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To whom it concerns:

Mark T. Small has asked me to provide a letter of reference regarding his American Music Concert presentation, and I am more than happy to do so. I will assume that Mark's award-winning musical abilities are not in question here, but rather his teaching ability, which is almost equally impressive.

Mark has done this show for our students each of the past two years (2013, 2014), and we are working to schedule him again for the coming year. What makes this concert so effective is his ability to combine historical scholarship with musicianship: he is both an expert musicologist and an expert player in a wide range of American music styles. When he talks about rhythm and syncopation, when he compares folk melodies to blues progressions, he can immediately demonstrate the techniques and comparisons, allowing our students—few of whom have much formal musical training—to anchor these potentially abstract concepts in concrete examples they can hear and feel. He reviews not just the history of the musical genres (including some brief and well-designed handouts), but also the history of the guitar itself, from its medieval prototypes through the development of the electric guitar, and even briefly surveys internet sites, youtube clips, and recording apps that the students can explore and utilize after the show.

In our case, Mark also offered a three-week mini-course in guitar playing each year for a subgroup of our students with a particular interest in learning to play (or play better: he proved adept at managing groups with students of widely varying experience and ability). As with the full-group presentations, Mark struck a perfect balance among the various components he addressed, using handouts to cover technical and formal materials, brief questionnaires and discussions to ascertain the students' ability levels and interests, and a range of workshop techniques to get the students engaged in discussions and drills. Like most good teachers, he knows how to vary the pace and form of his presentations to keep the students focused and attentive.

I would be remiss not to mention the personal rapport that Mark develops with the students almost instantly, not just in the small groups, but even in the full show to 100 students. As an accomplished performer, he knows how to reach out from the stage to each audience member. And of course nothing works quite so well with students as interacting with an instructor who brings not just expertise, but genuine passion for his art to the table: as you probably already know if you're reading this letter, no one brings more intensity to a presentation than Mark Small.

In a word, our students find Mark articulate, eloquent, approachable, friendly, and inspirational, and his American Music Concert has proven one of our most popular performances. I recommend Mark to you in the highest possible terms, with no reservations whatsoever: this is can't miss stuff. Please feel free to contact me should I be able to provide any further assistance.

Sincerely,  
Dr William Nelles  
Professor, Department of English  
Director, Spotlight Program