

My Story—the unofficial bio

I started out a classical prodigy type, took a 25 year odyssey through rock and jazz to find my sound, and returned full circle to the classical world, a changed man.

I started playing violin when I was 4 and was in Juilliard pre-college by the time I was 8. I was winning major competitions by the age of 13—I played 6 concerts with the Chicago Symphony when I was 13 as the 1st place winner in their youth competition. By 16 I had played the Sibelius, Bruch, Tchaikovsky and many other concertos with orchestras. I entered Chicago Musical College at the age of 16 and by 17 I went to NY to study with Ivan Galamian at Juilliard. My parents were very happy.

I entered Juilliard wanting to be the next Jascha Heifetz, but I left wanting to be the next Jimi Hendrix. Shortly after starting at Juilliard my brother gave me 3 records that changed my whole musical outlook—a Jimi Hendrix album, a Frank Zappa record and one by electric violinist Jean Luc Ponty. I was soon playing jazz with some other students and started writing and singing pop songs.

The pivotal moment came when I was searching the Schwann Catalog one day and noticed that there were 6 pages of Tchaikovsky violin concerto recordings. I thought, “why would anyone buy a Tracy Silverman recording of the Tchaikovsky violin concerto when you could get one by Heifetz or Milstein or Oistrakh or Stern or Perlman or any one of the incredible recordings that were already there. I decided that moment that I would take a different path. I wanted to be a violin rockstar. My mission was to see kids playing air violin. My parents were not so happy.

I graduated Juilliard at the age of 20 and felt that I had all the time in the world to explore my new musical calling. I joined a progressive metal band and learned that I needed an electric violin. At that time there were very few available so I built my own. After playing with electric guitarists I decided I wanted to add lower strings to the violin, so I designed 6 string instruments and over the course of several years had different guitar makers build an assortment of 6 string electric violins for me, each time changing my design and trying different things to achieve the sound I was imagining, all the while trying different amps, pedals, etc. I was about 20 years ahead of my time.

I had a band in NY for years call “Stradivarius”. I was the songwriter, lead singer and electric violinist. We played every all the time, anywhere—big rock clubs, tiny dive clubs, opening for people, closing for people. I was moving further and further away from my classical roots.

I moved to Minneapolis and started a very heavy, grunge-metal band called “Motherlode”. We played everywhere. “Motherlode” morphed into “Gutbucket” which was even heavier. I was playing exclusively distorted violin at very loud volumes, and my lead singing was more lead screaming. We couldn’t get a record deal because no one thought an electric violin could lead a rock band. An A&R man from Warner Bros asked me, “Can you just play guitar instead?” At that point I was about 10 years ahead of my

time. I was about as far away from classical music as I could get and my parents were despondent. I was wasting my talents, they told me.

Then I got a call from the Turtle Island String Quartet. The violist, Danny Seidenberg, had heard me playing jazz violin at a wedding in NJ 7 years before and remembered me. Since I couldn't get arrested with my rock band, I took the gig. Playing fairly traditional jazz on acoustic violin with a string quartet. Touring all over the world. My parents were happier. I was starting to come back around.

TISQ was on Windham Hill Records and after 4 years and 4 CD's with them, I left the quartet and produced several CD's for Windham Hill, one of which was my first solo CD. I went on to record a mostly acoustic CD with a Brazilian percussionist, a completely electric CD with a German percussionist, formed another rock band. I was still about 5 years ahead of my time. My parents were getting worried again.

The agent who booked TISQ in Germany was booking me solo over there and it was through him that I met Terry Riley. We did a fair amount of touring and it was at a 3-night stand at Yoshi's in Oakland, California that John Adams saw me play. He immediately came backstage after the show and asked if I'd be interested in playing a solo part in a commission he was starting for the LA Phil. The violin part soon expanded as we worked together on the piece and it became an electric violin concerto, "The Dharma at Big Sur." We premiered it with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the LA Phil for the gala opening of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. My parents were delighted. I was finally no longer ahead of my time. I had come full circle back to the classical world.

But the thing which I am happiest about is that John told me that it was only because I had spent so many years absorbing rock and jazz and Brazilian and other world music into my bloodstream that he was interested in me doing the piece. He could have Leila Josephewicz or any one else in the world play the piece, but it was precisely because I had "wasted all those years and talent" playing in bands and singing that set me apart from all the best classical players. I felt fully vindicated.

My next hurdle was to be able to fully realize my dream of being able to play solo shows, to play rhythm violin while singing and to create arrangements which required no other musicians. This, I felt, was the only way to prove what the electric violin was really capable of doing. My "I'd Rather be Dreaming" CD is the result. And now I teach jazz and rock violin at Belmont University and regularly perform solo shows. I'm recognized in the string world as being the most important innovator of the electric violin and the very best in the world at what I do. In fact, I'm the only one in the world who does what I do. I feel that my time has finally arrived.

And my parents? They're still wondering when I'm going to finally get off the road...