

## **MARK O'CONNOR—BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES**

By Cathy DeWitt • All Rights Reserved • ©2006

Watching Mark O'Connor play the fiddle, one can't help thinking of the grasshopper and the ants. Towering over his musical companions on stage, hunched slightly over his instrument, his long legs stomping out the beat, he appears almost ready to leap into the audience as he attacks the fiddle with a vigorous stroke of the bow, his elbow flailing in a blur of frenzied motion.

But, unlike the mandibled musician of Aesop's fable, this fiddler is far from lazy. In fact, Mark's level of focus, his determination and his willingness to work incredibly hard (like the industrious ants) have become part of his legend. Add to this a rare combination of incredible virtuosity and insatiable curiosity and you may begin to understand his ability to leap across musical boundaries without leaving behind any preconceived notions of musical stereotypes, categories and stylistic limitations.

Even Mark's brilliant 30-year retrospective double CD, a mind-boggling sampling of his productivity and versatility released just a year ago, has already fallen behind, due to his continuing outpouring of new projects. From award-winning teenaged old-time fiddler to Stephane Grappelli guitar sideman, from Grammy award winning country instrumentalist to symphonic composer, O'Connor has taken a long and winding road to get to the point where he is now, according to many critics, the supreme improvising violinist of our time. The New York Times calls his "one of the most spectacular journeys in recent American music."

As his friend, fellow Grisman sideman (both as teenagers) and virtuoso instrumentalist Mike Marshall puts it, "The kind of drive that lives in someone like Mark is not possible to understand at this point...certainly not scientifically. Otherwise we would tap into it and insert it into many of us. This energy must simply be born in you. It comes from a secret place hidden deep inside. Like tremendous water pressure it must find its way out."

O'Connor credits his mother, who died when he was twenty, with making sure he was well-versed in music and the arts from an early age. Guitar was his first instrument, and his first musical training was classical. "I also took voice lessons and dancing," he says. "My mother wanted me to do all those things. She gave me a background in classical music, and she started taking me to festivals when I was very young. I owe everything, really, to her."

Although he won his first award in a classical guitar competition, taking the award across all age categories while he was just ten years old, Mark says it was when he finally got hold of a violin at age eleven that the world of music really took off for him. He had been inspired by listening to the great early recordings—the infectious beat of bluegrass, the haunting beauty of jazz and classical violin, the soulful blues of Vassar Clements on Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's "Circle" album. Watching Doug Kershaw, the first fiddler he saw on television, at age eight, he was "amazed that violin music could be so happy sounding." So, for years, "I was enamored with the emotional breadth of the instrument."

His first teacher, Barbara Lamb, was a teenager who played both classical and folk music, later becoming a popular player with several recordings of her own. She taught him classical technique, but she also led him to transplanted Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson, thus cementing his relationship with swing at an early age. Mark started studying the swinging style of Texas fiddling, taking lessons from Thomasson at his old fishing cabin near the border of Washington and Oregon. By age 14 he knew over 200 Texas fiddle tunes. But in Seattle, where he grew up, there was not a big live music scene at the time. “It actually took me coming down to the South, going to festivals and contests for me to get access to the kinds of music I listened to on records at home.

“My mother and I would find out what festivals were going on mostly from the magazines like *Bluegrass Unlimited* and *Pickin’...*” {magazines whose covers Mark has now graced on numerous occasions}. Once he started hitting the festival circuit, Mark began winning awards, and Rounder Records produced his debut album, “National Junior Fiddling Champion,” when he was 12 years old. By the time he graduated from high school, he had four albums out on Rounder.

One particularly memorable occasion for Mark was when he first met Vassar Clements and got to jam with him at the Old Time Pickin’ Parlor onstage in 1974. The meeting resulted in a lifelong friendship.

“It’s been a great experience knowing Mark,” says Vassar. “I’ve been knowin’ Mark since he was a kid, and now he’s become one of the best. His mother used to bring him around to where we were playing. Sometimes he couldn’t actually go in the place {if it was a bar} and I’d go meet him in the kitchen or wherever he could go. Later he moved to Nashville and we became great friends.

“He just goes out wherever he wants to—in any direction. That’s what I like about him. I think it does him good. All of music goes together... the more you learn you can put it into whatever you’re playing—jazz, bluegrass, swing or whatever.”

A pivotal experience for Mark was when, at age 13, he saw Stephane Grappelli perform live in Vancouver, Canada, at Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1975. “It was totally mesmerizing,” Mark says now. “It changed my world.” At the time, just getting Grappelli’s autograph seemed like a great connection. But four years later, Mark’s world changed even more when he auditioned to be the guitar player for Grappelli’s tour with the David Grisman Quintet, a job he acquired at age 17. Working as Grappelli’s guitarist allowed Mark to gain access to the reclusive violin virtuoso, which led to private lessons for him.

“The first day of rehearsal,” Mark recalled, ‘Stephane found out I played violin and made me play it for him. Then he said, ‘You and I, young Mark, will play two-violin to end the show each time.’ I couldn’t believe it—Just like that, I was playing twin violins with my violin hero--what an amazing opportunity!”

O'Connor's experience with Stephane gave him a new perspective on what a career in music could mean. Whereas Benny Thomasson kept his fiddle playing to a mostly weekend scene, holding down a regular job and being content to stay in one place, Stephane traveled all over the world with his music, drawing from elements both classical and folkloric, leading the way down the path that O'Connor eventually chose..

"I'm very grateful...I got to spend more time with him than probably any other fiddler or violinist in history. He was very private, and he didn't really collaborate with many violinists." {most notably, with Mark on his 1993 album, "Heroes" and Vassar Clements on his album "Vassar and Stephane"}. "The Hot Swing Trio wouldn't exist without Stephane and his impact on my life."

The necessity to uncover "almost like a private detective" any source available to be able to learn from players of this caliber helped inspire O'Connor to start holding fiddle camps for young players. These summer camps, held twice a year, in San Diego and Nashville, offer young players the opportunity to be taught by professional musicians in a relaxed yet intensive setting. A lot of the work of breaking down the walls between the professionals and aspiring players is already accomplished, making that part of the task much easier than it was when Mark was young. Reflecting on his audacious audition for Grappelli, Mark chuckles. "I think that hurdle might be too great for most people to even imagine."

Mike Marshall notes, "Mark possesses one of those rare gifts in terms of just sheer talent and skill on his instruments. As an improviser, {he} can combine incredibly complex melodic ideas with intense rhythmic accuracy and drive, along with precise intonation and tone. It is incredibly inspiring to be near and, and it was great to have as a part of our earliest development as young people, teenagers really."

O'Connor played in Grisman's band with Grappelli during '79 and '80, but he and Stephane stayed in touch for years afterward, until Grappelli's death in 1997. After Grappelli's period with Grisman was over, he continued touring the States with his own band. O'Connor would sit in with him when he came to the States, occasionally even opening for him. ("Talk about being nervous—playing in front of a Grappelli audience!") That's how he met Jon Burr, the New York bassist who worked with Grappelli's U.S. band for twelve years and later, along with guitarist Frank Vignola, became part of Mark's Hot Swing Trio.

Burr is actually the one responsible for the coming together of the Hot Swing Trio. "I met Mark when I was playing with Stef...He came by to sit in. Then I met Frank on a gig with a singer here in New York named Judy Barnett. I wound up doing a recording/mastering project for him and there was a violinist on it. There was a tribute to Stephan coming up and I thought he{the violinist} represented the certain kind of spirit that Stef had, so I recommended him and Frank to the producers of this tribute to Stef that was coming up at Carnegie Hall. Of course, Mark was there."

Here Frank takes up the story. “We were getting together to do a tribute to Stephane at Carnegie Hall in 1998. When I heard that Mark was going to be there I was very excited because I’d never met him and I’d been a big fan for years. I said to myself ‘I’m gonna make sure I play with him!’ At the rehearsal, I wasn’t scheduled to play with him; but he was sitting there jamming with some guitarists and Jon, and I decided to be bold and just went and sat down and started playing—and sure enough, we hit it right off—it was great.

“I still wasn’t scheduled to play with him onstage, but then at the last minute the producer came up and said, ‘Frank! Where are you? Get out onstage; you’re gonna play with Mark!’ I had no idea what we were even gonna do. So there we are, Carnegie Hall, spur of the moment... We played Minor Swing, in the key of D minor. We had a great time. Afterwards he said ‘Gimmee your number, maybe we can do some things together’... And now, here we are three albums later, a hundred concerts under our belt—it’s been a great experience.”

Adds Burr, “When Mark asked us to come out to California to play some tributes with him we said ‘Sure!’ little knowing that we would be setting forth on a journey that became a passion for all of us.

“What’s interesting about this music is that we all bring different things to the mix... Frank and I come from New York, with very much a jazz background, while Mark has spent a lot of time in the South and the west, and kind of combines the classical and bluegrass influences... New music is generally a combination of stylistic developments representing existing elements. Through this combination the music takes on a life of its own and starts to sound different from anything else.”

O’Connor adds, “The synergy we create as a threesome is really a language that comes very naturally to all of us. It’s so rewarding.”

In concert at the beautiful Herbst Theatre during the San Francisco Jazz Festival, the Hot Swing Band performed acoustically, with no sound system. It’s a great thing to experience the natural sounds of these stringed instruments with no barrier, no artificial enhancement, and no tonal distortion. The purity and energy of strings vibrating naturally seems to influence the listener in a more personal and intimate way. O’Connor says jazz is actually a form of chamber music that can totally reflect an acoustic nature.

“For our upcoming recording, “Hot Swing Trio Live in New York!” (due in fall of 2005), I picked out the room we recorded in (Merkhan Hall next to Lincoln Center) for its acoustics. So we could play acoustically and capture our sounds with no enhancement but have the audience right there with us.”

“After all these years of battling sound systems, monitors, monitor mixers...,” he laughs, “it’s just so refreshing to be able to rely on your own sound that you’ve practiced and created on your instrument. To get in a room for people to share that is a real special thing. I wish more people did it, in jazz especially. Winton Marsalis does it a lot—of

course he does have an advantage with the volume of his instrument—but it’s so amazing to hear that trumpet acoustically--all the different sounds and overtones. It sounds so much better than through a microphone on a PA speaker at some festival.

“Over the years I’ve become more and more organic in my nature. With the violin—it’s really hard to reproduce it through a microphone and have it sound anything like the player really wants it to.”

One way O’Connor found to get back to the pure sound of the violin was by making the transition from country music session player (and Grammy award winner for his instrumental collaboration, the New Nashville Cats, in 1993) into the classical realm. His first classical album, released in 1994, bore the unlikely title, *Fiddle Concerto*, kind of a musical oxymoron. It was followed by six others in quick succession, every year from 1996 to 2001. His composition, “The American Seasons” (the title of the 2001 album) was nationally broadcast on PBS stations New Year’s Day 2002, paired with Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons,” and was called by one reviewer “the first musical masterpiece of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” His “Six Caprices”, dedicated to the Italian master Paganini, recorded on *Midnight on the Water* (1998) are fast becoming part of the modern violin repertoire, along with his “Fiddle Concerto No. 1,” which has now become the most-performed modern violin concerto.

Even in the title of the composition, “fiddle” concerto rather than “violin,” Mark’s penchant for blurring musical boundaries is apparent. His soundtrack for the PBS *American Revolution* documentary series (*Liberty!* Sony Classical label, 1997) features his arrangements of traditional American music and expansive orchestral works, with guest appearances by both Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis. His *Appalachia Waltz*, recorded with Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer, is a blend of original and new folk tunes, paying homage to classical chamber music, American roots music, Celtic music, jazz, folk, and Texas style fiddling.

“I’ve always tried to blur those boundaries,” O’Connor points out. “Even on my website it says Mark O’Connor, fiddler/violinist. The main reason is so I can represent an inclusive environment with my musical projects; I don’t want to leave anybody out. I don’t want to pick or choose; I want to reach out to all the camps out there and let them know that I’m doing something that could be of interest to them.”

The music from *Appalachia Waltz* apparently was of interest to the White House administration at the time, where Mark and Yo-Yo Ma were invited to play for President Clinton at a state dinner. The President, Mark says, “has a photographic memory” and memorized the entire contents of the album liner notes. O’Connor has also played at a Presidential Inauguration celebration, at the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta (for which he composed “Olympic Reel”) and on several major network television programs, including “Great Performances” and CBS network’s celebration of Israel’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Even when he’s not necessarily there, his compositions are being performed all over the world: “St. Matthew’s Passion”, a choral work commissioned by the International Bach

Academy, in Stuttgart; a concerto for violin and orchestra premiering at BBC Proms in London; and frequent performances of Appalachia Waltz by Yo-Yo Ma during his world tours.

According to Mike Marshall, “Mark is one of those folks who is a product of our times. He has traveled the world and been exposed to all of these musical styles and traditions, and has had the drive and determination to study them and to try to incorporate them into his own voice.”

As active and widespread as that voice is, Mark is not one who’s content to rest on his laurels. Barely into his mid-forties, he released “Mark O’Connor: Thirty Year Retrospective” at an age when many others’ careers would only be coming into full swing. He’s a strong advocate for music education, teaching master classes and workshops at music schools all over the country, including the Julliard School of Music, Berklee, UCLA and Tanglewood. His Mark O’Connor Fiddle Camp and Strings Conference, held respectively in Nashville and San Diego, draws participants from across the USA as well as Canada, Europe, South America and Asia.

It was at one of the Fiddle Camps that Mark met Sara Watkins, 13 at the time, and her guitar-playing brother, Sean. He learned they had a “little band” (Nickel Creek) with a teenager Mark had met earlier, a mandolin prodigy named Chris Thile. After hearing that Chris had grown up listening to his songs, Mark invited him to play on the Retrospective, along with Bryan Sutton, another youngster who showed up at the Fiddle Camp one year. Byron House agreed to hold down the bottom on the double bass.

While Mark was in the process of putting the double CD album together, Nickel Creek suddenly flooded the music scene, and Sutton started playing with Ricky Skaggs and the Dixie Chicks as well. This meant that, well, the kids were a bit busy. But, always one to turn a challenge into an opportunity, Mark came up with a plan that would make it easier: they would do the recording at a series of three live concerts, thereby eliminating the extensive studio time usually required for a recording project. Thus, the 30-year old retrospective recording became, in a way, a testament to its own history, as “elder statesman” O’Connor, certainly a legend at this point, joined with the new young lions of acoustic music, and invited the public into the setting. The concerts, held in Nashville and attended by folks from as far away as Japan, were hailed as “magical”, “extraordinary” and “historic.” The album garnered another Grammy award nomination.

Fellow fiddler Darol Anger points out, “Thirty years, when it starts at age twelve, is almost prelude. So what we have here, symbolized and embodied by Mark’s new retrospective recording, is the front half of arguably the most brilliant fiddling career on this continent. Retrospectives generally mean that there’s not going to be much more from this fellow, a last gasp of sorts. This retrospective is more of a pause in a continuing torrent of creative musical energy that has just begun to hit stride.”

As always, Mark has already moved on to other projects: the ongoing touring and recording process with his Hot Swing Trio, and his most recent collaboration between the

folk and classical realm, appropriately named Crossing Bridges, his 2004 release with the Appalachian Waltz Trio. The story of the Trio's birth has a familiar, full circle kind of a ring.

“I first met American cellist Natalie Haas in 1996, when she was 13 years old. She came up to get my autograph after a concert Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer and I performed at Stanford University. Four years later I heard her play at a post Appalachian Journey (Mark's Grammy award winning 2000 release) reception in Berkeley. When I found out she grew up in a fiddling family, I encouraged her to come to my Fiddle Camp. Now she's a member of our Fiddle Camp faculty, inspiring other young cellists and string players.” The third member of the Trio, violinist Carol Cook, made her debut with the Edinburgh Symphony at age 16, performed Mark's American Seasons with the 21-piece Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra, and also teaches at the Fiddle Camp and Strings Conference.

Between performances with Appalachian Waltz and the Hot Swing Trio, as well as his work composing commissioned symphonic and chamber pieces, Mark is even busier than ever. I did manage to catch up with him in Berkley, California, where the Hot Swing Trio was performing for a live radio broadcast (West Coast Folk) from the coffeehouse at Freight & Salvage. Also performing on the show was a group of musicians from Siberia. Mark wasted no time in making a connection.

“I couldn't wait to start a conversation with them. I wanted to know more about them, how long they're going to be here, where they're going and what they're doing... We've already traded CDs and talked about things that we have in common and things that are different about us. I think those kind of exchanges are just great.

“There's this thing with instrumental music that we feel can access different parts of the world. I think it's more about communication than anything—I think it's the desire to reach out towards other people. The chamber music I compose is part of my ongoing quest to find and explore new ways for string players to communicate to audiences and with each other.”

For Mark, blurring the boundaries has always come naturally. “When I began creating my own music as a young child, it was a blend of everything my mind could absorb. To me, it was all just music. As I grew older... I began to think of my playing as a bridge-- from folk to jazz, jazz to classical, classical right back to folk—and lots of places in between and beyond.

“Folk music has always influenced the great masters and composers, from the earliest times. That's documented history. It's incumbent on people working on the concert stages to draw from the culture around them. I've had my greatest success from making that connection.”

Mike Marshall agrees. “I personally think that musicians (and composers) of every era have always had the minds and curiosity to discover new musical ideas, to listen and be

influenced by everything that they could get access too. We happen to live in this amazing time of incredible access, and Mark is the manifestation of what can happen if the borders between societies and musical worlds can be broken down.”

With his ability to cross these boundaries effortlessly, and his apparently endless supply of creative energy and new ideas, we listeners can only wait in happy anticipation to see where Mark’s next leap will take him, and be ready to accompany him on the journey.

\*\*\*\*\*

POSSIBLE SIDEBARS: 1) Information about Fiddle Camps (on website) if published soon. (That would be best as there’s a lot of reference to the camps).  
2) Information about upcoming Hot Swing Trio album to be released in the fall, 2005.