

An artist of the guitar

Music provides a rich lifestyle

By Carol Pollock

Not bad company. The last time guitarist Peter Wainwright went out for drinks, it was with classical guitarist Liona Boyd and Pinchas Zukerman, violinist and conductor of the National Arts Centre orchestra.

Wainwright was playing at Muskoka Sands for one of the resort's "Cultural Weekends" when he was invited by guest artist Zukerman to join him and Boyd, who had played at the Opera House in Gravenhurst the night before. The local musician and teacher already knew Boyd; a mentor who was "very supportive of the up-and-comers." She often sat in during his two years in a guitar ensemble at the University of Toronto Music School.

Wainwright has played for many notables appearing in Muskoka. He says he was honored to back up Karen Kain during her performance at the Gravenhurst Opera House; he even rented a tux to play for her. He opened for guitarist Oscar Lopez when he played "the Op" and met Diana Krall during her edition of the Cultural Weekend. An idea launched by Toronto producer Garth Drabinsky, it includes tickets to a concert and a meeting with the featured artist. Limited to 200 people, Wainwright feels lucky to be involved as a player.

A Gravenhurst native, Wainwright was given his first guitar at the age of eight. "I knew when I saw it that it was for me; it wasn't for my sister," he says. "I think I made the decision that day that it was going to be my life, that it was going to be significant."

Originally a rock player, he began commuting to the Royal Conservatory in Toronto while in high school. "I thought, if I took classical lessons, I could just make rock history," he says, "playing that technique with pop stuff." To his surprise, he fell in love with the music itself and, although he now plays a blend of flamenco and pop, he still has a particular fondness for Bach.

At the same time, he was working part-time in the kitchen at Ascona Place in Gravenhurst and owner Ernest Zingg gave him a chance to play in the restaurant. Wainwright describes this period as his apprenticeship, a seven-year stint which gave him the confidence to try for jobs in Toronto. It was a good move; on his first try, he landed a gig that lasted "six years and three months" playing six nights a week at the Mediterra club in the theater district. Boyd often came in to hear him play there as well, with her friend Sam "the Record Man" Sniderman, who had a penthouse in the same building.

Not having graduated, Wainwright plays down the two years he spent at the University of Toronto. Like many creative types, he learned what he could at school and left when the time felt right. He was getting good work playing at the club and private parties and, finally, chose working life over academe.

In recent years, he has returned to school, taking private lessons from flamenco master Miguel de la Bastide, a Spanish émigré who replaced Jesse Cook in a Spanish dance company in Toronto.

In the late 80s, Wainwright came home to Muskoka to begin a teaching career and to be closer to his family. His mother, who passed away last year, was a singer in the Elder Berries choir in Gravenhurst and had a very good ear, he says. However, his father was "tone deaf" and the young musician's consuming passion for music was really an anomaly in his family. His only sibling, a sister, is a trade commissioner in Ottawa who happily travels the world for a living.

Wainwright spends about 35 hours a week teaching.

Hundreds of young Muskokans have passed through his studio, where he maintains a photographic "Wall of Fame" documenting the ones who have played in public. He says he once saw a video of a coffee house at the Bracebridge high school and he had taught every one of the players.

An ardent teacher, Wainwright's approach is not traditional; students are taught what they need to know, using the music they want to play. "A beginner usually goes home playing part of their favorite song, first



lesson," he says. Although teaching takes up a lot of his time and he once questioned its effect on his career, Wainwright says he realized early on, "if I can make 50 kids feel good about something in a week, I'm doing something significant."

He relies on word-of-mouth to recruit new students and, for the first time, has a waiting list. He also gets professional players coming in for a lesson "with just a few questions," usually about improvising or songwriting. A few years ago, he even made a house call to teach Goldie Hawn's son a few finer points of the instrument.

As for his own playing, Wainwright has developed a unique fingernail technique using "falsies" as picks, so he can make the guitar "sound like a piano," he says. "I can play very rhythmically but with a melody on top.

"It's something I had to do because, when I was playing in the restaurants, quite often, they didn't want any amplifiers. I started doing that to be heard and it became a big part of my technique." He gets a louder, heavier sound with the augmentations, which are more durable than the acrylic compound used by many guitarists as a fingernail coating and are easily replaceable.

"Originally, the nail thing was a big stress. I had to drive to Orillia to buy them," he laughs. "There'd be some 16-year-old girl and this guy buying fake nails. And, you can imagine, a guy trying to get fake nails on.... They stuck to everything.... It took forever."

He now has a change down to two minutes; he can do it right in front of an audience while talking to them and they won't even know what's going on.

Wainwright shares his globe-trotting sister's love of travel. Having fallen in love with Cuba, after spending last Christmas there, he plans to return this year. He went without a guitar, the first time, and ended up renting an instrument from a player on the beach. A testament to the island's poverty, "it had fishing line for strings," he says. It was "a piece of firewood, basically."

Although he was booked into an all-inclusive resort at Varadero, he asked the tour bus driver to leave him in Havana one night so he could take in the music scene. He hooked up with a local and told him to take him to all the best places. "There are players on every corner," he says, "and in the cafés, they'll play for eight hours straight, for tips." He told the driver to pick him up the day after that. He spent little time at the resort.

Since returning from Cuba, he has restrung one of his guitars in an island configuration, with three sets of two strings tuned to a major chord. "It's for picking, leads or melody work," he says of the guitar-tres combination, which has allowed him to further expand his repertoire of sound.

His favorite guitar, among the nine or 10 he owns, is a Ramirez, handmade in Spain, which he picked up about 20 years ago. "It's like the Stradivarius of guitars," he says of the deep red beauty made from Canadian cedar and Brazilian and Indian rosewoods. Its loud, natural sound proclaims its supremacy. His workhorse is a Takamine with a pick-up but he also uses a Fender electric and a Canadian-made Godin Multiact which, when programmed, can sound like 400 other instruments, including the human voice.

Recently, Wainwright has been studying voice, an adjunct to his songwriting and, after years of joking with people, "They don't pay me to play...they pay me not to sing," he is considering putting a vocal track on a ballad he wrote during a sleepless night in Cuba.

Called "Nunca lo olvides te quiero," it quotes a little button he picked up on the island: "Never forget I love you." His voice, which he says has been described as a cross between Leonard Cohen and Bryan Adams, is dusky and expressive, more poet than chanteur, an interesting complement to his pretty instrumentation.

Wainwright is about two-thirds of the way through his first CD, a compilation of jazz/pop/rock fusion tunes in the Spanish technique; that is, using nylon-stringed guitars. "People tell me I have trouble committing," he says of his difficulty in paring down the 400-some tunes he has written to a nucleus of 12 for the disc. The artist in him is never satisfied with the mix and he has an anxiety about being pigeon-holed, the downside of his facility in so many styles.

Playing alongside him on the disc is local percussionist Richard Jackson, who appeared with Wainwright in one of his concerts at the Huntsville Festival of the Arts. "He's amazing...makes me sound good," says Wainwright appreciatively.

Three years ago, Wainwright broke his wrist while shoveling snow on his mother's roof. When traditional therapy wasn't working, a doctor here sent him to the Musicians Clinic of Canada. "It was like occupational therapy," he says. "I was shown how to hold the guitar differently and reposition the knee."

He says it also made him appreciate, a little more, that he was an artist as well as a guitarist. "There a musician's clinic because we are a different animal. We express ourselves for a living...and emotional and physical discomfort affect your performance." He has become comfortable with the idea of being an artist in the last few years and, when he recognizes the traits in his students, he lets them know. "Sometimes, you're a little

eccentric. You think differently...you need a lot more time alone than most people," he says. Even in front of an audience, "you're still in your own little world."

Wainwright has turned his gig at Muskoka Sands into an art as well, creating an on-the-spot mix that will appeal to everybody. "I get a rush, reading every room," he says, "trying to play for every table and get a reaction.... Sometimes I'll see a foot going or a finger tapping, while they're talking. They won't even know I've got them."

He never goes into the room with a set list and sees every night as "market research." If he doesn't know a tune, he'll go home and learn it. And, he remembers people by their musical preference. "There's 'Hoagy Carmichael,' I'll say, or 'Bryan Adams,' when they come back in." His repertoire is necessarily much broader in the club than at his concerts but he'll selectively sneak in one of his own tunes sometimes; if it gets a reaction, "it's a keeper," he explains.

In February, Wainwright tried out some of his original material in a club in Barra de Navidad in Mexico, where he spent a month sitting in regularly with a local group, soaking up their Spanish sounds. He also travelled into the mountains on a gruelling 10-hour car trip to Paracho, a plateau village whose only reason for existence is guitars. "There are dozens of places making them. You see pickup trucks going by full of guitars," he says. He was the only gringo in the town, his fellow tourists refusing to travel into the heartland with him.

Wainwright realized early on that, as a musician, "you spend your life looking for work." He lives modestly but is passionate about what he does. When he started out at the Ascona, he says, he played for four hours straight, sitting on a piano bench, and he still plays long sets. "Some people think restaurants ask me to do this," he says, "but I just get into a time warp. It goes by so fast."

For the past 17 years, Wainwright has been able to support himself through music. "I have to live within my means, because of my choices, but I am so rich in lifestyle," says the guitar artist.

"I could make more money doing other things but I couldn't be happier."