

Russ Barenberg

When At Last ~ ((Compass 4459))



Guitar aficionados may be ready to hail the new display of virtuosity on Russ Barenberg's *When At Last*—his first solo album in almost 20 years—but for the legendary guitarist himself, the value of the collection is somewhat different. "What I maybe have to bring to the world," he says with a kind of wry deliberation, "is some good tunes." One of those tunes, *When at Last's* opening track, "Little Monk," was nominated for the 2008 GRAMMY for Best Country Instrumental Performance.

Of course, *When At Last* does, indeed, showcase subtle, compelling musicianship—and not only from Barenberg, but also from the carefully chosen crew of players who accompany him—yet the point is well-taken. In a world filled with guitarists renowned for technique, Russ Barenberg has always stood out for his intensely melodic approach to playing and writing, and the new album shows that the years since he, resonator guitarist Jerry Douglas and string bass maestro Edgar Meyer made the widely acclaimed, supremely influential *Skip, Hop & Wobble* have only deepened his musicality. For while Barenberg decided in the late 80s to forego a full-time musical career—or, more accurately, to defer one—he hardly stopped making music, and *Skip, Hop & Wobble* was only the most visible manifestation of that determination.

"I moved to Nashville in 1986 to be around the scene here and try to get studio work," Russ recalls. "I thought that possibly I could make a living at it, that I might not have to travel so much. And I did some when I first came down here, but it became clear that it wasn't a great match for me—I wasn't deeply enough into pop music that I could thrive in that world. So I took a job that allowed me to have a predictable income, that let me be at home more while my kids were growing up, and that allowed me to do the music I really wanted to do without having to feign interest in stuff I didn't care about just to put together a living. But it felt to me like I was still dead in the thick of music, because for a lot of that time I was playing in the trio with Jerry and Edgar, and I thought, this is as good a musical situation as I could ever hope for." And so I really felt that even though I was just doing it part-time, I was still doing it in a pretty fulfilling way."

And indeed, despite the restraints on his time, Barenberg was still wrapped up in music, not only with the trio but with a variety of other projects, most notably the *Transatlantic Sessions*—a set of filmed-for-TV performances featuring musicians from the British Isles, Canada and the United States in a stunning, evocative cross-cultural exchange. "I've been in the house band for all three of them, and a featured artist, too" Barenberg says. "In some ways, it's the best musical experience one could have. You wake up every morning learning these tunes, and then you film them with different combinations of great musicians—some of whom you've never met before. It's very invigorating."

Still, despite the satisfactions of projects like the *Transatlantic Session*, the Barenberg-Douglas-Meyer trio and a miscellany of appearances with friends like fellow guitarist Bryan Sutton, fiddler Aubrey Haynie and singer Tim O'Brien, Barenberg looked forward to the resumption of a career fully devoted to music. "What you miss when you're working during the day is having the time to really practice and write as much as you would like," he notes. "One of the most satisfying things for me is writing tunes, and even more, to actually record them and put them together and play them with other people. So I'm very happy to be back in that situation again."

The fruit of that long gestation, and of his move back to full-time status, *When At Last* is likely to make a lot of people besides Barenberg happy too. Leading off with the taut groove of "Little Monk," the set winds its way through bluegrass, Celtic and contradance-flavored tunes that frame Barenberg's lyricism and rhythmic subtleties in intricate ensembles that feature long-time friends and collaborators.

Douglas, fiddle giant Stuart Duncan and percussionist Kenny Malone, who appeared on Barenberg's last solo album, *Moving Pictures*, are back for the ride, while the bottom end is held down by Viktor Krauss and Dennis Crouch. "I'd played with both of them in various settings, but I hadn't recorded with either of them before," Russ says. "I wanted acoustic bass on the album, and those are two guys whose playing I really like."

Less familiar contributors turn up too and add a delightful new flavor to the work. "Ruthie Dornfeld is just a fantastic musician," Barenberg notes. "I played a lot of contra dances with her up around Boston in the early 80s. She's a great dance fiddler, but she does a lot of other things too and she has a great feel and rhythmic sense; she plays a lot of traditional music and understands it really well. And Jeremiah McLane is a very fine accordion and piano player from Vermont who plays in a wonderful trio called Nightingale; they're one of my favorite bands. He and I and Ruthie, along with Susan Kevra, who's a great contradance caller and teacher, went to France a few years ago and did a little tour doing dances and concerts. So we have that history together, and I wanted to have some different people from outside of the Nashville crowd on there, particularly on some of the more traditional-sounding tunes."

Still, 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—and by Barenberg's newfound energy and re-dedication to making music central to his life. "I'm at a point in my life now where I really appreciate what a gift it is to be a musician," Russ Barenberg says with a smile, "and I'm ready to embrace whatever's involved in doing it for a living. It's just a great time for me."