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By OWEN MCNALLY, Special To The Courant

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Specializing in relaxed, old-school jazz and cozy classic songbook material, guitarist **Guy Van Duser** and clarinetist **Billy Novick** serve their crisply crackling chamber music Saturday, Jan. 12, at 8 p.m. for the **Connecticut Guitar Society** at Hartford's Asylum Hill Congregational Church.

For more than three decades, the duo has presented its wry, gingery mix of classic, syncopated Americana — everything from ancient jazz pieces to vintage Tin Pan Alley tunes — in concerts, clubs and festivals throughout North America and Europe.

While much of its vital, swing-oriented material is rooted in songs from the 1920s through the 1940s, the duo can make them all sound new and forever young with its fresh improvisations steeped in a lively sense of interplay.

Besides the nine recordings they've made as a duo, Van Duser and Novick have appeared together frequently on **Garrison Keillor's** "A Prairie Home Companion" and been featured in a 30-minute interview on **NPR's** "All Things Considered." Van Duser's guitar playing, backed by Novick, has been regularly heard on **PBS's** "This Old House" and "Antiques Roadshow."

Keillor, a fan of the duo's wit and warmth, has called the pair "the two elegant gents of the swing music world."

Van Duser's fingerpick guitar style gives his instrument a piano-like capability, allowing him to play with an uncanny but seemingly effortless ability to play bass lines, chords and melodies all at the same time, creating a layered effect charged with rhythmic pizzazz.

Van Duser, a part-time professor in the guitar department at Berklee College of Music, explains on his faculty website how he teaches his students his dexterous, fingerpicking technique:

"I show them how to take melodies on the guitar — solo line melodies — and play those melodies while playing the chords at the same time. You're trying to get two layers going. You're using mostly your thumb just to play the lower notes of the chord while the fingers pick out the melody notes on the upper strings. The fingerpickers do that in such a way that the thumb is alternating back and forth on the string, being the rhythm as well. So I'm not just playing the chord under the note. I'm recreating a beat: boom-chick, boom-chick, boom-chick."

Of Van Duser's wizardry, **JazzTimes** has written that his "graceful (and swinging) fingerpicked style is closer to jazz piano than to guitar."

Perhaps one explanation of the pedigree of his piano-like guitar style is that Van Duser as a child first began studying not guitar but piano. In addition, his mother was a classically trained pianist who had studied at the Eastman School of Music.

Despite those early lessons and having a Mom with a concert pianist's ability in the house, piano studies and, later, accordion lessons quickly fell by the wayside as soon as little Guy got hooked on playing guitar duets with his father. At this formative period when raging guitarphilia was enflaming his pre-adolescent imagination, he discovered his father's enticing record collection and a seductive cache of music taped off the radio.

In a life-shaping experience, Van Duser, through a taped radio broadcast he discovered in the family's tape trove, first heard selections from the legendary guitarist **Chet Atkins'** "Finger Style Guitar" album.

Atkins became Van Duser's first icon, his supreme guitar hero and artistic catalyst who inspired his quest to become a guitar virtuoso with a style of his own.

When Van Duser doesn't want to sound like a piano or like someone who was raised as a young guitarist on a nourishing Atkins diet, he's sometimes satisfied to sound like a whole marching band. Marshaling his impressive chops, he has paraded his marching band-like tours de force to thunderous cheers, most famously with his pyrotechnical arrangement of **John Philip Sousa's** "Stars and Stripes Forever," the ultimate guitar hurrah for the Flag of the Free.

Besides a handful of originals, Van Duser and Novick, who also plays saxophone and pennywhistle, mine a wide field of golden oldies, including works by such historic luminaries as **George Gershwin**, Fats Waller, **Scott Joplin**, Jelly Roll Morton, **Glenn Miller** and **Benny Goodman**.

"Every Little Movement," a signature duo release, features their lithe, nuanced and relaxed instrumental and vocal interpretations of tunes ranging from "Wabash Blues" and "Wolverine Blues" to such serene, dreamily romantic, escapist fare as "When My Ship Comes In" and "I'll See You in My Dreams."

Tickets: \$25, general public; \$20, Guitar Society members; available on line at www.ctguitar.org or at [860-249-1132](tel:860-249-1132). Asylum Hill Congregational Church is at 814 Asylum Ave., Hartford.