

John Stropes

Featured Harp Guitar Player, April 2025

By Frank Doucette

I first heard of John Stropes in the early 1980s when I walked into the Amherst Music House, in Amherst, MA, and saw the book *20th Century Masters of Fingerstyle Guitar*. While co-written with his good friend Peter Lang, it is a perfect outline for the career of the man I would come to study with less than a decade later. It was a first stab at defining the style of guitar playing we all now know and love, giving it an historical context, and declaring it something worthy of academic study.

A couple years after finding the book, I met Michael Hedges on his first tour of the Northeast US. I was so taken with what I had just seen him do on stage that I had to talk to this person. I found a quiet, thoughtful, shy man. In subsequent encounters, I found the man who shot to the top of the heap in the guitar world at that time. I fell in love with the harp guitar when I first saw Michael using one.

By the time I got to Milwaukee to study with John, he was running a diploma program in fingerstyle guitar through the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, and a degree program in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin. Dan Schwartz, who has been featured at some of our Harp Guitar Gatherings, was in the degree program and was helping John develop the uniquely detailed notation system used in transcribing Michael Hedges music.

On the day we met, John took me to lunch at his favorite Middle Eastern restaurant, which quickly became my favorite. So, the mention in his article of tabouli in his and Dan's teeth is well understood by me and probably everyone John taught!

Later in my time in Milwaukee, John decided to teach a harp guitar class. I got one as quickly as I could and was the only one to sign up for the course, getting private harp guitar lessons. By default, I got to be one of the test subjects for John and Dan's groundbreaking transcription of Michael's groundbreaking harp guitar composition, *Because It's There*, though I never quite got it fully down on an old Austrian kontragitarre.

Though I moved on from Milwaukee after two years, John's work has continued to this day. He is a foremost authority on fingerstyle guitar, its history, music, and practitioners. He continues to mentor those practitioners with the degree program through the University of Wisconsin and private instruction offered through stropes.com. Through Stropes Editions, Ltd, he has transcribed and published many important works in the genre. He has also provided a tremendous resource for all interested in this music on his web site. Let us all thank John for everything he has done to advance the cause of fingerpickers everywhere!



John Stropes with his Dyer style 8