



12/01/2004

## Soundtrack of the Mind

By: Jillian Kalonick , TimeOFF

### Renaissance man Kevin Cotter mixes it up in 'Cobalt Light.'

Considering his record as a two-time Olympian and world-champion rower, venture capitalist, painter, and CEO of his own nonprofit organization, it's nice to know Princeton University graduate Kevin Cotter once had a job where he was a total slacker.

In college, Mr. Cotter had "one of those cushy, cushy work-study jobs" — guarding the chapel. Naturally, he turned it into something productive.

"I think my official job was to count the number of people that walked in, but I never did that, I always just made up a number," he says. "During that time I would sit at the piano and practice. I had the 9-to-midnight shift, so it was dead quiet. The only time there was anyone was during exams, when people were praying they'd get a good grade."

It was there that the largely self-taught musician learned how to play, and began to form his eclectic style. Mr. Cotter will present *Cobalt Light*, his ninth annual concert benefiting the Aquinas Institute and his nonprofit organization, Academy of Muse, at Princeton University Chapel Dec. 3.

Like many gifted pianists, Mr. Cotter began playing at a young age — but he hated every minute of it.

"I did the traditional American thing where your mom makes you take piano lessons for four years," he says. "I did that from age 7 to 11 and absolutely despised it, and did terribly at it. I was one of those people that would practice 15 minutes before my lesson."

Mr. Cotter went back to piano for a couple of years while attending high school in Buffalo, N.Y., taking jazz lessons and learning theory, which he found more interesting than playing classical pieces. At Princeton, his only lessons were those late-night chapel sessions. *Cobalt Light* will incorporate classical music and his own compositions, including variations on pop songs.

"Sarah McLachlan is one of my most influential pop artists," says Mr. Cotter. "For this concert coming up I'll do a song by Maroon 5. I do some Dido occasionally... Usually it's 10 songs at a concert and one or two of those would be pop-oriented... U2 and R.E.M. are the ones I've used in the past.

"I'll take the song and use the chord progression from it, start off in that song and go off and do a different song and improvise and come back to it at the end," he continues. "People recognize the chord pattern but then it goes off and does something new they haven't heard before, and then back to the beginning."

Mr. Cotter has built somewhat of a following since his first concert. Attendance at last year's performance was hampered by a snowstorm, but in 2002 he attracted more than 1,400 people.

"It's a different crowd, mostly by word of mouth, which is good," he says. "I think for a lot of people, this is the first concert they've been to that was for piano. Most of them enjoy it so they end up going back the following year... It helps me feel good as a musician because I feel my music can speak to all different segments and



TIMEOFF/MARK CZAJKOWSKI

**Pianist Kevin Cotter, above, will present his ninth annual concert at Princeton University Chapel Dec. 3, to benefit the university's Aquinas Institute and his nonprofit, Academy of Muse.**

demographics in society, as opposed to just people who listen to classical music on the radio. I can reach out to people who do not own a single classical music CD, and they would never listen to it on their own time."

As the founder of the nonprofit Academy of Muse, Mr. Cotter tries to give up-and-coming musicians and artists a chance to continue their creative lives post-college. The organization awards scholarships to nine recipients who show promise in their fields.

"They're not necessarily child prodigies — these are people that are between the ages of 22 and 30," he says. "We give scholarships to help expand their window to make it to be big time. Usually that window is pretty short — when you leave college you have maybe two years to go at it, but then you're going to have to get a real job. It's tough to pursue art or music."

Mr. Cotter had his own series of accomplishments after earning a degree in genetics from Princeton in 1996. He had the option of either going to medical school or training for four years and going for the Olympics in Sydney. He opted for the Olympics. He worked for Bloomberg Financial News, and is now assistant director of annual giving at Princeton. He still manages to make time for his own talents, and is currently composing the score for an independent film.

"I like being able to do other instruments besides just piano," he says. "I'll write the music and then record it using a synthesizer and samplers so it can overlay all the different songs. You have total control as a composer... it's one particular vision as opposed to a lot of music out there that has so much feedback from different people that it becomes generic whitewash."

As a performer, he gauges the audience's approval by that time between the last note of a song and the sound of applause. "The longer that silence is, the better job I did, because it just means I was able to send the audience into a totally different place," he says.

"(In the audience) I feel there's all these different stories going on at the same time, I just provide a soundtrack to play it out in their heads," he says. "I think that is probably why I play — to create that opportunity, knowing in all of them it will pull out a different story that's unique. A lot of people in the audience don't usually give themselves space in the day to think about their issues. When they come to the concert I give them that — here's an hour of different soundtracks that you can plug into."

"They sit, they're super quiet, it's a very pensive situation, and they're all superglued in on the sound. You can definitely feel that as a musician. More and more I find myself being able to figure out how to do that."

*Kevin Cotter will present Cobalt Light at Princeton University Chapel Dec. 3, 8 p.m. Donations will benefit Academy of Muse and social outreach programs sponsored by the Aquinas Institute at Princeton University.*