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Expression



Inspired

Brad Richter

Born in 1969, Brad Richter grew up in Enid, Oklahoma. He began teaching himself to play the guitar and compose at age twelve. At eighteen, having had no formal musical training, he was awarded the Presidential Scholarship to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago where he began performing, composing, and eventually teaching professionally. After completing his undergraduate degrees in performance and composition, Brad accepted a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London where he studied with guitarist Carlos Bonell. He became the first guitarist in the college's history to win the coveted Thomas Morherr Prize for voice accompaniment, and went on to win the Royal College of Music guitar competition before completing his Master's degree and returning to the U.S. to continue his concert career. In 2004 Brad won first place in the International Composer's Guild Competition. His original compositions draw from the rugged beauty of the American southwest as well as his experiences and inspiration from his world travels. He is fast becoming recognized as one of the most creative and important composers for the guitar today. When not touring, Brad lives with his wife and two boys in Tucson, Arizona, where he teaches at the University of Arizona.

by Bill Piburn

You were self-taught beginning at age twelve and by eighteen you were awarded a scholarship to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago – that's very impressive. Tell me about that journey and what music and musicians influenced you.

I was fascinated by guitars and guitarists for as long as I can remember. I tried for some time to talk my parents into buying me a guitar but they were reluctant. Maybe because, when I was eleven, I had played the trombone and quit without much success. It's just that I had shown up late on the day that they were handing out instruments for the sixth-grade band. Trombone was the only thing left and I had no real interest in playing that awkward contraption, no offense.

I eventually saved up enough money doing odd jobs to buy a \$40 guitar at a pawn shop. It was a Kalamazoo Strat copy with three strings. I spent the next several months learning riffs from friends that I could play on three strings. I moved pretty quickly into writing songs – very, very bad songs – but I thought they were destined to be hits. Early influences were the '70s electric guitar Gods – particularly Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, Randy Rhodes and Eddie Van Halen.

When I was sixteen, I went to see a Michael Hedges concert. We both grew up in Enid, Oklahoma and he had come back for a sort of homecoming concert. I was blown away. I dropped the electric guitar for acoustic almost immediately and emulated Michael. We met a few times and I gleaned what I could in those short encounters. My first real training came when my Mom took me to Chicago to have several days of lessons with Paul Henry at the Conservatory. I took that information and began practicing classical guitar very seriously for about two years, while simultaneously bouncing back and forth between L.A. and Chicago trying to make it as a singer/songwriter. When I came back to take some follow-up lessons with Paul, he encouraged me to audition for a scholarship to the conservatory. I decided to go for it. I won the presidential scholarship and threw myself totally into classical guitar for the next decade. I may have actually been aided at the audition by the fact that I had cut my hand quite badly the night before at my job as a dishwasher. The cut looked horrible but didn't affect my playing at all. I played as well as I ever had and I know I got bonus points from the judges who seemed to be thinking "just imagine what he could do if he wasn't injured!"

You went on to study at the world famous Royal College of Music in London. How did that happen and tell me about the experience of studying with Carlos Bonell

That's another series of events where I was aided by some good fortune. I met Carlos in the summer of '92 at the Guitar Festival of Great Britain. He was my ensemble teacher for an intense week. I was a very bad sight-reader (I had just begun to read a few years earlier) but luckily, he chose a piece for our group that I had just played and knew well. It made me look good. I pestered Carlos all week to let me play my first serious classical guitar composition, "Dance of the Harvest Fires," for him. One day I was playing in the hallway, feeling very warmed up and relaxed. He came by and said, "Let's hear that piece now." I played it very well – I didn't have time to get nervous – and he liked the composition.

Fast forward eight months: I had applied to the Royal College of Music for their Master's program. At that time there were seven students total in the program each year, so I knew the chances were slim. There was also no way I could have afforded to fly to London again to audition. Luckily they waived my audition because I'd played for Carlos (under very favorable circumstances). The admissions panel interview was by teleconference. It was going well enough when they happened to ask me if I knew anything about Nicola Culf, the last guitar student who had been in the program. They were very proud of her work. It just so happened that I had read her dissertation the night before it was published in *Classical Guitar Magazine* – the rest of the interview sailed by.

The Royal College of Music was very intimidating to me, at first. I definitely felt and was even told, on occasion, that I was not "Royal College of Music material." I had a couple of humiliating performances but, at the same time, I began to get amazing advice from the person I consider to be one of the most masterful teachers on the planet – Carlos. He changed my playing completely. I was practicing as much as eight hours a day and soaking up everything. Then I began to win the competitions at the Royal College of Music and to get noticed for my compositions. I improved more in that year and a half than in all my other years of playing combined.

Did you see any difference in the approach of music education in London



compared to the U.S.?

There was definitely a stronger emphasis on sight-reading and ensemble playing in the UK and throughout Europe than in the U.S. – not just at the RCM but amateur players, too. That influenced me quite strongly and I found myself gravitating more and more to playing in ensemble. The Royal Schools of Music grading system, a system adopted nationwide, is a system in which young students in the UK advance through a series of eight grade levels by passing playing and theory exams. We don't have an equivalent here. U.S. Colleges require minimum grade eight proficiency. I find the UK system too rigid myself but it does mean that the lowest common denominator at music colleges there is likely higher.

Did you live in a dorm situation or off-campus?

I lived off-campus. First with an amazing host family who treated me very well and introduced me to London in a way I otherwise would never have been. Later, I lived with my present wife Kerstin, in a flat in Putney (near Wimbledon). We lived in recently converted projects. We ended up getting scammed by a landlord who hadn't paid their mortgage in something like ten years. They convinced us to pay six months rent in advance for a discount on the rent and then left the country with our cash. The Sheriff showed up to evict us the night before a big exam. It made things interesting to say the least.

Tell me about life in London – did you perform outside of school?

I performed quite a bit outside the school but it was always on behalf of the RCM. I played in a few historic churches and halls in and around London as well as Cambridge and Oxford. I enjoyed getting to know the city and did what I could to spend time soaking up some of the other history and culture (both high and low).

You're an accomplished composer and player. How do you balance the demands of both?

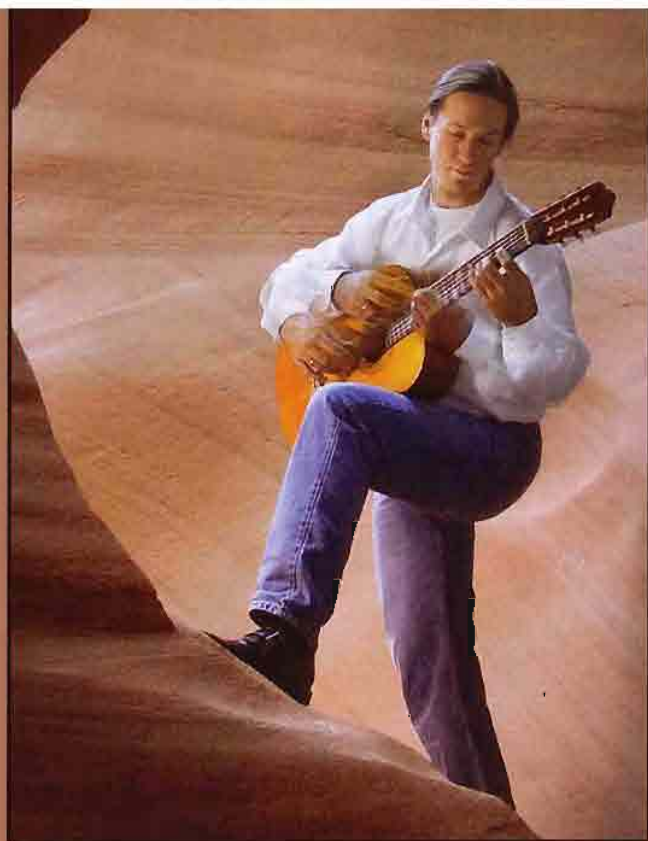
I find I practice because I have to and compose because I want to. I'm a composer at heart but it usually takes a back seat to practicing, especially September through May, during the busiest parts of my concert season. I live with my family in the summers and cut way back on the concert playing. Summers give me a chance to focus on composition for a couple of months. That's when I do my best work now.

Tell me about your duo with cellist Viktor Uzur.

Over the last year or two the duo has become the focal point of my practice and writing. Viktor and I met in '05 when I was commissioned by Weber State University to write a piece, "Navigating Lake Bonneville," for cello, guitar, soprano, choir, percussion and narrator. Viktor is the cello professor there and played the cello part in "Bonneville." Viktor and I hit it off immediately both musically and as friends. He is an amazing musician. As "Navigating Lake Bonneville" began to tour, I began to realize just what a monster player Vik is. We found ourselves writing and arranging duo music in our hotel rooms and then squeezing it into the larger ensemble concerts as we traveled. Before long, the duo became the center of those ensemble concerts. We have a blast working together and things seem to be taking off for us now.

I assume you compose and arrange for the duo. Tell me about the challenges and pleasures of pairing cello and guitar.

I've been writing for the cello for quite a while now. It has always been my second favorite instrument. In 2003 I was commissioned by David Finckel (cellist extraordinaire and director of Chamber Music at Lincoln Center) to write a cello guitar duo. The opportunity to work at that level



inspired me to dig a little deeper. I took some cello lessons and often tuned my bottom four strings like a cello to help me write parts that worked idiomatically.

As a duo, we operate differently. Even when I write a piece, Viktor will often write or drastically improve his cello part, but most often, we work as I imagine many bands do. We write and arrange together, bouncing ideas around and improvising until we start to move in a direction that works. We both have a history with, and a passion for, rock music. Viktor was the lead guitarist and songwriter for a rock band in Moscow when he was a student at the Moscow Conservatory in the early '90s and I worked as a singer/songwriter in Los Angeles in the late '80s. That, among other things, has led us to arrange and write music that combines classical, rock and world music in some interesting ways. We do classical/rock mash-ups. In our current favorite, we mash together the themes from *Superstition*, *Jungle Boogie* and *Leyenda*. I'm having more fun doing this than anything I've worked on. It's very rewarding.

Your foundation (called Lead Guitar) is very dear to you. Tell me about the mission statement and history.

Lead Guitar started with a guitar program I helped guide for the past eight or nine years on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. I worked there with some extremely talented high school students who had been identified as "at risk." A producer for PBS heard about the program and came to make a documentary centered on a camping/guitar retreat I was doing with about a dozen students. A philanthropist and entrepreneur, Marc Sandroff, eventually saw the pilot film and approached me about turning the guitar program in Page (Arizona) into a program for schools nationwide. We started Lead Guitar together in 2006. Its mission is to establish permanent guitar programs in schools that have a large population of at-risk students. Our goal is to positively impact drop-out rates and college attendance rates by giving students a reason to get excited about coming to school. There are a lot of statistics that support the facts that students who study music are more likely to graduate, go to college

and have a satisfying career than those who don't. Guitar tends to attract students that band, orchestra and choir classes don't. Once we have identified a school, I (and/or one of my assistants) provide teacher training in guitar pedagogy, student workshops, and private lessons. We organize an end-of-the-year student concert. We teach technique, music reading, and ensemble playing. These are the elements of music learning that best help establish discipline, connections with math, science and language and teamwork – the skills that they need to become successful students. We also organize guitars and music books and provide a two-year curriculum. At the end of two years, the schools and their teachers are ready to continue the program without us.

Stylistically how would you describe your writing?

I write in a few different styles I suppose. The writing I do for a project like "Navigating Lake Borneville" – with a large ensemble – tends to be more formal. I rely more on writing out the parts in detail as I'm going and I do a lot of re-writing and agonizing over details that, in the long run, may not be as critical as they seem at the time. Writing for solo guitar feels more natural. I usually have the guitar in my hands but occasionally, I do try to write without it, in order to get away from guitar patterns and clichés. I often compose and perform a solo piece without having written it down. I think, like every composer and arranger, that to some degree I'm stylistically just a filter of all the things I hear and particularly, the things I like. My music tends to be classical in form but uses a lot of ideas and themes drawn from folk, rock and world music. I like to write program music, music that describes something or tells a story. I've always been curious when it comes to exploring new sounds on the guitar especially if they help me tell that story. I try to be genuine to the music I hear in my imagination. I write music that I would like to listen to, and if I'm lucky, others will like listening to as well.

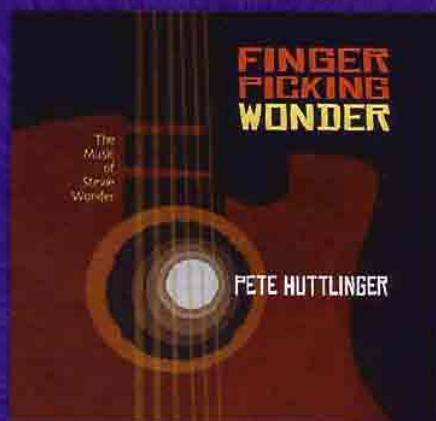
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Editors note: A PDF transcription and video of "Straelenor Wald" can be found on the enhanced CD.



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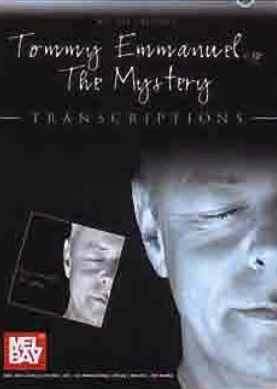
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