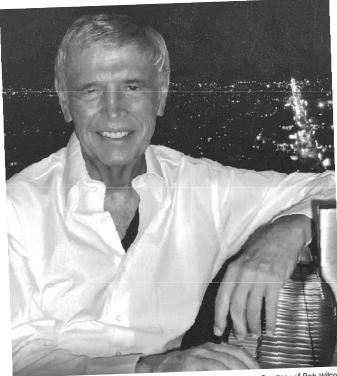


Tickling the Ivories With Roger Williams



Courtesy of Rob Wilcox

Pianist Roger Williams is used to being in the limelight, but you wouldn't know it from speaking with him. Modest about his talent, he speaks more of his joy of music rather than his accomplishments—which are many. Throughout his seven-decade career he's accumulated 18 gold and platinum albums and can perform an estimated 10,000 songs from memory; a feat he proves every year during 12-hour marathon performances in the name of bringing music back to public schools. In December, his latest CD, "Roger Williams in the Crystal Cathedral," became the #1 seller in the Readers Digest catalogue. He speaks with the Overture from his home in Encino.

You've performed for so many U.S. Presidents, you're known as "Pianist to the Presidents."

I've played for nine presidents now. The first one I ever played for was Harry Truman. I didn't realize how much Truman knew about piano. He asked for everything from Bach to Shostakovich. When I got through, he said, "Now I'm gonna play for you, Roger." I figured he'd sit down and play something like "The Missouri Waltz," but he played the Chopin "C-Sharp Minor Waltz." When he got through, I said, "Mr. President, you would have made a great pianist." He said, "I had a choice between being a warehouse pianist or a politician. Many times I thought I made the wrong choice."

How did you meet Ronald Reagan?

We started in the same radio station in Iowa. He was a sportscaster, and I had my own radio show. The last time I played for him he said, "Can you remember the theme song from my TV show 'Death Valley Days'?" I said, "You sure got me on that one!" He said, "I'm only kidding. Play 'The Impossible Dream.' That

encompasses everything I've tried so hard to do for this great country." He was quite a guy.

Have you performed for President Obama?

I was at the White House in December and played for all the foreign and current ambassadors in the East Room, but I haven't played for Obama yet. But this will happen... I hope!

Every year you perform 12-hour piano marathons to raise awareness for music education in schools.

The last one I played was 14 hours, and believe me, my fingers are bleeding at the end. When people come to these performances we hand them a piece of paper at the door, and they write what they want me to play. A lot of musicians come, so they ask for all these difficult things. So it's a very exhausting performance before I'm through.

What inspired you to get involved with bringing music to students?

I'm really upset about a lot of things. I loved Reagan, but he's like me—he's the greatest guy in the world, except when he isn't. He largely took music out of the schools. Kids are not really inspired. I would like really seriously to get music back into the schools, which has proved to make better students—they get better grades, they're happier, the whole thing.

Do you still enjoy playing as much as you did when you first began your career?

I am playing better than I've ever played in my life, and I can't understand that. I'll be 85 my next birthday, but I play better than I did when I was 20. I've got a lousy knee that I got playing basketball in high school, but outside of that I'm in great health, and I feel great, so I'm playing up a storm!

You've performed practically everywhere imaginable, from Carnegie Hall to the White House to Vegas casinos. What's been your favorite?

So many musicians will tell me, "I think Milwaukee is lousy, I was there last month and I hated it." What they're usually trying to say is they were bad that night. No matter where I am, if I'm in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and I play a great concert—I love Cedar Rapids, Iowa! But if I louse up...

You are a frequent guest on the "Hour of Power" TV show with Dr. Robert Schuller. How did that relationship develop?

Duke Ellington was playing a concert at the Crystal Cathedral. He got sick and asked me to substitute for him, so I went in to play. My manager forgot to bring the music for the orchestra, so I asked the musicians to make a few requests. Someone asked for "Jesus Loves Me," so for almost an hour I improvised in the style of all the composers. Schuller came up afterwards and just flipped out, saying he'd never heard anything like that in his life, and asked me to be on his program. I told him I don't charge for these religious things that I play—I just come in and try and thank God for the gift that he gave me. So he said, "Would you like to testify?" I said I don't know, because I believe in so many religions and have so much respect for so many religions. So he said, "I'll tell you what. You pray through your fingers." I said, "If that's good enough for you, that's good enough for me!" I have played with him now for over 30 years, whenever I'm in town. And of course we have a union orchestra out there, but I just don't charge.

I heard that to get you to practice piano as a child, your mother had to bribe you with milk and cookies.

She always had a plate of cookies and a pitcher of milk on the piano when I got home from school, and I practiced until the cookies ran out. Music always came so easy for me. I never really had to worry about it, so I didn't like to practice.

You used to aggravate piano teachers because you could play back exactly what they played to you.

All along the way I had trouble. Even in the university, the heads of the department were very jealous. This is something that we have to face in life. You have to pay for the things that you get in life. I was given a gift. I know about 10,000 different songs. I can read music, but I just don't fool with it. And I can play them in any key. But I'm a lousy golfer.

Is it true you were expelled from Drake University for playing "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"?

For my girlfriend, yes. In those days Drake had a policy of the three B's: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. My girlfriend came in the practice room one day and asked if I knew that song, and just then the head of the department came in, screaming, "We don't do that here!" As Truman would say, "warehouse music."

I understand in high school you wanted to be a boxer.

My father was a former boxer. Have you ever heard of a PK? It's a preacher's kid. And the combination of preacher's kid and musician spelled sissy in school. So my dad put a pair of gloves on me! And when I got in the Navy, I won the championship. I broke my nose two different times boxing, so I stopped.

What led you to a career in music?

When I was a kid, my father had the largest Lutheran church in the country. People would buy their kids trumpets and violins and everything else, and the kids would get tired of playing them after a couple of years and they'd donate them to the church. So we had all those instruments there and I just played anything that came in, by the time I was 12, I played about 13 different instruments. I play anything. I just love music.

What drew you to the piano?

It was a process of elimination, really. I really felt closer to the piano than anything else. We all gotta do what we feel. That's why I hate to make rules for anyone in life, because we're all so different mentally, chemically, religiously—how dare we tell the other guy he has to be that way! Live and let live. I believe in Darwin, I believe in evolution. I think that basically we're all animals, and I think that when we try and rise above the animal, that's when we become truly men and women.

In 2005, Steinway & Sons created the Roger Williams Limited Edition Gold Piano, the first piano ever named

for an artist in the company's 153-year history.

They made a gold Steinway for me, and it's just beautiful. They've never done that for an artist before, and I was the first one to receive the Steinway Lifetime Achievement Award, too. Steinway's been awfully good to me.

That sounds like every pianist's dream come true.

Well, it certainly was mine.

When did you join the musicians union?

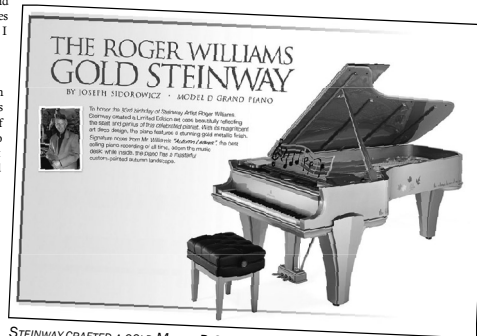
I was 11. My dad took me and said, you're playing on the radio now, it's time to join the union. And I did, and I've been a union member ever since. That was in Des Moines, Iowa.

How important do you think it is for young musicians to join the union?

We have to have somebody standing up for us. We do. And we have to establish a base. I always pay my musicians over scale. But if you don't have anything to go by... I strongly believe in the union. Except when I don't.

What's your advice to budding musicians just getting started in the business?

It's the kind of advice that they probably wouldn't take because they've heard it from the beginning: Work your butt off. I'm the luckiest guy in the world, and I mean that. That doesn't mean my knee doesn't hurt. But compared to much, I'm a very fortunate man.



STEINWAY CRAFTED A GOLD MODEL D GRAND for Roger Williams in honor of the famed pianist in 2005. Adorning the music desk are the signature notes from Williams' "Autumn Leaves," the best-selling piano recording of all time, and the interior features a custom-painted autumn landscape in honor of the song.