

The Making of a Musician

Matt Slotkin sampled rock and jazz before making his mark with classical guitar

By Dave Milano

They say that what goes around comes around, and what went around for the young Matt Slotkin was a home life unusually rich in music and culture.

“My father is a research scientist,” says Slotkin. “He also plays the harpsichord and clavichord, is an amateur folk and blues guitarist, and an avid classical music fan with a 3,000 CD collection...I’m one of the few kids in America

who grew up with a harpsichord in the living room.” It was perhaps inevitable then that Matt Slotkin’s life would turn toward music, but as things worked out music would mean more to him than mere pastime. He

would become a musical master of sorts, turning his academic and cultural roots into a Doctorate of Musical Arts, a busy performance career, and two university teaching positions.

A gifted classical guitarist, Slotkin is director of the guitar programs at Mansfield and Bloomsburg Universities, a teacher at the New York City Guitar School, and the guitar half of two unique musical duos: Dez Cordas, with bassist Craig Butterfield, and Duo Montagnard, with saxophonist Joseph Murphy.

In the demanding and highly competitive world of classical music, Slotkin has acquired a reputation for exceptional musicianship, and for being a ground-breaker, premiering numerous modern compositions. He has performed on four continents and been called “...one of the most well-rounded talents in the country” by Nicholas Goluses, a guitar professor at the Eastman School of Music. His guitar work has been variously described as “brilliant,” “exceptional,” and “elegant.”

Early on, Slotkin showed musical affinity, and at the age of four he was already beginning to play the piano. From there he made rapid advances in his classical music education. But boys will be boys, and before long the developing classical pianist came under the spell of other musical pursuits.

At ten he abruptly abandoned the piano for the electric guitar. Slotkin first began taking lessons from his father, then from a local music store owner. Soon he was playing in a garage rock band (mostly driven by a keenness for the music of rock icon Rush).

For Slotkin—for a while at least—rock ‘n roll was king. But it didn’t rule him for long.

“Rock didn’t cut it for me,” he says, “I needed something else.”

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So from garage rock, Slotkin moved on to jazz, playing in a high school ensemble. His studies there kept him happily immersed in music, but jazz, he discovered, was not perfectly suited to him either. In the end Slotkin realized that following his heart meant going back to his roots, and he turned his attentions back to classical music. Soon he was taking up the classical guitar.

His first classical guitar teacher, he said, was “brilliant and eccentric... [an] autodidact who understood more than usual about music theory and history, and incidentally, played the guitar upside down.”

Call him a non-traditional traditionalist.

Somewhere in the territory between traditional classical guitar and his teacher's unique expression of it, Slotkin found a comfortable fit, and he moved easily into studies at the Eastman School of Music.

“I was really happy to find an atmosphere at the university level conducive to seriousness about musical studies,” he says. Indeed, that is precisely what Slotkin now most enjoys from the other side of the classroom, as a professor of guitar and music at Mansfield and Bloomsburg Universities.

“I hold my students to a high standard,” he says, “and I enjoy their high level of achievement. It is very satisfying.”

But Slotkin is not exactly a traditionalist. In the mold of his father and his first classical guitar teacher, his musical proclivities are difficult to categorize. Call him a non-traditional traditionalist. Slotkin performs much classical music, but just as often he veers from the conventional into other musical territories. The repertoires from his two ensembles, Dez Cordas and Duo Montagnard, are—to say the least—

multifaceted. A single performance might include Bach, Béla Bartók, Chick Corea, and Appalachian folk tunes.

So between his university efforts to create a new generation of classically trained musicians, Slotkin fans the fires of creativity by embracing any number of musical styles, and by promoting and performing his own distinctive, entertaining, and always superb music.

Oh, and while Slotkin's youthful infatuation with the music of Rush has long since faded to distant memory, his partner Craig Butterfield remains a big fan... 🐝

What: Matthew Slotkin & Craig Butterfield in concert

Where: Alfred University in Alfred New York

When: Sept. 19 at 3 p.m.

Phone: 607-871-2175

Website: www.alfred.edu.

Dave Milano is a former suburbanite turned part-time Tioga County farmer. You can contact him at someplacelikehome@mountainhomemag.com.

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