

# Guitar slinger Richard T.

This local musician is easy to spot with his signature gray cap, black-and-white Fender Stratocaster and regular lineup of gigs on the North Coast

Maybe be you were in Cannon Beach sitting in a folding chair, eating a burger from a paper plate at the American Legion Hall while a friendly handful of musicians played bluegrass favorites around a formica table. Maybe you were across town nibbling tapas and sipping Malbec at Sweet Basil's while a breezy quintet deftly covered "Moon Dance." Or you and your sweetheart were in Astoria sipping dirty martinis at T. Paul's while a solo guitar filled the room with smokey blues. Did you drop by Port of Call for a beer and go jamming with the house band? You were listening to Richard T.

It's easy to recognize hard-working, free-spirited guitarist Richard Thomasian at all sorts of local musical venues. That's him wearing his signature gray tweed British flat cap backwards, playing fluent riffs and arpeggios on his black-and-white Fender Stratocaster and singing with a voice still clear, nimble and true.

Thomasian has been earning a living, "of sorts," he says, playing guitar locally for a decade or so. "If you start looking, there are places to play, all sorts of nooks and crannies, all over the place on the coast," he says. "You've got to find regular gigs, three, four, five times a week. You can start to make it."

And you've got to have chops.

Long ago in Fresno, California, Thomasian picked up guitar and, with some high school pals, formed a band that played "Like a Rolling Stone," "Ahab the Arab," "Satisfaction" and "House of the Rising Sun." "That was about it," he says. His guitar-playing journey, however, was underway.

After a brief experience in the Army, Thomasian took his guitar to stay a while in San Diego, then Eugene, then in San Francisco and Berkeley playing pop rock or jazz fusion or blues with Tommy and the Snakes or Incognito or Rhythm

Bones. He busked at Powell and Market and at Fisherman's Wharf where the tourists were generous but the shopkeepers impatient, the police uncooperative and the other buskers sometimes territorial.

Eventually he found himself again in Eugene playing in a duo called Ten and Thomas. An apple-picking date with a sweetheart led them west to Depoe Bay. "That's where I actually started making a living playing music," he says. "I got a solo gig four nights a week at the Spouting Horn restaurant. Twenty-five dollars a night, dinner and drinks. Four dinners and a hundred bucks a week. My rent was \$85. I had a view of the ocean."

Thomasian began to build the lounge repertoire that would serve him like a kit full of tools serves a carpenter. He also practiced the performer's subtle art of creating rapport with his audience. Those who enjoy his music today notice how contagiously at ease he is in any venue, with any combination of musicians.

Ultimately, following a break-up and a little lonely, Thomasian left Depoe Bay and headed to Portland where the Church of Scientology derailed his guitar playing for most of the '90s. He fled back to the San Francisco Bay Area, found a gig with the house band at the Berkeley Marriott and began painstakingly repairing a plywood sailboat he'd salvaged from the Bay Area shoreline. He started living on boats. In the San Rafael marina, alongside busy Highway 101, between '50s doo-wap car show gigs with Tom and the Cats and blues festival gigs in Marin and Berkeley he began looking for a place more calm and clean to raise two young daughters.

Someplace south and warm, maybe.

Instead, he and his ex-wife agreed to settle near each other in Astoria. Thomasian briefly considered sailing, then, instead, shipped his Coronado 41 up to the Warrenton mooring basin where he has lived since.

From there he drives to his various gigs in his weather-beaten buoy-red '92 Toyota Paseo, its back seat full of shoes, set lists and guitar player gear. "My green room," he shrugs.

Mondays he's at the Legion jam. Most Tuesdays he's at T. Paul's. Wednesday nights he leads the jam at the Port of Call with drummer



Photo by Erick Bengel

From left: Don Burgett, of Seaside, on bass; Ray Coffey, of Seaside, on tenor saxophone; Maggie Kitson, of Tolovana Park, doing vocals and percussion; and Richard Thomasian, of Warrenton, on electric guitar play at the Cannon Beach Hardware & Public House. That day, they went by the name "The Thomasian Trio with Maggie Kitson."

Tom Peake and keyboard player Peter Unander. "They've both got big ears," he says, generous, as always, with his bandmates. "They understand music, their instruments. They can pick up on most any song."

Friday or Saturday usually finds him with his Thomasian Trio at Sweet Basil's singing harmonies with stirring vocalist Maggie Kitson. The trio grew from a standing solo gig some years ago at Li'l Bayou in Seaside. Saxophone and flute player Ray Coffey and bassist Don Burgett began to sit in, so regularly and well that, when Sweet Basil's opened and the gig moved to Cannon Beach, Thomasian decided he ought to pay them.

"I wanted to name us something else, but

Ray and Don insisted we were the Thomasian Trio," he recalls. It's a happy, fluid arrangement in Sweet Basil's intimate confines. Some nights as many as seven musicians, often including Jay Speakman on harmonica and Scott Wagner on trumpet, play in the Thomasian Trio — which is just as likely to call itself Maggie and the Cats.

Sundays his trio often plays during brunch at the Bridgwater Bistro in Astoria.

Hardly a Clam or Crab or Wine festival stage hereabouts doesn't enjoy Thomasian's generous and versatile guitar, whether it's with Maggie and the Cats, North Coast Blues or the Thomasian Trio.

So you heard some good music last night? I'll bet Richard T. was there.

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Story by JON BRODERICK

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