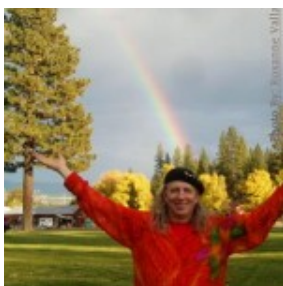


Harmonica player's death leaves void for Tahoe fans

By Denise Sloan Smart

I first fell in love with Norton Buffalo in the summer of 1977. The room was dark, save for a few twinkling lights coming from the radio station's control board.

It was about 2am and it was just me and Norton's first album, "Lovin' in the Valley of the Moon," from Capitol Records.



Norton Buffalo

We " Norton's music and I – were on the second floor of Harrah's Lake Tahoe, from where KOWL radio station broadcast for several decades. I was one of a few female disc jockeys back then. When the station owners were tucked into bed late at night, we DJs would expand the standard "play list" and throw in some new artists " like Norton Buffalo.

Oh, my heart sang to his searing, superb harmonica. And that voice, oh, that voice.

That voice is now silent " except for his recordings. Buffalo died last week at a hospital in Paradise. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer earlier this fall. He was 58.

Born in Oakland into a musical family – his father, a harmonica player, and his mother a vocalist in nightclubs in

San Francisco in the early 1940s – he had big shoes to fill and he did so magnificently.

“Norton Buffalo only played (at Harrah’s) a couple times in the early ‘80s in the Stateline Cabaret,” recalled John Packer, spokesman for the Tahoe casino. “I personally have seen him a number of times with the Steve Miller Band and with Roy Rogers.

“Obviously, this is a great loss to the Blues community and to the brotherhood and sisterhood of harmonica players,” Packer said. “He was one of a kind, a very unique player and a really nice guy. He was always really friendly – of course most Blues people are.”

Buffalo was regarded as one of the most versatile and talented harmonica players in the music business. Having performed and recorded across nearly every style of music, he became widely acclaimed as the finest multigenre harmonica player of all time.

His recordings, going back to his first releases on Capitol in 1977 and '78 all received great reviews, are revered by his fans, and are a must in every harmonica player’s collection. While his talents on the harmonica were the major parts of his success, Norton was known as a strong and soulful vocalist – Steve Miller introduced him each night as his “Partner in Harmony” – and is well regarded as a notable songwriter, engineer and producer.

For the last 34 years, Buffalo was a highly celebrated member of the Steve Miller Band, recorded and toured with some of the top names in music, worked in movies and television, and stayed busy performing and recording with his many diverse musical ventures.

Buffalo was highly sought after as a recording artist, having played on more than 180 albums by artists as diverse as Bonnie Raitt, Kenny Loggins, The Doobie Brothers, The Marshall Tucker

Band, Johnny Cash, Kate Wolf, Commander Cody And His Lost Planet Airmen, David Grisman, Juice Newton, Laurie Lewis and Elvin Bishop.

Buffalo was nominated for two Grammys and was part of the Doobie Brothers Grammy award-winning album "Minute By Minute."

Norton is also featured on Kenny Loggins new children's album that was released last spring.

He performed in the Lake Tahoe area from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, primarily on the North Shore and in Reno and was best appreciated at his outdoor concerts such as those at the Lake Tahoe Music Festival and at Northstar.

In the 1990s, this reporter " who first fell in love with his music in 1977 " had numerous opportunities to interview the musician prior to his Lake Tahoe performances and he was always a joy to speak with. That was when I was editor of *Action* magazine at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune*.

He always spoke of his love of performing, songwriting and collaborating with other musicians, which he felt brought out the best creativity in everyone involved.

I'd remind him that I still had his first two albums on vinyl (33 1/3) and he politely laughed, with delight. I never did have the nerve to tell him that "we were in love" from back in my radio days, when he first hit the airwaves.

Norton Buffalo was one of those musicians who should have been in the showrooms – not the cabarets, but mainstream audiences wouldn't have "gotten it." He was above their Saltine tastes. His music was caviar.

John Packer expects Mick Martin, who has a Blues party every Saturday from 1-5pm on (NPR) Capitol Public Radio, to do a tribute to Buffalo Norton this weekend.

Denise Sloan has covered the Lake Tahoe entertainment scene

since the 1970s.