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In Closter, a Ph.D. salesman rocker

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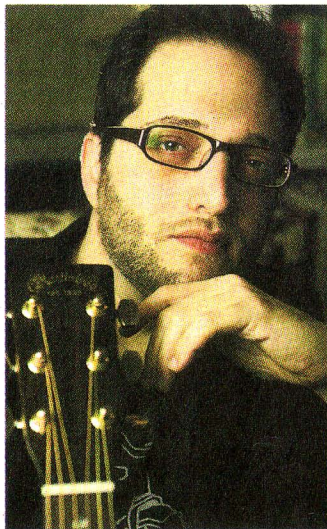
The dissertation is 191 pages long. It has a blue cover. It sits on a white bookshelf in his living room, wedged amid collections of Plato, Homer and Aristotle.

The shoe company has 170 employees. It is based in Teaneck. It manufactures athletic footwear for baby boomers, doing more than \$40 million in business each year.

The CD has nine tracks. Its album art features the meandering silhouette of a tree and its branches. It hits record stores on Feb. 6.

Matt Russell is painting a peculiar self-portrait, offering a character study of a man who has tried his hand at three very different disciplines.

"I've got to be the first philosopher-shoe salesman-rock star," joked Russell, 32.



JIM ANNESS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
"I've got to be the first philosopher-shoe salesman-rock star," Matt Russell jokes.

He lifts his debut album, "Climbing," off the coffee table in his Closter home, casually

waves it back and forth.

"The crossroads was really this," Russell said. "I was finishing my dissertation and deciding, Am I going on the academic job market? Am I pursuing music? I'm married. Where's the money going to come from? How am I going to do this?"

He learned saxophone and piano as a little kid and later added guitar to his repertoire. His older brothers, Larry and Evan Schwartz, educated young Matt with mix tapes, introducing him to Velvet Underground, The Who and the Rolling Stones.

"He was the only 7-year-old who really understood Bob Dylan," Larry Schwartz said.

Understanding gave way to mimicry.

"I was the guy who had my guitar and the harmonica around my neck, singing Dylan songs," Russell said.

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Russell: Ph.D.

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Russell played the Turning Point Café in Piermont, N.Y. He participated in a few different battles of the bands. But when he decided to chase his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Chicago, music went on the back burner.

"In those years it was more of a personal thing," Russell said. "I barely played out."

He dove into Plato, settling on the ancient Greek philosopher as the subject of his dissertation. Few people on the planet were reading and researching Plato with Russell's fervor.

Yet somehow this didn't seem like the right path.

"I got about three-quarters of the way through my Ph.D.," Russell said, "and realized though I loved philosophy, and everything was going well, I just wasn't going to be a professor."

His realization sparked three life-changing decisions:

He was going to finish writing his dissertation and complete his Ph.D. program.

He was going to leave philosophy in his rearview mirror.

He was going to return to his guitar.

"Being a professor is sort of a tough career choice," Evan Schwartz said. "Even though he had all this schooling, it's sort of a weird world, where music is something you can create on your own and try to get your word out in a more creative and artistic way."

Larry Schwartz isn't so sure his kid brother turned his back on

philosophy once the dissertation was complete.

"What he had to read at that level and the writing he had to do only made him a better songwriter," Schwartz said. "It's probably one of the reasons why his lyrics were so strong."

Russell cleaned out his first-floor apartment in Chicago, preparing for a move back to New Jersey. His wife traveled home first, leaving Russell behind with only an air mattress, a pile of clothes and a collection of recording equipment he had been squirreling away for just such an occasion.

Over a 12-day stretch, Russell recorded "Climbing," his first full-length LP. He invited Cory Biggerstaff, an upright-bass player, to the sparse apartment. Then Steve Schnell, a jack-of-all-trades who can play flute, clarinet and saxophone, made an appearance.

When the 12 days were over, Russell had nine songs, material enough for his debut CD: a mellow collection of guitar-driven tracks that are accompanied by Russell's pleasant voice. To support his lifestyle, he took a sales job with Aetrix, the family-owned sneaker company. His brother Larry is the CEO. His brother Evan is the president.

He does "a lot of direct selling and sales management," Larry Schwartz said. "Calling on customers, trying to grow sales within accounts ..."

Sixty hours a week, Russell is on the phone, in meetings or on the road pitching the shoe line to dif-



JIM ANNESS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Matt Russell's debut CD, "Climbing," has nine songs recorded over 12 days in his apartment.

ferent outlets. During breaks, his fingers punch song lyrics into a PDA.

"I love my job; I really love philosophy, and this is, in some ways, the deepest — the music," Russell said. "I don't think it's impossible to lead both lives."

He employs separate names to carry out this double life. Matt Schwartz is the name on his Aetrix business card; Matt Russell is the name on the cover of his new CD.

Somehow that seems fitting. After all, how many residents of Bergen County have a dissertation they have written on one set of shelves and a CD they have recorded on another?