

feature story

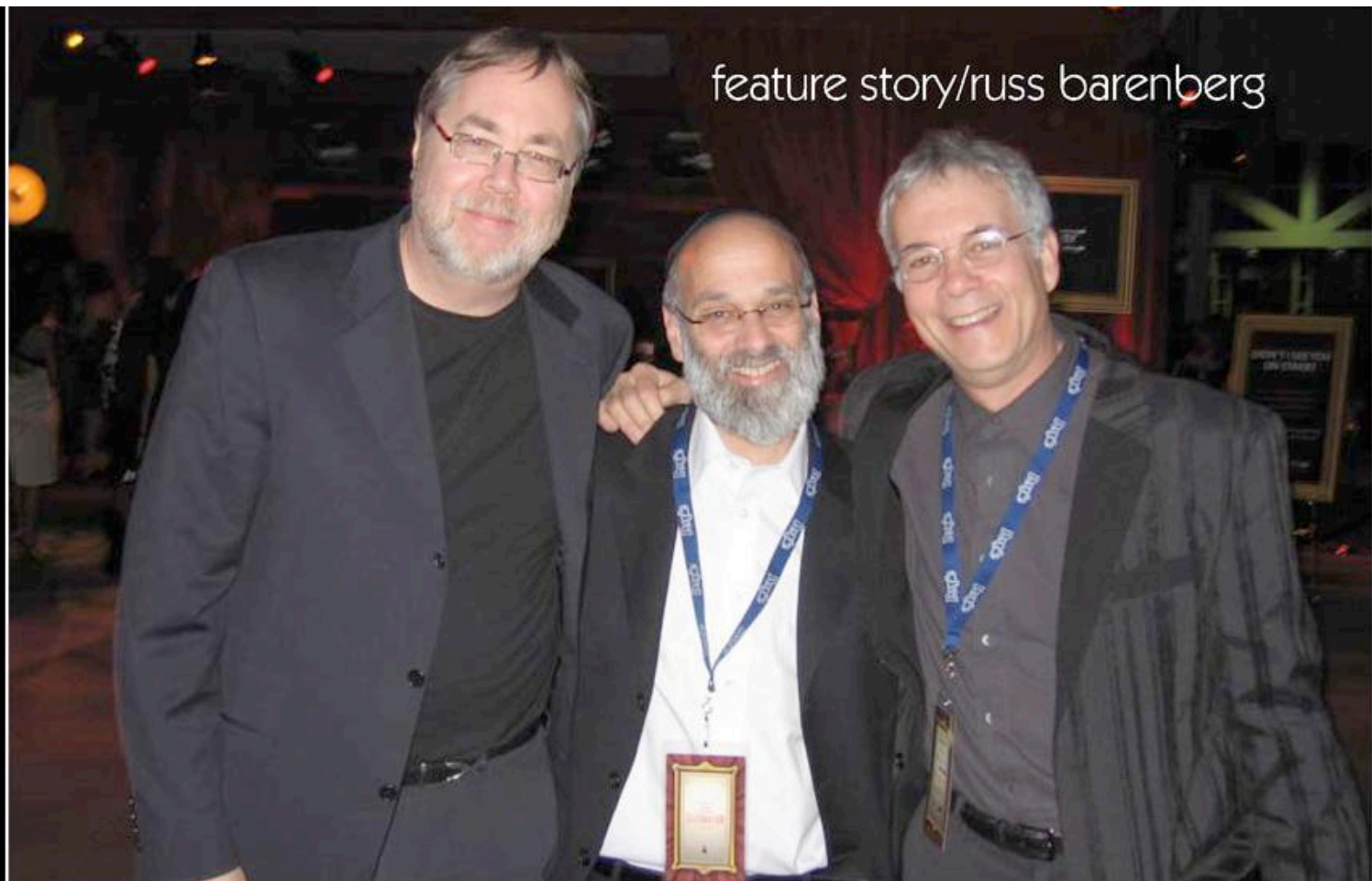
Prolific, Intense, Evocative:

Composer/Instrumentalist

RUSS BARENBERG

Announces His Presence

by Hilary West



Tony Trischka, Andy Statman and Russ at the Grammys

In 2007, guitarist Russ Barenberg released *When At Last*, and was promptly nominated for a Grammy. That's an exclusive ticket. For Russ, the big fun was heading off to Los Angeles for the 50th annual awards show, and having a mini-reunion with old friends and former bandmates Tony Trischka¹ and Andy Statman² who were also nominated. What are the odds that someone could have predicted the celebrity of today with an examination of the friendships and collaborations of yesterday?

On second thought, maybe it's not so surprising. Since emerging, virtually fully formed, on the acoustic music scene in the 1970s, Russ has been one of the elite musicians influencing acoustic string music today, yesterday... and likely tomorrow.

Russ Barenberg has what many can only dream of: a prodigious and consistent track record. His musical career began in 1970 when he joined Trischka, Statman, Pete Wernick, Kenny Kosek and John Miller to form the band Country Cooking. In short time, Russ earned a reputation as quite the "go-to" man for session work.

¹Russ' bandmate in Country Cooking and Heartlands; Grammy-nominated for Best Bluegrass Album *Double Banjo Bluegrass Spectacular* (Rounder Records) ²Russ' bandmate in Country Cooking and Laughing Hands; Grammy-nominated for "Rawhide" from *East Flatbush Blues* (Shela Records)

Over the years, he has created soundtracks for four documentaries by celebrated filmmaker Ken Burns: *The Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Shakers*, *Huey Long* and *The Civil War*, which introduced millions of listeners to traditional music through "Ashokan Farewell," featuring Russ' beautiful guitar solo. Russ has also added his graceful touch to recordings by a veritable Who's Who of artists, including Béla Fleck, Mark O'Connor, Chris Thile, Alison Krauss, Rhonda Vincent, Maura O'Connell, Laurie Lewis, and Randy Travis.

In 1982, Russ was tapped for Dobro master Jerry Douglas' *Fluxedo*. So began a long and marvelous musical friendship. In the early 90s, Russ and Flux formed a trio of titans with bass maestro Edgar Meyer, releasing *Skip, Hop & Wobble* on Sugar Hill Records in 1993 and performing together for twelve years. Douglas has played on all of Barenberg's solo projects since 1983, including 2007's *When At Last*. Released by Compass Records, this project featured Russ' Grammy-nominated tune, "Little Monk."

In addition to the recordings and performances on his résumé, Russ has written several books, including *Clarence White Guitar* (Oak Publications). He's also released instructional material and DVDs on Homespun. Russ has been on staff at various music camps and academies: Augusta Heritage Center, Steve Kaufman's Acoustic Kamp, Wintergrass Academy, RockyGrass Academy and many more.

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“Russ is a musician’s musician. For many years, he made every film he played on for us better. His talent and his heart always announce his presence.”

—Ken Burns



He has also enjoyed a longstanding gig “across the pond.” Since 1994, Russ has been involved with *The Transatlantic Sessions*, BBC’s television series featuring collaborations between top musical artists from North America, Ireland and the UK. As a member of the house band, he plays all the shows--sometimes backing up the featured artist, sometimes as the featured artist. “The Drummers of England,” a tune from *Transatlantic Sessions Volume 3* (released in 2007 on Whirl Records at whirlerecords.co.uk) is a Barenberg original, also found on *When At Last*.

As might be expected, the artists featured in the series are from both sides of the Atlantic, and all are at the top of their game: Jerry Douglas, Aly Bain, Tim O’Brien, Phil Cunningham, Iris DeMent, Cara Dillon, and Bruce Molsky, to name a few. Russ describes it as “just one of the projects I’ve been involved in: very fun, very satisfying, involving really great musicians.”

Great musicians. As an artist, educator, and arguably one of that number himself, Russ can recognize and articulate the elements that make a great musician. “Music is a matter of detail,” he begins, and almost immediately, he qualifies the statement. “It’s more than that, but it’s one of the things that make it so good, when it’s good.”

The way a musician approaches his craft is critical, Russ explains. “In good music, there’s so much fine-tuned detail, sometimes in ways that are not all that describable. I’m talk-

ing about tone, timing, phrasing, nuance--all the basic things that go into making it sound good. The beauty in music is in a lot of different places and a lot of different ways. Some of it has to do with that really finely-wrought detail. And in composition,” he says quietly. After a moment of reflection, he adds, emphatically: “The *compositional truth* of things.”

With the pragmatism of a mature professional, Russ accepts that a listener’s ability to relate to music is often just a matter of taste. “You know,” he points out, “there is a musical personality that comes through from either playing or composing, or a combination of the two. To a certain extent, it’s just a question of what hits somebody, whether they want to listen to my music or someone else’s. Some of it has to do with what happens to connect with the listeners’ life and sensibilities, and to what extent it speaks to them. There’s a lot of stuff out there that is really well-put-together, but not everybody wants to listen to it all.”

When prompted to talk about his background, Russ Barenberg demurs. “I don’t know if you really want to get into all the history,” he says quietly but firmly. As the interview for this article wove its way through his music, Russ revealed a number of different ingredients which--at least from the outside--seem to be reflected in his songs.

One of the threads in his development is Russ’ early interest in poetry, including a brief period--a year or two in the late 1990s--when he wrote a fair amount of it. No iambic

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pentameter here! "It was an abstract, sound-oriented poetry, more like music," he says. "Kind of let your ear lead you, and not consciously focus so much on the meaning, see what comes out. It leads, if you will, to a different kind of meaning." In the context of his instrumental tunes, it seems Russ is still writing poetry, though he's thrown the pen in for guitar and mandolin.

If instrumentals contain lyricism without words, perhaps moving beyond notes can give the listener a powerful impression, something akin to a memory. Some have said they find lyric or visual suggestion in Russ' music, but he denies any deliberate connection in his composing process. He chalks it up to the "fairly simple" melodies he creates, which could have words "if someone chose to write them."

So, dear reader, *you* be the judge! Listen to "The Talking" or "Open Arms" (from *Moving Pictures*) or the title track from *When At Last*. These songs could not be more articulate if they were carved onto the side of a mountain. Or how about "Redbird in the Willow/The Lakes" from *When At Last*? Under the guise of "simple melody," Russ has created a richly textured little universe; there are no words, but it is utterly visual and alive. The song evokes the big dance scene from Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (Russ hasn't seen the film), and you can practically see the couples swirling, skirts flying, the mountains outside the doors. Perhaps subconsciously, Russ even included the dips and twirls in his composition. You don't need a caller on this one. It's all right *there*.

With a listen to "The Drummers of England," the armour in Russ' argument seems to crack the tiniest bit. When he introduced the song to the spellbound crowd at Wintergrass last February, Russ *did* say he could "almost" see them coming over the crest of a misty hill. After you hear it, you'll agree: the drummers are there, all right!

There are many other threads which, when woven together, form the foundation of Russ' music. He has a strong background in basic folk, jazz, fiddle, bluegrass... and dance music. "My wife, Susan Kevra, is involved in contra dancing," he says. "She's a great caller. She plays clarinet and sings; she's a wonderful musician. She teaches French and American studies at Vanderbilt." Susan has also taught dance in Europe. A few years ago, Russ accompanied her on a tour of France, with accordionist Jeremiah McLane and fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld. His voice warm with respect and affection

for his wife, Russ adds, "It's fun to hear her call dances in French!"

All of his musical roots are evident in the 1987 Rounder release *Halloween Rehearsal*. Primarily original material, the recording is a consolidation of Russ' first two Rounder albums, *Cowboy Calypso* and *Behind the Melodies*. It is a suite of gorgeous and diverse lyric instrumentals--alive, emotive and animated.

These days, musicians with bluegrass and acoustic roots often look to fusions of styles with progressive and traditional music for inspiration. *Halloween Rehearsal* was, and remains, the vanguard of an intersection of different musical worlds, coming together for one project, without blurring the lines of what makes each distinct and worthwhile. Completely relevant to the musical dialogue of 2008, the recording is tremendously coherent and exquisitely original, with tracks accented, at turns, by marimba, alto sax and wind chimes, and banjo, mandolins, guitars and fiddles. Case in point: the traditional tune "Cooley's Reel" belongs on *Halloween Rehearsal* as much as "The Cola Calypso" or the sparkling "Gimmicks Ahoy," both written by Russ.

Barenberg followed up *Halloween Rehearsal* with *Moving Pictures* in 1988, also on Rounder. His original material—some traditional, some progressive--was again a major ingredient, all evocative, highly melodic and having a sense of movement. *Moving Pictures* is only nine tracks long, but those tracks are generous--the kind of music that can stay in frequent rotation for years, all the while remaining fresh.

Moving Pictures sprang to life with session work from Mark O'Connor, Edgar Meyer (on synthesized flute, organ, wooden blocks and arco bass) banjoist Béla Fleck, and two more bassists: Glenn Worf and Mark Schatz. Also on the session were Jerry Douglas (Dobro), Stuart Duncan (fiddle) and Kenny Malone (percussion), who also appeared on *When At Last*, with Russ' friends Ruthie Dornfeld and Jeremiah McLane, and bassists Dennis Crouch and Viktor Krauss. Both recordings offer a tip of the hat to the French—with the Cajun tune "Les Veuves De La Coulée" ("Widows of the Creek") on *Moving Pictures*, and "Aux Marches du Palais" ("On the Steps of the Palace"), a song Russ learned from his wife Susan that appears on *When At Last*.

Hallmarks of Russ' music include exceptional instrumental taste and tone, a love of beauty, and a deep, driving commitment to follow his own muse. Not considering himself particularly prolific, Russ has nonetheless amassed a large repertoire of material over the years--enough, he says, to make a nice evening of music. "That's what I'd like to do," he remarks simply.

What is not always so simple is *creating* that music. "When it's wrong you can hear it, because you drive yourself crazy with it," he declares with laughter, thinking about the devil in the details. Russ has obviously managed to think or create his way out of madness, guided by what matters most. "What's important to me," he says thoughtfully, "is that the

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LISTEN :

- *When At Last* (Compass Records 4459) compassrecords.com
- *Moving Pictures* (Rounder Records 0249) rounder.com
- Russ' website: russbarenberg.com

music has some emotion and some tension to it, and a beautiful sound. I'm just enthralled with the tone and the sounds."

He considers this for a beat or two. "Making a *sound* I really like. It's a very physical and emotional thing, just making the sound. Hearing the sound, and the sounds of ensembles working well together. That's the objective: to bring these tunes to life in a way that feels right to me."

How fortunate for those of us who are enchanted by Russ' music that he can't conceive of contriving a "message" within it! That lack of deliberation permits an unaffected honesty, and results in a natural beauty. The world in which he creates his music is a very inward kind of place. He thinks about it for a while, then carefully replaces the word "create" with "discover". "For me to *discover* melodies, the kind of feeling when it's really right is they"—the melodies—"feel they should have always been there." Discoveries are rarely epiphanies; usually they're the result of disciplined work and awareness. "It's sort of being on the look out for material. Mostly it happens while I'm playing and I have quick access to jot things down on a recording device of some sort."

Occasionally inspiration strikes when a recorder isn't so handy. "Sometimes I'll get good ideas when I'm lying in bed, or walking the dogs or driving in the car," Russ confides. "The time between sleep and awake can be a time when ideas float to the surface. The trick is dragging myself out of bed to actually run downstairs and try to capture them. For the most part, I sit with my guitar and I play. You could call it practicing; I'm exploring. Sometimes I'll just be playing away, not even thinking about it a whole lot, but in the back of my head I have a little scout looking out for interesting ideas."

Melodically driven, Barenberg is sometimes inspired by an initial melodic impulse which never even ends up in the finished tune, because while he's working with it, he finds a path to something even better. "Once in a while," he says with obvious glee, "you get a whole melodic phrase! It just comes out, and it's really the beautiful first line or the whole first part of a tune. That's always fun, always exciting."

Russ is happy to be able to spend time with his guitar—and mandolin—looking for new melodies, and he's had some real growth spurts generating tunes that meet his high critical standard. From *When At Last*, both "Fat Mountain" (a tune that draws on plank dance tradition with Russ' added "melodic twist") and "Jump Back Barley" were written in the same week—both on mandolin. Almost surprising himself, Russ enjoyed seven very intense days in which he was intent on learning tunes for a dance camp when five new tunes suddenly popped up—all written on mandolin.

Composing is rewarding, but there is a different kind of joy in performing. Russ has his solo show, which—if the Wintergrass show was any indication—is entirely captivating. He also has a duo act with guitarist Brian Sutton and has performed his music recently in a quartet with Viktor Krauss, Stuart Duncan and young guitarist Todd Lombardo. Given the connections and fans he made through *The Transatlantic Sessions*, Russ has established a foothold overseas, and he's

keen to do new collaborations.

Adept and flexible, Russ has recently worked with artists from diverse stylistic perspectives in the acoustic world. The great Irish singer Cara Dillon called him in for appearances at a couple of concerts and on her latest DVD. In January, Russ did two days of recording with legendary jazz bassist Charlie Haden. "This was a huge thrill and honor for me," Russ enthuses. "Charlie grew up with country music, and this record goes in that direction, among others!" The project includes vocal performances by Charlie, his son and three daughters. Jerry Douglas, Stuart Duncan, Vince Gill, Ricky Skaggs, Bruce Hornsby, and Dan Tyminski also appear on the project, as does jazz guitarist Pat Metheny.

These sessions likely come Russ' way because his approach is organic. "I'm open to those things," he asserts. "Letting things happen as they may, you just don't know what they'll be, and that's part of the fun of it. I'm just going to get out there and meet people and work with them and see what happens."

Following a path of musical serendipity and integrity has served Russ very well, and resulted in so much great music. Who knows what those recent collaborations and friendships will bring? **bn**

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Over fifty recordings are listed on Russ' website. Here are some he'd like you to hear.

Russ Barenberg, *When At Last*, Compass
Russ Barenberg, *Moving Pictures*, Rounder
Russ Barenberg, *Halloween Rehearsal*, Rounder
Barenberg, Douglas, Meyer, Skip, *Hop & Wobble*, Sugar Hill
The Civil War, *Original Soundtrack*, Nonesuch
Country Cooking, *26 Bluegrass Instrumentals*, Rounder
Jerry Douglas, *Restless on the Farm*, Sugar Hill
Jerry Douglas, *Best of the Sugar Hill Years*, Sugar Hill
Fiddle Fever, *Best of Fiddle Fever*, Flying Fish
Béla Fleck, *Crossing the Tracks*, Rounder
Alison Krauss, *Too Late to Cry*, Rounder
Laurie Lewis, *Love Chooses You*, Flying Fish
Rodney Miller, *Airplang*, Rounder
Maura O'Connell, *Don't I Know*, Sugar Hill
Mark O'Connot, *The New Nashville Cats*, Warner Bros.
Chris Thile, *Stealing Second*, Sugar Hill
Tony Trischka, *Dust on the Needle*, Rounder

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIO

Back in the '90s, writer Hilary West, who contributes this month's story on Russ Barenberg, took guitar lessons from fiddle and mandolin player Geoff Somers. Geoff asked his new student what she hoped to learn. Her friends had advised her to stick with the standards. "But I asked Geoff to teach me Russ' music," says Hilary, a huge Barenberg fan. "We renamed 'Magic Foot' [an original Barenberg tune from his recording *Moving Pictures*] 'Broken Hand' because that's how it felt to me." Geoff later worked as a guitar player with Canadian folksinger/songwriter David Francey, and Francey's band won a Juno award (the Canadian Grammy). "Not long after he started with David," Hilary recalls, "Geoff called to thank me for making him really get to know the guitar, as he prepared my lessons. I'd say Russ deserves more credit than I, so on behalf of Geoff: *Thanks, Russ!*"