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Photo by Ted Kirk

out of 'Closet musician' plucking guitar chords in darkness

By Bill Roberts
 It wasn't easy to get his consent for this story. Of course, we had to change his name.

You see, Tom, as he will be known, is a closet musician.

Just as there are many kinds of closet people, there are many reasons for their characteristic secretiveness. Sometimes it's shyness and sometimes plain common sense that drives otherwise gregarious folk to their special closets.

I accompanied Tom the other night on one of his ritualistic withdrawals. First he peered out his residence hall room door, checking for possible visitors.

Satisfied, he locked the door and stuffed a bath towel under it. He reduced his refrigerator's temperature, to insure a steady, muffling rumble.

Finally, he took up his guitar, sat in the back of his coat closet and I closed the door behind us.

Curse of the albatross

"It's my albatross," I heard him say wistfully as he tuned the instrument in the dark. "I'm cursed with this Gibson. I'll never give it up. But then, why should I?"

He was playing now and I noted he missed a pluck of the fourth string in his rendition of "Scarborough Fair."

"I don't care what the others might say," he said, almost to the beat of "parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme." "I pour my heart and soul into this guitar!"

I mumbled agreement, hoping to calm him. His outburst reminded me of Tom in high school, before he became a closet musician.

After months of practice, Tom mastered the quick chord change and the art of pulling on strings for a tremelo effect. Recognizing his destiny as rock'n'roll

stardom, he formed a combo with all the modesty of Joe Walsh.

In the locker room after gym class, Tom would stand in his post-shower puddle plucking away on an imaginary guitar, wailing "Inna Gadda Davida."

In his classes, teachers would tell him for the tenth time to quit playing bongos on his desk. Students gave him wide berth, and unintentionally a mobile stage, as he be-bopped down the halls between classes. He was outrageous and embarrassing.

Finally, Tom's combo got a job playing for the final sock hop of our senior year.

A hush fell over the crowd. The spitballs stopped flying, the couples stopped swaying and all eyes turned to the plywood stage on the east end of the gymnasium as the band...

Tom flopped. The hush lifted, the spitballs and couples resumed and all eyes began looking for their respective pair of shoes. It was the last time Tom played in public because he played badly.

Still missing

To be frank, he still plays badly. And, for the most part, he plays alone.

But there is one "friend"—call him Jack—with whom he plays guitar.

They sneak into Jack's squalid apartment on Thursday nights (when the couple upstairs regularly goes out), taking a 12-pack and their guitars.

I don't know how the two met, but their friendship is based solely on music.

I quietly got up to leave Tom's closet. He didn't notice my exit, so intent was he on his picking.

But just before the door squeaked shut, I heard him once again miss that pluck of the fourth string.

Full houses result of new conductor

The separation of the music public from current music and the musician's loss of alliance with composers are the major problems Dennis Russell Davies says he has encountered as a musician and conductor of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

The orchestra will perform at Kimball Recital Hall this weekend.

Under Davies, who has been with the orchestra since 1971, the group has quadrupled its home audience while gaining international recognition as one of the world's most important small orchestras and America's only resident professional full-time chamber orchestra.

Davies said one of the first problems he discovered as the orchestra's music director was that it had been striving for what he called the wrong audience.

Davies said he sought a different kind of audience through a different ticket pricing system: lowered admission for senior citizens and students, and fifteen minutes before each concert, allowing those who still couldn't afford admission to enter on a pay-what-you-can basis.

As he said resulted in full houses of persons truly interested.

Davies said he then worked to produce flexibility in the orchestra by introducing new types of music and dividing the orchestra into subgroups.

While in St. Paul, the orchestra regularly divides time between a subscription series with the entire orchestra and a small series called the Prospective Series, featuring the subgroups.

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