

RUDY CIPOLLA INTERVIEW

Bob Bruen

It was in the Fall of 1971 that I was first introduced to the world of Rudy Cipolla. At the time I was seeking a mandolin teacher and Rudy's name was given me by the man from whom I bought my first mandolin. I called, made an appointment, and soon found myself walking into the "Book Nook" in San Francisco, where Rudy hangs out. Immediately I was plunged into a maelstrom of candy, comics, and cigarettes, at the center of which stood the maestro himself.

The whole place looked as though it had fallen out of an airplane with Rudy as the sole survivor. Short, bald, weak of sight and ear, he painted a picture quite opposite from that which I expected. However, after an evening of his music I was totally won over and since have come to greatly admire this unique musician and protagonist of the mandolin.

It is interesting to note that he spent his professional career as a mando-cello player. It was not until a few years after he stopped performing that he began to play and compose with the mandolin as his main focus.

Rudy's compositions span a large number of contexts, from trios and small ensemble pieces up to chamber works and even an orchestral work. Most of his music has been performed in a fairly loose context and with the exception of some music that was used for the movie "Capone", none has been recorded for posterity.

All of Rudy's music is deeply emotive and reflective of his great love of life. Indeed, after an evening of his music, one feels an incredible warmth and serenity that can only come from the kind of life experience Rudy has had and his conviction about his music as a personal expression.

Rudy resides in San Francisco on Judah Street where he tends his store and composes during the working hours. Currently plans are in the works to record his compositions with a small ensemble consisting of two mandolins, two mandolas, two violins, mandocello, bass and accordian.

The following interview took place in Rudy's store on June the first, 1976.

MW: How did you become interested in playing the mandolin?

RUDY: There was no particular reason except the mandolin was there, and my father played it. He was a barber and a tailor who played both mandolin and guitar. He had customers who played it, and I simply one day must have picked it up. I can't remember except that I was 9 at the time. Until I was 15 I played by ear. I played a lot of polkas and mazurkas and tarantellas and things like that. I played for dances at farmhouses and different places and we used to serenade people under windows.

MW: Did you ever take lessons?

RUDY: No, no one really taught me how. I just picked it up by myself by ear. How well I did I can't remember. How badly I did I can't remember although I didn't read until much later.

MW: Where were you living during this period?

RUDY: Portland, Oregon. I had originally come from Italy at the age of 8. I was helping my father with his barber shop and later on my father hired a barber who played by manuscript and it was he who suggested that I buy an instruction book, which I did, and I started learning from that.



MW: At what point did you start composing original music?

RUDY: I composed my first number when I was fifteen and thinking I had a real world-beater, I sent it to a publisher, of course it was returned. (Laughter) At that time Jacobs the publishing house was doing a lot of printing and publishing for mandolin orchestras and because I had written it for the mandolin, I thought it would be accepted. It was not, so I immediately lost interest and didn't compose again until I was twenty-eight. I did a little Spanish march and then I did one or two things in 1935 ... that was when I was with NBC radio. I had joined NBC in 1931.

Previous to that, a group (myself and two schoolboys) had joined (The "Argentine Trio") and we played radio stations and played eleven weeks in the theater. They had lobby entertainment in those days and we played there and then were sent to Seattle and played six weeks and by that time the idea of lobby entertainment was discontinued and when we came down here on our own (S.F.) why, there was nothing but radio stations, but we played for Meredith Wilson right off, and he liked us.

What we played, we played very well. I played the mandocello, my friend played the mandolin, and his cousin played the guitar. Then we went to NBC and were hired there. We played on a large program that was sponsored by Packard Co. and then our guitarist left and we got another guitar player who sort of ruined our chances -- because at one time we had a program that was outlined so well that there was a little story built around our music, and because we were specializing in Spanish music (not really Latin American music, because L.A. music hadn't really come in yet) the program director had asked us to say 'olé' at the end of the program, which we did, and this guitar player shouted 'whooppee!' for no reason at all he said 'whooppee' and the director looked at us as though to say, 'what a bunch of crazy loons! I spend hundreds of minutes writing a story around the music and this guy spoils the whole thing that I had imagined.' So we played one more program without any story around our music and then we got so disappointed that both my friend and I gave up and I went working around selling Maytag washing machines (laughter) and I wasn't doing well, but I made an acquaintance of a man in Portland who had a bar on North Beach. He said his brother was opening up a speakeasy and he said I could work there.

MW: When was this?

RUDY: That was around 1930.

MW: What about your composing?

RUDY: The composing was evidently a potential at a very early age. The only thing is, I didn't think of developing it as I didn't have enough knowledge about harmony to evolve anything until later on around the 1960's, when I became a great deal more proficient in writing, and suddenly I became quite prolific, so that now all I had to do was sit down and start writing, almost like writing a story or a book. It's just a question of making up my mind, and I decide what type of piece I want to write -- and I write it.

MW: What styles have you become familiar with?

RUDY: When I first started writing, I wrote Latin American music, because by 1935 L.A. Music had become very popular. I met Cugat in a speakeasy. At the time I didn't know who he was.

The things that I wrote included a tango, a march and two gypsy numbers that were both played on NBC. I did a lot of arranging. I was so busy doing arranging and copy work so I really had no time to develop my talents regarding composing. Since then I've learned a great deal about harmony that I didn't know when I first started, 'cause I'm self-taught in everything. I never went to school for anything, although I'm sorry now that I didn't for I would have gotten farther ahead.

MW: Why did you play Spanish music?

RUDY: The reason we played Spanish music was because we felt the mandolin was originally a Spanish instrument and the Spanish music would sound good on the instrument. Of course we had a little repertoire of Spanish music that was available at the music store. Italian music was available also, but we felt the Spanish music was more



Photos: Phillips

commercial. We played a station called KOIN in Portland, Oregon that had opened up and we played as many as six paid programs a day for ten weeks, and we had to play so much music that the station manager said that we were caught with our pants down because we had so very little music we could play in that idiom. But we did our best and I started writing. We gave out tickets to a theater to help promote our music. I had approached the manager of this theater before and told him about us and a contest we were having on the air so he gave us ten dollars worth of tickets for a prize. Later, we auditioned for the place, and ended up there eleven weeks.

MW: How long was it possible to make good money playing the mandolin?

RUDY: During the time we were with NBC (8 years) we averaged \$35.00 a week, which in those days was considered darn good money.

MW: What about when you weren't playing for a living? What kinds of occupations did you fill?

RUDY: I started out as a barber and tailor. I worked for a butcher, in a sawmill, worked on railroads, I worked as a messenger boy with a bicycle and I sold washing machines. I thought I was a writer and I wrote for two years. In the meanwhile I was raising chickens and rabbits and killing them every so often for food, which broke my heart, because they were pets.

MW: So do you think the candy store is a viable alternative to making a living playing the mandolin? (laughter)

RUDY: I got into the store because my brother came here and he had no place to live and so he looked in the papers one day and he found this store advertised with an apartment in the back. He had just gotten married so we made our home here (1941) and as far as making money goes, we didn't think of it. It wasn't a place to make money, just a place to live and make friends and establish a way of life. I never have made money in 31 years. I'm in debt actually. The store just gave me a lot of time to experiment while waiting for customers.

MW: What about mandolin technique?

RUDY: I think the picking is very important. I have a feeling that there are three ways of holding the pick and each one is important. It's just a matter of choosing which one you can do the best with, and how you hold your wrist is a matter of choice. N w, Wakefield holds his hand downwards, and I hold mine almost opposite. David Grisman and many others have a flat pick and a rather loose wrist in playing.

MW: You use your whole arm then?

RUDY: Yes. The question of whether you should adopt one way or the other is up to the individual player. If he gets results from his style he should employ that. Otherwise he should experiment. Because I played with a flat pick for 51 years until about 1959, and suddenly I changed my style. And I find it very important now as my technique is better and my tone louder. I can come up with an upstroke almost as loud as I can with a downstroke because of striking the strings with the edge of the pick rather than the flat.

MW: Rudy, as a final question, what advice would you give to aspiring mandolin players?

RUDY: If someone wants to learn to play the mandolin he should find someone who has already learned and get pointers on technique and of course, he should learn to read. He should do it through people who are experienced in the style he wants to learn. Now, if you come to me, you can learn to read and you can play practically any music because if you learn to read and can find music in the style you want, you can learn that style.