

## **Acclaimed musician Mark O'Connor releases new memoir**

***Crossing Bridges: My Journey from Child Prodigy to the Fiddler Who Dared the World*  
available February 10, 2023**

For immediate release, December 1, 2022

Celebrating Mark O'Connor's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a musician, composer, recording artist, bandleader and educator, O'Connor unveils the unique story of his childhood in music in a new memoir. The book is a compelling and delightful examination of an American musical journey unlike any other.

Although violinists have followed in O'Connor's footsteps, using his career as a guide to what is possible, few musicians braved a childhood odyssey like O'Connor's. In the early 1970s, O'Connor made his mark as the first bona fide bluegrass and fiddle prodigy. Following his instincts to go against the grain of conventional thinking—the heart of a musical rebel was born.

During his teenage years, O'Connor was arguably the greatest fiddle champion in American history. Combined, he racked up more 1st place finishes, more state, regional championships and national titles in every region of the United States than any other fiddler. O'Connor entered more than 200 contests nationwide with nearly a 50% winning record. He has the best-combined record in the two major fiddle competitions, National Old-Time Fiddlers Contest in Weiser, ID, and the Grand Masters Fiddle Championships in Nashville, TN. At age 13, he was the youngest person ever to win the Grand Masters Fiddle Championships competing against all ages, amateur and professional. Nearly 50 years later, O'Connor's record still stands.

While in his teens, O'Connor won a Canadian national title (Calgary, Alberta) and is still the only artist ever to win the three sanctioned national and international U.S. competitions on three different instruments; the fiddle, guitar and mandolin (Weiser, ID; Winfield, KS; Kerrville, TX).

O'Connor's success in competition summarizes only a portion of his astounding achievements. The journey that brought him from child prodigy to daring the world with the fiddle in a way it had not been heard before—as a lead instrument, as a relevant solo voice in contemporary music after the Nashville music establishment had written it off as old-fashioned, and in the forefront of a new iteration of American classical music that incorporates the country's various strains of roots music—makes O'Connor one of the nation's leading composers.

O'Connor's early years in music are chronicled in his new memoir, *Crossing Bridges: My*

*Journey from Child Prodigy to Fiddler Who Dared the World.* O'Connor's story includes his own journey as much as how his life was shaped by the extraordinary artists he learned from and worked with during his childhood years, including Benny Thomasson, Stephane Grappelli, Roy Acuff, Vassar Clements, Merle Haggard, David Grisman, Rodney Crowell, Bill Monroe, Steve Morse and the Dregs, John Hartford, Emmylou Harris, Chet Atkins, J.D. Crowe, Tony Rice, Johnny Gimble, Joe Venuti, Byron Berline, Terry Morris, Doc Watson, John Hartford, Patrick Simmons, Kenny Baker and Earl Scruggs.

Crossing Bridges details the personal triumphs, struggles and demons that inform the decisions O'Connor makes about his music, career path and the risks he was willing to take for a shot at the brass ring. In O'Connor's professional journey, he has crossed bridges from bluegrass to country to hot swing to classical, sometimes solely on the strength of his own willpower to assert his voice as a solo artist hearing something no one else seemed to hear in American music.

O'Connor is the only artist to have learned the fiddle from icons Stephane Grappelli, Benny Thomasson and Vassar Clements as a child and then gone on to compose symphonies and concertos and perform them with the greatest symphony orchestras in the world in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles and London. For many years, O'Connor has enjoyed a close musical relationship with the two titans of instrumental music: jazz musician Wynton Marsalis and classical musician Yo-Yo Ma. In his Nashville years, O'Connor reinvented the fiddle in the modern country era, during which time he collaborated with artists ranging from Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash, to James Taylor and Twyla Tharp. His story is a sweep of history and personal reflection without precedent in the world of music memoirs.

"To this day fans ask me what made that young boy from Seattle believe that he could take his fiddle that far," O'Connor says. "My story reminds me of the dedication it required to develop something new at each critical stage of my youth and highlights the demands I placed on myself in digging in for the maximum I could give. Many were confused and wondered why I spent so much time working on things that few cared about at the time. But as I mark a professional music career of five decades, it's clear I had a plan all along."

O'Connor's memoir traces his journey from his childhood years, when at age 10 he was winning classical guitar competitions against University graduates, and at age 12 was thrust as a soloist onto the Grand Ol' Opry stage introduced by the "King of Country Music," Roy Acuff. It is a story of the child fiddler who learned tunes by ear from the greatest American fiddlers of all time, used what he had learned to comprehend the fiddle in a new light, and then reinvented himself as a classical violinist-composer-teacher. Like Dvorak, Aaron Copland and Charles Ives before him, O'Connor stretched the boundaries of classical music by daring to break with its hidebound formalism and construct a new foundation out of indigenous music—folk, blues, country, bluegrass—in order to fashion a new American classical voice.

For all its tales of his encounters with musicians famous and infamous, for all the fascinating insights into the life and work of a touring child musician, *Crossing Bridges* may be equally remembered for its gripping personal story and the struggles O'Connor experienced in his formative years when his abusive, alcoholic father often turned violent and lashed out at Mark, his mother and his sister.

"When I was 12 years-old, intimidation, ridiculing and fighting had begun at school. I was living a double life, outwardly confident in music circles where being a good boy was a virtue, but had a far different experience at the rough Seattle public schools," O'Connor says. "While withdrawing, hiding behind my longer hair and over-sized jacket that I wore during school and never took off, I wished that I could be a bad boy so the kids would respect me."

O'Connor's abusive, alcoholic father envisioned his son joining him as a common laborer by the time Mark was 12. Mark's mother who was dying of cancer, spirited her son and daughter, Mark's sister, to Nashville to get as far away from the kids' father as possible and to give Mark an opportunity to realize his potential as a professional musician. Mark witnessed adult situations long before he was ready—touring with veteran bluegrass musicians, giants in the field, who regularly invited girls on their buses for sexual trysts. Mark's onstage assurance melted away in his private life, when his lack of self-confidence and paralyzing self-consciousness doomed his every intimate relationship. Mark's story also includes the drug abuse that some young musicians became victim to in the 1970s when the hardships of the road were too much to bear.

O'Connor overcame it all. He grew into his successful solo career and made important records along the way, including the pivotal *The New Nashville Cats*, an album that announced the arrival of a new generation of A-team Nashville session players, the end of O'Connor's Nashville era and the beginning of his new identity and focus as a classical artist/composer. *The New Nashville Cats* won two Grammy Awards.

O'Connor began to shape a new American classical music form with his acclaimed 1992 album *Heroes*; made his orchestral debut in a televised performance with John Williams and the Boston Pops; composed *The Fiddle Concerto* that has received more performances than any other violin concerto composed in the last 60 years; became the first fiddler to share the Carnegie Hall stage with the world's top classical violinists Isaac Stern, Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell and Midori; and forges a musical partnership with Yo-Yo Ma. Their *Appalachia Waltz* recording, a composition of O'Connor's, spent the majority of 1996 as the No. 1 Classical album on the *Billboard* chart.

O'Connor composed eight more concertos, several chamber music pieces, composed the *Americana Symphony*, which made its recorded debut with the Baltimore Symphony, conducted by Marin Alsop; and writes the *O'Connor Method*, a new way of approaching violin pedagogy using music of the Americas. The method has supplanted

some establishment-embraced methods as the teaching tool of choice in music programs and schools for beginners all over the world—the first major challenge to Suzuki Method since its introduction in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. The O’Connor Method has string teachers repeating his buzz words “American Music,” “Creativity,” “Improvisation” and “Diversity” as these relate to the violin. O’Connor labeled the movement; A New American School of String Playing.

More recently, O’Connor put his family band together to win a Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album, collaborated with Zac Brown for more family band singles while still contributing to classical music. Over the last year, O’Connor composed the competition piece for the Menuhin International Violin Competition, and the Chicago Symphony presented two of his long-formed compositions in concert at Symphony Center in 2022.

Now he has teamed up with his wife of eight years, violinist and vocalist Maggie O’Connor, for a new album of original songs he has written called *Life After Life* (2023). It marks a return to his guitar-playing from his 2021 solo guitar album, *Markology II*. For Mark and Maggie’s fiddles, O’Connor created his arrangement of Verboyava Doshchechka, a stirring Ukrainian folk song the couple learned from one of the Kyiv Symphony violinists while in his basement bunker as bombs dropped from the sky on his city at the outset of the Russian war in early 2022.

*Crossing Bridges: My Journey from Child Prodigy to Fiddler Who Dared the World* is a heartening tale of personal triumph over adversity and how O’Connor became one of the most gifted musicians of his generation and a fully realized man. It is also the story of a visionary who gave young aspiring musicians advantages that Mark’s unprecedented surroundings afforded him, and created a new way to train future generations of musicians.

Along with *Crossing Bridges*, O’Connor will release two companion pieces to his memoir: *Early Childhood Recordings*, a CD of never-before-heard field recordings from age 10 where Mark sings a Johnny Cash song and wins a Flamenco competition, to his Grand Ole Opry debut introduced by Roy Acuff. The recording also includes the final rounds of Mark’s national competition wins as a 13 and 14 year-old; performances with the iconic bands he joined including Jim & Jesse and the Virginia Boys, the David Grisman Quintet tour with Stephane Grappelli, and with Steve Morse and the Dregs.

The trilogy of releases is completed by a finely curated book of black & white photographs by O’Connor’s mother, Marty O’Connor (1930-1982), *A Musical Childhood in Pictures*. The 170 page book that follows the narrative of his memoir, feature images of young Mark and the legendary musicians he learned from and performed with including his fellow teenagers at the time, Vince Gill and Marty Stuart, to his command performance before President Ronald Reagan introduced by Merle Haggard.

## Mark O'Connor in 2023

Mark O'Connor is a multi-Grammy winning and CMA Award winning composer, violinist/fiddler, guitarist and mandolinist. Today, he performs concerts with his wife, violinist and vocalist, Maggie O'Connor. They are releasing a new album of original vocal material that O'Connor has written, *Life After Life* in 2023. Mr. O'Connor releases albums for his own independent label, [www.OMACRecords.com](http://www.OMACRecords.com) and is active online with his official websites [www.markoconnor.com](http://www.markoconnor.com) and [www.oconnormethod.com](http://www.oconnormethod.com); a [YouTube channel](#) featuring over 600 videos from his music career with 59,000 subscribers and 32 million channel views; a [Facebook Fanpage](#) with 77,000 followers and is an active blogger, showing 700,000 views of his blogs posted at [Parting Shots: From a Musician's Perspective](#). The Library of Congress has archived these Mark O'Connor online sites to be a part of the United States cultural record. Mr. O'Connor's Christmas album, *An Appalachian Christmas*, a holiday hit having charted #1 in Billboard continues to be an annual national tour each December. Mr. O'Connor will direct two string camps with his wife Maggie in North Carolina during the summer of 2023.

###