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Interview

Artist Interview: Todd Hallawell

by [Stephen Rekas](#)

[Click here](#) to hear a sample of Todd Hallawell's song "Windy Bill" from the CD, *From Nashville and Back*.

Personal/Biographical**Who or what events inspired you to become a musician?**

My parents met in the violin section of an orchestra. So, I guess you could say I was born into it. And for a while, they were dance instructors for Arthur Murray in the 50s. So, I grew up listening to Latin music as well as classical and jazz.

How old were you when you began to play?

I started taking organ lessons when I was six, but I wouldn't say I was an inspired student. I don't remember liking it at all, but my parents felt it was important that I play a musical instrument. I don't think they really cared which instrument, just that I should play one. So, when my grandmother, Lillian, gave me a Sears Silvertone guitar when I was seven, my folks gave me a choice: continue the dreaded organ lessons, or learn to play guitar. Not a difficult choice, even for a seven-year-old.

Do you feel that your starting age is a critical factor in playing your current style?

Definitely! During my college years, I taught guitar in music stores and found that the children who started early had an enormous advantage over the kids who didn't. But even more important than that was the level of the parents' involvement. If the parents put music in the category of a hobby rather than making it part of their formal education, the kids almost always lost interest. I guess I was lucky that my parents thought it was so important.

Please describe your formal music training.

It was always pretty formal. At first, my dad taught me how to play chords and

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then began to teach me to read music. After that, they found guitar teachers for me. For a couple of years, my mother drove me to lessons in Sacramento, 50 miles each way.

Do you remember your first performance?

I remember singing and playing a couple of songs at the spring concert at my elementary school. This was about 5 months after I started playing the guitar when I was in the second grade. I was absolutely fearless back then. It took a long time for me to develop stage fright.

Do you still get nervous on stage?

Most every time. But, maybe nervous is not the right word. It's more like an anxious daze. Segovia once said that before each concert he wanted to cancel and at the end of the concert he wanted to do it all over again. I'm like that. Because a large percentage of the people who attend my concerts are guitar players themselves, the pressure is high. I feel I need to live up to their expectations. But, I'm not complaining. It keeps me on my toes.

What styles interested you when you first began to play?

When I first began, folk music was very popular. Peter Paul & Mary, The Kingston Trio, Harry Belafonte, the list goes on and on. "Puff, the Magic Dragon" was the first fingerpicking song that I could play and sing at the same time. But, I guess the biggest influence of that era was Simon & Garfunkel. The Beatles were also influential, but I didn't get into them until much later.

How did your early preferences in music influence your current style?

That's a good question. And it's something I've thought about quite a bit. Folk music is typically simple and easy for most people to understand harmonically. For a while I took lessons from a jazz teacher. He taught me how to play chord melodies, how to play complex chords and apply substitutions and so on. I had no problem playing the tunes he gave to me, but for some reason I couldn't make myself enjoy it.

After practicing all the jazz stuff, I remember sitting on the couch with my guitar listening to myself play a D chord. After all the 4 and 5-note chords I'd been playing, the sound of this simple triad was beautiful to me. I've never forgotten that moment or what made me feel that way. The music I write tends to be very tonal and easy to listen to. When I make use of altered chords, it's only to create enough tension to make the resolution (my D chord) a little more dramatic.

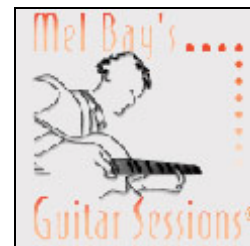
What other major influences have you had through your career?

My folks took me to see Andres Segovia and Julian Bream when I was quite young. I remember how amazed I was that a single person could cause a huge audience to become dead silent. Hearing these concerts made a big impression on me.

But, I think an even bigger influence has been the instrumental music of Jerry Reed. I don't think there's a better composer for the guitar on the planet. And through Jerry's music came my awareness of Chet Atkins and all the musicians he's influenced. I'm just now starting to realize the full scope of his contributions. Every year I perform at the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society (CAAS), and every year I'm amazed at how many really good players are out there.

I heard that you also studied with John Duarte. Tell me about that.

After I graduated from college, my music degree made me eligible for a vocational scholarship through Rotary International. Rotary is a fantastic organization and has done a lot to promote goodwill around the world through all



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their different programs. They gave me a very flexible award that allowed me to choose my own curriculum for a year-long study program in England. I continue to work with the Rotary whenever I can.

For the scholarship, I wanted to continue my study of classical guitar and composition. I also had an interest in sound engineering and computer editing. I was able to arrange lessons with Keith Andrews at Amazon Recording Studio in Liverpool; Gordon Crosskey, Professor of Guitar at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester; and John Duarte in London, for composition. I spent a lot of time on the trains.

I especially wanted to study with John Duarte because I had played many of his compositions in college and respected his work. I also had this romantic notion of becoming a symphonic composer and thought he would be able to start me moving in that direction. Although he was a fascinating teacher, I probably learned more about myself than about writing music. About halfway through my stay in England, I realized that I'd probably be an old man before having enough experience to make a living at composition. But, I kept going to my lessons just to hear him talk. Jack was quite a character and a lot of fun to be around.

Are there any method books you've used that others should know about?

There are three books that have had a big impact on me personally. The first, of course, is *Mel Bay's Modern Guitar Method*. I think that everyone I know who played the guitar learned to read with this series. The second is *Mauro Giuliani's 120 Studies for Right-Hand Development*. And last, and only because I came across it last, is *Heavy Neckin', The music of Jerry Reed* transcribed and edited by John Knowles. Someone gave me this book and said I'd enjoy it. So, the first time I heard Jerry Reed's music was from my own fingers. It felt so comfortable in my hands that I started seeking out other compositions of Jerry's and other composers that had the same groove. It was because of this book that I started to listen to Chet Atkins. Usually, people hear Chet first and then discover Jerry. Anyway, when people ask, I continue to recommend all three of these books.

What type of music do you listen to today?

Today, I mostly listen to the recordings of my friends in the business or CDs people have given to me. I have a pretty big stack of those now, so when I travel, I bring them along. It's kind of ironic that at home, where I have my best sound system, I hardly ever turn it on. Everywhere you go there seems to be some sort of music playing. At home, I mostly enjoy the silence.

Do you play any other instruments besides the guitar? If so, is there any particular advantage or disadvantage to being a multi-instrumentalist?

For three years, I was in the Army Jazz Band where I learned to play the bass guitar by reading Count Basie charts. I still enjoy playing bass. And, of course, in the Army there's also a marching band which has no guitars, so I became very good at the crash cymbals. I believe this is where I learned to play in time. When you make a mistake on crash cymbals, people will hear it!

I also played 5-string banjo just to add some diversity to my stage show, but I wouldn't call myself a banjo player. I just got really good at playing 8 or 9 tunes. Having said that, I think I could become a banjo player, but it would take time away from the guitar.

Is there anyone you would like to collaborate with in a recording or tour?

At the moment I'm collaborating with flatpicker Robin Kessinger who is also a Winfield winner. We've already toured a little and are now working on an album of ragtime guitar. I always have a lot of fun when Robin's around and I'm sure

we'll be working more and more in the future.

There are many other musicians I would love to work with. At CAAS this year, I got together with Daniele Bazzani, from Italy. If it weren't for all the miles between us, I think we'd already be working together. Often, collaborations are more about developing friendships than making money and, at the end of the day, it's the friendships that are the lasting part of any collaboration.

Which do you enjoy more, performing solo or with performing with others?

Both have their rewards, but I think that I have more fun when I work with others. When I perform on stage as a soloist, the performance is the result of practicing the same pieces for hours and hours. I'm basically reciting something that I've played hundreds of times before in my living room. The only thing that makes it interesting to me is the chance that the audience is hearing it for the first time- or better yet, has heard it before and wants to hear it again. But when somebody else is with you onstage it changes the whole dynamic. It becomes spontaneous and unpredictable with lots of creative energy. It's more interesting to the performers and ultimately more enjoyable for the audience.

What musical avenues do you wish to explore in the future?

I've enjoyed singing since I was a little boy, but I've never recorded a vocal album. So, I would like to do that. Because of the Winfield competition, I became known as a fingerstyle guitar player and most of the venues I play hire me for that reason. The last few years I've found myself introducing more and more singing into the mix. I don't know if the audience is enjoying it more, but I know I am.

What keeps you interested in the music business?

There's nothing that interests me about the "business" of music. I wish that I didn't have to deal with it at all- rather, just show up and play! Early in my career it was all about the possibility of making it big. When I was in my early 20's, there was no doubt in my mind that it would happen. But now, when I look back on it all, it's really been about people. Sometimes I think about all the friendships that wouldn't have come about if I were doing anything else. My grandmother once said, "Don't ever forget how happy your music makes people." That goes both ways. As far as my career goes, I just follow where the music leads me.

Have you ever had to weather a creative dry spell in your playing or composition? How did you overcome it?

To start, I'm not a very prolific composer. I like the pieces I've written, but some have taken me years to complete. So, I wouldn't call it a dry spell, more like constant low humidity.

Lately, I've been working more on flatpicking. It's a relatively new skill for me and I can hear myself getting better all the time. At the moment, that's what holds my interest.

Tell me about your 1997 Winfield win. Were you able to capture the prize on your first attempt?

Winning Winfield was definitely a career high. Friends had been telling me to attend Winfield for years, just to enjoy the festival experience. In May of 1997, I won the Southwest Regional Fingerstyle Contest in Tucson which guaranteed entrance to the National Championships at the Walnut Valley Festival (Winfield) that fall. Somebody told me that at Winfield I was likely to do better if I played on steel strings, rather than nylon. So three months before Winfield, I started practicing the steel string guitar and I've never gone back.

Just two weeks before the contest, I received a call from guitar builder Lance McCollum. I had bought a baritone guitar from him earlier that year. He said he was sending me a guitar and, if I liked it, to go ahead and play it at Winfield. I liked it. The guitar he sent was the most beautiful guitar I'd ever seen and the sound was incredible. He had sent me an instrument that he had built for himself, using all the best woods, and had inlaid the word "Mine" in abalone on the 12th fret - his attempt to actually keep a guitar that he built. After winning the contest I called Lance to ask him how much he wanted for his guitar because he wasn't about to get it back!

What was it like being in the contest?

I was as nervous as I had ever been in my life. It was about 95 degrees and humid, my fingers felt like sausages. Backstage, everyone was in their own little world, frantically practicing their contest pieces. We all gathered into a group and picked our order numbers - I got "2" meaning I'd be the second person on stage. I had to run back to the trailer in the campground to get my guitar. I barely made it back in time.

After I had played my two tunes, I went into the audience and sat down to listen to the other performers. With each contestant, my estimation of my own performance kept getting lower and lower. By the end of the first round I felt there was little hope of making it into the finals. When the finalists were announced, I was actually shocked to hear my name. Five finalists are chosen to go into the second round and we each played two more tunes. Again, I drew number "2". I guess it's my lucky number.

It was only after the intensity of the contest was over that I was able to relax and enjoy the festival. Winning the contest gave me the credentials that allowed me access to venues that would have been nearly impossible before. It was a very good day. My wife Kay and I have returned to Winfield every single year and can't imagine a year going by without making the trip.

Technique

How did you assemble the body of technique you possess now?

I learned the mechanics of playing the guitar through my classical studies in college. My feel and groove were developed by trying to make a living playing in bars and restaurants, which I did for fifteen years.

Have you produced any instructional materials - books or videos? Are you planning to write or produce any?

I've always had a beginning guitar book in the back of my mind. A lot of the ideas are written down already because I used to teach private lessons. When things slow down a bit, I'll dig it all out and start working on it again.

What sort of practice routine would you recommend for the beginning, intermediate or advanced player?

The only thing that seems to work consistently is playing every single day. You could get by with 30 minutes of practice a day as long as you were serious about it. This means practicing without watching TV...

Please describe your own practice routine.

I need to practice at least an hour a day to keep my repertoire from disappearing

from my fingers. So, this I view as minimum maintenance.

When I arrange a tune, I usually write it down. Once it's down on paper, my goal is to memorize it as quickly as possible. During this process, I try to practice around 3 hours a day- sometimes more, sometimes less- but skipping a day only makes the process harder. Once I've memorized it, I begin to explore different interpretations. I'll play it with different dynamics or I might mute the basses or work out different fingerings, change octaves, etc. By the time I play it on stage, I understand the piece as thoroughly as possible and have worked out all the weak spots.

One of the common mistakes people make when they practice is starting from the beginning every time. It's much more efficient to start practicing at different places in the music. This keeps you from knowing the beginning better than the end. But the most important reason is that it gives you bookmarks. If you lose your place in performance, there's some place for you to go other than the beginning.

What do you do to keep your repertoire sounding fresh?

Well, the most obvious answer to that would be to add new material. But, I worry less about the repertoire and concentrate more on the performance itself. Before a gig, I try to think of humorous things I might say to the audience. Being able to make people laugh is a great way to freshen up your act.

What do you feel are the key elements of your technique/style that set you apart from other players?

My classical studies gave me a very good foundation by helping me to master the mechanics of the guitar. Most people that see me play can tell I have a classical background. This training has allowed me to be in control of the music instead of the reverse.

With the mechanics out of the way, I can focus on my interpretation. After a concert, people often tell me that they enjoyed the musicality of my playing. To me, that means that they experienced some sort of emotional reaction to my interpretation. When someone says that you play with feeling, what does that really mean? If you can cause people to feel sadness or melancholy; or make them smile, laugh, or just feel happy, you are doing your job as a musician. Interpretation is a powerful tool.

One of the best compliments I receive is when someone tells me that my playing sounds honest. In other words, it didn't sound like I was trying to do something that I didn't feel deep inside, which also means that the emotion I felt while I was playing was transferred to the audience. Maybe that's the key.

Do you teach or act as a musical mentor?

I'd like to think so. It always gives me a good feeling when I hear someone who has put in hours of practice to play one of my pieces.

I've always enjoyed teaching and I'm happy to say that many of my students have gone on to professional music careers.

Any suggestions on forming a concert repertoire or preparing for a concert?

The most important thing is to change the character of the music every few minutes during a performance. Personally, I start with something I am very familiar with and fun to listen to. After I have the audience's confidence, it's easier to play the more complicated pieces. I try to get a laugh from the

audience close to the beginning. Most audiences are quick to laugh because they want to be entertained.

Creative Process

What inspires you to write music?

Historically, my best tunes have come from some sort of emotional trauma, usually involving a woman. But, since I've been happily married now for over thirteen years, my writing has slowed down a bit.

Do you ever get the feeling that the notes are being given to you; that you are a conduit for a higher intelligence or power?

There's no doubt in my mind that God has a hand in all this. But only once did I feel that a melody was "given" to me. I woke up in the middle of the night and ran to my guitar so I wouldn't forget it. In my dream, I was performing it, words and all. I was able to save the melody and chord structure, but not the lyrics. But, most of the time, if the music seems to come too easy, I begin to suspect that I've heard it before.

Do different guitars in your collection inspire different types of tunes?

Absolutely! I keep some of my guitars in alternate tunings. One is in DADGAD, and one in G6 [DGDEBD]. I also keep one of my guitars in C tuning [CGCGCE], and then I have a baritone guitar tuned down to B [BEADF#B]. Just playing in odd tunings causes you to think differently. You start to experiment; it's like playing a different instrument. The patterns that your hands are accustomed to forming sound completely different- which causes you to explore. This alone can take you in interesting directions. My McCollum baritone makes me think differently just because it's tuned down to B. It growls and barks and does things that my other instruments can't.

Do you ever use a thumbpick or a flatpick? Flesh, nails, or acrylic nails?

Since switching to steel strings, I've used acrylic nails. But, I'm also able to use the flesh of my thumb on the bass in contrast to the nail sound in the treble. It really sounds like two different instruments playing. Lately, I've been working on developing my flatpicking skills since I enjoy picking fiddle tunes and contradance music. And trying to keep up with Robin Kessinger has been an enjoyable challenge.

You are also a skillful songwriter. How much singing do you do in your sets?

I do enjoy singing, but the number of songs that I include in a performance depends on the audience and venue. If I'm playing at the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society in Nashville for example, the audience is there to hear the guitar so I sing less there than at other gigs. If it were up to me, I'd sing at least half of the time, but you really have to gear your material to the audience.

Gear

Inquiring minds will want to know your preferred guitars, strings, and recording microphones?

I have been a huge fan of Elixir strings ever since they hit the market and I'm one of their endorsers. They have a very controllable sound and I like the fact that I don't have to work as hard to keep squeaks and chirps out of my playing.

I've used them on all of my recordings.

The guitars I use most often are a McCollum Grand Auditorium, a Chris Jenkins' Saddle Pal, and a Lowden F-32C. If I'm driving to a gig instead of flying, I'll take along the McCollum baritone.

My recording mics have always been a matched pair of Brüel & Kjær 4003 condensers. I haven't found a more accurate pair of microphones anywhere. For vocals, I usually use a Neumann U-67.

Do you have any product endorsements?

Officially, I endorse McCollum guitars, Chris Jenkins' guitars, Elixir Strings, and Cedar Creek Cases (TKL).

What's special about the instruments you play?

All the instruments I play have radically different timbres, but they all share certain qualities. What I listen for is clarity of tone and a balanced sound. This is the most conducive to my style of playing. A guitar's sustain is less important to me than its clarity. Each note should ring clear of the others. In this way, I'm able to put the melody on any string and keep it singing above the accompaniment. Another thing I look for in a guitar is its dynamic range. It should sound as clear when played soft as it does loud.

Is there anything on your wish list as far as equipment or instruments?

I'm constantly searching for a better sound and will always experiment with different pickups and pre-amps in order to achieve it. And of course, I always want another guitar, but I've come to an agreement with my wife. For every guitar I buy, I have to sell at least one.

Current

Tell me about your home recording studio.

At the moment, I have a Macintosh-based system using Nuendo software by Steinberg, a MOTU Traveler for input, TC Electronic Powercore, and Lexicon reverbs. I monitor using a PreSonus Central Station (passive speaker control), Genelec 1031-A's powered speakers, and a pair of Magnaplanar MG II's.

Are there any upcoming performance dates or tours you'd like to mention?

My web site is kept up to date with my performance schedule. It's easy to remember - <http://toddhallawell.com>. One performance I'm particularly looking forward to will be on a cruise ship! If anyone wants to have a very enjoyable long weekend in the dead of winter, I will be performing on (and enjoying) a cruise from LA to Mexico Feb 23 - 26, 2007. The cruise is being hosted by Antsy McClain and the Trailer Park Troubadours. Also performing will be Tommy Emmanuel and Edgar Cruz. The details are on my web site. With a group like this, anything could happen!

What new projects do you currently have in mind?

I've already talked a little about the ragtime album I'm planning with Robin Kessinger and the vocal album. I'm also hoping to record a solo DVD in the near future.

Are there any other music-related interests that enrich your life?

At every festival we attend, whether it's here in the USA or abroad, we meet like-minded folks who welcome us as if we were family- all this based upon a shared

passion for music. This extended family of musicians and performers has become very important to both Kay and me. We make it a point to go to as many musical gatherings as we can each year, whether I'm performing on stage or just picking in the campground. It's amazing to me that something so human and so basic as playing music together can have such a powerful effect on people. I could do it for the rest of my life - probably will.

Thanks for the wealth of information, and for sharing so many insights and aspects of your life with our readers.
My pleasure, Stephen.

To learn more about Todd Hallawell and his music please see his website at:
<http://www.toddhallawell.com>

Todd Hallawell has received multiple prestigious awards as a guitarist, including the National Fingerpicking Guitar Championship in Winfield, Kansas and the Southwest Regional Fingerstyle Guitar Championship in Tucson, Arizona. Returning to public performance after many years as a music producer and audio engineer for Soundset Recordings, Todd enjoys performing at festivals throughout the US and Europe and has become a regular performer at the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society (CAAS) in Nashville. His exceptional musical range has become well known throughout the guitar world and his compositions have been selected for both film and theatrical presentations. His CDs *Before My Time* and *From Nashville & Back* have won critical acclaim.

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