



An Avant-Gardist's View of America, as Seen From the Back Seat



Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

The downtown cellist Erik Friedlander at his home in SoHo.

By BEN SISARIO Published: July 17, 2007

Every summer, like clockwork, Erik Friedlander's father would pack up the family in their 1966 Chevy pickup, with the two kids in the camper behind. From their home in Rockland County, they headed out West for two to three months of driving, camping, photographing, and more driving and camping.

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It's an ordinary summer ritual for an American family, but this family was not quite ordinary. Dad was the photographer Lee Friedlander, a MacArthur fellow whose street scenes and jazz portraits have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art. And Erik Friedlander, now 47, is the premier cellist on the downtown music scene, with a CV that includes collaborations with people from John Zorn to Courtney Love.

In his music Mr. Friedlander has tended toward esoteric themes; his last solo album was based on "Les Chants du Maldoror," the dark prose poem beloved by the French Surrealists. But for his new "Block Ice & Propane" (Skipstone) — the avant-cello album of the summer — he

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Oscar Bailey via Erik Friedlander

The Friedlanders during a family road trip outside Tampa, Fla., in 1972. From left, Erik, Anna, and their parents, Lee and Maria.



The Friedlander family

Erik and Anna Friedlander in front of the family's camper.



Maria Friedlander

The Friedlander family truck, a 1966 Chevy in which they took all their vacations, outside the Friedlander home in Rockland County, New York.

turned for inspiration to those indelible memories from the back of the camper: peering out into the night sky, visiting kooky relatives, loading up the icebox. The album will be released next month, and Mr. Friedlander will play from it tonight at Joe's Pub.

In pieces like "King Rig" and "Yakima" Mr. Friedlander offers an idiosyncratic version of American roots music, with steady, folklike themes that unfold like a trip down an endless highway. He plays most of the pieces without a bow, preferring pizzicato and his own adaptation of the finger-picking style of the guitar. The result is loose and meditative.

In making the album, Mr. Friedlander said, he was guided by a single question.

"What is an American sound, what does that even mean?" he said, sitting at his kitchen table in the spacious but cozy SoHo apartment he shares with his wife, the choreographer Lynn Shapiro, and 8-year-old daughter, Ava. Family photos line the walls, and an armlong section of one bookshelf is devoted to his father's works. "So I started checking out American music. But I realized that a lot of what I have in my brain about America is from these trips, seeing national parks and small towns and diners and parades — everything my father wanted to cover."

Tall and athletic-looking, his hair trimmed to a stubble, Mr. Friedlander demonstrated the techniques he used in making the album. He altered the cello's usual tuning on some tracks to let open strings resound, and as his fingers fluttered over the strings, the instrument sounded at times like a deep, soft banjo.

Mr. Friedlander's dexterity has allowed him a busy career. Besides his work in the jazz and avant-garde worlds — in the last few weeks he toured in Europe with Mr. Zorn and recorded an album of Mr. Zorn's cello works — he has lately become an in-demand player among brainy indie-

rock acts like the Mountain Goats and John Vanderslice.

"He's not just the go-to guy in the new-music world if you need a cellist," said John Schaefer, host of "New Sounds" and "Soundcheck" on WNYC-FM. "I mean, he is. But the guy seems like he can play virtually anything really convincingly, whether contemporary classical or indie rock or the downtown jazz thing."

The Friedlander family trips — the passengers also included his mother, Maria, and his younger sister, Anna — were built around his father's assignments and teaching across the country. And while the son did not take part in his father's work, he did absorb some of the trademark Friedlander artistic pragmatism.

"I had a model of someone who just pursued what they needed to do for their art," Erik Friedlander said. "So when I wanted to try to do something different with the cello, I didn't feel like, 'Well, maybe this is impossible, I shouldn't try this.' I know exactly what to do about this: You just do it."

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Mr. Friedlander’s parents still live in the same house he grew up in, and his father, at 73, continues to take pictures. His mother said the family trips were planned in part to give their children a sense of the vastness of the country and the variety of the culture outside New York.

“They went fishing, they went hiking, swimming,” she said of the children’s daily itineraries. “It was also boring and tedious at times. But I think our kids got a sense of what it was to be an American.”

*Erik Friedlander plays tonight at Joe’s Pub at the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village, (212) 967-7555, \$12.*

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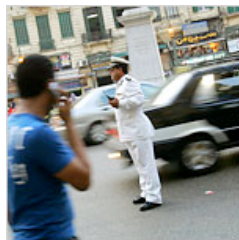
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