

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



36 / Gary Gackstatter, composer, conductor, performer, visual artist, St. Louis, Missouri

He is always on the run somewhere in the Midwest, conducting string and full orchestras; playing his solo and his '5 Men Trio' gigs on acoustic guitar, bass, mandolin, flugelhorn, trumpet or trombone; performing with jazz bands, festival bands and high-school bands in Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, Colorado and other states; and teaching music class or leading music clinics—and finding peace in between performances by creating excellent pen and ink drawings of everything in the land that catches his eye. His name became known in a wide circle when he started conducting the Winfield Regional Symphony and performing at the famous yearly Winfield Music Festival.

Music lovers in the Midwest know him well, not in the least because he conducted premiere performances of Elmer Bernstein's film scores 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'The Great Escape'. Mockingbird is the touching Oscar winning film with Gregory Peck as leading man playing Atticus Finch, an Alabama widowed lawyer with two children who agrees to defend a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman (although the film is more about Atticus' two children). The film uses ambient sound and music. Bernstein's score was described as "'warm, lyrical, curious, buoyant, impressionistic, and occasionally nightmarish.'" Gary was invited in 2003 to take part in a week-long celebration of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' (the book, by Harper Lee, and the film) in Long Beach, California. Mockingbird was that year's 'Long Beach Reads One Book' program and the concert, with Gary as its conductor, was modeled after the program. Bernstein, then in his 80's,

attended, as did Peck's son Steve and Brock Peters, who played the black man in the film (and later in his career contributed Darth Vader's voice to the PBS Radio 'Star Wars' trilogy).

Gary, who also premiered symphonies by Eugene Friesen and Carl Sandberg, teaches at St. Louis Community College Meramec as coordinator of music and conductor of the college's symphonic band and Meramec Orchestra. As a conductor, he is recognized as a leader in innovative works for band and orchestra. Most of his own five symphonies, such as 'The Black Sea', 'Jacob the Baker' and 'Blackberry Blossom', combine music with other art forms.

The visual arts have Gary's special attention. Nestled in the valleys and hollows of Cowley County, Kansas are eighteen stone arch bridges, all built before 1920; they have become a tourist attraction and subjects for many artists and photographers. The bridges have become the "stars" of a DVD produced by Gary (with Michael Beauchamp) which weaves art, music, photography and film into a unique program designed to share the beauty of the bridges, "and raise awareness about preserving them for future generations," says Gary. Included are Gary's own pen and ink drawings of all bridges. Gary's acoustic guitar playing and singing—'This Old Bridge' and 'The Muse Song'—are featured throughout the production.

'Sublime Stone and Sky—Inspirations from the Prairie Earth' was the title of Gary's exhibition, together with his artist wife Gretchen, in The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs in Matfield Green in 2011. "Come walk with us," they said. "Here is beauty in the sublime ... On the tallgrass prairie you can feel the arch of the earth as you walk." Both Gackstatters have roots in this land that inform the very existence of their work. It rises up and comes out onto canvas and paper in ways that capture the essence of the prairie's slowness and timelessness. Although the paths they take could not be more opposed in approach, they arrive at the same place, a place deep in the prairie earth. Watercolor is Gretchen's forte. Wild and free in her expressions, she takes the viewer on rides that can be equal parts abstraction and realism.

Using 100-year-old crow quill pen tips and ink, Gary has taken the ancient art of ink drawing to high levels. He crafts his images from thousands of lines and variances in value; they are almost shimmering with the beauty and depth he is able to bring to life through the simplicity of ink and paper. Each subject becomes an intimate portrait done out of profound love and respect—not to forget lots and lots of patience. With each microscopic layer of ink, he also layers meaning—he gives voice to the inanimate and lets them speak.

I first met Gary on a day I drove into Matfield Green after hauling stuff from New Mexico to Kansas in my pick-up. Someone knocked on the door and there stood William Least Heat-Moon, the author of 'Blue Highways' and 'PrairieEarth', and his wife Jan—and Gary, who was involved in the filming of 'Return to PrairieEarth', a film by John O'Hara documenting the impact of Heat-Moon's 1991 book. We had quite a little party. At some time Gary mentioned he didn't make just music but pen and ink drawings too, and he walked to the car to get his eternal companion, his sketch book. I was amazed, even if his work was representational, not abstract, which I favor. I was amazed by the perfection of his work and the deep contrasts he accomplishes—"Gee," I said. "Some of your pieces are as strong as Rembrandt's." I guess he believed I wasn't serious and rather influenced by the rich conversation and wine. But I wasn't.

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