

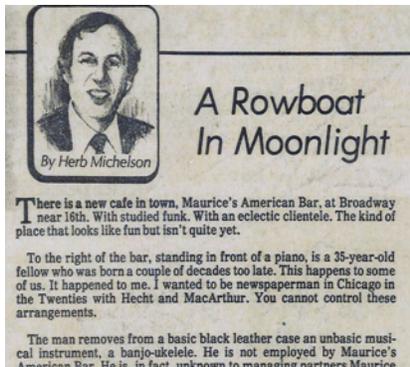
# A Rowboat in Moonlight

By Herb Michelson

Sacramento *Bee*, Summer 1978

**There is a new cafe in town**, Maurice's American Bar, at Broadway near 16th. With studied funk. With an eclectic clientele. The kind of place that looks like fun isn't quite yet.

To the right of the bar, standing in front of a piano, is a 35-year-old fellow who was born of couple of decades too late. This happens to some of us. It happened to me. I wanted to be newspaperman in Chicago in the Twenties with Hecht and MacArthur. You cannot control these arrangements.



The man removes from a basic black leather case an unbasic musical instrument, a banjo-ukelele. He is not employed by Maurice's American Bar. He is, in fact, unknown to managing partners Maurice Reed, Jerry McFetridge and Pat Malarkey and to back-bar consultant Pat Brawley. He is, in fact, unknown to almost everybody in the world.

**Dan Scanlan will be an unknown** as long as he continues to play banjo-uke, which he has played for 15 years, which he will always play. Because he seems himself as a wandering minstrel. And he knows this is a time when America's musical tastes run more toward stationary, amplified guitars and eight-track vocalists.

"Yes Sir, That's My Baby." And "Ain't She Sweet?" Or "Bye, Bye Blues." All from another time, a time in which the controller did not permit Dan Scanlan to live.

He has been in Sacramento for five years, making another passage here. Wandering. He was once straight and a newspaperman and a computer programmer and a teacher and all the right, obligatory things. Wife and child. Even ran for a seat on a school board down in San Diego County. Lost of course; job, wife, child, school board election.

He works here for the Daily Recorder and Press Journal, pasting up copy. He came here because his old roommate at Loyola, L.A., his old chrome Dobro guitar-playing buddy Pat Sauer was here. Dan and Pat played together at the Aero Club as Flathead. Dan needs backing because a banjo-uke is, well, it's so small. It needs help — piano or guitar.

**But now Pat has moved.** No more Flathead, so Dan has to solo or find unpaid gigs at which he can sit in or walk cold into laces like Maurice's American Bar and hope nobody throws him out. "Yessir, don't mean maybe..."

"I've owned six or seven banjo-ukes in the last 10 years," he says. "Started as a violinist; lessons were kind of imposed on me. Then I discovered this instrument and stuck with it. The banjo-uke was popular in the Twenties and then re-emerged in World War II because it was small enough for guys who liked to play guitars to take overseas with them. But today I don't know anybody else who plays one."

He offers his own songs, "Tunnel of Love" and "Saturday Matinee," to the mostly young crowd, people who have walked over from Tower Records across the street, people who are probably not quite sure why Maurice Reed has put portraits of FDR and MacArthur over the cash registers and records of Tab Hunter ("Red Sails in the Sunset") and Rudy Vallee ("As Times By") in the jukebox.

Slowly, these people warm to Da Scanlan. "...and I ask you very confidentially, ain't she sweet?"

**Dan talks about his biggest gig**, the El Dorado County Fair at Placerville this summer. Two days, a hundred big ones for being a wandering minstrel. "And my biggest assignment was to warm up the 2,500 people in the stands for the wheelbarrow race. Biggest crowd I've ever played for."

Maybe you used to see Dan at the Christmas Fair at the Produce Market. Played there on his lunch hour. Passed the hat and came up with 10 bucks in a half hour. He enjoyed that, and not necessarily the money.

"I don't even pass the hat here," he says. "Not important. I just like to play. I know I'm probably archaic. I know it's hard to find anybody to play with because most of the young musicians today don't know my music. It's hard for them to jam with me. I'm thinking of trying to sit in with the Red Rose Ranch Band (from Ancient Moose and Bitter Creek). They play Benny Goodman. They would understand."

"The banjo-uke is imagery for me. Reminds me of sitting in a rented rowboat on a lake in the moonlight. That kind of feeling. Like maybe how life was 30 years ago."



*Flathead 1975 (l)  
Scanlan 2009 (r)*

