



Stranger on a train changes pianist's life

By Greg Barr
Correspondent

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GALVESTON — Selling window blinds and shutters always came easy to Scott Graham. But one day, while riding a train in Europe, he finally understood why music was his portal to happiness.

Graham, who had been playing piano part-time in the Houston area at parties and weddings, won a vacation to Britain in 2000 for being a top company salesman.

After playing impromptu gigs at some London hotels, he was asked to stay to perform at a Paris wedding, and earned enough in tips to buy a rail pass.

In a scene out of Alfred Hitchcock's "Strangers on a Train," Graham struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger. Only this time, it had a happier ending.

The man told Graham about his brush with death in an accident, and how it made him realize that if his life had ended, he would have died without having pursued his dreams. He quit a job he didn't like and went on to a much happier life.

"I really took it as a sign from this random stranger telling me this, because I had been contemplating the same thing," said Graham. "I really thought I was here to create music for people to listen to and enjoy."

It was enough of a push that Graham, who was born in Baton Rouge, La., but spent most of his life in Houston, sold his last set of shutters in 2001 and became a full-time musician.

Graham is constantly in demand for corporate parties and wedding gigs, and has a regular two-nights-a-week slot at the upscale Tremont House hotel.

The 1995 Sam Houston State graduate, who majored in theory of composition with a minor in piano, is putting the finishing touches on his first piano instrumental CD to be released in February.

Initially self-taught when he would just fool around on the piano after classes in high school, Graham writes music drawn from a quirky and diverse set of influences ranging from Billy Joel to Ray Charles to Cole Porter.

But he is constantly exploring other styles, aided by a collection of music in his home that includes pre-Civil War railroad songs, national anthems and a CD he picked up recently of musical compositions for “The Simpsons” TV cartoon comedy.

And talk about diverse. Though his piano stylings are more Frank Mills than Wu-Tang Clan, Graham even recorded a hip-hop CD in 1997 with a neighbor who was looking for a musician to back up his rapping.

Graham uses a lot of counter-point in his poignant, flowing original compositions; that is, using the left hand to play a second melody line rather than just keep up the rhythm.

“Sometimes I’ll just sit down at the piano and close my eyes and start playing, and work a melody around a small phrase,” he said. “Or if I like a certain chord, I’ll just build a melody from there.”

He has notated some of his works, though some still reside strictly in his mind, which is apparently in creative mode even when he slumbers.

“I was at my grandparents’ place in Georgia, and was sleeping one night when I had a dream I saw myself playing this melody, and I began to play the song after I woke up,” he said about his composition, “Whispers From My Dreams.” “A month later, the second part of the melody came to me in another dream, and I could finish the song.”

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WHAT: Pianist Scott Graham.

WHEN: 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Thursdays and 6 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Saturdays.

WHERE: Tremont House lobby, 2300 Ship’s Mechanics Row, Galveston.

COST: Free.

INFORMATION: Call (409) 763-0300.

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