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A February 2024 interview with fingerstyle guitarist **Mark Kostrzewa**

By Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)



Fingerstyle,

'fine' guitarist

Mark Kostrzewa

Takes listeners on world joyride with new record:

WoodenHouse

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"**WoodenHouse**"

An interview by Jean Bartlett

February 27, 2024



Right out of the gate, Song 1, on Mark Kostrzewa's new record **WoodenHouse**, his fingers fly so fast and so right on some serious Southern slide rock guitar that I'm thinking, this man has put to music a wildly satisfying definition of flaming BBQ served with fireworks Delta blues. I look at the song title, "Sunburned in San Bruno." Where is this place in San Bruno, California? I've got to get there.

Well, it turns out, this composer and fingerstyle 'fine' guitarist has the ability to put his imagination right across the 6- and 12-string acoustic guitars he owns and let it rip, offering the listener a standout place to park their mind and allowing him to mostly name his tunes later, when the incidental song title lands. The process is maybe a little like the random wood that washes ashore on Pescadero Beach. People who walk the beach often take a few of these ocean wood gifts and do their part to build a temporary wooden house that is thrilling and unexpected but eventually, reclaimed by the ocean. Kostrzewa named his latest release after this Pescadero Beach phenomenon. Though unlike those wooden house structures, Kostrzewa's record is not a come and go experience. But it is thrilling and unexpected; and his **WoodenHouse** is a keeper.



Let's take a quick look to get at the heart of what the listener is going to hear. Fifteen tunes and 57 minutes of flat out astonishing: guitar skill and tone with a breathtaking expanse of complex chording, separate bass lines and string rhythmicity, blends of Brazilian and Latin tempos, some scuttle blues, raga rock, mountain folktale, coastal wind and sand, and some cowboy grit. This is one of the best records out of anywhere because it takes you everywhere. Before delving more into some of the individual listens on this guitarist/composer's latest release, Mark and I sat down for a chat at Pacifica's Chit-Chat Café on W. Manor Drive.

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"The record title is the mentality of wooden acoustic music," the guitarist/composer said. "To get the record cover, I went to Pescadero Beach with Coastside photographer Jeff Regan, and recording engineer and producer Rich Pierceall (and owner of Studio E in Moss Beach where this record was recorded and mastered) and together we added some of my guitars to the wooden house already in progress – a 12-String Guild, a 12-String Martin CEO-6, a National Estralita Resonator and a Martin D-28. I threw in an old mandolin just to stretch the vision. Of course I didn't really throw anything in there. My wooden guitars were placed carefully and then gently removed! Jeff captured the vision on film."

I first met this guitarist and longtime Montara resident in 2009, when I was doing a fair amount of Bay Area News Group music reviews. He had just released his first record "55 miles," and it was an immediate standout in acoustic guitar play. That one takes the listener on a sweet road trip along the 55 miles of coast from Pacifica through all of coastal San Mateo County and back again. Didn't need any coaxing to be there for his second record release. That happened in 2013 with "From Ear to There." He called it "progressive acoustic soundscapes," and I called it, "seductive virtuosity." Both true takes on the Mark Kostrzewa' natural, acoustic classic sound. So what makes this new CD, almost impossibly, even better and richer than his first two CDs? He's added deeper percussive elements and artificial harmonics. He's absorbed his personal palette and the palette of each one of his guitars and created unquestionable, fingerstyle fine art. He's taken his string virtuosity to a new level, where only the giants of fingerstyle play.

"I've changed my guitars a lot since those first records," Kostrzewa noted. (Those earlier selections included: Guild Jumbo JF-30, with a self-installed B-Band XOM 2.2 crossover pickup; a 12-string Takamine EG523SC-12; and a Yamaha nylon string CGX-171SCF)



"I got some new ones for a different sound. I kind of went from being a maple Guild guy to being a Martin Indian rosewood guy (Martin CEO-6). I do have a 12-string Guild, but its sound is deeper and richer, more resonant than my Guild Jumbo. And I'm doing more slide guitar. I love playing it. It has a lovely sound and it is just fun. The National Estralita, which is a resonator, it produces a big aluminum tone. I often play it in what is an unusual open C tuning, which is a droning Indian style. I also produce country western overtones with it. I've had the resonator for six or seven years, definitely new since my last CD."

The Martin CEO-6, Kostrzewa bought from his brother-in-law. The resonator, pictured at left with its owner, comes with a story.

"My buddy (electric guitarist) Jim Rogers, knew I was looking for a resonator and found one on Craig's List in Santa Cruz. So I headed to Santa Cruz and met the seller in the parking lot of Sylvan Music. He gave me a price in advance and I thought it was a good

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price. I never haggled with him when we met. I'm slapping down \$100 bills and he pulls out one of those bills and hands it back to me. 'What's this about?' I asked him. He said, 'You didn't haggle with me. Here's a \$100 back.' I didn't ask for it, I didn't expect it and I didn't even want it but he wanted me to have it. So I said, 'Okay, see this \$100 bill? Every musician's jar is going to get a piece of this, this week.' And that's exactly what happened."

Mark goes out to hear a lot of music, particularly musicians playing the Coast where he is very grateful there are so many "great" venues, from Pacifica through Santa Cruz. He also plays quite a bit in these venues. In fact, he had seven gigs coming up after this mid-February interview, which of course does not include his earlier February gigs. And readers/music lovers should make a note. The guitarist plays the Moss Beach Distillery every second Wednesday, "Acoustic Sunsets with Kostrzewa," 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. His frequent local performances additionally include Coastal Vine in Moss Beach and Barterra Winery in Half Moon Bay. He's also the guy behind the "Meeting of Acoustic Minds" concert series at the Half Moon Bay Oddfellows Hall.


HALF MOON BAY ODD FELLOWS

Meeting of ACOUSTIC MINDS



Michael Manring · Mark Lemaire · Mark Kostrzewa

Saturday, March 23, 2019, 7:30 PM

Odd Fellows Hall, 526 Main Street, Half Moon Bay

World famous solo bassist Michael Manring along with guitarist Mark Lemaire and Montara's own guitar instrumentalist Mark Kostrzewa share the stage for an evening of extraordinary musicianship.

With special guests; vocalist Cynthia Lemaire and Patty Hickner on violin.

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AT OUR WEB SITE

HMB-ODD.org

\$20

suggested donation
DOORS OPEN AT 7

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"I started the 'Meeting of Acoustic Minds,' an acoustic round robin, kind of on a whim, 10, 12 years ago. Then it really caught on. I'd ask bigger players and higher ticket prices and subsequently we moved into the bigger Oddfellows Hall venue and we've recently opened up to the Oddfellows Hall in Redwood City. These concerts are generally sold out and that's 100 plus in the audience. Michael Manring (fretless and Hyperbass prototype bassist, who additionally was the longtime house bassist for Windham Hill Records) has played with me twice. He is an absolute master. The same can be said of fretless guitarist Matthew Montfort (along with playing the Glissentar 11-string fretless guitar, Montfort also plays: scalloped fretboard guitar, electric guitar, classical guitar, flamenco guitar, bass guitar, ukulele, sitar, charango, mandolin and gamelan.) There is so much talent to mention here, but just one more of those performers includes instrumental guitarist Mark Lemaire."

Often referred to as a master class in fingerstyle guitar, Lemaire is additionally a sought-out, longtime recording engineer with numerous Grammy-winning clients.

One of the hardest nights, but perhaps most purposeful nights for a "Meeting of Acoustic Minds" performance, was the benefit Mark

hastily put together at Oddfellows Hall for the victims of the horrific January 23, 2023, mass shooting at two locations in Half Moon Bay, which left seven dead and one critically injured.

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"Everyone was absolutely devastated about this and we are such a tight community on the Coast. Rich called me and said, 'Why don't you use the power of Half Moon Bay's Oddfellows Hall. See if you can get a benefit going for the Coastside community nonprofits [Alas](#) (Ayudando Latinos A Soñar) and [Coastside Hope](#)."

"I was joined by John Lester, famous bass player and singer-songwriter from the Coastside, El Granada specifically. He is a fantastic musician. I also had my good buddy Teja Gerken, a fingerstyle guitarist and a former senior editor at Acoustic Guitar magazine, as well as fingerstyle guitarist Doug Young. If you are in need, the Coastside Community is there for you 100 percent."

The Half Moon Bay Coastside community is Half Moon Bay, Montara, Moss Beach, Princeton-by-the-Sea, El Granada, Miramar, San Gregorio, Pescadero, Loma Mar and La Honda.

"It was huge. We put it together in two weeks. We did full production of it as well. We did video and streaming and all that brought in \$10,000."

* * *

Married to Kate, dad to Devin, Kostrzewa is from Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. He picked up the guitar when he was a kid and always liked it, but never really jumped into it, until he was 40. That's when his work schedule at SFO switched from the graveyard maintenance management shift to the standard workweek, with weekends off.

"As a kid I was just messing around. I didn't take lessons. I didn't even get mildly serious until I hit middle age. But I listened to the greats on guitar when I was a kid and I was always inspired by their music. I listened to Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page and Pat Metheny. When I moved to Northern California, I really got more into the acoustic world, though I still love all my first picks. But that's when I learned about Leo Kottke, Pierre Bensusan and all these great acoustic guitarists.

"I took a couple of lessons, in Pacifica, from a guy named Randy Clark. This is 20 years ago and he was a great teacher. I learned about open tunings and slide guitar. Two lessons and that was it. But it just opened up a whole new world. It opened up a lot of the stuff that I do now in the open tuning, this very airy sound, all these alternate tunings that I do – it unlocked the mystery for me. I really dove in deep with how that goes and what sounds good and certainly what doesn't sound good. But I don't know how to read music and I suppose I still 'technically' don't know how to play guitar!" (This last statement causes both the guitarist and his interviewer to burst into laughter.)

"Could someone else play some of my tunes? I think most of the time it would be difficult because I don't write any music down, and additionally, though I think it's a good thing, my CD jumps all over the place." (It's a good thing.)

"Typically song titles come after I've written the tune. And these days, I jump between six and twelve strings. Songs that I used to play on 6-string, I do now on 12-string. I experiment on the different tunings. Each guitar I have, kind of has its own individual tuning that I hold it in – so I kind of mess around with it. Typically, as Pacifican/musician John Hall says, 'I'll be woodshedding,' and I think wow, this is good. Next step, assemble it and put it in an actual tune. Then I just burn it into memory. I don't consider it an actual legitimate tune until I've played it four or five times out in the real world. For example, 'Peace of My Mind' I had played for over three years, multiple, multiple times – never had a name. I did not name that song until six months ago. I would introduce the song and say, 'I have no name for this. If anyone wants to name this tune, feel free.' There is something different about this tune. Usually I am associating a

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certain person, place or event for most of my tunes. But when I play this one, there is no association with anything other than the melody itself. This is why I came up with the word spelling, p-e-a-c-e, 'Peace of My Mind.' I just love playing it and I think it is one of my most original pieces."

The song "Al Otro Lado," means "to the other side." The flavor is spirited and folkloric. The sound is Andalusian. At times you think you hear two guitars, but no, it's one guitarist/composer delivering a seamless blend of multiple notes. It is the oldest song on this record.

"I wrote it back in 2007, maybe 2005, but I play it all the time. I never considered putting it on my first two CDs, and not really for any reason. This time I thought, let's give it a go and my buddy Rich said, 'Dude, it's a beautiful song. It's a really cool tune.' And so I reinvigorated it for its place on this CD.

"On this record, we did an average of three to four takes per song. Even if we had it right on the first one, we would do it again. We would grab the best one and clean it up and take it from there. But that's my buddy Rich. He's a great guy to work with."

The song "Swanton Swing" is, at the start, an invitation to clog dance. It's kicking up mountain dust and then it switches, like a change in weather, and takes you down into the valley. It's got an Appalachian feel running right through it.

"That song was inspired by Swanton Road on the way to Santa Cruz. The road was devastated by the August 2020 fire (CZU Lightning Complex fire). I used to bicycle on Swanton Road. I loved it. It's just north of Davenport and it goes into the hills and through all these beautiful forests, then it hooks back up at Highway 1 just north of Davenport. It's an absolutely stunning road. It's like going back in time. I wrote this song before the fire happened."

The composer's tune "San Juan" is lovely, with its soft, swaying Latin rhythm. It's like kisses on guitar.

"The song is named for San Juan, Puerto Rico. It is the most recently written song. I wrote it two years ago. I hadn't written anything for a while and I got out one of my old guitars and I was playing it this one night and Kate said, 'Oh, wow, that's a really cool melody.' I expanded on it and started integrating it into gigs and I did not have a title for it.

"A friend of mine, who is from Puerto Rico, came to one of my gigs one night at Barterra Winery in Half Moon Bay. He and I used to work together at American Airlines and he went on to work in San Jose with the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA). Kate and I hadn't seen him in a while and it turns out that my gig was his first time out of his house in a year. He was there at the VTA in May of 2021, when the mass shooting occurred. He was just missed by the shooter. He felt the bullet whiz by. He liked the song and when I saw him and heard his story, the song had a name."

Kostrzewa's "Kick the Can" is named after the children's street game. It is a cool, stringy slider that absolutely captures kid thrill. "5 and Dime" is full of slide surprises with its very satisfying Spaghetti Western grit. "Peace of My Mind" is raga rock, a sweet little dip into psychedelia and a tune that most assuredly, would have gotten the thumbs up from George Harrison. "Purissima" has a ghost-like quality and for me, it's a walk through the history of Purissima whose old cemetery lies 4.8 miles south of Half Moon Bay.

"There are Purissima hiking trails above Half Moon Bay and that also inspired it," the composer said.

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Kostrzewa's 'Sans of Time' means, without time. It has a vastness to it, a sense of wandering and an unusual bass line. On "Celtic Rain" somehow the guitarist plays Cornish pixie dust. It's magical and mysterious. "Late Night Lover" is a body rocker – a little touch of bossa nova with surf rock 'n' roll, and it is chill.

"'Late Night Lover' is one of the best produced songs on **WoodenHouse**," the guitarist/composer noted. "That's Dave Kaufman on upright bass and Jim Rogers on electric guitar and hooking up on a little percussion."

The song "HMB Southbound" is one to close your eyes to. The guitarist's cascade of string notes offers a deep and profound heart call to Half Moon Bay and flutist Viviana Guzmán weaves in with astounding and delicate filigree. This song is all about the comfort of being where you love.

Why does the artist love his latest record?

"It's the range of style," Kostrzewa said. "It's Latin-inspired, sometimes. It's Leo Kottke-inspired, sometimes. It's not one genre; it's everything across the board."

The talent on this record makes you fall in love, all over again if you already have, with the musicians and the artists who live locally: Dave Kaufman, upright bass, mandolin, tablas; Viviana Guzmán, flute; Jim Rogers, electric guitar; recording engineer and producer Rich Pierceall on percussion, string and sitar overlays; Sunny Hibbits, steel tongue drum; Veronica Ciari, handclap; Jeff Regan, album photography; McKinley Hibbits; album artwork; and then there is the record's guitarist, composer and producer Mark Kostrzewa – pure gold.

Besides offering his record on CD and USB drive, the latter imprinted with the cover, and both which you can buy through the artist's website, markkostrzewa.com. **WoodenHouse** is on Spotify, Pandora and Apple. Additional online platforms and brick-and-mortar stores are in the works.

Like his guitar heroes, Leo Kottke and Pierre Bensusan, and as evidenced by his new record of pure 6- and 12-string fingerstyle magic, Mark Kostrzewa has reached that world-class tier where expanding his venue locations is just a natural turn in the road he is on, including beyond California's borders. But the Bay Area, with all its Coastal, East Bay, North Bay, Peninsula, South Bay and San Francisco venues, is just a mecca of stages for master musicians. After all, somewhere out there are a bunch of little and older Mark Kostrzewas in need of their own guitar hero.

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[Jean Bartlett](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is also a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author. Visit her website at: www.bartlettbiographies.com.