

THE UNCONVENTIONAL

MR. BELL

This fall, virtuoso violinist **Joshua Bell** was back on the Indiana University campus where he addressed a gathering of Jacobs School of Music students about careers in the arts. Later, he spoke with *Bloom's* **Mike Leonard** in two interview sessions.

Bloomington violinist Joshua Bell has reached the pinnacle of success in the rarified world of classical music—unusual for a guy who digs bluegrass pickers, loves the NFL, and prefers blue jeans. Photo by Richard Ashcraft



(above) Bell's demonstrative style of playing serves him well as musical director of London's Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. Courtesy photo (right) Bell was cheered and jeered in the classical music world when he burst on the scene wearing blue jeans, as depicted in this poster advertising the 1990 album, *Presenting Joshua Bell*. Courtesy photo

IT'S a rare double that Joshua Bell pulls off. He's classical. And he's unconventional.

His classical side includes childhood fame as a violin prodigy and an auspicious debut as a guest soloist with The Philadelphia Orchestra at age 14; awards including *Billboard* magazine's Classical Artist of the Year; and accolades such as *Elle* magazine calling him "the most celebrated American-born artist of the modern era."

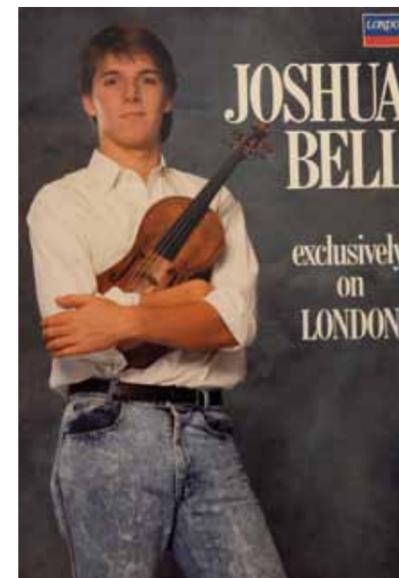
When composer John Corigliano accepted

the Academy Award for his score of *The Red Violin*, performed notably by Bell, he told the global television audience, "Joshua Bell played like a god."

Unconventional—for a classical music icon—is the handsome, animated performer, now 46, who's been raising eyebrows with the highbrows since he posed for an early album cover clutching his Stradivarius and wearing blue jeans. He's the guy whose skill demands the description of virtuoso artist but who obsesses over NFL games. He's the guy who has

collaborated with bluegrass, jazz, and popular performers; appeared on television programs ranging from *Sesame Street* to *Dancing with the Stars*; judged a Miss America Pageant; performed on film soundtracks; and made *People* magazine's list of the world's most beautiful people.

And then there's that legendary deception where he pretended to be a subway busker playing for change in a Washington, D.C., subway station, and the subsequent Pulitzer Prize-winning story describing the event.



The Bloomington-born artist wanted to be a scientist or a detective, or at least he did at age 7, his mother, Shirley, recalls with a chuckle. Whatever he did in his youth, though, and whatever he does now, he has to excel, she says. It's always been the way he approaches life. "He's a risk-taker," she says, recounting his childhood mastery of tennis and other sports to adult experiences paragliding, skiing, and being willing to stretch himself in every way, including the outer limits of time, sleep, and energy. "He lives on the edge," she says. "And he knows it."

THE NEW EYEBROW-RAISING ALBUM

His latest endeavor, a holiday album entitled *Musical Gifts from Joshua Bell and Friends*, is another exercise in risk-taking. Its genesis goes back to the 1999 album, *Short Trip Home*, in which he teamed up with fellow IU School of Music alumnus bassist Edgar Meyer, and bluegrass pickers Sam Bush and Mike Marshall. The marriage of classical music with elements of folk and bluegrass opened Bell's ears and mind to a broader musical palette, different instrumental approaches and techniques, and composing and improvisation on the fly—all things that intrigued the classically trained Bell.

"My newest album is along those lines," he tells *Bloom*. "Getting to work with some really brilliant people like [jazz saxophonist]

'I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD DO A CHRISTMAS ALBUM. IT ALWAYS SOUNDED KINDA CHEESY AND MARKET-DRIVEN.'

Branford Marsalis and [jazz pianist] Chick Corea and many, many others—it's a great education for me and also so enjoyable."

Musical Gifts was released October 15 with the goal of providing music aficionados with a new and distinctive take on the evergreen holiday music season.

The new album more directly follows *Joshua Bell at Home with Friends* (2009), which included such disparate artists as Sting, trumpeter Chris Botti (another IU classmate), vocalists Josh Groban and Kristin Chenoweth, and Marvin Hamlisch on piano. That laid a groundwork for *Musical Gifts*, which this time around includes friends Chenoweth and Botti, Corea and Marsalis, plus Alison Krauss, Renée Fleming, Plácido Domingo, Gloria Estefan, and the a capella group founded in Bloomington, Straight No Chaser. Also on the recording is Frankie Moreno, a singer and instrumentalist, who last year was named Best Headliner on the Las Vegas Strip.

"I asked Tony Bennett to work with me and he said no," Bell related with an aw-shucks chuckle to the students gathered at the Musical Arts Center (MAC) last fall. "But it didn't hurt to ask. Everybody's asking Tony Bennett these days," he said to laughter.

In the *Bloom* interview, Bell confesses, "I never thought I would do a Christmas album. It always sounded kinda cheesy and market-driven." But after knocking off, for fun, a couple of holiday songs with musical-theater star Chenoweth and jazz and pop trumpeter Botti, he came to the conclusion that a holiday collection could be an enjoyable challenge, especially in coming up with his own arrangements and playing off the talents and styles of musicians better known in other musical genres.

Musical Gifts opens with a collaboration between Bell's decidedly classical violin style

melding with the pure and unadorned vocals of bluegrass-and-country artist Alison Krauss and progresses through artists known for jazz, classical, and popular song. It even includes a romp with violinist Aleksey Igudesman and pianist Hyung-ki Joo on a song titled "Christmas Confusion," which melds "Silent Night" and "Jingle Bells" with "Hava Nagila" and "The Dreidel Song," a Hanukkah favorite. "It's a parody on the holidays and something that will definitely make people smile," he says.

CHILD OF A MIXED HERITAGE

Bell expresses genuine affection for Christmas music, even though, in recent years, he's acknowledged he identifies more with Jewish traditions and culture. "I have a Jewish mother and spend a lot of time with that side of the family. I went to a lot of bar mitzvahs, although I didn't have one of my own. Everyone around me—my mother, my family, my teacher [Josef] Gingold, even my heroes [Jascha] Heifitz and Itzhak Perlman—are Jewish. I feel proud to be a part of that culture, although I'm not, in a religious way. I'm not religious and my father [Alan] was an Episcopal priest in his younger years. Eventually he became a psychotherapist. But for him, the holidays were very, very important. Even though he never really mentioned religion once growing up.

"But we exchanged gifts on Hanukkah and Christmas Day, and around the holidays it was time for our extended family from around the country. We would have musical gatherings. We called them musicales and everyone would play their instruments and play together. So I very much identify the holidays as time with family and music," he says.

"Hey," he adds playfully, to emphasize the irony, "White Christmas" was written by a Jewish composer, Irving Berlin."



of IU music school faculty member Walter Bricht. He gave his first orchestral performance with the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra at age 7 and moved on at age 8 to work with instructor extraordinaire Mimi Zweig in the Young Strings Program at IU. “She took me back a few notches and in a way started over with my bow arm, and we spent two years on the second Kreisler etude and, thanks to Mimi, I put a lot of things in order,” he says.

“At age 12, I went to Josef Gingold who I *hope* is still a legendary figure around here,” he said pointedly to the music students gathered at the MAC. “I *hope* everyone is still aware of his presence, even though he’s been gone since 1995. I *hope* Josef Gingold is still a part of the heart and soul of this school.”

At age 11, Joshua found his way to the Meadowmount School for Strings in upstate New York, where Gingold was an instructor. “Ironically, since I grew up around him [in Bloomington], it was really at Meadowmount that I had my first lesson with him.

“He was one of the most incredible, most generous and loving people. Loved music. Loved the violin. He had a great Stradivarius he would let me play once in a while. That inspired me to get my own one day and now I have a 1713 Strad [purchased for nearly \$4 million in 2001]. I hope it’s still here,” he said, looking back toward his unguarded violin case in the spacious MAC lobby.

Up until their lessons together at Meadowmount, Gingold had been reluctant to take on Joshua as a student back in Bloomington, in part because of an unpleasant experience with stage parents and another prodigy. When Joshua’s parents asked Gingold to accept Joshua as a student, he no longer needed proof of the boy’s talent but expressed concern that the youngster lead an otherwise normal life so that he could develop his social and broader intellectual skills. Gingold’s empathy was understandable and even prescient, but otherwise unnecessary. Joshua already was a normal kid—on a fast track to adulthood, but typical of a boy his age, nonetheless.

THE SPORTS-LOVING KID

His mother says young Joshua first latched on to tennis, and at age 10, he finished fourth in a national tournament for youths 12 and under. He was intrigued by sports generally, and embraced the *lingua franca* of life in his hometown, IU basketball.

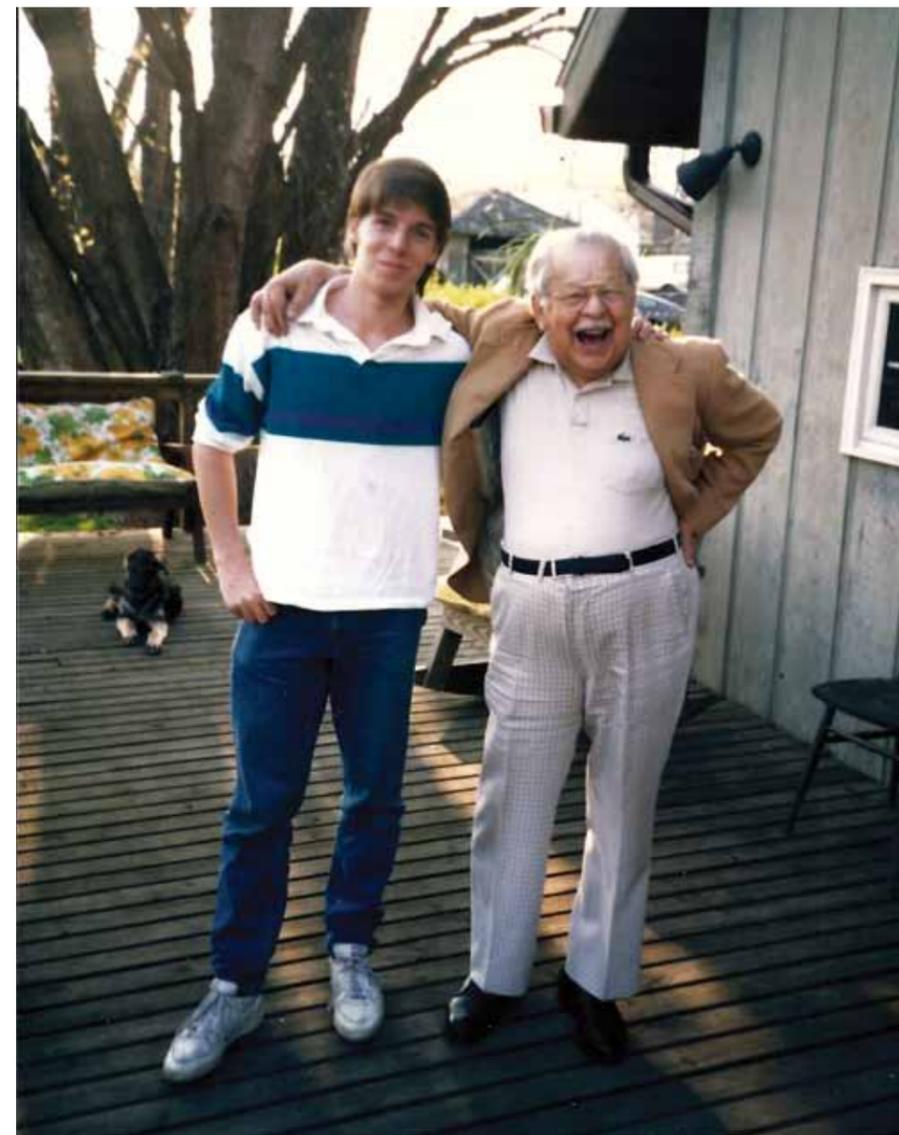
“Of course, growing up in Bloomington, my

Joshua Bell is a thirteen year old violinist from Bloomington, Indiana. He has been playing the violin since the age of five and is presently a student of Josef Singloid, (one of the greatest teachers of all times) at the Indiana University School of Music. Joshua has won several awards and scholarships and most recently he became a Stillman-Riley national winner, and grand prize winner of the ASTA competition in Minneapolis. This year Joshua has won over \$12,000 in prize money and an invitation and full scholarship to attend a master violin class in Geneva, Switzerland during the summer of 1982.



(opposite page) Bell was a serious student of the violin at an early age. (left) A Bell performance was noteworthy, even at age 13, though his teacher’s name was badly mangled in this clipping. (below) The great violinist and teacher, Josef Gingold, became Bell’s mentor, grandfather figure, and family friend. Bell so admired Gingold, he named his first-born son after him. Courtesy photos

‘WHEN MY MOTHER COULDN’T FIND ME AT SCHOOL, SURE ENOUGH, SHE WOULD GO TO THE RAC-N-CUE AND FIND ME BEHIND A PINBALL MACHINE.’



dad used to take me to every game with Bobby Knight as the coach. I can still name all the players on the ’76 championship team, and I was all of nine years old when that occurred,” he says. “I used to love to play basketball. But then, jamming fingers became a problem. It’s hard to play violin when you have fingers that are swollen and sore. And then, I recall going up on stage on two different occasions on crutches because of basketball injuries. I have very strong memories of basketball and sports.

“I’m very grateful to have grown up in a place like Bloomington with the music school right there, and yet I could live on a farm with my family and play outdoors and have lots of animals, yet be so close to a great institution such as IU and all it has to offer. I wasn’t shipped off to New York as a young kid, as many people are.”

SAYING NO TO NEW YORK

Young Joshua had his opportunities to study in the Big Apple, particularly after moving on from his Meadowmount summers to similar, high-level workshops at the Aspen Music Festival and School, which focused on older and more accomplished young musicians.

“At the time, the sort of figurehead there was Dorothy DeLay, a famous teacher. At that point, I was surrounded by Juilliard students,” he says. “It was a little

THE PRODIGY

Bell was born in Bloomington on December 9, 1967, the son of Shirley, an education consultant, and Alan, a psychologist and psychotherapist who also did important research on male homosexuality for The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. He was a precocious child, and famously

signaled his interest in music to his parents by stretching rubber bands across the handles of his dresser drawer to pluck out sounds like the ones he heard from the musical collection of his mother, a pianist.

Young Joshua first started taking violin lessons at age 4 from Donna Bricht, the widow



1

more competitive, coming from here. I got the feeling the New Yorkers were on the cutting edge of having a career and everybody talked about which kid was going to have the next record contract. It was kind of enticing as a fifteen-year-old. For a second I thought maybe I'd move to New York and study with Dorothy DeLay. I had some lessons with her and she had some interesting things to say about sound. She was an interesting teacher from a psychological point of view. She coached her students on how to be confident and get out there and really play out and feel good about themselves. It's an important factor. But it's not everything."

Truth of the matter was that Joshua didn't lack for confidence.

"Coming back to Gingold it was a totally different experience," he recounts. "With Gingold it was all about music. It was all about phrasing. It was all about playing, and he was one of the greatest violinists I ever heard up close. For me, demonstrating is very important. It was kind of no contest for me. I knew coming back to Gingold, I had to stay here.

"The thing is, there is no exact career path. Some people said you have to go to New York to have a career or you have to enter into international competition to have a career, and I didn't really do either of those things. I found my own way."

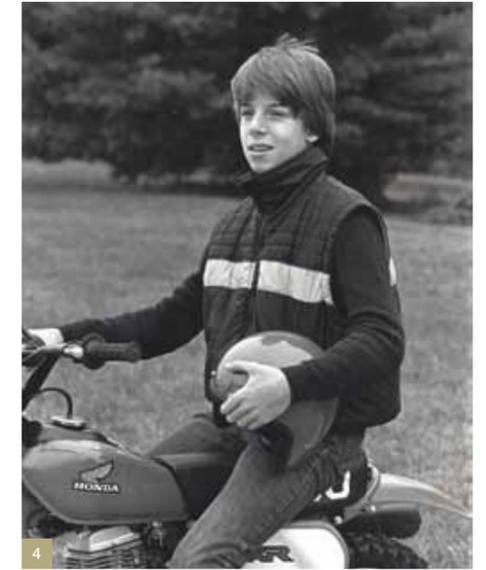
It wasn't a straight path to success, even though in retrospect it might appear that way. Bell chuckles when asked about memories of attending Bloomington High School North and then going into town to take lessons and practice at IU. "I used to skip out the back door of the music school when I was supposed to be practicing and go down to the Rac-N-Cue, a pool-and-video-game place," he says. "When my mother couldn't find me at school, sure enough, she would go to the Rac-N-Cue and find me behind a pinball machine."

His mother remembers things slightly differently. "I'd always find him at Spaceport," she says, recalling what was then a video-game destination on the southwest corner of East Kirkwood and South Indiana Avenue. "The thing there was that Josh was not known as a violinist. I don't know if most of the kids there even knew he played. He was the kid with the high score on all of the video games," she says.

Shirley recalls that the real take-off moment for her son was being featured, at age 14, playing *Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major* with The Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Riccardo Muti. By 15, he already was under professional management and earning his own money—enough to buy his own Apple computer. A few months before his 16th birthday—before he was even old enough to drive—he bought his first car, a sporty Datsun 280ZX. Bell also was just 16 when he moved out of his parents' home and into a condo, rooming with his college-age friends. "He was very independent at an early age," says Shirley.



3



4



2



5



6



7

1. As a child, Joshua showed a propensity for chemistry experiments in this family photo. *Courtesy photo*

2. A teenage Joshua and one of his heroes, Itzhak Perlman, discuss the nuances of violin design. *Courtesy photo*

3. Joshua placed fourth in a national tennis tournament at age 10. *Courtesy photo*

4. As a teen, Joshua liked to explore the family farm on a small motorcycle. *Courtesy photo*

5. By his late teens, Joshua's management

realized he not only was a virtuoso musician but a heartthrob. *Courtesy photo*

6. Bell already was famous when he appeared on *Sesame Street* in 2002 to play "Sing After Me" with Telly Monster on tuba. *Courtesy photo*

7. Bell posed with his mother, Shirley, at a 2010 benefit for The Kinsey Institute in his Manhattan apartment. *Courtesy of Indiana University*



Music students gathered in the Musical Arts Center's lobby last fall to hear Bell speak about careers in music as part of the school's Project Jumpstart, a career development and entrepreneurship program. Photo by Jim Krause

THE PRODIGY AT 46

Bell accomplished so much early in his career it's sobering for some to realize he's now 46. "He's still the good-looking poster boy for the classical violin," author Amanda Holloway writes in the British magazine, *The Strad*. "Today his T-shirt and jeans fit more snugly, but he wears his thick chestnut hair in the same pudding-basin no-style that deserves the epithet boyish, whether he likes it or not."

- He appeared with Meryl Streep in *Music of the Heart*.
- He's been the subject of his own BBC documentary about his life, which aired on Bravo.
- He performed at the Indianapolis 500 victory celebration on ESPN.

'CHILDREN HAVE CHANGED MY LIFE IN AN AMAZING WAY.'

In the classical music world, there's not a lot that Bell hasn't accomplished. He was named Classical Artist of the Year by *Billboard* magazine in 2004, inducted into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame in 2005, won the Avery Fisher Prize for outstanding achievement in classical music in 2007, and was named to the board of directors of the New York Philharmonic in 2010.

"The Maserati driving/video game/youth tennis champ has received recognition beyond his awards that are not common to most classical artists," his thick compendium of promotional information crows. That includes:

- In the *Nightline* TV special, "To Be The Best," Josh was the only musician featured in the program which included Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan.

THE SUBWAY STUNT

The story about his subway experiment is a topic that seems to slightly grate on Bell. People ask about it everywhere, across the globe, in virtually all settings, and you can sense he wants to say, "Yeah, but I've done some other things, too."

In 2007, *The Washington Post* columnist Gene Weingarten "ginned up" the idea, presenting it as a minor sociological study, in which Bell, one of the world's great violinists, would play like a typical busker during morning rush hour outside of the busy L'Enfant Plaza Washington, D.C., Metro station. Would anyone notice the beautiful music, the world-famous face, the \$4 million Stradivarius under his chin?

As Weingarten documented in his Pulitzer Prize-winning story, seven people actually stopped to listen during Bell's 45 minutes of

busking and 27 tossed money into his empty violin case, for a take of \$32 and change. More than 1,000 people hurried by without so much as a double take, prompting Bell to say afterwards, "It was a strange feeling, that people were actually, ah...ignoring me."

As he told the assembled IU students, "It's something I was not surprised about. Playing for people while they're rushing for work is not the way you're supposed to play music. You're supposed to listen to music. Classical music, unlike house music or other kinds of music, and I don't want to be snobby about it, but classical music and jazz and bluegrass and those that are complex, they really demand the listener to listen and be creative in their own head...what made me think, about this experiment, was how often we hear classical music in the background at restaurants, while you're getting a massage... it's not meant to be played at soft volume when you're eating your soup. It becomes wallpaper. I hate it when music becomes wallpaper."

After expounding on how disappointed that makes him, Bell realized he'd unintentionally taken his crowd of music majors down a dark alley. "I did make \$39 in forty minutes, which is not bad," he allowed, reciting figures from memory that don't quite jibe with initial reports. "People tend to forget that," he said to laughter. In addition to the questions, which, due to the Pulitzer Prize story, likely will last a lifetime, the incident also inspired a children's book emphasizing the wonder of curiosity, called *The Man With the Violin* (Annick Press, 2013).

AN UP-TEMPO LIFE

"I live, now, here in Bloomington and New York City, where it's a very good place for me because I'm on the road two-hundred-and-fifty days a year. In the last month, actually, I've been in five continents. I should have stopped in Africa, just because I've never done six continents in one month," he said, mostly joking with his student audience. "Last month was crazy and it continues to be that way. That's the way I like it."

"There's just not enough time to do everything, and have time off to watch football on Sundays and Mondays and Thursdays," he said to laughter. "That's an inside joke with my mother and sister who know that we like to place a little bit of bets with each other on football games."

On this brief fall sojourn to Bloomington, Bell rehearsed a Tchaikovsky piece with string players to be presented this spring and visited with family, as well as making his presentation to the music students and taking their questions. After his formal talk, he remained in the room



Joshua Bell's travel schedule proves to be a bit too tiring for son Josef, who was about 4 when he fell asleep while his father was studying a musical score on an airplane flight. Photo by Heidi Frederick

and insisted on speaking with and posing for photographs with every student who waited to meet him. "I'm so tired I'm having trouble making my lips move," he confided to Alain Barker, interim director of career development and entrepreneurship for the Jacobs School of Music.

A HIGH HONOR IN ENGLAND

A fairly new obligation in Bell's life is one that he cherishes for several reasons. In 2011, he was named music director for the London-based Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, the first music director not named Sir Neville Marriner, since the conductor and violinist established the famed chamber music orchestra in 1958. "I say directing instead of conducting because I lead from the first violin," Bell explains. "I sit on a slightly higher chair, and I direct even Beethoven symphonies from the violin. Sometimes I stop playing and let the orchestra play, but I'll conduct and play along. It's an unusual way of doing it, but it's something that grew for me out of starting to play concertos with orchestras without conductors."

The position offers Bell the opportunity to not only demonstrate the myriad skills he's developed over the years but perhaps get in a

little payback for some criticism he's taken. "I've often been accused by conductors, some, usually jokingly, that while I play, that I'm conducting, more than they are when they are conducting right next to me. I lead a lot. I've had people in the orchestra say we end up following you, and we're not looking at the conductor.... It became very natural for me to lead from the violin because I'm already very physical and very demonstrative. So all of those years of people saying I move around too much...it comes in handy when I lead an orchestra."

AT HOME IN BLOOMINGTON AND NEW YORK

A few years ago, Bell bought a home around the corner from his parents' 20-acre spread just southeast of Bloomington. (His father, Alan, died after a stroke in 2002.) He stays there when he comes through town, often to carry out engagements at the Jacobs School, where he is a senior lecturer. Most of the time, when he's not traveling, he lives in Manhattan in a spacious Gramercy Park apartment very near his ex-girlfriend and mother of his three children, Lisa Matricardi. "They're literally a block away from me and I have a great relationship with

their mom. It's a very easy situation, and I'm basically back-and-forth between places. I use a little push scooter.

"Children have changed my life in an amazing way," he says. "For the first time—as much as I love traveling—the negative side has made me get much more homesick than I ever used to be. That's probably going to get worse."

Son Josef (named after Gingold) is six and already fond of the cello. Three-year-old twins Benjamin and Samuel also show a strong predisposition to music, and all three, Bell says, fight over what disc and what track to play on the home music system. Will they, too, become musicians?

"I certainly would encourage it. It's always funny to me when musicians, and some famous musicians, when you ask about their children, they say, 'I wouldn't wish that [a music career] on my kid,'" Bells says with incredulity. "If you love playing music yourself, why wouldn't you wish your kid to do so as well? You wouldn't want to put pressure on someone to do what you do. But the nice thing is, you don't have to be a professional to have music in your life. I would definitely encourage everyone, and my kids, to always keep music in their lives. But you can do other things and play music seriously. I know a lot of doctors who probably practice more than some of the professional musicians I know and are probably more serious than some of the musicians I know."

"Serious" is an important word in the virtuoso violinist's vocabulary. He says "classical music" is a "strange" term to him because it includes music written hundreds of years ago as well as music written today. "It's sometimes called serious music and I hate that term as well," he says. "I've worked with bluegrass musicians and jazz musicians who are probably the most serious musicians I've ever met. I enjoy working with people with different perspectives on music. I learn a lot from them and it helps my classical work as well."

In fact, Bell's been working at writing his own cadenzas since hanging out with bluegrass musicians and watching them pick out melodies and harmonies—composing on the spot. "I want to be sort of a composer, which is something I want to do in the next decades of my life. I want to do more composing."

Seriously. ✨