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After dropping out, guitarist back in A2

BY KATIE CAREY, DAILY ARTS WRITER ON 3/3/08

After his first semester at the University, Robert Spalding Newcomb did what many idealistic musicians and artists fanaticize about but never gather the courage to do. Newcomb walked out of his Psychology 101 lecture and moved to New York with a guitar, two pairs of blue jeans and a hundred dollars.

Newcomb spent time in New York learning to program computers, devoting his nights to playing music and writing poetry. Years later the pattern continues. Newcomb now works as the program manager of business information network security in the School of Music, Theatre and Dance during the week, and puts on amplified sitar and electric classical guitar concerts on the weekends.



Newcomb will play tonight at 8 p.m. at the Kerrytown Concert House. (Courtesy of Partial Music)

But Newcomb's path to his musical career was shaped much earlier. As a child, Newcomb sat by the family stereo where he would listen to Charlie Parker, Mozart and Woody Guthrie. And while Newcomb has created music in all these musical veins, from old time banjo, jazz, folk and electronic, he has no particular influences. Rather, everything is an influence to Newcomb.

"I don't walk around with an iPod," said Newcomb. "I don't listen to anything, but I try to hear everything. Actually, that's kinda stupid, it could go either way. I listen to the wind or the waves or the screaming in the kitchen and deconstruct the math of it."

This "deconstruction of sound" has led Newcomb to experiment with integrating his knowledge of computers into his music. Switching between ambient reverb and brash and electronic clamor, Newcomb's sound is dictated by the environment he's in, making each performance completely different from the last.

The freedom the combination opens up for him comes through in his music. It is evident that he isn't falling back on learned chord progressions, but, rather, he's making a new kind of improvisation. This new method is focused on the belief of human interconnectedness. Through his improvisation, Newcomb takes the people and places that surround him and manifests them into a collective sound.

"Playing jazz feels like I'm in a box. It's a big box, but still, a box," he said. "It gives you the basic architecture of

an emotional flow."

What Newcomb finds as his main challenge is not falling back on the comfort of classical musical structure, the sitar playing a large part in this. Newcomb admires the instrument because it creates a large pool of material but has little demand on how it is sequenced. Pairing this with technology has allowed Newcomb to explore an infinite amount of space, while concisely moving within the controls of his own vision at the same time. By listening to his compositions, it's easy to notice Newcomb's belief in technology. It permits his music to move beyond the physically restrained and transforms it into a more transcendental experience.

Robert Spalding Newcomb

Tonight at 8 p.m.

At the Kerrytown Concert House

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