

Oliver Schroer, 52: Boundary-pushing violinist

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ENTERTAINMENT COLUMNIST

Oliver Schroer was a late bloomer. But boy did he bloom.

Over a 25-year career, the violin virtuoso produced or performed on more than 100 albums and wrote more than 1,000 pieces of music.

He is credited by his peers with having achieved and fostered in a new generation of fiddlers a unique fusion of traditional, classical and progressive musical styles.

Schroer died Thursday in Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital after a 16-month battle with leukemia. He was 52.

"Oliver was so spiritually involved with his music," award-winning guitarist Liona Boyd said Friday from her home in New Canaan, Conn. In April, Schroer, a close friend since childhood, played on two tracks on Boyd's soon-to-be-released album.

"In April he had already come to terms with death," Boyd said. "He knew he didn't have much time left, but he was so full of life ... and music."

Schroer was born in Toronto and raised in a conservative German immigrant family in Flesherton, Ont. Having abandoned recorder and violin lessons for an electric guitar and jazz at age 16, he returned to the violin – this time electrified – in the early 1980s, after being exposed to the music of Frank Zappa, Lenny Breau, Chick Corea and Bill Evans in college, where he studied history and philosophy.

Over the next 25 years he shared stages and studios with American songwriting legends Jimmy Webb and Barry Mann, as well as Canadian artists Bruce Cockburn, James Keelaghan, Loreena McKennitt, Sylvia Tyson, guitarists Jesse Cook and Don Ross, violinist Anne Lindsay, the Toronto folk band Muddy York and the folk-rock bands Great Big Sea and Spirit of the West.

"It wasn't just his playing that made him special, though he was an amazing performer; it was also the clarity of his musical vision," said his longtime musical collaborator, David Woodhead.

"He took the violin as far as it could go. There were no boundaries for him. He had a way of bringing things out in other musicians that they didn't know were there. He had such an adventurous spirit."

Schroer focused on teaching young violinists – in a British Columbia-based program called Twisted String – and on writing and recording an astonishing body of

instrumental work that embraced Scandinavian, Balkan and Asian folk forms, jazz and avant-garde contemporary orchestral music.

He was working on an album only hours before his death, said Woodhead. "In hospital he'd jam with anyone who dropped by.

`` One day he and I started jamming in time with the beep on his IV machine. He had a great sense of humour."

Schroer's best known solo albums were *Camino* and *Hymns and Hers*, a work of profoundly spiritual elegance, recorded after his cancer was diagnosed.

"Oliver's instrumentals were more eloquent than most songs," said Grit Laskin, co-founder of the Canadian Folk Music Awards.

"*Hymns and Hers* touches every emotion humans are capable of feeling.

`` His playing pushed boundaries in a way that was accessible. Unlike many jazz musicians, he worked with melodies, stretching them into new shapes."

Schroer attended the Toronto City Roots Festival June 28 to watch his "kids" – Twisted String students who had flown in from B.C. – performing at a concert highlighting new musical discoveries.

"There was such purity of intent in everything he did," said Toronto roots/jazz violinist Lindsay, whose recent album, *News From Up the Street*, Schroer co-produced.

"Oliver touched so many people with his music."

Schroer leaves his wife Elena, mother Irene, sister Martina, and brothers Andreas and Ansgar.

The funeral is private, but a celebration of his life and music will be staged in the first week of September at a venue to be announced, Andreas Schroer said.

A scholarship is being set up in his name to sponsor young string players of promise interested in pushing the boundaries of their instruments.

Cheques may be made out to the Oliver Schroer Scholarship Trust Fund at 725 College St., P.O. Box 31029, Toronto, Ont., M6G 1C2. To donate via PayPal, and for more information go to oliverschroer.com.