

Pop Talk: YouTube lands violinist DePue a shot at stardom

by *George_Varga*

Violin virtuoso Alex DePue has distinguished himself in country, bluegrass, rock, swing and classical music, with his Carnegie Hall debut coming when he was just 14. But this Ohio-born, Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.-based musician's national profile really took off after he played an open mic night Nov. 11 at Lestat's, the tiny San Diego venue that has a seating capacity of just 50.

ALEX DEPUE - After intense competition, violinist Alex DePue has been selected to join guitar star Steve Vai's new touring band. CNS Photo by Steve Covault. His classically-tinged solo violin medley of "Owner of a Lonely Heart" by the English prog-rock band Yes and Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" was filmed at Lestat's by Chris Richards, his friend and manager. Richards posted the barely two-minute clip on YouTube three days later, and the response was dizzying.

"It got 80,000 hits in the first week," a still incredulous DePue recalled. "Now, it's up to over 781,000 hits on YouTube alone. If you include the other Web sites that have posted it, like break.com and iFilm.com, and add them up, we've had 1.5 million viewings."

One of those viewings came in May in the Los Angeles management office of rock guitar star Steve Vai, who was then auditioning violinists for his new touring band.

Vai rose to fame in Frank Zappa's group in the early 1980s, then worked with everyone from Joe Jackson and David Lee Roth to Ry Cooder and Tony Williams. On the basis of his YouTube video, DePue was invited to audition after he learned three Vai compositions, including the violin feature "Sparks and Shadows."

DePue, 34, got the gig. He began a monthlong European tour with Vai in late June in Luxembourg, to be followed by a two-month North American concert trek.

"The rehearsals are very demanding and very rewarding," DePue said from a Burbank, Calif., soundstage, where he has been preparing for the tour under Vai's strict supervision. "It's a 2 1/2-hour show and we rehearse at least nine hours a day, six days a week. And I spend three to four hours rehearsing by myself each day before I even show up for the band rehearsals with Steve. I'm learning so much from him."

Vai is a stern taskmaster, but DePue welcomes the challenge. One of four violin-playing sons of a concert pianist mother and classical music professor father, he was only 10 when he won a concerto competition and performed with the Bowling Green State University Orchestra.

He discovered rock music the same year, thanks to one of his mother's Beach Boys albums, then became enamored with bluegrass and the work of French jazz violin pioneer Stephane Grappelli. His diverse tastes are showcased on his self-produced 12-song "Live" album, which features him performing everything from "A Maiden's Prayer" by Western swing legend Bob Wills and a traditional Hungarian folk-dance number to a jazzy version of "Mr. Sandman" and a quicksilver excerpt from Beethoven's Violin Concerto.

Beginning in 2000, DePue spent six years in Nashville, Tenn., as the musical director in country singer Chris Cagle's band. In 1999 and 2005, he won first place in the Walnut Valley National Fiddling Contest in Kansas. Earlier this year, he won first place in the California State Old Time Fiddlers Association's annual competition.

Lured by the weather, DePue moved to San Diego last fall, with a suitcase in one hand and his violin case in the other. Nearly broke, he quickly took matters into his own hands.

"I put on my wrinkled tuxedo and went up and down Fifth Avenue in the Gaslamp Quarter, shaking hands with restaurant owners, until this wonderful Italian man let me come into Asti Ristorante and play for his customers for tips," DePue recalled. "On a good night, along with CD sales, you can do very well just playing for tips."

The tour with Vai will introduce him to an international audience beyond YouTube, and DePue hopes to

work with the guitarist indefinitely. As for his future goals, he has a glittery vision.

"I'd be very comfortable in Las Vegas doing a 'violin freak show,'" DePue said. "Every single style possible on the instrument would be exposed during the show so I could bridge the gap between people who are fans of only one style. I would also involve elements of magic and illusion. I've always had this dream where, in the middle of a slow, sexy, swing song, I let go of my silver bow and watch it float up in the air around me, with no visible strings attached."

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