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Spotlight: Programmer a Hawaiian music master

By Kevin Brown

The road Gerald B. Ross took to U-M included two stops in Minnesota to appear on Garrison Keillor's National Public Radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" with his group The Lost World String Band.

"It was quite a treat to perform on that show knowing that our music was being broadcast live throughout North America," Ross says.

But it was while working at a Lansing music store in the mid 1980s that Ross was introduced to software programming. That introduction led to his position as senior programmer analyst with Architecture, Engineering & Construction (AEC) on Hoover Street on Central Campus.

Ross recalls asking Paul Winder, one of his band mates, how he wrote a computer program to produce mailing labels to send out band promotional materials.

"He showed me how a computer program flowed and the programming language used to perform the tasks. It seemed logical, like I could do this. And at the time I painfully knew that as a musician I was making the same amount of money at age 29 as I was at 19," Ross says.

The 1972 Southfield High School graduate already had a bachelor's degree, earned in 1977 from Eastern Michigan University. Five years later, Ross' new interest in computer programming led him back to college. He studied programming at Washtenaw Community College and earned a degree. "As soon as I graduated, Washtenaw offered me a teaching job in their information technology department, then I worked for a couple of tiny computer shops around town," Ross says. In 1991 he began working at University Hospital, then left in 2000 to join AEC.

A growing fascination with Hawaiian music — particularly steel guitar and ukulele — has led to teaching and performing jobs at workshops and concerts around the country.

The road from musician to software programmer started when Ross was a boy. "My younger brother brought home a plastic recorder, a song flute; I just started jamming

with songs on the radio. I would try to match up the sounds of the top 40 songs with sounds on the recorder."

At age 14, a friend showed him how to play a few chords on guitar. "I just loved making musical noise," he explains. Ross convinced his parents to buy him a six-string guitar, and soon after a bass guitar, when a local band auditioned for a bassist.

Ross kept studying with better guitarists and eventually joined a bluegrass band while attending EMU. The band, Stoney Creek, was inspired by the just-released "Will the Circle be Unbroken" three-record set. The project joined youth culture musicians with bluegrass veterans. In the late '70s, Ross moved to East Lansing. There, he hooked up with a new group, The Lost World String Band.

Meet Gerald B. Ross

Title: senior programmer analyst, Architecture, Engineering & Construction
At U-M: 16 years
On performing as a pastime:
"I'm not looking to get rich at this; my goal is to perform high quality music, meet and play with better musicians, make new friends from around the world and have fun in the process."

"I was getting really tired of playing bluegrass," Ross recalls. His new band "played old timey music, early jazz, blues and swing, Cajun music — it was much more interesting music. I learned how to play the Cajun accordion." The band toured the East Coast, Midwest and other areas of the country and released two albums. Ross says the band reassembles twice each year for reunion shows.

It was in 2004 that Ross on a whim bought a ukulele.

He began reading online ukulele discussion groups and bulletin boards, and posted two of his own finger style ukulele recordings. He has now put out two CDs, both available with free song downloads on his Web site www.geraldross.com.

"I'm not looking to get rich at this; my goal is to perform high quality music, meet and play with better musicians, make new friends from around the world and have fun in the process," Ross says.

In his day job at AEC, Ross, along with a team of three programmers and support staff, is in the process of rewriting 10-to 15-year-old software his department has used to manage projects. "I get to be creative on the job," Ross says. "I work with a very good team; we are a tight group that works together to solve complex problems. We are constantly bouncing ideas off of each other to arrive at the best solutions."

Gerald, his wife, and two sons live in Ann Arbor.

The weekly Spotlight features staff members at the University. To nominate a candidate, please contact the Record staff at urecord@umich.edu.