

Musician? Magician? Mortician?

Mike Runyan on roads taken and forsaken

by Jaine Rodack

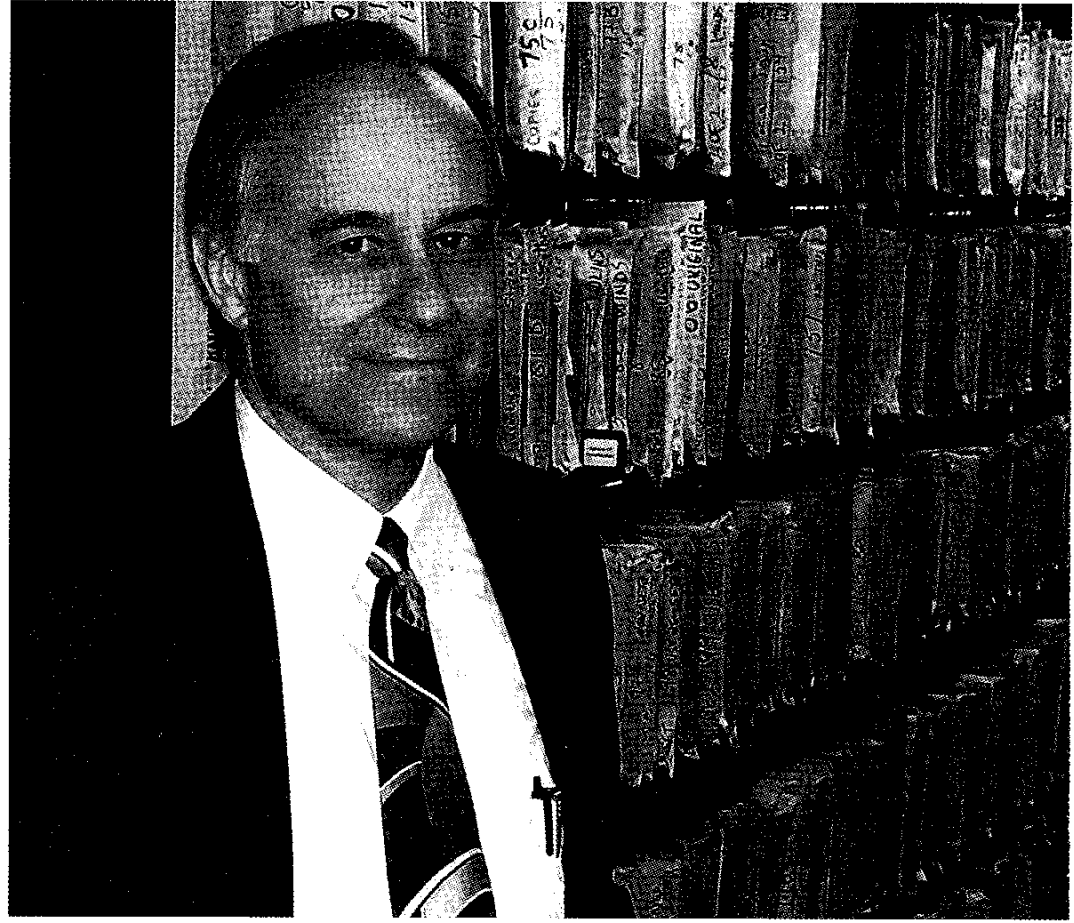
As children, we have all been asked the magical question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Doctor? Lawyer? Indian Chief? Mike Runyan knew early-on that he wanted to do something that had to do with music. Exactly what that ‘something’ was, he wasn’t sure. For a while he took piano lessons as a boy, the tunes in his lesson books (What Mike refers to as “the boring stuff”) did nothing to inspire him. It wasn’t until he stopped taking lessons and started playing the music he was drawn to, that he realized how much he loved playing the piano.

“But what about the harmonica?”, you ask. Well, truth be told, the harmonica took a back seat to the piano in those early days. Literally. It happened on a family vacation, when Mike and his brothers were acting up a bit in the back seat of the Runyans’ station wagon. Mike’s dad, hoping to calm things down, tossed them his echo harp with a hopeful “Shut up and play this.”

Barely missing Mike’s head, the harmonica was nonetheless “a hit.” It wasn’t long before the lad could play a tune or two, although he never really did take the instrument seriously. Such thoughts were reserved for the piano, and more scholastic musical endeavors.

And yet, Mike did manage to get in some “harmonica time” during his high school days, when the director of the school’s show mentioned that he had found a piece of music featuring a harmonica obbligato. “Too bad we can’t play this,” he said regretfully. Mike’s response was immediate. “I played the harmonica when I was a little kid. I bet I can figure it out.” And so he did. “I went to the music store, bought a ten-hole chromatic, took the little sheet out that shows you how to hold your mouth and tongue back and all of that and figured out where the notes were and how the blow/draw pattern worked.”

Mike went on to study music composition at Brigham Young University, where he focused on the classics. Mike says that had he known there was a place where he could have studied the harmonica, his life might have taken a different turn, but such options were then unknown to him.



Mike Runyan

Still, Brigham Young provided a wealth of experience and opportunities, including the chance to write (and eventually perform) something for harmonica and the school’s jazz ensemble. After undergraduate school Mike took a two-year break to go on a Mormon missionary trip to Germany, marrying shortly after his return. “I was anxious to support us,” he says, “and started doing some music copy work to make money.” Before long Mike was working for the Osmond organization as well as a local copy house.

It was at that point that Mike once again took stock and considered his options. “I got to thinking about what I wanted to do with my life: should I forget graduate school and just go about breaking into the business, or should I go through getting the degrees and be more classical?”

Cue the telephone, and a call that would put yet another option on the table. Recalling that particular moment in time, Mike says, “My dad—who had been in construction

all of his life—called me up and said, ‘Guess what, I’m going into the funeral business.’

The funeral business? Mike had to admit it was intriguing and fascinating work, and thought it might be a great back-up profession. And so he started searching for a town where he might work on his Masters and take up Mortuary Science. Cincinnati, Ohio offered both.

Over the next eight years, Mike would go on to earn his Masters and Doctorate in Music Composition at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. He never did go to mortuary school. Those plans fell by the wayside as his studies and family responsibilities grew. And the harmonica? “By then we had four kids,” he says, “so there wasn’t much time to even think about it.”

Finally out of school and ready to try his wings, Mike applied for a job as Music Librarian for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. The year was 1986. Over the years Mike had done a good bit of work for Erich Kunzel, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops. Kunzel, along with other staffers, encouraged him to apply for the position. “They put in a good word for me, and I got the job. It was a good fit.”

What exactly does an orchestra’s librarian do? Mike says the job is 25% library science and 75% production. “Yes, we put stuff on shelves and give things catalogue numbers,” he explains, “but mostly we’re preparing music for rehearsal and performance: making sure the string bowings are the same and the interpretive marks are coordinated so that rehearsal time is saved. You can perform a Beethoven piece many ways—you don’t always play it at the same tempo, or pause in the same place. The librarian’s job is to make sure that the interpretive marks are coordinated between all the parts and are the same as the conductor’s score.”

As the years progressed Mike’s responsibilities increased. Before long he was copying new, leading-edge arrangements for their Pops programs, working with guest conductors and soloists, preparing and/or coordinating their charts with those of the orchestra and doing all of the associated paperwork. It was, at the same time, fulfilling and exhausting. “I’d come home and want to relax,” he recalls. “The piano was nice, but I couldn’t really cut loose, so I’d dig out my harmonicas, and started enjoying them as a release. It was a way to have some peace and beauty in my life. And so I started getting my chops back.”

Over time, Mike expanded his repertoire, playing ev-

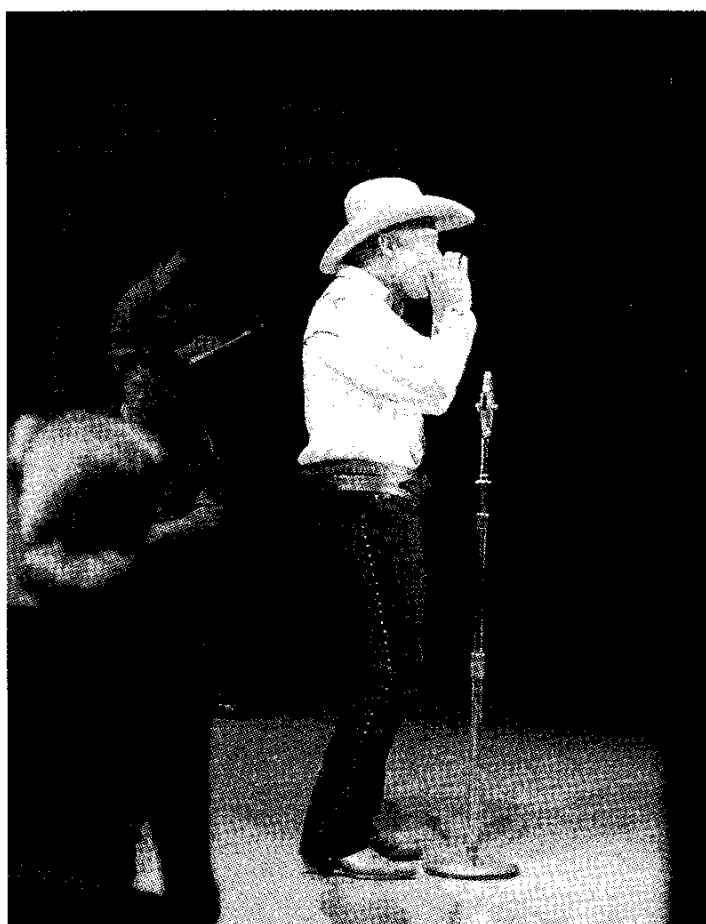


Photo by Roberta Wong

everything from Handel to the blues. Soon he was performing at concerts, ladies’ luncheons and various non-profit events, gaining experience and confidence along the way.

His work as librarian for the Indianapolis Symphony was helpful in giving him access to people he might otherwise never have had the chance to meet. When Robert Bonfiglio guested with the symphony in the mid 1990’s, Mike asked if he might take a lesson from him, and continued to work on “getting around the chromatic, tongue-switching and other techniques.” By the time Richard Hayman performed with the orchestra Mike was confident enough to ask him if they might do a duet. Hayman said, “Sure.” “It was a lot of fun,” says Mike.

Then, in 1999 a golden opportunity presented itself when an ailing Larry Adler was forced to cancel an appearance with Marvin Hamlisch and the orchestra. Mike mustered up all of his new-found confidence and asked Hamlisch if he might fill in for Adler. Hamlisch gave him the go ahead, and go ahead he did. “I came out and played ‘Claire de Lune’ along with a little encore I had worked up, and I didn’t die!” he laughs.

Two years later Mike had the chance to work with Mr. Hamlisch again – this time in Pittsburgh. The concert had a western theme, and Mike rose to the occasion, injecting a little humor into his performance. The spot was a hit, and soon Mike was asked to perform with other orchestras, incorporating a bit of magic and juggling into his routines along the way. “I do ‘Galloping Comedians’ in tails with a Mad Hatter hat on while juggling three balls,” he says, “but there are serious classical numbers as well.” Mike is also developing a piece for youth concerts based on the book, *Lentil*, about a boy who learns to play the harmonica and saves the day with his playing.

This second career has opened up a whole new world of friends, fans, and opportunities. A member of SPAH for the past four years, Mike can’t say enough about the organization. “It’s been such a rich experience and source of information,” he says, adding, “Just being able to go some place, connect by email or at a conference and hear things you never knew were possible is a great benefit.” 🎵

To learn more about Mike and his music visit:
www.popsharmonica.com