

# the music man

BY THOMAS K. GROSE

It reads like the curriculum vitae of a 21st century Renaissance man. George D. Stetten has an M.D. from SUNY-Syracuse, a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering from Duke, a master's in neuroscience from New York University, and an engineering degree from Harvard. He was involved in the startup of MIT's Media Lab. And lately, he's getting a lot of enthusiastic press for his "sonic flashlight," an ultrasound device that superimposes on the patient, in real time, the internal image being scanned. But Stetten, 48, insists that his "so-called career" is less than the sum of its parts, and the variety of interesting jobs he's held and degrees he's acquired resulted from indecision—he says he did not know what he wanted to do.

False modesty? Perhaps, but Stetten says that music has really driven and shaped his career. He calls it "an essential part of my life." An accomplished musician—he sings, and plays the piano and guitar—music has been the one constant in Stetten's life since his fingers were first taught to dance over a piano keyboard 42 years ago. Now he's recorded and produced a 10-track CD of his music, *Awake at the Wheel*.

Stetten—whose musical influences include James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, and Carol King—calls his music a "mix of folk, rock, and jazz . . . thoughtful lyrics and humable tunes." An apt description. His next goal is to sell a few thousand copies via cdbaby.com, an online retailer of independent labels. That may take awhile. As of press time, he's sold only 10 copies. But Stetten calls his goal achievable, because the Internet can help talented unknowns find a fan base outside the mega-marketing machines of the major labels. He cheerfully admits to "piggybacking" his CD marketing onto the publicity generated by his sonic

flashlight. "I am not allowed to, and would not want to, shamelessly sell the sonic flashlight. But, if I can get somebody to listen to my music in the meantime, that's great," says Stetten, whose soft-spoken demeanor belies a sharp sense of humor.

Stetten says academia wrongly snubs pop music. The engineering that goes into making music, from the instruments to the

at the MIT Music Lab—which eventually morphed into the Media Lab. There he helped develop a touch-sensitive keyboard that just missed getting a patent. Next stop was Woods Hole, Mass., where he played guitar at a local coffee shop. That's where he met Jim Atkins—an engineer who was involved with the Deep Submersible Alvin, a tiny, three-person research submarine. Stetten developed the sub's first onboard computer system. Next, he enrolled at NYU, and while getting his master's, got involved in the fledgling field of biomedical engineering. "That's when I realized I could do engineering and have a lot of fun with it."

Stetten eventually followed in his father's footsteps and got an M.D. His first prognosis: "That I was clearly not a doctor." He hated blood and making life-and-death decisions. So he focused on biomedical engineering and got his doctorate from UNC. And still, the music muse beckoned. He produced a CD, *The Voices of D.U.M.E.*, that featured songs by Duke students and faculty—including himself. The album sold a few hundred copies at the campus bookstore. Today, he specializes in visualization—putting images from scanning devices on screens—and image analysis—getting

computers to analyze those shapes. He's an assistant professor of bioengineering at the University of Pittsburgh and a research scientist at Carnegie Mellon University. For one of his courses, he had students inventing new musical instruments. One student's novel idea: a "grimace guitar" whose sounds are shaped by the way the player scrunches his face.

Stetten clearly enjoys his work. Nevertheless, he hopes music provides a career coda. "I want to retire on my songs. My dream is to go to the mail box and pick up my royalty checks." But, he adds wryly, "In the meantime, I'll keep my day job."

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recording techniques, "is very advanced, and it's something that should be taught at universities." Not only would many students be interested, he insists, but there's a huge market for those skills.

Although he studied classical piano for 12 years, Stetten preferred pop music, partly because it offered more social interaction. "You couldn't exactly sit down at a party, start playing Beethoven and get a girlfriend." Tinkering with microphones and sound systems while playing in rock bands generated his interest in electrical engineering. After Harvard, he spent a year studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. In the late '70s, Stetten was in Cambridge, Mass., working