

Tom Griesgraber Sept. 3, 2004
“Politely Pushing the Envelope”

The next generation of great Stick players has arrived and leading the charge is 31 year-old Tom Griesgraber of San Diego. Since first picking up The Stick in 1997, Tom’s rise through the musical ranks has been meteoric. He has gone from watching his idols perform to touring and recording with them.

Tom is a fixture in the San Diego music scene, performing regularly as a soloist and with his two bands: Agent 22 and a new group led by legendary drummer Jerry Marotta. He is also a sought after opening act, with three national tours with the California Guitar Trio and shows with Al Dimeola, Stanley Jordan, The Tony Levin Band, Bill Bruford's Earthworks, Larry Carlton and Steve Lukather, Tower of Power, Jazz Mandolin Project, Planet X and the Dixie Dregs with Steve Morse.

But like any other artist’s seemingly overnight success, the true story is one of years of hard work, dedication and good timing.

Tom has just released his first solo CD *A Whisper in the Thunder* and has just worked out a U.S. distribution deal. The disc features contributions from Jerry Marotta, Pat Mastelotto, Darren DeBree, Don Schiff and the California Guitar Trio.

World music, jazz, and prog rock influences are evident throughout the CD’s nine instrumental tracks. Tom’s Stick playing is strong and confident and serves the music rather than overpowering it with flash and pyrotechnics. My favourite song *77 Times* is quickly climbing up my list of all-time favourite Stick tunes.

But just how does one put it all together? Tom’s music is great, but there are lots of other great musicians out there who can’t find an audience. What’s the secret of his success? We talked about that and much more from his home in San Diego.

Jim Reilly: There’s so much exciting new stuff going on that I thought we’d dive right into that first.

Tom Griesgraber: The big thing is that my new CD, *A Whisper in the Thunder*, has been picked up by a label. It’s a new subsidiary of a label called Spotted Peccary. Spotted Peccary has been known as an ambient, electronic, synth dominated label but they’re starting this new imprint label called O³E to release some eclectic music. That’s where I found a home with them.

JR: How did that come about?

TG: They’re based here in northern San Diego so I’ve known about them for years, but I really started associating with them three or four years ago. I’ve played on a few projects of theirs. They had a group where three of their artists collaborated and put out an album

then went out and played live. They kind of roped me in as the 'fifth Beatle,' even though there were only four of us. We did some regional shows.

It's a cool marriage. They've totally survived with all their artists essentially not playing live and I've survived by only playing live, my sales have been completely based on that. So the thinking is that you put the two of those together and you have something good.

JR: This is nationwide distribution?

TG: Yes. They're distributed by a company called Allegro and a company called Music Design. They get into a bunch of smaller chains and Amazon.com, Borders, Barnes and Noble but the big question is how much money do you put behind it. These days to even get into the stores you need to spend four or five thousand dollars just to have them stock you and if you're not doing big promotion they won't even bother to stock your music. So that's what we're looking at now.

JR: How have they promoted their artists without live performances?

TG: They do a lot of magazine ads, Web stuff, radio. In the New Age genre they're well known in radio. Tony Levin has played on some of their albums. I was just on tour with Tony and the California Guitar Trio and we got to talking about this. His take was that they really know their genre and they know how to reach that audience.

I guess with me it's stretching the limits of that genre a little but that's what they're looking to do.

JR: And you have another tour with the Guitar Trio in the works?

TG: We're still working out the details but if it comes together, and it looks like it should, the first show will be September 24th and I believe the last show will be November 20th. We'll be travelling all over the U.S.

*(UPDATE: The tour is now confirmed.
Check out the current tour itinerary at the end of this interview.)*

JR: Will your CDs be in stores in time for the tour?

TG: The official release date is October 5th so they'll be out there for most of the tour.

JR: It sounds like things are looking good.

TG: Things are looking good, there is business spinning in several different directions. If you even set aside the solo Tom thing, there are developments as we speak with The Tom and Jerry band, or The Jerry and Tom Band as we call it because Tom and Jerry has been taken. We're actually taking to labels now.

JR: So how did you get to this point? You had a musical upbringing and success early on but how have you been able to take it to this level?

TG: Music is one thing. The music business is something else entirely.

JR: Let's start with the music.

TG: It was piano lessons when I was around five or six. Those continued for four or five years. I totally hated them. I can remember being dragged out the door crying, not wanting to go to my piano lesson. My mom eventually gave up on that. I was music free for a few years around junior high.

In high school I met this guy who became a good friend of mine. He was this longhaired, Strat player, playing Metallica and I just thought that was the coolest thing ever. The Christmas of my sophomore year, my folks got me an electric guitar.

About a year later there was this career class where we had to figure out what we wanted to do with our lives. The first thing that popped into my head was "I want to be a judge." But then I thought, that's dumb, I want to play guitar. So a little while later, I went to Berklee College of Music's summer program in L.A., called Berklee in L.A. and I totally got my butt kicked. I didn't know the theory they were talking about, I couldn't solo, I couldn't sight read. It was kind of ridiculous but it was really cool. I got home and figured that if I wanted to do this as a career I'd have to get focused. So I started taking lessons, and ended up going to Mira Coasta College for two years to study classical guitar, then on to Berklee in Boston. I did two years at Berklee doing jazz, fusion and prog rock then went straight to San Diego State, which was nothing but traditional jazz. I did the first year of a two-year program there but ended up just getting sick of it. I was used to Berklee where you could play just about any kind of music you wanted as long as you were serious and focused and doing something creative. At San Diego State they only wanted us to play Real Book tunes and that wasn't what I wanted to do.

I was also starting to get tired of playing the guitar. I was getting hungry to do something different.

JR: That's when The Stick entered the picture?

TG: At the NAMM show in 1997, Taos Drums presented a concert with Jerry Marotta playing Taos Drums, Tony Levin on Stick and Steve Gorn playing woodwinds.

JR: Was that the first time you saw The Stick?

TG: I had actually seen it back when I was in high school. I had gone to a one-week music school in Pittsburgh and somebody, I don't even remember who he was, had come out and done a short clinic on The Stick. All I remember was that he was playing jazz and there were all these notes and soloing. He was accompanying himself, just the whole

solo Stick thing. It was cool but it was just too much for me at the time. I was still trying to figure out guitar.

When I saw Tony it was an entirely different thing. He was playing these little riffs using both sides of the instrument, just these cool little patterns. It didn't sound like a guitar or a bass and it was simple enough that I thought with a little practice I could play that type of music too. So that was it, there was suddenly the 'something new' that I was looking for.

That was late January '97. I started getting on Stickwire, found someone in North Carolina selling one used, sent him a check for \$650, which I really couldn't afford and got my first Stick that July.

JR: So you go from seeing these guys in 1997, being inspired by them, to playing with them in 2004. How does that happen?

TG: Well if I can wax philosophic for a while, this was a real sketchy time for me. I had just finished school, was supposed to be starting a music career, I had dedicated a year to a band that wasn't going anywhere but what became obvious to me was that The Stick was something I needed to pursue fulltime. I realized on logical level that if I got good enough on Stick I could always fall back on doing solo shows. If any band I was in didn't work, I could always fall back on the solo thing.

But more than that, if I can dare to use the word, it was almost a spiritual thing. There was something internally that was saying, "Just do this! This is the direction you need to take." I've kind of learned that the more you follow that instinct, the more stuff just falls in line, even if it doesn't make sense at the time. And it didn't make sense at the time. I essentially put everything else aside and working through The Stick Book basically became my job. Unfortunately nobody pays you to work through The Stick Book.

Next, I met Jimmy Patton. He was the tapping guitarist in town. He plays with a standard guitar tuning and uses two guitars. One he holds normally and taps, the other he taps either on his lap or on a stand. We got together and started playing on each other's songs. Eventually we began to write songs together. One song had this sort of spy-vibe to it, which we called Agent 22, and that led to the creation of the band Agent 22.

Originally we were focusing on recording and I decided to form my own label around it. I decided to do everything the formal way, pay taxes, have a Website and an office phone.

JR: So it was a business right from the start?

TG: It was a business right from the start. It took forever. This was another year of my life where my parents were going, "What are you doing?" It took about a year from the time we finished recording in 1998 to having the finished product in hand in 1999. Then

the focus shifted to live stuff. We did a couple of coffee shop gigs but the first significant thing we did was the Belly Up Tavern's music contest. That was weird too.

At first I couldn't get them to give me the time of day. There was this guy doing the booking and I'd call him up and he'd say, "Uh, I haven't listened to your stuff yet, call me next week." For three or four months I'd call him once a week and it was always the same. Finally I gave up on it. Then about a month later, somebody new called me. I guess they had fired that guy and gotten somebody new and this new person had found our package and called me. We got into this year long contest right at the end of 1999 and since we got in so late, it all happened really quickly. We were this weird instrumental trio playing against reggae bands and punk bands, all the normal stuff, but the sound guys and the booking guys at the club really liked us. I guess they were tired of all that other stuff and we came in with something different and wound up winning the whole thing. After that, the club offered us a steady stream of opening gigs.

JR: So you kept getting rejected but you did what you were told and phoned back every week.

TG: I don't anger easily. I think it's just part of my personality but it seems to work. So when someone is blowing me off like that I can stay persistent but stay nice about it.

I think the biggest lesson I've learned over the years is that for you to be involved with somebody else's show, to open for them or tour, there has to be something in it for them. All a club will look at is numbers, how many people are you going to get there. But there may be something else you could offer them. The club may like having someone local to run around and put up posters or maybe they're looking for someone to hang around and sell CDs at the end of the night.

I don't mind putting in extra work to make things happen. You've got to somehow set things up to be a win-win for everybody. If you get a big opening gig it could mean that you're playing for 200, 500, 1000 people but what's in it for them to have you? There are lots of people who want to be in your shoes.

The biggest thing that's pushed things ahead for me was getting a mailing list together. The Belly Up thing gave me a bit of a résumé but I started doing all sorts of less glamorous things where there would at least be a lot of people around, like street fairs. Today my mailing list is pushing 4,000 people, with about 60 or 70 per cent of that being regional here in Southern California. That's enough so that when I do an opening slot, a lot of these clubs know that I'll get a lot of people there.

The Coach House has been particularly good to me. They're traditionally brutal to openers. They always have two openers a night and they always make openers sell tickets. But I've been able to prove to them that I can sell between 60 and 120 tickets a night. If you sell 60 they're willing to keep you around, if you sell 100 the love you and start offering you more things.

JR: And what if you sell 120?

TG: They give you real food instead of chips and salsa.

JR: So do they contact you when they have someone coming who fits with your music?

TG: Sometimes, but I make it a habit to look at the local club listings and see if there is somebody coming to town who would fit musically, who I like or more importantly, who I think people on my mailing list would like, then I pursue it.

JR: How did you hook up with the California Guitar Trio?

TG: Through The Coach House. That was one of the first Coach House gigs I did. The Trio doesn't have that superstar mentality. They'll just talk to people. When I had to sell tickets I emailed them and asked if I could advertise on their Website. Paul (Richards) wrote back and said basically that that wouldn't work because they had to sell tickets too.

The night of the show I remember standing around downstairs, Paul came down and I introduced myself to him. He asked me how the whole ticket thing went and I said that I had sold 96. I remember the number because he couldn't believe I had sold that many. He was stunned. I think that planted the seed in their head that when they play in Southern California they need to play with me because I get 100 people there.

They came back to San Diego about six months later and had me booked to open but the whole thing fell through. The promoter hadn't really done anything and basically disappeared. They had already booked the tour and had a hole in their schedule for a San Diego show, so I put together a show at Mira Costa College with about a week to prepare. I hit the streets and literally dragged people there. We ended up with enough of a crowd to make it a pretty decent night for them.

Shortly after that I mentioned that I'd like to do more things with them and would be happy to come along on tour. I suggested that if there was something they needed help with, that I'd be happy to pitch in however I could, like if they needed a soundman or something

JR: So again, you're doing more than just playing, you've found that added value.

TG: Sure, I've never ended up being the soundman but I have ended being the merchandise guy. That's all well and good because after I'm done playing I have to go back and sell my own CDs anyway and this way they don't have to worry about finding someone in each city and showing them how to do everything. It saves them a lot of hassle.

JR: How did you hook up with Jerry Marotta?

TG: Once again through The Coach House. In 2002 I opened for the Tony Levin Band. That was easily one of the best Coach House gigs I've had to date. I didn't have to push to sell tickets, they sold themselves. I ended up selling 140 or something insane like that. I sold every CD I brought that night too.

Jerry's a cool guy. He's approachable. I think he'd been looking to have his own group for a while, instead of always being the sideman. That night I did a duo thing, myself and a drummer and think a bell went off for Jerry and I guess he was thinking, "Hey, wait a minute, maybe a minimal Stick and drum type thing is the way to go."

I talked to him that night, I can remember the moment. We were standing around the merchandise table and I said, "I love your playing, I love what you do." He said, "Thanks, I like your stuff too. I'd really like to play with you sometime." Of course I thought, "Oh crap, what do I do now?" I wasn't expecting that at all.

The end of the night rolled around and he asked me for a copy of my CD but I had literally sold them all. He was blown away by that. I think I sold more than Tony did that night.

I was already working on the *A Whisper in the Thunder* and thought it would be great to get him to play on some of those tunes. In May of that year he was in L.A. and had a day off so we worked out a deal where he came down and recorded some parts on two songs, "Waking the Day" and "Victor's Chase," at the Spotted Peccary studios.

It was great to have him play on my album but he kept pushing to work out a group project and I wasn't going to say no. I went to his place in July and spent a week at his studio. The two of us basically started writing material and recording stuff as we went. In a week we had four tracks started. So it was underway.

Later that year I went back to his place for two months and literally slept on a mattress on his studio floor and worked night and day on the project. We had a Stick and drum album together by the end of it. He wanted to add some other colors so he invited keyboardist Harvey Jones in. Harvey had worked with Chris Botti and others. We invited Tony (Levin) in and he played on two tracks. That album is waiting in the wings. There's still work to be do. We have to master it and get the artwork done. And we're talking to a booking agent too.

JR: You're doing what everybody says they're going to do when they graduate from music school. Everybody says it but you're actually doing it. How have you been able to create a solid career in the music business?

TG: I don't think there is any one great secret. I started playing and I had two things going: the solo thing and Agent 22. What I did was look for gigs anywhere I could. I called Pacific Bell and bought phonebooks for all of San Diego County. I spent \$90 and bought every phone book. I went through them and called every single coffee house and made a list of who had live music, what they did, what the situation was and started

talking to all of them. I got into street fairs. I found a guide that features every arts and crafts and street fair in the Western U.S. and sent stuff to all of them.

Like anybody, I probably sent out 20 kits for every one gig that I got. But you establish relationships with people and it goes from there. Bookstores were another venue. Anything and everything I could do to build up the mailing list. There were a lot of gigs where I made little or no money, but I'd write it off because I'd add 20 more people on the mailing list. Then I'd go home and spend the hour or so that it takes to type all that information into the database.

I wish I could say that all I did was play music but there is always an enormous amount of music business to take care of. Robert Fripp says, "Musicians make music. Professional musicians make music business." It's really true. As I start getting higher paying gigs and sell more CDs there's less pressure to pursue *any* situation that could possibly turn into a gig and I can put more energy into actually making music.

The Spotted Peccary/O³E deal will help. Hopefully there will be some sales where I'm not the person doing the selling. That's what I'm hoping for anyway.

JR: Are there plans for some new solo music?

TG: Part of the Spotted Peccary/O³E deal is to make my music available on iTunes. They want me to do some tunes exclusively for iTunes. I've got a couple underway. If all goes well I should have two or three tunes exclusively on iTunes that will eventually end up on a solo record.

It's funny I put out the first Agent 22 CD in '99. The next release was a live CD from the Belly Up concert in early 2001. So this new album is the first full-length studio album that I've managed to get out in five years. And that's because of the music business thing. I switched gears from recording and releasing to playing coffee shops and chasing every gig that was out there.

Now I have this album out. I have the one with Jerry in the wings and I'm starting my next solo album. So, hopefully we're going to be looking at one release a year for the next while. That would be nice.

***Tom Griesgraber on tour with The California Guitar Trio:**

September

24 Santa Fe, NM - Santuario de Guadalupe, 505-988-2027

25 Mancos, CO Millwood Junction, 970-533-7338

26 Boulder, CO TBA

27 Travel Day

28 Salt Lake City, UT - Port O Call, 801-521-0589

29 Travel Day

30 Battle MT, NV - Battle Mountain Civic Center, 775-635-1112

October

1 Fallon, NV - Barkley Theater, 775-423-1440
2 San Francisco, CA - Noe Valley Ministry, 415-454-5238
3 Sutter Creek, CA - Sutter Creek Theater, 209-267-1070
4 Santa Cruz, CA - Henfling's, 831-336-8811
5 Redwood City, CA - Little Fox Theater, 650-369-4119
6 Lancaster, CA - Performing Arts Center, 661-723-5950
7 Travel Day
8 Eugene, OR - Café Paradiso, 541-485-3088
9 Portland, OR TBA
10 Bellingham, WA
11-13 Off
14 Federal Way, WA - Knutzen Family Theater, 253-835-2020
15 Port Angeles, WA - Juan De Fuca Festival (2 shows)
16 Everett, WA - Everett Civic Auditorium, 425-303-9070
17 Travel Day
18 Travel Day
19 Creston, IA - Southwestern Community College, 641-782-1479
20 Creston, IA - Southwestern Community College, 641-782-1479
21 Cedar Rapids, IA - CSPS, 319-364-1580
22 Minneapolis, MN - Cedar Cultural Center, 612-338-2674 ext 2
23 Morris, MN - Edson Auditorium
24 Travel Day
25 Off
26 Ann Arbor, MI - The Ark, 734-761-1818
27 Cleveland, OH - Night Town, 216-795-1818
28-31 Off
November
1-2 Off
3 Lowell, MA - New England Art Rock Society
4 Fall River, MA - Narrows Arts Center, 508-324-1926
5 Pawling, NY - Town Crier, 845-855-1300
6 Philadelphia, PA - Tin Angel, 215-928-0770
7 Harrisburg, PA - Whitaker Center,
8 NYC? - TBA
9 Washington DC XM Radio
10 Vienna, VA - Jammin Java, 703-255-1566
11 Williamsburg, VA - Corner Pocket,
12 Charlottesville, VA - Gravity Lounge, 434-977-5590
13 Asheville, NC - Stella Blue, 828-236-2424
14 Charleston Mountain Stage Radio
15 Lexington, KY - Kentucky Theater, 859-231-6997
16 TBA
17 TBA

18 Birmingham, AL Sirote Hall (2 shows)

19 Atlanta, GA Red Light

20 Charlotte, NC - Neighborhood Theater, 704-358-9298

FOR TOUR UPDATES CHECK OUT

<http://www.cgtrio.com/tour.htm> and www.thossounds.com/schedules.html