



Minnesota Guitar Wizards

Any survey of Minnesota's natural wonders will mention the pristine lakes, forests, and rivers for which the state is famous. Musicians, guitar aficionados, and critics know the state is also home to a wondrous concentration of nationally and internationally acclaimed acoustic guitarists.

The Minnesota Guitar Wizards is a collaboration that celebrates and showcases this amazing pool of talent. It's purpose is to present to audiences the marvelous diversity of style and repertoire found in the music of five of these acoustic masters: **Peter Lang, Dakota Dave Hull, Tim Sparks, Phil Heywood, and Dean Magraw.** (A typical concert will feature three or four of these artists.)

Presenting solo performances and group pieces, each show highlights the unique artistry of the individual players as well as the stunning creative synergy of the ensemble. With a dizzying array of musical genres at their disposal, including blues, ragtime, jazz, folk, gospel, spiritual, Latin, western classical, Hindustani and Carnatic Indian music, the Minnesota Guitar Wizards tap American and world musical roots in their virtuoso performances of original compositions and covers of timeless pieces.

Artist Biographies

Peter Lang

Discovered by guitar legend John Fahey in 1972, Lang is one of the finest acoustic finger-style players in the nation—a true master. His songs are complex, mercurial, lyrical, and fluid. After 20 years in absence from recording and performing . . . he's back with an excellent new CD *Guitar*. A rare must-see show for fans of finger-style guitar. *The Village Voice*

A pioneer of fingerstyle guitar music, Peter Lang has been dubbed an “American Primitive” following the analogy of legendary guitarist John Fahey who used the phrase in the sense of the French Primitive painters, meaning “untutored.” Influenced by country bluesmen such as Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Blake, Rev. Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, and folk revival icons Dave Van Ronk and Dave “Snaker” Ray, Lang has dazzled audiences and critics for decades with equal portions of technical brilliance, originality and soul.

He was discovered in 1972 by John Fahey who promptly signed him to Takoma Records. Lang's debut album *The Thing at the Nursery Room Window* quickly established him as a peer of other notable artists on Fahey's label, including Leo Kottke, George Winston, Robbie Basho, and Bola Sete.

In 1973, Lang joined Fahey and Kottke to record Takoma's most successful release ever *John Fahey, Peter Lang, and Leo Kottke*, (1974) a compilation that climbed to top of the Billboard charts and reached #4 on the FM radio charts. His next recording, *Lycurgus (Flying Fish)* garnered a Grammy nomination in 1976.

For nearly a decade, Lang toured, recorded and performed, cementing his reputation as one of the nation's top acoustic players and a composer of rare ability and originality.

During this time he was in good company, having recorded or performed with Ry Cooder, John Fahey, Jerry Garcia, Chet Atkins, Vassar Clements, Norman Blake, John Hartford, John Renbourn, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Emmylou Harris, Leo Kottke, David Bromberg, Freddie King, The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Hot Tuna, John Hammond, Keith Jarrett, Phoebe Snow, Maria Muldaur, Jimmy Buffett, The Yellowjackets, Robben Ford, Oregon, Larry Coryell and many others.

Then in 1981 he all but retired from music to pursue other interests and raise a family, accepting only select engagements. In 1989 he started a new career, producing animation for film and broadcast and began a self-imposed exile from performing.

By 1999, Lang decided to leave his job as an animation/special effects producer to reinvigorate his musical career. Subsequently, he has returned to concert performance and produced two critically acclaimed recordings which clearly demonstrates he didn't miss a beat during his time off from stage and studio. These latest CDs, Dharma Blues (2002) and Guitar (2004) were both recorded for his own label, Horus Records.

Lang's credits include:

- Seven record albums including John Fahey, Peter Lang, and Leo Kottke
- Grammy Nomination, 1976 Lycurgus
- Guitar Player Magazine 1974 - Readers Poll, "Best New Guitarist" category
- Minnesota Music Awards, "Best Guitarist" 1981, 1982, 1988
- Co-author of the book Twentieth Century Masters of Fingerstyle Guitar, 1981, Hal Leonard Publishing

Dakota Dave Hull

Hailed by everyone from Dave Van Ronk to Doc Watson, from the The Washington Post to Downbeat, Dakota Dave Hull's guitar style spans a wide musical geography to create an infectious, uniquely personal blend of jazz, ragtime, folk, blues, Western swing, and vintage pop. Dakota Dave is a restlessly curious, adventurous traveler along the broad highway of America's music. In his playing the masters speak, but in a vocabulary that is Dave's alone, alternatively mirthful and moving, always melodic.

A gifted composer as well as a strikingly original interpreter of older tunes, Dakota Dave calls what he does "classic American guitar." Folk legend Dave Van Ronk called Hull "one of the best guitarists in the world."

Most all, Dakota Dave's music is great fun. As Douglas Greene (Ranger Doug of Riders in the Sky) puts it, "There is an imp within Dave Hull that always expresses itself on the fretboard; a witty, intelligent yet respectful imp who frolics in his music, an imp Dakota Dave neither fights nor lets take control, but simply absorbs into the heart of his style."

On stage or in the recording studio, Dave has performed with Utah Phillips, Doc Watson, Robin and Linda Williams, Dave Van Ronk, John Renbourn, Paul Geremia, Spider John Koerner, Cam Waters, Sally Rogers, Butch Thompson, Peter Ostroushko, Garrison Keillor, and Norman Blake, among others. His albums include three with early performing partner Sean Blackburn and four solo efforts (the acclaimed Hull's Victory and Reunion Rag, both on Flying Fish) with two more, New Shirt and Sheridan Square Rag on Arabica Records. His three albums with guitar and mandolin ace Kari Larson (also on Arabica) have become legendary.

For a long time Dave has been somewhat of a closet fingerstylist. There have been a few fingerpicking tunes on his recordings, but they've mostly taken a back seat to the flatpick pieces for which he's known. At the urging of Van Ronk, among others, in 2002 Dave released his first album of fingerstyle tunes, Sheridan Square Rag. A new album The Loyalty Waltz was released in November 2004.

Phil Heywood

“Phil Heywood may be the Midwest’s best-kept secret.” – Gary Joyner, Acoustic Guitar

It is something of a well-kept secret that Phil Heywood is one of the premier acoustic guitarists working today. His list of achievements includes a stint with internationally renowned guitarist Leo Kottke, who, after hearing Heywood for the first time, promptly asked him to join his tour so the two could play duets. Heywood is a former National Fingerpicking Champion (1986) and winner of the American Fingerstyle Guitar Competition (1987), events judged by some of the genre’s top players. He has appeared on NPR’s “A Prairie Home Companion” with guitar legend Chet Atkins, and shared the stage with a host of the best regional, national, and international artists, among them Norman Blake, John Renbourn, Greg Brown, Stephen Fearing, Tim Sparks, Peter Lang, Pat Donohue, Robin and Linda Williams, Dave Ray, and Spider John Koerner.

Listen with half an ear to a Heywood performance and you will soon be fully absorbed in his wide-ranging grooves and dynamic tone. His playing encompasses the rhythmic pulse of the early country bluesmen, the melodic flair of contemporary steel-string guitar, and the nuanced right hand attack of the classical guitarist. Lucid, lyrical, soul-grabbing guitar instrumentals are his stock-in-trade, yet he frequently fields requests to sing more.

His warm plainspoken voice blends seamlessly with his rock-solid guitar work and draws the listener in with equal allure. Playing or singing, his rootsy sources bubble to the surface in a way that is organic, eminently accessible, and, as one fan put it, bound to “make your ears smile.”

Heywood has earned standing ovations at the Cedar Cultural Center following CD release concerts for his most recent recordings. *Banks of the River* (2003) and *Circle Tour* (2001) are in many ways companion pieces, parts of a continuing excursion tapping into and branching out from the roots of American fingerstyle guitar music. With his original pieces and choice of covers, Heywood takes his audience on a musical pilgrimage through a rich landscape that is both personal and linked to tradition, paying homage along the way to a lineage of inspiring players who have sprung from native soil. As one reviewer writes:

“...there are few who are able to infuse contemporary fingerstyle guitar with the sophisticated yet straightforward and no-frills sensibility and technique of the acoustic blues masters in the way that Phil Heywood does. He may very well be unique in the level of taste and virtuosity and mastery of tone and dynamics that he brings to this music.” *The Guitarist*, a publication of the Minnesota Guitar Society

Tim Sparks

“You can hear Tim Sparks think. He plays by choice not habit; ideas, not licks. I’ve heard him do this on guitars so badly intonated, they wouldn’t make a good ashtray; the same guitars—I remember a piece called *Blues on Bartok Street*—are guitars in Tim’s hands. Beautiful. I’m Tim Sparks biggest fan. His stuff is very difficult to play but it doesn’t sound difficult. I think that’s real musicianship. He’s really one of the best musicians I know.” Leo Kottke

Tim Sparks’ long journey to the 1993 National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship and beyond began modestly in Winston-Salem, North Carolina when he started picking out tunes by ear on an old Stella flat top. He was given his first guitar when a bout of encephalitis kept him out of school for a year. The music he heard around him was traditional country blues and the gospel his grandmother played on piano in a small church in the Blue Ridge Mountains, so that’s what he taught himself to play.

A musically astute uncle heard Tim playing one day and amazed that he had come so far on his own, nominated him for a scholarship at the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts. There he studied the classics with Segovia protégé Jesus Silva while continuing to play all kinds of music, including classic jazz to which he increasingly turned for inspiration.

He adapted compositions by Jelly Roll Morton, Scott Joplin and Fats Waller to the guitar, frequently reducing piano arrangements to their spare essence. Early influences were Doc Watson, Arthur Smith and, most importantly, Duck Baker, who opened up a horizon of possibilities for the fingerstyle guitar.

After a stint on the road with a Chicago based rhythm and blues band, Sparks arrived in Minnesota where he soon established himself as a journeyman guitarist and session player. While recording three albums with the seminal vocal jazz ensemble Rio Nido, Sparks also became proficient in jazz styles from Brazilian to Be Bop.

His jazz chops have garnered him several regional music awards including Best Acoustic Guitarist, Best Latin Jazz Guitarist, and Best Jazz Guitarist. Important models in this period were Kenny Burrell, Wes Montgomery, and fingerstylists Lenny Breau and Ed Bickert. Two Minnesota guitarists with whom he shared a lot of ideas and inspiration were National Fingerstyle Champ Pat Donohue and plectrum ace Dean Magraw. It was at this time that he arranged Carla Bley's composition "Jesus Maria" for Leo Kottke.

He also found the time to revive his interest in the classics, adapting Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite to the guitar, a work that has been cited as a significant contribution to solo guitar literature. For Sparks it was a labor of love that earned him the fingerstyle guitar championship in Winfield, Kansas.

A sojourn abroad inspired an interest in European and Mediterranean styles, particularly the music of the Balkans, culminating in the recording of Sparks' Balkan Dreams Suite, a remarkable collection of odd-meter guitar arrangements. Many of the Balkan Dreams compositions were recorded on Tim's debut solo guitar CD, The Nutcracker Suite. The recording was cited by Guitar Player Magazine as "An exhilarating, odd-meter minefield inspired by Near Eastern music. An important recording from a gifted composer, arranger and performer." Two more releases followed on the Acoustic Guitar label: Guitar Bazaar and One String Leads to Another.

In July of 1995 Sparks was a featured performer with Crossing Borders at the Bethlehem International Music Festival. He has received two Arts Fellowships to pursue ethno-musicological studies and spent one fall studying Fado and Portuguese guitar in Lisbon.

Three CDs have appeared on the Tzadik label featuring Tim's renditions of Jewish music. Neshamah was a solo effort while Tanz and At the Rebbe's Table included ensemble work. All three releases have been critically acclaimed from a broad spectrum of critics and listeners alike. In Spring 2003, Tzadik released Masada Guitars featuring interpretations of John Zorn's music by Sparks, Bill Frisell, and Marc Ribot.

"This is totally beautiful and inspiring music. Tim Sparks is incredible, a complete original. Every guitarist on the planet has got to hear this." Bill Frisell commenting on Neshamah

Dean Magraw

"He is all over his acoustic guitar, inventing chords, bending strings, rolling the bass note like distant thunder and squeezing sounds out of the instrument that should not, it seems, be possible...This passionate music, genuine compositions that come from the heart."

Michigan Daily

Since his earliest performing days, critically acclaimed guitarist and composer Dean Magraw has performed in a cornucopia of musical worlds. Among his influences are various blues styles, particularly the country blues of Robert Johnson, diverse jazz styles, western classical music, Hindustani and Carnatic Indian music, the music of Armenian duduk player Djivan Gasparyan, and folk and traditional genres of many cultures.

Dean studied composition at the University of Minnesota under C. Lee Humphries and Steven Barnett, and attended Berklee College of Music where he received his Associates Degree in instrumental performance in 1977. He also studied privately with Boston area experimental guitarist John Damian and Be-Bop saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi.

In addition to solo tours in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, Magraw's unique, soulful style has made him a favorite collaborator of other internationally touring artists. For 15 years, Dean's live and recorded performances with Prairie Home Companion violinist/mandolinist Peter Ostroushko have been celebrated by audiences and critics worldwide. He has also performed with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, classical violinist Nigel Kennedy, the traditional Irish super group Altan, with singer/songwriters Paul Brady, Greg Brown, John Gorka, jazz bassist Anthony Cox, bluegrass fiddler Byron Berline, jazz violinist Randy Sabien, traditional Irish multi-instrumentalist John Williams, experimental guitarist Steve Tibbetts, Jam-Band rockers Big Wu, tabla artist Marcus Wise, veena virtuoso Nirmala Rajasheker, the world music trio Eight Head, radio host Garrison Keillor, and jazz organist Jack McDuff, to name a small sampling.

Besides appearing on countless recording projects as a sideman, producer, arranger, and composer, Dean has released three solo CDs. The first two, Broken Silence and Seventh One were nominated by the national Association of Independent Record Distributors for the "Indie" Award for Best Acoustic Instrumental of the Year, the equivalent of a Grammy for smaller independent labels. Broken Silence won this award in 1994. In 2003, Dean celebrated the release of his latest recording, Heavy Meadow which features his solo guitar compositions soaring effortlessly through myriad emotional soundscapes from serenity to intensity and beyond.

Dean's dynamic compositions range from spacious heartfelt melodies to explosive, spirited flights of passion. His highly original performances reflect his love of music in all its dynamic and tonal splendor as he playfully seduces full spectrum sounds from a limitless palate of wood and steel.

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