

## An Interview with Morning Nichols ~ A Master Class in being "of" music

Written by Jean Bartlett, October 2, 2018  
(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)



(Jean Bartlett photo)

**Chatting with Morning Nichols at Manor Starbucks, September 2018.**

Morning Nichols is the Artistic Director of Pacifica Performances. A nonprofit, Pacifica Performances runs the Mildred Owen Concert Hall, long considered one of the Bay Area's top concert venues. The Hall is just under 200 seats.

"We showcase blues, classical, world, guitar, cabaret, big band, rock 'n' roll, Americana and roots music, jazz and the Great American Songbook," Morning said. "We also have dance, comedy and spoken word events. We're really proud of our concerts and the caliber of our performers."

In 2006, Pacifica Performances was declared "A First-Rate Art House" and entered into the Congressional Record by the late Congressman Tom Lantos, D-California.

One of Pacifica Performances in-demand headliners is the Artistic Director. Morning is a song stylist and she and her husband, critically-acclaimed "Chet Atkins" fingerstyle and jazz guitarist Jim Nichols, take to the Hall's concert stage at least several times a year. One of their more famous fans was the late great Chet Atkins.

"I remember the first time Jim and I played at the Chet Atkins Festival (officially the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society). I walked into the Green Room and sitting right there in front of me was Chet Atkins, Duane Eddy, Nokie Edwards and Jerry Reed," Morning laughed. "And in my mind I thought, 'Wow!' Eventually I sat right down and we hung out and talked. It's one of those great things that can happen when you're a performer. You find yourself chatting with people that are phenomenally famous and deeply good at their art, but of course, just regular people. Still, it's one of those very sweet memories."

Both Nichols gigged with Atkins and got to be friends with "The Country Gentleman." In 2000, Jim and Australian fingerstyle guitarist Tommy Emmanuel released a tribute to Chet's music titled, "Chet Lag." Recorded in Germany, the recording also features Morning on several songs. In declining health, Chet nevertheless got word to all the artists. He loved the CD. (The world lost the amazing Chet Atkins on June 30, 2001.)

"Did I know my life would be all about music?" Morning pondered. "I never thought consciously on whether I would have a life of music. I just did music."

The daughter of Ruth and Sol Gerber, Morning was born in Chicago. She has an older brother, Richard.

"We moved from Chicago before I was a year old to Los Angeles, briefly, and then to the San Fernando Valley – the latter due to allergies I developed in LA. My father's sister Ruth, my dear Aunt Ruth who I loved tremendously, was

the first in the family to move to Southern California. That motivated my father to move and then most of the family moved, including my grandmother. I've been back to Chicago as an adult but I love that I was born there where the very distinctive Chicago jazz and Chicago blues were also born!"

Morning's paternal grandmother was from the Ukraine. (Morning is three quarters Latvian and one quarter Ukrainian.) Her mom's family was from Chicago. Her parents met at a wedding.

"There was definitely music in the family. My mother's uncle Bud had a professional big band in Chicago and he played trombone. My mother's cousin played piano and worked music jobs, and my mother was really quite musical. She could sing on key, she loved to dance and she loved music. On my dad's side, his brother had a beautiful singing voice and my uncle's son is an actor and singer in New York."

Once a month the local grocery store highlighted a record and sold it for a buck.

"Early on my mom bought me classical records and I adored Tchaikovsky and Dvořák, and also thoroughly enjoyed Debussy and Chopin. She bought other records as well. My folks listened to Benny Goodman, Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and so many other artists. They also enjoyed Latin violinist Xavier Cugat and Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado. This was the kind of music I was exposed to in my earliest years. I had my own little record collection and record player. I remember my first 45 was Gene McDaniels' 'A Hundred Pounds of Clay.'"

It was obvious their daughter was musical and so her father asked a musical friend to interview Morning when she was 8. "Do you think she is musical enough that I should get her a piano?" And the guy said, "Yeah." My dad said, "Nah, too expensive!" Morning laughed. "But they really couldn't afford it so my father bought me a guitar. My life would be totally different if I had learned the piano," more laughter. "But I never would have been a concert pianist. I like the illegitimate music!"



Morning's first guitar was a rental, a classical guitar that was a workhouse.

"I started playing folk music. The folk boom was happening and I continued playing that, and loving it, but when I was about 11, my brother's friend gave me two records by Andrés Segovia and those inspired me to also study classical music."

By that point in time her parents had replaced the rental with an inexpensive classical guitar, an Aria. A little later they bought her a steel string Martin 00-17, which is a classic. Probably under \$100 back then, but it's now worth a fair amount of money. She still has it and the sound is great. Somewhere in those elementary, junior high school years she also played the clarinet.

"For a minute," she said. "I was second chair, but there were only two chairs! But I did sing in the choir and really loved singing."

The musician went to Rhoda Street Elementary, Sequoia Junior High and Taft High School. She had her first "gig" in junior high.

"I had a friend who was a boy, Ed, and we played music together and we got this 'gig' at a coffee house. I was so scared. I had the guitar in my hand. We were like Simon and Garfunkel, only not! I remember my knee was shaking so much my guitar was going

up and down. It was hard but somehow I was able to play."

Morning was playing the music of the popular folk artists of her tween years, artists like Pete Seeger and The Weavers, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Bud and Travis. Then she started getting more specific, tuning into blues artists. Some of those artists included: Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Koerner, Ray & Glover who did folk and blues revival.

"When I was in high school, I used to go to a folk and blues place called The Ash Grove in Los Angeles on Melrose Avenue."

The Ash Grove opened in 1958 and it became the place for West Coast artists to find an audience and to find their way onto the charts. Linda Ronstadt got her start there, two future members of The Byrds, Chris Hillman and Clarence White, met there when they were teenagers. Suspected arson closed the club in 1973.

"Because of the Ash Grove, I was exposed to all of these wonderful blues artists in person when I was in high school. I saw people like: Lightin' Hopkins, Taj Mahal, Reverend Gary Davis and The Chambers Brothers. Taj Mahal not only played in his band but he was the club's doorman. His band was great. I remember just looking at him play and thinking, 'This guy is awesome!' I was really influenced by blues, influenced by folk, influenced by R&B. I saw Ray Charles in high school. He's still a huge influence. And while Billie Holiday had passed away before I was ever seated at the Ash Grove, I was exposed to her music as a teenager and she was a huge influence – still is."

Morning said she was all about music as a kid: listening to it on her own, playing it, and listening to it and playing it with her friends. When she was in college, she started deeply listening to jazz.

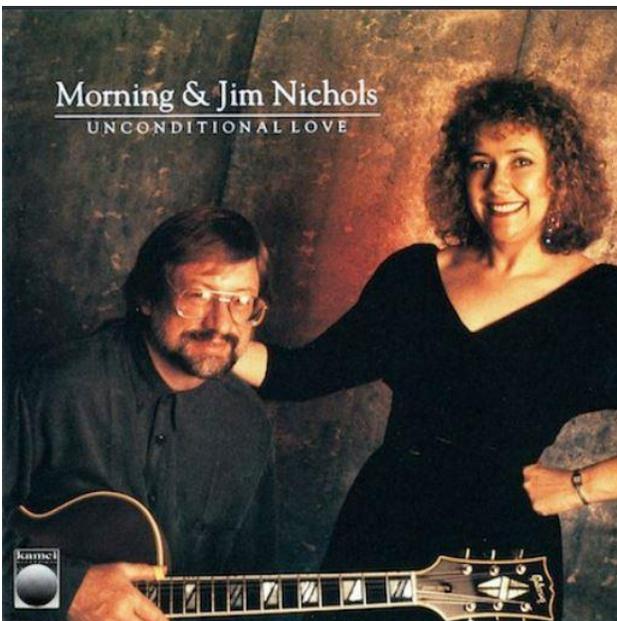
"It took me a while to develop an ability to really listen to this more heavyweight stuff. But I wanted to hear it. It fascinated me. It still does"

She discovered more music heroes in people like jazz saxophonist and composer John Coltrane, jazz pianist and composer Bill Evans, jazz trumpeter Miles Davis and tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins. She listened to jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae, Shirley Horn, and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Then there was R&B Queen Aretha Franklin. She was another huge talent who still inspires Morning.

"What is really true about me is that I love the most simple music, 'Amazing Grace,' for instance, or Irish music. I love songs that reflect the people, the folk – simply stated with gigantic emotion. I love that and that is why I include some of that material in my performances. But to occupy my brain, I am going to listen to Coltrane, or (jazz pianist) Oscar Peterson, or (jazz guitarist) Wes Montgomery."

She was also drawn to another musician, pop and jazz singer-songwriter Kenny Rankin. Unbeknownst to her at that time, when she bought Rankin's 1974 released "Silver Morning" – considered one of the best singer-songwriter records of all time – there was a featured guitarist on the record who would become hugely important in Morning's life.

"I was blown away by that record and I remember hearing this solo guitarist and thinking wow, who is this guy?" It was Morning's future husband, Jim.



At this point in time, Morning was living in San Francisco and teaching guitar out of three studios: the Guitar Shop at 9th and Irving, 24th Street Music, and the famous Guitar Solo, now on Townsend near Caltrain.

"Jim used to come into Guitar Solo. I was teaching his girlfriend guitar. In fact, before I went with Jim, Jim and I double-dated. He was with his girlfriend and I was with my boyfriend."

The first time they gigged together professionally was at a party. At this particular event, Morning was performing with guitarist Frank Markovich. (Markovich recently retired as Associate Professor of Music and the Director of Guitar Studies at Skyline College.)

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**Author: Jean Bartlett ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))**

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"Frank and I needed a bass player and Jim also plays bass. Frank called him and he said, 'yes.' Then I started thinking about just how good he was on that Kenny Rankin record and I started feeling nervous. But at the event, Jim was his typical charming self and I got over any nerves."

Not long after, Jim's folks needed some help and Jim packed his things up and took off for Virginia. But the two friends kept in touch and Jim eventually headed back to San Francisco.

"Jim really comes from a musical family. His dad, Rusty Nichols, played trombone and was a vocalist with the Jimmy Dorsey and Charlie Spivak touring bands. His dad also played with the Freddie Lee (Corstaphney) Orchestra out of Roanoke, Virginia. Jim grew up in Roanoke until the family moved to Bedford, Virginia, where the family still has a home. Jim and his brother John, an extraordinary bass player, worked as the 'band boys.' They helped set up, took care of the music and always played some of the gigs with their dad. Jim's mom was a pianist and was a staff musician on the radio in Richmond, Virginia. Jim's sister is also very musical. She plays and teaches piano, guitar and voice, and performs with two bands where she lives in Bedford. Jim got his first guitar when he was 10. He discovered Chet Atkins when he was 11 and that was pretty much it."

Love happened one night when Morning made Jim dinner. They spent the evening and several subsequent evenings, passing a guitar back and forth playing Beatles' songs to each other.

The couple married in 1982 and between them they have at least 20 guitars: the steel string Martin 00-17, a Harmony Archtop, a Gretsch Chet Atkins Tennessee Rose, several other old Gretsch guitars, a Kirk Sands nylon electric, a Johnny Smith, a Morris guitar that was made for the couple, a Hollenbeck, and the list goes on. Pacificans, they have made their home on the California Coast for over 36 years.

After the couple married, Jim began to do a little touring and Morning started organizing her music. She decided it was time to put the emphasis on her voice.

"You have to be professional, have your book ready and your musicians lined up. I started buffing up my act. Jim and his brother worked with me and we started working together. We still work together: The Nichols Band. It's always great to play together! John is the only bassist I know who can tell a story while he is playing the bass. It's also wonderful to sing together and harmonize with him. But I always liked performing, even way back when I was a kid and got so nervous. You either like performing or you don't and the nerves work themselves out."



(Ricky Kawada photo)

**John Nichols, Jim Nichols and Morning Nichols play the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society, 2018.**

As a vocalist, Morning gigged for seven years with the Full Faith and Credit 21-piece big band, including on the stage of the Monterey Jazz Festival. She sang with others as well, including: Tommy Emmanuel, Kenny Rankin, Mark Murphy and the Les Brown Big Band. She additionally opened for a number of acts. Those artists include: Maria Muldaur, the Smothers Brothers and the Beach Boys. Like most musicians, she also taught – voice and guitar. Then she and Jim toured, and she and Jim and John toured.

"Guitarists from all over the world come to play or listen at the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society, and once Jim and I played there, invitations to tour came in from all over."

Their list of international gigs includes: France, England, Italy, Germany and Finland. France in particular has been a many-time journey, and they have often invited their good friend – French fingerstyle guitarist Jerome Malaval, who they originally met at the Atkins Festival – to come stay at their home when he tours California, which includes playing Pacifica Performances. As to nationally, they've played throughout the Bay Area, all over the West Coast, in Kentucky and Virginia, and they are annual players in Nashville – and of course the list goes on.

There is also a long list of legends they've played with, which includes: classical guitarist Mason Williams, jazz fingerstyle guitarist Martin Taylor who played with French jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli following Django Reinhardt's passing, virtuosic electric bassist Michael Manring, fingerstyle guitarist and musical prodigy Richard Smith, Chet Atkins fingerstyle guitarist and musical prodigy Sean Weaver, drummer David Rokeach, guitarist Jack Pearson (Allman Brothers Band), and the late jazz pianist Smith Dobson.

"As any of the famous people we've played with would agree, many of the legends of music are not famous names to the public but they are truly gifts to the world. We have been blessed to play with so many extraordinary talents. I can't even begin to list them but I'll tell you right now, we've got massive talent in the Bay Area. Of course on his own, the names of some of the folks Jim has shared the stage with or recorded with is mind blowing. I know I'm married to the guy, but Jim's guitar playing is tops."

Just to mention some of those folks Jim has gigged and/or recorded with – along with Kenny Rankin and Chet Atkins – that list includes: Buddy Montgomery, Van Morrison, Tom Waits and Toots Thielemans.

Jim and Morning have produced seven recordings together. Jim is also a featured artist on numerous other LPs and tracks. Right now, Morning is working on a project with guitarist/composer Tony Corman and his big band Morchestra.

Morning and Jim played Pacifica Performances back when the organization was called the Pacifica Arts and Heritage Council. The name change came when the nonprofit moved its location into its current space at the Sanchez Art Center in the Pacifica Center for the Arts. Morning began serving on the organization's Board in 2002, was made Associate Artistic Director in 2004, and became the Artistic Director following the death of Pacifica Performances founding Artistic Director Mildred Owen in 2009. The Hall was renamed the Mildred Owen Concert Hall in July of that year.

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Morning travels less these days and devotes more time to her work as the Hall's Artistic Director.

"I've got to mention here that Pacifica Performances is primarily volunteer-driven and we have a fantastic, hard-working board that I absolutely could not do without, nor could I do without our one employee, Kat Ilvedson. We are so lucky to have to her.

"Originally Pacifica Performances was about classical and jazz, with additionally an annual performance by Golden Bough, a really wonderful Celtic trio with a huge following. There's everything good about that and we're keeping it! But I decided my goal was to also attract lots of different and new audiences."

Here's a sampling of some of those performers: Lavay Smith and Her Red Hot Skillet Lickers (big band), Chris Cain and Daniel Castro (both electric blues guitar masters/singers), The Black Brothers (Irish music), Yaelisa and Caminos Flamencos (nuevo flamenco), Molly's Revenge (Celtic), Will Durst (political satire), Jeremy Cohen (South Chicago Swing violinist), County Line Trio (Kingston Trio nostalgia), Led Kaapana (Hawaiian slack-key guitar), The Hot Club of San Francisco (Django Reinhardt-inspired gypsy jazz), and Larry Dunlap (pianist, composer/arranger) and Bobbe Norris (jazz vocalist). In the summer, Pacifica Performances features local talent – mostly rock and blues bands.

"Our mission is to present live music to the community and to bring in professional musicians. They need a place to play and an audience to hear them and we are that place.



"It is so important for people to hear music and musicians must play," Morning stressed. "There are musicians everywhere that enjoy expressing themselves through music but not necessarily in a public forum. But professional musicians have to be heard. They need to play and it's also about making a living. For Jim and me, without music as our life we wouldn't have lived our potential. There are other things that we could have done and do. But music is our essence. It's my joy. It's what I have made of my life."

Morning made it a priority as Pacifica Performances Artistic Director to satisfy ASCAP requirements and to make sure the Hall was on board – a worthy goal and a three-year project – and to get the Hall an alcohol license. Beer and wine are available for purchase.

"We have wonderful, generous artists that love our Hall, love performing their music or their spoken word, and love our audiences. Our audiences come to really listen and appreciate – they don't talk during performances – and when it is called for they sing along, or dance or both.

"To me hearing live music is as important today as it always has been and always will be. Music is its own language. It is a huge way to communicate. Of course, lyrics are a huge part of it and we are free to interpret them as listeners. As singers, we take our own interpretation and sing it to our audience. But the vehicle is music. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

"Last week, Jim, my brother and I saw Leon Bridges (gospel and soul singer, guitarist, songwriter and record producer) at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley. There were 8,500 people there and Leon was communicating with all of us. His band was communicating with us. We were getting their message through the music – including lyrics, melody and rhythm – whether we could understand the lyrics or not. It's a kind of communication that gives you direct connection, that resonates into your deepest core – a passage into your own soul.

"How do we talk to people when we don't share the same spoken language? We have the language of music. It brings people together from different cultures. It is primal. When you are a baby, you don't understand verbal language, but you understand music. Animals respond to it. The mind works on comprehending music. It helps develop the mind. Music often stays with people who have dementia. Our brains need it. That is the power of music. It's powerful and it is a gift."

Morning had one very difficult time with music. It was when she developed a hematoma on her vocal cords. The cure was absolute vocal cord rest. Always, good at art, Morning took courses on painting. Since exhibited many times, Morning's oil paintings are reminiscent of the California "pioneer" landscape painters, artists which include William Keith and Thomas Hill.

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"I do love painting. It is completely different from music. It's singular and there is something wonderful about the silence. Music is not silent and if you are a performer, even a solo artist, you always have an audience. I did recover and went back to performing. But I am also very much a painter now."

Morning knows music affects people deeply. She recalled an experience where she was on the stage end of that process.

"It was long ago and I was singing a ballad at the Pete Douglas Beach House (Half Moon Bay Coast). At the end of the song, as I took the time to express the emotion of the lyrics, I became aware that the people listening were leaning forward in their seats. They were moved with the emotion of the song's story. That's the beauty and magic of music."

To learn more about Pacifica Performances, visit [www.pacificaperformances.org](http://www.pacificaperformances.org). Visit Morning and Jim Nichols on the web at: [www.jimandmorningnichols.com](http://www.jimandmorningnichols.com). Catch a 2006 clip of Morning, Jim and John Nichols swinging Dolly Parton's "Do I Ever Cross Your Mind," at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQM9YOqcNiI>.



(Jean Bartlett photo)  
Morning Nichols at home, 2010.



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.

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