

By Virginia Myers

Charlie Barnett Knows the Score

He should. He wrote it.

Charlie Barnett is about to play one of his favorite tunes.

"Listen to this," he says, as if sharing a delicious secret. And suddenly you can't wait to hear what he has cued up on his computer.

This is a guy who has penned symphonies, scored award-winning films, played before large audiences, and written music for acclaimed poet Maya Angelou's spoken-word performances. But his enthusiasm makes every song he plays feel brand new.

At 62, Barnett looks relaxed and trim in jeans and a snug T-shirt as he discusses life as a composer and musician. A Mac Pro sits at the ready in his light-filled Bethesda home studio, along with several guitars, a grand piano and a banjo. Bookshelves reach two stories up one wall; vintage album covers line another.

The song Barnett plays, "Snow Day," is one he wrote in 2011 and has listened to hundreds of times. Still, he follows each phrase, tilting his head to listen, then punctuating an especially jazzy note with a jab of his elbow. The tune, with its bouncy beat and smooth vocals, sounds like something out of the early '60s.

"I was born with narrow lapels," he jokes.

Take his symphony, *The Blue Chevrolet*,

which conjures up classic family vacations of the era, with its movement "The Detour, the Argument, and finally, the Map." Victoria Gau, the Takoma Park-based conductor who presented *The Blue Chevrolet* with the Capital City Symphony at D.C.'s Atlas theater in 2007, loves Barnett's retro sensibility. "There's really great energy in his personality, and that comes right across in the music," she says.

It also comes across on stage, where he plays piano, guitar and/or accordion for Chaise Lounge, a local sextet that has been around since 1998. Barnett describes the group's music, which includes his own compositions as well as Frank Sinatra songs, as "equal parts dry wit and dry martini."

Writing film scores, though, is Barnett's bread and butter. He has won several awards, including for Discovery Channel's *Raising the Mammoth* in 2003 and for National Geographic Channel's *Treasure Seekers* and the History Channel's *Holocaust: The Untold Story*, both in 2000. And he wrote the score for the 2004 Emmy-nominated *Paper Clips*. The documentary followed small-town Tennessee middle-schoolers as they collected millions of paper clips in order to grasp how many people were killed in the Holocaust. Barnett's work also has been heard on popular TV shows, including *Saturday Night Live*, *The Cosby*

Show, *Weeds* and *Royal Pains*.

Paper Clips producer Joe Fab, who lives in Vienna, Va., calls Barnett a great collaborator. Chaise Lounge singer Marilyn Older, an Alexandria, Va., resident, adds that he's a lot of fun. "He finds a place of complete and joyful presence on stage that infects the band and the audience," she says.

Not bad for a kid who grew up in a nonmusical family. "We had no records in the house," says Barnett, recalling his childhood in tiny Riverside, Pa. Nevertheless, Barnett played folk music with friends in high school. And after dropping out of Cornell and becoming



The composer—surrounded by all his instruments in his Bethesda home studio—is known for his retro sensibility. "I was born with narrow lapels," he says.

a surveyor, he took off every Wednesday afternoon for piano lessons with jazz great Jimmy Amadie, who introduced him to a whole new repertoire in Philadelphia. "I was thrilled to be invited into this world of jazz, this club where we knew this canon of songs," he says.

Barnett eventually returned to college, played a few coffeehouses, graduated with a degree in English and taught music at the Severn School near Annapolis for three years. He did his first film score for a public service announcement about truancy and was hooked. In 1988, he and his wife moved to Bethesda to raise three daughters, all of whom are now grown.

(He since has divorced.) Meanwhile, he taught himself the movie-music business and began calling studios for work. By 1993, he was commuting between Los Angeles and Bethesda.

These days, Barnett runs a small recording label, Big Kahuna; designs his own CD covers; tours with LA-based actor-singer Gia Mora in her show *Einstein's Girl*; plays with traveling bands; and in his spare time, creates whimsical collages using vintage odds and ends like Boy Scout insignias and appliance nameplates. He also has served as an advocate for the arts in Montgomery County, including a stint as artist

in residence at The Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, where he mentored young musicians.

It's a lot of keep track of—kind of like all those notes and musical instruments in his compositions. So he creates lists to be sure he doesn't miss a beat. Among his recent entries: Put out a box set with some cool packaging; get to be a good banjo player; write three new songs; and "visit Mom more." ■

Virginia Myers lives in Takoma Park and frequently writes about the arts. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.

RICHARD WOODS