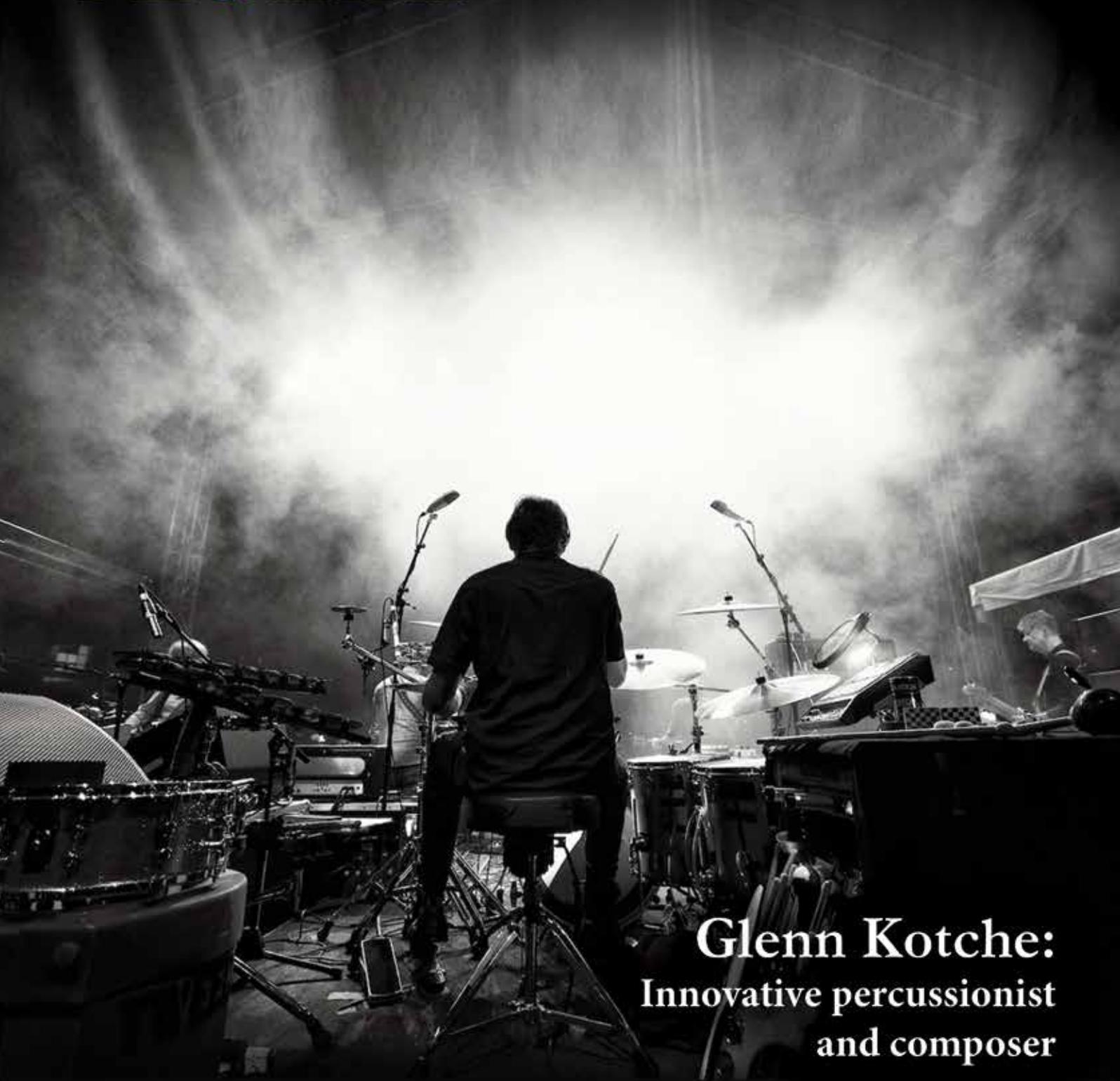


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Glenn Kotche:
Innovative percussionist
and composer



GLENN KOTCHE '94 FA:

A creative life with Wilco and beyond

By Hal Morris

Whatever turns his music career took, Glenn Kotche '94 FA traces it all back to what he credits as a well-rounded education from the University of Kentucky.

Best known as the drummer and percussionist for the Chicago-based rock band Wilco, Glenn Kotche has carved out a career that has seen him play in front of thousands of fans around the world, perform just about every form of music imaginable and even create music on a kitchen faucet.

None of which, he says, would have been possible if he had not come to Kentucky to study under professor of percussion, Jim Campbell.

“That’s something I got at UK that there was no way I would have gotten somewhere else. I got a uniquely well-rounded education in percussion and music,” Kotche says.

Kotche came to UK from suburban Chicago specifically to study with Campbell in the College of Fine Arts’ prestigious percussion program.

“Kentucky was one of the main schools I auditioned for,” Kotche says. “I came to study with Jim. He won me over with his reputation.”

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Most of the schools Kotche looked at, he says, had more of a conservatory approach to music, where professors have one way of training and it was, “Their way or the highway.

“So there were a lot more classical training-styled programs,” says Kotche, who experienced something different at UK. “He didn’t just let me focus on one area.

“Jim realized we need to be well-rounded students in a lot of areas. He treated us as individuals and realized what our interests were and what our strengths and weaknesses were,” Kotche says. “Jim always kept very current and realized there are a lot of different job opportunities for working musicians in this day and age. You can’t just churn out kids to get a symphony job, because there are only a handful of those open each year.”

To that end, Kotche participated in pretty much everything he could at UK. He was in the marching band, orchestra, wind ensemble, jazz band, pep band for men’s and women’s basketball, percussion ensemble, steel drum band and competitive drumline. He also played for dance classes and musicals.

“I think UK was a good incubator for Glenn,” Campbell says. “With the entire faculty contributing to musical growth, including my graduate students, they’ve been all highly successful. This was a good launching pad for him and his career.”

Of course, his learning did not stop at the classroom door. Around Lexington, Kotche threw himself into playing rock, country and other types of music. He learned to play jazz at the now closed High on Rose with David Fanning.

“When I first came in as a freshman, I didn’t have a clue how to play jazz other than big-band jazz in a school setting,” Kotche says. “High on Rose is where I really cut my teeth playing jazz. When I got closer to graduation, there was a band called The

Placebos that played country covers. It was all acoustic, and that’s where I learned to play the brushes outside of a jazz setting. My experience was spread all over the place.”

MAKING HIS MARK

After graduation, Kotche stayed in Lexington to play drums in a production of the musical “Hair.” Then, armed with the tools he learned at UK, Kotche set out to make a living as a musician. But he knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

“With the degree I got, there is no guarantee. It’s not like law or a medical degree, where you’re likely to land a job. There really are few jobs for just having a bachelor’s degree,” he says. “If I wanted to be a professor, I’d need a master’s and Ph.D., but I knew at the end of my undergrad years I at least wanted to try and play professionally first.”

Did he have as a career goal to become part of one the most influential and important bands in the world with Wilco?

“Not even a little bit,” he says laughing. “Had I known, it might have made things less stressful. But I also don’t know if I would have worked as hard.”

One of his first professional gigs was with Lexington cult hero Paul K and the Weathermen in the late 1990s. “I went to Detroit to audition for the job, and I ended up staying with them for about 3½ years,” Kotche says. “I learned about a lot of different styles of music, and learning how to tour. A big part of the job for any professional musician is learning all the stuff when you’re not on the stage. If you’re not a good hang, you’re not going to work out.”

Kotche also played with birddog, featuring Lexington’s Bill Santen, who recorded with the late Elliott Smith, before Kotche caught his first big break.

“I met a lot of people in Chicago because birddog’s label was in Chicago,” he says.

Kotche’s next gig was playing with Edith Frost. One night, they were playing the club Lounge Ax, which happened to be owned by

Sue Miller, wife of his future Wilco bandmate Jeff Tweedy, when influential Chicago musician Jim O’Rourke happened to be in the crowd.

“I was playing a cocktail bass drum and a metal sculpture I had built in Lexington with Gordon Gildersleeve (’91 FA),” Kotche says. “He put all these pieces of metal together so I could play it. Jim loved it, and loved that I could play quietly and was using an interesting setup. So a few months after that I was asked to record with Jim. It was with Jim for the Noise Pop Festival (in Chicago), that I first played with Jeff Tweedy.

“Jeff was listening to Jim, and they got together to play. Jim insisted on bringing me along. Jeff and I hit it off, played that show and went in to make the first Loose Fur record. Then Jeff asked me to work on the ‘Chelsea Walls’ (movie) soundtrack.”

But then, Kotche got the job that would change his life, and the next phase of his career was about to take off.

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LIFE WITH WILCO

At Tweedy's invitation, Kotche became Wilco's next drummer in 2001, just as the band had fired its previous drummer and was preparing to record what became the classic album "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot." Kotche also came on at the same time a film crew was in the studio documenting the making of the band's newest album.



Photo: Whitney Hale

Glenn Kotche is at the drums and talking with students as part of his visit playing with Bang on a Can All-Stars in 2011.

It was quite a situation for Kotche to plunge into, he admits. "There was a full film crew, and Jeff pulled me aside and asked me to be Wilco's new drummer," he says. "It was such a good fit, musically and personally. Jeff knew it was inevitable (Kotche would join the band), and he wanted to avoid any on-camera drama."

Kotche's good fortune reminded him of something former UK music professor, Vince DiMartino, once told him.

"I remember asking him advice about how you make it. He said, 'Look, everyone gets their shot. It just might be tomorrow, it might be 15 years from now. So you better be ready when it happens,'" Kotche remembers. "I kind of trace that back to Lounge Ax when Jim was in the audience. I connect the dots from there when it happened and all the opportunities that opened up from playing with Jim."

For the past 16 years, and seven albums, Kotche has been behind the drum set with Wilco. The band earned a Grammy Award for best Alternative Music Album in 2005 for the album "A Ghost is Born," and has played hundreds of shows around the world. The band also hosts its own music festival, Solid Sound, each June in North Adams, Massachusetts.

SOLO WORK

While Wilco is his full-time job, Kotche continues to record on his own and with other musicians. In 2006, Kotche released his third solo album, "Mobile," on Nonesuch, the label Wilco was once on.

"Once I put that out on Nonesuch, a lot of artists heard it, and I started being asked to write pieces for them," he says.

Besides albums Kotche has released under his own name, he has recorded four albums with Darin Gray as experimental music duo On Fillmore. He has also worked with Yo-Yo Ma and the Silkroad Ensemble, Bang on a Can All-Stars, eighth blackbird and Third Coast Percussion, as well as many other groups.

He is currently a composer-in-residence with the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra (CYSO). He had a new piece for orchestra and solo percussion performed by the orchestra, and arranged his piece "Mobile" for CYSO's philharmonic orchestra.

Joshua Simonds, executive director of the Percussive Arts Society in Indianapolis, recruited

Kotche to the CYSO when he was executive director. Simonds said Kotche is the poster child for not only arts education, but also for giving back.

"We wouldn't have a Glenn Kotche if it wasn't for arts education," says Simonds, who also hosted Kotche to an event when Wilco was in Indianapolis this summer. "Glenn was a guinea pig, and it was so successful. Now we're looking to do more. Whatever Glenn can do to help, he's always happy to do. Things that are a big part of his life, he gives back. That's something that's amazing."

A VARIED MUSICAL CAREER

All of Kotche's composition is based off drumming, since he did not study musical composition at UK.

"But all of the classes I took — orchestration, counterpoint and arranging totally paid off. And still, when I approach anything, I approach it as a percussionist," he says. "Then I blow it up and transpose it for other instruments. I see composing as separate, but still very much a part of my drumming."

Wilco, a collection of musicians that come together as a band, has also given Kotche the opportunity to perform music that would not fit into the framework of a rock band. That in turn, he says, makes the band better.

"I'm very fortunate for the opportunities that exist. Wilco has always valued that we are a collection of musical personalities that work great in a rock band setting ... our other projects make us stronger and make us appreciate what we have in Wilco, how well we get along, how well we work together musically," he says. "It's always been valued, all the other things we do that bring greater value to the band. That is very forward thinking of Jeff."

One musical piece Kotche called a "fluke" was the 2013 Delta Faucet Co. commercial, where he literally played the Four Tops hit "Reach Out I'll Be There," on a set of kitchen faucets.

It began as a casual conversation with then Leo Burnett exec Gabe McDonough at their daughters' piano practice. Was it possible to

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play music on a faucet? This turned into Kotche going to Los Angeles to see that conversation become an ad. Kotche initially recorded all of the sounds and did the arrangement, but soon was recruited to actually be in the commercial.

Again, his UK training came into play.

“They realized, no actor could do this ... I thought, ‘OK, let’s wrap my head around it,’ and all my training came in. Thank God I had training in other areas of percussion because I don’t think a regular rock drummer could have done that,” he says. “It was more suited for a person who had training in classical and marching music. I was hesitant, but this is showcasing percussion in a new way, so I just went for it. It was challenging for sure.”

He recruited his wife Miiri Kotche, a professor of bioengineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago, to help him with ideas for a 2014 multi-media performance for Third Coast Percussion called “Wild Sound.” It was commissioned by University of Notre Dame in collaboration with its College of Engineering.

Kotche asked his wife for help on the project, and she turned him on to Arduino technology, which enabled the engineers to build an entirely new instrument to be played in the final section.

“It’s a huge part of the piece,” he says. “It’s great having a wife who’s not a musician but I’m able to learn from and get inspiration from.”

THE FUTURE

Kotche credits his wife for keeping things steady at home while he’s out on the road. He’s ready to give back to her. Miiri Kotche won a Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program award to study medical-device design in Finland. The family is heading to Helsinki for six months, his way of supporting her career. He will use that opportunity to recharge and think about what is next in his musical journey.

“It’s a great opportunity for me to step back and immerse with the kids. It’s nice to get that break and rejuvenate and get a lot of ideas. You need breaks sometimes. If you always work, you can run dry or just repeat. It’s good to get the creative juices flowing again and get ready for the next phase.”

That next phase will, of course, continue to include Wilco.

“Wilco — that will keep going. We’re playing better than ever. We’re all still inspired, we’re healthy and we’re having fun,” Kotche says. “But I also enjoy composing. I’m definitely due to make another solo record soon. So I’m going to put some ef-

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Glenn Kotche and his family enjoyed a visit to New York and checked out the Brooklyn Bridge.



Photo : Glenn Kotche

fort into doing that. I just started working in the field of dance. I did an hour-long piece (titled “Calling Glenn”) with Danielle Agami, an Israeli choreographer that premiered in Seattle. And we’re doing it at UCLA in the fall.

“Instead of having my hands in many difference pies, I want to focus on just two or three things to work on.”

GIVING BACK TO UK

Since everything Kotche practices comes back to his training at UK, he tries to give back as much as possible. In 2011, Kotche came back and visited students before his performance at the Singletary Center.

“I actually wish I could do more, but with my schedule, it makes it hard,” he says.

Kotche says he tries to get back to Lexington, mostly because of his gratitude for Campbell and the percussion program.

“The studio has grown, and there’s really a strong caliber of students now. I don’t know if I would be accepted now,” Kotche says. “It’s great seeing how the program and Jim have evolved ... Things they do now are light years ahead from what we were doing. I can’t tell you how fortunate I feel about studying with Jim and the example he gives has been huge for so many of us that have been through the program.”

Campbell says he always appreciates the time Kotche or any of his alums can spare to spend with his students.

“I’m impressed more by the way he’s still a part of the UK alumni network,” he says. “He savors those as opportunities to give back and teach. He’ll always find time to interact with UK alums around the country.”

In 2007, Kotche received the College of Fine Arts Distinguished Alumni Award.

“It was definitely an honor, and I guess some sort of validation that I did OK — that I didn’t disappoint Jim or my parents,” Kotche says. “For me, a big part of it was Jim has done such tremendous work for so long and of course I feel he doesn’t get enough recognition because he doesn’t toot his own horn. But I’m also one of dozens of graduates he’s churned out that are doing amazing things. That was the biggest honor for me to be able to shine a little more light on Jim and the studio.” ■

Watch this video from several years ago of Wilco drummer Glenn Kotche inspiring UK students: www.ukalumni.net/glennkotche