



Photos on left and next page: Jason Vieaux. Photo by Tyler Boye; Photo right: Timothy McAllister. Photo courtesy of the artist

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## Parallel Lines

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By Benjamin Pomerance

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IN CHILDHOOD, Timothy McAllister and Jason Vieaux chose the outside path. Amid a Texas boyhood, McAllister unwrapped an underworld for the saxophone outside of his school band. In Buffalo, a classical guitar showed up in Vieaux's 5-year-old hands — a mistake, it turns out, for his mother intended to purchase an instrument more in line with her personal tastes, a menu flavored with Motown and The Beatles. Both moves were unusual. A saxophone played jazz; a guitar was the golden road for rock. Classical music stayed in the shadows on the side.

Separately, and now together, they embraced their niche, even when it came with a different degree of pressure in the atmosphere. "There's a little bit of heat on people like us to make a difference," McAllister states. "You feel a bit of weight on your shoulders to go out there and impress audiences, to make listeners feel like this is something that they've been missing out on. Because there is no question that in the classical scene, we've always been a little bit on the outside looking into the establishment."

The establishment seems intrigued now. Both the guitarist and the saxophonist have Grammy Awards next to their name. Headlining academic institutions have sought their services. Top orchestras have featured them as soloists in works crafted by leading composers. In Vermont, their upcoming collaboration for a Tuesday night concert at Shelburne's All Souls Interfaith Gathering drew so much positive attention that people scarfed up every ticket — inspiring the Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival to schedule a second performance.

But it wasn't always this obvious. Vieaux picked up that classical guitar after his mother bought it by mistake and, semi-consciously, started teaching himself how to unveil some of its mysteries. Among his musical peers, he was the oddball, the kid playing on nylon strings while the cooler cats shredded on strings of metal. Then came the day when the Buffalo Guitar Quartet showed up for a concert at his school. His mother, who worked at the school, decided to make up for her past error. "My son plays a guitar like that," she informed the quartet's members.

Suddenly, Vieaux was face-to-face with Jeremy Sparks, one of the group's founding artists, taking formal lessons for the first time in his life. Rather than noodling on the instrument with the melodies that constantly flooded his head, Vieaux's days became filled with the discipline of etudes by Fernando Sor, single-line melodies from Happy Traum's flatpicking books and duets of increasing complexity that he played with Sparks. In 1987, at the age of 14, he took his first flight on an airplane: a trip to accompany the Buffalo Guitar Quartet at a festival.

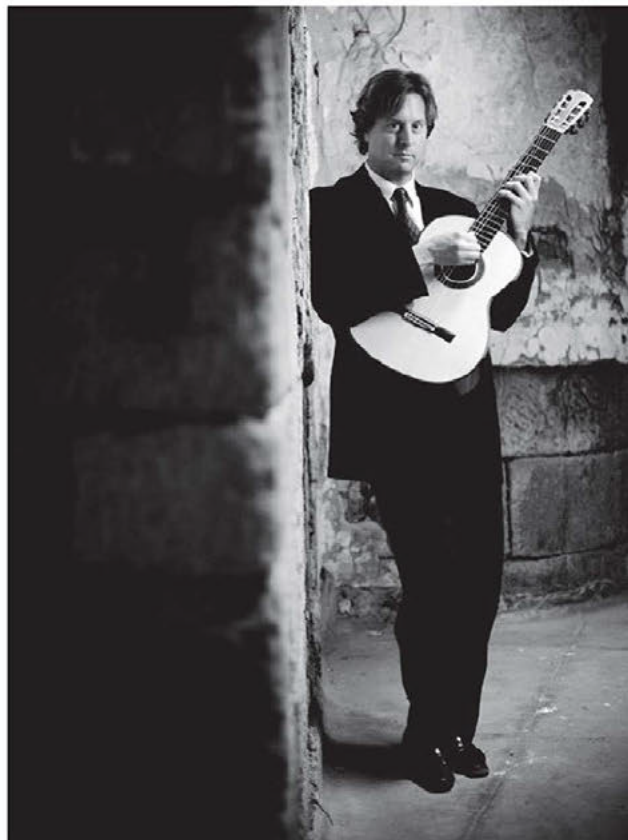
"It became sort of an identity to me as a teenager," Vieaux remembers. "The guitar really didn't have a voice in the school band or the orchestra. And I kind of wore that fact like a badge of honor, that I was doing something that no one else in the school was doing." He pauses. "I didn't have much desire to play in a rock band. I played the electric guitar with my friends, but I could play that stuff by ear off the radio. On a note-to-note level, classical music always was just so much more challenging to me."

Exactly 1,500 miles away, McAllister was savoring opportunities to amp up the degree of difficulty on his instrument, too. "I had a good ear," he recalls, "but it wasn't until I started taking private lessons that I really began discovering the concert repertoire and started working at getting proficient at it." At the age of 16, he had already gained enough proficiency to win a concerto competition, resulting in a featured performance slot with the Houston Civic Symphony. "Once that happened," he states, "the blueprint kind of presented itself."

Yet even from the beginning, he saw that the blueprint would not be easy. The solo repertoire for his instrument, the catalogs of saxophone quartets, the chances to play in saxophone choirs and other related opportunities were fewer and farther between than the bounties that awaited top performers on other instruments. "You can't make a living doing that kind of thing full-time," he explains. "But if you learn to see it as another limb, it can work. So, I decided I would teach at a college and orbit my freelance performing life around that."

He learned from a legend, gaining a coveted spot in Donald Sinta's studio at the University of Michigan. While still in his undergraduate years, he received an invitation to audition for the baritone chair of the PRISM Quartet, an already-renowned group comprised of Sinta's former students. The fit wasn't right at the time, but the concept intrigued him. With three collaborators, he began playing in a different group, the Ninth Circle Saxophone Quartet. In 2001, they won the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, the first sax quartet ever to do so.





Vieaux, too, found the limelight ahead of schedule. “When I went to the Cleveland Institute of Music as a freshman, I was still working heavily on my mechanics,” he says. “My golf swing, as I call it.” Two-and-a-half years later, his mechanics were solid enough to win the Guitar Foundation of America International Competition. The prize package included a 50-city concert tour — forcing Vieaux to take a year off from school to perform. “The worst part,” he laughs, “was taking the year off for that concert tour caused me to default on my student loans.”

By his senior year, though, he had found a way to earn that money back: recording his debut album for the Naxos label. When that album proved to be successful, the dean of the Cleveland Institute of Music invited the 21-year-old guitarist to join the faculty. “The next year, I had my own studio there,” he remembers. “It was a pretty heady time, for sure.”

Yet the heady times never exactly seemed to go to Vieaux’s head. As his concerto appearances and acclaimed albums — covering a range from J.S. Bach to Astor Piazzolla to Pat Metheny — mounted, reviewers consistently noted how relaxed the guitarist appeared on stage, appearing to be graciously at home in all environments. By the time he put out *Play*, a Grammy-winning collection of short selections that shone like the Caribbean sun at midday, his reputation had been secured as an artist who could perform anything ever written and have fun doing it.

McAllister, meanwhile, had translated his skills into a seat at the table with PRISM, the quartet that had observed his talents since his undergrad years. In 2001, fresh off the Ninth Circle Saxophone Quartet’s historic victory at the Fischhoff Competition, the members of PRISM invited McAllister to dine with them in New York City. Before that lunch ended, they offered him the group’s soprano saxophone chair. To this day, that seat has remained his.

Still, as he had predicted, it was not enough by itself to put bread on the table. Teaching became a daily rhythm of his life, starting with a professorship at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam. Then the upstate New York winters took their toll, and McAllister decamped for the desert, teaching first at the University of Arizona and then at Arizona State. From there, it was off to the Midwest, succeeding Fred Hemke at the end of Hemke’s 56-year tenure at Northwestern University.

“The alumni who had been devoted to [Hemke] didn’t necessarily feel that I was a worthy successor to him because I hadn’t been part of their tribe,” McAllister says.

“But I stayed.” Still, there was one more place waiting for him to unpack his suitcases: the spot where the whole journey had taken wing. Nine years ago, the University of Michigan recruited McAllister after Sinta wrapped up his storied career. He has remained there ever since.

But he has not been planted solely in Ann Arbor. Five years before Michigan welcomed him home, the music of John Adams had led to a collaboration with the Saint Louis Symphony that produced a Grammy Award. Since arriving at Michigan, his concerto playing linked him with the London Symphony Orchestra to present *Rush* by Kenneth Fuchs for Naxos Records and the Brussels Philharmonic to play Guillaume Connesson’s *A Kind of Trane* for Deutsche Grammophon. In 2021, John Corigliano’s *Triathlon* featured his artistry in San Francisco.

And eventually, his wide-ranging trail crossed with Vieaux’s globetrotting ways. In Portland, Oregon, Chamber Music Northwest recruited them to perform a premiere by the prolific Vermont-raised composer Pierre Jalbert. By this time, McAllister and Vieaux had recorded enough albums between them to start their own record store. They had individually received enough awards to fill any trophy case and played in enough venues to fill an atlas. Yet they had never worked side-by-side before.

Then they began to read through Jalbert’s new duet, and the two self-professed football fanatics — Vieaux cheers for his hometown Buffalo Bills, while McAllister’s allegiance rests with the Detroit Lions — felt a surge of the popular adage among today’s top athletes: *Game recognizes game*. “I don’t set out to collaborate with a particular instrument,” Vieaux explains. “I get interested when it is a superior musician playing that instrument: not just a virtuoso, but also an artist. So, it was really easy for us to work together.”

“Our chemistry was terrific right away,” McAllister recalls of that initial union in Portland. “This program, when we rehearsed it, felt like we had already been playing together for years. Sometimes, a match just works. This one worked from the start.”

They will echo that Portland program in Shelburne — Astor Piazzolla’s infectiously delightful *Histoire du Tango*; a tonal soliloquy by San Francisco Conservatory composition department chair David Conte; a duet by Andrew Zohn showcasing the capacities of both instruments; solo selections by Stacy Garrop for McAllister and Pat Metheny for Vieaux; and at the center of it all, Jalbert’s *Sweet and Doleful Timbres*, the piece that brought them together, 18 minutes of music that took two masters of their craft and formed a sustaining bond.

And in the state where Jalbert took his first piano lessons at age 5, McAllister and Vieaux emphasize that listeners will be dazzled by how far their homegrown craftsman — winner of the Rome Prize and the BBC Masterprize — has come. “Overall, it has sort of a dreamy vibe,” McAllister says of *Sweet and Doleful Timbres*. “And then, in the last movement, it drives to the end with a ton of energy. He paces it out so well. By the time you finish it, you feel like the audience hasn’t even been breathing because he keeps their attention so strongly.”

Yet even before these concerts end, questions will already be rumbling about where things will go next. The two artists on the mountaintop want to hike further. The trails, to both of them, seem practically limitless. “When we find good music out there, regardless of genre,” Vieaux states, “we can play it, and it will do what it is supposed to do.” On their own, the two parallel lines of their lives will continue. But now that they have crossed before, they will intersect again, two like-minded paths supporting and reinforcing, each one stronger than ever.

*The Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival will present Jason Vieaux and Timothy McAllister in concert on April 11 at 2 p.m. at the All Souls Interfaith Gathering in Shelburne, Vt. The 7 p.m. concert is sold out. For tickets and more information, call 802-846-2175, email [info@lccmf.org](mailto:info@lccmf.org), or visit [lccmf.org](http://lccmf.org).*

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