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FREQUENT FLIER

Traveling With a Moody Old Friend That's Tightly Strung



Steve J. Sherman

Dorothy Lawson is a cellist with the string quartet Ethel.

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FLYING is never simple for me. It's not really a simple process for anyone these days, but I have a permanent challenge. I travel with a cello. Depending on my energy level and the actual amount of support or resistance I encounter from security or fellow passengers, my cello brings about moments of connection, amusement, anxiety or intense frustration. Often all in the same trip.

The band travels all over the United States and abroad, playing or recording with everyone from rock stars like Lenny Kravitz, Sheryl Crow and Roger Daltrey to more traditional artists like those of the New York Chamber Symphony.

While we do perform in large cities, we also travel to smaller, more remote destinations under a program we call TruckStop. It's an 11-stop, 10-month long tour, and we figure we'll log about 40,000 miles across the world.

With this program, we are developing relationships with artists from various cultures, like Native American or Hawaiian musicians, writing and improvising together to produce a whole new body of work. No string quartet has ever done this before since it resembles the craft of the rock band far more than that of the classical artist.

It will be a wonderful experience for everyone. But the trials will be in the travel.

While the band members take separate flights to our gigs, each of us always travels with our musical instrument.

My cello was built in 1695. My father bought it for me when I was just 21 years old. And like any old creature, it has moods varying from cranky to surprisingly sweet. Those moods can be spurred by what we have to go through to get from point A to point B when we travel.

There are many ways to carry a cello. I carry mine on my back, with a kind of Rube Goldberg backpack mount. The cello weighs only 18 pounds, but it is terribly ungainly. I'm a slender person, but put the cello on me, and I become the size of a doublewide trailer. Fortunately, I have never knocked out anyone out as I try to get to my assigned seat on the plane.

Once the cello and I make it on board, I may get some questions. Some airline personnel, especially when tired or stressed, are sticklers for a regulation that requires oversize items to occupy a bulkhead seat. The cello can be secured in a completely satisfactory way in any seat, as long as it blocks no one's exit. It can even be mounted so that it does not infringe on the ability of the passenger ahead to lean back.

Ironically, especially on smaller flights, the bulkhead seats are often available only in first class. So my dear silent companion has ridden in style, oblivious to the privilege, while I'm in coach.

I have found that despite the troubles I sometimes encounter, the cello is a great conversation starter.

The best part for me is the spontaneous connection I derive with people when they see me carrying it. It evokes their appreciation of music, their curiosity, and often, fond memories of childhood music lessons.

I treasure the brief insights they share and their respect for the art. With a cello on my back, I never travel alone.

By Dorothy Lawson, as told to Joan Raymond. E-mail: joan.raymond@nytimes.com