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Michael Nix

By Jane Kaufman

The sound of a vibrating plucked string stirs the depths of Michael Nix's soul. Nix developed the 7-string Banjar to give voice to longings that he felt could best be expressed by crossing three instruments, the lute, the banjo, and the classical guitar, to establish a new, singularly recognizable musical voice. "It's given me the freedom to become a creative artist, to go beyond being an interpretive artist."

Accomplished as a soloist, composer, and collaborator, Nix finds joy in composing and performing transcendent melodies and surprising harmonies.

Nix performs on Banjar, classical guitar, banjo, and mandolin, throughout the United States and Asia, has recorded for the PBS series "American Experience", numerous independent documentaries, and CD projects. Nix's instrumentals, songs, and compositions draw from classic banjo and guitar, early banjo, folk, jazz, and world music traditions. His compositions are performed internationally.

A willing collaborator, Nix has worked with orchestras, choirs, dance ensembles, classical musicians and folk musicians in many different contexts. He performs and records with violinist/mandolinist Chris Devine with whom he was a founding member of the Pioneer Consort, using the seven-string Banjar to explore its use in world chamber music. Nix participated in Seegerfest 2014, and other concerts commemorating the life of Pete Seeger.

Music has always been part of the landscape of Nix's life. While growing up, many of his family members played instruments. He sang in school and church choirs and played in school bands from a young age. Family sing-alongs and informal concerts were common at holiday gatherings.

Nix's first instruments were violin and piano, on which he experimented with simple compositional techniques. Early fascination with The Beatles and acoustic tinged folk rock fueled his interest in guitar, which became his primary instrument for decades.

An aspiring playwright in college, his interest in the arc of a story -- in drama, in dance and in all of the arts and sciences -- inform his work as a composer,

librettist, song writer, teacher and in planning concert repertoire.

Nix went on to study classical guitar at Keene State College. By his junior year, he was performing in a professional classical guitar duo, but his steady income was playing bluegrass and folk music with Rick Fiske, with whom he toured as the duo Whole Wheat. "That's where I began really getting my banjo skills together," Nix says. It's also where he first noticed something he still likes about the banjo: "It makes people twitch, makes them want to move." Upon graduation, he was asked to remain on the music faculty at Keene State, teaching guitar, and coaching ensembles.

From his earliest days with the banjo, he began to experiment, writing a banjo version of "Purple Haze" that won second place in a Jimi Hendrix play off contest, and an atonal version of Devil's Dream, which he called Devil's Nightmare for the Newfane, Vermont Banjo Festival.

"We didn't win anything at that one, but it was wildly fun, and people were dancing."

The five-string banjo finger style classical banjo evolved in the last half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Originally strung with gut strings, which were replaced with nylon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had a bright bell-like piercing tone and limited bass range in comparison to a guitar. The seven-stringed instrument allows him to play multiple melodic lines with both the lower registers of a classical guitar and the tonal coloring of the banjo.

"The Banjar has a unique timbre. It allows me to play in a polyphonic manner at a high technical level similar in range, and palate as a classical guitar. But it also allows me to have similar sparkle, colors, and the use of a drone string that the banjo offers. My goal is to bring the classical banjo from the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

"I hope that I can give the audience the theatrical experience of flow," he says. "That is, the outside world experience goes away, and for an hour or so the music becomes the only reality."

"I want people to feel like I've taken them on a musical journey."