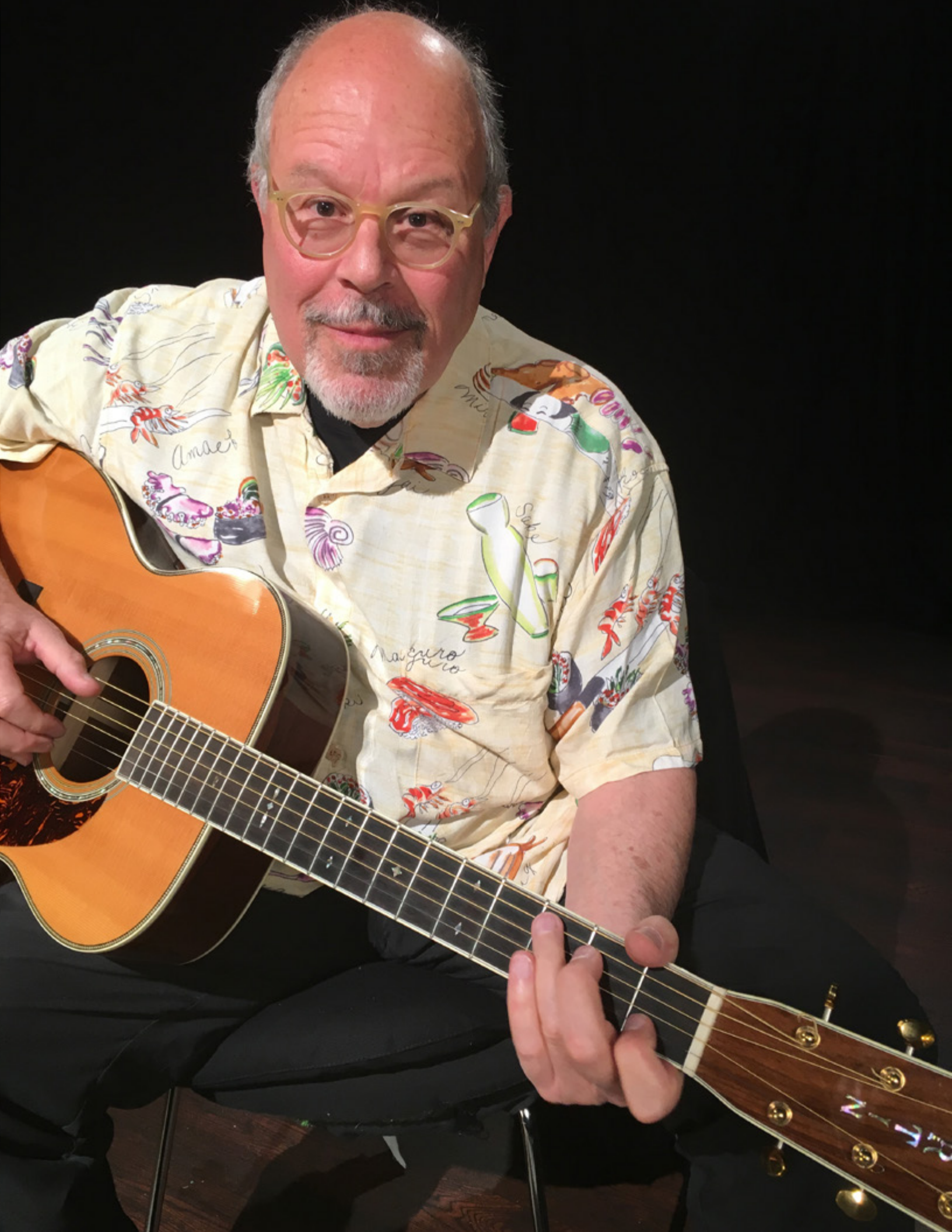

Stefan Grossman was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 16, 1945. He is an acoustic fingerstyle guitarist, singer, music producer and educator, and co-founder of Kicking Mule records. Stefan is also known for his instructional videos and Vestapol line of historical videos and DVDs.

He took guitar lessons for several years from Rev. Gary Davis. Stefan spent countless hours learning and documenting Davis's music, recording much of it on a tape recorder, and developing a form of tablature to take down his teacher's instructions.

During the mid-60s, Grossman met, befriended, and studied guitar with Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Skip James, and Mississippi Fred McDowell, among others.

Much of the music Stefan recorded on vinyl was reissued on CD, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, houses the Stefan Grossman Collection, 1967-2000 (Collection Number 20578). The collection contains approximately 7500 items from his life's work.

You've had a long career both as a performer and a businessman. I'd like you to tell me about your life and how it all unfolded.

Sure.

Let's go back to the beginning, where you were born, and talk about your family.

Well; I was born in Brooklyn in 1945. By nine years of age, we were living in Queens, New York, and for some reason, I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. So, my dad got an F-hole guitar for me from a Goodwill shop, and I got lessons from a teacher who was using a Mel Bay instructional book. I learned to read music, strum chords, and sing "Autumn Leaves." After about a year and a half, I got bored with it and was more interested in playing handball or basketball, so I put it down until I was fifteen and then picked it up again.

My parents were leftist New Yorkers. They suggested that I listen to Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie records. One of the first records I found was a Pete Seeger record, but then I saw another record that had one side with Josh White and on the other, Big Bill Broonzy. Just the names intrigued me, and when I listened to the side with Big Bill Broonzy, I was absolutely floored. I wanted to be able to play like that and sing like that. So, I started to try to learn how to fingerpick.

It's interesting because in the New York area at that time, Merle Travis and Chet Atkins weren't very much at the forefront of people who wanted to play the guitar. I guess it was because of the folk guitar scene. Their heroes were players like Dave Van Ronk. He was a very influential player in New York City.

My parents suggested I go down to Washington Square Park on Sundays from noon until sundown because people would gather around the fountain and play music. So, I went there, and goodness gracious, you'd have bluegrass in one corner and another group playing old-time music, yet another playing blues. There was so much happening. I was thrilled to see other kids my age interested in what I was interested in. So, I made friends there.

I also met a guy named Bob Fox from one of the groups who suggested I go to the Bronx and get lessons from this blind Baptist preacher named Gary Davis, who I'd never heard of. I called him, and he said, "Come on up and bring your money, honey."

Laughter

I turned to my dad and said, well, I'm going up to have lessons with this black blind preacher. Imagine a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn saying that to his parents. My dad said, well, where

does he live? I said it's on Claremont Parkway up in The Bronx. Without dropping a beat, he said, oh, that's funny. I have to buy a pair of shoes up there. He drove me up there with my mother. I had no idea where I was going or what part of the city it was. As we drove onto the parkway, it looked like Hamburg during World War II. There were all these tenement houses that were empty. People weren't allowed to live in them because they were so derelict. Reverend Davis didn't live in one of those. He lived down an alleyway where all the garbage cans and rats were.

Then up some stairs was a shack in the middle of the block. Imagine a New York block where the perimeters had tenements, and in the middle, there's an empty space with this shack. I went up the stairs and knocked on the door. When he opened it, he didn't have his glasses on, so he had one bulbous eye, and the other was just empty. He said, "Come on in. Did you bring your money, honey?" and I entered this world. I said to my parents, "I'll see you in two hours. That was the only time they took me there. From then on, I'd take the train and walk to his house. I'd go there every moment I had, every weekend, and every school holiday, I'd go to his house.

At that point, Reverend Davis had only one or two LPs out. So, I bought the albums to have something to refer to. At least I'd have a vocabulary of what tunes he played. The lessons would last for eight to ten hours! He'd play on and on, going into a totally different world. His home was so warm, so cozy, and so welcoming.

He was a great teacher. He taught in the traditional way. He would play, and I would imitate. There was obviously no written music, but to get as much as possible out of these lessons, I started to write things down in tablature.

What was interesting in retrospect was his way of playing with the right hand as a lot of black players like Lightnin' Hopkins all just played using their thumb and index finger. And strangely enough, in the white fingerstyle tradition, Merle Travis and Doc Watson only played with their thumb and index. For me, what was important when writing this stuff down was which right hand finger the notes were played with.
I had to develop a tablature system to reflect this picking approach. I didn't even think about it, but I drew seven lines and used the spaces as the strings, not the lines as the strings. It seemed obvious to me that if you put a zero on the line, it could look like an eight. It's not clear, but if it's in the space, it's very clear. To me, it seemed logical. So, the tablature showed me where his left hand fingers were. Whenever I'd get a chance, I'd bring my old Tandberg tape machine up to his home, and I'd tape him and interview him. I'd have him play tune after tune. I started to become acquainted with his immense repertoire. He was an amazing musician who played folk, ragtime, blues, and gospel. He was reluctant to play blues because he was a preacher, but he would play them when his wife wasn't listening! He was reluctant to sing blues but would play them on the guitar as instrumentals.

At the same time different parallel courses were happening. In Washington Square Park, I started to meet other musicians and hear different types of music. There was a very vibrant scene for folk, blues, ragtime and old-time music.

After the park on Sundays, if the kids still wanted to play music, they went to the Folklore Center in New York, or we'd end up at someone's house if their parents would allow like fifty people to come. We'd break up into different groups playing all different types of music. You were learning because you saw people who played better than you or didn't play but would talk about musicians you hadn't heard of, and you'd think, wow, who is Blind Boy Fuller? Who is Charlie Patton? Who is Son House? All that was happening, and there were people like Dave Van Ronk, Patrick Sky, Barry Kornfeld, Steve Katz and Danny Kalb. They were basically playing their version of the blues.

Another parallel track was when people would say, "You should go listen to Blind Boy Fuller," but there were no reissues of him at that time. There were no LPs. Then someone said, "I know this guy named Dave Freeman (who ended up running County Records), who lives in New York on 34th street. Give him a call because he has a lot of Blind Boy Fuller records.

Dave collected white music from the 1920s and 30s, but he had a lot of black Race Records. He would trade these 78s to other collectors collecting black music for white records that he wanted.

That got me into meeting records collectors, and they were fantastic. I guess being a collector is sort of a nerdy thing but they were extremely important during the folk music revival as people were interested in hearing their collections. And they were happy to turn people on to all types of music.

When I'd go up to Dave Freeman's, I'd bring a tape machine and connect it to his amp. As I'd be recording Blind Boy Fuller, he would say, "Have you ever heard of Clarence Ashley?" "Have you ever heard of Riley Puckett or Charlie Poole?" Who are all white players. He would play their music for me, and it was fantastic! It was music from the '20s. It was so direct. It was just a microphone, and people recording around it live.

In the 1920s there was a lot of live music because folk didn't have television, and the radio was just coming in. That increased the vocabulary of all these different musicians.

Another parallel course happened when people who were not necessarily players would listen to Mississippi John Hurt and say, I wonder if he's alive? And these white kids went down into states such as Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama, searching for these legendary figures. Some they found, but some had passed away. They didn't find Blind Wille Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, or Charlie Patton, but they found Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Bukka White, and Skip James. It was unbelievable that these legends from the 20s and 30s were now coming up north and doing concerts. And when they came up, they would stay with us. Or with other people who had an extra room. Skip James would come to my parent's house, Son House would come, and John Hurt, and we'd spend direct time with them. My pursuit was to sit down with them and learn as much as possible from these masters. I would transcribe as much as possible and learn about the history of their music.

At the same time, a fellow named David Laibman who was a student at Antioch College, where my brother went. David was a Rhodes scholar and went to Oxford. He was an economics student, an emeritus professor, and an incredible musician. While at Oxford, he picked up some classic ragtime music and brought that back to New York to Washington Square Park. Here was this guy playing. Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" and "The Entertainer" on the guitar and playing all four sections and the bridge! The only other guitarist tackling classic rags at that time was Dave Van Ronk, and his arrangements were sort of a folky version.

This classic ragtime on the guitar is different than the way Reverend Davis played ragtime. It was almost a classical guitar technique that took care of all the voicings. It made the guitar sound more like a piano by transposing what was played on the piano to the guitar.

So, I was exposed to all this mish-mash of different guitar music. What wasn't there was Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed. Merle Travis was part of what I heard because I picked up his *Walkin' the Strings* album. And I wanted to learn his tunes. The only guitar player in New York City playing Merle Travis at that time was Danny Hamburg. He could really play the Merle Travis stuff well.

Initially, when I heard Chet's music, it sounded like elevator music to me. It didn't have that grit and drive of these blues players like Big Bill Broonzy or Reverend Davis. Chet played very cleanly and precisely but lacked that soul, whereas Merle Travis, to my ears, had that. He had a black influence in his playing.

It wasn't until I met Marcel Dadi and we were doing tours together in England and France that I became aware of Jerry Reed, and I thought, this guy is great. I wished I had known about him ten years earlier. Then I started to hear Chet doing the Jerry Reed stuff, and it was fantastic!
There was so much fingerstyle guitar stuff happening, but my initial dive into the fingerpicking pool was related to black music. In fact, in the 20s and 30s, there weren't that many great white fingerstyle players. The only one I can think of is Sam McGee. He had classic tunes like "Buck Dancer's Choice" and "Franklin Blues." And he played with Uncle Dave Macon.

Most of the fingerpicking was being explored and expanded by black musicians during that period.

You were very fortunate to spend time with many legends. As you were learning their music, did you think you were helping to preserve their legacy?

Not at all! It was a hobby, and I didn't realize, nor did my parents, that this hobby would shape my life.

When it came time to graduate from high school and go to college, I was just playing guitar and spending my time in Greenwich Village. But you had to attend college, especially if you wanted to stay out of the Vietnamese War. So, I went to an incredible college called Cooper Union in New York. At that time, it was the only free private school in America with an outstanding reputation. So, everyone had a full scholarship. I wasted that education because every moment, I was off learning and playing the guitar. It completely consumed me, never thinking I would be a professional musician, write books or try to put this stuff into some historical order. I never thought of that; I just wanted to learn. I'd hear Blind Blake and think, I've got to play that! I'd hear a Broonzy tune and think, Oh man! I've got to learn that.

You eventually start seeing connections between these players. Initially, I thought they were regional guitar styles, but then I realized that it's more that in one area, you had a player that was a genius, so everyone around there got influenced by that person. So, in Mississippi, around Clarksdale, you had Charlie Patton, Tommy Johnson, Son House, Willie Brown, and they all play similarly. They all had a similar technique, yet thirty miles up the road, you had Mississippi John Hurt playing more like the way they played in Memphis, like Furry Lewis and Frank Stokes, which was more the way Merle Travis, Ike Everly, and Mose Rager played.
I can't remember the man's name, but I've heard that a black musician traveling through Kentucky influenced Merle, Ike and Mose Rager's playing.

Paul Yandell told me about this man. I think his name was Amos Johnson, but I'm not positive. He also influenced Mose Rager, Merle's mentor. It's quite a history; it's a movie.

It is, but when you think of the white players like Chet, Merle, and Sam McGee, you should also think of some of the black players like Reverend Davis.

When I asked Reverend Davis how you should play the guitar, he said you have to play the guitar like a piano. I asked him, what do you mean we have to play like a piano? He said we're lucky as guitar players because piano players only have two hands, and we have three (laughter). I said, what are you talkin' about? He said, well, we have our left hand to play chords, our thumb

on the right hand is like the piano player's left hand, and our index finger is like the right hand.

If you think of the Merle Travis, Chet Atkins school, or if you think of John Hurt, Frank Stokes, Gary Davis, or Blind Blake, that's what's happening.

In the early days, these musicians played for dances, so as the dance crazes changed, the guitar styles had to adapt. So, the boom-chick you hear with John Hurt and Merle Travis became ba-boom-chick in the 1920s when the Charleston became popular. It's that stumble bass. So, that's what Blind Blake did, and he started to play games with his thumb, but he still made it sound like a piano, eventually trying to make it sound like a whole jazz band. That's what Gary Davis took and pursued even further.

Considering that Gary Davis told you to play the guitar like a piano, do you think piano players influenced him?

Absolutely!

In the 20s, before being baptized and becoming a preacher, he used to stand in front of record shops and listen to the records of the day. So, he played everything from Louis Armstrong to the pop tunes of the 1920s.

He would try to capture the feeling of the recordings. Let's say he was listening to a quintet. He would try to put all of that on the guitar. He wasn't intimidated. He had alternating bass with rhythm and single-string runs interspersed with sound effects. He had a tune called "Soldiers Drill," where he would make the sound of the soldiers marching and then play bugle calls on a tune that sounded like a Sousa march.

I found it surprising that when I asked Chet if he had ever heard of Blind Blake, he hadn't. But I guess it is not so surprising since that was in the 20s, and they were Race Records. People on the other side of the track really didn't hear that stuff. Later I think Pat Donohue turned him onto Blind Blake.

Chet Atkins once told me that when he was a little kid, his mother took him to Knoxville, and when they got off a bus, there was a black man playing slide guitar with a butter knife. He was so enamored with him that he told his mother he wanted to be black.

(Laughter) How interesting.

That way of playing the guitar is fascinating because where did it come from? Hawaiian music was incredibly popular at the turn of the last century, and musicians from Hawaii were touring all over the south and the north as well. They were even touring in India, if you can believe that. So, the lap slide, which is what the Hawaiians were doing, combined with the African take on it.

A lot of African instruments are played with a bone, which is a slide and again, played with the index and thumb. When you put this mess together, it's hard to tell exactly where their version of slide guitar originated. Still, Hawaiian music definitely influenced the blues, black musicians, and how they played the guitar.

At what point did you turn to your career as a performer?

In 1967 if you remember those years, there was a big slogan in America that said, "Love it or leave it," I left it.

I had left college and played rock and roll with an electric guitar in two different bands; The Fugs and The Chicago Loop. I had become friends with some heavy-weight electric guitar players such as Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and Mike Bloomfield, who were all part of the scene. And in '67, I left America to meet a girlfriend traveling to India, but I never got there. My first stop was in En-

gland, and when I got off the plane, the customs and immigration officers initially wouldn't allow me to enter the country. I had my guitar with me, and they asked, "Are you a draft dodger?" I said, "No, here's my draft card. You can see that I have a deferment." They looked at my address book, and the only addresses I had in England were Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker, and Joe Boyd, the head of Elektra Records in England. Because of that, they felt sure I was coming to play music and earn money and didn't have a work permit, but I wasn't. I was just on my way to India.

They finally let me in for a month, and then I had to leave. I went up to Sweden, and then I went to Denmark, Spain, and Italy. Then I went back to England and they let me in for six months. I had names of people to look up to from the first time I was there. They were Martin Carthy, John Renbourn, and Bert Jansch. I finally met all of them at a club in London called Les Cousins. They asked me to play a set, and the following weekend there was a big write-up about me in The Observer newspaper.

My new folk musician friends said it's so easy to get gigs. All you have to do is hang out. There were hundreds of folk clubs in England. You can have fun, play music and earn ten pounds a night. You were doing fine if you made thirty or forty pounds for a week's work. So, that's what I ended up doing. That's when I've always said I became a quote-unquote professional.

I was very lucky because I didn't know that in England, they were used to American musicians coming there with their persona and performing, but I was performing as sort of a bridge. I would say here is a tune that I learned from John Hurt or Skip James, and that presentation struck a chord in the mind of the audience there. I was never a blues man. I was a guitar player who happened to play blues and ragtime. I wasn't like John Hammond, who's a blues guitar player; he's blues! But I got accepted and became an integral part of the scene there.

So, you looked at yourself as a guitarist that was delivering and showcasing the music.

Right.

Who is the amazing gypsy guitarist from Germany, Joscho Stephan?

Yes, that's him.

He's an incredible gypsy guitar player. I'm considering joining his school.

Then there's this guy Emil Ernebro who plays within the style of Tommy Emmanuel who is doing some fantastic stuff; man, I want to play some of that! His guitar playing is exciting. I'd like to be able to play all that stuff, but I don't think I have enough time in my life to learn it all.

You have a passion for learning, don't you?

Yes. Well, the guitar is a great instrument with so many possibilities.

Where did you first stay in England during that short period when they allowed you to stay?

I knew this girl who was not a girlfriend who had gone there before, and I was able to stay for a couple of nights where she was staying. Then I went to a record shop called Collets that was famous in London. It was a folk, jazz, and blues record shop. I was looking at records, and the fellow behind the desk, Hans Fried knew me from a record that had come out on Electra called How To Play Blues Guitar. We started talking, and I asked if he knew of any places I could stay, and he said, "We have a place you can stay." So, I stayed with them.

When I returned to England, I played at a club called The Troubadour, and I asked, does anyone have an extra room where I could stay. A woman named Linda Fitzgerald Moore said you can stay

1968 Cambridge Folk Festival
Photo by Linda Fitgerald Moore

with me and she became one of my best friends. I stayed with her for about two years and we have been close for over 50 years.

So, you had two years of living in London.

Yes, and then I met my first wife, who was Italian, and we lived in England for a couple of years, then we moved to Rome, Italy. Rome was geographically right in the middle, so I could tour all over Europe or get on a plane and tour in Australia and Japan.

All in all, from 67 to 87, I lived either in London or Rome. I returned to the USA in 1987 to work at Shanachie Records and continued touring with John Renbourn.

I had never worked in an office environment, but it was great. I worked there for five years and was putting together guitar records, Celtic records, reggae, everything. Then I left to focus on my *Guitar Workshop* www.guitarvideos.com

Please tell me about your friendship with John Renbourn and touring together.

I initially met John when he was playing with Bert Jansch. They had formed a group called Pentangle. For about five years, they toured worldwide and were very popular but then broke up.

John came by the London apartment I was staying at. I had just made a record titled *Bottleneck Serenade*. I was playing it for him, and he really liked it. He thought, why don't we tour together because we're such two different types of guitar players? Our thought was not to play together but to tour together The first tour organized for us was in Belgium, and the promoter of the first concert expected us to play together. So, we each did a solo set and quickly put together a duet set, and it went over great. Then we decided, hey, this works.

It was very interesting because where John was more of a delicate player, and I was more a rhythmic player, but when we played duets, I became more delicate, and he became more rhythmic. We became a complement to each other. We wrote original music together and arranged music together. And touring with a friend is easier than touring alone, that's for sure. So, we did that for about fifteen years. We made four records and toured Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Europe, and America.

Touring like that can be a hard life. Are there elements of it that you miss?

The elements I miss are being on stage when you're playing well and playing with your partner; that's fantastic! Traveling is the hard part and trying to keep your brain together because when you're doing a tour for like three weeks, that's twenty-one days theoretically, you're doing twenty-one concerts. That's great if you're playing that much, but you never really know where you are. You wake up and travel on a train or an airplane, get to the concert hall, do a sound check, do the concert, and by the time the show is over, you're pumped up, and it's hard to go to sleep, but you have to wake up at five o'clock in the morning to catch another train or plane. It's difficult.

Everything you get in life, you're also giving up something.

Definitely!

You're giving up time with your family.

Absolutely! When you're a parent to be away for two months, there's no way that helps a marriage. I was away from my firstborn son David for the first two years of his life for one hundred and eighty days each year. I stopped touring at one point for about five years. Once the kids were grown, I toured again. Now I much prefer being with my grandkids.

One of the nice things for my children was meeting some great musicians. Our two youngest daughters had a close relationship with John Renbourn. Our older daughter Anna had a close relationship with John Fahey and Larry Coryell through photographing them. Mickey Baker was very close to all five of the children. Dave Van Ronk, John Fahey, and other musicians would live with us when they toured. They would use our house as a point of reference. So, the kids were around some interesting people. They also met people from many cultures that would visit us.

When I did return to touring, I started going to places I wanted to see, like Norway. I would travel with my wife and occasionally with one of the kids. We went to places like Australia for three weeks, but I didn't want twenty-one concerts; I had seven concerts. For the other fourteen days, we'd travel and meet people. That changed the complexion of touring. It was like a paid vacation.

After leaving Shanachie Records, you started focusing more on the Guitar Workshop. Please tell me about the workshop and its development.

I guess my prime motivation for the workshop was, hey, I want to learn more John Renbourn tunes and get him to offer me some lessons. Hey, Larry Coryell (we toured together), come on, Larry, do some lessons so I can learn some jazz stuff. Tony McManus, wow, you're an incredible Celtic player! I want to learn that stuff. I'd say that ninety percent of the lesson materials are things I wanted to learn and musicians that I admire.

In the circles I travel, I meet a lot of musicians. Plus, there is a whole other stratum of great musicians who are not professionals who play fantastically. They love to teach and share their transcriptions. I also find people online and contact them. So, that's the basis of the lesson part of the Guitar Workshop. The other part was the historical collections we put together for folk who never saw Big Bill Broonzy, John Hurt, Chet Atkins, Merle Travis, Jerry Reed, Doc Watson, or Wes Montgomery. That was very strong for many years, but when YouTube came along, it totally killed it. People are no longer interested in buying DVDs or downloads; they just go on YouTube.

YouTube is a double-edged sword. It's great to be able to discover great musicians all over the world, but it destroys the business side. It's the same with streaming music killing record sales.

Absolutely! Nowadays, if you're not a touring artist that can sell your CD on tour, why make it?

Artists used to make most of their money from recording, but now the recordings are primarily advertisements for touring.

Exactly. Also, YouTube, which I enjoy because I like to discover things I don't know about, whether it's musical or historical. But at the same time, you have people teaching on YouTube that are terrible. On the flip side, there are players like Andy McKee, who became famous via YouTube.

I want you to know that I admire your work, so much touring, recording, educational material, and preservation of music that could be lost.

Thank you.

Do you have any current projects in the works?

I always come back to the core of what I love. I just finished a book of Gary Davis instrumentals that are not well known. From the first to the last note is transcribed so you can see the progression of his thinking. I'm also going back to Blind Boy Fuller and updating my previous

book of this playing. When I did the original transcriptions, it was done using analog tape. You'd have to slow the tape to half speed, and you would miss notes. Now with digital technology, it's much more accurate. The program I use is Transcribe.
I've given up the idea of touring, especially after this covid thing we're still in. I'm focusing on writing and transcribing music and putting together new DVDs.

Gary Davis had a profound influence on you. Before going, do you have any memories you'd like to share about him?

Yes. I had returned from Europe and was doing a concert in the village, and one of his students brought him to hear me. When it was over, he went down the road to listen to David Bromberg play at the Gaslight club. David was also a former student of Reverend Davis. Rev. Davis started preaching at a certain point and said he never had children but had many sons. I remained in contact right up to the end of his life. I would write his wife, Annie, after his passing.

Bromberg and I used to talk about how these two middle-class boys going to the Bronx to a shack that yet felt so much like home. Here was this couple. Annie and Gary Davis who had nothing, and I mean nothing. They were poor, but they would give everything to you, love, food, and knowledge.

How can you beat that?

You can't.

https://www.guitarworkshop.digital/
https://www.guitarvideos.com/

Top right photo: 1979 John Fahey, Stefan Grossman, John Renbourn Berkeley, Ca. Photo by Jo Ayres - Bottom right photo: Jorma Kaukonen, Stefan Grossman

Eric Clapton, Stefan Grossman checking out Stefan's 1920s Jumbo Stella guitar at the Crossroads Festival
Photo by Jo Ayres

1985 Sarah and Stefan Grossman, Monte Porzio. Italy. Photo by Jo Ayres

1983 Stefan Grossman, John Renbourn, Vancouver Folk Festival, Canada. Photo by Jo Ayers

1978 Duck Baker, Stefan Grossman, Teatro Lirica, Milan, Italy

2010 Stefan Grossman at the Crossroads Festival, Chicago, IL

2014 Jeff Daniels, Stefan Grossman, Sparta, NJ checking out guitars