



## **Pete Huttlinger Interview: He Shall Overcome**

*By Adam St. James*

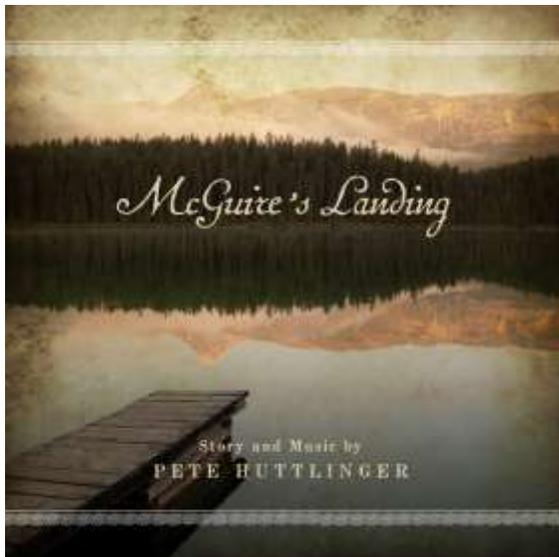
Overcoming obstacles in your guitar playing is something we all struggle with. Simply finding the time to practice is one of them. So too is trying to learn a new song, or a new style of playing -- like mastering acoustic fingerstyle ragtime guitar after playing nothing but electric rock and roll all your life.

Pete Huttlinger knows a thing or two about overcoming obstacles. For years the strumming partner to John Denver, the Berklee College of Music grad made a name for himself after Denver's death in 1997 among fingerstyle guitar circles -- especially after he won the National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship in 2000. He has a knack for working out cool solo acoustic guitar arrangements of "impossible" pop songs, such as Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" -- search him out explaining and playing that on YouTube, it's as entertaining as it is inspiring.

Huttlinger has since played the stage at Carnegie Hall a couple of times, and found himself invited to perform at Eric Clapton's Crossroads events. He has shared stages and TV cameras with country star LeAnn Rimes. The Nashville-based guitarist has released nine albums, and an equal number of instructional videos, mostly through Homespun.

Clearly, the fingerstyle ace was building a pretty strong resume and following, particularly in the acoustic solo world, when he was dealt a pretty major setback or two, in the form of a major stroke in 2010, followed within months by end-stage heart failure.

But he didn't give up. Instead, after doctors outfitted him with a device that keeps his heart ticking, Huttlinger, a self-proclaimed "goal oriented" person, picked up the guitar and "slowly but surely" worked through the pain, not to mention the total inability to use his right hand. And now he's back out there, touring, playing, and amazing audiences the world over once again.



In this exclusive Guitar.com interview, conducted the day of Huttlinger's recent Montana guitar clinic, we spoke with him about overcoming obstacles, and about the daily practice routine that got him back on stage. We also discussed the cool “concept” album he released last year, *McGuire's Landing*, which comes complete with a 52-page fictional short story Huttlinger wrote to give “pictures” to the gorgeous music on the disc.

Watch for Huttlinger at this week's Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas -- where he once won that National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship -- and in October, 2014, at Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch, in Pomeroy, Ohio. Huttlinger also has two upcoming Nashville camps, in October and November. At all events, Pete will be teaching must-see guitar clinics, and performing live -- living proof that overcoming obstacles is within everyone's reach.

Guitar.com: Hi Pete.

Pete Huttlinger: Hey, how are ya!

Guitar.com: Good, how are you doing?

Huttlinger: Doing great!

Guitar.com: Are you at home in Nashville, or are you over in Bozeman for your guitar workshop today?

Huttlinger: We are in Livingston, Montana. It's just beautiful up here.

Guitar.com: I bet. And you have a clinic and performance tomorrow, right?

Huttlinger: Yes, at a place called Music Villa in Bozeman. It's a music store there in Bozeman. And Livingston is a town about 25 miles away from Bozeman. They're two different towns.

Guitar.com: So are you just hanging out in Livingston, or are you performing there?

Huttlinger: Well, when I started off out here I did a guitar and fly fishing camp where we had three days of intense guitar instruction, and then a whole day on the river, fly fishing. I had 20 students up here and brought in another teacher, an old friend from Wyoming. It was quite an undertaking.

Guitar.com: That sounds pretty cool. Are you big into fly fishing?

Huttlinger: Very much so. Yes.

Guitar.com: Did you catch a few?



Huttlinger: We caught a ton. Everybody did. Everyone. That was the best part: everyone who signed up for this deal caught fish, and they all learned a lot of guitar stuff. And then everyone became good friends. I don't know if you know about guitar camps, but they can be really great experiences in a lot of ways other than just playing the guitar.

Guitar.com: A lot of camaraderie.

Huttlinger: Exactly.

Guitar.com: Were you fishing on a river or a creek or what?

Huttlinger: A river. We all fished on the Yellowstone River, the big, big river. It was big.

Guitar.com: What do you do in your guitar clinics and workshops? What did you show these people?

Huttlinger: I brought up several different arrangements and different styles of music. I taught them the arrangements, but then I talk about my concepts of arranging and how I approach arranging tunes for solo guitar. And then the other guy who was here taught a flat-picking class. Every student got three sessions with me, and three with Jeff Troxel, the other teacher. Jeff is a flat-picking champ. So they all got a lot of fingerstyle and a whole lot of flat-picking.

Guitar.com: When you talk about your view of arranging, and knowing your performance style and how you arrange the pieces you play, do you tend to take people through a bass line, and then chords, and then adding a melody on top of all that?

Huttlinger: It depends on the tune. A tune like Superstition, that's one where you have to get the bass line, and melody, and then you figure out what chords you can get in there, and what horn parts you can get in. But I generally start with things that aren't that difficult. I start with tunes that are more accessible, and easier to play. I start by teaching what the melody is. And once they get the melody down, then we can start looking at the chords. I think melody is king. You have to be able to play the melody. The melody has to be the loudest part of what you're playing.

And then you put the chords to it, but then you have to decide what style am I going to do it in? Am I going to do it as a bossa nova tune, a folk tune, a bluegrass tune? Or a funk tune, or pop tune? There's a lot of things that go into play when you're arranging for solo guitar. A lot of times -- like if it's a pop tune -- I'll just cop whatever the feel is from the original recording, and try to incorporate that on the guitar. But unfortunately most of the students aren't ready for that kind of, that level of playing yet. So we start them out slow and easy as I like to say.

Guitar.com: I've been listening to your new record, *McGuire's Landing*. It's a beautiful album.

Huttlinger: Oh thanks.

Guitar.com: There was a lot that went into this one, both musically and emotionally.



Huttlinger: Yeah. You know the whole story thing -- I don't know how much emotion went into -- but certainly a lot musically and a lot to think about in terms of writing the story that went with it. Musically it took several years, because I had to get over a stroke and heart failure and all that stuff. So that took a few years to work through all that. And then my wife reminded me, "Hey, you've got to finish this project." And so I finally got back to work on it and I'm really happy with the way the whole thing turned out.

Guitar.com: When I said emotionally, I meant because of the health issues you had to overcome to get the album finished.

Huttlinger: Oh yeah. Well, I'm pretty good at separating those kinds of things. I view the music as one thing, and the health stuff as another. Granted, the health stuff definitely affected the music, because I couldn't play for a year or more. I couldn't convince anyone that I'd ever been a guitar player. And slow but sure it's coming back. But I don't know, maybe, it could have gotten in there. But I think almost all of the music was already written, and all I had to do was write the story. And I re-recorded some of the stuff. But for the most part it was done and ready to go I just had to get healthy enough to get back to work.

Guitar.com: Was the overall story something that was in your head for a long time and evolved, or did you have the whole thing planned out from the beginning?

Huttlinger: The story was sort of kicking around in my head for a long time, but I didn't sit down and try to write it until I had all the music recorded, and I had the order that I wanted

it to be, just in terms of the flow of music. Then I wrote the story to match all that. But the basics of the story had been floating around in my head for several years. I just had to sit down and write it. I'm a great procrastinator.

Guitar.com: The book is very well written, and it's quite an entertaining story.

Huttlinger: The story makes the music mean so much more. It kind of plays out like a movie, when you have the story.

Guitar.com: I saw some quotes from you where you said the original inspiration for *McGuire's Landing* came about when you were playing with John Denver, and that he encouraged you to put it together.



Huttlinger: Yeah. He's one of the first people who heard the tune "McGuire's Landing." I had recorded it with a cellist friend of mine in Nashville. And John heard the recording and he grabbed me after a show and said, "Hey, I heard this tune, what's it about?" And I said, "It's not about anything, boss. It's just a tune." And that wasn't a good enough answer for him, so he pressed me. And I told him basically the gist of the story that I wound up writing. But in just a few sentences. And he said, "I like it, and I want to write the lyrics to this."

And so, he obviously never got a chance to do that. So I just always remembered what I told him that night, and the fact that he was so pumped about the tune. It kept the excitement up for me to get the whole thing done.

Guitar.com: Did his pushing you affect the way you wrote in the future?

Huttlinger: No, it didn't.

Guitar.com: You didn't start digging deeper for the scenes in your head?

Huttlinger: Not as a result of anything John had said, no. Just as a result of my own inquisitive mind.

Guitar.com: So why the story of an Irish immigrant? How did that come about?

Huttlinger: That's what I told John. That's exactly the story I told John. It was an Irishman who came to the U.S. That's just the picture that I had in my mind when I wrote the tune.

Guitar.com: It didn't have anything to do with your ancestry?

Huttlinger: No. There was German on my Dad's side, and my Mom used to say I've got English, Irish, Welsh, German, and a fifth of Scotch in me. So I don't know what else is in me, but I know I'm half German and a bunch more.

Guitar.com: So with the medical issues that you overcame in the past few years, and having to put in quite a bit of practice time to overcome that, you more or less had to put yourself through what would essentially be an incredible guitar course, would it not?

Huttlinger: Yeah, well you know the problem was, I had the knowledge in my head. And my left hand worked. My right hand no longer functioned worth a darn because of the stroke that I suffered. And so I had to just, in some ways I had to start back at square one, and teach myself how to play again. I'm still overcoming some of the difficulties. I'm playing pretty good these days, but there's still some things that I can't do that I used to be able to do. And I want to get better than I was, but I can't do that until I become as good as I was. So it's a tough thing.

But yeah, I had to go back and basically start over. Especially when it comes to playing with a flat pick. I used to have a hell of a right hand for flat picking, and [after the stroke] I couldn't do an up-stroke for about a year. I knew what I was supposed to do, but I just physically could not do an up strum or an up stroke with a flat pick in my hand. I just couldn't figure it out.

And then I saw a Woody Allen movie, I can't remember the name of it, but there's a jazz tune in there that I was really taken with. So I said, "I'm gonna learn this tune if it's the last thing I

ever do." And it took me about a year to learn to play the tune, but I did, and everything went really cool after that. It's like, "All right, I did that, now what else can I do?"

Guitar.com: And working on that tune helped resolve the issue of the up-strokes with the flat-pick?



Huttlinger: Oh yeah. That helped tremendously. That and a lot of other things I was doing, not just that one tune. But I believe very much in setting goals, and I set the goal for myself of learning that tune. And I did it. And meanwhile I was working on other things: a lot of exercises and simpler tunes that I would flat-pick.

Guitar.com: With the fingerpicking, you were probably putting yourself through exercises with that too?

Huttlinger: Yes. But that came back a whole lot faster. It kind of baffled my neurologist that I could fingerpick but I couldn't flat-pick.

Guitar.com: It would seem like flat-picking would be the easier of the two.

Huttlinger: You would think. I would have thought that. But the mind does strange things to our body. I just learned that doctors can be just as baffled as the rest of us. They know a lot, but then there's a lot they don't know.

Guitar.com: Have you ever heard of a book called "Musicophilia"?

Huttlinger: No.

Guitar.com: I think you would find it very interesting. I've told a lot of people about this book. It was written by a doctor who studies music and the brain, and in particular he studies people who have either health issues, such as a stroke, or situations where people maybe have dementia, or situations where people have autistic leanings -- all manner of things that happen in the brain. And this book is just filled with example after example of the most unimaginable musical outcomes, let's say, some of them positive, some of them negative.

And after having read this book, it just amazes you what the brain is capable of, in both good and bad ways. I think you might really enjoy it, you should check it out. It's very interesting.

Huttlinger: I'll look for it and check it out.

Guitar.com: The reason I brought up the course thing, I imagine you probably put in some time where you sat down in the beginning and just did flat out exercises, especially with your right hand.

Huttlinger: Yeah, absolutely. Like any guitar player of any note, I spent many years of 10 to 12 hours a day with a guitar in my hand.

Guitar.com: But at this point, in a sense your starting out, physically, as almost a beginner, but armed with the knowledge of an expert guitar player.

Huttlinger: Mmm-hmmm.

Guitar.com: I bet you could put together an awesome DVD course on that right now, showing what you put yourself through to get your playing back to where you're at. All the various picking patterns you had to work out again. I'm sure there were a lot of exercises.



Huttlinger: Yeah, there were. There was a lot of frustration.

A lot of cursing around my house in those days. A whole lot of cursing. I'd be playing and I just couldn't do the simplest things. I'd spout out a whole bunch of curse words, put my guitar down, and go have a beer, and come back and try it again a couple hours later. But slowly but surely, if you don't give in to all these things that are keeping you down, and you keep fighting, we can get through a whole lot more than people realize.

And it's not just me. I do some public speaking now. I tell people what I've been through and what I've overcome, and people come up to me and say, "Oh yeah, it's so amazing what you've done, and I'm going through whatever and it's not really that big a deal." And I tell them, "No, it's a big deal, because you're going through it. And you have to deal with your problems. And your problems are every bit as big to you as mine are to me." Mine seem kind of big -- you know, heart failure and a stroke, those are two big things that generally kill people, and I didn't die. But I tell people, "We all have stuff to go through. Everyone."

And if you haven't gone through anything yet, you will. Brace yourself, but be confident in the knowledge you can get through it. Or you can learn to live with whatever it is. I live with a heart pump, and I have a bag over my shoulder 24 hours a day that carries the batteries and the controlling device for my heart pump.

Guitar.com: Do you feel like you came through all of this with more motivation than you previously had?

Huttlinger: More motivation? No, I guess my motivation was just redirected. I've always been really motivated, and really goal oriented. I just had to set a new set of goals and work on them. And fortunately my wife and I were in a position financially that I could take the time, I didn't have to go get a job at McDonald's, or at a local bookstore, or wherever. I could take the time that I needed to heal, and to learn to play again. And I realize that a lot of people aren't in that position, and I feel for all of them.

Guitar.com: So you've got the show in Bozeman, and then, according to your website, you're off until the Walnut Valley Festival, September 17 through 21. You're looking forward to that, I'm sure.

Huttlinger: Oh yeah, that's another fun festival to play, probably the most fun festival I know of.

Guitar.com: What makes this one so special?

Huttlinger: Because 80 to 90 percent of the people who attend the festival play an instrument. So there's people playing music day and night out there. Not just on the five or six stages, but throughout all the campground, day and night there's music. It's just the greatest time.

Guitar.com: Are you performing every single day of the festival?

Huttlinger: Yes.

Guitar.com: You have some guitar clinics there too. Do you do clinics every day?



Huttlinger: I don't do them every day. I do an all day clinic on the Wednesday just before the festival starts. The fest starts Thursday. And then I generally do a morning clinic on Thursday morning on stage 2 at this festival. We do kind of a group clinic with me and two other guitar players where we get together and talk about our unique approaches to playing fingerstyle guitar.

Guitar.com: And when you do your performances, either in Bozeman, or in Walnut Valley, or in the future, how will you be working in the music from *McGuire's Landing* as far as all the other instrumentation that you put on this album?

Huttlinger: I just play them as solo pieces, until I can afford to take a band out with me. I generally write everything on the guitar first. They transfer just fine just to solo guitar.

Guitar.com: Will you end up adjusting the way you play any of the songs to try to pull in some of the melodies played by some of the other musicians on the album?

Huttlinger: No, I just play what I play, and when I get those guys with me, then we parade the parts out.

Guitar.com: Have you had a chance to do that?

Huttlinger: Yeah, I've done several shows with the strings from the album, and the guy who played accordion on the album. We've done several numbers from this album and from some other albums that I've used strings on, in this past year.

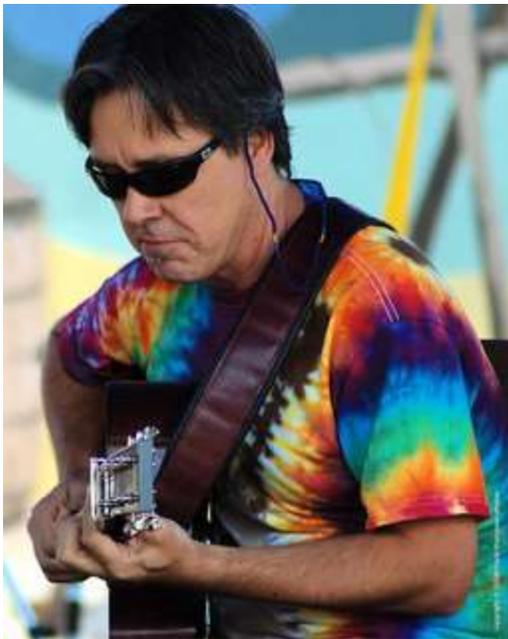
Guitar.com: Tell me about Fur Peace Ranch. You've got a couple of dates coming up there this fall.

Huttlinger: Fur Peace Ranch is a guitar instruction camp in Pomeroy, Ohio, which is the southeast part of of Ohio. And it was started by Jorma Kaukonen, from Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna. His wife Vanessa started this place. Jorma teaches there, and all of his great old rock and roll buddies teach there. It's a great camp, and it's got a nice venue there they call the Fur Peace Station. That's where we have concerts there. So I'll be doing a clinic there on October 18th. I'll be teaching for a few days there too. It's one of the cooler camps I've ever been to.

Guitar.com: When people come there for the guitar camp are they staying cabins, or nearby hotels?

Huttlinger: They have little cabins up there that hold two beds. And that's about it. Two beds and a night light. But not a lot of people are spending a lot of time in their cabins before they go to sleep. They generally pair up people and you go in and crash at night, and you get up in the morning, grab your guitar and start playing. You play all day.

Guitar.com: That's cool. And I see you're going to do something special: Mandolin for Guitar Players.



Huttlinger: Yeah, that one has morphed into mandolin and guitar. We decided to alter that a little bit. So it's for guitar players and mandolin players, but I'm hoping that guitar players who want to learn about mandolin will attend and I'll be

teaching how to accompany mandolin, and how the mandolin should accompany the guitar as well.

Guitar.com: I have a mandolin that I have not put enough time into in my life. I can do a few things on it, and I enjoy the instrument, but I never really sat down and did everything that I had hoped to with it.

Huttlinger: All right, so we'll see you at Fur Peace then!

Guitar.com: I would love to be there at Fur Peace. That would be fun. I also see that you have a few dates coming up in Dana Point and Mission Viejo, California, where I used to live and sail a lot.

Huttlinger: Yeah, I play down there every year at the Dana Point Community House, and in Mission Viejo at the city council building, city hall, whatever it is. They have a nice little venue. It's a great place.

Guitar.com: So in between dates are you working on new material for future recordings? What are you typically doing at this point?

Huttlinger: I'm always writing material for new projects, whether they're mine or other peoples'. I'm producing some projects for some people right now. I think I've got three different projects I'm producing right now. That takes up quite a bit of time. Plus my wife and I are finishing up a book we've written about the experiences we went through with all my health stuff. To try to give people a sense of hope that they can get through stuff too. The book is tentatively called "Joined at the Heart." We're hoping to have it out by December. So there's a lot going on. A whole lot.

Guitar.com: How far along are you with this book?

Huttlinger: We finished the second draft of it. It's very close.

Guitar.com: So you're definitely keeping busy.

Huttlinger: Yes.

Guitar.com: You have a month between the Bozeman show and Winfield, the Walnut Valley Fest. Do you play guitar every single day for hours and hours, or do you take a break?

Huttlinger: I generally play between three and five hours every day. And I try to do that seven days a week. I'm not always successful. Occasionally if I'm traveling or something -- I can't play when I'm driving down the road. If I'm driving for 12 hours I might not play when I get to the hotel. But for the most part, my goal is to get three to five hours in every day, starting with an hour to two hours in the morning. Another hour or two in the afternoon. And then in the evening again.

Guitar.com: Do you have a certain routine that you put yourself through, like an hour of scales and exercises, or whatever?

Huttlinger: No. I have some warm up things that I do that take 20 to 30 minutes to get warmed up. And then I start working on things that I'm still trying to get back, whether it's flat-picking or finger picking. A lot of the tunes that I wrote and I play, I've been listening actually this week to a lot of arrangements that I had done, and I thought, "Man, how in the world did I do that?" You know, I don't mean to toot my own horn, but there was some stuff that was really cool that I had recorded. So I'm trying to get some of these things back into my hands.

Yesterday I did a recording just for Facebook of John Mayer's tune "No Such Thing." I thought, "Well that will be fun to do," because John lives about two miles from where we're staying here in Montana. So I worked that one back up this week and that felt good to get that back under my fingers. I generally, I've always got something to work on. That's the thing about playing an instrument: You're never "good enough." There's always more to do.

Guitar.com: I hear that. OK Pete, thank you so much for your time.

Huttlinger: You're very welcome!