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Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

‘Bluegrass is a great vessel. It can take a lot of weight.’

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Peter Rowan, who performs in Brattleboro on July 19,
keeps the roots tradition alive with more than five decades of
writing, recording, and touring

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TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

GRAMMY AWARD-WINNING singer songwriter Peter Rowan
has spent over five decades shaping the sound of American roots
music — from bluegrass and folk to rock, country, and more. He
debuts at the Stone Church on Sunday, July 19.

A 2022 inductee into the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame,
he’s also received the Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award in

12 Music in 2025 from the Your Roots Are Showing folk conference
13 in Ireland. In 1997, the compilation album *True Life Blues: The*
14 *Songs of Bill Monroe* — on which Rowan performed a track,
15 “Letter From My Darling” — won a Grammy Award for Best
16 Bluegrass Album.

17 Raised in Wayland, Massachusetts, Rowan has a special
18 bond with New England and tells *The Commons* he found his
19 voice in Boston’s vibrant 1950s folk scene, learning guitar from
20 his uncle and frequenting the Hillbilly Ranch nightclub, where
21 old-time legends like the Lilly Brothers graced the stage.

22 He formed his first band, The Cupids, while in high
23 school, and in the years that followed he pushed musical
24 boundaries in various bands like Earth Opera, Seatrain,
25 Muleskinner, and The Rowans (with his brothers Chris and Lorin).

26 *The Commons* spoke with Peter Rowan from his home in
27 Mill Valley, California, about his debut performance at the Stone
28 Church and how bluegrass has evolved over the decades. Here’s
29 an excerpt of the conversation.

30 * * *

31 **Victoria Chertok:** How has Bluegrass music evolved, and
32 why is it so popular?

33 **Peter Rowan:** There was always an attraction for people
34 to love bluegrass, because bluegrass speaks of the heart; it’s very
35 poetic. It speaks of a spiritual dimension and a kind of love
36 songs, but mostly of love lost.

37 I think everybody has some sense of regret in their life of
38 the moments that have come and gone in our lives, especially
39 when you’re young. Where passion seems to rule the day, and yet
40 it takes a long time to finally realize what it means to be
41 committed in love.

42 [I’m talking about] more of the romantic style of writing,
43 and it’s different than honky-tonk music, although bluegrass now
44 encompasses everything! I’ve been doing Rolling Stones songs in
45 bluegrass for years.

46 Bluegrass is a great vessel. It can take a lot of weight.

V.C.: How did you get introduced to it?

P.R.: I was 14 and my mom used to drop me at the

[transit stop] in Dedham[, Massachusetts], and I would [go] into the city. I would make two stops: I would go to Copley Square and go to the Golden Vanity and hear blues: Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

And then I would go into Park Square to a place called the Hillbilly Ranch. I even began playing there myself. I was way underage, but if you carried your instrument in a case and acted like you were there to play music, the management usually let you in.

There was a band there that I got to be friends with — the Lilly Brothers from Clear Creek, West Virginia — and they were just super nice people.

V.C.: Who was in the audience back then?

P.R.: It was sailors and their girlfriends at Hillbilly Ranch and garage mechanics and working people out in the bars of Acton and Worcester[, Massachusetts].

V.C.: You moved to Nashville when you were 21 and got to work with Bill Monroe [and his band, the Blue Grass Boys]. You've said that "Monroe's music had more blues in it. It had more edge, and it carried the old ballad tradition I loved."

P.R.: I went to Nashville and worked with Bill Monroe and became a Blue Grass Boy in his band for a couple years. And since that time, Bluegrass has grown so much, especially in New England.

It was always almost a secret [genre of] music, and slowly people began to become more and more aware of it. There were several bands out of New England, and Northern Lights (originally How Banks Fail) was one of them. It's been slowly growing since then.

V.C.: What was your first instrument?

P.R.: I learned the ukulele first, because my uncle Jimmy came back from World War II and he brought coconut bras and hula skirts. He had us all dress up, and he sang Hawaiian songs

82 in the living room. I was only 4, and I became totally enamored
83 with music at that point. In those days we were square dancing
84 on Friday night and learning to ballroom dance on Saturday
85 night.

86 **V.C.:** How fun!

87 **P.R.:** All of a sudden the radio started playing this other
88 music, Buddy Holly and the Crickets. Oh, yeah — and Elvis
89 Presley.

90 I remember my ukulele-playing neighbor Bob Emery —
91 we saw a picture of Elvis [Presley] with his guitar hanging on him
92 with a guitar strap, and we fashioned straps on our ukuleles and
93 started saying, “Maybe we should be playing this.” We ended up
94 playing Silvertone guitars and electric instruments and playing
95 what they called “record hops” all around Boston.

96 **V.C.:** What year was this?

97 **P.R.:** That was like 1954 or ‘55. By 1957, Elvis had sort of
98 eclipsed the music world and, of course, everybody was going for
99 a harder sound. That was at the time when I started hearing
100 bluegrass and identifying bluegrass. I’d heard it, but I never knew
101 what it was. And then at the square dances, there was a caller
102 from New Hampshire named Dick Best, and he had a live band,
103 so we got to see fiddles and banjos up close.

104 **V.C.:** What can the audience expect from your upcoming
105 show in Brattleboro?

106 **P.R.:** There are a lot of bluegrass musicians in the area, so
107 I expect two or three of them to join me at Stone Church. Matt
108 Flinner is going to be coming down and will play some
109 mandolin. My second cousin once removed, Max Wareham, will
110 plays some banjo, and Chris Sartori, I believe, will be playing
111 some bass.

112 My calling in life is as a songwriter, and I do a lot of solo
113 work, singing and telling stories. But it’s always especially
114 rewarding when we get to actually play a little bit of bluegrass,
115 with this wonderful interplay between musicians and instruments.

116 Everybody knows the canon of the work: the Jimmy
117 Martins, Bill Monroe, and the Stanley Brothers, so there's quite a
118 lot to draw from, and it's so much fun.

119 **V.C.:** Which guitars do you tour with?

120 **P.R.:** Over the past decades, many instrument makers
121 have entered the field of making bluegrass instruments, and some
122 of them are super fine.

123 I use the Martin 000 style guitar or a D-28, and I use a
124 Preston Thompson guitar that was made for me. I have a Gibson
125 J-200, and all the instruments have a voice that is both inspiring
126 and also wonderfully accompanying.

127 **V.C.:** Any closing thoughts?

128 **P.R.:** I have a [memoir](#) coming out in December: *Walls of*
129 *Time: Tales of a Bluegrass Pilgrim* from Shambhala Publications.

130 And I'm looking forward to be back in New England for
131 a couple of weeks around the Newport Folk Festival. To get to
132 play in Vermont is just icing on the cake.

133 * * *

134 *Peter Rowan performs at Stone Church, 210 Main St.,*
135 *Brattleboro, on Sunday, July 19, at 8 p.m. Doors open at 7 p.m.*
136 *For tickets and more information, visit*
137 stonechurchvt.com/#/events. *For more information on Peter*
138 *Rowan, visit* peter-rowan.com.

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140 *Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this*
141 *format are edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words not*
142 *spoken by interview subjects appear in brackets, as do editorial*
143 *clarifications.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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144 **VICTORIA CHERTOK** is a contributing writer to *The*
145 *Commons* and *The Keene Sentinel*. Since 2017, she has
146 published more than 250 arts and entertainment features,

147 interviews, and columns in both newspapers, as well as in the
148 *Brattleboro Reformer*. We at *The Commons* wish her well in her
149 move to Florida and will miss her interviews and contributions to
150 this section.

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