

Never Stop Learning: Joe Robinson, September 2 at the Redstone Room

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Self-taught guitarist Joe Robinson won *Australia's Got Talent* in 2008, and he earned the top prize at the 2009 World Championships of Performing Arts – meaning that at age 20 he carries the ridiculous title of Senior Grand Champion Performer of the World.

Guitar Player

readers tapped him the best new talent in the magazine's 2010 poll. He released a pair of solo instrumental acoustic albums as a teenager.

All of that hints at a young man with talent and ambition. Now it's time to see whether Robinson's chops can match his drive. Because what Joe Robinson *really* wants to do is sing.

He will play at the Redstone Room on Friday, September 2, and the show promises to be significantly different from his two CDs, which showcased a surfeit of compositional and performance skills in the jazz and blues veins.

His third album – which he expects to release later this year – has some instrumentals, but Robinson's focus in recent years has been expanding his arsenal. "I just really needed to push myself in a different direction," he said in a phone interview this week. "I just wasn't challenged enough by guitar playing alone. I wasn't as excited about just guitar playing as I was when I first started or when I was writing for my last instrumental record."

So beyond his solo-acoustic work, he's been leading an electric trio – with bass and drums, the same setup he'll be using in Davenport – and working on songs with vocals for that trio.

"When I was very young, I promised myself I would never stop learning new things, and I would

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never let myself become arrogant,” he said. “I suspect in my career I’ll fall on my face in a few circumstances. ... [But] I think I’ll do some things that hopefully no one else has done before.”

There’s undoubtedly some chutzpah here. More accessible songs, Robinson said, are a way to “take this level of musicianship and bring it to people who might not have experienced it otherwise.” And he said he can’t think of anybody in the mainstream music scene “who has a real virtuoso ability on an instrument but who can connect with people on a song-based level.”

But that’s tempered by an acknowledgment that he needs to *learn* and work at writing lyrics and singing.

“Up until I started writing lyrics, I listened to music from pretty much exclusively the musical perspective,” he said. “I’d hear songs on the radio and just hear the musical parts and not even pay attention to the lyric content. Writing lyrics has really taught me a lot about communicating with people, and what the majority of people in the world who listen to music are attuned to. ...

“It’s definitely been a challenge” to learn to sing, he added. “I will say I love it. I love learning a new thing. ... I’m really looking forward to developing it.”

His guitar style makes extensive use of counterpoint – playing two or three parts at once – and he considers Tommy Emmanuel a mentor. His playing *is* awe-inspiring, and his second album *Time Jumpin’* doesn’t showcase technique at the expense of melody or composition. But it’s also music with a limited appeal, and Robinson clearly wants an audience beyond guitar geeks.

Counterpoint, he said, is rare in a band context, and it’s even less common among singer/songwriters. “I feel like there are very few guitar players who really sing and play an interesting accompanying role on guitar and make that part of their signature sound,” he said. And lest you think he’s only talking about shredders, Robinson cites James Taylor as somebody “good at both.”

The trio format, he said, “gives me so many colors in my palette,” and his goal with composition

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is to “have really strong parts across the spectrum.” But “the vocal has to be the thing carrying the song.”

In his short life, this has been a relatively late epiphany. Since he started playing the guitar at age 10, his aim was “to become as bad-ass as I could,” he said. But a few years ago, his management asked him what he wanted to be as a musician. “It hit me like a ton of bricks from the perspective that I didn’t know,” he said.

Once he chose his current path, he knew he didn’t want to release a mediocre “transitional” album. “I’ve probably worked harder in the last year than I have at any other point in my life,” he said.

And he added that he’s eager to show off the fruits of that labor: “I’m just itching to release new material. It’s killing me not being able to share it with everybody yet.”

Joe Robinson will perform on Friday, September 2, at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport). The concert starts at 9 p.m., and tickets (RedstoneRoom.com) are \$12 in advance and \$15 the day of the show.

For more information on Joe Robinson, visit JoeRobinson.com .