

Comments



Marc Berger, left, and Mike Ricciardi collaborated on Berger's album 'Ride.' / Photo provided



Written by

[Chris Kocher](#)

IF YOU GO

- **Who:** Marc Berger
- **When:** 9 p.m. Saturday
- **Where:** Cyber Cafe West, 176 Main St., Binghamton
- **Admission:** Free (but donations gratefully accepted)
- **More information:**

marcbergermusic.com; www.cybercafewest.com

ON THE WEB

Hear entertainment writer Chris Kocher interview Marc Berger and Mike Ricciardi on his WHRW radio show The Signal. Go online to www.whrwfm.org/shows/signal and click on the Oct. 9 link at right.

As a kid who grew up in Philadelphia and later New York City, Marc Berger experienced a whole new world during a journey through the American West at age 21.

In five weeks, he and a friend crisscrossed the region from Yosemite to the Grand Canyon and many points in between, which inspired a profound yearning to return there and explore that vast and open country in greater depth.

“I was not prepared for the effect it was going to have on me, and the scale of things — the distances and the size of things, the aesthetic of the environment. It was a really shocking experience for me and what it did for me,” Berger said in an interview last week. “That trip changed my life, and I thought, ‘Now I want to get back to every one of these places one at a time and spend a long time in each of them.’”

His explorations of the mountains, deserts and mesas, coupled with the writings of Walt Whitman and A.B. Guthrie, also fueled his passion for songwriting. His latest album, “Ride,” is a love letter to all the beauty that the West has to offer, with each of its 10 original tracks boasting of a cinematic scope that evokes romance and loneliness as well as the frontier spirit of the American psyche.

Berger (guitar, vocals) and his band — including “Ride” co-producer Mike Ricciardi (drums), Rich DePaolo (guitar) and Harry Aceto (bass) — will perform selections from the CD and other songs Saturday night at Cyber Café West in Binghamton.

Songwriting first became a burning desire for Berger while he attended law school, so by the time he graduated, he had “a few pretty good songs” that landed him a few publishing deals in the early 1980s.

“I wasn’t much of a singer, so I was only thinking of myself as a songwriter,” he said. “I said, ‘Wow, this would be really cool if some major artists started to record my songs and I could have a little career as a songwriter’ — because it’s more fun than working at a law firm.”

A chance meeting with folk singer Richie Havens at a West Village diner led to the Woodstock icon recording Berger’s anti-nuclear anthem “The Last One,” which was broadcast on the national news and quoted in the New York Times when Havens sang it at a protest rally.

“Richie became a very enthusiastic supporter of my music, and it was his validation of me as a writer that led me to take myself more seriously, because I admired him very much,” Berger said.

After trying to write with Gary Portnoy (who, among other tunes, had composed the theme from the [TV](#) show “Cheers”) and having a chart-topping singer misappropriate one of his songs, Berger decided he needed to go his own way.

“Having had had so many close calls as a songwriter without things quite happening the way I wanted them to, I started to take myself more seriously as an artist, but I had to will myself into being able to sing, because I was pretty awful,” he said. “That took a number of years, from me playing in rock ‘n’ roll clubs like CBGB and screaming my lungs out onstage, eventually being able to figure out how to sing a song.”

In another fateful moment, Berger met Ricciardi 25 years ago, and the two have been collaborators ever since. It took about a decade to hone and shape “Ride” into the finished album. Eric “Roscoe” Ambel produced four early tracks, but Berger and Ricciardi decided they needed to tackle the recordings themselves.

“What took so long for me and Mike was really the blind man feeling the elephant thing. We had to get some recording gear, create a little recording studio — and the place where we worked on it moved around a bit, from the East Village to upstate New York, as we made the record,” said Berger, who now splits his time between the Big Apple and Ithaca.

“But the process was all about how to use recording gear, which we had no experience with, to create this visual, sonic piece of art. We would mix a song and think it was really good, but then by the time we mixed two more, we’d learned so much that we went back to listen to that one and it wasn’t so good. It was a very steep learning curve for the two of us, and it wouldn’t have been possible for each of us to do it alone.”

Ricciardi agreed that there was a definite learning curve.

“We thought we were done at one point. A friend came over to Marc’s place, walked in and we got talking about resolution and bit rates and all this digital stuff, and I told him what we were recording at, and he said, ‘Jeez, you ought to do it at this.’ And I just looked at Marc and said, ‘Oh man, here we go — we’re gonna do it again!’” Ricciardi said with a laugh. “But ultimately, because of that happening, it got exponentially better every time we redid it.”

Adding to the album’s packaging are Ricciardi’s photos of Western landscapes. He originally traveled to the region with rough mixes of the “Ride” album, but without a good enough camera. When he later realized that no [stock](#) images matched what he and Berger wanted, he returned to the Four Corners region where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah meet.

“Each song for us, we’d be sitting at the mixing board and see the [movie](#), and that experience really added to the photography experience,” Ricciardi said. “I decided to go out and get a real camera to see

what I could do.”

Since its release, “Ride” has garnered praise from critics in the United States and Great Britain, and next month it will be a featured in-store selection at Starbucks. Mindful of the ever-shifting sands of indie music, Berger and Ricciardi are also scheming for other ways to get the music out to more people.

“What we’re saying is that we pretty much want this record to take over the world.” Berger said.
