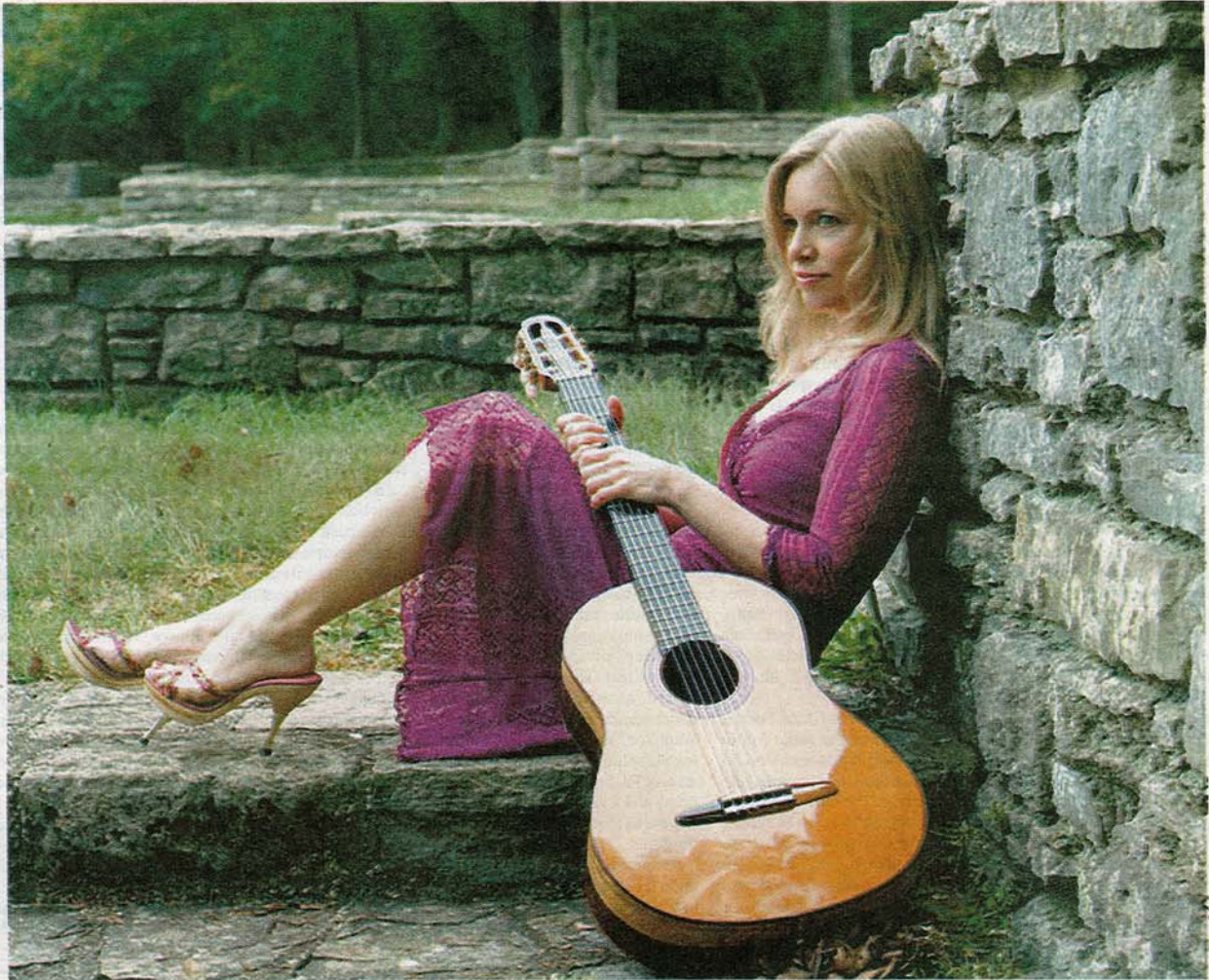


Pop Music



Finger-picking good

Muriel Anderson brings star power to guitar festival

By Andrew Gilbert
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

For a musician who practices an essentially solo craft, Muriel Anderson always seems to be in the midst of a crowd.

One of the world's foremost fingerstyle guitarists, she has created a dazzlingly diverse body of work that often seems to defy the limits of her instrument. Within several numbers, her self-invented technique can conjure the sound and spirit of a classical Japanese koto piece, an intricate Bach minuet, or a brass band playing a rousing John Philip Sousa march.

"My approach to music is different from a lot of people," says Nashville resident Anderson, speaking by phone from Montauk on Long Island. "I try to envision a sound and feeling I want to get, and then I just go about experimenting. In the process, I end up creating a lot of my own techniques with both hands on the guitar."

While her guitar itself contains multitudes, more than a dozen fellow fret masters will surround Anderson this weekend at the New England Guitar Festival at the Bay-

side Expo Center. It's an immense event tomorrow and Sunday that's part trade show and part educational seminar, with workshops and performances by illustrious players such as Robben Ford, Duke Robillard, Mimi Fox, Monte Montgomery, Stu Hamm, Frank Vignola, and Gerry Beaudoin. The festival is an offshoot of NAMM, the International Music Products Association's huge trade show held annually in Anaheim, Calif.

TrueFire, a company that spe-

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MURIEL ANDERSON PLAYS

Watch the acclaimed guitarist perform "Angelina Baker" at boston.com/clips.

She's got the world on six strings

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cializes in guitar instruction and performance CDs and DVDs, is producing the festival's educational and performance component. Anderson has worked extensively with the company, which recently released her DVD "Innovations for Acoustic Guitar."

"Muriel is remarkable," says TrueFire founder Brad Wendkos. "She's a world-class guitarist and top-notch composer who travels the world performing to standing-room-only audiences. Yet she still finds the time to stage All Star Guitar Night, rallying fellow artists to help support the Music for Life Alliance, which puts instruments in the hands of disadvantaged kids."

As Anderson tells it, the All Star Guitar Night was born out of a little social gathering. The first event was actually a pool party for guitarists who hung around town after the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society's convention in 1992. Over the years, the annual event, which raises funds for Anderson's Music for Life Alliance organization, has turned into a highlight of Nashville's vibrant music scene. She's presenting an All Star Guitar Night as part of the festival tomorrow night.

"It all started when I invited everyone over to sit around the pool and play music," Anderson says. "I realized that's where the best music happens, sitting around informally playing for each other. The next year I said, let's have it on stage, and we had just as much fun. It became a magic thing we're able to share. Sponsors heard about it, and it grew until we're playing in front of 2,000 people."

Anderson's life has been suffused with music. Growing up in Downers Grove, Ill., she started hearing tunes in her head at the age of 6. With her mother teaching piano and her grandfather sharing memories of playing saxophone with Sousa, she saw two clear musical paths: as a player and an educator. Drawn to the guitar, she tried to master every style possible, and by the time she started studying the European classical tradition at DePaul University she had already found mentors who would encourage her idiosyncratic ways.

"I was taking mandolin lessons from Jethro Burns when I was in college," Anderson says, referring to the comedian and jazz mandolin master. "I played a ragtime



"I try to envision a sound and feeling . . . and then I just go about experimenting," says Muriel Anderson, winner of the National Fingerpicking Guitar Championship.

tune called 'Nola,' and he said, 'You've got to meet my brother-in-law,' who happened to be Chet Atkins — they married identical twin sisters. Chet started sending me cassette tapes he recorded for me in his basement, with a note saying, 'You should learn this one.' I would write some music and send it back to him."

Hanging out in Nashville, she soaked up musical wisdom from Atkins, a fountainhead of American music whose cool, jazz-tinged sensibility transformed country music in the 1950s. Anderson credits Atkins, who was also a prolific producer and composer, with teaching her a tremendous amount about arranging, but most important, she grew to appreciate his in-

sistent curiosity. "He was always inspired to learn from other players and musicians," Anderson says, "always trying something new."

She was already a widely admired player in 1989 when she won the National Fingerpicking Guitar Championship, becoming the first nylon-string guitarist and first woman to win the contest. The triumph put her career in overdrive, while clearing up the persistent confusion that often dogged her gigs.

While she's an accomplished songwriter who can sing with a pleasing, fine-grained voice, she's first and foremost a vastly resourceful player with a wicked sense of humor.

"Before, whenever my photo

went up in the paper, the editor would identify me as a 'singer-songwriter,'" Anderson says. "But after 1989, they'd put 'national guitar champion.' I never got labeled singer-songwriter again."

Her latest release, last year's "Wildcat," features a dozen original numbers, most of which were inspired by fellow guitarists or her adventures on the road. But like many of her previous releases, "Wildcat" doesn't capture the wildly picaresque quality of Anderson's concerts. Rather than playing live sets that unfold like a seamless suite, she revels in rapid shifts in tone, following an aching ballad with an antic Beatles cover. Above all, she communicates a sense of unbridled joy at the sheer fecundity of her ingenuity.

"Growing up, we didn't have a TV," Anderson says. "I spent a lot of time inventing games with neighbor kids and building things in the basement. That helped to develop the way I approach music and art in general."

■
Muriel Anderson performs at the New England Guitar Festival tomorrow night at 7 at the Bayside Expo Center (200 Mt. Vernon St.). Tickets are \$15 (individual concerts), \$25 (one-day pass), and \$45 (two-day VIP pass) at premierguitarfestivals.com.