I Built the Sky performs, discusses musical style

Karen Ho, Reporter | Posted: Monday, January 23, 2017 5:20 pm

The Department of Music hosted a free metal guitarist seminar for guests of all disciplines at the campus’s Music Recital Hall on Thursday to discuss songwriting, guitar techniques and the music industry.

Australian modern progressive metal guitarist Rohan Stevenson, known as I Built the Sky, was the featured musician at the two-hour seminar.

He spoke about his compositional style and techniques, performed a few of his songs and provided tips on producing and developing unique sounds.

“I think it benefits the students greatly to be exposed to these professionals who come in and tell the students what it’s like to be a working professional musician,” said Darren “Buzz” Gravelle, the organizer of the seminar and a professor in guitar and music theory.

Gravelle noted that although the department holds seminars fairly regularly featuring musicians of different instruments, this was the first time that a heavy metal guitarist was invited to speak.

“I thought it would be rather unique and kind of an exciting opportunity to have someone of this genre come in,” said Gravelle.

In the first hour of the seminar, Stevenson deconstructed and discussed his music in-depth, performing some of his songs from his most recent album, “The Sky is Not the Limit,” to demonstrate.

Stevenson also explained the importance of generating melodic variety and being unafraid of exploring new tones to create music.

“The main thing I’m thinking when I’m creating is that anything goes,” said Stevenson to the audience. “There’s no limits—you’ve got 22 frets and I’ve got six strings on this thing, and potentially all those notes are usable.”

He emphasized a “free mindset” when creating music and pushing boundaries to discover new sounds.

“You don’t have to stick to a certain area on the fretboard or scale… it’s all up for grabs,” he said.
The last hour of the seminar was a Q&A session. The entire seminar was streamed live onto I Built the Sky’s Facebook page, allowing online viewers as well as audience members to ask Stevenson questions at this segment of the seminar.

Some questions were ones about Stevenson’s progression to becoming a songwriter, his approaches to music composition and the question of quality versus quantity.

Other questions were more casual ones about his musical inspirations, his current activities and his dog.

Stevenson expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to perform and speak at the seminar.

“It’s been a great experience for me because I’ve had to put a lot of thought into how I make music, so I can learn by that as well,” said Stevenson.

He also voiced his pleasure for being a part of helping others in music.

“If one thing I can say helps someone in music, that’s the dream,” he said. “It’s an honor to be a part of it.”

While this is his second visit to the United States, this seminar was the first official masterclass that Stevenson instructed.

The seminar extended its invitation to students and non-students.

The audience members consisted of fans of Stevenson’s music as well as people with little experience with the metal genre.

Kathie Tran, a first-year music education student, had not listened to Stevenson’s music before the seminar, despite many people telling her to, because she wanted the experience to be entirely new for her.

She stated that she found the seminar informative and enjoyable, citing Stevenson’s talent.

“I got to hear the music he plays without hearing any of his music [beforehand], and I got to see what concept he uses, so it’s amazing,” Tran said. “And, he got himself a new fan.”

Nick Scott, one of Gravelle’s students from the Santa Monica Academy of Music who also attended the seminar, has been following Stevenson for a while.

Scott introduced Gravelle to Stevenson’s music, and when Gravelle brought up the idea of inviting Stevenson to the university, Scott happily agreed to it.

“I think he’s one of the best guys in the genre,” said Scott about Stevenson. “I just think he’s a great player and a great writer.”

The seminar concluded successfully with a decent turnout, and the Facebook live stream ended with a
total of about 6,400 views.