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Oregon's famous son stays home

Mason Williams has come home again. To Oregon, to Eugene, to the Oakridge home of his childhood.

Williams has made it big in the entertainment scene in this country. Best known, perhaps, for his Grammy Award-winning Classical Gas, he has spent a large amount of his time writing for television, most recently as Head Writer on NBC-TV's "Saturday Night Live." Williams has returned home to Eugene to perform his Concert for Orchestra and Bluegrass Band.

As a child he roamed the hills around Oakridge; since then Mason Williams' songs and jokes have been roaming the airwaves of the nation. But his recent return to Eugene is something he says almost shouldn't have happened. Williams had to "bail out" from his Head Writer position at Saturday Night Live, and for at least the second time in his career he found himself leaving the "life in the fast lane" and heading back to his Oregon sanctuary. The first time, he went fishing for six months; this time he has come home to make some new music with some old friends.

Williams' career grew up in the coffee shops of Oklahoma, and he eventually brought his guitar and folk songs to Southern California. It didn't take long for his talents to be discovered: The Smothers Brothers, hungry for new material for their act, caught Williams' act one night, and two days later they were recording an album together. The Smothers Brothers — with Williams as their "right-hand man" — moved into the world of television.

As one of the head writers of *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Williams was propelled into the Hollywood mainstream. Things got big real quick. He stopped writing music and concentrated on his television career — and exploring and enjoying the Hollywood lifestyle. Then, after a trip to Las Vegas, where he and Tommy Smothers "stayed awake for two weeks," he returned to his guitar.

"It was like an old buddy I hadn't linked up with in a long time," Williams says. "I hadn't played much music since the television writing thing became so big. But when I finally got back with my guitar all this enthusiasm for exploring the instrument came out of me. 'Classical Gas' developed out of that enthusiasm; it took about two months to finish writing it."



The Year was 1968, and "Classical Gas" brought Williams into stardom. The song won two Grammy Awards, racing to the top of the charts all across the country. And then, something snapped.

"One day," he says, "I was driving down the Ventura Freeway going to a meeting and suddenly I decided 'what the heck?' So I turned right on the San Diego Freeway and went back home to Oregon to go fishing. I never came back. I gave up my place in line in Hollywood.

"I wasn't having that much fun being rich and famous. I was raised on cheap thrills and how much beer can you drink?"

For the next 12 years Williams "sort of hung out," played music with friends, and occasionally surfaced to write television. He wrote his Bluegrass Symphony, introducing it in 1974.

Last year he wrote television specials for the Smothers Brothers and Steve Martin. Then the new Saturday Night Live producer hired him. Back to the fast life, Mason?

"I thought Saturday Night was gonna be a lot of fun," he says. "I was really looking forward to it. But the new producer didn't know what the hell she was doing — she was nothing but ego and bullshit. She had hired me as Head Writer and then wouldn't let me do anything.

"Now, when I was younger I could put up with infinite amounts of bullshit. But as you get older you find yourself less willing to put up with it. I had done a lot of television; I just didn't feel like wading through it anymore." He lasted only six weeks before he decided to leave the show, six weeks which he says "almost killed me." And, besides, New York was "too far from home."

"New York is one of the most foreign countries I've ever been in," he says. "And I like to go barefoot and take a leak in the backyard — you know?"

And so Mason Williams is back home (he has a

house in both Eugene and Oakridge). His Bluegrass Symphony concert is March 7, and he is more than busy with rehearsals. It is, after all, no small thing to bring bluegrass and symphonic music together.

Williams has performed the concert 14 times; he performed it in Mac Court in 1976 with the Eugene Symphony. He says the March 7 concert will be much better than the earlier one. He's re-written much of the music, and is giving this latest version more of a bluegrass emphasis.

Bluegrass and symphonies aren't as different as one might think, Williams stresses. "There are some basic, underlying qualities about them," he says. "They are both acoustic forms of music — less fashion is involved, and more attention is paid to the art form itself. And they both have a good tradition of story telling.

"When I'm writing this music, what I want is to have the bluegrass and the orchestra tell a story that neither one could tell without the other. They should do what they do *in context* with each other, not merely one trying to imitate the other.

"I try to stretch the compositional space the music could be in."

Williams isn't trained in orchestration, but he says it's been challenging to write for an orchestra of highly-trained musicians. "What we're doing is more of a folk-art concert. I don't claim to be a real symphonic writer; but I've always been able to find these spaces that no one's playing in and see if there's a nugget in there."

Williams' Concert for Orchestra and Bluegrass Band will consist of the Eugene Symphony Orchestra along with Williams and his seven-piece bluegrass band. The concert will be at 8 p.m., Saturday, March 7 at the Lane County Fairgrounds Exhibit Hall. There will be only one performance. For reservations and information call the Eugene Symphony office at 687-0020.

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