

A photograph of Edgar Meyer playing a double bass. He is wearing a blue button-down shirt and is focused on his instrument. The background is a rustic wooden wall. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

EDGAR MEYER

25 Years OF BLUEGRASS AND BEYOND

by Charlotte Bell

For many of us who gather each year for this musical bonanza, the bluegrassy vibrations we absorb from the main stage feel as if they're not simply coming from musical instruments; they emanate from the hearts and souls of the artists whose instruments have become extensions of them. For a Festivarian, there's nothing more inspiring than witnessing these sounds from the soul soaring out into the canyon. And for 25 festivals, we are especially fortunate to have been able to bask in the vibrations of one of the world's unparalleled examples of musical mastery: Edgar Meyer.

Born into a musical family, Edgar began his lifelong relationship with the string bass at age five. "My father played bass and loved music almost more than anything," he says. "I identified with that. I cannot remember a time when I did not think of the bass as my voice. The decision of whether or not to pursue music professionally is secondary to the fundamental importance of music to me."

By junior high, Edgar was playing jazz gigs with his dad—Edgar on piano and his dad on bass—and had begun writing his own music. Also in junior high, Edgar formed a band with three other musical friends who played an eclectic combination of instruments: bassoon, alto sax, bamboo flute, piano, bass, trombone, electric bass—perhaps a harbinger for the diverse and inventive musical trails he would later travel.

While attending math camp in high school Edgar and his classmate, guitarist Andy MacAfee, met and formed a trio with singer-songwriter Lucy Kaplansky. It was also in high school that he was introduced to the high, lonesome sounds of bluegrass music.

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Edgar attended Indiana University's prestigious school of music where he studied classical bass with Stuart Sankey. In the classical world, Edgar is renowned as a composer and performer. He performs with symphony orchestras around the world, and in 2002 he won a MacArthur Fellowship for composing and performance. Among his many notable classical compositions are three concertos for bass and orchestra, and a concerto he wrote for renowned violinist Hilary Hahn.

In 1960, Edgar's father discovered what would become his son's lifelong musical companion, a 1769 Gabrielli bass from Florence, Italy. The instrument had come to the U.S. in 1950 and for years, Edgar's father followed its travels with an eye to purchase it. In 1983, the bass became available and Edgar has been playing it ever since.

Edgar's journey to Telluride began with a fortuitous meeting with Béla Fleck while Edgar was a student at the Aspen Music Festival. The two had met once, briefly, but had never played together. Béla was performing with New Grass Revival in Aspen at the time, and heard about an amazing musician who had just placed third (Tim O'Brien took first) in the Pitkin County fiddle competition—on upright bass. "People were knocked out," Béla says.

Edgar and Béla ended up jamming on Charlie Parker tunes in front of Aspen's Häagen-Dazs shop. "We knew then that he wasn't your average hillbilly bass player out of Oak Ridge, Tennessee," remembers Sam Bush.

Soon after, Edgar made his first trip to Telluride where Béla, Sam and Jerry Douglas were scheduled to play as part of the "Telluride All-Stars" with Vassar Clements. Edgar was invited to join the jam. Both Edgar and Béla remember a particularly complicated tune from that

set, "The Long Way Around," that Béla says had "six million chords in it that nobody could fake." Edgar says, "I believe the only chords I got right were by accident." But Béla's overall memory of Edgar's first impromptu set in Telluride was that he blew everybody away. "I knew Edgar was going to be a part of our musical world from then on," says Jerry.

In 1985, Festival founder Fred Shellman invited Sam, Béla, Jerry and Mark O'Connor to put together a "thunder jam" set. They had recently collaborated with Edgar on his first MCA album, *Unfolding*, and the five of them performed Edgar's music at Summer Lights in Nashville. Edgar envisioned them forming a band.

Béla suggested to Fred that instead of a wide-open jam, they could let the fledgling band do its thing. "It turned out to be a new direction for the music that celebrated all the different things the five of us wanted to do and combined them," says Béla. From that first Telluride All-Stars set grew Strength In Numbers.

In 1989 Strength In Numbers released an album of 10 original compositions titled *The Telluride Sessions*, in which each member of the group co-wrote a composition with each other member. "Having us write in pairs encouraged a more varied, less traditional, and maybe slightly more complex manner of writing than might have otherwise occurred," says Edgar.

"That record is so cool because you can hear all our personalities in it," says Jerry. "The pieces Sam and I wrote, Béla and I wrote, Edgar and I wrote, Mark and I wrote, are all completely different. The matching up of personalities is so apparent." The five performed as Strength In Numbers on the Telluride stage from 1989 through 1993.

During the '80s, Edgar and Béla began performing an annual duo set as part of the Telluride workshop schedule. The standing-room-only banjo and bass mini-concerts became a workshop tradition that later graced the main stage, and produced the 2004 CD, *Music for Two*. Edgar and Béla will perform as a duo in Elks Park this weekend. ►



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Chris Thile first met Edgar backstage at RockyGrass in the late 1990s. He says he basically apprenticed with Edgar when he moved to Nashville a few years later. "He has always been a hero of mine," he says. "He has influenced me in all ways—his work ethic: he is a tireless worker. He leaves no stone unturned. Seeing the way he works with a piece of music, dotting all the I's crossing all the T's, has taught me so much. There's no performance situation too trivial for him not to throw everything he has into it. Watching him connect body and soul in his playing and composing is incredibly inspiring."

Over the years, Edgar has performed main stage sets with Jerry and Russ Barenberg; James Taylor; as a member of the Telluride House Band; and in duos and trios with Béla, Chris and Mike Marshall, including a 2003 all-Bach Sunday morning set. In 2010, Edgar performed here with Béla and Zakir Hussain, who Edgar says has influenced his music profoundly, especially in recent years.

"As technically proficient as Edgar is and as educated as he is, it's really about the feel," says Sam. "Edgar appreciates all kinds of music, and it's never about the amount of notes; it's about the feeling and the communication with others."

Edgar has collaborated with his bluegrass cohorts on many CDs. These include duo and trio CDs with Béla, Chris and Mike, including 1997's *Uncommon Ritual*; projects such as *Appalachia Waltz* and the Grammy-winning *Appalachian Journey* with Yo-Yo Ma and Mark O'Connor; *The Goat Rodeo Sessions* with Chris, Stuart Duncan and Yo-Yo Ma; *Skip, Hop and Wobble* with Jerry and Russ; and *Short Trip Home* with Sam, Mike and Joshua Bell.

Many of these projects bring together musicians from the classical and bluegrass worlds. "The way he's invited so many bluegrass musicians into the classical world is really wonderful," says Sam. "Edgar is the most generous musician I've ever met. He's inclusive with his knowledge. He wants to bring us into his world."

Whether he's collaborating with his bluegrass or classical friends, Edgar writes with each musician's musical temperament in mind. "I try to come up with parts that fit them well but that also maybe

stretch them a bit. With a classical player, I might write out his or her part but include some rhythmic writing that might be outside that person's wheelhouse. With an improviser, I might give them more room to construct their own part, but I might ask them to take on something a little more arranged than they might normally be used to."

"What he writes and what he brings to any group is always demanding—technically and physically," says Jerry. "He's made me a better musician. I don't get to play with Edgar all the time, but when I do I know I'm going to learn something new."

Outside of Telluride, Edgar stays exceedingly busy juggling a wide assortment of musical projects. "I am at least five years overdue getting a couple of solo recordings done, one of original music and one of classical short pieces," he says. "Chris, Yo-Yo Ma, and I have just finished recording some Bach trios. Christian McBride and I are preparing material for an upcoming recording. I am writing my first purely orchestral (no soloists) piece for the Nashville Symphony to be premiered next spring and I am also writing a violin concerto for Joshua Bell and the Academy of St. Martin in the Field to be premiered and toured the following year."

Most years, Edgar travels to the festival with his wife, Connie Heard, and son George, both violinists, with whom he sometimes plays in a classical trio. This year Edgar and George will perform together—including compositions by both—on the workshop stage.

Looking back on his 25 Telluride festivals, Edgar remembers that first Strength In Numbers precursor set as a standout experience. "My most cherished memory is the 1985 Telluride All-Stars jam, with Mark, Sam, Jerry and Béla," he says. "It introduced me to a musical energy I had never felt before. I enjoyed the Strength In Numbers years immensely. Those guys are like my teachers."

Here's to another 25 years of virtuosic, soul-searing sonic experiences with this one-of-a-kind master. 🌄



Charlotte Bell is a writer, yoga teacher, oboist and Festivarian of 34 years who lives in Salt Lake City. She is the author of two books published by Rodmell Press: Mindful Yoga, Mindful Life and Yoga for Meditators, and is currently writing a book on yoga for healthy hips.