

# York musician Harvey Reid knows the value of the troubadour. He wrote the book on it.

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By Bob Keyes

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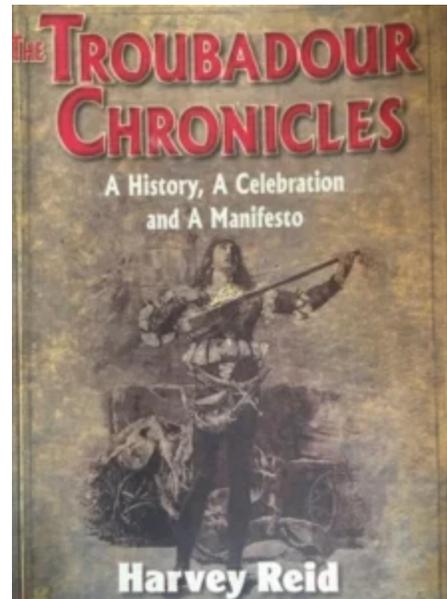
Harvey Reid plays guitar on a stage in a barn at his York home. He and his wife created the stage space to do livestream concerts during the pandemic. Reid has written a 500-plus page tome titled “The Troubadour Chronicles” about the art and history of the troubadour tradition. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

Harvey Reid self-published a massive book about the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the lonely troubadour because someone had to do it.

“The story needs to be told, and I just kept realizing I was the guy to do it,” said the singer and guitarist from York, who has made his living as a solo performer all his adult life. “My credentials are pretty damn good. My body of work in this field is impressive.”

Reid, who turns 68 in the spring, might be guilty of being boastful, but he’s not lying. His credentials are impressive. Until the pandemic shut him down, he spent every year of his life since his early 20s on the road playing his guitar and singing. He’s performed thousands of concerts and recorded hundreds of songs, in coffee houses, churches, clubs and on festival stages. He started his own record label in 1982, has released dozens of CDs, and has been recognized as both an innovator and traditionalist on the six- and 12-string guitars, among other instruments. For 40 years, he’s carried the reputation as one of the finest fingerstyle guitarists, having won the National Fingerpicking Guitar Competition as a young man. Acoustic Guitar magazine named his CD “Steel Drivin’ Man” a top 10 essential folk record.

Thus, he felt it was within his proverbial wheelhouse to take a swing at the massive task of telling the history of the often-disrespected but vibrant tradition of the self-accompanied solo performer, sometimes known as a singer-songwriter, although being a songwriter is not required of being a troubadour. The result is “The Troubadour Chronicles: A History, A Celebration and A Manifesto,” which checks in at 515 pages and tells the history of the troubadour tradition going back to ancient China and Arabia, up through the ages of minstrels and kings who ordered their deaths for sedition, and the “relentless digital forces” of modern times that have wiped out much of Reid’s income.



And yet, Reid is hopeful. A basic premise of his book is that solo performers have an increasingly important role in our society, as robots and algorithms take over larger segments of life and work. He believes his art form is showing more strength and promise than it has in his lifetime and vastly more than in the last 500 or so years, because as technology dehumanizes society, “wildly human activities like troubadouring” will become more valuable. “We were there at the beginning and we will be there at the end,” he said. “We win by doing the things computers can’t, like creating and performing, and being capricious and unpredictable.”

Reid played one gig in the last year, on March 10 right before the shutdown, with his wife, Joyce Andersen, at the South Berwick Public Library. He recently booked his first live gig for 2021, a limited-audience, socially-distanced show on July 11 at Hamilton House, also in South Berwick. Despite the pause in what had been a busy touring life, he had rarely been more productive than last year, the publication of a fully self-produced 515-page book notwithstanding. In April, he and Andersen began livestreaming Friday night concerts from their barn in York, which they outfitted as a homemade sound studio and stage. They’ve livestreamed more than 300 songs over 25 concerts since the pandemic.

After a break for the holidays, the livestream concerts resume Feb. 11.

From Reid’s perspective, he and Andersen – and their peers around the world – are exploring a new art form in livestreaming that inherently benefits the solo acoustic performer. It’s simple DIY technology convenient to home that’s readily accessible to people everywhere. He compares livestreaming to the 78-rpm records of the early 20th century. Both represented new technology that expanded opportunities for troubadours.

“I am thrilled with the success of our livestreaming effort. Our numbers are not in the millions. They are not what skateboarders and gamers get,” he said. “But we are reaching people all over the country and other countries, and people who have been loyal fans for

decades are saying the nicest things. Joyce and I are spending more time working on music as never before. We have a reason to create and dust off instruments we haven't taken out of the house for years," he said.

They're having fun. Creative juices are flowing. "I haven't written so many songs in I can't remember," Reid said.

When touring resumes, livestreaming will be part of his future, whatever that future looks like. He loved being home in 2020 with his wife and kids, ages 12 and 15, and never once wished to be waiting for a flight at an airport gate. "I don't have the time or energy to travel all around the country like I have been doing all of my life. I don't like rest areas, motels and airports. I don't even need a guitar case anymore," he said.

But he won't, and can't, stop troubadouring. "I'm not really employable. I've got a 45-, 50-year gap in my resume, and I can't live off retirement. I can't retire. I guess I will sing right into the grave."

A friend and fellow troubadour, the flatpick master Dan Crary of California has known Reid for 30-plus years, and has always appreciated his friend's commitment to playing well on many different kinds of instruments, as well as his interest in the history and integrity of the minstrel tradition. "The reason for his book is that he is thinking seriously about what he does. He is philosophical about it, and as a philosophy and theological seminary student, I appreciate people who get philosophical about what they are doing. They think about the significance and importance of it, and it influences what they do and how they do it," Crary said.

"This is a guy who is serious about what he is doing and wants others to be serious about it, and he wants respect and regard for people who are seriously trying to perform this kind of artistic expression."

Bruce Pratt of Swanville, another longtime friend, music promoter and a former touring companion of Ramblin' Jack Elliott, called Reid "the most independent of the successful musicians I know. He has always done it his way rather than capitulate," said Pratt, who teaches English and creative writing at the University of Maine. "I've always admired his business skills, because he never became a businessman. He just became smart about how to keep his career going."

Reid began thinking about the book in 2016 when Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in literature. After centuries of exile from culture's upper echelons, the troubadour tradition seemed to be entering a new era of respect. That idea gestated, and he piled up his research over time, always with the idea of a tomb-like book as an outcome. He read 400 books and listened to more than 1,000 songs. "I combed the entire recorded output of hundreds and

hundreds of artists, both obscure and popular, to find the kinds of songs and ideas I was looking for, since I had a feeling no one else had ever tried to look at the landscape of American music through the lens I was using,” he said.

Because he published “The Troubadour Chronicles” himself, Reid decided it was OK to indulge, and 2020 created both the opportunity and incentive to finish the book. Available through Amazon and Reid’s [website](#), woodpecker.com, the book is an often funny and always interesting take on the peripatetic life of a lonely musician. It’s not a memoir, though Reid weaves his story throughout. It’s a lively history and a treatise, and, as its title promises, a manifesto about “an eternal but invisible music.” The book’s basic premise is people have been singing songs while accompanying themselves on an instrument since they lived in caves, but the solo troubadour art form rarely penetrates pop culture in significant ways – until maybe lately. There are untold examples of solo artists with big hits and long careers as soloists, but they rarely perform solo in lasting or significant ways. As soon as a performer becomes adept and popular as a soloist, they’re given a band and lose the essence of what made them popular in the first place, Reid writes.

He points to examples from Elvis Presley to Dylan to Shawn Colvin to Ed Sheeran and even 12-year-old Grace VanderWaal, who won “America’s Got Talent” in 2016 for singing and playing the ukulele and quickly stopped producing solo songs “even though it was abundantly clear that her unadorned personal troubadour energy was the essence of her appeal,” he writes.

The unmet potential of Elvis as a troubadour especially rankles him. “Elvis played a powerful rhythm guitar, and did so on most of his recordings until about 1958, though playing acoustic guitar in a band with poor amplification, he broke a lot of strings on stage, and often put the guitar down or didn’t play,” Reid writes. In 1968, when Elvis staged a comeback with his band in the studio and small audience, “he’s no slouch on guitar, and plays like a freight train, while also being impossibly handsome and cool. Like so many who followed him, he was a troubadour before he became a rock star.”

Reid obsessed over his premise. He studied 80 years of Billboard charts, all the MTV “Unplugged” set lists, and set lists and rosters of more than 600 “Austin City Limits” TV broadcasts. He studied all the set lists of Woodstock, which he called “a cultural high water mark” for solo performers with eight troubadours out of 32 acts, though only three totally solo sets, by John Sebastian, Melanie and Country Joe. According to his research, Billy Joel is the only musician who has performed a solo, self-accompanied version of the national anthem at a Super Bowl, in 2007. By his historical reckoning, there hasn’t been what he calls a major hit song with just one person playing and singing since “T For Texas” by Jimmie Rodgers in 1928.

Troubadours have often been treated as outlaws, in a strict sense when English kings executed minstrels, and in a figurative sense, when the fathers of the girls Reid dated in high school stared daggers at him when he showed up at their doors with his guitar and long hair.

With Dylan’s Nobel prize as one piece of evidence, Reid thinks that might be changing, and he sees both the pandemic and those relentless digital forces – despite one decimating his income from a lack of touring and the other from lost CD sales – as reasons for hope. Both have left people craving the direct musical connections that only solo performers can provide – and always have, in person or through livestreaming, no matter the circumstance.

He noted the presence of Bruce Springsteen and John Legend – “two of the most-troubadour-like pop stars today” – in President Joe Biden’s inauguration as other hopeful signs. It’s a good time for troubadours, he said.

Have guitar, will travel.

“Musicians and troubadours are not really first responders. They never send for us, except for weddings,” Reid said. “But we have to know what to do when we are called. When the ship is sinking, you don’t need a troubadour. But when you have been in a lifeboat a few days, music is really valuable.”

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