

A SPECIAL MAN CREATES A SPECIAL ORCHESTRA

When Cleveland, Ohio, native Gair Linhart stuck out his thumb 43 years ago to go visit a friend in La Joya, New Mexico, he could never have predicted what life had in store for him. Nor could he have known how many lives he would enrich with Special Orchestra®.

The singer/songwriter/guitarist/harmonica player/poet/novelist had been living the life of a troubadour before buying an adobe ruin in La Joya in 1984, but by 1989, having fixed the place up, he found himself in need of a steady job. With the help of a friend, he went to work at the Los Lunas Hospital and Training School, which served individuals with developmental disabilities, a field unfamiliar to Linhart.

"Before I started the job, I thought that most of the people I would be working with were happy, cuddly Down syndrome individuals who were always ready with a big hug for strangers and were likely

to pop out with cute, incongruous statements," he says. "I quickly learned that the people who I would be working with had challenges and hopes and dreams just like all of ours. It changed my life for the better."

When the movement to deinstitutionalize pushed the hospital's residents out into the world, Linhart saw a need to continue to provide a musical outlet for these individuals. Little by little, he came to develop a method that enabled people with a wide range of disabilities to make music together.

Years before, studying with his mentor, the great blues guitarist Robert Junior Lockwood, he had been introduced to open tuning, a way of tuning a stringed instrument that allows the player to play a chord just by strumming, without having to press the strings down. With stringed instruments tuned to an open C chord, players of almost any ability could blend together fairly well with the other chords in a simple song in the key of C. Add percussion instruments and the occasional C

harmonica, and you've got an orchestra.

In 1999, with this method in hand and leveraging his experience in Los Lunas, Linhart founded Special Orchestra® to help children and adults with developmental disabilities worldwide share in the joy of making music. For 17 years now, this nonprofit, working on a shoestring budget, has been spreading the word, with some members of the New Mexico Special Orchestra®, the first of its kind, even making an appearance at the Special Olympics in Ireland in 2003. Linhart has published a pamphlet that details his method and a play-along CD that the nonprofit offers free to anyone interested in starting their own orchestra.

Everyone is welcome to join the New Mexico orchestra at its regular music sessions, held in both Albuquerque and Belen, whenever they can, and there is never a fee to participate. Players can bring their own instrument or use one of the orchestra's. The group also performs at a number of events around the state, such as the Albuquerque Folk Festival and Expo New Mexico, throughout much of the year.

Just recently, Linhart has opened the La Joya Music and Nature Retreat. Located an hour south of Albuquerque, the retreat includes the Bill and Agnes Thimble Theater, named in honor of his parents. "Perhaps the tiniest theater in the state of New Mexico," he says. The wheelchair-accessible facility boasts an ADA-compliant bathroom, two shady gazebos, and a bird refuge. The New Mexico Special Orchestra® played the theater's inaugural event in May.

Linhart stresses that he is not a music therapist. His intent is to enrich participants' lives, and he has been wildly successful at that. Rhonda Castleberry, whose son, Bryan, aka "Rappin' Bryan," has been an enthusiastic member of the orchestra since the beginning and says he goes to the music sessions all the time, put it quite simply: "Bryan loves to play his drums. He plays his guitar. And it doesn't matter if you're good or whatever—they love it. And the benefit for me is it makes him happy." 🍷



Gair Linhart helps provide participants with a special musical outlet.

Be sure to check out *Musically Speaking* Mel's online music journal, at www.melminter.com.

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