

If you can make it here

Roger Salloom brings his get-out-of-Worcester story to the silver screen

By Brian Goslow

A movie documentary based on the life of Worcester-born songwriter Roger Salloom will make its debut next month at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in Missoula, Mont. *So Glad I Made It: A Portrait of Roger Salloom, America's Best Unknown Songwriter* is the work of independent filmmaker Chris Sautter, whose 2001 film *The King of Steeltown* won "Best Political Documentary" honors at that year's New York International Independent Film & Video Festival. Sautter was also a key member of then-Vice President Al Gore's 2000 Florida presidential election recount team.

Salloom is best known locally for his mid-1970s song "[Gotta Get] Out of Worcester." (See our cover story in this issue.) He did make it out of Worcester — even before the song's release — and achieved a rare degree of national success. His group, Salloom, Sinclair, and the Mother Bear, were signed to Chess Records; their first album received a rave review in *Rolling Stone* and was called the best album of 1968 by *The Chicago Tribune*. The group played the Fillmore and Avalon ballrooms in San Francisco, opening for the likes of Santana and Van Morrison. However, when Marshall Chess left his family's label to become president of Rolling Stone Records, it left the group without its biggest fan and label support.

Undeterred, Salloom and Robin Sinclair traveled to Nashville, where they recorded with the same band Dylan used on his *Nashville Skyline* LP. While there, Salloom participated in a songwriters' circle with Guy Clark, documentation of which Sautter is scurrying to get for his film. In the documentary, Salloom's former wife talks about him winning an audition for a college coffeehouse tour and following in the footsteps of Jim Croce, Jerry Jeff Walker and Brewer & Shipley. He also performed with the post-John Fogerty Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Since the end of the 1970s, he's been living in musical semi-retirement in Western Massachusetts, making his nationally syndicated "Leold" comic his main priority.

Sautter was introduced to Salloom while attending college. "I was a student at Indiana University in the late '60s when he was at the school," he says. "He was a charismatic folk singer-turned-rock 'n' roller. In Bloomington, he was our Bob Dylan."

However, few people around here were aware of those achievements when Salloom returned to his hometown in the mid-'70s. He released "[Gotta Get] Out of Worcester" on his Blueberry Record label. It hit a chord, drawing many requests on local radio (helped by its refrain, "Gotta get, out of Worcester, gotta get") He sold it during weekly Friday night appear-

ances at the Midheaven Restaurant on Highland Street. The song got a second life when he re-recorded it for a solo album in 1983, when it was voted WBCN's "Song of the Week." It almost received a third life, thanks to a rumored recording of the tune by James Taylor, but that's never seen the light of day. And that's pretty much all we've heard from Salloom since, outside of a visit to Café Fantastique a few years back.

It was a new love that encouraged him to return to music full-time. "I met my wife and she liked my music and said, 'Why don't you start playing again?'" Salloom says, admitting he was fearful about returning to live performing. "She added some stability to my life and promised she would go on the road with me."

It was about this time that Sautter discovered what happened to that guy whose music he loved so much in college. "Two years ago in March, I was on the Internet, went on Google, and punched in his name and his Web site came up," Sautter says.

The two began exchanging e-mails and Salloom sent him a CD of his latest demo recordings. "It arrived via Express Mail as I was waiting for a taxi to Dulles Airport," Sautter says. "I listened to it all the way to London. He kept writing me for the 10 days I was gone, but I didn't have a chance to respond." He suspects Salloom may have thought the silence was a passive negative review, but that was far from the case. When they finally talked, Sautter



Caught in the camera: Roger Salloom performs for a television audience.

pitched his idea of doing a documentary on his music career. "He said, 'My first response without thinking was yes, with further thought, it's yes, yes.'"

The film includes footage of James Cotton and The Blind Boys of Alabama performing at the annual Northampton Blues Festival. Salloom has produced in recent years and a visit to the home of Marshall Chess in Woodstock, N.Y. As for Salloom's infamous musical tribute to his

hometown, Sautter says, "It's in the film. He talks about how he came to write the song and plays it acoustically."

Salloom is also seen walking down Front Street and through Elm Park and his old neighborhood on Lovell Street. "We also used some news clips from years back from Worcester newspapers," Sautter says. "It weaves a powerful musical verity, showing a story of how elusive pop-

ular success can be no matter how talented you are. Watching it, it's obvious he's more talented than many performers who are much more famous than he." It's also "the story of a psychedelic Nashville songwriter who tries to jumpstart his career — and finds it's a very different world," says the filmmaker.

Sautter hopes to attract a national distributor for *So Glad I Made It* or convince independent film channels and public television outlets in Massachusetts and Indiana to air it. Salloom hopes it'll be shown in Worcester, where he can perform as part of its screening. And he's not giving up on his dream of achieving that elusive mainstream success. "I listen to some of these current singer/songwriters like David Gray and I think it's entirely possible I'm the best,"

says Salloom, who returns to Central Massachusetts on March 19 for a show with Steve Forbert at the Bull Run Restaurant in Shirley. □

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