

The Son Also Rises

Gifted gringo David Wax sings and plays Mexican roots music.

DAVID WAX '06 never took a music course at Harvard. But while traveling and studying music in Mexico on a Sheldon Fellowship after graduation, he realized that what he really wanted to do was learn to perform the Mexican "roots" music he loved so much. Instead of pursuing the academic career he seemed destined for, the history and literature concentrator is now a professional musician, the founder of La Tuza, a Mexican roots-music trio that has been performing around New England for the last couple of years. La Tuza recently

issued its first CD, *Son del Otro Lado* ("Sound from the Other Side," available from www.latuzamusic.com).

Son—"sound"—is the collective word for Mexican folk and popular music. *Música*, Wax explains, was the word for the art music of courts and cathedrals; *son* "was the 'noise' everyone else made." *Son* (rhymes with *bone*) exists in many styles and forms, most of them regional in origin, yet also reflecting the complicated cultural history of Mexico. *Son* therefore mingles indigenous music with Spanish, African,

David Wax plays *jaranas*, Mexican guitars of various sizes.



and Caribbean influences, not to mention polkas and waltzes that came to Mexico by way of German immigrants to Texas.

Wax focused on three kinds of *son* he

F O L I O

Sharks, Fiction, and Wall Street

If research is essential to fiction, then the new thriller *Top Producer* by Norb Vonnegut '80, M.B.A. '86, boasts sterling credentials. This is Vonnegut's first novel (yes, he is a fourth cousin to Kurt; "all Vonneguts are related," he explains), but it builds on his two decades as a Wall Street stockbroker and investment adviser to wealthy clients. "I didn't start with the idea of writing a mystery," he says. "I just tried to tell the best story I could about Wall Street—funny, shocking, horrific, a story where you would learn a little something. Wall Street is so rich with stories, and it was something I understood and enjoyed."

The book opens with a terrifying scene in which Charlie Keleman, a spectacularly rich, high-living investment manager who runs his own firm, hosts a black-tie gala for 500 friends to celebrate his wife's birthday. The New York convoy flies in to party at Boston's New England Aquarium, with its four-story-tall Giant Ocean Tank filled with live sea creatures. At the height of the festivities, Charlie momentarily disappears, and is next spotted *inside* that tank with a caterer's cart roped to his ankle, pulling him down like an anchor. The guests then helplessly witness his savage execution by shark bites.

The question, as always, is, "Whodunit?" Charlie's reputation as the most amiable of men only deepens the mystery. His best friend, narrator Grover

O'Rourke—a Wall Streeter himself and 32-year-old widower—becomes enmeshed in the homicide investigation. "Grover goes through life keeping his head down, trying to do the right thing," Vonnegut explains. "Then suddenly something big and bad comes along and turns his world upside down." He adds that, "In the wake of [the financial collapse of] 2008, a lot of us can relate."

Indeed, *Top Producer*, written in 2006 and 2007, resonates so clearly with certain recent financial news that at one point Vonnegut called his agent and his editor at Minotaur Books/St. Martin's to say, "My novel just came true." He keeps a hand in the financial world with a blog called Acrimoney (acrimoney.com), but has become a full-time writer now. *Top Producer* had a huge first printing of 100,000 copies, and Vonnegut is now working on a second novel.

"A stockbroker's life means waking up really early," he says. "You are constantly on the phone, in the middle of sensory overload. There are two TV screens, tuned to CNBC and Fox Business, 200 or 300 e-mails a day, and the squawk box. You're totally a conduit for information and you quickly lose control of your day." To write *Top Producer*, Vonnegut woke even earlier, at 5 A.M., and wrote until 7 o'clock, as well as on evenings and weekends. "Writing, I was in charge," he says. "I loved the process. It gave me the opportunity to decompress."

The novel also gave Vonnegut the chance to explain the workings of Wall Street, which "outside a 50-mile radius of New York City," he says, "is a four-letter word." And though his background does share certain elements with his narrator, there are also bedrock differences. Grover O'Rourke, for example, "is a stunning athlete," Vonnegut says. "I'm not." —C.L.

Novelist and Wall Streeter Norb Vonnegut, during a book tour in Sydney, Australia



Visit harvardmag.com/extras to hear excerpts from an interview with Norb Vonnegut

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

The Idea of Justice, by Amartya Sen, Lamont University Professor (Harvard, \$29.95). The Nobel Laureate explores philosophical notions of the “just society,” motivated, as ever, not just by theoretical reasoning, but by the search for applications to (and appreciation of) different societies, their conceptions of what is just, and the “advancement or retreat” of what is just.

1688: The First Modern Revolution, by Steve Pincus, Ph.D. '90, JF '94 (Oxford, \$35). A sweeping reinterpretation of England's Glorious Revolution—embracing foreign policy, religious culture, and political economy—that argues for its status as the first modern, truly transformative revolution. The author is a professor of history at Yale.

The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America, by Lara Freidenfelds '94, Ph.D. '03 (Johns Hopkins, \$60). An examination of middle-class mores and modernity through close study of menstrual products and practices. Illustrated by advertising and instructional materials—for instance, a Kimberly-Clark pamphlet instructing girls to take walks but not to hike or jump rope during their periods.

The Hardest Questions Aren't on the Test: Lessons from an Innovative Urban School, by Linda F. Nathan, Ed.D. '95 (Beacon Press, \$25.95). A practical discussion of teaching, race, the achieve-

ment gap, and more, by the founding principal of the Boston Arts Academy.

Genius of Common Sense, written and illustrated by Glenna Lang and Marjory Wunsch, M.A.T. '65, M.Arch. '74 (Godine, \$17.95). A young-readers' introduction to Jane Jacobs and the revolution in urban planning effected by *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

The Virgin Warrior, by Larissa Juliet Taylor, A.L.B. '81 (Oxford, \$35). A life of Joan of Arc as electrifying leader, in the context of her times, by an associate professor of history at Colby College.

Engineering Invention, by Frederick Dalzell, Ph.D. '93 (MIT, \$30). A lively business history of Frank Sprague, Edison colleague and competitor and serial innovator, who pioneered inventions that led to electric railroads, elevators, and more.

A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon, by Neil Sheehan '58 (Random House, \$35). A sweeping history of the Cold War, nuclear deterrence, and the development of the intercontinental ballistic missile, by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who obtained the Pentagon Papers.

Nerds on Wall Street: Math, Machines, and Wired Markets, by David J. Leinweber, Ph.D. '77 (Wiley, \$39/95). It takes an applied-math doctorate to unveil the technologies and algorithms that drive modern Wall Street. Not always

easy reading, but leavened with humor: a derivatives-driven program used by Fannie Mae is described as “a divining rod...held by a suicide bomber.”

Sowing the Seeds of Character, by Judd Kruger Levingston '86 (Praeger, \$44.95). A rabbi and educator, the author addresses the challenges of and techniques for conducting the moral education of adolescents, in public or private schools—recognizing that this is a fundamental part of their mission, whether conducted explicitly or only implicitly.

American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods, by Bonnie Tsui '99 (Free Press, \$25). A journalistic exploration, from the oldest (San Francisco) to the biggest (New York) and beyond (Los Angeles, Honolulu, Las Vegas).

Inventing Equal Opportunity, by Frank Dobbin, professor of sociology (Princeton, \$35). In this closely researched work, Dobbin argues that corporate personnel managers and norms defined the policies and procedures that have come to govern hiring, promotion, and firing—and thus defined discrimination. Legislation and litigation, he argues, merely followed, codifying what have become ever-widening affirmative-action and diversity practices.

Strength in What Remains: A Journey of Remembrance and Forgiveness, by Tracy Kidder '67 (Random House, \$26). Kidder follows the pilgrimage of Deogratias Niyizonkiza, A.M. '02, from genocide in Burundi through camping out in Central Park, making his way through Columbia to the Harvard School of Public Health, and back to his native land to provide care to his impoverished community.

Amartya Sen



STEPHANIE MITCHELL/HARVARD NEWS OFFICE

felt he could learn. *Son jarocho*, which comes from Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, is probably the best known outside Mexico because of the international popularity of the 1958 Ritchie Valens hit “La Bamba,” an adaptation of a local folk song.

Son Huasteco, from northeastern Mexico,

is music for dancing. “The meter never changes,” Wax says, “and when people hear it, their feet start moving into a *hualpango*—there is no excuse not to dance.” The singing is tricky, because the melodies lie high and require acrobatic leaps into falsetto. The fiddle-driven *son calentano*,

from southern Mexico's Tierra Caliente, also requires dancing but of a more sophisticated kind, because the interlocking rhythms are more complex; a pair of dancers usually performs a foot-clicking *zapateado* on a platform alongside the musicians. Though the names of many *son*

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composers are lost, Wax says that some key creators of *son calentano* are famous in Mexico.

Part of La Tuza's mission is to demonstrate that there is a lot more to Mexican music than the familiar strains of mariachi bands. He admits he is no ethnomusicologist, but explains that the popularity of mariachi derives from the golden age of Mexican cowboy movies in the 1940s; it's an urban descendant of *son calentano* that reflects nostalgia for a rural life. "In the 1930s, cornets and then trumpets were added to the violins in mariachi music," Wax says, "because they made the music sound better on the radio."

Traditional *son* ensembles usually include a violin; guitars of various sizes, timbres, and tunings; and percussion instruments—yes, that strange sound you hear in *son jarocho* is the clattering teeth in the jawbone of an ass, the *quijada*. The lyrics, sometimes traditional, sometimes improvised on traditional texts, range widely. Many are about love, of course, sometimes filled with bawdy innuendo, sometimes expressed as fables about personified animals. But there are also songs of battles and heroes, and others reflecting the conditions of daily rural life.

Assimilating different styles of Mexican music comes naturally to the soft-spoken Wax, who for most of his life has engaged with many kinds of music. Growing up in Columbia, Missouri, he learned classical piano but soon shifted to jazz; he also played in a klezmer ensemble. (In La Tuza he sings and plays guitar and its Mexican cousin, the *jarana*.) In high school, he was the drum major in the school's marching band, played in a rock band, and played the electric bass in church. Wax has also written songs from an early age. (Besides La Tuza, he's created another group, The David Wax Museum, to perform his own songs. One is an adaptation of a Mexican song in La Tuza's repertoire, though it sounds quite different

La Tuza in concert, with David Wax in the middle



because he added folk, country, and bluegrass to the mix, along with a saxophone, which evokes the world of jazz.) He says poetry classes at Harvard helped hone his skills as a lyricist, and his concentration in Latin American history and literature helped him understand the roots of roots music.

Wax transferred to Harvard after two years at Deep Springs, a tiny, all-male experimental college on a ranch in California. He first went to Mexico in the summer between his two Deep Springs years. "I was mesmerized by *son* even then," he recalls. "Because I was doing rural development work in a very small town, I could see very clearly the role music plays in bringing people together. They would get together for a fandango, their version of a hootenanny, and play music all night."

Wax says he hasn't encountered much resistance to the idea of an American crossing the border to perform Mexican music. "Some people in this country dehumanize Mexicans because of immigration issues," he says. "But there is a rich culture in Mexico, and this beautiful music deserves to find a wider audience. Perhaps it can help

people to think about Mexico in a different light. Most of the musicians I encountered in Mexico were thrilled that someone else was trying to learn their music. Nobody cared that I am a gringo."

—RICHARD DYER



Visit harvardmag.com/extras to hear "El Colás" from the CD "Son del Otro Lado."