

The JD Family Tree

Pete Huttlinger grows his own acoustic sound

By Stewart Oksenhorn
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From the first time he got turned on to music, Pete Huttlinger was drawn to the acoustic string sound.

Huttlinger had grown up listening to his mother play piano most evenings in their home in Danville, Calif., just east of Oakland. It was an experience he remembers as "sweet," but more for the familial vibe than the music. But when Huttlinger was 9, he first heard the sounds that moved him.

"My sister married a guy from Virginia whose whole family played old-time music," said the personable 43-year-old. "They all came out for the wedding with their dulcimers and fiddles. I was fascinated by all that. So I begged my mom to get me a banjo. I had heard my mom play piano a lot, but really playing songs together, that was fascinating. That was something I wanted to explore."

While investigating the banjo and acoustic guitar, Huttlinger took a side trip into electric rock 'n' roll. During high school, his friends were in the garage, working out the era's rock - Led Zeppelin, Blue Oyster Cult. "And I'd come in with my banjo," he said. "So I got an electric guitar and for two weeks played Kiss in a garage band. And it just didn't do it for me. It just didn't have the flavor of the acoustic music."

Huttlinger abandoned rock 'n' roll and played in an acoustic country-rock group led by his guitar teacher. And when the family moved to rural New Bern, N.C., in the middle of his high school years, any sense of displacement was eased by the wealth of acoustic outfits to pick with.

When Huttlinger went to Boston's Berklee School of Music, however, he experienced an artistic reversal. Surrounded by jazz cats, fusion fans and rockers, Huttlinger learned to appreciate the wider world of styles. And he had the realization that if he wanted to make a life of music, he'd be best off with a well-rounded set of skills.

"Living in rural North Carolina, there's not much opportunity to learn technical, advanced stuff. You only learn what everybody else there knows," he said. "I didn't want to be a one-trick pony. If I got an education, there would be a lot more opportunities. I thought being narrow-minded was a sure way of ending a career. And I wanted to stay in music. The Berklee experience served me well, because I got exposed to bebop and fusion and funk and rock. And there was even an acoustic bluegrass band."



Moving to Nashville right out of Berklee, Huttlinger found plenty of work - thanks in part to his ability to read music, which he says is a rare commodity among Nashville guitarists.

Huttlinger could also play dobro and banjo and electric guitar in addition to acoustic guitar, and this versatility led to one of the more unexpected but noteworthy gigs of his career.

Producer Kris O'Connor was making a record with Mike Muldoon, and the project's small budget called for a picker of various skills. Huttlinger got the call to play a variety of instruments on the record. At the close of the session, Huttlinger got an unexpected invitation from O'Connor: Did he want to go to China with John Denver, for whom O'Connor had long served as road manager?

Huttlinger jumped at the gig, figuring it was a chance to see the world and play to bigger audiences than he had ever imagined. What he didn't expect was much of a chance to strut his stuff as a musician, but Huttlinger was quickly surprised by how Denver worked.

"On John's gig, one of the best things of all was he didn't say, 'play this part.' Or even, 'play this instrument,'" said Huttlinger, who toured Asia - most everywhere but China, as it turned out - in 1994, and remained a member of Denver's band until the singer's death three years later. "He let you play what you feel. And that kind of freedom, especially for an artist of John's stature, is unheard of. On a pop tour, they usually want you to play the record.

With Denver, "I asked them, 'do you want me to do James Burton's stuff?' (Burton had been Denver's longtime guitarist.) Or the stuff from the early records? And they said, 'we want you to do your thing. We want to hear what you bring to the table.'"

That freedom made the musical side of things instantly enjoyable. Off-stage, Huttlinger took some time to get used to his boss. In the mid-90s, Denver was going through rough times personally, which Huttlinger couldn't help but pick up on.

"I joked with John a lot and got no response. I thought he hated me when I joined the band," said Huttlinger. "K.O. (Kris O'Connor) "told me, no, he's just going through bad times." The cold feeling didn't last long, and Huttlinger was around long enough to witness a marked improvement in Denver's mood and music.

"The last year, he was singing better and playing better than I had ever heard him," he said. "I think he was coming back. He was really singing great. Which is a great way to remember him."

Huttlinger also recalls fondly how well Denver handled himself on-stage. "Every night on-stage, he was a complete pro," he said. "He gave 100 percent every night. I learned a lot about performing from that - here's a guy going through hard times, but when he hits

the stage he's giving the audience what it came for. And I learned a lot about playing a song behind a singer."

One song Denver never got around to singing was "McGuire's Landing." Huttlinger had written the melody for a flyfishing TV show, but had always envisioned it as a fully arranged song. O'Connor got a copy of a guitar-and-cello demo Huttlinger had made of the song and played it for Denver, who announced his intention to write lyrics for the tune. He died before he got the chance, and Huttlinger has decided "McGuire's Landing" should live as an instrumental work. An upcoming DVD about Denver features Huttlinger playing the tune in Aspen's John Denver Sanctuary, and Huttlinger recorded a version for his recent CD, "The Santa Rita Collection."

Soon after Denver's death, Huttlinger took another musical turn. For years he had messed around with what he calls "hot acoustic" music - finger-style and flat-picked solo guitar. Friends continually told him to record the music, but Huttlinger put them off. "I said nobody wants to hear this stuff," he said.

But Huttlinger - perhaps taking a cure from seeing Denver give his all - poured himself into the music. He entered the 1998 competition in Winfield, Kan., and the experience of competing lit a fire under him. "Going to the contest, being competitive, that drove me to get better. I kept searching for material to arrange," he said. "I enjoy that nervous feeling before you compete. It doesn't feel like playing a regular gig."

Huttlinger took second place at Winfield the following year, and won top prize in 2000, the first year the fingerstyle competition at Winfield went international. On "The Santa Rita Collection," and before that, "Naked Pop," Huttlinger plays a mix of original compositions and a wide range of pop hits - Steely Dan's "Josie," George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" - on solo guitar.

It's worlds away from backing Denver on "Sunshine on My Shoulder." But Huttlinger hasn't abandoned his Denver days. He has made three instructional DVDs in the "Learn to Play the Songs of John Denver" series. And Huttlinger has wound up the de facto music director for the annual Musical Tribute to John Denver concerts. This year's concerts, set for tonight at 7 p.m. and tomorrow at 6 and 9 p.m. at the Wheeler Opera House, will have Huttlinger leading a group of Denver bandmates and co-writers that includes Herb Pedersen, Bill Danoff and John Sommers, as well as Chris Nole, Alan Demero and Jim Horn, who played in Denver's band with Huttlinger. Special guest Noel Paul Stookey, of Peter, Paul & Mary, will appear at the Saturday shows only. Proceeds from the shows go to Challenge Aspen.

"I'm the guy who knows all John's parts," said Huttlinger, explaining how he came to be the music director. "I don't direct anything - everyone here knows what they're doing."