

The Cast of the 2002 Western Canada Chapman Stick Experience

March 11, 2002

On Friday, March 8, 2002, 13 Stick players gathered at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design on Granville Island in Vancouver B.C., Canada.

Stick players have been gathering at various locations all over the world since 1996 for a series of seminars and other events. It's hard to describe these seminars to folks who haven't taken part in one. Officially these weekends involve Stick instruction for all skill levels, performance opportunities and a concert featuring the more experienced players. But there's something else happening. Something beyond words. Something that only seems to happen when a bunch of Stick players get together, in the same place even for a short period of time.

This event included four days of instruction, a presentation on the history and development of The Stick, a performance by Greg and I at the Emily Carr auditorium and an awe-inspiring performance Sunday night by Greg and percussionist Pete Gordon at The Cellar Jazz Club.

On Monday I managed to herd up almost everyone before day began in earnest. We set up in a circle, I propped up my mini-disc recorder in the middle and told them we were doing a Talking Sticks interview. Thankfully no one ran for the door.

Taking part in the discussion were:

Matt Tate from Chicago

Scott Schurr from Portland

John Edmunds from Eagle River, Alaska

Louis Hesselt-van-Dinter from Seattle

James Charbonneau from Vancouver

Qua Veda from Yaurhill Or.

Winston Burger from Davis Ca.

Greg Howard from Charlottesville Va.

Oliver Mittendorff from Coquitlam B.C.

and yours truly.

Jim Meyer, who did an amazing job setting up and organizing the weekend was busy running around, probably photocopying something for me. Bruno Dominell, also from Port Coquitlam, arrived just as we were wrapping up and Randy Clere from Seattle, unfortunately had to leave Sunday morning.

This cast ranges in previous Stick seminar experience from none to 16 and in length of time with The Stick from a couple of months to 18 years.

Jim R.: I want to start off with some of the new folks. John, this is your first seminar, did you have any expectations coming into it?

John E.: No, not really. I had a couple of questions. So far at least one has been answered and I'm hoping Greg will talk about the life of professional Sticking.

Jim R.: What were you expecting to walk in on Friday morning and see?

John E.: More Stick players in one place than I'll probably see in a long time. And that's exciting. I don't know anyone else who plays Stick up where I am. If there are any, I'm not aware of them. I was hoping to play a little bit more, maybe next time. Pair off or do some small group stuff, jam with you guys.

But I really had no idea what to expect. I had a vague idea but nothing specific.

The main thing I'm taking home is a lot of stuff I didn't know I didn't know, which is great. And technique. I think like a lot of us, I picked The Stick up out of the case clueless and started finding my way as best I could. I didn't even open Emmett's book until about a month or two ago. So it's nice to have some foundation.

Jim R.: What about you Matt, any expectations, preconceived notions?

Matt T.: No, I really didn't know what to expect. I had very little idea what I was getting myself into, but it was everything I could have hoped it had been.

Jim R.: So what prompted you to hop on a plane in Chicago, without anybody else knowing you were coming and show up here on Friday morning?

Matt T.: (Laughs) I don't know. As far as I've come I've come on my own, but I feel like I can do a lot more. I really want to do a lot more. I want to accomplish as much as I can on the Chapman Stick. I felt like I've absolutely wasted enough time and I don't want to waste anymore. I want to get down to business. I want to really excel.

Jim R.: What have you gotten out of being here?

Matt T.: I hate to use a generic term, but all the tools that I'm going to need for the next however long. I've got enough material to last for years. If I cycle through it and use it creatively, rather than just book study, I've got enough to last me a long time.

I just wanted to get the fire lit under my ass to get down to business. And that's what I got.

Jim R.: Scott, how many seminars is this for you?

Scott S.: I don't have an accurate count but I think this is number six.

Jim R.: What keeps you coming back?

Scott S.: That fire lighting under the ass that Matt was referring to.

Jim R.: Anybody else like to talk about the fire under their ass? (Laughs) Do you get something new out of each one?

Scott S.: Yea. This was a great one. Often I come home from seminars feeling depressed about how rotten a Stick player I am and how I'm never going to amount to anything (still more laughs). This time, it's like, "You know, I've just got to get better." I'm feeling really good coming out of this one.

Jim R.: Winston, it's your first seminar too, did you have any preconceived notions, ideas?

Winston B.: I came expecting to be pretty intimidated. Maybe I just had some sort of fear about where I stood. I thought there would be people here with attitude, hot players. It's been a long time since I've taken lesson for anything musical. It's been about 12 years and my last experience was not good. I didn't get along with my teacher and there were some attitude problems. I think that kept me from doing something like this.

I was actually really reticent until my girlfriend made me come here. As soon as I got here everyone—Greg, all the people here—had a real accepting attitude. There was really no pressure. Everyone's priority was to do what we can to make ourselves better, you guys, the instructors included.

My expectation of what to learn was just to get more solid grounding in technique. That's always been my weakest area. I've definitely gotten a lot of ideas about what to do with that.

Matt T.: I have to agree with Winston. I was really intimidated coming in too. I didn't know what this was going to be like. I didn't know how everyone was going to be but everyone has been wonderful. This is one of the most supportive groups of people I've ever been involved with in any way. Everybody is so supportive and it's just a total joy to be around. I've gotten a lot of inspiration from that, not just the instruction, but just from hanging out with everybody.

Scott S.: I'd like to add to that. I've been to a bunch of other Stick seminars and I haven't been to a seminar where there has been somebody with an attitude. This is unquestionably an exceptional group but it's not the only exceptional group. At every single Stick seminar you've got great people and they're just there to help. And they all want to get better. It's a great bunch of folk.

Jim R.: Louis?

Louis HvD.: I like to come to these seminars because there's a feeling of community. There's a feeling of belonging. I went to a couple of seminars where I didn't expect to learn much. I just went so I could hang out. I've made some really lasting friendships at these seminars and I don't get to see you guys except at the seminars. So I do that.

But this one was a little different in that I didn't have that deep frustration level that I get when I'm trying to do stuff and I can't do it.

Jim R.: Why was that? Can you put a finger on that?

Louis HvD.: Yea, I've just progressed in my playing where I can do things that I couldn't do before. I'd like to say I don't practice a lot, but Scott pointed out that I rehearse with my duo twice a week without fail for at least three hours. That's practice. So I'm playing more, and I actually picked up more things that were helpful to my playing.

Qua V.: For me I feel like I need to get jump started, catapulted into a routine, into the groove of playing more, practicing more. My routine, like with many of us, is very all-consuming and it's hard when you get home. This gets that momentum up over the threshold and you can coast for a while.

This is my second one. Last time I had no idea what to expect. Because of that I knew I couldn't be disappointed either. But I was just blown away by the last one and this one. Just the whole vibe and what everyone has been talking about, that community. It's extraordinary.

I've been to lots of different kinds of seminars where vibe and the community and that support-thing was what the seminar was about and yet it wasn't there at all. And here that's not the primary thing and yet it's just thick with it. Everybody's help and the performances and the fun that we have, it's just amazing.

It gives me inspiration and boost. That's what I need and it's great.

Jim R.: Greg, what motivates you to keep doing these?

Greg H.: I always learn new things about what I'm doing when I come to these seminars. This time, just this discovery of 'axis of pivot' when working with Matt to try and explain this thing to him. That's something that I've never been able to quantify before. In terms of understanding the method, it's a great opportunity for me. When you're playing by yourself it's hard to analyze your own playing. But when you can talk through things with other people you can really get some good things out of it.

So for me, a lot of it is just to come out of my own little musical shell and understand more about what I'm doing and learn some things with other people.

I'm building a community with this group of people here. The reason I do these seminars—I've done 16 of them now—is to connect people, to try and get people together with a common interest. You guys would probably never meet each other—maybe some of you would meet at a concert somewhere—but for the most part, you're coming from different parts of the world and different walks of life. To find this one interest that brings us all together, I think is pretty fantastic.

Jim R.: James, what were some of the highlights of the weekend?

James C.: Greg's performance last night.

Jim R.: Is that unanimous?

(All Agree)

Jim R.: I have to say that that really was a treat seeing Greg play like that. I've seen him play with other people but never with that connection to another musician. For me, sitting there, his playing was on another level last night.

Greg H.: Not to sound sappy, but I was playing for you guys. I've spent two-and-a-half days telling you how to do stuff and I felt like I could show it. I felt like that was happening while I was playing.

John E.: Wait, you pulled off some stuff you haven't shown us yet!

LAUGHS

Greg H.: I've got to get you to come back to another seminar.

MORE LAUGHS

Jim R.: What else James?

James C.: What I really liked was the technical instruction. Like earlier when Greg was talking about having someone to look at your playing from the outside, another perspective.

Jim R.: What did you learn about your playing?

James C.: Technically I learned how to move my left hand more, which is a great thing. And positioning of the hands. It's like having a golf instructor check out your swing. It feels right, it feels like your doing everything right but you still slice it for some reason.

Just having someone there to look at all the little things and put it all together for you really makes you play more efficiently.

Jim R.: Qua, anything stand out this weekend for you? Other than Greg's performance of course.

Qua V.: Yea, that hand positioning and getting that feedback on being relaxed. You know, you think, "I'm relaxed," or "I'm moving my hands," but you're not. That was really valuable. I really appreciate that.

Scott S.: I begged Greg to show us the bass part to All Along the Watchtower. What I really appreciated about that was that it pushed me to a new level in my left hand. By the

time we were through that, I was whipping through things in my left hand I never thought I would be able to. It took an hour-and-a-half or so. I could have practiced some riff like that at home, by myself, for six months and never got to that level of dexterity and speed.

Jim R.: Who's got a good Stick story? A good Stick story from home? Like this one time I was playing in a coffee shop in Nanaimo B.C., facing the window, peering off into the distance. And I see this homeless guy walk by. He's all disheveled, with typical homeless guy clothes. Suddenly he sort of stops and looks in through the window. Then he goes right up to the glass and stares in. He's got my attention now.

He walks over to the door and he looks right in the place. I'm sitting there playing, the people in the café are off on their own things. Then the guy walks right in, comes straight up to me, grabs me, physically grabs me—he's not the best smelling guy—and says, "What ah, what are you doing with that thing!?!"

So I explained it, he said thanks and went on his way. And of course nobody in the place stopped their conversations or seemed to notice anything at all.

Greg H.: One time I was playing in a bar/restaurant. It was on a Tuesday night and it was pouring rain outside, cold and nasty. There was nobody in place except for me, the bartender, the manger, a waitress. The stage was right up by the front door. I was using it basically as an opportunity to practice.

Then I hear a WHUMP, the door slams open and in comes this guy, dripping wet looking really freaked out. He runs into the place, looks around and he sits in a chair right in front of the stage and just stares at me.

I just stopped and went, "Whoa, what's going on here."

And he says, "DON'T JUST SIT THERE...*PLUCK!!!*"

Before I even had time to think about how I'm going to explain to this guy that you don't pluck, you tap on the strings, three police cars go racing down the street and turn around the corner into the little side street next to this restaurant. As soon as he sees them he gets up and bolts back out the door.

LAUGHS

Greg H.: One of the highlights for me, and it's always the case at these seminars, is to do the kind of group playing that we were doing yesterday afternoon. To hear the sound of that many Sticks playing together is something you can't get on your own. It's always so great to get together with a bunch of other Stick players and just do that.

Jim R.: I want to go around the room and in minute or so give me your last thoughts. Wrap up the weekend.

Matt T.: I don't where to start. It all feels like a haze, it's gone by in a flash. It feels like it's just beginning and we're wrapping up already. It has just been an amazing time, a massive source of inspiration. Especially from Greg's performance, but yours and Greg's instruction has just been amazing. I didn't know what to expect and I got more than I could have hoped for. I don't know what to add to that.

Jim R.: There's nothing to add to that. Scott?

Scott S.: I had a great time.

Jim R.: Are you coming to another one?

Scott S.: You bet.

John E.: I've got to go to San Diego.

Oliver M.: It's always nice playing with other Stick players. It seems like now that I've been to this one, the next thing is to go to another one especially if we start of from where we left off here.

Louis HvD.: I really enjoyed being with everybody. The one thing I really remember is that I learned more about my left hand, about moving it and setting up. One of the highlights for me was yesterday. I had a really bad emotional day and I got to come back here and jam with Jim. That just took all of that away. I'd forgotten how easy it is to get lost in music and use it to repair. It was just awesome.

James C.: I'd just like to reiterate how great it is being here, all the stories you hear. It's really worth it just to meet all the people who are here.

Qua V.: It was great seeing everybody from the last seminar. I feel kind of overwhelmed, kind of humbled but inspired at the same time and I feel more focused. I'm real excited and I look forward to the next one.

Winston B.: I just had a great time with everybody. The instruction was really helpful. It was great to be able to understand last night at Greg's performance the 'whys' behind what we're doing. It's not so you can be real impressive. The looks I saw on some people's faces, closing their eyes and being transported somewhere else. It's good to know we're taking steps to hopefully reach our own personal zone of expression like that.

It's great to get the nitty gritty nuts and bolts and then see what the goal is.

Greg H.: I'd like to pick up from what Oliver said. I think I've done enough of these now and we as a community have done enough of these now that it's really time to start focusing on different skill level courses. So people who have a good grounding in the instrument can come into it and take a concentrated leap in their playing with something that's more involved.

The most important thing for me is to make sure that everybody has a basic grounding in the fundamental technique. Once you've got that, it opens up a whole lot of doors. I feel like I'm ready to start exploring those doors with Stick players who have done these courses in the past. I'm really looking forward to that.

Jim R.: Thanks guys, that's good.