

OLIVER SCHROER, 52 MUSICIAN, PRODUCER AND TEACHER

# Fiddler was a prolific composer and performer with a style all his own

Hateful of the violin as a child, he defied calls to conform and chose to blend such traditions as country, jazz, folk, South Asian and Scandinavian. 'I don't write music,' he said in 1999. 'I catch it as it goes by'

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GAY ABBATE

Oliver Schroer arrived home from high school one day to find his mother vacuuming while listening to Pink Floyd music. "Hey Mom, how can I rebel if you keep listening to my records?" he asked. But rebel he did. The gifted Canadian fiddler and composer refused to be bound by what he considered the restrictions of classical instruction and, most importantly, by the limits of any one musical genre. Through his rebellion, he took contemporary fiddling music to a whole new level. "He opened up a whole new range of possibilities," said musician Anne Lindsay, who played second fiddle in Mr. Schroer's band, Stewed Tomatoes.

To Grit Laskin, co-founder of the Canadian Folk Music Awards, Mr. Schroer was the ultimate musician. "His playing style of music was unique. It was his own style and physically what he did with his bow technique and the kind of rhythms and structure in the music he wrote - there was nobody else like him."

The Globe's music critic, Robert Everett-Green, referred to Mr. Schroer's style as a "fusion of Ontario's fiddling traditions with the kind of architectural, string-crossing music of Bach's solo violin works."

For his part, Mr. Schroer considered the violin more than a musical wooden box. "I think of my violin as a vibration generator, a drum, a sex partner, a confidant," he wrote. "We dance, we tell each other secrets, we pray. We make music."

A prodigious composer and music producer, as well as a master of the acoustic violin, Mr. Schroer received eight Juno nominations during his 25-year career. He wrote more than 1,000 musical pieces, recorded nine CDs of his own compositions and produced 30 CDs for other artists. He also performed on more than 100 albums of new traditional, acoustic and popular music by other musicians. He recorded with such artists as composers Jimmy Webb and Barry Mann, singers James Keelaghan and Sylvia Tyson, acoustic guitarists Jesse Cook and Don Ross, and the groups Great Big Sea and Spirit of the Wind.

His most recent collaboration was with his childhood friend, the classical guitarist Liona Boyd. In late April, he played on two tracks of her new CD, to be released this fall. "He was an inspired musician," said Ms. Boyd. "Music reflects the soul of a person. You could tell he was a deep, sensitive person."

Mr. Schroer was very iconoclastic and a global person from a cultural point of view, said his brother André Schroer. Oliver Schroer defied calls to conform, choosing to blend many musical traditions, including country, jazz, folk, South Asian and Scandinavian. "He was a very

complex individual who in one way skewed authority and bombast but still had one foot in traditions."

Mr. Schroer took little credit for his unique music. In his view, he merely kept his ears open to the wind. "I don't write music," he told *The Globe and Mail* in 1999. "I catch it as it goes by. It's all floating by for the taking."

Oliver Schroer was born the third of four children of Hendryk and Irene Schroer, German immigrants who had arrived in Canada in 1954. When Oliver was 10, his father, who worked in sales and management, decided to uproot his young family to the countryside. They settled in Markdale, Ont., a village located in the Beaver Valley about 30 kilometres south of Georgian Bay and about 150 kilometres north of Toronto. It was while growing up in Markdale that he first met Ms. Boyd, who lived nearby with her family.

By then Oliver was already a budding musician, having played the recorder since he was 6. When he was 8, his parents switched him to the violin, which he did not enjoy playing and took every opportunity to get out of practising, including making a tape of the scales and exercises. "When my mother told me to go upstairs and practice, I would go into my room and play the tape," he wrote last year, after finally admitting his pretense to his mother.

Meanwhile, his parents were not musicians but they had an appreciation for classical music and resolved to expose their children to it. For a time, the only window to popular culture the children had was a weekly dose of *The Wonderful World of Disney* on television. Oliver's first intimate contact with popular music was when he was 12 and a friend of his older brother brought over a copy of the Beatles album, *Abbey Road*. His 16th birthday brought significant changes that would further expand his musical horizon: his father gave him a guitar, acknowledging his son was not interested in the violin. Later, Oliver went to Quebec on a student-exchange program and was exposed to the music of Frank Zappa, Jethro Tull and James Taylor - all of which he greedily soaked up. The guitar was his instrument of choice even after he enrolled in philosophy at the University of Toronto. There, he discovered the jazz music of Chick Corea and Lenny Breau.

It took 10 years for him to graduate from university. He never really settled to his studies and instead took time off for other pursuits. He bounced through a series of office jobs and played for a time with a country swing group called the Treverston Band. His first gig in 1982 earned him \$30.

His violin, meanwhile, remained neglected on a shelf until the night a girlfriend persuaded him to learn square dancing. He took along his violin and was surprised to find a fiddler and guitarist playing for the class. The musicians introduced him to Irish and French-Canadian fiddling. He didn't learn much about square dancing because he spent most of his time jamming with the band. It was the beginning of his love affair with an instrument he had previously loathed.

He abandoned the guitar and took up the violin - this time an acoustic violin he painted blue - with one of the musicians he had met at the square-dancing class. One night, while playing in Eastern Ontario, he had a revelation that music was to be his life's work - not the law or academia as he had expected. "I hadn't ever had that thought before in that same way. This time it was for real," he once wrote. "If I could just do that, I would be so satisfied."

In 1987, he and a friend formed a jazz group called Eye Music. The quartet met with some success and was invited to play at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland the following year. In the early nineties he formed Stewed Tomatoes, which played across Canada and in venues ranging from small pubs to New York's Lincoln Centre. For a time, the group served as the house band on Stewart McLean's CBC radio program, *The Vinyl Café*.

In 1993, Mr. Schroer established his credentials on the Canadian music scene with his first album, *Jigzap*. It was won rave reviews and earned him his first Juno nomination.

His best known solo albums are *Camino* and *Hymns and Hers*. The music for *Camino* was recorded in churches during a 2004 hike of the 1,000-kilometre-long Camino de Santiago, an ancient pilgrimage route which meanders through the Pyrenees mountain region of France and Spain. For two months, he and friend Peter Coffman stopped at any church or chapel along the way that seemed acoustically promising. Mr. Schroer would unpack his portable recording studio, take out the violin he carried wrapped in his sleeping bag and begin playing. For his part, Mr. Coffman recorded the adventure through photography. His pictures form a 28-page booklet that accompanies the album. Often while recording, Mr. Schroer would have unforeseen accompaniment, such as the sound of children playing or people laughing. At one location in France, while playing *The Lord's Prayer*, the church clock started chiming. "I couldn't believe the fortune of that happening," Mr. Schroer told the Globe in 2006.

*Hymns and Hers* followed *Camino* and shares some of the same deep emotion, although the sound is very different. Recorded after Mr. Schroer was diagnosed with leukemia in early 2007, the album is a collection of introspective ensemble pieces, "*Hymns and Hers* is one of the most stunning records I've ever heard," said Mr. Laskin.

Mr. Schroer's style of playing was as distinctive as his music. Four years of busking long hours in Toronto's subway stations resulted in tendinitis, a condition that has ended many a promising musical career. After taking a nine-month hiatus, during which he started composing music, he changed the way he held his bow.

In the process he discovered he could produce exquisite music, so he kept playing that way, said jazz singer and actress Michele George, a friend for 25 years. "He took something you could look at as negative and saw how it could work to take him further into a new way of making music and a way to hear music that wouldn't have happened had it not been for the tendinitis."

Mr. Schroer's large stature in the music world was matched his physical appearance. Standing 6 feet 6 inches, with his mohawk, goatee and designer frames, he did not conform to most people's image of a fiddler. He enjoyed being outrageous and changed his hairstyle frequently for effect, his brother said. The mohawk was the favourite look. His goatee grew back bushier than ever. Over the past year, he would wear clogs - one red and one orange - just to startle people, his brother said.

Mr. Coffman said his friend was a wise man, but could also be silly, mischievous and goofy. Most of all he was inspiring. "He just made you want to go out and do great stuff. He was one of those rare people who expand your sense of what is possible."

Part of Mr. Schroer's legacy is Twisted String, a project he launched about seven years ago with the idea of teaching young violinists. He was living and teaching in Vancouver and started the group after going to Smithers, B.C., to conduct a violin workshop. Smithers is located about halfway between Prince George and Prince Rupert, which means it is a 14-hour drive from Vancouver. As such, the children there would never have been exposed to a musician like Mr. Schroer, said Emilyn Stam, who was one of his first students. Other artists, such as Miss Boyd, later followed in his footsteps to Smithers.

Mr. Schroer taught his students that nothing was too crazy or wrong when playing the violin. "He told us to embrace any mistake and to turn it into something cool," Ms. Stam said.

He became a father figure for many of the students, and mentored them all as though they were his own children. "He taught us how to live life," she added.

Since then the original group has grown and several of his original students, including Ms. Stam, are now not only leading Twisted String but also establishing new groups elsewhere in the country. Some have gone on to form their own bands.

About two years ago, Mr. Schroer was diagnosed with myelodysplasia, a condition that inevitably leads to the leukemia that developed early last year. He moved back to Toronto to be near friends and family, and to undergo chemotherapy. It was later learned that the cancer had spread to his spine.

Mr. Schroer did not let the disease slow him down. During his chemotherapy treatment, he composed 59 musical pieces, one for each of his students in Smithers. Each tune had the person's name in the title and totally fit each kid's personality, Ms. Stam said. The tunes make up *Smithers*, his final CD, which he sent to each student at Christmas.

His last public performance was on June 5 in Toronto on what he dubbed the Last Concert on the Tour of the Planet. He played one solo to a standing-room-only crowd of 800 people.

He continued to work even as the end drew near. Doctors and nurses in Unit 14A at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto let him bring in a piano and other recording equipment into his room so he and his friends could work, Ms. George said.

A final message to friends and fans which he posted on his website reveals that he had come to terms with his pending end on this Earth. "Some people live very intensely and burn very brightly during their time here. I think I am one of those people. A shining star while I am here. So I look at my life as I have lived it, and I feel very satisfied with all I have achieved and gone through."

## OLIVER SCHROER

Oliver Schroer was born June 18, 1956, in Toronto. He died July 3, 2008, of leukemia at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. He was 52. He leaves his mother Irene, brothers André and Ansgar and sister Martina.

A celebration of Mr. Schroer's life and music is being planned for early September. Details will be posted on his website: <http://www.oliverschroer.com>.