

GET

Defying expectations with fingerstyle guitarist **Eric Skye**

BY PAUL ANDREWS

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Eric Skye practices in his Portland, Oregon, backyard while a few of his family's half-dozen chickens look on.



REAL



E

ric Skye is warming up onstage, strumming chords and running through arpeggios during sound checks for a Seattle Folklore Society show. There's a pause, a few ticks of silence. Then a long, lingering, elastic slide note on the upper E string comes over the speakers.

Say what? Skye doesn't play slide guitar. There's no bottleneck, no lipstick case, no lighter... no slide implement of any kind anywhere in sight.

The sound tech looks up from his audio board with a quizzical expression. The stagehand stops adjusting the mic stand and cocks his head. The producer rises up from his introductory notes and says out loud, "Where did that come from?"

Skye holds up his left hand, flashing his wedding ring. "It's why I got married, man!" he says, grinning.

Lauren Skye, who fortunately shares her husband's sense of humor, is sitting with Eric at the kitchen table, having coffee over the print version of the *New York Times*, which the couple has subscribed to for nearly three decades. They're listening to a familiar playlist—a little Bill Frisell improv, some Scottish fiddle from Jenna Moynihan. All of a sud-

den, an electronica cut comes on. Lauren starts in her chair. *Where did that come from?*

"He's always changing his music library, throwing in something totally different," Lauren says. "And when I ask, he says, 'Oh, it's just something I came across—isn't it great?'"

Storied L.A. sideman and session ace Mark Goldenberg and Skye are playing a concert at "Skye House," Eric's comfy art- and artifact-filled northeast Portland home featured in his numerous YouTube videos. Eric's left fingers are dancing higher and higher on his 12-fret 00-Skye, the Santa Cruz Guitar model he designed with company founder Richard Hoover.

"So he gets up there playing with his thumb over the 15th fret—over it!" Goldenberg exclaims. "And he's playing harmonics! I'm sure he's fretting with his thumb!"

One would assume that a guitarist's guitarist like Goldenberg has pretty much seen it all in half a century of playing alongside everyone from Jackson Browne to Hugh Laurie. But when it comes to Skye, Goldenberg sounds in awe. "It's a pleasure to play



Eric's personal Santa Cruz Guitar Co. 00-Skye model has proven to be one of the company's best-selling models over the years. The guitar features a cocobolo back and sides, an Adirondack spruce top and a 24.9-inch scale. Skye, ever the minimalist, uses just two guitars and both are this model.

with him just to see the technical feats he pulls off. Eric does a lot of things on the guitar where I look at him and I go, *Where did that come from?*”

Welcome to what may be Eric Skye’s chief artistic asset: the musical ambush. Skye has an uncanny ability to make the familiar sound new, and the new sound familiar. “Contemplation” and “Watermelon Man” in his hands are unlike any version you’ve heard before. “Wichita Lineman” and “Ode to Billie Joe” are no longer just pop tunes. His own songs, like “Blues for Freida,” written for the grandmother who gave him his first guitar, and “Message to CJ,” for his drummer friend Carlton Jackson, stick in the mind like Top 10s on the first listen. On “June Apple”—the title song of an album he did in 2016 with mandolinist Tim Connell—and “Cold Frosty Morning,” you can swear there’s a fiddle down there in his soundhole somewhere. Not to mention the out-of-body experience of *A Different Kind of Blue*, his masterful “reimagining” of Miles Davis’ landmark album.

Whatever his choice of the moment, Skye’s music crisscrosses so many boundaries and triggers so many associations that it takes genre-bending to the point of stress fracture. It’s genre-breaking. He’s a genre unto himself—Eric Skyewalker, hyperdriving across the musical galaxy.

“He’s one of those players whose sound, style and technique are so wholly unique to him that you hear three notes and you know right away who’s playing,” says Goldenberg.

In an age of rampant musical homogenization, Skye’s ingenuity glitters like a diamond on black velvet. A study by Barcelona’s Artificial Intelligence Research Institute examined 500,000 pieces of music from 1955 to 2010 for timbre, pitch and loudness. The finding, which any serious music follower would have no problem accepting, was a diminution of variety in melody, instrumentalization and loudness (diversity of volume). In the current environment, success means doing one thing over and over again—the one thing often being just a variation on someone else’s one thing.

In contrast, Skye is a musical changeling, forever defying expectations. Although he grew up like a lot of American boys dreaming of being a rock star, the choice to chart untrammelled frontiers was pretty much forced on him—by a confluence of triumph, sorrow, misfortune and creative rebirth around seven years ago. Over the course of a couple of years, he launched a signature guitar, lost his mother to breast cancer, was diagnosed with a serious heart condition, underwent corrective surgery, developed

a life-threatening infection and lost a kidney. He emerged a new person with a new vision.

“I definitely got a good look behind the curtain,” Skye says. “It changed my art completely.”

Eric Skye was born 53 years ago in the tiny Pennsylvania township of Doylestown, Bucks County, about an hour north and an epoch removed from Philadelphia. Culturally, the region is not that different from when George Washington crossed the Delaware there in 1776. “It’s a really historic place, bridges, landmarks—right out of a coffee-table book,” Skye says. Although his father liked classical music, Eric was born to a household with no musicians. “So I don’t know where this came from,” he says.

His first guitar was a plastic red Sears-Roebuck archtop from his grandmother for Christmas at age 6 or 7. “My sister got the real guitar—a basic Sears classical model,” also from their grandmother. Fortunately, his sister wasn’t interested, so Eric appropriated hers, got a Happy Traum chord book and started teaching himself how to play. He was immediately hooked. “It was my Xbox.”

Seven years Eric’s senior, his sister did guide him musically. “She had beads in her room you had to walk through, and incense, and she was like, you gotta listen to Neil Young, and *At Fillmore East*, the Allman Brothers, the first Black Sabbath record, all the Stones, *Revolver*. I was so drawn to that ’70s Bohemian thing, it was a big influence.”

But how to grow on the guitar? Eric’s father, a painter and wood artisan who made early reproduction Penn Dutch furniture, considered rock music “garbage.”

“He had a shop in the basement, and if you wanted to spend time with Dad you had to grab some sandpaper and go down there and help sand whatever armoire he was working on.” If there was music playing, it was classical.

“He was pushing me against my will to take up classical,” Skye remembers. Around 1980, his father moved the family to Silicon Valley for a “real job” as a technical draftsman. It was work he hated, and he died soon after from a heart attack—but not before buying Eric a decent Yamaha classical guitar and paying for introductory lessons. His father’s sudden demise taught Eric to focus on what you love rather than what will make you lots of money. “The message was stick to the art thing if you can.”

But he stayed lukewarm on classical lessons. “In seventh grade this rock band came and played outside our school, and I see them setting up and wow, there’s an actual Marshall full stack in front of me, and bass and drums, and I remember thinking *that’s cool*. But the real flash of insight moment was when I saw the girls watching them play. I thought, *OK, I gotta do this. I gotta get an electric guitar.*”

Skye’s sister, who was working as a dental assistant, had noticed a lot of aquariums at the clinic. She suggested Eric pitch them on cleaning the tanks. Skye began hauling in \$100 a round, which paid for rock lessons.

It was his classical teacher, though, who provided the aha moment. “When I brought in a Led Zeppelin thing and he was able to listen to it and write it out on tablature, that was like a superpower, man,” Skye says. “I was like, what witchcraft is this you’re doing?”

His classical guitar teacher also pointed Eric to blues and jazz artists—George Benson, Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, Grant Green. At the same time, completely out of left field, Windham Hill was gaining traction. “You could go into a coffee shop and see Tuck & Patti playing, Michael Hedges, William Ackerman, Alex de Grassi.” He found Hedges a bit too flashy and Ackerman too New Age. But de Grassi was the Goldilocks.

“A key moment for me was in the ninth grade, a friend’s mother knew I was into guitar and gave me a cassette with Alex’s first two records on it. I’d never heard anything like that. It rewired my brain to hear solo guitar that wasn’t classical and wasn’t primitive blues. I didn’t know about open tunings and couldn’t get my head around [how] this was just one dude with a steel-string guitar sitting in front of a microphone.”

Thanks to his classical teacher’s expertise, to say nothing of broad-mindedness, the would-be rock star’s trajectory changed. Electric no longer interested Skye as much. Again courtesy of his sister, he had come into a Stratocaster a boyfriend had left behind. “It was really nice, an early ’70s model that looked like Clapton’s, maple and all black. I went into a music store and saw a 12-string acoustic and I thought, *that’s what I really need*. I mean, it had twice as many strings! So I walked in there and said, ‘Excuse me, sir, do you think I could trade a Stratocaster for that \$200 Yamaha 12-string?’ And he’s like, ‘Sure, no problem, I’ll even throw in a set of strings!’” For the tyro guitarist it was the deal of the century. “I had this giant 12-string I spent the rest of my youth tuning,” he says. Sometimes he’d take it down to the standard six “and it’d be a super wide

neck, with the empty tuning pegs rattling. But I loved that thing. I do think it upped my hand strength.”

By high school, Skye—“not the best student, kind of struggling a bit”—was thinking more and more of a professional music career. He was good enough that a girlfriend’s father, a guitarist, began referring Eric for private gigs. “I’d make like \$300 for 45 minutes. I said, ‘Hey, this is OK.’” Teaching became another revenue stream. “I was about one inch ahead of any given student,” he says with a laugh. “Someone would call up and say ‘Can you teach me some James Burton Tele stuff’ and I’d go like, ‘Sure!’ I’d hang up the phone and go ‘Shit, what have I done now?’ So I’d go down to the San Francisco library and get old issues of *Acoustic Guitar* or *Guitar Player*, go to Amoeba Music and buy a record, and work 10 hours of prep to do a 45-minute lesson.”

Practicing, gigs, teaching, private events... by the late ’80s, music had become pretty much Skye’s life. He grew out his hair, shortened his surname, collected tattoos, often on top of other tattoos. One night, he was playing at the Los Gatos Roasting Co. near San Jose when he caught the eye of a dark-haired, free-spirited beauty managing the espresso bar. “It was instantaneous on both sides,” Lauren recalls. “He was warm and funny. It was that thing across the room.” As manager, she had an easy entrée: “I had to pay him by check.” The two discovered they had some mutual friends and started hanging out together. Two years later, they wed.

At the time they met, Lauren was getting her BA and teaching certificate from San Jose State University. After the wedding they moved to San Francisco, where Lauren was pursuing her master’s at USF. Knowing they wanted a family, it seemed a bit risky for Eric to pursue a music career. They realized, though, “We don’t spend a lot of money, we don’t travel a lot. We were very lucky in that respect,” she says.

Skye became a fixture in the Bay Area music scene, sometimes working with a band, other times doing solo gigs. “I was still trying to figure out where

“It was like Steve Jobs asking would you like to make a signature model phone.”





No matter the gig, Skye's setup is as simple as it gets: his SCGC guitar and some aLaska fingerpicks along with a Fred Kelly thumbpick. For flatpicking, he relies on an old 2mm tortoiseshell pick.





“I never want to pick a tune to make me look like a good guitar player.”

I was going,” he says. “One of my bands was a seven-piece, almost like a tribute to Grant Green, doing all the funky stuff with bass and horns. I still had an electric guitar, a 335, but then our first daughter was born. Lauren’s getting up at 5 a.m. and coming home at 5 p.m. I’m typically working late afternoon and into the night.” The schedule seemed perfect for a stay-at-home dad. “So literally, the very first night I play till 1 a.m., then we all go out to dinner, I get home at 3:30 in the morning with a belly full of pizza. The baby started crying at 5 and Lauren wasn’t home. I thought, I gotta sell my electric guitar. This is not sustainable.”

Skye decided to concentrate on acoustic performing and recording. A second daughter was born. In 2001, he and Lauren moved to Portland, Oregon, to be closer to his sister and their mother. His first CD, *Acoustic Jazz Guitar Solos*, came out, followed the year after by the birth of his son. The album did well enough to lead to a second three years later—*For Lulu*, which featured traditional jazz tunes as well as some original compositions. “The feedback was really good on the originals,” Skye said. “I felt I was onto something.” (Unfortunately, both records are out of print and unavailable even on streaming services.)

Around 2006, Skye was shopping for a new guitar when he met Willie Carter, store manager at Gryphon Stringed Instruments in Palo Alto. The two hit it off and stayed in touch. When Carter—who today is half of the eponymous Carter Poulsen Guitars—moved over to do artist relations for Santa Cruz Guitar Co., he invited Skye for a tour. Skye, who’d been a featured artist for Taylor Guitars, knew of Santa Cruz largely by reputation. “Somewhere along the line I’d played one of their OM models and remember thinking, ‘This thing weighs like a bag of chips!’ But it sounded unbelievable.”

Visiting Santa Cruz Guitar’s outwardly nondescript headquarters in a warehouse section east of downtown turned out to be a mystical experience. “I walked in and there’s the smell of sawdust every-

where and the sound of saws—it was my father’s basement workshop all over again.” Then he met Richard. “I’m not easily star-struck, I’ve met a lot of famous people in my life, but here’s this guy who is one of, if not the, preeminent steel-string guitar builder[s] in the US, and he’s my instant friend.”

Of course Skye had to play the whole line of guitars. Of course he ordered two for himself—a dreadnought for gigs and a oo, which he figured would be “my couch guitar.” So of course as he was leaving, Skye got asked if he’d like to be a Santa Cruz Guitar artist.

“You still have to pinch me about that whole thing,” he says.

There was more to come. Back home in Portland, Skye began working on an entire album of originals as well as what ultimately turned out to be his Miles Davis collection. When it came to guitar preference, though—surprise!

“Lauren and I like to watch movies, and sometimes I’ll play along with the soundtrack,” Skye says. “I was thinking the little guitar would be the softer instrument. So I’m on the couch with this oo and the first time I start to play, Lauren said, ‘Are you going to play that thing? It’s too loud!’”

The oo, a standard Santa Cruz model with an Adirondack spruce top and rosewood back and sides, became his sole instrument. For *Slow Moving Dog*, his 2010 CD of original tunes, Skye used it exclusively, even though he was playing in a trio with bass and drums.

“One morning I’m walking the kids to school and it’s Richard calling. He was like, ‘What would you think about making a signature model oo?’” Skye recalls. “It was like Steve Jobs asking would you like to make a signature model phone.” The result was a painstakingly customized oo 12-fret set off by striking cocobolo—a tropical Central American hardwood—for back and sides, and Adirondack top.

The guitar quickly became a Santa Cruz customer favorite. Sales data are proprietary, but Hoover says the oo-skye is among its top five bestsellers.

“Eric is a gift to the universe,” Hoover effuses, adding puckishly, “I’d say that even if we didn’t have a guitar named after him.”

More gifts were on the way. In 2012, Skye, whose mother had suffered a recurrence of breast cancer, decided to look into medical marijuana, which was legal in Oregon, the first state to decriminalize possession of small amounts. “I figure hey, I’m a jazz musician, I ought to be able to find some,” Skye recalls. Cannabis turned out to be a huge help to his dying mother. “It allowed her to relax a bit, sleep a

bit and maybe become a little more OK with dying.” Although Skye had long since given up drugs after experimenting in his youth, he and Lauren decided to explore.

At the time, Skye was working on his fourth album, the Miles Davis tribute. During downtime at a Puget Sound workshop retreat, he focused on an arrangement of “So What” while “really high,” playing 45 minutes straight into his iPhone. When he returned home and played the session back, a new world opened up. “It was stuff I never would’ve thought of on my own—like listening to someone else play, but with my ideas.” He transcribed it all, and the routine became his template for the whole record. Just look at “Flamenco Sketches,” he says—a 17-minute opus actually edited down from 45 minutes. Skye’s use of cannabis became strictly purposeful: “I don’t want it to play any role in recording or performing,” he says, “but for generation of ideas, it’s really great.”

A Different Kind of Blue gave Skye a different kind of musical persona. While it might be said the earlier albums were accomplished but not distinguished, *Blue*’s eclecticism ran the table for jazz arrangement on an acoustic guitar. A new sound was born. Critics raved. The album scored in *Acoustic Guitar*’s Top 10 for 2012 and drew special acclamation from Davis’ estate and his son, Erin.

Skye’s originality drew partly from his technique, partly from his guitar. Most jazz guitarists use archtops, often amplified, played with a flat pick. Skye uses plastic Alaska finger picks, and his flattop acoustic offers up a strikingly different sound from an archtop. Beyond the instrument, though, Skye turns the arrangement backwards. Typical jazz guitar consists primarily of single-note lines, complemented with periodic chording. With Skye, chording is the lead. It establishes and often carries the melody. Arpeggios and riffs take a back seat to the chords. Skye’s arrangements also benefitted from his use of a capo—anathema to standard jazz guitarists.

Connell is impressed with Skye’s ability to escape orthodoxy. “With Eric, you get a huge variety of sound, harmonics and textures. He doesn’t get bogged down in flashy riffs, he’s more about building up over 32 bars.” Connell’s observations are somewhat orthogonal, given that his collaboration with Skye consists of flatpicking fiddle tunes. There again, “I love it that he can play a jazz solo and a fiddle tune on the same guitar and come up with a unique sound for both.”

Blue’s success was soon overshadowed, however. Skye was diagnosed with persistent heart arrhyth-

mia, a condition that can lead to stroke. Adults often live with an irregular heartbeat that’s either undiagnosed or treated with the aid of blood-thinner medications, but Skye’s condition was serious enough to warrant surgery. Although successful, the operation left him with a serious infection and dangerously high fever in the ICU for several days. Ultimately, he had to have a kidney removed—a second major surgery that made his recovery all the tougher.

Skye feels he emerged a better person and artist. “I would describe myself as consistently much more present,” he says. “More serious, but in a very relaxed and comfortable way. I’m very happy and content, but always very focused in on the moment with family and my work.”

If Skye’s close call left a single thematic stamp on his work, it might be described as poignancy. Not the quiet desperation of angst. Not melancholia or despair. Just...poignant. Look at the titles on his latest album, *Ballads and Blues*, released in the fall of 2018: “Contemplation,” “Equinox,” “Search for Peace,” “Nostalgia in Times Square.” When you listen to Eric Skye, it’s a commitment. He invites you to step away from your world for a moment in time and enter a consciousness full of immersion, discovery and calm. A song is a journey with a beginning, yes—but its end extends well beyond the final chord.

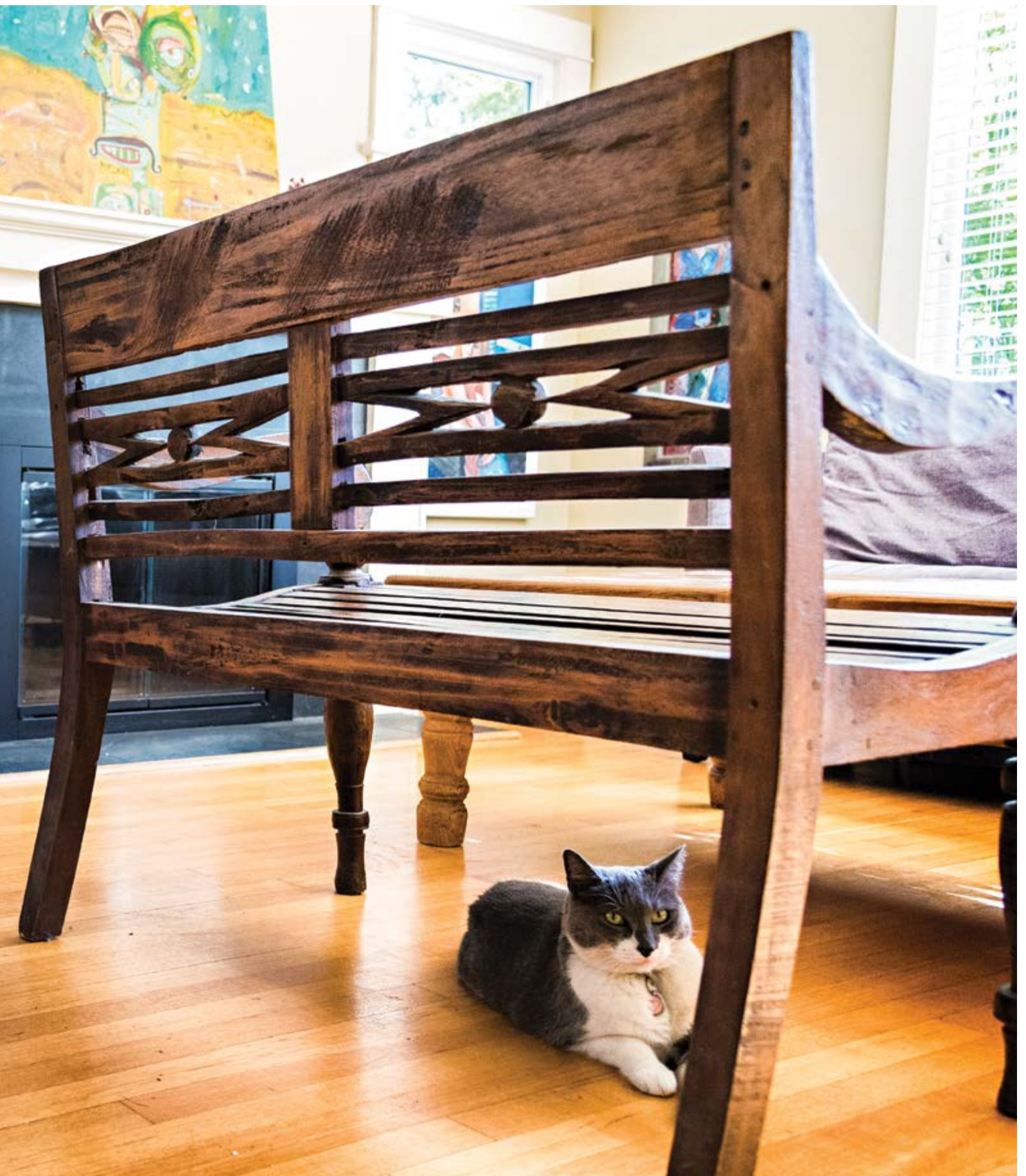
“We never play the same song once,” says Goldenberg, whom Skye describes as a mentor and teacher as well as friend. The pair, whose mutual admiration is most evidenced in their joint 2016 CD, *Artifact*, are even known to take improvisation a little too far sometimes. “We were playing somewhere on the coast of northern Oregon, having a really lovely time on the drive back, not paying too much attention to where we were,” Goldenberg recalls. “And we lost contact with GPS. I’d never been so lost. We almost ended up in the ocean.”

Skye himself will list different reasons for choosing tunes. “Wichita Lineman” came up after he watched the Glen Campbell documentary on his fight with Alzheimer’s. “I was so moved by the film, it made me want to learn that tune.” With “Ode to Billie Joe,” he explains, “I loved the old video of Bobbie Gentry, the girl with the big hair and little guitar. Also it’s kind of modal, just a two-chord tune. You can certainly go down the rabbit hole.” His original songs are deeply personal, and share the striking capacity to evoke their subjects. With “Blues for Freida,” the listener has a clear image of his grandmother sitting meditatively in the garden. Similarly with “Newman’s Blues”—dedicated to his videographer and friend, Richard Newman—“Golden,” for



Skye at his art-filled home with cat Stella. Why the love for slothead headstocks? "I think of the oo-Skye as a classical guitar with piano strings," he explains. "I grew up playing mostly a cheap Yamaha classical guitar that my father gave me when I was 15. He paid \$128 for it back then. I remember the number because that was a lot of money to him, and if I wasn't practicing, he would say, 'I paid \$128 for that goddamn thing...'" He passed shortly after that, so that guitar has always meant a lot to me.

"Plus, a slothead just looks like a guitar to me!"



Mark Goldenberg, and the aforementioned “Message to CJ.” The songs leave you with the unshakable feeling you know them even if you’ve never met.

“I’m trying to write a tune or pick a tune where I can just play with a level of sincerity,” Skye says. “I never want to pick a tune to make me look like a good guitar player. I’m just looking for a place where shit can get real.”

With both daughters in college and his son getting close, Skye finds his time even more available for getting real. To say his days are organized around music is to say the earth is organized around the sun. He gets up around 5 a.m., reads the paper with Lauren before she heads off to teach, then works three to four hours, practicing, playing, composing. Then he goes for an hour-long walk in his tree-lined old-town neighborhood, often going over audio of his session. “I’m definitely the guy you see with the big studio headphones.” Each Thursday the walk is with Bruce Robertson, the drummer on *Slow Moving Dog* who records Eric’s albums in what is lately his custom studio—converted from a garage he jacked up, put a new foundation and floating floor under and separated the walls from touching. “The first time I recorded him, I got everything set up and he started playing ‘Summertime,’ and my jaw just dropped,” Robertson says. “I’m thinking, ‘Oh my God, this is by far the most accomplished guitarist I’ve ever had in the studio.’”

Once back home, Skye plays and practices some more, building off the morning’s session with feedback from his recordings and notes. Dinner might be an original Eric concoction, often exotic, always fresh and healthy. “I love to cook and work in the garden—there’s something very zen about all that stuff.” Cuisine is abetted by Lauren’s backyard chickens. When Goldenberg stays at Skye’s home, he practices for hours with the chickens. “Those eggs are really good,” he says.

Sometimes Skye will invite neighbors like Connell or fellow fingerstyle acoustic guitarist Jamie Stillway over for a jam session that can last for hours. “We get lost in these tunes without knowing where they’re going,” she says. “We can play an ’80s hair metal [song]—but it’ll end up being a fiddle tune.”

In the evening the Skyes typically hit the couch for some Netflix, Eric with guitar in hand. “Sometimes the guitar gets a little close to my head, so I’ll gently put my hand on it for him to bring it down

just a tad,” she reports. “It’s always nice to be able to hear what we’re watching.”

Mondays through Wednesdays are packed with two dozen or more lessons, five of them with students who have been with Skye for more than a decade. One, Mark McPherson, a former Tektronics engineer and project manager who discovered Skye playing in Grolla, a since-closed gluten-free Portland restaurant, admits he gets asked how he could take weekly lessons from one instructor for so long. “I’ll always go with some particular issue in mind—how to use diminished chords, how to find different voicings, how to pull off a certain technique,” he says. “Having Eric as a teacher is kind of like having your own exceptionally competent consultant.”

Skye’s flair for teaching extends to the Internet: one-minute instructionals on Instagram or Facebook, hour-long “deep dives” into one of his arrangements on YouTube, a belly-of-the-whale “30-Day Challenge” video series chock full of ideas, tips and suggestions. Adding in his dozens of professional-quality music videos, Skye’s digital presence may be the most varied and extensive of any musician. Much of the credit goes to Newman, a professional filmmaker based in Monterey who uses multiple cameras along with lighting and recording chops to turn Skye’s kitchen or living room into a near-studio. A typical session will have Newman drive 14 hours straight from home to Skye’s house, film for a day, then drive back home. “We’ve got the drill down,” he says. “We don’t even talk until we’re done recording.” The pair teamed up on an early DVD together and have worked together for nearly a decade. When Skye first played “Newman’s Blues” for him, Newman says, “truth be told, I kind of cried.”

Skye’s leveraging of digital media may ultimately show a path for any artist. Acknowledging he doesn’t get millions of hits or “trends” on social media, Skye nonetheless leverages his omnipresence into real income. Social network viewers go to online services for his music, even to order CDs. He gets requests for lessons. He sells concert tickets. “I’ll get a call saying, ‘I saw your YouTube video, what will it take to bring you to Chicago?’” Skye notes. “Or ‘I saw your 30-Day Challenge, can I get a Skype lesson?’”

To finish *Ballads and Blues*, Skye posted an Indiegogo link and exceeded his four-figure goal in hours. “It was like Bernie Sanders, all small amounts,” he says. “I wound up with a lot more money than I asked for.” Skye also sees it as a warm affirmation for “a guy who’s maybe one notch cooler than a solo accordion, apologies to all my accordion friends.” (Although not an accordionist, Robertson disagrees.

“If there were any justice in the so-called music business,” he says, “Eric would be a multi-billionaire.”)

Given the current atomization of the so-called music business, however, Skye may well be a model of fiscal viability. House concerts, lessons, streaming, CDs, private gigs and social media—the musical entrepreneur has to work all the channels. “We all have to figure out how to make our way,” says Teja Gerken, cofounder of Peghead Nation and a congenial online presence himself who has done concerts and videos with Skye. “I played a gig with Don Ross a few years ago, and he was saying [that] in the ’90s, if he didn’t sell at least \$1,000 of merchandise, it wasn’t a good gig. I don’t know anybody who’s selling \$1,000 of merch these days at a gig. We all have to rethink our strategies, what works for us.” One possible glimmer of hope: a recent Goldman Sachs study predicting music streaming was about “to take off” globally, with recorded-music revenue set to nearly triple to \$80 billion annually by 2030. Phone streaming is outpacing other sources as millennials and Generation Z listeners spend more of their discretionary income on music than other age groups. How much of the gravy trickles down to nonheadliners remains an open question, but at least professional-quality music is on track toward a business model beyond *free*.

Producing his considerable oeuvre can add up to 10 hours or more a day just of playing guitar for Skye. Everyone associated with him cites a work ethic that would wither a mere mortal. “Every time I see Eric, I think, boy, I really need to practice more,” Stillway muses. When Newman stays at the Skye home, “I’ll hear him playing some arpeggio over and over at 2 a.m.” McPherson compares Skye’s tenacity to the 90-hour work weeks of tech culture, noting that it would strain any other spousal relationship. “It’s impressive how well Lauren and Eric have worked out their lives. They chose each other very carefully, I think.”

A doting dad and husband, Skye clears out room for his personal life by overlaying everything else with music. “Family is definitely the center of my life, but I’ve got this other thing that’s super time-consuming, so everything else has to get minimized. I could never go to Trader Joe’s without my headphones.” An unusual—for a guitarist—testament to his focus is that Skye plays just one instrument, his oo. He owns two, including the first one made, along with a few other acoustic guitars—the Yamaha classical that his father gave him (which he restored for his 50th birthday at a cost worthy of its

sentimental value), a flamenco given to him by Goldenberg and a dreadnought he calls “the cello”—a highly customized sunburst Santa Cruz VS he provided input on, made for him by Hoover. But that’s it, and Skye says his go-to will always be the oo-skye. A pianist likely has only one piano in the house, he says by way of analogy. “It’s easy to pick up every shiny object on the road, but I don’t want to be thinking about the gear thing.”

Skye performs all over the country, but his favorite venue is his living room. Three or four times a year he will invite a fellow musician for what is guaranteed to be an overflow house concert drawing fans even from out of state. Typically with no format, the duo performs without amplification for a couple of hours. Besides Goldenberg, Connell and Stillway, Skye’s house concerts have featured fellow Santa Cruz Guitar artist James Nash, Berklee School of Music’s Jane Miller, L.A. sideman Eric Garcia, steel-string flattop jazzist Charlie Rauh, former Norah Jones band member Adam Levy and others.

“Not everyone likes performing with that kind of intimacy,” says Gerken, who points out that the take-home from a house concert at \$20 to \$30 a head rivals and often exceeds a club or coffeehouse gig. But the house concert circuit is thriving, he says, because for both performer and listener, “I think it’s the best way to experience music.”

Family, friends and inspiration—they are the keys, chords and melody of Skye’s life. The path is not easy for a solo steel-string acoustic musician, he acknowledges. “I have kids in college and a mortgage. But I’m very fortunate my wife has a job she loves with great health care for us. I’m not going on a big European vacation, and my car might need new tires. But I get to follow my dream.”

When it comes to following that dream, it might be said Skye’s the limit. Plans include a collection of original reels, jigs and waltzes conjuring his Pennsylvania roots. For a concert a while ago, he visited his home town with his sister. “We were there a few days and went to places we’d been to with our parents. And we had these epiphanies. I’m older than my parents were then, I have my own kids who are older now than we were then, and I’m seeing this sort of continuum. I may do a recording around that and maybe issue a book that has the tunes, maybe with sketches, using art from the community there.”

Still, there are no guarantees. “It could be it turns out a couple of years from now I’ve made a funk record,” he says with a laugh. To which his colleagues, friends and fans will say, in wonderment and unison, *Where did that come from?* **FJ**