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On road to law, he answered music's call instead

By Nancy Shoet West

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Marc Berger plays his songs of the West in a multimedia show Saturday in Framingham.

While forging a career as a singer-songwriter may not have been the very farthest thing from Marc Berger's mind when he started idly penning lyrics, it's safe to say that it wasn't part of the big picture at the time either.

Having taken his time getting through his undergraduate education and dipping a toe into the professional world, he was finally well ensconced in law school, attending Rutgers University at night.

But, it was also while in law school that he started writing songs.

"The first ones were god-awful, but by the time I graduated, I'd written a few that I thought were pretty good," Berger recalled. "I was on my way to becoming an attorney, so I decided to just take a few of my songs to a music producer who, I was sure, would tell me to go get a real job, and then I wouldn't have to spend the rest of my life thinking I should have at least given the songwriting a try."

But Berger's prediction was wrong. Upon taking his work to a music producer, he was almost immediately awarded a contract. It wasn't long before Richie Havens was regularly performing one of Berger's songs, "The Last One."

"And at that point there was no way I was going to be an attorney," he said.

Berger's latest CD is titled "Ride," and it will be the focus of a multimedia performance at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Amazing Things Arts Center, 160 Hollis St. in Framingham.

When he embarked on songwriting, Berger said, he did not think of himself as much of a singer. But a couple of bad experiences with other performers stealing his work gave him second thoughts.

"I realized I'd better become a performer, because it was getting a little frustrating trying to make money from other people doing my material," he said. "I had confidence in my songwriting, not my singing. I had to will myself into becoming a performer."

But he managed to develop some comfort on stage. At the same time, Berger had started making yearly trips out to the American West, and the open landscapes and desert topography became something of a passion.

"Having lived most of my life in New York City, I was wowed by the idea that I was seeing places very few people get to see," he said.

Gradually, he began to think about putting together an album specifically devoted to the region's history, romance, and culture.

"It took a long time to make this album," Berger said. "The challenge for me and my co-producer, Mike Ricciardi, was that we were not recording engineers. We were attempting to make an album where the recordings came at you like a movie almost, super-visually, like we almost didn't want you to think about the fact that there were musicians playing.

"We did not know how to do that using recording equipment. But we also knew we couldn't really express our vision to someone who had the technical abilities we lacked and expect them to understand us. We had to find our way to where we wanted to go. In the end, it was thrilling and challenging and wonderful."

And in the course of designing packaging for the CD, on a journey that took him deep into Utah's Monument Valley with a local Navajo guide, Ricciardi discovered a passion of his own for photography. At the Amazing Things show, a slide show of Ricciardi's images will be projected while the band plays.

"The thing I've always found so intoxicating about being in that environment is the way it gives you the ability to hear yourself think and breathe," Berger said. "It creates a freedom from authority and from people telling you what to do. That's what drew me to the place and compelled me to make this album, to try to communicate these things."