

# Marimba King

Leigh Howard Stevens chucked his drum kit for a quixotic musical search. Today musicians around the world call Asbury Park marimba headquarters.

**I**TS HISTORY OF QUIANT PROHIBITIONS—BOOZE and Sunday driving were no-nos there well into modern times—makes Ocean Grove a tad more genteel than the world outside it, and that's still apparent on a Saturday evening in June. Over at the Stone Pony, nearly a mile away in adjoining Asbury Park, a rock festival called the Great Bamboozle is underway, and even through a gun-metal rainstorm it sounds like the pummeling of Dresden over there. Here, though, at Ocean Grove's Youth Temple, an audience of about 80 has settled into neatly ordered chairs to hear Leigh Howard Stevens tickle his marimba. No, even here, that's not banned.

The marimba is a keyboard percussion instrument made of tuned rosewood bars and metal resonator tubes that suggest the fire-belching exhaust systems of Raceway Park

dragsters—but that's about as menacing as it gets. Struck with yarn-tipped mallets, the bars yield an aural bouquet of gurgles, plinks, and *ka-chongs*, perfectly suitable sounds for what might be regarded as the Stepford version of the Great Bamboozle. Stevens plays Tchaikovsky's "Sweet Dreams," which calls to mind happier raindrops than those pelting the streets outside. He plays some Bach. Polite applause follows each piece. Then Stevens closes with "Rhythmic Caprice," one of his own compositions. It's tame compared with just about anything by Bamboozle headliner Sonic Youth, with its trio of blasting guitars, but it's still not your granny's idea of music, unless granny has an ear for complex, atonal stuff.

Stevens works up a sweat as he throws himself into the physical demands of playing up to four widely separated

notes at a time on a keyboard almost nine feet long. The white heads of his mallets trace arcing blurs as he grimaces, shuffles from left to right, and reaches to strike the far edges of keys. During one passage, he uses "splash clusters," slapping the wooden handle of a mallet sharply—and loudly—across several keys like a demon telegraph operator.

After an encore, half the audience—the half wearing cargo shorts and tank tops—swarms onto the stage to congratulate Stevens and pick his brain for tips. It turns out that all 35 students from his annual summer marimba seminar are here. A couple of them volunteer to disassemble his 350-pound instrument and return it to the basement classroom where, every morning for three weeks, they gather to learn theory and technique from the man who is widely credited with having freed the marimba from the back of the orchestra. But tonight's concert wasn't solely a demonstration. In no small way was it about Stevens's need to prove to the marimba stars of tomorrow that, sixteen years after *Time* magazine called him "the world's greatest classical marimbist," he's still got major chops.



Stevens's work on the marimba earned him a worldwide following.

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER MURPHY.

"Just showing them that we practice what we preach," Stevens says, mopping his brow like a rock star.

THE SOUND OF THE MARIMBA IS everywhere, says Stevens—in pop music, in television and radio commercials, in the score to *The Lion King*—only most of us don't realize it. "It's a beautiful filler instrument," he says. "It's not *meant* to be noticed."

Stevens slumps into a plush chair in what he calls the panel room of his home, a century-old wreck of a mansion he's restoring in Elberon, just up the road from his marimba factory and music publishing company in downtown Asbury Park. Stevens is 51 years old, with a pleasantly resonant voice and an upbeat disposition. He's also got Popeye forearms, no doubt the result of practicing something called the Stevens One-handed Roll his entire adult life.

### **At Columbia High School, Stevens was one of the two best drummers. The other was an older kid named Max Weinberg.**

In spite of its low profile, Stevens says that in the classical realm the marimba may become "the piano of the 21st century." The notion isn't as farfetched as it sounds, he contends, because the market for piano music is glutted, making it nearly impossible for talented composers to have their work heard. "If you write the two millionth piano sonata, trying to get someone to play it is going to be difficult, as opposed to the two thousandth marimba piece," he says. For now, though, even a marimba tune that gets a lot of attention by marimba standards won't buy its author a fixer-upper house like Stevens's. "With a successful marimba piece," Stevens says, "you'll be able to go out to a nice dinner once a year on the royalties."

To replicate Stevens's success, you'd first need to travel often, giving concerts that leave "critics around the world gasping with astonishment," as the *Star-Ledger* has said of his. You'd need to own a company that turns out the marimba equivalents of Steinways—which is what Stevens's Mallettech Inc. does, using, of course, Stevens's own designs and patents. It wouldn't hurt if you spent six weeks a

year teaching marimba at the Royal Academy of Music in London and gave a summer seminar down the Shore. As a kicker, you might also have a few well-regarded marimba compositions out there earning dinner money. In sum, you might want to be obsessed with the marimba.

"You can be famous in this field, but totally unknown to the general public," Stevens says. So he passionately mines his instrument for all it has, with the result that his life, he says cheerfully, "is basically Marimba World."

As a boy in South Orange, Stevens wanted to play the sax, but in the third grade, a music teacher steered him into drumming. By the time he got to Columbia High School in Maplewood, Stevens was one of the district's two best drummers. The other was a kid a year ahead of him named Max Weinberg, who now keeps time for Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band and leads his own combo on Conan O'Brien's TV show.

At the time, when he wasn't drumming, Weinberg had numerous musical interests, one of which was "managing" a rock band called the Tiger Tails, for whom Stevens was the drummer. "He could do a snare roll that sounded like you were ripping a piece of sandpaper," Weinberg says of Stevens. But while most of the kids of the day were agog over the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and dreamed of matching their success, Stevens showed early signs of breaking from the pack. "I wanted to rock, and he wanted to become a *musician*," says Weinberg. "Leigh was a very serious kid—very directed, and not distracted."

Stevens first encountered what he calls the "extremely oddball instrument" that would come to dominate his life when he was fifteen, at an orchestra competition. Another kid showed up with a marimba, and Stevens was knocked out by both its melodic capability and the sheer volume it could generate. "I got down on my hands and knees to look at it," he says. "I couldn't believe it wasn't amplified somehow. I went home and said, 'That's what I want to play. I found my instrument.'"

WITHIN DAYS OF TAKING UP THE marimba, Stevens concluded that the usual approach to playing it was flawed. So he improvised a new way of holding the mallets and a new technique for playing rapid-fire alternating notes with one hand. Years later, after some resistance by the old guard, the Stevens

Grip and the Stevens One-handed Roll would become as ubiquitous in marimba classes as "ten-o'clock-and-two-o'clock" in driving schools.

### **Within days of taking up the marimba, Stevens concluded that the usual approach to playing it was flawed.**

As an undergrad at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, in the early 1970s, Stevens was a strong-willed student who "had other opinions" about how he ought to be educated, says John H. Beck, who's still a professor of percussion there. Stevens, who had set his mind on becoming the first solo marimbist of his generation, didn't care about the timpani, snare drum, or other staples of the curriculum. Beck says he wanted to play the marimba, period. "At the time, it sort of bothered me," Beck says, mainly because he worried that Stevens would be a bad influence on other students. Beck also admits to having been dubious of Stevens's career goals.

Stevens concedes that shooting for a non-orchestra job "was tantamount to being a rocket scientist at MIT and saying I wanted to be an intergalactic space pilot." But while still at Eastman, he commissioned composer Raymond Helble to write a solo piece that incorporated his new playing techniques—and then won acclaim performing it. After graduation, he booked Manhattan's Town Hall for a solo concert during a major percussion convention in the city. Old guardists gagged at his shameless self-promotion, just as they had at his newfangled grips and the stiff new mallets he had devised and was then marketing. But in short order, Stevens was making a living on his own.

Beck, who says that Stevens has mellowed in recent years, now understands his former student's drive. "He did become the pioneer," he says. "It takes someone like him, with the discipline, the aggression, to make that happen."

Weinberg, who occasionally runs into Stevens at their favorite Red Bank restaurant, says he's been "delighted" at Stevens's success. "It's hard enough to make it as a mainstream musician," he says. "Leigh took something that was pretty much closed-off territory and broke through

and expanded it. *Very cool.*"

A WEEK INTO THE 2004 SUMMER seminar, the 25th in a series that began in Stevens's Manhattan apartment and migrated with him to the Shore in the mid-1980s, Stevens has invited his students to his house for an informal concert and party. Among the soloists is 24-year-old Grant Braddock of Dallas, who learned the Stevens technique in the ninth grade, went through the Stevens seminar four years ago, and is now in the graduate percussion program at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers. Taking a page right out of Stevens's career, Braddock commissioned a piece by a composer friend, Jason Bahr. Like his mentor's "Rhythmic Caprice," this one, called "Strikes and Resonance," is modernist hard stuff. Braddock plays it confidently, brilliantly.

Later, in a large, well-worn kitchen that wouldn't look out of place in a frat house, Braddock says that Stevens is not only the best marimbist in the world, but also the instrument's leading light. "As far as marimba players are concerned, Leigh's the source," he says. "He thought about the possibilities of the instrument in ways that no one had before."

### **"As far as marimba players are concerned, Leigh's the source," says student Grant Braddock.**

Then Stevens, wearing a T-shirt and carrying a glass of wine, summons his students to the panel room, where he puts on a CD of Samuel Barber's Symphony No. 1. There's no starring role for the marimba, but the third movement, Stevens tells his pupils, promises an "orgasm" of sound. Later, he may show one of his favorite films, *Every Morning of the World*, about a profoundly sad and reclusive seventeenth-century violist who loses himself in his instrument. "Great art is great art," Stevens says, and even in the capital of Marimba World, there's always room for a little something else.

---

*Contributing editor John T. Ward wrote about a woman who robbed a bank with her teenage daughters in the August issue.*

**New Jersey**  
MONTHLY