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Rock 'N' Roll On the Wall

BY SILVO KARO

ROCK 'N' ROLL ON THE WALL. Silvo Karo. Translated by Gorazd Pipenbaher. Self-published, 2020. Paperback, 304 pages, €25.

I bumped into Silvo Karo and Mauro “Bubu” Bole on the streets of Huaraz, Peru, in 2000. Asked what they’d been up to, Silvo humbly replied, “Just a little climb in the Cordillera.” He and Bole had just done the first ascent of “little” Cruz del Sur, an 800-meter 5.12 on La Esfinge, a massive granite bubble in the Blanca. The comment was typical, I’d learn, of one of the world’s greatest alpine wall climbers. He was always humble, always downplaying.

In his new memoir, humility is the theme, Silvo is the master. It tells the story of a kid growing up in a tiny Slovenian village before the end of the Cold War, meeting like-minded souls, and of his approach to the very, very hard climbing that grabbed his attention: extreme walls.

In fact, the extreme nature of both the training and climbing in this book is quite mind-boggling. In the summer of 1982, visiting the United States, Silvo did an amped-up version of the standard Colorado-Wyoming-South Dakota tour with 172 routes climbed in “a little over a month.” These weren’t single-pitch sport routes. Many were multi-pitch routes on the Diamond, Hallett Peak—you get the point. In this book, the 1993 fifth ascent of Wyoming Sheep Ranch on El Capitan is little more than a footnote!

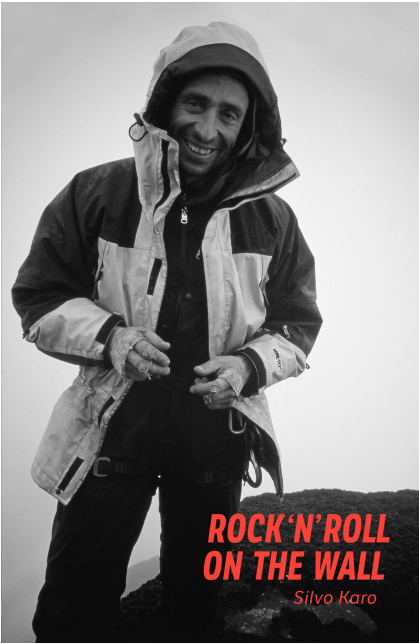
New route after new route in his beloved Julian Alps (many of them approached by cycling or running) are punctuated by climbing trips that seek out the most extreme terrain on Earth. Straight out of the gates in 1983 (at age 23), he climbed a new route on Fitz Roy, followed by more wild Patagonian routes, including two on Cerro Torre. His description of his and Janez Jeglic’s ascent of the 1,200-meter line up Cerro Torre’s south face is truly the stuff of nightmares. It’s terrifying but highly addictive reading for anyone who’s ever juggled frozen fixed lines on an alpine wall. It made me feel physically ill. Their ascent of the west face of Bhagirathi III in India, in 1990, is just as soul-throttling, but for Silvo it seems just another run-of-mill “madmen and masochists” outing.

Rock ‘n’ Roll isn’t just a memoir, it’s also a peek into that period of the 1980s and 1990s when Eastern Europeans were becoming some of the greatest high-altitude alpinists on Earth. While the Poles were banging out first winter ascents and new routes on the 8,000-meter peaks, other Easterners—particularly the Slovenians—were tearing up both big peaks and massive alpine walls, like the ones on Bhagirathi III and Torre Egger. In the tales of these climbs, the Slovenians are juggling torn and frozen ropes, dodging barrages of stones, and hanging in icy corners by their harnesses. You expect death at any second, but somehow Silvo and his wildly talented partners daintily dance between the bullets.

Yet what I loved most about this book is the unforced humility. Silvo took up climbing with his friends, got good, explored his local mountains, then just kept on going. And he looks back at it all as one great adventure, which is the best way to look back at any climbing life, including one of the most impressive the world has ever seen.

— Cameron M. Burns

Images



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