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FEATURES

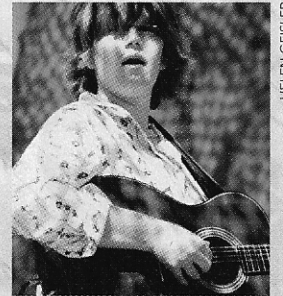
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Russ Barenberg's RETURN





His melodic playing helped define contemporary flatpicking. In this exclusive lesson, **RUSS BARENBERG** explains his approach to fiddle tunes, composing, and creating his adventurous new recording, *When at Last*.

If you've been following bluegrass and flatpicking for the last decade or so, you may not have heard his name much, but Russ Barenberg has had an indelible (though underheralded) influence on the development of bluegrass lead guitar and contemporary acoustic music. Barenberg was one of five guitarists (Dan Crary, Tony Rice, Larry Sparks, and Norman Blake are the others) whose playing in the 1970s amplified the work of Doc Watson and Clarence White and burst the boundaries of what could be done with a flatpick and a dreadnought. Barenberg was the least traditional of these guitarists, incorporating influences from jazz, Latin music, and folk fiddle styles to create a hypermelodic, harmonically suave sound that has influenced all forward-thinking flatpickers since then.

BY SCOTT NYGAARD

PHOTOS BY FAIRLIGHT HUBBARD

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Russ Barenberg

Dropped-D Tuning: D A D G B E

Ex. 1: "Little Monk"

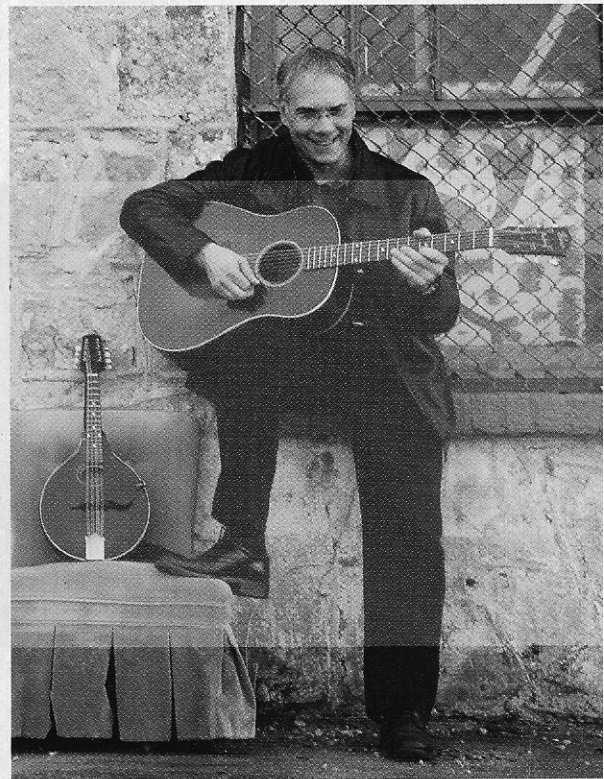
* Play with back of middle fingernail

But until last summer, which saw the release of a new album, *When at Last* (Compass), and his return to the ranks of full-time musician, Barenberg hadn't been heard from on record since the extraordinary *Skip, Hop, and Wobble*

been 19 years since his previous solo recording, *Moving Pictures* (Rounder).

"There's a lot of rhythmic expression in fiddle tunes, which you hear more often when you hear a fiddler play than when you hear plectrum instruments, but you can get it."

(*Sugar Hill*), the 1993 document of the trio he co-led with Jerry Douglas and Edgar Meyer, and it had



Barenberg's first solo album, *Cowboy Calypso*, appeared in 1979, and it defined the range of musical interests that would color his work to varying degrees throughout his career: jazz, funk, Latin music, and Celtic fiddle tunes, along with bluegrass and old-time music. His work in the early '80s with the band Fiddle Fever and contradance fiddler Rodney Miller renewed his interest in fiddle music, inspiring him to find a way to translate the fiddle's rhythmic pulse to guitar.

When at Last demonstrates that Barenberg's long layoff from the recording studio has done nothing to hurt his signature rich, singing tone and melodic sense, as he spins effortlessly through a batch of original fiddle tunes and memorable melodies. Uncategorizable tunes like "Little Monk" and "The Man in the Hat" will delight fans of his preternaturally inventive trio with Douglas and Meyer, but fiddle tune-like melodies dominate the CD, from the Irish-sounding "Pleasant Beggar" to the contradance-ready "Redbird in the Willow" and "Jump Back Barley" to the old-timish "On Milo's Back." Barenberg's keen ear for melody is also in evidence on the gorgeous title track [transcribed on page 57] and "The Drummers of England."

I met with Barenberg last summer during a break at Steve Kaufman's Acoustic Kamp to discuss his new CD, tune writing, fondness for unusual keys, and melodic improvising.

This is your first solo recording in quite awhile.

BARENBERG Nineteen years. I'm not sure why it took so long. Every year that went by I'd say, "I've gotta make a record. I've gotta make a record." I was working a full-time job [at the Saturn plant] through most of that time, but that can't be the only reason. It may just be that I need some open space to do a project like that. I was involved with music all through that period, even though I wasn't doing it all day long, every day. Now it's definitely the time, because I left that job behind, and I'm ready to embrace the music lifestyle again and get out there. The first thing I wanted to do, and needed to do to make that happen, was to get a record done. So that was my first focus upon my job ending.

Did you have all the tunes written already?

BARENBERG There were a couple that I wrote shortly beforehand. The tunes were chosen from stuff I've written since about 1993. The first one on the record I wrote somewhere back then, around the *Skip, Hop, and Wobble* time. I was writing a bunch of tunes with this dropped-D kind of thing.



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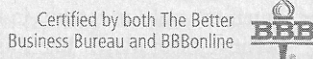


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Dropped-D Tuning: D A D G B E (Ex. 2-3)

Ex. 2: "The Drummers of England" with pick and fingers

♩ = 120

* Play with back of middle fingernail

Ex. 3: "The Drummers of England" with pick

♩ = 120

You're referring to "Little Monk," which is kind of like "Big Bug Shuffle" from Skip, Hop, and Wobble.

BARENBERG Yeah it was written in a cluster with some other tunes like that [Example 1].

You get this great groove with pick and fingers where you're often playing the bass note just before the downbeat. Where did that come from?

BARENBERG The syncopation might come from a little bossa-nova groove I taught myself back in the late '70s, sort of a João Gilberto thing. I was into listening to him for awhile. But there's also a little bit of John Miller in that groove. There's some rhythmic stuff going on with damping and hitting the strings. That's from my years of playing with John, I think.

So you're playing with your pick and your middle and ring fingers?

BARENBERG Yeah, there's just two notes coming from the rest of my hand. It's a two-note chord, not a three-note chord. And with this one it's mostly on the G and D strings. I also play some of that with the back of my fingernail, a frailing thing.

There are a couple tunes on the record that have that sort of thing happening. "The Drummers of England" is also in dropped D. It's a much different feel, but it's pick and fingers [Example 2]. I sometimes play that much more with the pick. It depends on how much control I'm feeling in my right hand, because I can play it like this [Example 3]. But on the recording I did the finger thing.

Is it difficult to get the same kind of tone with your fingers as with your pick?

BARENBERG To get the articulation and control, I feel much more secure with the pick than with my fingers, to tell you the truth. It isn't going to sound exactly the same anyway. And sometimes you can get more of that percussive pulling up and snapping sound with your fingers.

What about the other tunes on When at Last? Are they more recent?

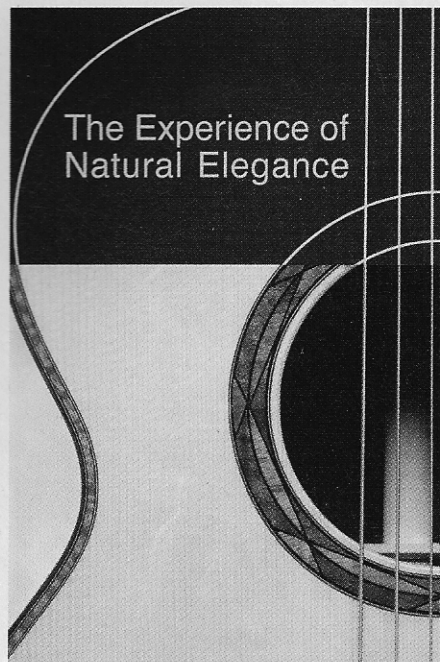
BARENBERG There are some from the late '90s, and a couple tunes were written in 2001. I wrote five little fiddle tunes, I remember, in one week back then, and two of them I liked enough to record: "Fat Mountain" and "Jump Back Barley." Those were written shortly before I got into some contradance situations again. I was gearing up to do a music camp with Rodney Miller, relearning fiddle tunes and dance tunes, and all of sudden I just spit out a few on the mandolin.

There are a lot of fiddle tunes on this record.

BARENBERG There are, more than in the past. Around 1983 I really got into playing contradance music—playing fiddle tunes for dancing. That was a big influence, both in terms of some of the tunes I wrote and my approach to them, which wasn't so much in terms of vehicles for "flatpicking" improvisation but as playing in a groove for dancing. Some of the tunes on this record definitely have that element to them.

Were fiddle tunes some of the first things you played when you started?

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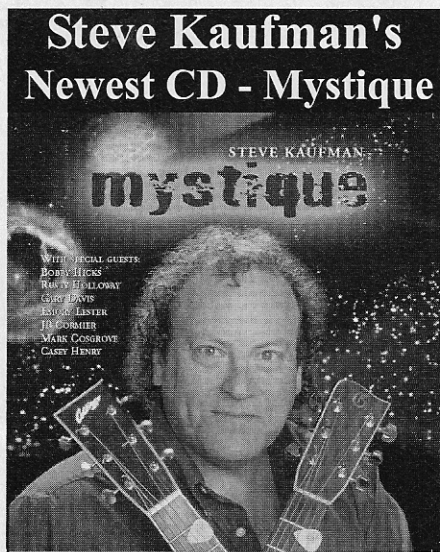


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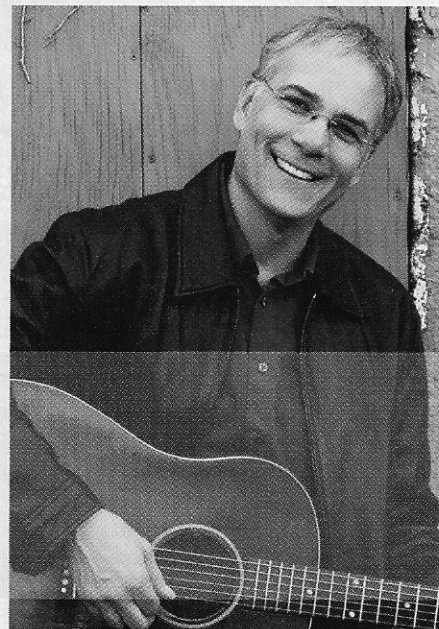
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Russ Barenberg

BARENBERG When I first started I played "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" [laughs] and those sorts of things, basic chords. I took lessons from John Miller's brother Alan for about a year. He'd gotten into the Philadelphia folk scene real early, around 1963, so he was familiar with Doc Watson and he taught me some flatpicking. I learned some basic finger-

"I've relished the opportunity to create an ensemble and use other sounds—the voices of other musicians—to bring the tunes to life."



picking at the time, too—we were also listening to John Hurt—but I put more energy into following up with flatpicking. I remember playing "Down in the Willow Garden" and "Rosalee McFall." I still love that, it's a beautiful melody [Example 4].

After hearing Doc and Clarence White

around that time—'63, '64—I started learning some fiddle tunes. I learned "Billy in the Lowground" within the first year, I think. I heard Clarence's version on *Appalachian Swing* and that started taking off a little, getting more zingy, crazy, syncopated.

WHAT HE PLAYS

- **ACOUSTIC GUITARS:** 1945 Gibson J-45 (spruce and maple), 1946 Gibson J-45 (spruce and mahogany). "I got the maple J-45 in 1992," Barenberg says. "I hadn't really appreciated Gibsons much before that, but this friend of mine, David Sebring, who used to work at Gruhn's [Guitar shop in Nashville], turned me on to the potential they had. This guitar was on the wall at Gruhn's at the time and I liked the way it sounded, so I bought it. I keep wanting to move to something else, but I keep coming back to it. Gibsons—the good ones—have a very complex tone, and I just got into playing it. It's not a loud, wide-open, free-and-easy sort of guitar. It's got a pretty heavy top and plywood back and sides, so it's a whole different kind of energy.

"What I hear in Gibsons in general is a real saturated midrange that sounds really good close up. This guitar sounds really good live on a mic, and it's a pretty versatile "play anything" instrument. My other J-45 is a more typical lightweight mahogany guitar, a much more limited-focus guitar for me. It has a very eccentric tone, but it's beautiful for slow melodies. I used it for the melodies on 'Fat Mountain' and 'When at Last.'

"On 'The Man in the Hat' and 'A Dream for Sophie,' I used a \$285 Korean-made Olympia OP-20SWM, sort of a Nick Lucas-size guitar. That's not a guitar that would normally be considered first choice for a recording, but it was great. You can make stuff sound good if you mic it right, and that guitar has a really cool bottom end."

- **FLATPICKS:** Wegen 1-mm. "Not a real heavy one," Barenberg says. "It's stiff enough to get a nice firm sound, but it lets it breathe a little. I sometimes use a lighter pick, like a Fender medium, or slightly heavier than that, to do some kinds of strummy things, like the Irishy rhythm playing on 'The Pleasant Beggar.' That kind of thing sounds better with a lighter pick. If you're strumming all six strings like one string, the lighter pick lets it open up a little more. I just experiment and see what works."
- **STRINGS:** John Pearse light-gauge phosphor bronze.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** "It depends what the configuration is," Barenberg says. "When I play with Bryan [Sutton], we just play into microphones. The maple J-45 usually sounds pretty nice on a mic. But I also have an [L.R. Baggs] iBeam in it, and when I play with Jerry [Douglas] and Edgar [Meyer], for instance, I have to run a pickup as well, because they both do, so I use the iBeam and a Baggs Para DI. I try to use as much microphone in the house as I can. I recently got an Epiphone Masterbilt dreadnought that I put a Fishman Matrix in, not to use by itself, but to use with the Fishman Aura, and that really works well for that guitar."