

PROFILE





# Nate Blaustein

## First Things First

Article by Amy Lakin

To say that Nate Blaustein has “a hobby” doesn’t quite do the man justice. His fascination with the harp guitar began on a first date and has led to years of writing music and recording of his first CD, aptly titled *First*. A majority of Nate’s time is devoted to his career as an ER doctor at St. John’s Hospital and to his family, but playing the harp guitar “would be like other people sitting and having a glass of wine; it’s a relaxation thing for me.”

Defining *harp guitar* is no easy task because there are so many different versions of the instrument. Basically, a harp guitar is a standard six string guitar with additional unfretted strings that supply lower and higher tones. Don’t imagine those huge triangle-shaped harps played by women in long, flowing white dresses; the term “harp” in this sense is simply referring to the extra strings that are plucked to provide additional high and low tones. (For a highly detailed

definition, including the etymology of the words “harp” and “guitar,” visit [www.harp guitars.net](http://www.harp guitars.net))

Harp guitars are built to the musician’s specifications and no two are exactly alike. Nate’s harp guitar looks like an acoustic six string guitar with five sub-base strings added at the top on a large hollow neck and eight treble strings at the bottom. The extra strings are not fretted, so there aren’t any raised bars to press down on, so Nate plucks them like someone playing a harp. When the instrument is played, it sounds like more than one person because of the additional high and low tones.

*“My instrument is set up around the way I think about music and the way I play, perform, and write music.”*

“When I first started, I was going to buy an instrument that was 100 years old, a Dyer harp guitar, and I got it off of eBay, but when it arrived it was broken. There’s no one in the area that could do servicing on the instrument. So I had someone make this for me, and that seems the route that a lot of people are taking these days. They become interested in the instrument, and then they say ‘What is it I want to be able to accomplish with this instrument? What do I need?’ The limits are your imagination.”

Nate’s instrument was originally built by Jim Hewett in Texas, “and it came with the sub-bases and the actual six strings,



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and then as I got more involved in this community, I discovered I really liked the treble aspect too. My instrument is set up around the way I think about music and the way I play, perform, and write music."

Music has always been a part of Nate's life. As a child, he played the piano and then took up the guitar in college, so transitioning to the harp guitar was a natural progression. Nate says, "When I got involved in this whole harp guitar music scene, I had a lot of guidance, but I actually do my own thing, which is what really drew me to the instrument. There are so few guidelines out there. When I first started, there wasn't much sheet music available. For the most part, you're walking your own trail."

Harp guitarists are as uncommon as the instrument itself. Nate is the only harp guitarist that he knows of in the Springfield area, and the nearest harp guitarist lives in Peoria. Since they are such a rare breed, harp guitarists from around the country and world meet each year at an event they call "The Harp Guitar Gathering." Musicians,

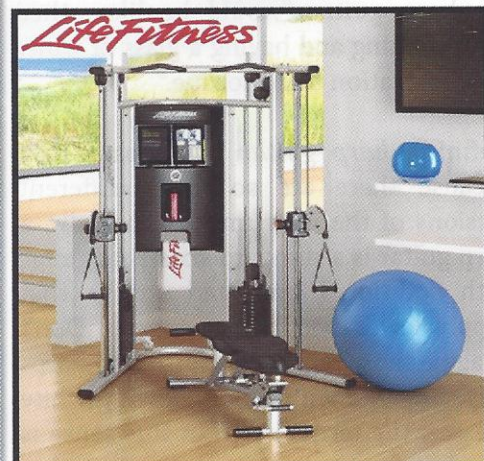
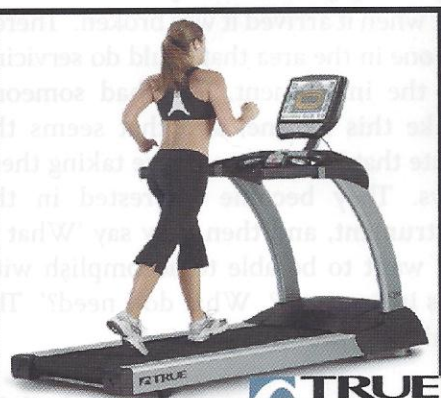
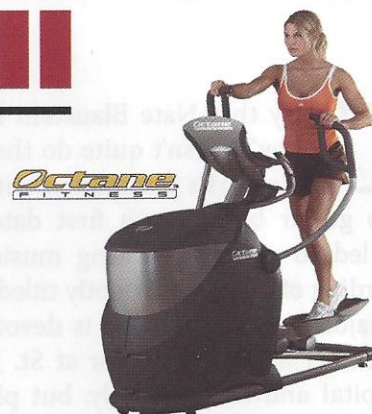
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historians, and luthiers (someone who makes or repairs string instruments) all converge for concerts, workshops and fellowship. "This is our 10th Gathering, and each year we do it in a different location. We have performers coming from as far away as Japan this year . . . I get a chance to meet a lot great performers and musicians, some of which are big names in *our* circle." Nate jokes how the average person has probably never heard of any of the "big names" in the harp guitar world, but he points out that "one of our friends, Andy McGee, is now performing with Prince!" Yes, *that* Prince.

Nate's style of playing is influenced by the late acoustic guitarist Michael Hedges, who transformed the acoustic guitar world with his unique style. It was at a Michael Hedges concert where Nate first saw and heard the distinctive harp guitar. Hedges played "Because It's

There" on his harp guitar, and Nate was immediately intrigued by the unique instrument. He was also intrigued by his date, Stacey, who is now his wife of 16 years. "It was our very first date. She and I saw the instrument at the same time for the first time, so when it became a part of my life it was definitely with her blessing."

Stacey was the inspiration for one of Nate's first compositions, "Stacey's Song" which is the first song on his CD. "Stacey's Song" has been around for a while. It was written before I got my harp guitar, but it has evolved since then and continued to evolve to about a week before I recorded the CD! I love it and it's my 'go-to' song." Four of the other songs on *First* were inspired by either Stacey or their daughters Emma (12 years) or Annie (9 years). He also covers Elvis Costello's "Alison," Bach's Minuet, and The Beatles' "Here, There

and Everywhere." Nate explains, "I really love composing, and all of the songs on the CD are very intimate, they all have a story. . . . The music I play is a little more calm, a little more mellow," which is a nice contrast to his hectic and stressful job as an ER doctor. *First* is available on iTunes, cdbaby.com, and locally at Samuel Music.

There was a time in college when he thought about changing his career path from medicine to music. "My dad told me if you choose medicine, music will always be an option. Now I know he was right; I wasn't quite sure he was right then," Nate says laughing. He adds, "I think I'm a better doctor than I am a musician, so it works out well in the end!" **SS11**



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