



Playing With
**HEARTS &
HANDS**

BY MARTIN WALLS

THERE ARE PLENTY OF WOMEN WHO LOVE THE GUITAR—WHO HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO PLAY IT OR WHO ARE RETURNING TO IT AS ADULTS—AND THESE DAYS THEY ARE FINDING WAYS TO LEARN THE INSTRUMENT ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

■ There are plenty of women who love the guitar—who have always wanted to play it or who are returning to it as adults—and these days they are finding ways to learn the instrument on their own terms.

“I inherited my guitar from my brother, but it just sat there,” recalls Casey FitzSimons, a 59-year-old publishing company mathematics editor. “I’ve always liked the sound of the guitar. It was the signature instrument when I was growing up, and I wished I could play it.”

Instead of ignoring her desire and letting her guitar gather dust, FitzSimons acted. In her 40s she signed up for her first guitar camp. “I went to large camps when I got started, with hundreds of men and women, but the experience was overwhelming,” she admits. Then in 2002 she discovered the Women’s Hearts and Hands Guitar Camp in picturesque Mendocino, California, a small women-only guitar camp that welcomes guitarists of all abilities and tastes.

The cosy, supportive environment that this weekend getaway offers was exactly what FitzSimons was looking for as she transformed herself from a beginner into what she calls an “intermediate guitarist.” “I wanted to find a smaller camp with a personal environment where you can sit and chat with other women guitarists,” she explains. “I love this camp. The atmosphere is very accessible. Since 2002, I’ve gone to every camp Women’s Hearts and Hands has offered.”

That FitzSimons sought out an intimate, women-only setting in which to learn guitar is not unusual, say Harmony Grisman and Kay Eskenazi, co-directors of the camp. “When men are present at musical gatherings, there can be an element of competition,” they observe. “Certainly not all male players play competitively, but women can feel side-lined or intimidated in these settings.”

“Many women sense that in an all-women environment they can expose their vulnerabilities as learners and performers,” explains Grisman. “Our concept is very appealing for some women,” Eskenazi adds, “and an extended weekend in lovely Mendocino is an added incentive.” So conducive is the atmosphere to sharing and camaraderie that new friendships and playing partnerships develop at the camp and often continue beyond the weekend.

The suite of classes attracts many kinds of women guitarists, who like to play in a variety of styles, from country blues to

Celtic music to jazz and bossa nova. Many of these guitarists are accomplished players, looking to hone their skills or learn new styles. Others are relative newcomers like FitzSimons, looking to step up. The camp also welcomes absolute beginners with open arms.

The support for beginner guitarists begins on the very first afternoon. “The camp starts with a slow jam on two-chord songs,” explains Eskenazi. “That way, everyone can join in.” Throughout the long weekend, Grisman says, experienced players help and encourage beginners by sharing skills and information, and sometimes by accompanying them during a debut performance at the Saturday evening showcase. “We also offer classes specially designed to help beginning level students,” she says.

On Sunday night, the camp has a performance so the musicians can demonstrate what they have learned. “Participation is voluntary,” says Eskenazi, “but when a beginner gets up the nerve to be part of the show, the audience is wildly appreciative.” During the weekend, she notes, beginners become inspired, and more confident, by hearing and seeing so many women players at different levels of development.

Jayne Schabel considered herself a beginner when she first went to the camp in August 2003, although she had tinkered around on the instrument as a youngster. “I heard about the camp through my writing group. It sounded encouraging for beginners,” says Schabel, who is employed by a hospice as a grant writer. “It was a great experience with a nonintimidating energy.”

Schabel hadn’t played guitar since she was 14; she was 51 when she decided to give it another try. “I went back to the guitar because I wanted to learn how to play something beautiful. I’d always loved the instrument, and I wanted to improve my skills.”

“Why do some women want to take up the guitar later in life?” asks Grisman. “Perhaps, it’s because their children are grown, their careers are established, and mid-life is a time to make sure our lives include things that nurture our souls.” Or perhaps, she adds, it’s because later in life, women have a better perspective on what has been gained and lost in their lives, and they can make a clearer choice about what they need.

Whatever the reason, facilitating and nurturing the musical ambitions of their campers has driven Grisman and Eskenazi from day one of Women’s Hearts and Hands. “Most of our campers have full, busy lives,” Eskenazi concludes, “and we think it’s a very special gift for them to devote three days to their passion for guitar.”

WHEN HIS WIFE IS NOT HOME, MARTIN WALLS LIKES TO SNEAK A FEW BAR CHORDS ON HER BRAND NEW MIDNIGHT BLUE FENDER STRATOCASTER.