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T O D A Y

Richter's Scale

When classical guitarist Brad Richter and his ensemble of musicians mash "Flight of the Bumblebee" with Dick Dale's "Misirlou" in Enid later this month, the city will not only welcome home a native son and member of Enid High School's Class of '87 but also one of the world's most acclaimed guitar masters.

Richter, who was born in Oklahoma City and grew up in the Garfield County seat, was determined to play music from a young age, despite an ill-fated first attempt in school.

"I showed up late to band in sixth grade, and the only thing left was trombone," Richter says. "I didn't like it."

After that brief and underwhelming experience, Richter's parents weren't inclined to foot the bill for another passing interest, so he took it upon himself to try again. He bought his first guitar the year Ronald Reagan was shot. He was twelve years old and snuck off to an Enid pawn shop with cash he had earned mowing lawns.

"I had always been attracted to the sound of a guitar," Richter says. "I liked to play air guitar with a tennis racket."

Richter's early repertoire was limited to songs he could play using the beat-up guitar's three remaining strings. By age fourteen, he announced to his family that playing guitar was what he wanted to do for a living.

"They wisely tried to talk me out of that," he says.

However, two years later, his mom bought him a ticket to a Michael Hedges concert in Enid. The late Hedges, an Enid native considered by many the most innovative and kinetic acoustic guitarist in the history of the instrument, died in a car accident in 1997. Richter pauses as he recalls hearing Hedges perform live.

"It was the most formidable experience of my youth," Richter says. "I started to emulate Michael Hedges."

A year and a half later, Richter's mother arranged several summer lessons for her seventeen-year-old son at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, and those few lessons represented the sum of Richter's early formal training.





"At the time, I had a real urge to get out and see the world," Richter says.

Richter left Enid in 1987 on the morning of his eighteenth birthday. He, along with several members of a band he helped form, headed for the mountains of Aspen, Colorado. That stint lasted six weeks before the group moved to Los Angeles. For the next year, Richter played gigs across southern California while spending hours a day practicing classical guitar.

At nineteen, he returned to Chicago to compete for a prestigious scholarship to the American Conservatory of Music and was selected from a field of 120 contenders. After earning his bachelor's degree in music performance by saying, Richter was accepted to the Royal College of Music in London.

Prior to his acceptance, Richter, who attended a summer music camp in Chichester, England, had the opportunity to impress Carlos Bonell, a member of the school's faculty. Bonell waived his audition; however, on the first day of ensemble class, Richter admits he couldn't keep up.

"I wasn't very good at sight reading," he says.

Bonell responded to Richter's unremarkable performance by saying, Richter recalls, "You don't really have any technique, Brad, but I'll fix that. It will be like pouring water in the desert."

By the time Richter completed his graduate studies, his technique was anything but lacking. He left London in 1994 with the Royal College's coveted Thomas Morherr prize in tow and returned to Chicago to begin a concert career. The first few years out, he eked out a career teaching guitar and playing in clubs.

In 1997, Richter and his wife Kerstin relocated to Arizona, where they now live with their two young sons, Luca and Noah. Today, between teaching guitar classes at the University of Arizona, Richter plays as many as fifty concerts a year to a worldwide fanbase. Recently, Mel Bay Publications, a giant in the field of music education materials, released several instructional books featuring transcriptions of Richter's original compositions.

"He is definitely one of the most important guitar composers in the United States, if not the world," says Matt Denman, director of the guitar program at both the Classen School of Advanced Studies in Oklahoma City and Southern Nazarene University in Bethany.

The landscape of the southwestern United States, with its canyons and deserts, has served as inspiration for Richter. So, too, has Oklahoma.

"I wouldn't have wanted to grow up anywhere else," Richter says. "I spent a lot of time in the countryside around Enid. I feel at home in the air there, watching the sunset, looking at the stars at night, being with old friends and family. It's very near and dear to me."

— Jennifer James McCollum

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Photos by Darris Harris (above); Marc W. Lypcynski (previous page)