAT red dirt band, maybe the best of all, ever, and Gary killed us, we thought we had found Keith Jarrett and Pig Robbins rolled into one. Seems like we just locked in...and bang, we were a band.”

The new lineup of Pat, Kevin, Mike, Steve and Gary played as New Rodeo for a couple of months until, as Steve puts it, “after a while decided we needed a different name, since we weren’t doing the same material.” So the band changed their name to Blue Rose Café in June of ‘75, taking the name from a real café on Main St. in Norman, OK which a friend of the band, Michael Masterson, owned.

Steve continues, “Mike and I both came from bands that had played mostly original material. When the name changed, everyone was totally accepting of new songs. Suddenly, Pat came forth with a bunch of original material that I guess he didn’t think would work with a band because of tempo changes, etc. We loved them. Eventually all of us offered up original songs to do in the band, but the bulk of them were Pat’s tunes.”

Gary offers his perspective. “Pat was a deep thinker, a serious musician and a good songwriter who aspired to be even better. As Blue Rose began to abandon cover songs and focus more on original material, I think Jack started encountering resistance from bar owners who wanted a good-time, ass-kicking’ hard-drinkin’ band, instead of Pat’s sensitive ballads that at times couldn’t be heard above the din of conversation and clink of beer bottles. I recall at one point Jack asking Pat ‘Couldn’t you write some happy songs?’ And Pat really did his level best, but he was just more concerned in his songwriting with battling his own demons and sorting out how he felt

about religion, politics, and other important values than in tailoring a song to his audience's expectations. Maybe that was beyond his grasp, but more likely he just didn't have any interest in it."

In addition to their original songs, prominent songwriter John Hadley became the band's mentor and they covered many of his songs, several of which, including "Blue Rose Café," he'd written specifically for them. Others were songs by revered singer/songwriters such as Willis Alan Ramsey, Bill Caswell and Woody Guthrie, as well as the up-and-coming John Hiatt, who's "Train From Birmingham" became a highlight of BRC's shows. Kevin chimes in, "Most bands didn't have the luxury of knowing Hadley's songs, or Caswell's. Hell, we just ate the apples right off the tree. With songs from Hadley, Caswell, Prine, Woody, Haggard, Jimmy Reed, Bob Wills, Randy Newman, Pat, and a few from each of us, there was plenty of worthwhile material."

Fondly recalling those days, Jack says, "I know that the band's favorite venues and fans loved them and were always wild to have them back. I remember them as mostly a high energy band that had folks dancing all night long, but also doing some great original material."

"We had two secret weapons in my opinion," Mike adds, "Pat Long's incredible voice and Gary Johnson with his Elka Rhapsody. Pat also proved to be a gifted writer whose songs have stood the test of time. Over time, we built a loyal audience for our "emo/country rock" sound in this part of the country. Steve and I were the 'old' guys of the group. We were both 26 or 27. Kevin was only 18 or 19 when I joined New Rodeo. But, I have to say that they (Pat and Kevin) were always a little older than their years, and from them and the BRC experience, I got life lessons that have stood the test as well."

A close friend of the band in it's hey day, Lora Larson, remembers this about Pat, "He was alive when he was playing, happy and complete; he had a voice that could light you up or bring you to tears- it was often flawless and clear despite the smoky venues they played."

"I was going to college in a town about 3 hours from Norman," Linda warmly remembers. "When Blue Rose was playing in Norman, I tried to get over there every chance I got. I learned to swing dance with some of their good friends and had a great time. I used to love to just hang around their house and listen to the guys play and sing there after the gig, during the day, or whatever. It was pretty cool having two brothers and a dad who were in the music business and getting to just go listen and hang around all of that."

That same year, 21 year-old Pat married Patti, a girl he had met and fallen in love with. She opted out of accompanying her new husband when the band went on the road, instead staying behind in the house they shared with Lora Larson. For the next year and a half, Blue Rose Café hit the roads of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and Colorado in an old bus they bought and named Oscar, where they became one of the hottest bands on the circuit and one of the most influential bands out of Oklahoma. However, towards the end of 1976, as is the case with many bands, life on the road began to take it's physical and emotional toll. There were families to support and various other obligations to fulfill, and so the band reached a crossroads where they felt it best to pull the plug and disband Blue Rose Café.

Steve explains what happened, "The bands all kind of imploded at the same time. It wasn't that anyone was mad, it was more of a case of road burn. Everyone just needed time and space. It's amazing that we spent about 2 years with each other on the road on a 24/7 basis and came away still being friends."

At that point, BRC's last booked date was on 9/25/76 at their home base, the High Horse Tavern in Norman, and during the set they announced it would be their last. However, a couple of weeks later the band played one final show at the High Horse. It was a bittersweet event, the place packed with the band's devoted following and just about every musician who'd ever sat in with the band showed up to play one last song with them. One more time John Hadley took the stage and sang the song he'd written for the band, "Blue Rose Café," this time straying from the original lyrics and tossing out an ad-lib that left all who were in the High Horse that night misty eyed as the end of an era came to a close:

***"There's some talk goin' 'round town
that this band's breakin' down
and layin' all this good music aside.
But if you think like me friends,
this band will never end,
'cause it'll play in my head 'till I die."***

After the members parted ways, they all pursued various endeavors. Steve and Mike briefly formed another Oklahoma based band with John Hadley called Quartermoon. Both later became members of the John Arnold Band, and Mike played with Ray Wylie Hubbard for a time. Gary eventually moved to California to pursue his music career and played with artists that include Del Shannon and Robben Ford. Pat and Kevin headed for Nashville where they soon found themselves to be two small fish in a very large pond. It probably didn't help that

they hit Nashville during a transitional period, just as the “Outlaw Movement” was winding down and Nashville was looking for “Rhinstone Cowboys,” with the “Urban Cowboy” days looming on the horizon. Nashville just wasn’t interested in the deep, thoughtful songs of substance that Pat had to offer.

As close as anyone can determine, around the time BRC had broken up, Pat had written what was perhaps the song of his career called, “Fire In The Hole.” (Pat’s own rendition of the song can be found on the Blue Rose Family website). It’s a brilliant song, stark and mournful, that tells a poetic story of a mining disaster that took the lives of 13 miners and offers the observation that there’s a give and take between man and nature. Barbara cites it as her favorite among Pat’s songs saying, “He was so proud of it, and it is a beautiful moving song. He put a lot of research into it so he’d know just where he was coming from while putting lyrics together.” Jack adds, “Pat’s mom wrote (in his Memorial Book) ‘Pat was my softie.’ And he was a very sensitive guy. He identified with people in trouble, and wrote a lot of sad and lonely songs. I’ve been listening to and digitizing hours and hours of BRC tapes the last week or so, and came upon a Woody Guthrie tune that Pat sang, “1913 Massacre.” It’s pretty easy to see the influence on ‘Fire.’ I know that he researched the story behind that song, probably from the library, since there was no internet in those days. I found the little pocket-sized notebook with his scribbling of the facts in the story, and the lyrics. George and Linda used those notes to sing it for the first time at his memorial service. They do it regularly in their own gigs now, along with his brother Mike. The story is that a major recording star was ready to put it on an album, but that got cancelled when he changed producers and the theme of the album. And that was a huge blow to Pat.”

In the meantime, Pat’s marriage produced two daughters, Cassie and Olivia. Now with a family to support and his music career going nowhere, the marriage soured and turned toxic, fueled by alcohol on both sides which further lead to Pat’s battles with severe depression. Barbara reflects, “He was so gentle, such a peace lover, and his wife was so extremely strong-willed, in a way he sort of lost his identity during his turbulent marriage. It was a sad situation. But out of it came two lovely daughters, Cassie and Olivia.”

While Kevin slowly but surely found success as a songwriter and later as a solo performer, Pat’s life spiraled downward. He adored his daughters and took whatever work he could find to support them as he faced battling his personal demons. Some of Pat’s family and friends offer their thoughts on Pat’s struggles.

“The failure of ‘Fire In The Hole’ to get cut was just another brick in the wall that he felt surrounded him,” Jack says, “and Pat just drifted away from writing and performing as the bumps and bruises of life deepened his depression. He once wrote, when he was in treatment, ‘I used to write all the time, now I can’t even start.’ Kevin put it kindly at the reunion when he said ‘after Pat retired.’ He kept a day job through it all, and did the best he could for his girls, though he was carrying a heavy load.”

Kevin shares his thoughts on the struggles of his close friend, “Moving to Nashville as a young songwriter/musician will give anyone pause, as it did for both of us. For a variety of reasons it stopped Pat in his tracks. He still made music and wrote some beautiful stuff, some of which was probably his best work, but his life conspired to take him further away as the years passed. This is not an uncommon thing, as anyone who has gone through that mill will tell you. Music Row just didn’t suit Pat. We might have moved to Austin instead. It was almost a coin toss. Nashville won, but maybe Austin would have been better for him. I don’t know.

In the early years I tried to keep our partnership in the forefront, but I eventually had to do the unthinkable, which was to start doing things without him. I had to. We were partners, best friends, and it was scary to push on, but it came down to survival finally, and I felt I had no choice.

Over the years I kept giving him pep talks and so forth, but also tried not to tell him what he ought to be doing, because who was I to say really. Dreams change. I never wanted him to feel that I thought less of him for not doing what he had come there for. His home life was way beneath what he deserved, and I think maybe he stooped to fit in. I used to try to talk him into splitting and taking over my couch until he figured it all out, and he almost did a few times, but he never made the jump. Finally he did, moving back to Tulsa without his beloved kids, which had to be incredibly hard, a desperate move really, but at least an aggressive one. By then he was such a private person. He had cornered all his devils and wouldn’t let us see them. That’s the hell of it. You have to give a man the respect to back off and let him deal with his troubles and hope that he will come to you for the help you want to give. At least that’s the way I looked at it.”

Although Gary hadn’t seen Pat since the BRC days, looking back on those days he concludes, “Pat was one of those sensitive souls for whom the unfairness of the real world and the compromises it required were difficult to come to grips with. I’m not sure Nashville was the right place for him because he was not the type of writer to write according to someone else’s formula, nor dumb down his music to make it more accessible. But the music business is a devastatingly unforgiving business everywhere, and I have unfortunately known many extremely talented musicians who never “made it.” Los Angeles is littered with them. When you look at his lyrics from Blue Rose days- and as Jack has pointed out, even in the covers he sang- it’s pretty obvious that he was a lost soul,

and probably battled depression all his life. That said, (in those days anyway) Pat was not a sad person, but rather a fun-loving guy who loved to laugh and was very easy to like and spend time with. We both loved nature and the outdoors, and I'm sure he found inspiration in the natural wonder and beauty of the Earth."

Pat's turbulent marriage had finally ended and at the time his divorce became final, he was working two jobs as he struggled to support his daughters and was literally working himself to death. He knew he couldn't go on much longer like that, and with the help of his family, he was able to quit one job while he returned to college full time. Pat took computer technology and did well. Unfortunately that became another major setback for him, as right at that time, the industry collapsed and he was unable to find work in that field. His personal situation in Nashville continued to worsen and he knew if he had any chance of survival, he had to extricate himself. So he made the hardest decision of his life, which was to leave his beloved daughters and return to Tulsa.

Jack and his wife Suzanne had just bought a new house across town in Tulsa to be closer to Jack's other children. They drove down to Nashville to help Pat with his move back to Tulsa, arriving back at their new home on September 8, 2001 where Pat would be staying with them in a spare room. Once Pat was settled, on September 11 they were still in the process of moving their own belongings into their new house when the horror of the terrorist attacks brought the nation to a standstill. Just as Pat had hoped the move would mark a new beginning for him, that fateful day proved to be yet another major setback for him. Both job opportunities and the economy went south, and for Pat, his age and lack of any real job resume made things all the more difficult. He eventually found a job as an assistant manager at a convenience store, working up to 80 hours a week for minimal pay.

After returning to Tulsa, despite his constant struggles, whenever he could, Pat found time for music. Barbara recalls, "After he moved back to Tulsa a couple of years before his untimely death, he introduced what he called guitar pulls. He gathered up family, musician friends from early to late stages of his life, stirred them all together & they sat and jammed together for hours, bouncing music off one another and loving it. They still continue what he started, playing music together about once a month, introducing new people to the group." Jack fondly adds, "He did enjoy pickin' and singin' with friends and family here after he came back to Tulsa that last couple of years."

"When Pat moved back here," says Linda, "we saw more of him than we'd seen in years, but he was still working a lot and was short on time. He came over and sang with us a few times, and the song of his that we worked on was 'Fire in the Hole.' We sang it with three part harmonies and it was so cool for me because I'd never sung with him before."

Kevin shares this poignant memory of Pat, "After he had moved, I kept telling him to make sure he got out there in Tulsa and started singing again, told him that he needed to let everybody know that the best singer in Oklahoma was back home. He told me that I was the best friend he had ever had. Shortly after that I was playing at the BlueDoor in OKC, and Pat came down from Tulsa for the show. When I did 'Train To Birmingham,' I explained to the uninitiated in the audience that this was a song that I had been trying for over a decade to sing like Pat Long sang it, and that he was in the house that night, and I asked him to come up and sing it with me. I took the first verse, and handed him the second. When he started singing, it didn't sound like him at all, as if he were trying to sing like somebody else. Then I sang the chorus and played a little instrumental section, and gave him the last verse. Then he opened his mouth and the old Pat came out, that untouchable sound of heartache and gentleness and understanding, and all was right with the world for a minute. I will never forget that."

Desperate to find work that paid a living wage, Pat's thoughts turned to something he'd loved as a child, flying. He went to the local flight school to see about training as an airline pilot, however his hopes were quickly dashed when he was told the training would take 4 years and cost \$40,000. So instead, he turned his attention to the only jobs that were available, truck driving. Family members expressed their concern over Pat's struggles with the bottle and making driving his living. However, Pat was determined to make this work, and in regard to his drinking replied "I'll have to stop doing that." He enrolled in the training course and worked hard. He graduated, receiving his license after spending a month on the road with a trainer with no problems. Three weeks after Pat started driving solo, he was ticketed for DUI. While his blood alcohol level was at the legal limit for the general public, it was 3 times over the limit allowed for commercial truck drivers.

Although recalling those events is difficult and painful, Jack goes on to explain, "They took his license that he had worked so hard to get, had him take his stuff out of the truck he was so proud of, booked him, and put him on the street, where he got a cab to a motel." That proved to be the final blow for Pat. He checked into the motel, and it was there on April 23, 2003 at age 49, that Pat took his life. "There was no way he was going to come out and face everybody again," Jack continues. "We know from records he left of his time in alcohol treatment, that he considered his whole life just one failure after another. I know he loved his brief moment of fame back in the '70s and '80s. Beyond that, a very toxic relationship, depression and the alcohol gene he inherited took their toll, and by the time he checked out, his self esteem was all but gone. I'm very thankful for that last year and a half we had

together, because we know we did everything we could to help him get his life back together, and we had some good times...he must have been black and blue from all the hugs I gave him. He brought a lot of family and old friends back together, playing music and enjoying each other...and that goes on...in his memory. The last thing I heard Pat say on his cell phone was 'See you later,' and I wrote in his memorial booklet 'That's what keeps me going...see you later.' The day that his earthly remains arrived in a little box, I set it gently on the dining room table and said 'Welcome home, guy. I've got to go out for a little while...be back shortly,' and went off to run my errands. So it's possible to keep that old conversation going, though seldom easy."

At Pat's memorial service, it was his music that once again brought family and friends together. Jack goes on, "We had a memorial service for Pat just three days after we lost him, a very informal thing on the back deck of a dear old friend, Lora Larson, who used to sing with the band on occasion back in Norman. We ended up in our back yard (around the corner), just a bunch of folks and guitars, trying to make sense out of nonsense. Kevin managed to sing 'Train to Birmingham,' which he had learned from Pat. All of the band members were here except Gary Johnson. We had lost contact with him after he moved to California, and somehow didn't get the word to him until later. Folks came from all over the country, family, friends, pickers who sat in with the band in the glory days. We had not seen the band folks since '76. We were all in shock, and that still lingers at times, at least for me, but it was actually a joy reintegrating them into our lives. They are now our major link with one of the happiest parts of Pat's life."

Linda adds, "George (Barton, Linda's husband) sang 'Fire In The Hole' at Jack and Suzanne's house after Pat's memorial service with Kevin sitting across from us and singing along. It really hit me hard at that time that I'd never heard anyone but Pat sing that song before, and I sang the harmonies with tears running down my face. I couldn't sing it for a while after that because it was so powerful that night. George and I do a version now with my brother, Mike, on dobro that is just beautiful."

Although Gary didn't learn about Pat's death until a few days following the memorial service, he ultimately became the driving force behind the reunion/tribute show and explains how this came about.

"A few days after Pat's death Neil Kingsley e-mailed me after finding my e-mail address on a list of old Normanites from that era. On a hunch that it was me, he e-mailed with the news. I think this was Monday, and Pat's service had been during the weekend— so it was just a few days afterward, but long enough that I missed any possibility of going to the service in Tulsa. I got in touch with whoever I could, and eventually reached Kevin and we had a good long talk on the phone. Kevin and I had been in touch sporadically since we had both left Norman. He would come to LA every now and then and I would often go out to his gigs, etc. It didn't take long for it to occur to me (and possibly simultaneously to others) that we should get together, have a Blue Rose reunion, and honor Pat's memory. I was really upset that I had allowed myself to become so isolated from my past that when something big happened they didn't even know how to contact me. I had moved to LA in 1978, and had lived at the same address for 18 years, but for some reason I hadn't kept in touch real well with the Blue Rose bunch. Not on purpose, it just sort of happened, as these things will do when you move far away. But Pat's death brought so many memories flooding back, and I realized how much all these people meant to me, and I wanted to do something, contribute to something, that would be meaningful and would truly honor Pat in the way I felt he should be honored. Perhaps I was fortunate in that I hadn't been in touch with Pat for many years, so did not have to witness his descent. I remembered Pat as a lively, fun, serious musician and good friend. Regardless of what Pat had gone through, I saw him as a casualty of the music business, and I felt there was no shame in that. He deserved to be honored just the same as if he had died in a car accident, of cancer, AIDS, whatever. That became my mission."

"I have never been so convinced of anything," he continues, "as the fact that we could and should pull off this reunion. For one thing, I was dying to reconnect and play with these guys again (though it would have been so much better if Pat had been there!). We wanted to try to raise money for Pat's daughters, and it just seemed the obvious and right thing to do. The community— the extended family— needed to get together, grieve together, and celebrate Pat's life. It seemed as soon as I got excited about doing a reunion, Steve and Mike caught it. I was absolutely determined that it was going to happen. It took a lot of calls to Kevin, getting him to commit to a date (his schedule was the hardest to coordinate since he is the only full-time touring musician of the bunch at this point). But he came around, and then Steve, Mike and I really started working in earnest. Steve and Mike did all the local work in finding a venue, selling tickets, getting Greg Johnson involved, borrowing equipment, etc. Steve and I chose the repertoire after sending e-mails around and getting suggestions on what people thought we should play. I did the actual set list, with Steve's help."

Steve offers his insight into what went into coordinating the show, "Because everyone was scattered around the country and world, we only had a two day window to pull this off. We got together for the first time in 27 years for four hours the afternoon of Aug. 1 and ran over the songs to remember them. We then went to a big group BBQ

and got drunk and talked till the sun almost came up. Then on the evening of Aug. 2, we just gave it a shot without a net.”

He goes on to explain how Bob French and John Arnold became an integral part of the BRC reunion band, “Mike McCarty and I knew Bob French from the BRC days when he played with a bluegrass group that Jack occasionally booked called Pacific Fast Mail. In late '79, Bob joined the John Arnold Band, and thus we got to know John. In the early 80's, Mike and I joined the John Arnold Band too. In the process of touring the country, we did numerous Nashville Now TV shows on TNN. Many times we were in Nashville for a night or two, and we would call Kevin and Pat to come out to our hotel and jam. That's where John got to know Pat. Since Kevin no longer even has an electric guitar and hasn't had to play lead for decades, Bob was a natural to fill the lead guitar spot. Also, Kevin was on the road in Australia and didn't have time to learn the words to all the songs, so John was the natural to cover that half of the event. I'd say things worked out pretty well in the long run.”

Sharing his views, Mike says, “The reunion came about in a very miraculous and spiritual kind of way. Let me add here, we could not have done it without John Arnold and Bob French. When they came on board for the reunion, I knew we were going to be ok. The real effort came from Gary and Kevin though, working in a vacuum and not really knowing Bob and John very well. Anyway, John, Bob, Steve and I got together a total of 4 times to work up the basic arrangements of a master list we had put together. We also didn't know until the afternoon of the concert, which songs Kevin would want to sing lead on. So, John had basically learned all of them. During our one rehearsal with the whole group (Kevin and Gary flew in the day before the concert) there was a lot of ‘are you singing that one, or am I?’ going on.”

Gary talks about how he prepared for the show, not being able to physically rehearse with a band he hadn't played with for 27 years. “Our one rehearsal was in the venue where the show would be the next night, so that helped. I had been hearing of Bob French for years and was psyched to play with him (he has played with Vince Gill among others). Likewise Steve and Mike had played in the John Arnold Band for a long time and sent me his CDs, so we knew he would do a good job. Plus the four of them had been getting together to rehearse, so we knew there would be a core of people who were on the same page. Meanwhile, though it's true I hadn't played any of these songs in years, I had tapes and eventually received CDs of old Blue Rose gigs to re-learn from and practice with. I practiced a lot that summer preparing for the show, believe me. I knew it would be an emotional evening, and I put in extra preparation knowing there would be distractions and, more important, that we would have ***one chance only*** to play these songs – there were going to be no retakes.

We had talked about recording the show but I didn't know for sure if it was happening, even the actual night of the show, because the engineer, Carl Amburn, was almost invisible and I didn't even realize for sure that the recording had gotten done. Likewise, the video, and the photo montage that played during the last part of Train to Birmingham– all that was Mike and Steve's doing (the main videographer was Mike's son Bo, who was a tiny kid in Blue Rose days). They did an amazing job, and special credit should go to Carl Amburn, who did an exemplary job with the cleanup and mixing of the CD. He is a huge talent. They even fixed most of my mistakes!”

John Arnold, who came through and delivered an incredible performance during the reunion show, didn't quite walk into learning the Blue Rose material cold though and says, “I had the privilege of listening to recordings of Pat and Blue Rose Café during my teenage years, but I was too young to get in the bars to hear them live. Later when I started my own band we were fortunate enough to have Steve Grunder and Mike McCarty as our rhythm section. To make a long story short I got to know Kevin and Pat while we were shopping for songs in Nashville after we signed a record deal with Compleat/Polygram in the early 1980's. Having talented songwriters like Pat, Kevin and John Hadley was a great resource since they were from our home town of Norman. We were playing locally before that, playing many of Pat's songs such as “I'll Be Seeing You Sometime” and many other songs that we picked up from Blue Rose. Unfortunately for us, our record label wasn't interested in those songs and had us record songs written by other artists associated with our label. I'm saying this because I wanted to give you an idea of the respect and admiration I had for Blue Rose and these great songwriters. Time has proven that our instincts were right since they've all been very successful writers over the years.”

As planning progressed, so did the scope of the reunion show. “Several family members, and a few close friends wanted to participate,” says Jack, “so I forwarded those requests to the band, and they were honored. I remember how Pat loved to fly with me when I had my own small plane, so I also suggested that we do ‘I'll Fly Away’ as the grand finale with everyone on stage.”

Linda continues, “When we heard that the guys were talking about doing the reunion/tribute, one of my first thoughts was that I would love to hear Blue Rose again, and also that I wanted to be involved and sing with George and Mike if that was at all possible. We knew that those guys were working very hard to put this on, and didn't want to step on their toes- but- it seemed only natural that Pat's two surviving siblings should have some kind of part in this, as we also played music and wanted to be a part of this tribute to Pat. So we got to do an

opening act and quickly learned a couple of songs that seemed to fit, as well as a couple that we already did regularly. We stopped in during Blue Rose's rehearsal and were really impressed with how good they sounded."

In addition, other musicians who sat in with Blue Rose over the years also wanted to participate. Mark Dulac came ready with his fiddle, as did Nick Rorick with his mandolin. And the reunion/tribute just wouldn't have been complete without the presence of John Hadley, who made an exception and broke a self-imposed ban on singing and performing live, to take part and sing "Blue Rose Café" one more time in tribute to Pat. The Blue Rose Café reunion show soon became a full blown tribute show that included 'openers' doing 3 song sets: the trio of Pat's brother Mike, sister Linda and her husband George Barton performing one, Gary Johnson and his wife/musical partner, Libby Harding, performing another, and Kevin performing a solo set before the Blue Rose reunion band took the stage.

On the night of the show, both anticipation and emotions were running high. The tone for the evening was set by all three of the opening sets with lovingly chosen songs and heartfelt performances, especially a beautifully done rendition by Mike, Linda and George of Pat's masterpiece, "Fire In The Hole."

When it was Blue Rose Café's turn to take the stage, Linda offers her perspective as she took her seat in the audience, "The number of people who showed up at the tribute/reunion was really impressive and we saw people we hadn't seen in years. When Blue Rose started their set that night, my brother Mike and I had the same feeling that it was very cool, but sort of wrong or off because these were the same songs we'd heard over and over by this band, but the guitar player was different and the person who was singing was different from what we had been used to hearing. During the first song or two I sat and listened with tears running down my face again because I'd never heard anyone but Pat sing those songs of his, and felt it was just not right. But I had to tell myself that his music was going to live on and I had to get used to hearing someone else do it. I pulled myself together and loved the rest of the night. There was a place in the show when Kevin sang 'Train to Birmingham,' which he always dedicated to Pat, even when he was alive, (and which Pat always sang beautifully, and Kevin now does so powerfully), when a slide show began behind Kevin with pictures of Pat and the band back in their prime. I don't know about the general crowd there, but I know that all of Pat's family was in tears at that point and it was a very memorable part of the tribute. The band then went on to do a few more songs to wind out the night and we all got ourselves back together again."

Asked about what his feelings were about the emotional aspect of stepping in to fill the huge void Pat left and his own observations on the evening, John Arnold says, "I was not really nervous about doing Pat's songs that night. It was such an honor to be asked to sing them. I didn't know Pat as well as the other Blue Rose members but I was aware of how close they all were and how much they loved Pat. As the night unfolded I was even more comfortable listening to Kevin talk of his admiration for Pat and how he would be missed. To see Pat's daughters watching Kevin sing Pat's songs with such emotion made the night more special than I had imagined it would be. There was something very special about the people who showed up to pay tribute to Pat that night. People were reminiscing about old times, remembering great details of performances that had occurred many years ago. As the night unfolded I realized that this was not just a special night musically, but a night that seemed to help the Blue Rose family deal with the tragic loss of a great friend.

In short Blue Rose Café is one of those special bands that had an influence on many musicians like me. To see first hand the selfless commitment of Steve, Mike, Gary and Kevin to share with the rest of us the special bond and love for Pat is something I will always cherish."

Steve offers his observations on the evening, "It's amazing the whole thing came together the way it did. During the concert that night, we ran the photo slide show of Pat on TV screens during 'Train to Birmingham,' and it's amazing we got through it. We could only see the first three or four rows of people (who were mostly friends and family of Pat's), but everyone was crying. It was tough."

It's virtually unanimous that Blue Rose Café's closing song, "Train To Birmingham," during which the photomontage of Pat ran, coupled with the sheer strength of Kevin's emotionally powerful performance, was the show's most intensely poignant high point. Although that aspect comes through clearly on the CD, watching the actual performance and seeing the very visible emotions that shared the stage makes it even more devastatingly so.

As was Jack's wish, after Blue Rose's set, all of that evening's performers took the stage for one final song- a rendition of "I'll Fly Away." As incredible as the reunion CD is, the CD only contains Blue Rose Café's set. The DVD provides the entire tribute show, including the opening sets, (which includes Kevin's moving solo performance), along with the show's grand finale rendition of "I'll Fly Away." It also includes some footage of the rehearsals and makes for some truly fascinating viewing, seeing how things were pulled together so well after so many years in so little time. Seeing the show in it's intimate setting offers a greater perspective into its emotional aspect. Without a doubt there were several very poignant and difficult moments, but there were also plenty of

upbeat moments- the moments that show the true camaraderie between a group of people who shared a history together and gathered together for a common goal- to pay honor and loving tribute to a man who meant so much to and touched so many people.

With the show now behind them and with the release of the reunion/tribute CD and DVD, when asked what their feelings about the experience are, Jack says, "It's just incredible that all this was put together by a bunch of folks who, with the exception of Kevin, had little or no contact with Pat for 25 years. I love all of it."

"It was a great event," Linda adds, "and we are very grateful to those guys for pulling it together the way they did in such a short time. We're also very impressed with the quality of the CD and of the DVD. They just outdid themselves. I wish Pat had realized how many people he touched and how much he meant to so many of them."

Mike perhaps summed it up for most people the best when he said, "The concert itself was simultaneously joyous, tragic, healing, and hopeful. I hadn't seen Gary since the late seventies and I only saw Kevin every once in a while. So, it was really good to reconnect with them as well as many, many old friends who came from all over the country. I hope Pat's girls saw a little bit more of their dad's life through all of his friends that showed up that night. I told Kevin at Pat's memorial that I always believed we would all get together again sometime. We were all together that night in Norman. Pat was definitely there too."

"Well you know by now,

this ain't a song about no damn restaurant.

It's a song about a rusty old band with the blues.

Hey Pat old friend.

we're gonna sing this one more time again,

and this time by God it's for you." ~ "Blue Rose Café" (as sung by John Hadley, August 2, 2003)

By AnnMarie Harrington

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