

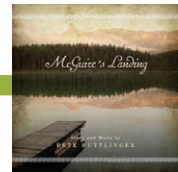
INDIE SCENE

Kim Sherman



PETE HUTTLINGER

The guitar virtuoso bounces back to complete an ambitious project



PETE HUTTLINGER IS A GUITARIST'S guitarist whose resume includes backing John Denver, LeAnn Rimes and John Oates, performing solo at Carnegie Hall and Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival, and releasing eight acclaimed albums. "I always wanted to play with talented artists and perform in great venues," says Huttlinger. "I got lucky. All those things have come true, beyond my wildest dreams."

Huttlinger was enjoying a steady gig with John Denver when the singer's death in 1997 forced him to refocus his career. "After John died, it was time to think about what I wanted to do," he says. "In one fell swoop I lost my friend, my boss and my job. I had to start relying on myself."

When Huttlinger won the National Finger Style Guitar Championship in 2000, guitarist Steve Vai was paying attention. "He called and said he was starting a label and wanted me to be on it," says Huttlinger, who plays a Collings guitar. "That was a coup, because now I was sanctioned by a major rock guitar player. That opened many doors."

One of those doors led to the first of Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festivals in 2004. Invitations to perform at two more followed. In 2007 a producer heard Huttlinger play and asked him to open a

concert at Carnegie Hall. "I said, 'What's it pay?'" Huttlinger jokes. "If he had said it would cost me \$5,000, I would have paid." His career was taking off.

Suddenly, three years ago, everything changed. Huttlinger was stricken with a near-fatal stroke that left him paralyzed on his right side and unable to speak. Five months later, a childhood cardiac abnormality led to end-stage heart failure, forcing doctors to airlift him to Houston's Texas Heart Institute, where he was fitted with a heart pump. The 52-year-old didn't know if he'd survive. "I was so sick," he says. "My lungs failed. My kidneys failed. My liver failed. I was knocking on death's door. I told my wife I didn't think I'd ever play again."

His wife, Erin Morris, who's also his manager and publicist, began bringing his guitar to his hospital room. "I'd try to play it, but it was discouraging," Huttlinger admits. "I couldn't strum a D chord."

Slowly he regained his ability to play. "I was sitting in my room practicing," he recalls. "One day a nurse said, 'I didn't know you played guitar. You should play for one of my patients who's feeling blue.' So I went to his room, and while I was there, another nurse asked if I could play for her patient. When I realized my playing

was helping people, things started turning around for me."

Following a prolonged rehabilitation, Huttlinger returned to a project inspired by a song he had written decades earlier, the instrumental "McGuire's Landing." Huttlinger included the Celtic-sounding tune on his 2006 album *The Santa Rita Connection*, and it's become one of his most requested songs. In 2006 he began recording what would eventually become his latest album, *McGuire's Landing*.

"After John died, I began mulling it in my head," he explains. "I decided to write some tunes to go along with it. Then I felt like I needed to write a story, since most of the songs were instrumentals."

The story, about two friends who venture westward following the Civil War, took its cue from the music, and vice versa. The album—which includes contributions by violinist Andrea Zonn, mandolinist Matt Flinner, bassist Byron House, Herb Pedersen on banjo, and Rob Ickes on dobro—took seven years to complete. "I've done lots of records, but this is the culmination of everything I've done," Huttlinger maintains. "Everything on it is out of my head, and I'm really proud of that."

—Lee Zimmerman