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Free Fare at the Shea Theater: A Musical Journey to Outer Space

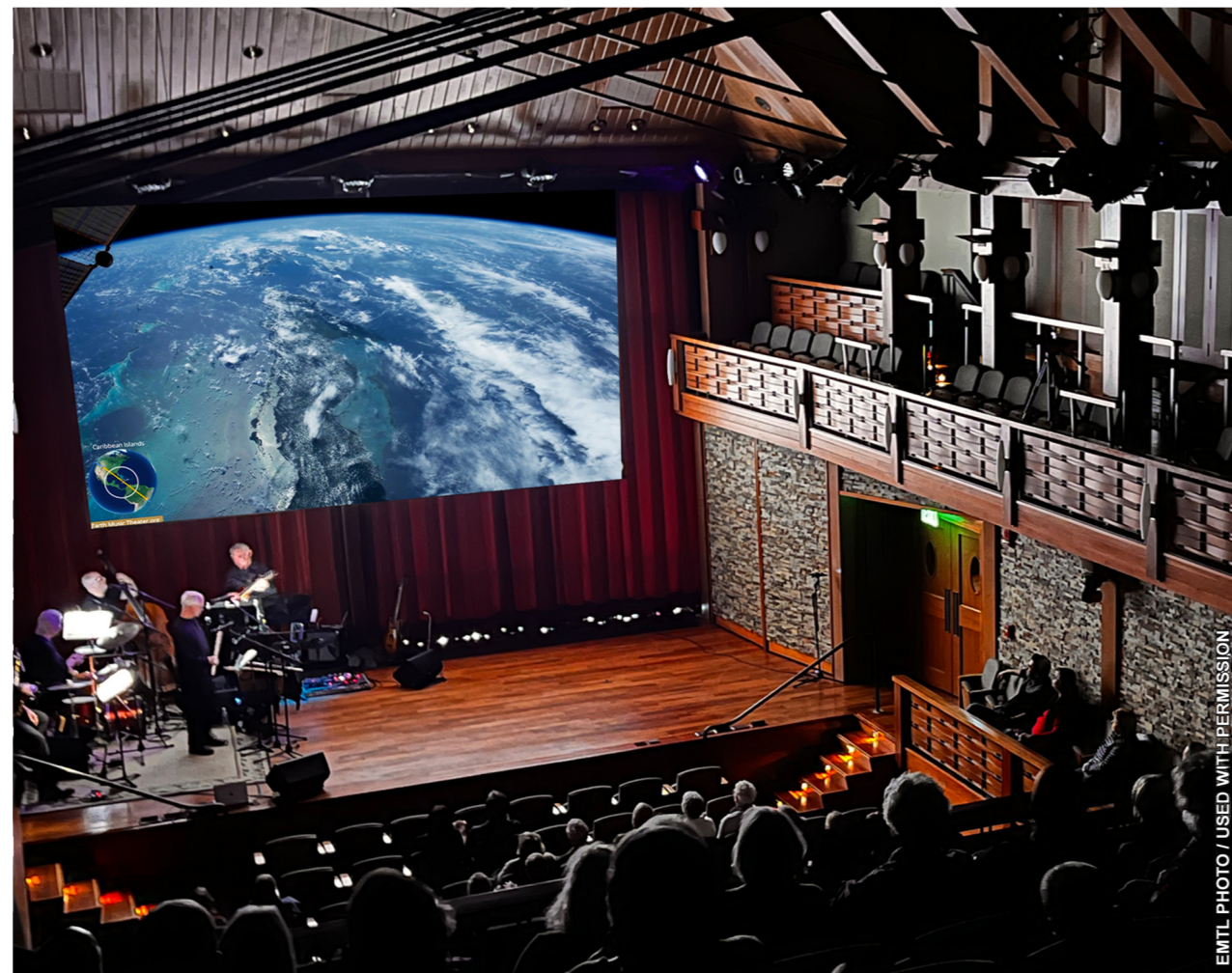
By BEN GAGNON

TURNERS FALLS – Awe inspiring. Mind expanding. Fascinating.

Words can only go so far in describing the visual and audio experience of high-resolution photos of Earth taken from space and displayed on a big screen, combined with improvisational, ethereal music produced by top-notch musicians playing drums, guitar, saxophone, acoustic bass, and the bamboo *bansuri* flute of India.

This combination of imagery and sound first came together when Northampton musician Steve Thomas wrote the soundtrack for the 48-minute film, *Windows on Earth – The Movie*, produced by the Association of Space Explorers, a group of astronauts committed to science and space education.

As a young guitar player, Thomas was inspired by cutting-edge musicians Brian Eno and



A live performance of Earth Music Theater Live last October at the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport.

Jean-Michel Jarre, known for electronics and special effects. The music aligns with stunning views of landscapes from the Sahara to the Himalayas.

The movie is free to watch in 4K streaming on Thomas’s website, EarthMusicTheater.org, but from 4 to 6 p.m. next Sunday, May 31,

the public has a chance to soak in the experience live at the Shea Theater, interspersed with commentary from astronaut Cady Coleman, author of the book *Sharing Space: An Astronaut’s Guide to Mission, Wonder, and Making Change*. The event is free and open to the public.

The accomplished musicians in the live ensemble all have roots in western Massachusetts, with Chris Cheek on alto saxophone, Carl Clements playing flutes, Josh Metz on acoustic bass, and Claire Arenius playing drums. A large model of the International Space Station contributes to the ambiance of the show.

“There are some basic guardrails for us to match the visuals with the music, but there’s always room for improvisation,” said Thomas in an interview with the *Montague Reporter* this week. “We can’t help but be inspired by what we’re seeing on the screen, so every show is different.”

The group has performed the live show eight times over the last 18 months, including a performance last summer at the JFK Library in Boston that Thomas called “a fantastic experience.” The upcoming show at the Shea Theater will be Coleman’s third time participating.

“Cady has a way of reaching people that’s really special,” said Thomas. “We want to make this a community event for all the hill towns in western Massachusetts and southern Vermont that will attract families, so children will be ignited by what they’re going to see and hear. There’s something about pairing the music with the visuals that takes people outside of themselves.”

One of the highlights of the show is the haunting sound of the Indian bansuri flute.

“When we show coral reefs from space and Carl Clements plays the bansuri, it creates an ethereal feeling,” said Thomas. “The bamboo creates a visceral sound, a woody tone like a human voice that creates harmonics that bounce around and stir people’s emotions. I’ve had people come up afterwards and say they were moved in a profound way.”

Shea Theater managing director Linda Tardif says she is “thrilled” to host the event, which is made possible in part by state and local grant funding.

“We’re hoping it’s a full house for what is a real family-friendly event,” said Tardif. “It will be actual footage from the Space Station, with live orchestration and an astronaut sharing her experience. When we heard about this it sounded so cool – how could we not find a way to do it, and make it free and accessible to people? Because that’s what the Shea is all about.”

The idea to make *Windows on Earth* a live event came after the 2024 election when University of California Television released “Shades of Blue,” a five-minute montage of Space Station footage featuring a “guitarscape” piece by Thomas. After receiving comments that the music brought solace to listeners upset by the election, he talked with his wife about what else he could do.

“Finally she said, ‘If you’re going to do something, go big!’” recalled Thomas. “I want to provide art that excites, provokes, calms, and inspires people. Something I said to myself at the time was, ‘There is no time like the present to affect the future.’”



Clockwise, from top: Cady Coleman, a retired NASA astronaut who spent half a year on the International Space Station in 2010 and 11, will join the live show for the fourth time in Turners Falls; Chris Cheek; Carl Clements; Claire Arenius; and Earth Music Theater founder Steve Thomas.

