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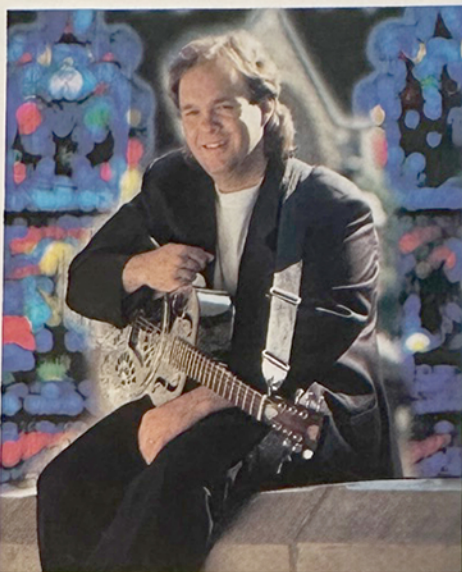
Pavarotti's Virtuoso:
Musician Rob Mathes

GREENWICH

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FEATURES



COVER PHOTO BY JONATHAN STRAIT
Musician Rob Mathes pg. 60

60 *Musician Rob Mathes:*
PAVAROTTI'S VIRTUOSO
by Timothy Dumas

76 *There's Life after Twenty-five*
For Slalom Racers:
MASTERS SKIERS
by Bill Slocum

91 *GREENWICH Magazine's Guide:*
GIFTS AND MORE GIFTS
by Donna Moffly and Martha Zoubek



Masters Skiers pg. 76

108 *Christ Church Choir in England:*
QUITE GOOD, ACTUALLY
by Martha Zoubek

116 *Eventing at the Olympics:*
HORSES IN (MOCK) BATTLE
by John Briggs

DEPARTMENTS

- 13** Publisher's Desk: DEFENDING GREENWICH POINT
- 17** Notable Notes
- 21** Behind the Headlines
- 31** People & Places
- 53** Previews
- 127** Weddings
- 159** What's New
- 169** Featuring Food: COOKBOOKS
- 185** Children's Activities: HOLIDAY HAPPENINGS
- 193** Calendar



Previews

pg. 53

Rob Mathes: Songwriter, Vocalist, Arranger, Guitarist, Pianist and

PAVARTI'S VIRTUOSO

BY TIMOTHY DUMAS

SOMEWHERE IN ITALY, LUCIANO Pavarotti, perhaps the greatest tenor who ever lived, popped a cassette into a tape machine and listened to a song called "Holy Mother." The songwriter, Eric Clapton, is a deity in his own circle. The blues-rock guitarist propelled his bands Cream and Derek and the Dominoes into the rock 'n' roll pantheon before launching an equally fabled solo career. On June 20, 1996, in Pavarotti's hometown of Modena, Italy, the maestro and Clapton would sing "Holy Mother" together — an unlikely duet, maybe an absurd one, but nevertheless in tune with the oddly mesmerizing flavor of the Pavarotti and Friends celebrity concerts.

Pavarotti was listening now to a version of the song designed to show him how he and Clapton would share the vocal, and how the completed whole might reasonably be expected to sound. But Pavarotti kept listening to that voice — high, almost angelic, with an earthy undertow. First the voice approximated the sweet mud of Clapton's, then it vaulted into an operatic tenor. When Pavarotti next spoke to legendary producer Phil Ramone, who would run the show in Modena, he had to ask about the voice on the demo.

"It's Rob Mathes," said Ramone, who has endowed the music of stars like Paul Simon, Billy Joel and Frank Sinatra with a crystalline shimmer. "The guy who did the arrangement."

"Beautiful voice! Wonderful!"

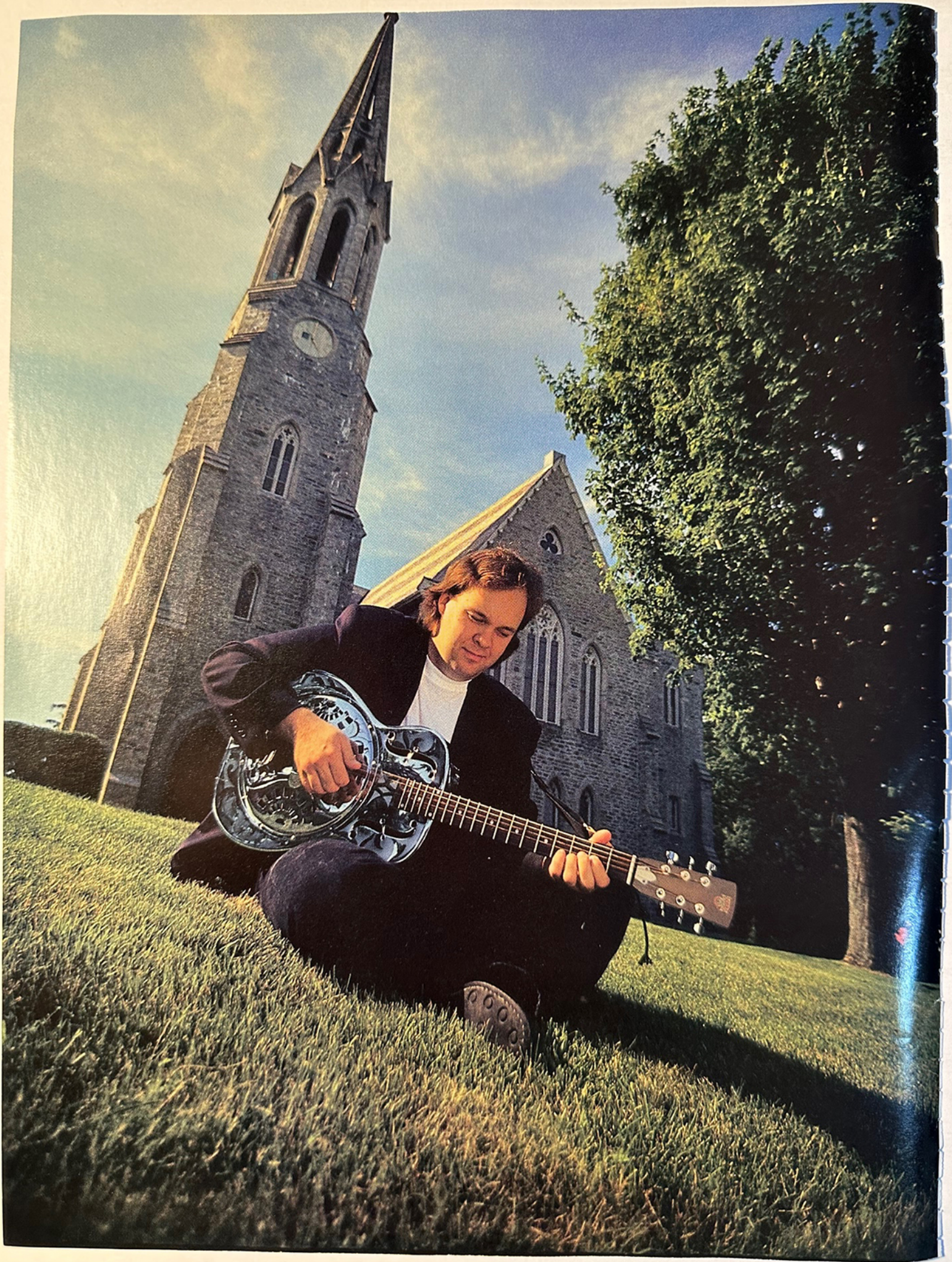
"Great. I'll tell him."

"And who is playing the clarinet?" Pavarotti wanted to know. Actually, it was a distorted guitar, but that needn't go too far.

"Well, that's Rob," Ramone told him.

Pavarotti boomed into the receiver, "I must meet this boy!" Rob Mathes soon found himself hustling down Manhattan streets on his way to the Hampshire House hotel, where Pavarotti keeps an apartment for his New York visits. It would be the latest, most unpredictable stop on Mathes's Byzantine musical journey. Rocker, jazzman, Mahler acolyte, Bernstein groupie, arranger, orchestrator, writer of spiritual song cycles — not even Mathes can pin Mathes down.

"I can write a piece of music for chorus and orchestra, and I can play the blues club on Saturday night," says the cherubic thirty-one-year-old, who lives with his wife Tammy and





ROB, TAMMY AND DAUGHTER EMMA. Rob wrote his first love song to Tammy in eighth grade, when she was his mother's piano student (and ignored him).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rob with Pavarotti and conductor/arranger Jose Molina at a gala following Pavarotti's Modena concert; in a New York recording studio with (l.-r.) singer Bobby Caldwell, Vanessa Williams and Jeff Kievet; with Liza Minnelli; with singer Jon Secada; with Eric Clapton; with Chuck Mangione and his band in 1987

baby daughter Emma in a spacious Cos Cob Colonial. "My absolute love of all different types of music is my weakness as an artist," he adds, "but it's also my strength."

So Phil Ramone and the nervous virtuoso, who had practiced laboriously in case Pavarotti sought accompaniment, went on up to see the maestro. Pavarotti was cordial, if not quite warm. "I really don't know what Phil wanted me there for," Mathes confesses. "I think he just wanted to get a sense of how I'd deal with the situation." A few days earlier, after Pavarotti and Clapton had each lauded Mathes's plan for "Holy Mother," Ramone asked him to arrange a second song, the Italian Christmas classic "Jesu Bambino," which Pavarotti would sing with rookie pop sensation Joan Osborne. But the maestro had reservations about the selection. "Will the kids like it?" he asked Mathes. "You don't know these Italian kids. All they like is rock 'n' roll."

"Well, the original 'Jesu Bambino' is just flute, clarinet and strings," Mathes said. "I'll give you some French horn, some oboe and a little percussion, and maybe use the gospel choir. We'll make it a little fuller sounding."

Pavarotti stroked his beard and nodded. He liked the sound of that. The boy would do well in Modena. "I think Phil knew that because I was a singer," Mathes reckons, "I would be able to understand Pavarotti's language." Soon enough, Mathes's grasp of voice brought him to the rescue of another arranger hired for the concert. Jose Molina, highly regarded for his work with Gloria Estefan and Joan Osborne, had done an arrangement of "New York, New York" for Pavarotti to sing with Liza Minelli.

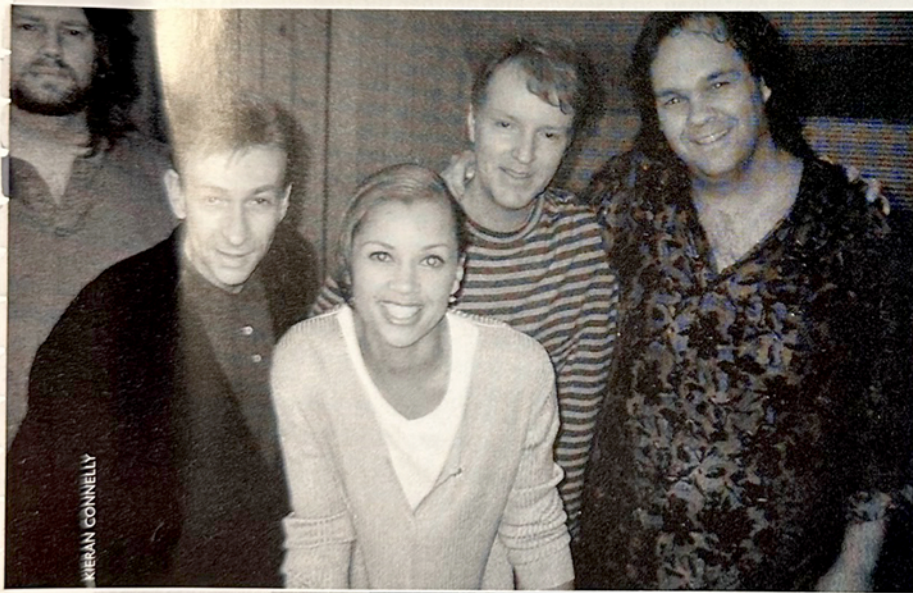
Molina told Mathes, "I have Pavarotti singing in the key of B."

"The key of B? That won't work."

"High Bs, repeated high Bs!" Mathes recalls in horror. "Even in Verdi, the high Cs, they're the big money notes that come at the end of an aria. You don't repeat them over and over. You really wreck your voice that way." Worried that a huge mistake might be unfolding, Mathes called Pavarotti's apartment, expecting to speak to an assistant. Pavarotti himself picked up the phone. "Maestro, 'New York, New York' they have it in the key of B!" Mathes said. Pavarotti asked him

to play it into the phone. He played. "No!" exclaimed Pavarotti. "Much too high!" Mathes spent Memorial Day squirreled away in a studio, arranging "New York, New York" in the key of G. Later, in Modena, Pavarotti would call Mathes *Tenore* in homage to his vocal gifts. "Whenever he couldn't remember my name, he'd call, 'Tenore! Tenore!'" Mathes remembers with a chuckle. "And I'd say, 'No, no, you're *Tenore*. I'm the janitor with the broom.'"

MODENA APPEARED ON MATHES'S musical horizon as if from around a blind curve. As it happened, he was working furiously on a Christmas album by Vanessa Williams, the deposed Miss America turned pop star and movie actress. This particular crest in Mathes's career arose out of a fortuitous meshing of his musical paths. His friend Jeff Kievit, a trumpet player he'd performed with on the New York City club scene in the 1980s, had long been a top "session man" in the recording business. Kievit met Vanessa Williams while playing trumpet for the Broadway show *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in which she





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rob performing in last year's Christmas concert at Purchase; playing in the Memorial Day parade in Old Greenwich with Eastern Junior High's band; with one of his first bands in eighth grade at Eastern; in a 1985 family portrait with (l.-r.) his sister Janna, parents Joan and George, and brother Richard

DANIEL R. GAGE/ART OF ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHY

starred to rave reviews, and soon they became musical compatriots. He won her a gig singing the national anthem at last January's Super Bowl (which he arranged), and she signed him on to help produce her Christmas album. But Williams was dreading the project: Her pop records took an enormous amount of time and trouble, leaving her drained. "I want this to be a joyful experience," she told Kievit, "and I want to do it in Manhattan with real musicians."

"Absolutely," Kievit agreed. "In fact, I know Mr. Christmas."

Professionally, Mathes's reputation as "Mr. Christmas" flowered after he wrote, performed and recorded *William the Angel* and *Heart of Hearts*, eclectic song cycles that probe the Christian faith. A concert video called *I Want to Hear the Bells*, which combines the works, has aired on more than one hundred public television stations across the country, and Mathes's live holiday performances pack area concert houses each December.

"I have this weird, cosmic relationship with Christmas," Mathes says. "It's the focus of my year. There's got to be some sort of psychological reason for it. My friends joke that it's because I asked for Pivot Pool for Christmas when I was

seven and my parents gave me Pivot Pool."

Or perhaps the Christmas connection owes to Mathes being a miracle baby. Rob's mother Joan Mathes, who is an accomplished classical pianist, explains that she had a difficult pregnancy. "We went to see a doctor in Boston. He said that I had a separated placenta, and that there was no life." At that point Rob's grandfather, Arthur Ballou, asked for prayer, and incredibly it turned out that there was life after all. "Robbie belonged to the Lord before I had him," Joan says with shining eyes. "And then we had two more."

"He could have been a real mess," adds George Mathes, Rob's father, who for thirty-four years was a beloved music teacher in Greenwich schools — winning the Distinguished Teacher Award in 1987 — and for twenty years was lead clarinetist in the Greenwich Symphony. Early on, however, Rob showed signs of advanced musical aptitude. "He was singing the alphabet song at a year and a half — on perfect pitch," says Joan. George flings his hand in the air: "The music came right through him." Of course, it helped that Rob's parents and grandparents had always lived their lives around music. Joan's father was a composer who worked in Vaudeville; George's was a recording engineer for the legendary



OLAN MILLS STUDIOS

conductor Arturo Toscanini. George and Joan, the two talented offspring, met at Yale School of Music and grew close after a professor asked George (older than Joan by a couple of years) to coach her. "But we were just friends," Joan insists. "I helped him write fugues." Later they started dating, but not for very long. "We had three dates and got married."

Though George Mathes was a brilliant clarinetist, he never enjoyed the confidence in his abilities that is second-nature to Rob. George traces his history of ferocious nerve attacks before performing to his father's unmet demands. "My husband's master's degree recital was the greatest thing ever to hit Yale," Joan says. "They were talking about it for years afterward." But not even this performance touched his father's impossible standard; nothing did. With his own children, George vowed, things would be different: Whatever Rob, Richard and Janna wanted to do, they would do, with all of his and Joan's encouragement; whatever they needed to do it, he and Joan would do their best to provide. In their eldest child's case, that meant a parade of keyboards, guitars and horns.

"My launching pad was sand," George Mathes says. "Robbie's was rock." After a moment he adds, "You know who Leopold Mozart was? Well, I don't mind playing


Leopold to his Amadeus."

"I grew up with my mother playing Chopin in one room and my dad listening to Bob Dylan in the next," Rob Mathes recalls, explaining the roots of his many-sided talent. By the sixth grade, Joan says, Rob could play Bach's Italian piano concerto better than she had at her senior recital in college. Also by this time, Rob had discovered rock 'n' roll. Though he'd been listening to the Beatles almost since birth, his pop influences soon ranged to the more musically complex Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan, whose jazz-inflected compositions called for expert musicianship. In the eighth grade, George and Joan gave Rob his first electric guitar, a Gibson Les Paul. As his prowess soared, his path suddenly seemed clear: He would become a rock star. He later immersed himself in guitar at the famed Berklee College of Music in Boston — by which time, incidentally, he had become "a true agnostic." One day, though, he went to the school library to take out a guitar tape, but found inside the cassette box a misplaced symphony by Gustav Mahler.

Stirred by Mahler's power and sweep, the young man's own creative world once again yawned open. For Mathes, what is moving is also what is spiritual, regardless of the composer's creed. "In the music of Mahler, the spirit, especially with Bernstein conducting — well, there's just no way this is an accident. Certain Christians would find my listening habits and my reading tastes profane, in a way. Seamus Heaney [the Nobel Prize-winning poet] has said he's rejected Catholicism, but I find God in his poetry, all over his poetry. I find God rampant in great art."

WILLIAM THE ANGEL AND HEART OF Hearts are notable not only because they employ some of the finest musicians anywhere, but because they explore the convolutions of the human heart rather than spew the feel-good platitudes that make most modern Christian music dull. "I would buy tons of Christian music growing up, before I went to college and sort of drifted away from the faith," Mathes recalls. "And to be perfectly honest, I *bated* it. I couldn't stand the music. It was maudlin and there was never a dissonant chord." Now, he says, recording artists like Margaret Becker and Charlie Peacock bring a richness to Christian music that the genre had sorely lacked.

"I've written a lot of Christian music, and my gut feeling is that if that's what I'm supposed to do, I'm willing to do it," remarks Mathes, who has signed a contract with EMI's Sparrow label to write Christian pop songs. Still, he says, the conventions of the genre remain narrow and do not generally permit "the grittiness, the edginess" that mark the work of great Christian writers like Flannery O'Connor and Graham Greene. In the next year, Mathes promises, his fans will see the first "nonseasonal" Rob Mathes record. →

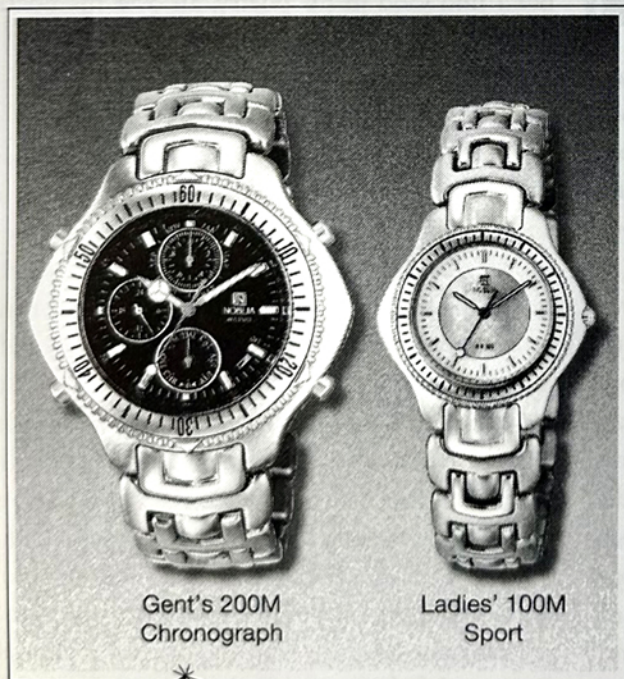

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"There'll be at least five songs dealing with spiritual issues, but there'll also be songs about love and songs about politics. I'm thinking of calling it 'Reach' — reaching for some meaning in these troubled times."

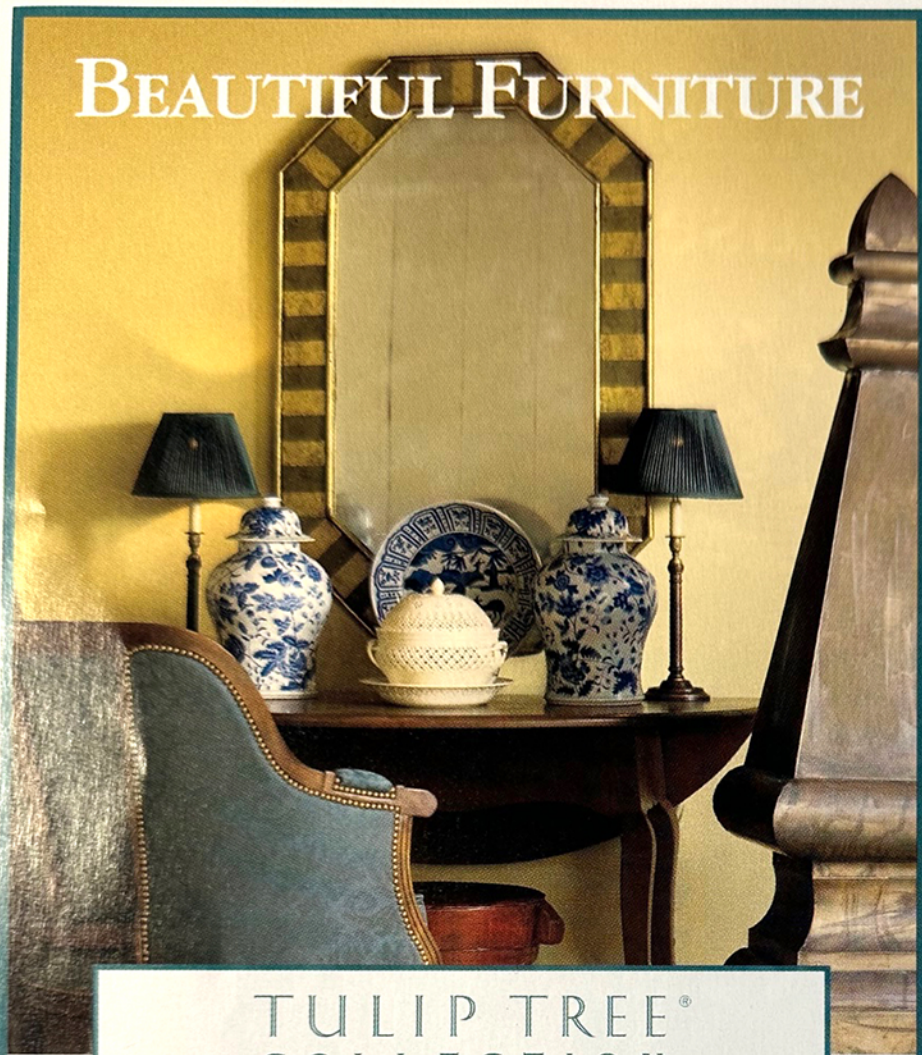
For Vanessa Williams, Rob Mathes and his spiritual gift bag materialized at exactly the right time. On listening to the CD of *Heart of Hearts* that Jeff Kievit had given her, Williams "flipped out" over two songs — the haunting "Gracious Good Shepherd" and the lovely "Star Bright" — and promptly decided to record the latter. This was not the first time a "name" had so honored a Mathes composition. Country star Kathy Mattea had recorded "Good News," from *William the Angel*, as the title track of her 1994 Grammy Award-winning holiday album.

Mathes happily found himself drifting deeper and deeper into the Williams project. "I've heard a lot of Christmas records, and most of them are pretty cheesy," he says. "I knew Jeff would do a great job, but I still wondered if he might need some help." So Mathes called: "Jeff, do you need me to do a string arrangement for 'Star Bright,' or for any of the Christmas carols? I mean, I don't want to bull my way into this record or anything ..."

Kievit said sure, he could use the help, and asked Mathes to work out a couple of arrangements. Mathes wrote an "almost Mahlerian" arrangement for the classic "I Wonder as I Wander," with strings, trumpet and harp; added strings to "Star Bright"; and set "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" to a hip-hop beat, "grooving like from the ghetto." On May 18 Mathes walked into a New York recording studio, dressed in his signature black jeans and black T-shirt, clutching his score paper and his pencils. "They had the conductor stand set up for me and some of the best string players in New York City, all there waiting," Mathes recalls.

Thrilled by the results, Kievit and

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Williams asked him to try more arrangements. Mathes is proudest of his work on "Angels We Have Heard on High," a song so suited to his sensibility that he felt compelled to add an original verse. On hearing Mathes's innovative treatment of the standard, Williams uttered the phrase, "I'm in Rob mode."

"When you hear someone of her stature say that, it's one of the things you hang on to," Mathes says, beaming. In the end, Williams recorded "Gracious Good Shepherd" in addition to "Star Bright," and Mathes arranged seven songs and played piano, guitar and organ. One other thing Williams is titling the album, due out this season, *Star Bright*. "She's really amazing to work with, just so easy," Mathes says. "I would bust on her and say, 'Could you cut it with this diva stuff?'"

WHILE SUBMERGED in the studio with the Williams record, Mathes got a call from John Patterson, a recording engineer whom he had met years before in a Chicago studio. Patterson now worked for Phil Ramone, whom he kept telling about this "arranger-guitarist-keyboardist guy" until the producer finally relented: "All right, then, let me hear him." Mathes's first assignment was to arrange "Happy Birthday" as a gift for the conductor Andre Previn. He went out to Ramone's personal studio and whipped up a little something on the spot — "a couple of Count Basie licks mixed with an almost classical string arrangement." Next Ramone hired him to do what amounted to menial labor on Frank Sinatra's *Duets II* record. Mathes sang demos for the stars to practice by before they recorded with Sinatra himself. And then the producer had Mathes arrange and play guitar and keyboards for talented young artists Fran Lucci and Kyle Davis.

"Up until this year, Phil hadn't



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given me a really big gig. It was always sort of background stuff. I must say that in many ways the Vanessa Williams thing was the flag for him to say, 'Rob is really starting to do some big stuff. Hire him on a big project.' And he did."

The call asking Mathes if he could do some demos for Luciano Pavarotti came at an inopportune time. "I was sort of freaking out, because I was working around the clock with Vanessa. I had never worked harder in my life. I remember calling back saying, 'I'm in the studio every single day for the next two weeks, but I definitely want to do this.'" Hanging up the phone, Mathes said to himself, "Wow. What an incredible résumé item." But for two weeks he didn't hear a thing, so he figured the Pavarotti caravan had passed him by. "I thought, 'Well, they don't want to hear that I'm busy.'"

One morning in Cos Cob, the phone rang and Phil Ramone was on the other end. "Listen," he said. "I really want you to do an arrangement for this Clapton tune. Can you come to the studio and meet me?" Mathes was due in the city that day to work with Williams, but managed to sneak down to the Hit Factory to see Ramone during lunch break. Ramone handed him the Clapton tape and said, "I want you to figure out a duet. I want Pavarotti to come in in the middle, I want it to be very dramatic." When Mathes took the tape home that night, he immediately saw that he could make the song fit the improbable format.

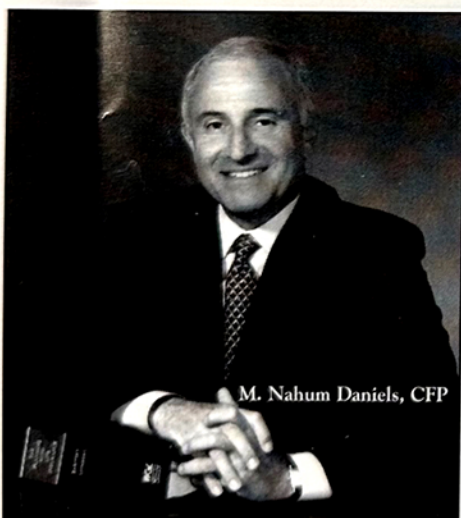
"You know, part of the kitschiness of the Pavarotti and Friends concerts is that Pavarotti does sound out of place singing with these pop stars," Mathes observes. "Certainly, Clapton and the others realize that Pavarotti doesn't

swing in a traditional sense; he doesn't feel things in the backbeat, like a pop artist. But that's the fun of it. Suddenly this incredible voice comes in, maybe the greatest voice in history ..."

After Mathes had successfully arranged "Holy Mother" and "Jesu Bambino," he sought to win the job of orchestrator — the person who takes the arrangements and figures out how the orchestra should play them. He dropped off a tape of rough orchestral mixes he did for Vanessa Williams and told Ramone, "Look. I work quickly, I'm good at this, and I really want a chance to do this for you. You can hire another orchestrator, but I'm cheaper and I'll do a great job."

"Okay," Ramone said. "Do the orchestrations."

Mathes flew to Italy on June 15 for a week of rehearsals before the concert (which is due out on CD and video by



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year's end). Modena was a madhouse: Elton John was there with his entourage, joined by Eric Clapton, Liza Minelli, Cheryl Crow, Joan Osborne and John Secada. Crow, who became an overnight superstar with the release of her *Tuesday Night Music Club* in 1993, had suffered a minor crisis before leaving for Italy. She'd disliked Jose Molina's "schmaltzy" arrangement of the song "Run Baby Run." Mathes deftly charted out some simple, Beatlesque strings, but it turned out not to matter: "The rock band was so loud you couldn't hear it anyway."

The last-minute crisis set the tone for a manic week ahead. Phil Ramone had been working so hard that everybody began to worry about his heart, and inevitably, "I became Mr. Utility Man," Mathes says. "It was a very stressful week for Phil, and in turn, I was expected to jump through hoops

for him. It was definitely a baptism by fire." But even the unexpected chores had their rewards. Ramone had asked Mathes to bring his guitars just in case, and Mathes wound up playing in the house band behind Elton John, Crow, Osborne and Clapton. "Rob can play a screaming guitar solo," notes John Patterson. "But when he was up there playing guitar with Clapton, he was holding back a little. And Clapton said, 'Don't hold back, let it go,' and Rob let go. Anyone who can hold his own on a stage with Eric Clapton and turn around and play classical piano beautifully — now, that's rare."

Mathes was also drafted, at the last minute, to be choir director. The magnificent East London Gospel Choir had been neglected amid all the confusion. Mathes said to them, "Just do what I tell you," and they turned out dazzling

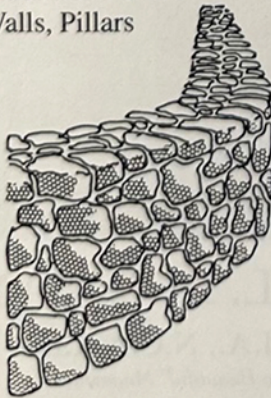
accompaniments to "Holy Mother" — bringing a smile to Eric Clapton's face — and to the Elton John-Pavarotti duet of John's "Live Like Horses," the concert's finale. "In the end," George Mathes allows, "the choir were asking for Robbie's autograph."

Elton John, for one, was pleasantly baffled by Mathes's omnipresence. Last he'd seen, Mathes was saying, "Mr. John, I taught the choir your choral parts," and suddenly there he was, playing guitar on his song "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues." "He was giving me the strangest look," Mathes recalls with a grin. "It wasn't a negative look; he just sort of looked at me like, 'Weren't you just conducting the choir?'" □

Rob Mathes will perform at the PepsiCo Theatre at Purchase College on Friday, Dec. 20, and Saturday, Dec. 21, at 8 p.m.

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