

OUTER BANKS WRITING



by Jerry Leath Mills

One fine afternoon in May of 1984, Bland Simpson and I drove through the Orange County countryside on some now-forgotten errand. If the truth be known, there may have been a cold beer or two involved, but memory fails me now on that issue, too. Anyway, the conversation was about one of Bland's projects, then in a very early stage, for a musical production centered on the Carolina coast with its attendant lore and "beach culture," a culture of fishing, music, shag dancing, and any number of serio-comic situations associated with that long and endlessly fascinating chain of boardwalks and gleaming strands between Kill Devil Hills and Myrtle Beach. The germ of the idea had come, Bland related, in a phone call from Ron Perkinson, a Sanford, North Carolina attorney and sometime stand-up comedian, an admiring friend of what was then probably the premier beach music band in the Southeast, The Embers. Perkinson had seen a television pilot of the review *Pump Boys & Dinettes* by Bland's longtime buddy Jim Wann. Bland and Jim had collaborated earlier, with resounding success, on the musicals *Diamond Studs* and *Hot Grog*, and Perkinson was convinced that the two were exactly the right combination to write a show for The Embers.

As it turned out, The Embers were too solidly booked on a six-night weekly performance schedule to undertake rehearsal time needed to develop an original dramatic production; but by the point at which that became clear Bland and Jim already had several songs written and a portfolio of musical ideas under consideration, so they decided to go ahead with the project on their own. Having originally considered doing the show with the University of North Carolina Playmakers Repertory Company in a "book musical" format, with a plot involving a radio station trying to stay on the air during a massive hurricane, they had finally come back to what Bland calls "an episodic reviewsical" in "loosejointed" style with a minimalist story line and a lot of songs. In what I considered a moment of either madness or blind trust, they invited me to contribute some song lyrics and bits of narrative, and by mid-April of 1984 I'd talked some anecdotes into a tape recorder and submitted the words to a doleful ditty titled "Ain't that Something?" chronicling a number of unpleasant things that could – and not infrequently did – go wrong on an offshore fishing trip. To my amazement as we drove along, "Ain't That Something?" began to issue from the tape deck of Bland's car, set nicely to music by Simpson and Wann. Wow, I thought, these boys work fast.

Working around Bland's teaching schedule at UNC and Jim's attention to the productions and tours following the 1982-83 Broadway run of *Pump Boys & Dinettes*, the two managed to get together fairly frequently both in Chapel Hill and at coastal locations such as Bland's grandmother's 1930s-era cottage on the beach in Dare County. Very soon it was apparent that a third musician was needed to form the combination they eventually billed as the Coastal Cohorts, and it took no time at all to conclude that the obvious person was Don Dixon, multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and arranger, co-founder of the band Arrogance and producer for many other artists, including R.E.M. and Marshall Crenshaw. Dixon, an old friend of Bland and Jim, was a native of the coast and very much to the manor born, equipped not only with musical talent but with extensive personal experience of teenage beach shenanigans, more song and narrative ideas, and inspired technical and dramatic suggestions such as Bland's use of a belt draped over a microphone in a simulation of shag dancing without a partner. Dixon agreed readily to become a Coastal Cohort after hearing from Bland the conditions of membership: "Your job is to steal the show."

Near the end of 1985 the three-man show *King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running: Songs and Stories of the Carolina Coast* was ready to go, hitting the boards for the first time December 8-12 in Rhythm Alley, a club on West Rosemary Street in Chapel Hill, replete with a set impressionistically put together with items dug out of Bland's yard and storage area – a couple of boat paddles, a wire crab trap, rods and reels and a duck decoy or two. Special stage effects included – and still include, as the production continues – a most unusual Bingo game at intermission, with plastic fishing worms flung to the audience as consolation prizes for pretended failure of the system to locate an undisputed winner.

Later, in 1986, more spectacular one-time effects were added to an outdoor production in Fayetteville, North Carolina, with a Special Forces rappelling team obligingly bearing an eerie light across a trestle over the Cape Fear River during performance of the "Maco Light" number. In Manhattan in 1994 a most unintended bit of drama may have drummed up interest from passers-by as props were being unloaded for a show at the West Bank Downstairs Theatre on 42nd Street, though it caused considerable anxiety to the Cohorts when it occurred. On that occasion a minor melee had just erupted in the street over an incident involving a broken auto window. As the struggle spilled over, a couple of the combatants attempted to arm themselves with the boat paddles then lying on the sidewalk, an escalation thwarted by Bland and a Chapel Hill friend, David Robert, who managed to stand on the intended weaponry until the action moved along.



Bingo machine at full throttle (machine created by Scott McLean); left to right, Wann, Dixon, Simpson

With such rare exceptions, *King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running* has held closely to its original format as it has continued to delight audiences in many venues, on Public Television as well as on stage and with all its music available on tape and compact disc. Its availability for production by other Cohorts than the original three, through arrangement with the publishers Samuel French, Inc., coupled with the willingness of Bland, Jim, and Don to stage revivals of their own with a satisfying frequency, seems certain to keep the blues on the run for a long time to come. Asked what pleases him most about his experience with the show, Bland responds,

How gratifying the little "fish show" (Dixon's moniker for it) has been over two decades. We never could have foreseen the affection Carolinians have shown for it, people telling us about "always putting on the tape" (or, now, the CD) in the car when the family heads for the coast, about keeping a copy on the boat, etc., saving as souvenirs the plastic worms we throw at the shows. And I run into folks all the time, sometimes in gas stations along Highway 70, who say, "Hey, aren't you one of those blues-are-runnin' guys?" There's a lot of good marsh-mud all over the show, and it feels good just to think about it.

For more information, see the various links from www.redclayramblers.com.

What follows is, of course, the title song by Bland and Jim, the opening and close of every show.

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King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running

by Bland Simpson and Jim Warr

(from the musical King Mackerel & The Blues Are Running: Songs & Stories of the Carolina Coast by Simpson & Warr, with Don Dixon and J. L. Mills)



Slow, in 1

BLAND:

G Em C G

Tide rolls in, tide rolls out,

5 *G Em C G*

Sum - mer - time is just a - bout gone.

9 *C Am G D7*

All that's left to think a - bout, is the

13 *C D G C G*

fish in' com - in' on.

17 *G Em C G*

JIM: Who's got the la - test in - for - ma - tion?

BLAND:

21 *G Em C G D*

Coast Guard or chart - er boat crews?

25 *C* *G* *B7*
 DON: Could be the kid down at the fil - ling

28 *Em* *Am* *D7* *G* *C*
 sta - tion - say - ing "Bud -dy have you heard the news?"

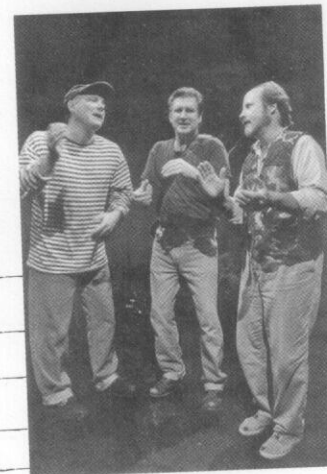
32 *G* *Slower* *A* *D* *C*
 JIM: Hey, bud -dy have you heard the news?"
 BLAND:

35 *G* *medium tempo* *D* *Em*
 King Mack - erel and the Blues are Run -ning, all a - long the coast,

38 *C* *D* *Em* *C*
 Talk a - bout fish ing, you can't give the fish

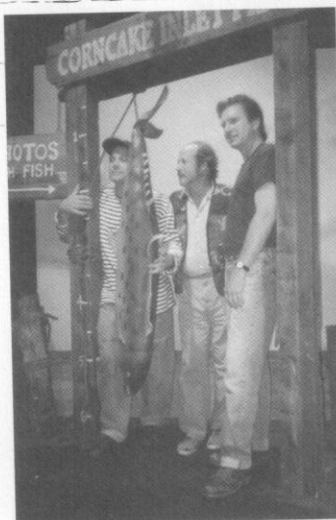
41 *D* *D7* *G*
 a - way, ev - ery bod - y's luck -y. Oc - to - ber and the

44 *D* *Em* *C*
 moon is com - ing but the clouds won't give up the ghost, Ah,



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47 *Am* *D7* *G*

let the good weather hold one more day.

51 *Am7* *D7* *Am7* *D7*

(Spoken rapidly, as radio weathercasters do:)

BLAND: Winds are currently from the Northeast at ten to fifteen knots—Coast Guard has lifted yesterday's small craft warnings from Cape Henry to Cape Fear—

55 *Am7* *D7* *C / G/B Am7 G / C/G G*

Seas are running one to two feet above normal, though, so stay tuned to the weather channel.

59 *Am7* *D7* *Am7* *D7*

Ocean temperature off Hatteras, Ocracoke and Core Banks is sixty-two degrees—Air temperature probably won't break a high of sixty—

63 *Am7* *D7* *C* *D7*

But it's a beautiful day all along the Outer Banks, and all reports are: The fishing is EXCELLENT!

67 *G* *D* *Em*

DON: King Mack-erel and the Blues are Run-ning, all a-long the coast.

JIM: King Mack-erel and the Blues are Run-ning, all a-long the coast.

BLAND:

70 *C* *D* *Em* *C*

You can't give the fish

Talk a-bout fish-in', You can't give the fish

73 **D** **D7** **G**

a - way, Oc - to - ber and the
 a - way, ev - ery bod - y's luck - y. Oc - to - ber and the

76 **D** **Em** **C**

moon is com - ing but the clouds won't give up the ghost,
 moon is com - ing but the clouds won't give up the ghost, Ah,

79 **Am7** **D7** **G**

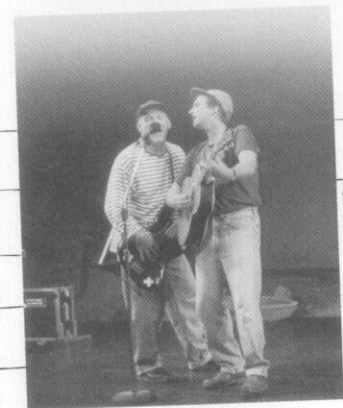
let the good wea - ther hold — one more day —

83 **Am7** **D7** **Am7**

Ah — Ah —
 Wake up we're mov - ing out, Four wheel drive - 'll take

86 **D7** **Am7** **D7**

Ah —
 us where we're going, yeah. If it don't we're mis - sing out, you want to



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Photograph by Joan Marcus

89 *C* *G* *Am7*

Ah

be there be - fore dawn. But when the sun

92 *D7* *Am7* *D7*

is fi - nally set - ting, and there's sand in ev - ery bod - y's shoes, yeah,

95 *Am7* *D7* *C*

Coo - ler full of fish there ain't no - bod - y fret - tin', no, it's, "Hey bud - dy have you

98 *D7* *G* *D*

King Mack - erel and the Blues Are Run - ning,

heard the news?" King Mack - erel and the Blues Are Run - ning,

101 *Em* *C* *D* *Em*

All a-long the coast. you
All a-long the coast. Talk a-bout fish-in', you

104 *C* *D* *D7*

can't give the fish a-way,
can't give the fish a-way, Ev-ery bod-y's luck-y.

107 *G* *D* *Em*

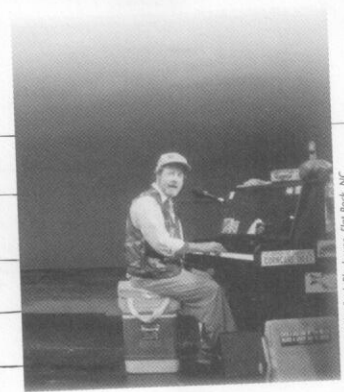
Oc-to-ber and the moon is com-ing but the clouds won't give up the ghost.
Oc-to-ber and the moon is com-ing but the clouds won't give up the ghost.

110 *Am7* *D7*

Ah, let the good wea-ther hold one more day.

113 *G* *Am7*

Let the good weath-er hold,
Let the good



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116 *D7* *Am7* *D7*

Let it hold, _____ Let it hold

Let the good, good, wea - ther hold, _____

wea - ther hold, _____ let the good wea - ther hold, _____

119 *Am7* *Bm* *C*

hold

hold

Let the good wea - ther hold

122 *G* *C G D G*

one more day.

one more day.

one more day.

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