



Guitarists Crook and Bruce  
Quit Flying Solo for Awhile

# Doubling Up

20 TULSA WORLD OCTOBER 10, 1997

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Tom Gilbert, top, and Stephen Pingry/Tulsa World

Two longtime Tulsa guitarists have teamed with new singers: Tommy Crook with Kathy Wolfe and, top, Buddy Bruce with Jennifer Miller.

Once a year, two of Tulsa's best guitarists get together to do a show celebrating their February birthdays. "We've known each other since at least 1970 – probably before that," says Buddy Bruce (former West Coast studio musician, who played rhythm guitar on the hit instrumental "Tequila" 40 years ago), referring to his friend Tommy Crook (whom Chet Atkins, during a "Tonight Show" appearance, allegedly called "the greatest guitar player in the world").

And while their careers haven't followed the same pathway, with Bruce preferring to play in groups like his long-lived VIPs, and Crook more inclined to play as a single, they do have one thing in common these days: both are performing regular gigs with a young female singers.

"Well," says Crook with a chuckle, "for years, female singers have been where it's at around here. If you're trying to play Tulsa without a female singer, you might as well be trying to play for a weekend without doing a Bob Wills tune."

Crook recently settled into a Friday night job at the Smokehouse Barbecue in Sand Springs, playing in a newly built showroom off the main dining room. His vocalist is Kathy Wolfe, an alto somewhat reminiscent of Karen Carpenter who shows an affinity for swing and blues as well as country music. She comes by it naturally: Her father is Western Swing Hall of Fame piano player Jerry Emery, and her mother is a singer as well. The last time her parents headed to West Coast to visit some of their musical friends, Kathy went along as well.

"My mom and dad know a lot of people in the Western Swing Society out there, and when they had a jam session, I got to sing with them," she recalls. "My dad was just trying to get me to meet all those different musicians; he'd never heard me sing that kind of music before. And when he heard me, he said, 'Whoa. I didn't know you could do that.'"

Mostly, he'd heard his daughter at the Cathedral of Praise in Sand Springs, where she'd been singing for years. But it takes a special person to be able to sing both "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and "Take Me Back to Tulsa" with equal effectiveness. Kathy realized she could do it, and, as she says, "I thought it'd be fun to do some part-time work in music, and start singing outside the church."

Over the next couple of years, she played a few jobs with her dad, who also introduced her to several other musicians – including Crook.

"I've known Jerry since I was just a kid, back in '55, when we were doing hillbilly shows down at the Rialto Theater," says Crook. "Kathy called me and asked if she could come sing with me, and she came down to St. Michael's Alley, where I play on Saturdays. She just had a wonderful batch of tunes."

They struck a deal: If Kathy found a job for the two of them, Tommy'd play it. As it turned out, she came by Smokehouse Barbecue one day, where owner Jim Flemings was putting in his showroom.

"I told him what I'd be interested in doing, and told him about Tommy," remembers Wolfe. "He knew about Tommy, of course, and said he'd even been thinking about calling Tommy and hiring him here."

Together, they began their run at the Smokehouse – where, on a recent night, diners filed in with plates full of ribs and barbecue bologna, to be entertained by music ranging from Tommy's dazzling solo work on the Gershwins' "S Wonderful" to a version of "Cowboy's Sweetheart" that, with Wolfe's rich yodel-enriched vocal over Crook's jazz chords, seemed the very definition of "cowboy jazz."

The two play on Friday from 6 until 9:30 p.m. There's a \$2 charge for people who don't eat; otherwise, the show is free.

#### MY NEW BUDDY

Meanwhile, over at Grille 51, Jennifer Miller and Bruce spin out a repertoire heavy on jazz standards, spiced by Miller's programmed keyboard arrangements as well as Bruce's inventive fills and leads. Many of her homemade arrangements are both complex and inventive; her "Orange Colored Sky" features a layered musical bed that took her three and a half hours to program, and she's turned the pop tune "I Remember You" into a jazz samba.

"She's an excellent arranger," says Bruce. "She doesn't just go out and buy a tape. She programs it all, and some of the songs take four or five hours."

The two have been playing as a duo

for just a few weeks, but Bruce has been playing in Miller's band, the Shade, since July.

"What happened was that my keyboard player got up and left me high and dry two weeks before I was getting married," Miller says. "I had about a half-dozen jobs booked – two or three before I left for my honeymoon, and two or three after I got back. So I had to find either a guitarist or a keyboard player, and it was scramble-rama."

"I'd heard of Buddy, and I knew of Buddy, and what should've been a misfortune turned out to be what I think is very good fortune."

"When she first called me, I asked what the average age of her group was," recalls the 60ish Bruce with a smile. "She said they were all in their 20s, and so I had my doubts. I figured it would be some three-chord thing. But as luck would have it, she and I found out that we think along the same lines as far as chord structure, the tempo of the songs, the sound level, the quality."

Bruce played a job with the band at Shangri-La, and encored with her at the BOK/Williams Jazz on Greenwood festival a week later.

"And then the phones started ringing," recalls Bruce. "One of the calls was about this job."

It was Bruce's friend, keyboardist Ray Hamilton, who also plays at Grille 51. He told Bruce that a weekend gig was coming open at the venue, and asked if Bruce could come down and play it as a single.

"I said, 'I can, but I won't, because I like a little more excitement than me by myself,'" recalls Bruce. "I asked if he'd ever heard Jennifer, and he said, 'Oh, yes.' So we came down, and we've been here ever since."

Miller and Bruce, buttressed by Miller's programmed arrangements, play Friday and Saturday from 7 until 10:30 p.m., and they're likely to do anything from "Flashdance (What a Feeling)" to "Blame It on My Youth," with Miller's dynamic vocals running from a detached whisper to a throaty growl – sometimes in the same number. There's no cover charge.