

Whence Gunnar? From deep in the furthest regions of the arctic circle. At least, that's where my great grandfather Gunnar Eriksen was from (Tromsø, to be exact). Other ancestors come from Copenhagen and points north and points unknown. These various ancestors emigrated in various ways (legal and illegal) to the west coast of the U.S., and, eventually, I was born. I come from 2 generations of garbagemen. Both my father and his father ran garbage companies. The Bobs' song "Trash" was written for a safety awards ceremony at my father's company (one of the Bobs' first well-paying gigs). The ways to a career in the performing arts are many.

I was a boy, a son of a garbageman with a funny name. Yes, kids made fun of my name. Music was not part of our home life. My parents had few records. Our record player was a strange sleep-teaching device with a clock built into it. Until the age of 8 I had one record - Huckleberry Hound. Then I saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show. My life changed. I mowed lawns, I washed cars, I did whatever it took to buy Beatles records. For Christmas my parents gave me a transistor radio, which I went to sleep with every single night. Music became my passion. I took piano lessons for 6 months or so, but gave it up, discouraged because I sounded nothing like the Beatles. Still, I listened to records.

Then I was a teenager.

I bought a stereo, I needed my music louder than the sleep-teaching contraption could deliver. My older sister left her folk guitar behind when she went off galivanting one summer. I picked it up and started strumming. I followed the diagrams in her Joan Baez songbook and learned chords. I took the guitar to the piano and found how to make chords on the piano. I wrote songs with friends. I made music!

My mother thought I made noise.

Still, she offered me piano lessons for my 17th birthday. I studied classical piano, practicing 4 and 5 hours a day. I worked as a garbageman for 6 months, saved up enough money to go to UC Berkeley. I studied music there, like a demon. A wonderful professor urged me into a job as an arranger for a little-known Brecht play "The Measures Taken". It was a hit. I got more work, mainly writing for Brechtian theater, then Shakespeare, then all kinds. I graduated. I got a job delivering singing telegrams for Western Onion. It was a blast, the perfect job for me at the time. But suddenly, the market for singing telegrams evaporated, the company went broke, and I was out of work...

Out of work along with countless other singing telegram deliverers. The great singing telegram depression of 1981...

One of the unemployed, Matthew Bob Stull, and I got together and thought it would be fun to form an acapella group (which eventually became known as The Bobs). We drew up a 25 words or less ad for the free classifieds, looking for a bass singer. We got one call. From Richard 'Bob' Greene. He was not only a bass singer, but a songwriter and recording engineer. We rehearsed for 6 months, a beer-in-the-afternoons kind of thing, then went to an open mike. At a Cuban restaurant. A line of flamenco guitarists stretched out the door, waiting for their turn on stage. The promoter, sensing the diners' apathy towards nylon strings and wood, moved our acapella trio to the front of the line. If memory

serves, we treated them to Psycho Killer, A White Sportcoat, and a few others. They loved us. We had our first fans.

Still, that wasn't a paying gig. I continued making my living by working in a video store, accompanying for voice teachers, and so on.

Richard and I did all the arranging, it was all cover tunes at first. Then we began writing songs together. We felt the need for another voice, so we auditioned and found Janie 'Bob' Scott. Our stage show began to gel. We did weekly shows at a Jazz club (there were no acapella clubs), and a local record company approached us. We signed, made our first record ("The Bobs"), and then we had offers to tour around the country. We did. Richard and I got nominated for a Grammy for our arrangement of "Helter Skelter". We got on radio shows, TV shows, we traveled to Europe, we did festivals, huge concerts. We met a dance troupe named Momix (they later changed their name to ISO). We improvised together and worked up a show with them. The collaboration continued over the years, with a commission from Lincoln Center and a one-hour presentation on PBS. Life was exciting, it was a blast.

It was very much a blast. My childhood dream of a Beatle-like existence had come true. And, in 1991, I decided to quit.

Why?

Our performances, our songs were beginning to feel flat to me. I was tired of touring. I had a lovely woman waiting for me at home. More than anything, I wanted something more, but I didn't know what. Just something more.

I suppose it was time for my midlife crisis.

The ways out of a career in the performing arts are many...

Life after The Bobs was miserable. I'd grown quite used to having hundreds of fans making me feel good one out of every three nights, and I had nothing to replace it. I gave some concerts, I got commissions from ODC/SF, NPR, the New Music Theater Ensemble and others. I learned improv, I wrote a film score, I did some more theater scores, produced a record, I sang on a film score, did some small acting gigs. Life was not empty, but it felt like it. I was depressed and couldn't find a way out. Things were dark.

The ways out of depression are many...

I began to study acting. Deep, rich, method-style, with a very gifted teacher. It was just the thing for me. As I delved deeper into my own self, I found new freedom, new power and joy in performing. (Sounds holistic? Well, it is!) Life was still hard, but eventually the gloom started to clear. It wasn't an all-at-once kind of wake-up-and-be-happy scenario, but every day became a little bit easier, even a little bit better. Out of the blue, I was offered a job writing video game music for Atari. More money than I'd ever made in my life. And my first ever regular job behind a desk in a corporation for 40 hours a week. And it was exactly the right thing at the time.

Life is weird. No doubt about it.

The Atari job filled my days and my bank account. Evenings I continued to write. I wrote a bunch of waltzes, and they were recorded and almost released by a record company, until they ran out of money. Then I got a huge bonus from Atari, and the stars were suddenly in alignment, and my eyes lit up, and I suddenly knew EXACTLY what I wanted to do: Record my own record.

I'd been writing all kinds of pop/folk songs for years, I had a big catalog of songs to choose from. I gathered together my favorite drummer; a guitarist who knew how to get wild; a great bass player from the Seattle area; my good friend to be engineer and producer; a French-Canadian Djembe player on a motorcycle - and we all gathered on 100 acres in the bend of a river somewhere in nowheresville in Washington State, where an incredible recording studio had been built into a huge log cabin. We recorded from 9am to 4am, we recorded outside with the birds, we recorded inside in the dead of night. Every one of us is an accomplished cook and we made huge delicious meals in the kitchen upstairs. We were like the Rolling Stones, living the high life while making a record – Except we all liked each other and didn't have to be the Rolling Stones! It was one of the best weeks of my life.

Quit your day job – take a chance!

The resulting album, *The Power of a Hat*, was mixed in late 97. I quit my job at Atari and became a full-time actor for 5 months, working with Culture Clash in their production of *The Birds* at South Coast Rep and at Berkeley Rep. While at South Coast Rep, I landed a job doing the singing for Don Cheadle's portrayal of Sammy Davis Jr. in HBO's "The Rat Pack". I got to record with a 17-piece big band, I got to record in Capitol Records Studios, under a huge portrait of Nat King Cole (one of my heroes) looking down on me. It was another childhood dream come true (not singing like Sammy Davis Jr....the part about recording at Capitol Studios)!

I released *The Power of a Hat* and I licensed the rights to release the waltzes (*Spinning World: 13 Ways of Looking at a Waltz*), and all of a sudden I was the head of a record label.

Cigars and Limousines?

Running your own record company is better than not putting out records at all. And it's better than a bad deal at somebody else's record company. But it's real work. Endless phone calls to DJs whose offices are stacked to the ceilings with Cds they've never had the time to listen to. Press releases, glossy 8x10s, mailing labels, promos, glad-handing and huge long-distance bills. I do very well, get good airplay, made the charts - I sell Cds. But glamorous? Not quite.

Feeling Silly.

Part of my reason for leaving the Bobs was that I was tired of being funny. I wanted to be serious and be taken seriously. With *The Power of a Hat* and *Spinning World: 13 Ways of Looking at a Waltz*, I was now bona-fide serious. It felt seriously good! And *Spinning World* was turning out to be especially successful. My obvious next step was to record a follow-up CD to it. Every fiber of my Record Executive Being screamed at me to make "Spinning World 2". But the pesky little recording artist in me decided it was time to record a children's record.

Children's music?

WAY back in 1986, I teamed up with 3 other songwriters to write some songs for the burgeoning children's market (think Raffi). Our project didn't go anywhere, but our demo tape did, and it landed on the desk of a book publisher in NY. She liked the song "Old Mr. Mackle Hackle" and gave me a contract to write a book based on it. I bought my first computer with the money, and the book almost came out, except the editor quit her job, and her replacement didn't like my book and cancelled it. Only somewhat daunted, I made a demo tape of my children's songs and sold them through the Bobs' fan club for a few years. But gradually my dreams of being a children's author/songwriter faded. It wasn't SERIOUS enough for me!

Seriosity chilled the cat...

I guess, having finally achieved seriosity, I was ready to really get silly and do the children's' thing. I wrote and recorded "Old Mr. Mackle Hackle", the CD, in a flurry of activity. When released in 1999, it turned out to be a hit. Kids, parents, and librarians loved it! I was invited to perform for kids (which, it turns out, is way different than performing for grown-ups), and I began to learn the intricacies of making a good kids' show. I made a follow-up CD, "Ants in My Pants!", which was another big hit. And then, I was invited yet again to write a book based on the song "Old Mr. Mackle Hackle". 19 years in the making, the book, published by Little, Brown & Co., hit the shelves in 2005. It failed to make the Best-seller list, but I kept writing songs and stories, and released "I'm Growing" in 2008.

No More Serious?

Oh, no. All the while I'm putting out these children's Cds and books, I'd been working on a serious new musical – The Shaggs, Philosophy of the World. It's deep. It's not without humor and some light, but we're talking about a serious piece of drama that explores some dark stuff. Not for kids. And I took a year off to travel to Russia and make a documentary film about a farm for disabled people that my brother had been working at. And my sketchbook continued to fill up with material for the follow-up to Spinning World, "Two Hands", which came out in 2009. The Shaggs musical was produced in LA and Chicago, and made its Off-Broadway debut in 2011. I'm hard at work on new songs for the film adaption of the that musical, currently in pre-production. NOTE: Our son was born in 2002, that is ongoing Serious Fun, every single day.

No More Silly?

Here's the thing. I am serious about children's music. Some of it may be silly, but I am dead serious about making sure that the music, the lyrics, the stories are of the utmost highest quality. I want anyone of any age to be able to listen, read and enjoy this music. I want families to be able to enjoy it together. Just because it's silly doesn't mean it shouldn't be GOOD. Your honor, I submit as evidence: "I Am Your Food".

AND, I now recognize that I am both a serious and a silly fellow. I need to do both. So, I can't say if the next project will be silly or serious, 'cause one day I'm writing a new silly book for kids, and the next I'm writing a piece for chamber orchestra. The winds blow me this way and that. And I like being blown by the winds. Beats trying to hold still in one place. And it sure beats trying to make my own

wind!

The End? I doubt it...