

In search of the bossa nova spirit

Mactaggart prize winner to travel Latin America with his guitar on his back

By Geoff McMaster

Sandy and Cécile Mactaggart couldn't have imagined a better reward when they created their Faculty of Arts essay contest.

Dr. George Lang plans to use his \$10,000 winnings from this year's Mactaggart Writing Award to travel around South America over the next two summers with a guitar on his back. No itinerary, no expectations, just a world of possibility. It's exactly what the Mactaggarts had in mind: travel and open your mind.

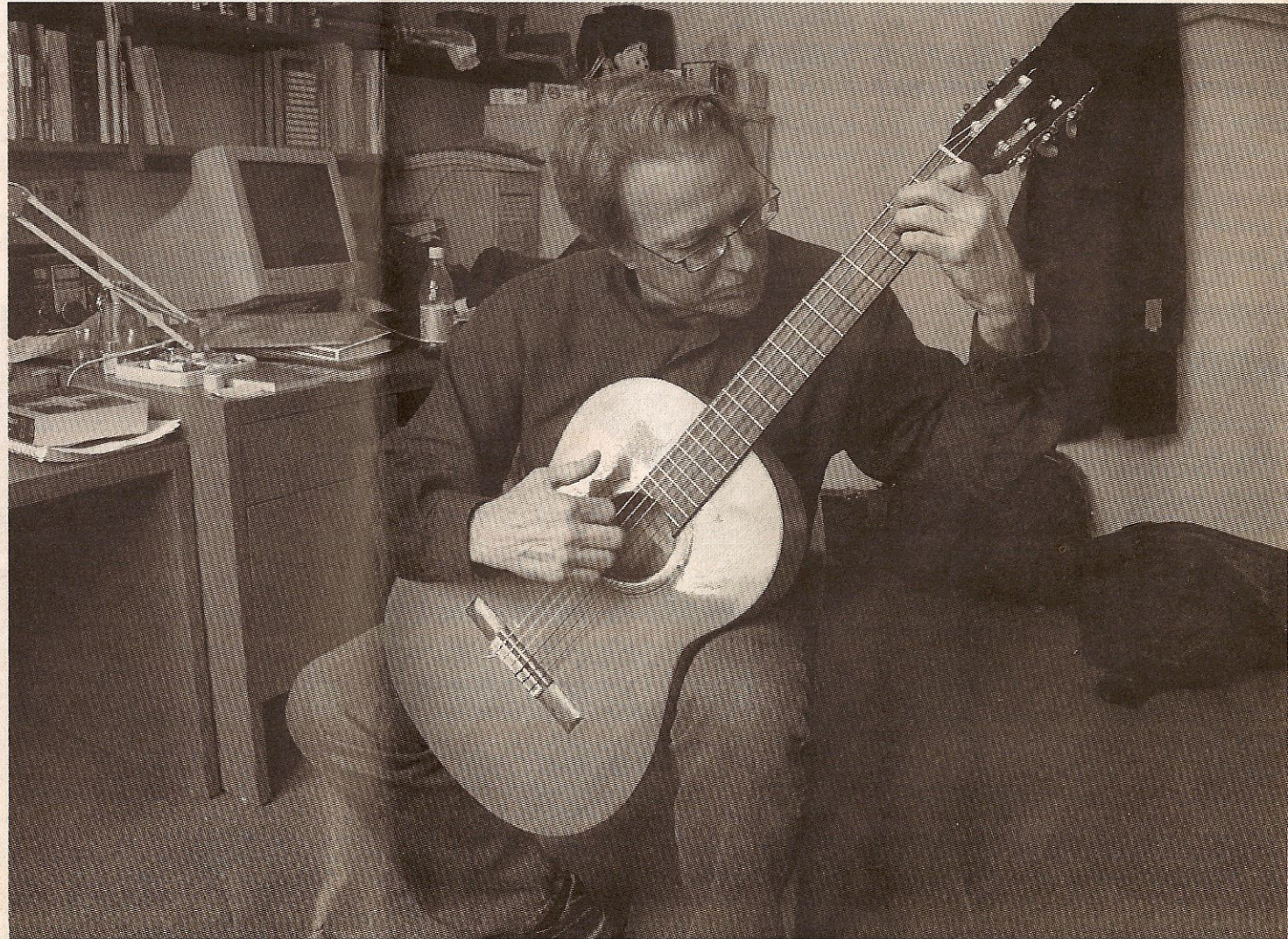
"I'll go to Rio and try to figure out what to do from there," said Lang, a professor of French literature and cultural studies. He plans to wander the country in search of guitar stores, schools, concerts and any other opportunity that presents itself – from master classes to informal jam sessions. Then he'll move on to Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico.

Best of all, he doesn't have to account for any of it. It all falls under the category of personal growth, and when the money runs out, he comes home.

"The idea of just being able to go find out what's going on and carry the guitar is fabulous," he said.

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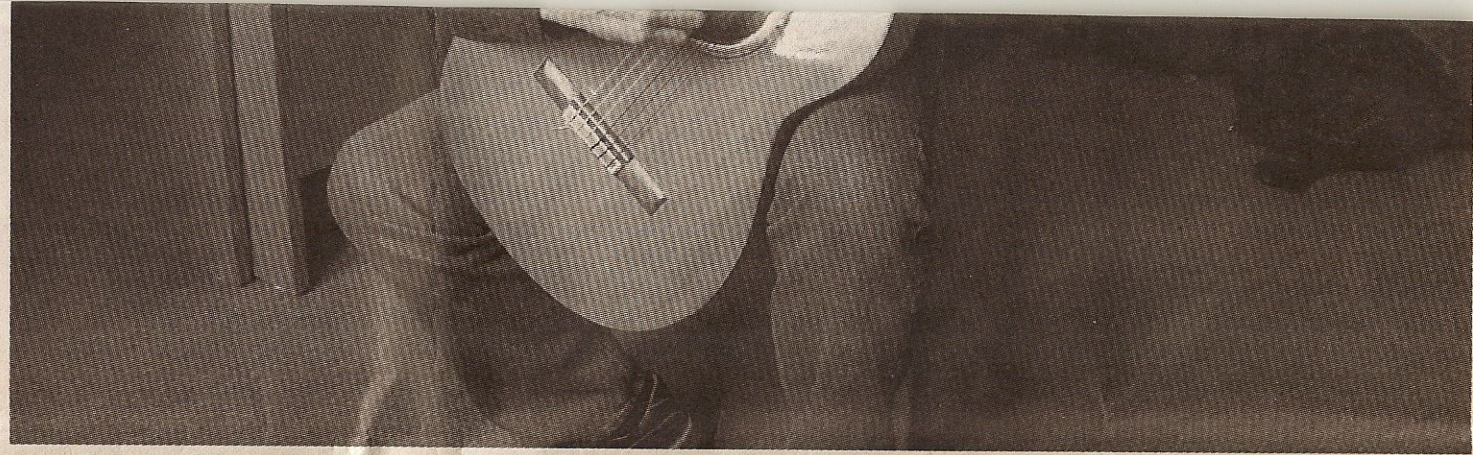
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Lang knows well enough not to plan things out too meticulously. He once took a short trip to Seville, Spain, with the idea of learning flamenco, "but flamenco's not what happened to me. There were all kinds of Salsa things and jazz things going on, all kinds of other music that wasn't the obvious thing.

"So who knows? I've always had a thing for bossa nova and Brazilian guitar. One of the first movies I remember seeing is *Black Orpheus* (the Brazilian film that launched the bossa nova movement in North America) and have written academic pieces on bossa nova."

But as he learned from virtuoso guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima during a master class in Edmonton last fall, "it is virtually impossible to acquaint oneself with the Latin American repertoire at this distance."

In Lang's mind, life is all about timing. As the deadline for the Mactaggart Award approached, he was coming to terms with the death of his life-long friend Georg, an intellectual soul mate who shared his love of the French language, literature and



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wine. Lang felt he needed to write through and understand what that relationship meant to him; the essay contest was the perfect catalyst. And so *The Death of a Psychoanalyst* began to take form.

"It's a fabulous concept because, even by virtue of the fact that even if you don't win, you still have done this," he said.

As Lang describes in the essay's opening paragraph, Georg Garner walked out of a seminar in Paris last June to get a breath of fresh air and collapsed on the sidewalk. The cause of his death remains unknown. For Lang, his friend's sudden death unleashed a flood of memories about time spent together as students in "Bohemian Montreal," later in Edmonton, Budapest and Paris.

Though their meetings became less frequent with time, they were always intense, characterized by the kind of incessant con-

versation that went on "until the fire died, well after midnight," more often than not in a language native to neither.

"Books bound Georg and I together," writes Lang in his essay, "but we read them like French theorists read food. It was a system or code of books we shared, not particular ones. Often I initiated a conversation with Georg by scanning his shelves, looking not for actual reading matter, but token titles to ante and start the play. To this day I have a crazy idea of myself dancing around like a bee in the combs of the flat on rue Charenton sending signals to Georg about where the pollen lay."

Lang quickly discovered that writing about Georg's death was paradoxically writing against death. "The writing preserves him," said Lang. "When I wrote this I realized there are things outside of so-called

ordinary reality. Obviously I believe he's still there, even though I know he's dead."

Lang's Latin odyssey will be a solo journey. His wife isn't crazy about guitar and serendipity has a way of favouring the lone traveller anyway. But chances are he'll raise a glass or two while on the road to an old friend before turning to the solace of his instrument.

"The terms of the trip say stimulation," said Lang. How can he go wrong?

The Death of a Psychoanalyst is available online at: www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/arts/lang.cfm . ■

(*Ultimate R & R* is a regular feature in *Folio* profiling the unique off-campus passions of university faculty and staff. If you have a story suggestion contact Geoff McMaster at geoff.mcmaster@ualberta.ca or Richard Cairney at richard.cairney@ualberta.ca .)