

Renowned luthier, festival founder Graf remembered

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Much-lauded luthier Oskar Graf was the founder of the long-running Blue Skies Music Festival in Clarendon. He died in late August at age 81. Supplied photo

A nationally renowned luthier and founder of the long-running Blue Skies Music Festival, Oskar Graf is being remembered by friends for his generous and welcoming spirit.

Graf, 81, died at his home in Clarendon, north of Sharbot Lake, in late August. His Blue Skies Music Festival family will celebrate his life on Saturday, and another celebration is being planned in Westport in November.

Oskar Graf was born in a small town in southern Germany during a 1944 air raid. After the war, his family relocated to Berlin.

“My father grew up in West Germany, did an apprenticeship in fine cabinetry, and then went to design school for interior architecture and furniture design,” son Tony Graf said.

He would meet his wife, Shoshannah (who went by Susan when they were married), on a ferry in Denmark in 1964 and they eventually married. The couple emigrated from Germany to Toronto in 1968 and, two years later, relocated to Clarendon, north of Sharbot Lake, as part of the back-to-the-land movement.

That's where the music-loving Graf began using the skills he had honed in Germany, crafting hand-built instruments. He started with dulcimers before switching to guitars.

As a luthier, Graf was the "finest of craftsmen" who took an old world approach to his work, explained fellow luthier Gord Mylks.

"Oskar was at the top of the craft of woodworking. Other people can build really beautiful-sounding guitars, but not have mastery over wood and grain and humidity and seasoning your wood the correct way and things like that," Mylks said.

"And anybody that built instruments or worked on instruments or saw an 'Oskar Graf,' you can tell that."

That a guitar is referred to after its creator speaks to how revered Graf's creations were, Mylks continued. Rob Baker of The Tragically Hip, jazz and classical guitarist Roddy Elias and fingerstyle guitarist Don Ross are among the many owners of an 'Oskar Graf.'

"They're precise and beautiful and symmetrical, and there's nothing out of place on an Oskar Graf, or nothing that isn't perfect somehow," he said.

Mylks, who worked alongside Graf for a year, said luthiers often are too focused and busy to accommodate others, but not Graf.

"Oskar was different," he said. "He was still warm and open and willing to help you and teach you. I felt lucky to be allowed into his space."

The first time Don Ross met Graf was as a performer at the Blue Skies Festival, held on Graf's property in Clarendon.

After the festival, "I went up to his workshop on the hill and got to know his guitars a little bit," Ross said from Germany, where he was on tour, "and then I finally got him to make me a guitar in 1995."

That particular guitar had seven strings and was modeled after a Brazilian guitar Ross had long admired. They discussed what kind of wood would be used and other specifications, including an indulgence Ross wanted.

"I saw Pat Metheny had a guitar with his name on the 14th fret or something, so I said, 'Could you possibly put my name on it?' So he made little brass letters, and put them on it," Ross recalled.

"I still have that guitar 30 years later. It's very much a prized possession, and I've used it on a lot of my recordings."

Whenever Ross was in the Clarendon/Westport area, he would always try and pay Graf a visit.

"He was always such a lovely, welcoming guy," Ross said. "He was very hospitable."

One of Graf's oldest friends was Bruce McGregor, who's been known simply as Magoo since he was in grade school.

The singer-songwriter has been the emcee of the Blue Skies festival since 1978, and owns two Graf-built guitars, including one of the last ones made.

“He made hundreds of instruments that have had an impact around the world, instruments that are on par with any instrument of its kind ever built,” Magoo suggested.

“The ripples of his influence are truly deep and wide.”

Magoo and Graf met the year after Blue Skies had started, in 1975. Magoo had been performing at the Perth Hotel when one of the audience members told him he should sign up for the new Blue Skies Music Festival in Clarendon, a short drive away.

“I knocked on his door and said, ‘Hi, my name is Magoo. I’m playing at the Perth Hotel. They told me you have a music festival and gee willikers, mister, blah, blah, blah, blah.’ And he just said, ‘Come on in. Sit down.’ It was amazing. I still remember that moment. We had a cup of tea, and his son, Tony, was about two or three years old, crawling around on the floor at the time, and his wife Susan was there, and I became friends with this stranger right away.”

The year after his first performance, Magoo was asked to return to play and serve as co-emcee. The next year, he was asked to be the emcee, and has served in that role ever since.

Magoo and Graf — former artistic director Al Rankin called Magoo the heart of the festival, Graf its soul — got to know each other well over the years, and continued to spend time together over the years. They continued to stay in touch.

Magoo admitted he’s still trying to come to grips with his dear friend’s death.

“It’s just really sad. I mean, he was 81 years old. He lived a great life. That’s the upside of it all,” Magoo said. “We had a great time at the festival this year, and we all had fun together, and he was going to be coming to our house (a couple of weekends ago) for an event. It was just so sudden, you know.”

For Magoo, a story that illustrates Graf’s generosity is what he did for the Blue Skies Music Festival shortly after its 25th anniversary.

Graf, who owned the land on which the festival takes place every August long weekend, told Magoo and others on the festival committee that he “might not live here forever.”

“He said, ‘I might decide to sell this property, and in that case, whoever gets the property after me might not have an interest in a music festival on the property,’ ” Magoo recalled.

“He said he’d been thinking about it, and he decided that, if you really want to move forward with this idea of keeping the festival going, then he would be interested in having a surveyor come in, survey the property and then have it appraised.” He would then sell the property to the festival at the appraised value.

The festival bought the property in 2006.

“We often talk about what a great move that was for the festival,” Magoo suggested, “thanks to Oscar.”

Kate Thomas, who worked as the festival’s general co-ordinator when partner Dale Driver was its artistic director, will remember her Graf as an honourable and loving person.

“He really felt that peace and love and community and sharing and music was what brought people together,” she said.

Al Rankin, who served as the festival’s artistic director on two separate occasions, said that Graf liked the festival the way it was.

“He wasn’t interested in any kind of commercialization or making it bigger,” Rankin said.

Graf had always wanted to keep it small — the property itself only had room for so many people, mind you — and they could have sold eight times as many tickets as they did.

Sometimes you wouldn’t notice Graf at his own festival as he didn’t go around like he owned the place, even though he did, Rankin said.

“He wasn’t a person that tried to generate any kind of interest in himself,” said Rankin, who’s also an owner of an Graf- crafted guitar.

“He was very soft spoken, very humble, so he kind of blended in.”

Tony Graf said that the only time his father revelled in attention was at the festival.

“He took the philosophical position that external accolades were not something to be sought,” the younger Graf said from Los Angeles, where he works in the film and television industry.

Tony Graf spent only a few years in the Clarendon area before moving to Toronto with his mother when his parents divorced.

He would come down regularly, and remembers spending more time during the summers with his father.

“We had a long-running conversation trying to solve the problems of the world,” the younger Graf chuckled. “It started when I was about 12 and never came to any resolution.”

Tony Graf spent grades 7 and 8 with his father and wife Claudia Brown when they spent two years in Vanuatu, an island east of Australia, working on behalf of the Canadian University Service Overseas, or CUSO, in the mid-1980s. There, Graf was running a furniture factory.

“I don’t think he particularly liked managing the people when he was running that furniture factory, but I think he really enjoyed the mental exercise of designing and figuring out how to manufacture stuff,” his son said.

His father had a unique perspective because of his extensive travels. Oskar Graf had travelled across Germany on motorcycle while still a teenager, and crossed the Atlantic Ocean four times working as a ship’s carpenter between his apprenticeship and design school.

His father also travelled across Canada four times by himself.

“He was a curious person and he wanted to see things firsthand,” Tony Graf said, adding that his father was both well-informed and politically astute.

Tony Graf was trying to visit his father more often these past few years, and that included a father-son trip to the East Coast just last summer.

He'd talked to his dad on the phone two days before he died. He was making plans to travel to Europe, build more guitars and such.

"For me, I kind of take solace in that he was living his life, and then he was just there and then not," Graf said.

"Quite frankly, we should all be so lucky to go quickly like that."

Since his father's death, Tony Graf has been struck hearing about how his father was highly thought of, even by people he only knew casually.

"It was gratifying," Tony Graf said, "to see the impact that he had on people."

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