

# Russ Barenberg

Acoustic guitarist Russ Barenberg is known as one of the most melodic instrumentalists in contemporary acoustic music, and his compositions are among the finest the genre has to offer. He got his start in 1970 with the groundbreaking bluegrass band Country Cooking and since then has been a member of a variety of highly influential groups, most notably his collaboration from 1989 to 2001 in a trio with dobro master Jerry Douglas and bassist Edgar Meyer. Barenberg's 1979 debut solo album *Cowboy Calypso* showcased his sophisticated playing and immediately established him as one of the premier composers and arrangers in the emerging new acoustic scene. His work since then, including his most recent collection, *When at Last* (2007), reflects an ever-deepening musicality with continuing dedication to vibrant, roots-based melodies and ensemble interplay. "Little Monk," the opening track from *When at Last*, was nominated for the 2008 GRAMMY for Best Country Instrumental Performance.

Barenberg began playing guitar at the age of 13 in Chester County, Pennsylvania, west of Philadelphia. He took lessons from Alan Miller, the older brother of future band mate, guitarist John Miller, and was inspired early on by guitarists Doc Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, and Clarence White along with a wide range of old-time, bluegrass and contemporary folk and blues artists.

While attending Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, in 1970, Barenberg joined with Peter Wernick, Tony Trischka, Kenny Kosek and John Miller to form Country Cooking. During the four years that Country Cooking was together, the group recorded two influential albums, *Country Cooking: 14 Bluegrass Instrumentals* and *Barrel of Fun* and accompanied mandolinist Frank Wakefield on a third album. Barenberg also played on a number of Trischka's solo albums throughout the 1970's.

After Country Cooking disbanded in 1975, Barenberg temporarily switched to electric guitar and performed with a jazz-rock band, *Carried Away*. In 1977 he moved to New York and, together with Trischka, Miller, and fiddler Matt Glaser, formed the eclectic string band, Heartlands. Heartlands backed Barenberg on many of the cuts on *Cowboy Calypso*.

Moving to Boston in 1979, he joined Glaser and fiddler/mandolinist Jay Ungar in the triple-fiddle band Fiddle Fever, recording two albums with the group. Fiddle Fever's recording of "Ashokan Farewell" was later used as the centerpiece for the soundtrack to Ken Burns' celebrated documentary, *The Civil War*. Barenberg played on the soundtracks for several other Burns' films as well, including *The Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Shakers* and *Huey Long*. During this time, he also worked with Glaser and mandolinist Andy Statman in the experimental bluegrass-jazz band Laughing Hands. Barenberg recorded his second solo album, *Behind the Melodies*, in 1983. That album, along with his appearance on Jerry Douglas's 1982 release, *Fluxedo*, marked the beginnings of an ongoing series of collaborations between the two musicians. While in Boston, Barenberg was also active in the vibrant contradance scene, playing frequently for dances. He played on fiddler Rodney Miller's recording, *Airplang*, which was seminal to the development of contradance music in the late 80's and 90's. A number of Barenberg's own tunes have since become popular standards in the contradance repertoire.

Barenberg moved to Nashville in 1986 and has lived there since. Along with Douglas, he worked for several years accompanying Irish singer, Maura O'Connell, and in 1988 recorded his third solo album, *Moving Pictures*, another beautiful collection of original instrumentals featuring Douglas, Meyer, banjoist Bela Fleck, and fiddlers Mark O'Connor and Stuart Duncan, among

others. The previously mentioned trio with Douglas and Meyer, active throughout the 1990's, was a highly original ensemble that further reshaped the direction of acoustic music. Their popular 1993 recording, *Skip, Hop & Wobble*, has been extremely influential with the a new generation of acoustic instrumentalists. In 1996 Barenberg worked with Douglas, fiddler Darol Anger and Los Angeles-based music producer Snuffy Walden to create the soundtrack for *Homecoming*, a film starring Anne Bancroft.

Barenberg has performed and recorded with many other top acoustic and country music artists including Randy Travis, Emmy Lou Harris, Ricky Skaggs, Tim O'Brien, Sam Bush, Paul Brady, Darryl Scott, Joan Osborne, Bryan Sutton, Aly Bain, Phil Cunningham, Eddi Reader, Natalie McMaster and Sharon Shannon. Many of these musical associations came about through his ongoing work on *The Transatlantic Sessions*, a series of television shows produced in Scotland beginning in 1994 that bring together top acoustic musicians from the British Isles and the United States for collaborative performances. The third and most recent group of *Transatlantic Sessions* was filmed in March 2007.

Barenberg currently freelances in Nashville and performs with his own group as well as in a duo with guitarist Bryan Sutton. His 2007 release on Compass Records is described well by music writer Jon Weisberger: "...while ensemble interplay is the foundation of *When at Last*, its heart and soul ultimately is to be found in Barenberg's tunes—some dating back to the early 90s, others composed shortly before recording began—and in his glistening playing. Few guitarists so perfectly blend a mastery of roots music traditions with melodic originality, or so finely balance muscularity with delicacy, and each moment of the album is shaped by these artistic dualities..."