

Festival Hill: secluded getaway for music lovers

By John Mabry

Imagine herds of cattle grazing on green, rolling hills as strains of Mozart and Beethoven fill the air. Although it sounds like a scene right out of an 18th century painting, the sights and sounds of one of America's premier classical music institutes beckons from, surprisingly, only an hour drive away.

Known as Festival Hill, the institute is located in the tiny town of Round Top (population 87), and was founded 20 years ago by the internationally recognized concert pianist James Dick.

In 1971, when Dick began to build his vision of an aesthetically pleasing, tranquil and inspiring place of musical study, Festival Hill was little more than a few acres that served as, of all things, the town garbage dump.

With the aid of talented Round Top craftsmen and designers, the site is now a place of such outstanding natural and architectural beauty that it is difficult to imagine its humble beginnings.

The most outstanding architectural attraction of the festival peeks out over the countryside from miles away — the large European-inspired, cupola-crowned concert hall. Designed by area architects under the supervision of Dick, the presently uncompleted hall will someday be a richly detailed work of art, capable of seating 1,200 people.

Other architectural gems on the site include the Clayton House, now a permanent residence for Dick and his staff, and the Menke House, which serves as guest quarters and as a dining facility. Both homes are exquisitely restored area residences whose lavishly detailed exteriors and interiors are a rich offering of German-Texan and Gothic architecture.

A portion of the Menke House, for example, serves as a study of the wood-inlaid ceilings, candelabras and Gothic arches that are planned for the concert hall.

The interior of the Clayton House typifies the festival's eclectic approach to design, one of its trademarks. The woodwork on the ceiling of the parlor, for example, was inspired by the geometric design on a glass plate.

A large collection of antique furnishings, another passion of Dick's, fills both homes.

Other structures added to the site over the years include a Russian gazebo and a swimming pool, as well as an abundance of intricately designed landscaping.

Although the physical structures of Festival Hill are an attraction in themselves, they enhance an environment seriously and primarily devoted to the art of musical study and performance.

Each summer, Festival Hill offers advanced training to a limited number of approximately 80 accomplished musicians worldwide. Participants undergo intensive study under Dick and a host of other distinguished faculty and also perform for the public.

"I feel Festival Hill was meant for a number of reasons," Dick said. "The most important being that it becomes a significant factor in a talented person's music education."

The chamber, vocal and orchestral repertoire includes classical music or "continuing music" from Early Music to works by 20th Century composers.

Many internationally famous classical musicians have taught and performed at the institute since its inception, including conductor Heiichiro Ohyama, principal violist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; Martin Lovett, founding member of the Amadeus Quartet; and celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who made his Texas debut at Festival Hill.

The festival has, in fact, been critically acclaimed as the place to hear "not just the top orchestral players of the next decade, but the first-rank soloists."

Richard Royall, information director for the institute, said its accessibility to musicians of this quality is one of the unique attributes of Festival Hill.

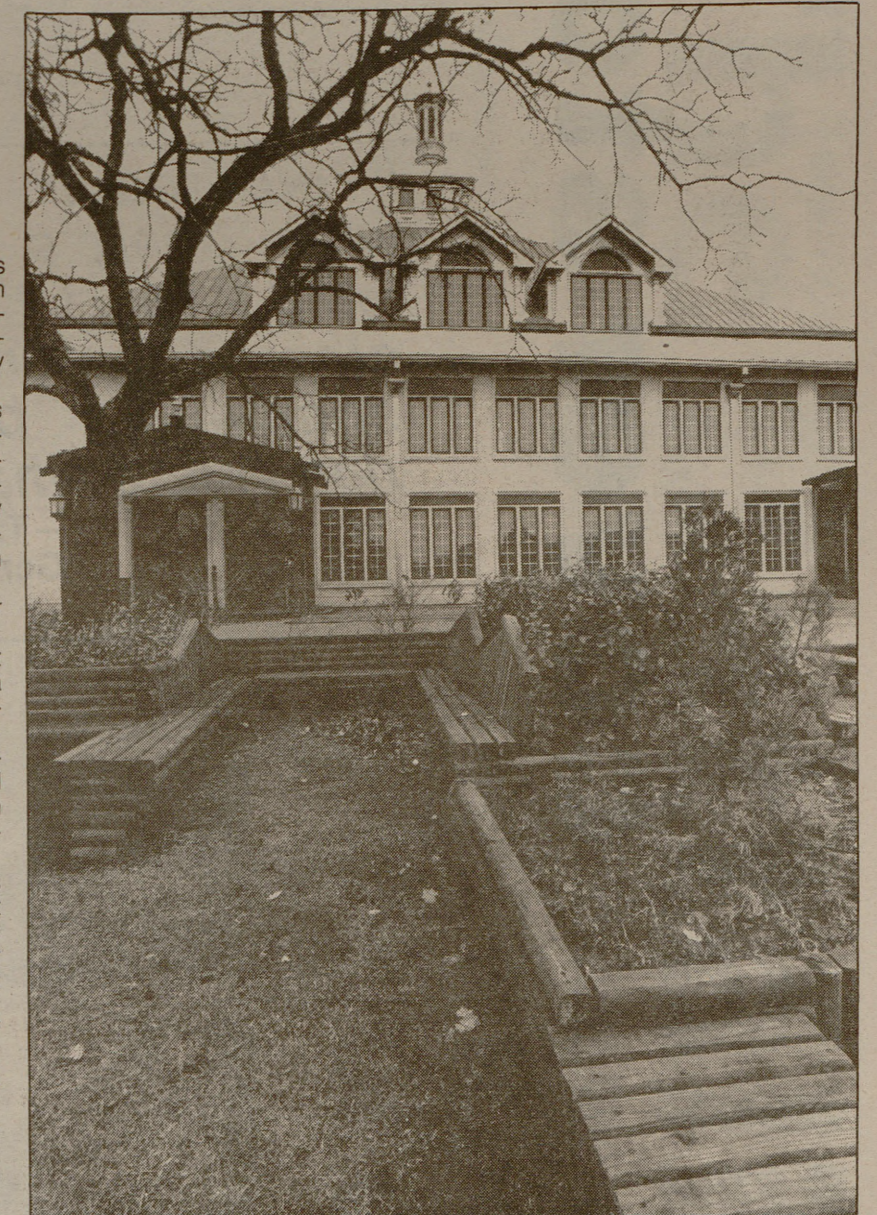
"On an evening when we feature three different performers, our admission price is \$7.50," he said. "Any place else, such as New York, you would have to pay at least \$20 to hear just one of the performances."

In addition to accessibility, Texas hospitality is another strong attraction of the festival. Rather than "artists" removing themselves from the public, Kansas-born Dick and his staff warmly greet old friends and newcomers as welcome guests in the distinctly casual atmosphere they call home.

But the public certainly is not the only beneficiary of the offerings of Festival Hill.

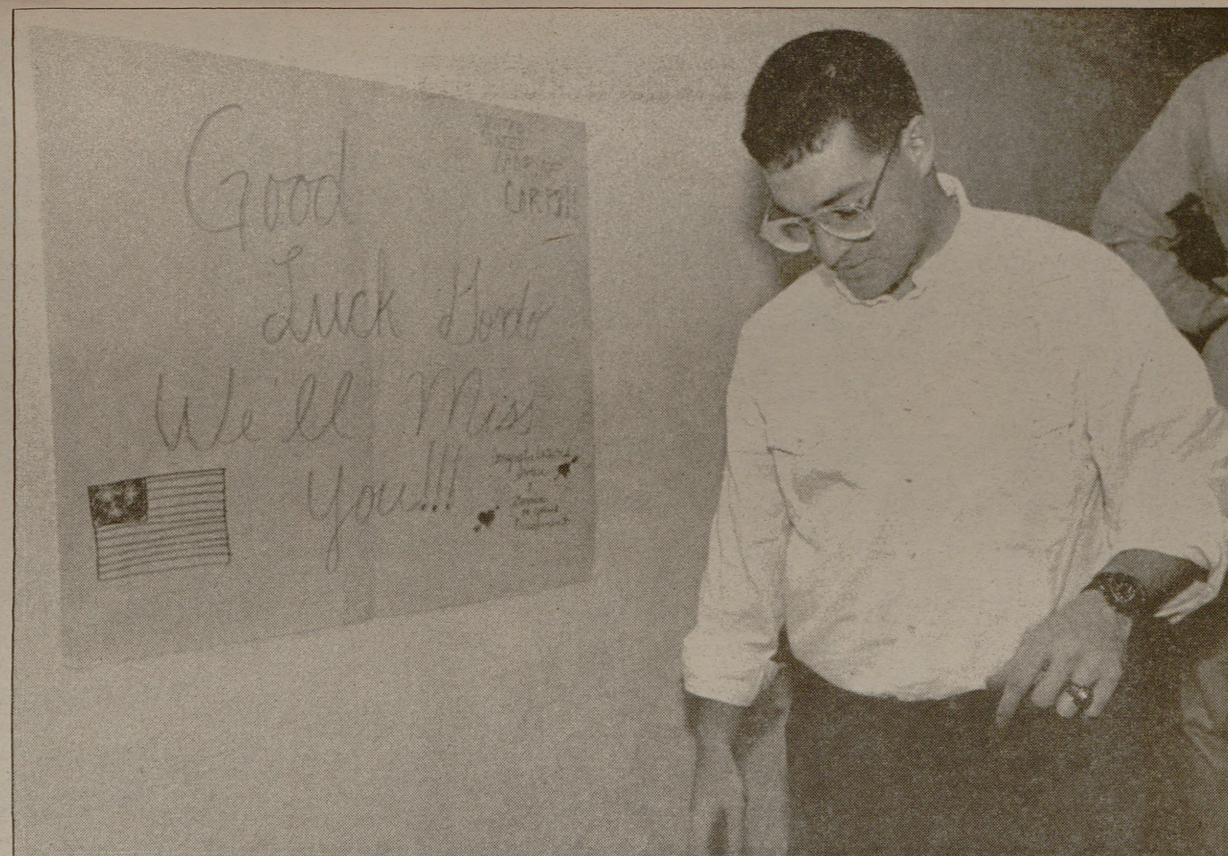
Pianist Sid Norris was one of the original artists to study in Round Top in 1971, and he recently paid a return visit to the site he visited during his college summers.

"Although it has been 20 years, I



Phelan M. Ebenhack

The grand concert hall at Festival Hill stands amongst the well-manicured grounds.



At Gordon Slaton's going away get-together, his buddies drew a banner expressing their feelings for Gordon.

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Christmas, so Slaton waited until the last possible moment to enroll in school. But on Jan. 12, Slaton received notice that his unit had been activated.

"It was almost a feeling of relief," he says. "I thought to myself, 'Alright, now that I know what's going on, let's get it done and over with.'"

"I've got a job to do. I just want to get over there, do it and get on with my life."

This attitude of courage and determination is shared by Slaton and his friends. For many, it's not only an obligation but an opportunity to serve their country.

Todd Champney, a sophomore speech communications major, says he wouldn't hesitate to go either.

"When you're a Marine, you give your life to your country," he says. "I know Gordon loves his country, and that's what he wants to do."

Michael Zanger, a junior political science major, is disappointed to see Slaton leave, but being a reservist himself, he understands the risks involved with the job.

"When you sign up for the reserves, you know what you're getting yourself into," Zanger says. "I don't think Gordon has any regrets."

Maintaining his cool demeanor, Slaton has no regrets of joining the reserves and no second thoughts about going to war. He joined the reserves for several reasons, one of which was camaraderie.

"I joined the Marine Corps because I knew if anything ever happened like this situation in the Persian Gulf, I'd want to be with people I know," says Slaton.

For Slaton, having confidence and trust in his infantry Marine unit is easy.

"The better the people, the better the chance you have of coming through," says Slaton. "We may just be in the reserves and working part time, but we're not amateurs."

Yet before Slaton, an English major, can get on with his life, he must finish "taking care of business." Business that includes last-minute shopping, finalizing his withdrawal papers from the University and writing his will.

"Wills are a big deal," says Slaton, "for anyone who has anything."

And as if it weren't a big deal, he says "wills are just normal procedure."

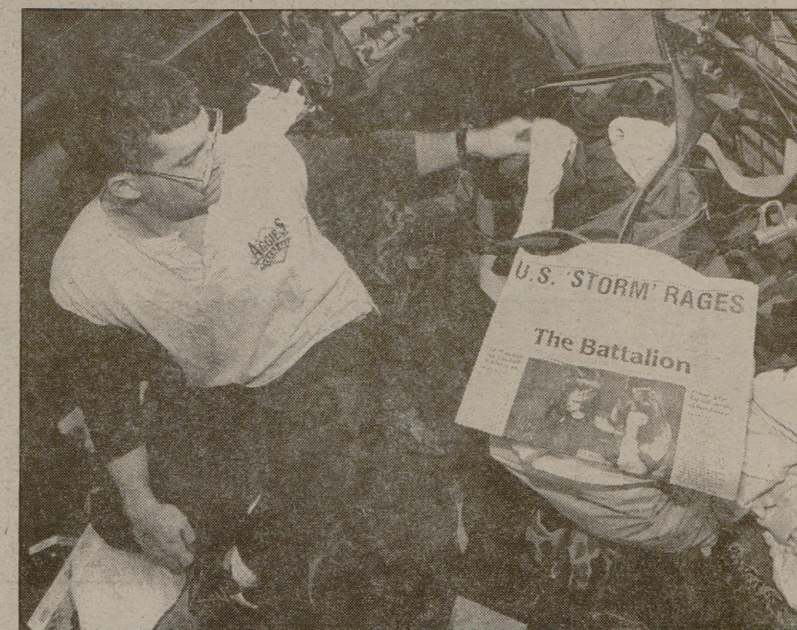
The normalcy of such a process brings tears to the eyes of his friends, family and fiancée. They, like Slaton, try to remain strong and supportive. But just as it is difficult to hide in the desert, it is difficult for them to conceal their feelings.

"I don't want him to go," says Tania Fauquet, his fiancée. She thinks back around Christmas time when he proposed marriage, and her fears of never seeing him again surfaced.

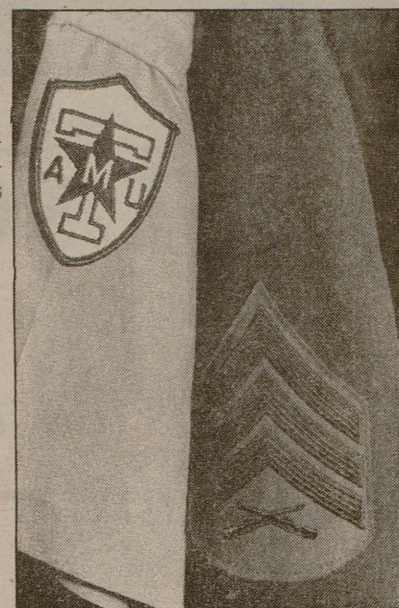
"When we left for Christmas break, I resigned to myself that I probably wouldn't see him again," Fauquet says.

In the past few days, she's been spending a lot of time with Slaton, cherishing every moment together and trying not to worry.

"You reach a time when there's nothing left to say to one another. You want to say something, but just don't know what."



Top: Gordon Slaton sorts and packs his belongings after being called up to serve in the Persian Gulf War. Above: Slaton's Corps of Cadets uniform hangs side-by-side with his U.S. Marine Corps uniform in his closet.



Fauquet joined Slaton on his trip to Houston Tuesday. But before he left, his friends took the opportunity to shake his hand and wish him good luck.

As he loaded the last bags into his car, Gordon Slaton turned to them and in an optimistic voice said, "See you guys next year."