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By LAWRENCE DEL CASALE



PHOTO: DAVID LAI

Sharon Isbin and Stanley Jordan.

THE GUITAR through its polyphonic nature lives in many worlds. It can also be said that the guitar is an international instrument, popular in its appeal to virtuosos of varied genres. In the classical realm, the guitar of nineteenth century performers Fernando Sor and Mauro Giuliani is still evolving, taking into its repertoire music from around the world and morphing it into something new. Reviewing a concert in New York City the *New York Times* music critic Allan Kozinn wrote: 'The world of the classical guitar has become appealingly chaotic over the last few decades, in much the same way the new-music world has: players with traditional tastes and interpretive instincts work alongside guitarists steeped in pop and folk sensibilities, with avant-gardists and world-music devotees contributing new textures and languages to the mainstream' (*NY Times*, July 2011).

In keeping with Kozinn's comment, one guitarist who has been a leader in creating such above mentioned parameters is Sharon Isbin. Isbin received her second Grammy award for

'Best Instrumental Soloist Performance' for her 2009 CD *Journey to the New World* (SONY). *Journey* features Isbin in solos, in collaboration with the iconic folk singer Joan Baez, and with virtuoso violinist Mark O'Connor. Isbin accompanies Baez on the song *Wayfaring Stranger* (arr. Barbosa-Lima) for an absolutely beautiful rendition, and she later joins O'Connor to perform his composition *Strings and Threads*, a quasi-bluegrass/jazz suite. Both works speak directly to Kozinn's view of collaborations with musicians grounded in folk music.

Moving to the present, Isbin's latest release, *Guitar Passions: Sharon Isbin & Friends* (SONY) anchors itself securely in Latin America and features a number of her guitar heroes: rock guitarist/composers Steve Vai and Steve Morse (the latter of Dixie Dregs fame), jazz guitarists Stanley Jordan and Romero Lubambo, singer/songwriter/guitarist Nancy Wilson (of Heart), Brazilian singer/guitarist Rosa Passos, and Gaudencio Thiago de Mello who teams up with Isbin and saxophonist Paul Winter. And so it goes



PHOTO: AFSHIN JAVADI

Sharon Isbin and Steve Vai.

throughout this incredible recording. Many of the eleven titles on the album are premiere recordings, including the Barbosa-Lima/Passos arrangement of Pixiguinha's *Carinhoso*, as well as the arrangements by Vai, Jordan, Wilson, Wolff and Lubambo.

Isbin is ahead of the curve with *Guitar Passions*, perhaps in the running for another Grammy, and once again pushing the envelope to the benefit of us all.

Your latest CD, *Guitar Passions: Sharon Isbin and Friends* (SONY) is something like your previous 2009 CD, *Journey to the New World* (SONY).

Please explain how you developed this wonderful project.

During the late 80s when I was recording and touring with Larry Coryell and Laurindo Almeida, I envisioned making a multi-genre collaborative guitar disc with a New York-themed wish list of performers and composers to be titled, somewhat playfully: *Muggers Holiday*. Hah! Maybe I had just moved to the city and feared what might be lurking down the block...Anyway, though that project never came about, flash forward a couple dozen recordings later...

After *Journey to the New World* with guests Joan Baez and Mark O'Connor, Sony proposed

that I develop a guitar tribute album, and they gave me the freedom to choose from players whose music I love and admire. The net cast was wide, and embraced not only current friends, heroes and colleagues such as Steve Vai, Stanley Jordan, Steve Morse, Nancy Wilson of Heart, Rosa Passos and Romero Lubambo, but also icons from the past including Segovia with whom I first studied at fourteen, Rodrigo who was a friend of 20 years, and Brazilian pop legend Antonio Carlos Jobim with whom Carlos Barbosa-Lima and I collaborated and shared a warm relationship.

I also pay tribute to two great guitar makers of our time whose instruments I play on the CD: Michael O'Leary from Ireland (cedar with double back and sides) and Antonius Mueller from Germany (cedar double top). Enhancing their

artistry are revolutionary custom made signature model tuners by Jorg Graf (www.graftuners.com), and Savarez New Cristal, Alliance and Cantiga strings.

Passions contains traditional solo guitar pieces such as Segovia's setting of Asturias by Albeniz next to an arrangement of the Adagio from the Concerto de Aranjuez by Laurindo Almeida. In this particular arrangement the piece moves from traditional classical to bossa nova and then to



improvised rock with an excellent solo by guitarist Steve Morse. Was Steve Morse originally slated to do a solo over the bossa groove?

Yes, Steve was the man! We first met in 1985 when I invited him to perform in the Guitarstream '85 festival I created for Carnegie Hall. What he came up with in this rocked out improv on *Guitar Passions* is amazing, one of the coolest things I've ever heard. Laurindo, with whom Larry and I premiered the work, designed his arrangement to feature classical, Brazilian and rock in a very innovative way. To our delight, Rodrigo loved our recording. This time around, Romero is at the bossa helm, and he spices up his solos with a jazz infused freedom, which adds such a fresh vision.

Later in the disc, Romero and I play Jobim's *Chovendo na Roseira* based on an arrangement by Carlos Barbosa-Lima. We had played it in Carnegie Hall in one of the first Jobim memorial concerts.

You and Steve Vai have toured together in the past, what was that like?

He's like a brother, and a really wonderful, smart, witty, fun person – in addition to being a phenomenal rock guitarist and composer. We met performing together at a Recording Academy event and hit it off. When Theatre du Chatelet in Paris asked me to do a week of performances a few years ago, Steve wrote *The Blossom Suite* for us to premiere. That's a future recording project. On this album, he does a lovely, lyrical improv to the Allegro from Barrios's *La Catedral*. The idea evolved spontaneously when we were playing together at his home for a segment in a documentary being made about me. Have a look on my website at the video sample of *Guitar Passions*, which also includes behind-the-scenes footage with Stanley, Nancy, Thiago de Mello and Paul Winter.

Can you talk about some of your personal favourite tracks on Passions?

In addition to the above, it was such an honour to play *Dreamboat Annie* with Nancy Wilson. I've loved Heart for years, and that song has always been one of my favourites. Not only is she an elegant singer songwriter, but also a terrific guitarist. Rosa Passos's interpretation of Pixinguinha's *Carinhoso* is melting, as is the Brazilian jazz-infused lyricism of my musical partners of many years, Paul Winter and Thiago de Mello.

One of the highlights is Stanley Jordan's brilliant improv to a hot work by Argentinian composer/guitarist Quique Sinesi, *Sonidos de aquel dia*. You have to hear it to believe it. Stanley and I first met in the late 90s performing together on a Guitar Summit tour. His unique innovative tapping technique in which the electric guitar is played almost like a piano is legendary. Wild stuff - I still can't figure out how he does it!



Paul Winter, Sharon Isbin and Gaudencio Thiago de Mello.

PHOTO:

The CD opens with a duet version of the Colombian dance *Porro*, in which I play both the original Gentil Montaña part, and the delightful second guitar part written by Gustavo Colina, with a few extra measures penned by Berta Rojas. And another work not yet mentioned is Jorge Cardoso's arrangement of *Alfonsina y el mar*, music I've always wanted to play ever since hearing Mercedes Sosa's moving performances.

Do you see the traditional classical guitar giving way to a blend of classical and popular music the way you have presented it to us on Passions? After all, the album is rooted in Latin America where the boundaries between classical and popular are often blurred.

A project like this dissolves traditional boundaries and leads us to simply revel in the joy of the music. We celebrate the diversity of the guitar. And it's our passion for the instrument that brings us all together.

Sharon, you have performed all over the world. Do you see a difference in the way the Segovian classical guitar is received in the United States as opposed to say Western or Eastern Europe or even Asia for that matter?

So many cultures have a history of plucked instruments, which makes the guitar feel familiar and welcome almost anywhere. For example, I was just in China in June where I performed and taught as a guest of the Central Conservatory in Beijing. I've never heard so many fine students in one place before! In between climbing the Great Wall, visiting The Forbidden City, temples, and Xi'an warriors, I had the opportunity one evening to attend a party given by a painter friend, and I improvised with a banhu player, singers, and China's top pipa player. We were drawn to the magic of each other's cultures, finding common ground in both Western and Eastern music. The music Tan Dun wrote for me has inspired an

appreciation for the colours, gestures, lyricism and ritual in traditional and contemporary Chinese music, and served as an initial springboard for the improvisations we shared. It was a fascinating evening!

Will you be touring Passions and if so will you be going on the road with some of the artists who contributed to the recording?

To celebrate the August 30 release, Romero, Paul, Thiago and I kick things off with a CD release concert club appearance in NYC.

After this recording what can we all look forward to from you in the future?

I really look forward to the completion of the documentary. It's exciting to me because it was filmed over the last three years, and explores collaborations I've enjoyed with great composers and performers who have made important contributions to the guitar. Footage includes interviews and collaborations with Carlos Santana (the newest!), Joan Baez, Mark O'Connor, John



PHOTO: DAVID BLACK

Nancy Wilson and Sharon Isbin.

Corigliano, Christopher Rouse, Tan Dun, Howard Shore, Joan Tower, Steve Vai, Paul Winter, Thiago de Mello, Leonard Slatkin, Martina Navratilova...teaching at Juilliard and Aspen, performing at the White House, Grammys, and with orchestra, and even Latin dancing...it's a bit dizzying to imagine the producer fitting all this into an hour!



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