

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Williams balances teaching, his music

By Jae-Ha Kim
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Alan Williams is a college professor by day and a singer-songwriter by night. **ADRIEN BISSON**

As a music professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, ethnomusicologist Alan Williams said that his students don't know he's a recording artist as well.

"I did have an odd moment performing at a coffeehouse in western Massachusetts," said Williams. "A group of students stumbled upon their professor when they were just looking for a night out away from school. Thankfully, we all got over the shock and had a lovely time."

His latest album is "Floating on the Dreamline."

Of the title, Williams said the dreamline is wherever our imagination takes us, which allows everyone to travel without ever leaving home.

This interview with Williams has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: When you tour, do you plan gigs so you won't be on the road when school is in session?

A: You've hit on one of the biggest challenges to balancing the music and the academic careers. Essentially for eight months of the year, I'm locked in place, though I try to play shows locally. And while my job does allow for some blocks of time to tour, it isn't conducive for booking the tour dates. The net result is that I have only infrequently traveled to play, though I've had wonderful brief excursions to areas across the country.

Q: From your travels, what musical trends have you

heard that grabbed your attention?

A: I've seen brilliant collaborations between improvising musicians and dancers in Amsterdam, hybrid medieval and electronic dance music in Copenhagen and punk bands playing the nyckelharpa — a fiddle with keys — in Stockholm. But I also know that more recent generations of my students from the U.S. have much more broad listening habits and seem more predisposed to accept and engage with music from around the world and across time periods. ... Seeing my students listening to K-pop, Congolese street bands playing heavily distorted metallophones and Cambodian pop from the golden age before the Khmer Rouge gives me hope for the future.

Q: Have you worked on any songs while on the road?

A: Absolutely. A number of songs on the album began during a road trip in a rented camper van. In the moment between camp stove dinner and the mosquito apocalypse, a little guitar plucking at the picnic table resulted in the seedling of a song. I have clear memories of crafting lyrics crammed into the middle seat of an economy class airplane flight. And I have developed the odd habit of writing some of my most despairing or heart-broken songs while lying on a beach.

Q: Have you visited places

for work that were so nice that you traveled back there later for a personal trip?

A: For a few years, I found myself frequently traveling to Europe for academic conferences, research projects and guest lectures. I made it a point to fly into Amsterdam before heading to my final destination. There was a spa (that was) a short bus ride from Schiphol airport where I could steam, sweat (and) soak away jet lag and then head back to the airport for a short flight. I often extended my trips to allow an extra day or two to roam the city. The old center of Amsterdam is so walkable. With each trip I tried to explore some of the surrounding neighborhoods as well.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: For many years, I would save up money to allow for multiweek stays in Hawaii. I never really took to the tourist areas like Waikiki, but I loved being in some of the less traveled areas of Maui and later the Big Island. Obviously, the weather is a draw, but the landscape is so dramatic. Each island has its own character. I ended up owning a little cottage with no kitchen on the Big Island where I will retire to when I no longer have the desire to travel with a guitar.

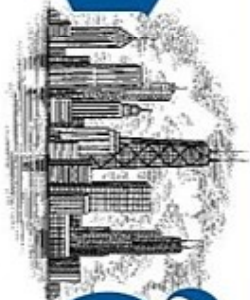
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