

JAMES COBERLY SMITH & SEVERIN BROWNE

By PAUL ZOLLO

James Coberly Smith and Severin Browne are superb solo musicians. But when they team up, something magical happens. It's because they passionately love the inspirational songs they write and play. They're both gifted songwriters, singers and guitarists, and when they unite, as they do almost every week, their jubilant music is phenomenal.

Both of them play a multitude of instruments. James Coberly Smith, a native of Racine, Wisconsin, began his musical adventures playing the ukulele, which he still reveres. From there he graduated to banjo and guitar.

To this day, he loves all of these instruments. "When you get a good banjo, and someone is playing it well," he said over lemonade during a recent joint interview on a sun-drenched Angeleno afternoon, "the sound is so loud and so great."

Smith began writing songs on his uke in the 6th grade. The first one was "Your Mama Wears Combat Boots to Church," a funny lyric that set the stage for the kind of songs he writes now. When this was pointed out to him, he laughed and said, "Yeah, I found my niche early!" Now distinguished by his great 12-string slide playing, he said he was inspired listening to **Leo Kottke** records in college. "Only thing was that Leo Kottke finger-picked when he played slide," he said, "and I ended up flat-picking, which was different, but it was good, as it gave me my own style."

He moved to L.A. in 1977, and brought his tape to Geffen and other producers and record companies. One producer was impressed by his work and invited him to stay in L.A. He then invited his friend **John Bossman** to move here from the Midwest. They formed the duo of Bossman & Smith, and played around town frequently.

Severin Browne was born in Frankfurt, Germany. He moved back to L.A. at the age of two to live in a house built by his grandfather, where his father was raised and where Browne still lives. Browne's brother Jackson is also a famous songwriter, and there are also two sisters, Gracie and Roberta, both of whom play instruments. Every member of the family was musical, especially his father, a jazz pianist who also played guitar and other instruments. "I used to take my dad's guitar," Severin recalled with a smile, "and I used to play it and jump around to **Elvis Presley** records." That guitar was a nylon-string model strung with steel strings, which severely bowed the neck, forcing the youngster to develop a muscular left hand to form chords.

His other musical influence at the time, surprisingly, was **Myron Florin**, accordionist for the Lawrence Welk show. Severin initially chose the accordion as his primary instrument. His father was less than thrilled with his son's choice of the accordion, as he preferred jazz instruments. But Severin was soon drawn to both guitar and piano, and mastered sophisticated jazz chords (which figure powerfully into his music to this day) learned from his father. At age 16, he lived in Japan with his dad and began writing his own songs. "I was already into the jazz chords then," he said. "I was very influenced by the jazz that my father always played."

He returned to L.A. from Japan and continued writing songs. At the age of 21, Browne went to Motown, and was hired as a staff writer. His good fortune flabbergasted him, as he recalled: "I said, 'What? You're going to pay me money just to write songs?' And they said 'yes!'" He teamed up with many Motown songwriters and wrote a ballad that was cut by Thelma Houston. He stayed at Motown for four years and recorded two albums in 1973 and 1974. To promote them, he went on the road, opening solo for such luminaries as Kenny Rankin and John Hartford.

When Severin's stint with Motown ended, he worked as a singing waiter for a spell in L.A. and also played solo around town. He and James met up at a coffee house called the White House on Pico. "I remember hearing Severin for the first time," James recalled. "And he had *such* an easy, great groove, that I wanted to play with him right away. It was a pretty jazzy song he was playing." This was 1978.

"I had been playing with Bossman," James said, "and we made a single in '78, which actually made the charts. Severin and I kept seeing each other at various clubs, like the Ala Carte on Highland in Hollywood, and at Yesterdays in Westwood." Years went by, and they exchanged tapes as Severin moved to Louisiana. "And I loved that tape," Severin said.

Severin eventually drifted back to L.A. He and James first officially teamed up in 1990, informally rehearsed a few times, and developed their style of backing each other up, and switching off songs. The first time they played was an hour-long gig at an outdoor community festival in a Northridge park. They continued to do solo gigs as well, but nothing was ever quite as musically magical as when they teamed up together, to add guitar and vocal harmonies to each other's songs. They have been playing together, and musically supporting each other, ever since.

These days the best place to hear Severin and James perform great originals is Kulak's Woodshed on Laurel Canyon in North Hollywood, where they perform the first Friday of every month. Kulak's is an enjoyable, comfortable and amiable listening room. They also play other venues and festivals around the L.A. area, such as Bean Town in Sierra Madre, Backstage at the Coffee Gallery in Altadena, and

assorted house concerts. Smith says, "house concerts are great, I love them."

But Kulak's remains the favorite. Smith says, "Kulak's is a special place for us to play. We play a set first, and then we bring in guests to play. We get a good crowd there, and the great thing about Kulak's is people come there not to talk and socialize, but to listen to the music. And there's an ongoing webcast there, so people around the world can watch us. They even email us during the shows — we've gotten ones from as far afield as Australia."

A Smith-Browne gig usually includes their greatest hits, such as Smith's hilarious and spirited *Flypaper Highway*, Browne's soulful *My Love Mo' Better*, the very funny and rocking *Angelyne*, and the poignant ballad *Leaving You*. But they also throw in old and new songs that no one knows, so that each show they play is a new experience. "People who

come to see us a lot want to hear our standards," said Smith, "but they also like us to mix it up and play some new stuff. And so we do. No show we do is ever the same."

Smith & Browne are maintaining the tradition of performing duos, such as the Everly Brothers and Simon & Garfunkel. The difference is that Smith & Browne are both still solo artists, with their own solo CDs out, available at their gigs and at CDBaby.com. You can contact the duo at www.SeverinBrowne.com, where you can be added to the list of those lucky folks who get notified of every gig they play.

If you've never seen them and are hungering for some good music, check them out at Kulak's on a first Friday, or at one of the other venues around town where they appear. You'll be glad you did.

Paul Zollo is a singer-songwriter, and the author of Songwriters On Songwriting, 4th Expanded Edition. His CD, Orange Avenue, features a duet with Art Garfunkel, and is available at CDBaby.Com.



PHOTO BY BOB STANE

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