

# THE Fretboard

The Quarterly for Musical Instrument Players, Collectors and Builders

# JOURNAL



**Gamble Rogers: The Oracle of Oklawaha**

# THE ORACLE OF OKLAWAHA

## GAMBLE ROGERS, SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

BY HAROLD FETHE

**He** was the namesake of two prominent architects, yet his own architectural gifts simply couldn't compete with an intense desire for a life in the performing arts. He was en route to a job interview at Cambridge Seven, an innovative Massachusetts architectural firm, when he accepted a friend's invitation to watch a Serendipity Singers audition in New York. Exasperated by the indifferent performances he saw all morning, he borrowed a guitar, tried out and got hired by lunchtime. He didn't look back, and for nearly 30 years, he toured North America with little more than a flattop guitar and a plane ticket. ►





His stage act was one-man theater that defied category: original stories, written with a literary eye and told in vivid character voices; evocative singing; and a fierce, accurate fingerpicking prowess — which he called “West Kentucky choke style” — strong enough to appear at Carnegie Hall with Doc Watson and share a concert bill with Chet Atkins.

He drove Florida’s back roads in a fastback Mustang with an unknown songster named Jimmy Buffett and taught him the troubadour’s craft. Buffett acknowledged his debt by booking him as the inaugural act at Margaritaville when it first opened in Key West in 1988.

He died in a rescue attempt in the Florida surf in 1991, trying to save the life of a Canadian tourist he’d never met. When that happened, his wife decided his soul couldn’t be allowed to “cross the creek” in any store-bought vessel. So, three boatwrights in his beloved hometown of St. Augustine worked days and nights around the clock, barely finishing a handmade casket so stoutly built that, as a friend said, “you could put an outboard motor on it and take it out on the river.” Nobody offered to pay them; they just did it, finding time to add a hand-carved paddle, which is buried with him.

In his memory, friends and colleagues launched a successful, long-running folk festival, a memorial foundation and a website where a Pulitzer-nominated poet contributed one of the first eulogies — where his fans and colleagues continue to express their admiration for his life and work, and their sorrow for his death. The beach where he drowned and a St. Augustine school have been named for him. His manager, at his own expense, keeps available every album he ever made. Buffett even dedicated the *Fruitcakes* album to his memory. “I dedicate this collection of songs,” he wrote, “to a troubadour and a friend who has gone over to the other side where the guardian angels dwell and has, in all likelihood, become one.”

Now, 15 years later, musicians and friends still have a mixture of affection, reverence and unresolved grief that causes them to tell the story of his drowning death as if the outcome somehow still hung in the balance; as if this time, it didn’t have to end the same way.

## “When I first met Gamble Rogers,

we were playing a little coffeehouse in Linville, N.C., a ski resort with typical tourists. I first met Gamble in the dressing room, and we were talking about show business. I was going on and on, telling him I was tired of ‘hat acts.’ ‘Cookie-cutter cowboys, assembly line look-alikes, sound-alikes,’ I said. ‘I’m so fed up with all these hat acts. It’s not what’s on your head; it’s what’s in it!’

“Gamble said, ‘You’re exactly right, George.’ We said goodbye, gave each other a hug. He reached over on a peg and pulled off this big Stetson hat and stuck it on his head as he walked out the door. There he was, with a Stetson hat, just dyin’ to put it on, so I could feel as embarrassed as possible.”

— George Hamilton IV, country musician

Should all this seem too mythic for any real human — especially one you’ve never heard of — then welcome to the world of Gamble Rogers.

### Stagecraft

Songwriter and performer Mike Cross describes Gamble Rogers as “a man who had command of the stage and could create an atmosphere in a concert setting [with] a rambling set of tales mixed in with some brilliant fingerpicked guitar. [He] created a world that people could escape into for the time he was onstage.”

Delivered with clear diction and a reedy vocal timbre, Rogers’ singing style never strayed far from the cultured Southern dialect of his speaking voice. His vocals were punctuated by energetic thumb-picked bass lines and buoyed by arpeggio guitar flourishes. No less a storyteller when he was singing than when he was speaking, he favored songs with narratives, despite the challenges of drawing audiences into that genre. Throughout his career, he often challenged his own artistic range, performing songs with story lines that were funny, poignant, heroic or dissolute. Some were traditional, and some he wrote, calling them “Southern Gothic art songs.” Others were written by friends, just for him to perform.

For his stories, he painstakingly composed

**OPPOSITE:** Gamble performs at a folk festival.

ROB BLOUNT/COURTESY OF THE GAMBLE ROGERS MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Randy Wood built this guitar for Gamble Rogers, with design elements they developed together: 12th-fret body joint for travel stability, big cutaway to preserve access, under-swept pickguard for thumbpicking.

CATHERINE STRAUSS/COURTESY OF THE GAMBLE ROGERS MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

## “Gamble let me play a guitar Randy

Wood had built for him. Next time I saw Randy, I said, ‘I really love that guitar you made for Gamble.’ Randy thought he ought to build one for me, so I said, ‘Why don’t you just build one just exactly like Gamble’s?’ He made me an exact duplicate, except for the ornamentation. I meant for it to be an heirloom guitar, to sit in the living room and pass down. Some time later, Gamble was playing *The Pier* in Raleigh, [N.C.] He called and said the airline had misrouted his guitar, and asked if he could use my Randy Wood guitar. So, I drove it over to him. I’ve never taken that guitar out, except when Gamble played it. I wondered if Fate was intervening; if the reason that duplicate guitar got made was so it would be there for Gamble when his got lost. I mentioned that to Gamble, and he said, ‘Aw, Mike, you bury yourself too deep in these things.’”

— *Mike Cross, songwriter and performer*

serpentine, alliterative, mock-scholarly sentences and then practiced them before a mirror until he could deliver them in long, energetic bursts of revival-tent elocution. Audiences would start chuckling at the first laugh line, not knowing that seven more would come before the sentence ended. (As for the storytelling class he sometimes taught, Rogers named it Liar’s Workshop.)

As his stage act matured, it flowed seamlessly between stories, songs and virtuoso guitar excursions. While Rogers fulfilled multiple roles — author, storyteller, songwriter, singer and guitarist — audiences felt they were experiencing the man directly and naturally, as if they’d just happened by his front porch or caught him holding forth from the imaginary loading dock at Erindale’s Purina Store. “Gamble came about as close as anybody could to being onstage what he was in real life,” says Cross. “He didn’t have to hide anything — there was so much good in him that he could just strip naked.”

He dressed unpretentiously for the stage, but with dignified touches such as wool blazers and conservative brown Florsheim Imperial cap-toe shoes. His work ethic was prodigious. A tireless performer, he wanted

to give his audiences more than their money’s worth, yet still be true to the performer’s dictum: “always leave them wanting more.” Cross says, “The contracts [for Rogers’ performances] would just blow your mind. It would be a five-night run, and the contract would say, ‘Tuesday through Thursday: three 90-minute sets; Friday and Saturday: three 120-minute sets.’ Three sets! Six hours!”

## Southern Gallantry

If the bred-in-the-bone gallantry of a Southern gentleman can be a tragic flaw, it would be the only one anyone ever found in Gamble Rogers. His manners were old-fashioned and courtly, and he was patient and generous with his audience. When they met him, they experienced what fans often dream of, but rarely get — he treated them as if *they* were the stars and he had all the time in the world to visit with them. Emotion-filled messages posted at [gamblerogers.org](http://gamblerogers.org) describe these encounters, remembered vividly by fans despite the passage of years or decades.

Friends and fellow artists describe someone who had achieved a near-seamless blend of life and art, with well-measured ingredients: humility, wry humor, obsessive technical excellence, literary acumen and an affectionate, offhand conversation style that made people forget that he wasn’t just another Southern cousin stopping by to swap stories.

“When Gamble showed up at a party,” says singer Bob Patterson, “people would greet him or try to get his attention. He’d acknowledge them, but he’d go around and say hello to the kids and dogs first.” Roy Barnes, a neighbor, describes working with Rogers on a coastal preservation issue. Rogers was scheduled to speak at a hearing, in opposition to a disputed dock. Barnes says, “The audience just parted for Rogers, like the Red Sea. He spoke eloquently and passionately about the issue.” Yet when referring to the opposing side in the debate, the harshest language Rogers was willing to use was when he urged the commissioners “not to fall prey to opportunists.”

His sense of obligation to his fellow man was extreme. Rogers’ manager and agent, Charles Steadham, describes a breakfast meeting they had one morning in Micanopy, Fla., when his client had

**OPPOSITE:** Fretboards of Rogers’ ornate Randy Wood custom guitar and “road warrior” Guild, pictured in the *Signs of a Misspent Youth* album.

EVON STREETMAN/COURTESY OF THE GAMBLE ROGERS MEMORIAL FOUNDATION





Gamble Rogers, Steve Goodman, Kenneth "Jethro" Burns and Merle Travis at the Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1976.

ROBERT YAUN/COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA FOLKSONG SOCIETY AND GAMBLE ROGERS MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

just come off the road. Sleep-deprived and physically wrung out, Rogers wanted to deal quickly with the business matters of the morning and cover the few remaining miles to his home on the coast. As they left, a man approached Rogers in the parking lot and asked to speak with him privately. Rogers agreed. After a while, the man went to his car and drove out of the parking lot — with Rogers following him and waving goodbye to the Steadhams.

The wife of the man at the restaurant was an avid fan and was near death from cancer. Rogers followed him home and performed a long bedside concert for an audience of two. Postscript: At Rogers' memorial service, Steadham recalled that story, as an example of his friend's altruistic nature. Partway through, a cry came from the middle of the crowd, and after the service, a woman approached Steadham and said, "The woman in that story was my mother."

## The Baffled Knight

Born to energetic, educated and mature parents, James Gamble Rogers IV grew up in the crucible of a loving family of Renaissance-style high achievers. His father, an architect and designer, was also a disciplined athlete — who trained himself to Olympic level by swimming in the Daytona Beach surf — and a skilled musician. (A 1917 Vega banjo with a single-digit serial number, from the senior Rogers' Dartmouth days, is still in the family.)

By the time he'd established a family, Rogers' father had gone to Dartmouth on a swimming scholarship, set a national record, qualified for the 1924 "Chariots of Fire" Olympics and established his own architecture firm. (Rogers' father designed Florida's award-winning Supreme Court building and hundreds of homes in Winter Park renowned for their architectural grace; Rogers' great uncle designed the



university libraries at Yale and Columbia.) As his skills became critical to United States efforts during World War II, Rogers' father moved the family about the South, exposing young "Jimmy" (Gamble's boyhood nickname) and his brother Jack to military seaports, a family farm and the emerging cities and suburbs of Florida and Georgia.

Gamble Rogers' early life was marked by his social and intellectual gifts, his evident creativity, his precociously high personal standards — and a life-altering medical setback. Jack remembers an eighth-grade high jump so vigorous that it took his brother past the sawdust pit and jarred his spine on hard ground. It exposed the progress of a type of spinal arthritis that would fuse his spine in just a few more years. The medical treatment of the day was to steer the inevitable progress of the disease, so that the spine fused as straight as possible. For therapy, Rogers had to lie on a large stainless-steel reflector, under a heat lamp, for three hours a day. He handled this duration by becoming an avid reader, which Jack Rogers believes helped galvanize his brother's emerging love of language into a lifelong passion.

As a youth, Gamble struggled to find his *métier* and harness his considerable aptitudes. During an exploratory visit to Princeton, an admissions interviewer told James Rogers that his son Gamble was one of the most gifted language students he had ever seen — then criticized his science and math abilities. As they left, the senior Rogers, normally slow to anger, told the interviewer, "I thank you for your time today. Should my son decide he wants to attend Princeton, I'll do everything in my power to dissuade him."

Rogers enrolled instead at the University of Virginia. While there, he met several times with Nobel laureate William Faulkner, who kept office hours as writer-in-residence. Rogers then decided to skip final exams and left Charlottesville to take guitar lessons from Charlie Byrd in Washington, D.C. Jack Rogers says, with the family's gift for gracious understatement, that this resulted in Gamble being "*excused* from the University of Virginia, for at least a year." He filled that time at Rollins College, where Professor Edwin Granberry — author, essayist and trusted biographer of *Gone With the Wind* author Margaret

**“We lived in Pensacola during WWII,**  
while our father was working with an uncle who was building Liberty Ships. Shot-up warplanes would be brought back and dumped behind a big chain-link fence, with German Shepherd dogs guarding the storage yard. Gamble and I would drag sticks on the fence to make noise, and bunch the dogs at one end of the yard. Then, one of us would run ahead of the dogs, get in the cockpit and ‘fly’ one of the wrecked planes for awhile. When his turn was over, the other one would bunch the dogs again to cover him to escape, and it would be the other brother’s turn.”

— Jack Rogers, Gamble's brother

Mitchell — wrote a glowing recommendation that helped Rogers get into Stetson. Several years later, Rogers said goodbye to Stetson, ending four years of college, four different majors (including architecture, English and philosophy) and three educational institutions — with no degree to show for it.

A while later, he and friends Paul Champion and Jim Bellew opened a downstairs grotto club in Tallahassee called the Baffled Knight. Those three, the Baffled Knights, were the house act. Rogers' brother and his manager both think the group's name was autobiographical: an ironic epigram that lashes together Rogers' deep idealism with the frustration that came from his youthful search for a satisfying path.

While his own life was guided by his personal archetype of a Southern gentleman, his stories affectionately and wryly celebrated earthier, and ruder, Southern characters. What others might see as ornerness, laziness or provincialism, Rogers chose to interpret as the identifying marks of a colorful regional personality. Still Bill, who moved so slowly that you had to line him up with two fence posts to be sure he was in motion, was not someone you imagined inhabiting the striving middle-class enclaves of postwar suburbia. Same goes for Agamemnon Abramowitz Jones, Penrod, Downwind Dave, Forklift Mary, Sheriff Hutto Proudfoot or Flat Tire, the three-legged dog. But they came to life in Rogers' mythical Oklawaha County and flourished in the parallel universe of his stories.



Brad Kinsey, Harvey Lopez and Jesse Allen, at Nancy Rogers' request, built Gamble's casket.

HARVEY LOPEZ



He introduced his audiences to a perverse Southern idea. Rustic, rural inertia doesn't just happen on its own; it actually takes philosophical commitment, conscious effort and a kind of regional perseverance to attain the existential condition Rogers called "sorriness."

He describes the quest toward the Nirvana of true sorriness in one of his monologues: "I come from a place where sorriness is a prime virtue — a reason to be, a way of life," he says. "See the noble pilgrim, how he moves from station to station, ever ascendant, his brow knit with purblind avidity, until finally, in one supreme spasmodic movement of palpitant glorification, he grasps that brass ring of Truth, clutches it Excalibur-like to his heaving bosom, and it can truly be said of him, *God, be's sorry!*"

## Beach Camping in October

One weekend at Florida's Flagler Beach, Gamble and Nancy Rogers returned to their campsite from a four-hour bike ride, tired and ready to go home. The October daylight was waning, heavy weather was coming in and the surf was head-high and dangerous. The Halloween Storm, a three-hurricane hybrid that sank the swordfishing boat *Andrea Gail* and formed the basis for Sebastian Junger's bestselling novel, *The Perfect Storm*, was only a few days away.

It was no day for swimming, but a tourist from Ontario, Canada, had gone into the water and gotten into trouble. His young daughter ran to Rogers, pleading for someone to help her father. His arthritis, relentlessly worsening since childhood, had frozen his spine to the point where he could hardly twist around enough to back up an automobile. In fact, he'd struggled in the calm waters of a swimming pool just weeks before. Rogers had to know that he couldn't maneuver in that surf on his own.

He stripped to his shirt and shorts, grabbed a plain air mattress from under a sleeping bag and started into the surf. As minutes ticked by, park ranger Chuck McIntire, a strong swimmer, joined Rogers and another would-be rescuer who was in the water. McIntire swam past Rogers, who signaled that he was still all right. As McIntire continued outward, working the undertow and searching for the Canadian, a big wave took Rogers' air mattress away. The surf overcame him, and Gamble Rogers drowned.

## A Vessel for the Styx

Harvey Lopez describes how three of Gamble's friends were enlisted to build his casket:

"Nancy [Gamble's wife] said, 'I have a big favor to ask of you. I'd like for you to build a coffin for Gamble.'

What could I say? ‘No problem, when is the funeral?’ And of course, it was, like, three days away. And, you know how *dead*lines are, not to make a pun.

“I called two friends of mine who were wonderful boatbuilders, woodworkers, cabinetmakers: Jesse Allen and Brad Kinsey. We all got together and I said, ‘This is what we got to do, boys.’ Brad Kinsey had a nice shop, so we decided to build it out there.

“Where do you start? We kinda traced it out on his big workbench there, with chalk. Then we got to thinking, ‘Well, how tall is . . . heh, heh?’

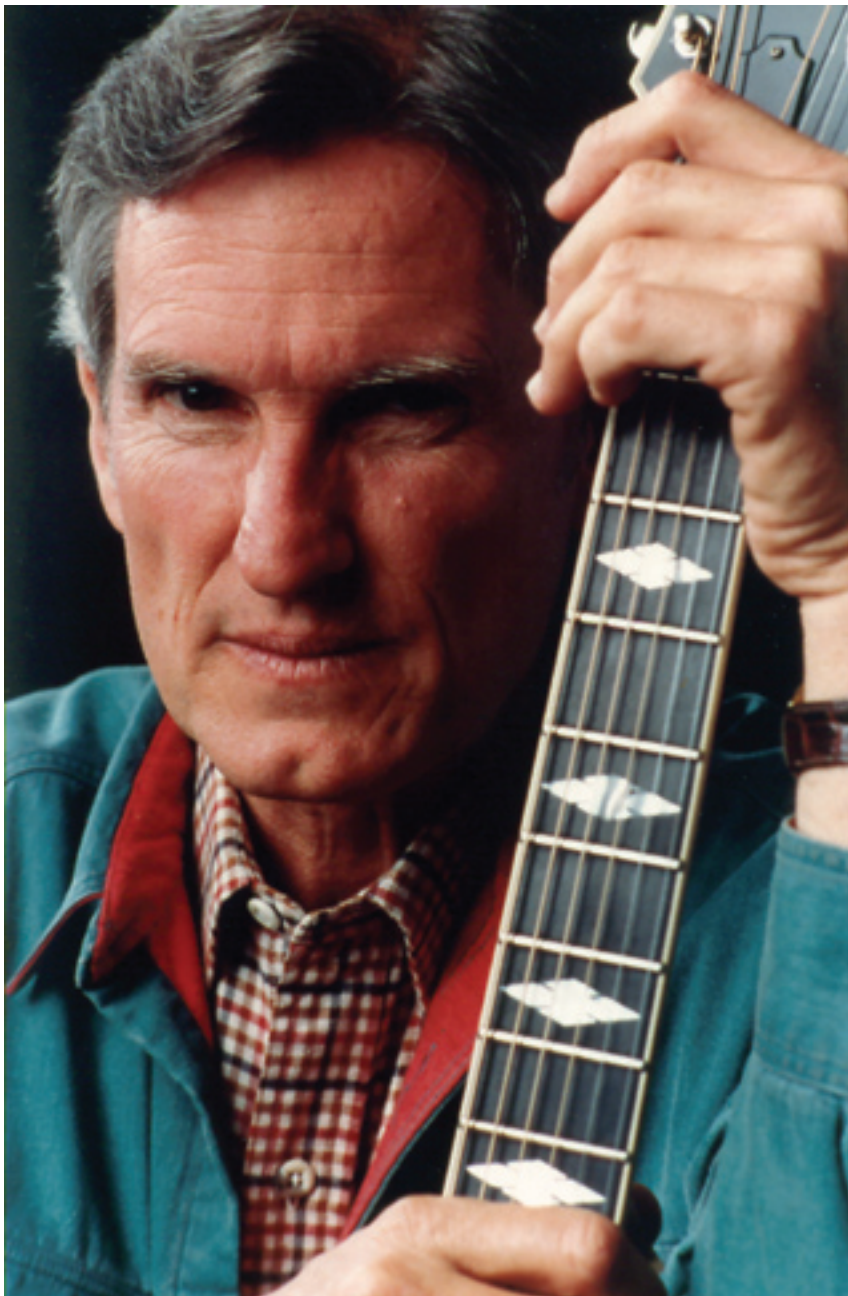
“Of course, I’m only five-seven, so I knew I didn’t have to do it. Brad was six-six. That was too tall. We both looked at Jesse.


“We said, ‘Jesse you’re about the right height. Lie down!’

“So, he laid down on the workbench. We had something in mind, traditional three-sided coffins like you see in the old West days. We traced it out, and said ‘OK, you can get up.’ He was feelin’ pretty weird. We decided we were going to build it like a boat. There’s chine logs that connect the sides of a boat to the bottom, they run all the way around it. We built it flat bottom, cross-planked it like a dory. Found some old Florida cypress. We planed it out in planks, smoothed it, started putting it together. From an old minesweeper that was decommissioned, we found brass handles, polished them, three on each side. We stained it after we got it together, made the top for it, stained it an old rosewood color, just like the ‘Rosewood Casket’ song. This went on night and day.

“We wrapped it up in some sheets, loaded in my pickup, took it to the funeral home. Next day, we had to go back and screw the top down. Gamble was in it by now. With our screw guns, we put the top on. You can’t cross the River Styx in a boat, without a paddle. So we made this little miniature oar, beautiful little paddle, and just before we screwed the top down, I lifted it up and slid the paddle in.

“It was a very close family ceremony at the gravesite, but I was lucky to be included. I remember looking back through the beautiful Winter Park cemetery, with oak trees and moss, and there was that rosewood casket, sitting in the sunlight. It was just gorgeous.”



TODAY, ROGERS’ WORK is preserved by the Gamble Rogers Memorial Foundation, and by friends, fans and fellow artists with personal stories and memorabilia that they treasure and share. Each May, St. Augustine’s Gamble Rogers Festival commemorates his life and work and attracts performers whose style and personal history relate to Rogers’ own. Yet, despite the popular show business cliché, not one of them so far has suggested that he is, or knows who will be, “the next Gamble Rogers.” 

A portrait from Rogers’ final photo session, with Guild-Gruhn F44 number 100001, now owned by the author.

SPENCER WEINER

For more information on Gamble Rogers,  
visit the Gamble Rogers Memorial Foundation's web site at [www.gamblerogers.org](http://www.gamblerogers.org)

This article was originally published in slightly different form in *The Fretboard Journal* issue 3, Fall 2006.  
For more information or to subscribe, visit [www.fretboardjournal.com](http://www.fretboardjournal.com) or call 1 (877) 373-8273.

*Designed by Patrick Barber/McGuire Barber Design*

FRONT COVER PHOTO: ROB BLOUNT/COURTESY OF THE GAMBLE ROGERS MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

This publication © 2008 Occasional Publishing, Inc.  
All rights reserved. Printed in China.

