



**PIANO MAN**  
Hollander is always in  
the mood for a melody.

# The Old Master

Virtuoso pianist Jeffrey Hollander can play anything. All you have to do is ask. **by Michael Drew**

**J**effrey Hollander's surprisingly delicate hands are large enough to reach 10 white keys, which accommodates most of the piano repertoire, including jazz legend Art Tatum's finger-stretching bass tenths. Jazz, Broadway show tunes, opera, instrumental classical works – Hollander has a reputation for being able to play anything you ask, and in any style.

When one particularly inventive listener requested some Beethoven and Sousa-style variations on a Mozart aria, Hollander whipped it up on the spot. While playing for President George W. Bush at an affair in Milwaukee, Hollander recast "Deep in the Heart of Texas" with Baroque innovations, as if Bach had composed it.

On a hot evening in August, Hollander

arrived at the Pfister Hotel's lobby bar, where he plays five nights a week. Hollander started his six-hour shift wearing one of his dozen tuxedos. As he heated up – tossing off dazzling arpeggios, inventive runs and thundering chords – the jacket came off.

His audience that night included members of the Doobie Brothers, here to perform at the Wisconsin State Fair. Three of the aging rock 'n' rollers, a spouse and their road crew sat at two ringside tables, relaxing from road-tour rigors. They'd arrived near the beginning of Hollander's 5 p.m. shift, ordering drinks and hors d'oeuvres that became supper, and never left. For five hours, the group stayed planted, making requests for classics, Cole Porter, George

Gershwin – all music the Doobies have never played in three-plus decades of gold and platinum discs and fan adulation.

Pleased and challenged, Hollander played more than two hours until he took his first break, pouring out his typically delicious stew of heavy and light classics, the Great American Songbook and jazz standards. He reinvented the ballad "Like Someone in Love" as a fugue, ran through nine key changes and tossed off some chandelier-rattling tremolos. (A few nights later, the tune would get a whole new treatment.)

"What you do is so difficult," Doobie singer-guitarist John McFee volunteered to Hollander. "And you make it look easy."

As usual, Hollander filled the spaces between melodies with anecdotes about the composers and compositions. For instance, Dooley Wilson, who seemed to be playing "As Time Goes By" for Bergman and Bogart in *Casablanca*, was faking. Wilson was a drummer and singer, not a pianist.

And why is so much Chopin filled with sadness? Much of his music was composed after he was dumped by famed female author George Sand, who had several lovers.

Around 10 p.m., after thanks, tips and hugs, the Doobies' group retired for the night. Hollander was exhausted but exhilarated. For him, the memorable evening wasn't unusual. Over the years, he's entertained hundreds of celebrities.

For a quarter-century at the Pfister, he has been inspiring romance, amusing lonely travelers and amazing visiting pianists with his keyboard fireworks. Well into his seventh decade, Hollander radiates the energy, virtuosity and scholarship of his earlier lives as a child prodigy and university professor.

**One day in 1946, Hollander**, then just 7 years old, was being driven to a scholarship audition at the prestigious Eastman School of Music, part of the University of Rochester in his hometown, Rochester, N.Y.

Listening to the car radio, he heard and instantly fell in love with a waltz from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. Bored with his over-rehearsed audition material, the precocious pianist decided to try the Tchaikovsky piece, over parental objections. Without ever seeing the sheet music and after hearing the waltz only once, he played it for the audition with improvised chords. It was a feat worthy of Mozart. Hollander became the youngest scholarship winner in



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## Arts >>

Eastman history.

Hollander went on to get bachelor's and master's degrees there at Eastman, earning some of his first paychecks by leading a high school jazz band. While receiving a doctorate in music at the University of Michigan, he began a longtime student-mentor relationship with concert pianist Gyorgy Sandor, who'd studied under classical composer Bela Bartok.

After a lapse of decades, Hollander resumed the friendship in 2001, flying to Sandor's New York apartment at least once monthly until the virtuoso's death last year.

Earlier in his career, Hollander toured concert halls more regularly. But that demanding life is fiercely competitive, and Hollander settled down to a career in Milwaukee. He has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra here and in Chicago, and he's preceded Chicago and Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra concerts with lectures, featuring his piano orchestrations of symphonic works.

He's also had a long tenure as a professor at UW-Milwaukee, where this writer audited his recital/lecture course on American Popular Song. After I questioned, in a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* story, how he could play a tribute to Hoagy Carmichael without including the song "Skylark," he opened his next class with an eight-minute concerto version of that tune. After the last cascading note, he turned on the piano bench, stared me down and asked dryly, "Will that do?"

University music departments typically value classical music. Hollander has paid those dues, but also cares deeply about classic pop and jazz, perceived by academics as far less worthy. "He's close to a genius, but was underappreciated at UWM," says singer William Duvall, Hollander's former music department colleague and actor Robert Duvall's brother.

And so Hollander has done most of his work at the Pfister, where he's played for 25 years (as of this December), along with a concert series at the Milwaukee Art Museum, also approaching its silver anniversary. His museum dates run from September to July, and nowadays he performs at its Windhover Hall, surely one of the most scenic concert settings anywhere.

Doc Severinsen, now retired as the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's principal pops conductor, regularly stayed at the Pfister, where he first met Hollander. Late one night, Severinsen asked if Hollander



could play "Embraceable You" in the key of F. When Hollander replied that he could, and in any other key, Severinsen hired him on the spot to replace Doc's combo – delayed elsewhere – in a benefit concert the next morning. Without a rehearsal, the two virtuosi played about 20 tunes.

Hollander helped Severinsen program several MSO concerts and has performed with the MSO under Severinsen's baton. At the Pfister over the years, Severinsen has spent countless hours sharing swing-era memories and "Tonight Show" stories with Hollander. "He'd sit next to the piano, puffing on his cigar, until well past midnight," Hollander recalls.

One evening, Hollander serenaded Paul McCartney and his now-estranged wife, Heather, with Beatles tunes and what they called "our song," "The Very Thought of You." When McCartney walked to the keyboard to thank Hollander, the pianist recalls, the Beatle's bodyguards grew visibly tense, eyeing Jeff closely.

Other Hollander fans at the Pfister have included Broadway/Las Vegas baritone

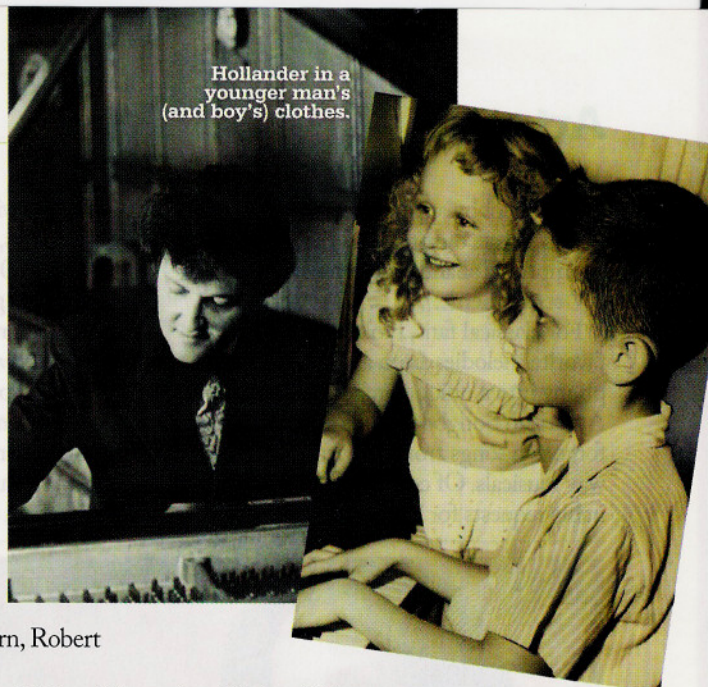
Robert Goulet, who often joins Hollander to sing along when he's here on tour. Author Maya Angelou, who invited Jeff to visit her southern residence for a home-cooked meal. The cast of the TV series "Happy Days," which encouraged actor Pat Morita to dance around the lobby with Hollander's tip jar and solicit contributions. MSO conductor Andreas Delfs, Ringo Starr, actors Bruce Dern, Robert Duvall and many more.

Walking through the Pfister lobby with a concierge, Robin Williams stopped dead upon first hearing Hollander. "Who is that?" he wondered. Informed, he settled in for a long listening session and dropped a hefty tip.

Hollander has perfect pitch – he can identify all five tones in a five-note chord – and he can play most of his vast repertoire in any key, adapting it in myriad ways for

the delight of Pfister patrons.

Whenever he walks into the lobby, Sen. Herb Kohl gets serenaded with a favorite waltz. To mark the arrival of many Pfister regulars, Hollander plays signature tunes, such as "Alice Blue Gown" for various Alices. And when Hollander spots a familiar married customer being sociable with someone other than his spouse, he may slip in a few bars of "Your Cheatin' Heart."



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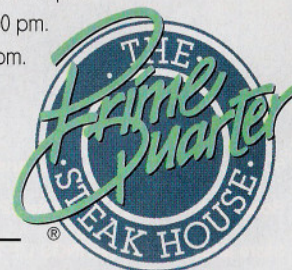
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Even the lobby appearance of a collie that played Lassie didn't stump the expert. Promptly, Hollander delivered the "Lassie" TV series theme.

For classical fans, Hollander combines favorite melodies from an opera or symphony into a unique orchestration. For American Songbook buffs, he'll dredge up forgotten songs from movies and Broadway musicals. Of course, there are the inevitable requests for "Happy Birthday," which

he freshens with many variations.

Sometimes, it yields substantial tips, as much as \$100 from the well-heeled.

His record gratuity came from a man who asked for the overture to Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, which the pianist recreated on the spot, incorporating solos from several instruments. A few nights later, the man asked for the overture to Wagner's *Tannhauser*, and Hollander came through again with an extended version.

When the guest checked out after a month's stay, Hollander was stunned by the gift he left behind: two first-class plane tickets to Germany's Bayreuth Festival, two second-row seats for the four-opera Wagner Ring Cycle there, and 10 nights of hotel rooms in both Bayreuth and Munich for Hollander. The benefactor, it turned out, was a major sponsor of the festival.

**The ambience of the Pfister** lobby – the embodiment of old wealth – makes a perfect setting for Hollander's particular style. A grandfather clock, dating from the hotel's founding in 1893, alerts guests to last call. Behind the pianist, couches frame a large fireplace and painted cherubs cavort on a painted sky ceiling.

Three figures of art history stare down at Hollander as he plays: two fashionable women in long gowns in a gilt-framed Andreotti oil and a Trentanove marble bust of Guido Pfister, who inspired the hotel's founding. "When Guido likes what he hears," Hollander observes, "he smiles."

Every cabaret performer suffers obnoxious customers, drunks shouting up requests and the like, but Hollander claims that doesn't happen much. When it does, he says, "I just play for myself." He prefers to think of the lobby as more of a salon than saloon.

"As far as I can tell," says Marcus Corp. Chairman Steve Marcus, whose family saved and restored the Pfister, "Jeff has no ego, although all performers must." Marcus says he cherishes the hotel's relationship with Hollander and marvels, "He's never negative."

Hollander loves playing piano. Even on nights when he presides at the Pfister Apollo grand from 5 p.m. to midnight, he practices first on one of the three Steinway grands packed into his Pewaukee home.

His concert series at the museum is staged amid the glass-and-white magnificence of the ship's bow of the Calatrava addition. Concertgoers enjoy a sweeping view of Lake Michigan. Joggers, bikers, bladders and seagulls may swoop by, sometimes in synch with the music.

For the popular/request part of the Windhover programs, bassist Mike Britz moves in, adding depth and a beat with his expert bowing and plucking. Perhaps Britz's toughest chore is not losing it when the pianist decides to throw him an improvised curve.

"Sometimes, I don't give Mike much



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warning," Hollander admits.

Coming next to the Windhover: a program titled "Spanish Eyes," on Oct. 16, including Gershwin's "Cuban Overture," Albeniz's "Iberia" and more classics and requests. That concert is dedicated to artist Martín Ramírez, featured in an MAM show Oct. 6-Jan. 13.

Nine more themed concerts follow, through July 8. At the MAM, Hollander plays a Steinway grand that was rescued from a trip to a dumpster by a former Milwaukee piano technician. As with his own three Steinways and the Pfister Apollo, Hollander adores its touch and tone.

Playing the classics, Hollander sits erect in the conservatory manner. But when lost in classic pop and jazz, his posture relaxes into a comfortable slump. Hollander most cherishes the Great American Songbook's golden period, the 20th century's first half.

"I'm not particularly interested in music from the last 30 years," he says. "Those awful voices, screaming at you."

Jeff's wife of nine years, Elaine Erickson-Hollander, is "the light of my life," he says. A DeForest, Wis., native, she has bachelor's and master's degrees in voice from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has taught at Carroll College. Their wedding present to each other was one of their Steinways.

Hollander has three children by his first wife: Jill, 31, a teacher and singer in the Milwaukee area; Jody, 29, a California English teacher and poet; and Jamie, 27, like his father a University of Rochester high honors graduate, now a Google statistician in California.

Hollander won't discuss his first marriage, which lasted three decades, other than to say "the divorce was unpleasant and unnecessary and not of my doing. But I came out much the better for it."

Hollander is 68 now, but seems much younger. He lost 35 pounds over the last six months by following the Jenny Craig diet, and there is no sign of his prodigious piano powers receding.

"Nothing stumps him" says his former UWM colleague Mary Pautz. She recalls him playing a concert in Florida, where a curious songbird chirped along near the piano. Hollander paused, then began answering the visitor's song, trading four-bar phrases with the guest in the jazz manner.

In 2005, during one of his visits to the Pfister while in various capacities with the Milwaukee Admirals, Phil Whitliff asked

for a song made famous by the late French boulevardier, Maurice Chevalier.

As it happens, Chevalier was already in Hollander's consciousness that day because he had returned in the morning from his mother's funeral in Rochester. Chevalier was her favorite entertainer.

Remarkably, Whitliff said he'd been in Rochester the day before. Whitliff had never requested a Chevalier tune, but did so now because "my parents liked him."

Hollander was stunned.

"No one has requested Chevalier since," Hollander recalls. "I'm convinced it was a message from my mother."

It was eerie. But he answered the request as always, with perfect musical timing. ■

*Longtime Milwaukee Journal and Journal Sentinel critic and jazz fan Michael Drew has written about music and broadcasting for decades.*



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