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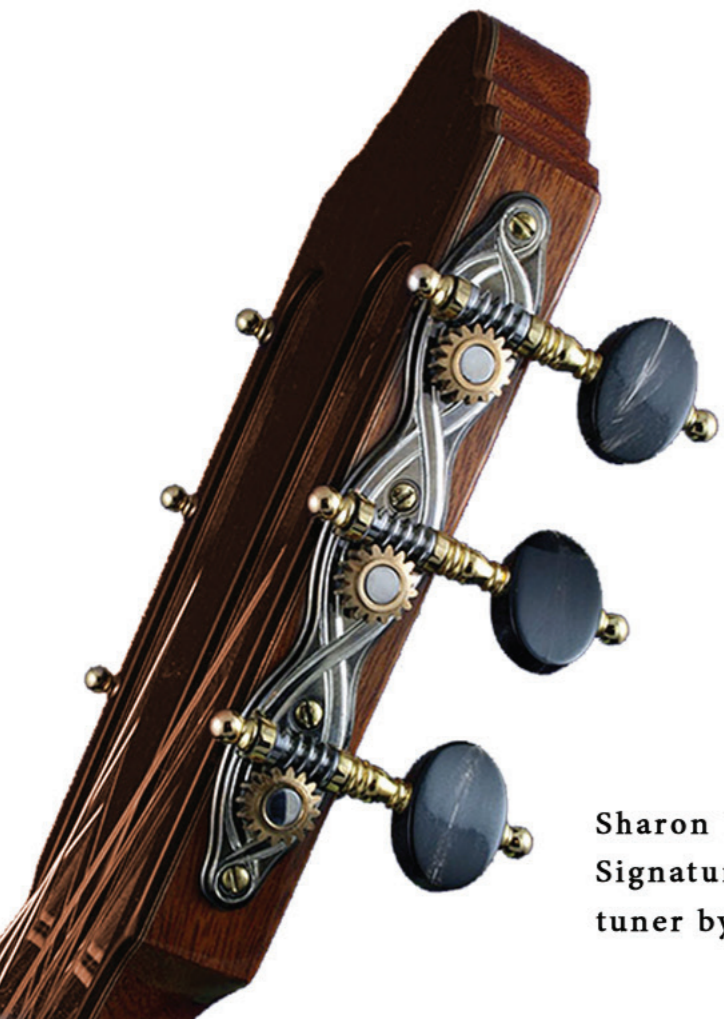


FOLK RHYTHM & BLUES JAZZ CELTIC BLUEGRASS COUNTRY
OPEN MIC FOLK NITES GIGS VENUES AND LOADS MORE.



Sharon Isbin

How did a kid from Minneapolis, Minnesota with a passion for rocket science come to create The Juilliard School's first guitar department, win Grammys, record with the New York Philharmonic, Joan Baez, and most recently a CD with rock and jazz legends Steve Vai, Stanley Jordan, and Nancy Wilson of Heart titled Sharon Isbin & Friends: Guitar Passions?



Sharon Isbin
Signature Model
tuner by Graf



SONY MUSIC

Photo: J. Henry Fair



I grew up as one of four children to parents born of Russian and Polish immigrants. When I was nine, our family moved to Italy for a year, the chance circumstance which brought me to the guitar. My father, a scientist and professor at the University of Minnesota, had accepted an invitation to be a consultant. My mother, a law school graduate, folk dance instructor, and naturally gifted musician, was eager to provide artistic experiences for me and my siblings.

When my oldest brother Ira asked for guitar lessons, our mother learned that a famous classical guitarist and former student of Segovia, Aldo Minella, commuted weekly from Milan to teach at the local conservatory in Varese where we lived. Ira's fantasies to be the next Elvis Presley were quickly dashed, however, when he realized he would have to grow long right hand fingernails and learn classical. He bowed out, and I volunteered to take his place. I hadn't a clue what classical guitar was, but I liked folk music and figured it couldn't be too far afield.

Aldo sent us to a builder in the countryside who measured my hands and made me a small guitar. I'll never forget the thrill of holding it for the first time. We climbed a rickety staircase, waded through a gaggle of chickens and entered a modest studio where he presented me with the instrument. It had a fresh wood and varnish scent,

and felt like a treasure. Unlike the piano which I had given up a year earlier, this was to be cradled and strummed, flesh to strings, no picks, keys or pedals. It vibrated through my being. It was thoroughly exotic.

Aldo soon became overwhelmed with concertizing and turned over all his students to his father, an exuberant, enthusiastic man who fueled my mother's imagination by telling her that when he placed my hands on the guitar they looked just like his son's. Twenty minutes a day of practicing didn't produce any miracles, but I had a good time and played in a little recital the following spring. Meanwhile, I learned French in school, discovered ruins in Pompeii and Rome, gondolas in Venice, Michelangelo in Florence, castles and prehistoric caves in France, Notre Dame in Paris, bullfights in Spain, the Matterhorn in Switzerland....

My life changed forever!



Before our return to the States by ship, I broke a finger in a fight with my mischievous oldest brother. With my arm in a cast, it was a sad journey back on the SSFrance. But I learned a life lesson about temper. And my finger recovered its full range of motion, albeit a little crooked.

Once back in Minneapolis, I continued with Jeffrey Nan, a young pioneer of classical guitar in Minnesota. I had my first lessons with Segovia at fourteen and discovered up close the enchanting magic of his gemlike sound and rich, colorful tone. But I was on a fast track to becoming a scientist, dissecting every miniscule thing that moved, building cloud chambers and model rockets. My father used to bribe me by saying I couldn't launch my rockets until I'd put in an hour on the guitar. The turning point came when I won a competition and performed for 10,000 people as a soloist with the Minnesota Orchestra. I had discovered something more exciting than sending worms and grasshoppers up into space, so I shifted gears and began practicing five hours a day.

During a summer of study with Venezuelan guitarist Alirio Diaz, I became fascinated with South American music. From sixteen, I no longer had a teacher during the year - I learned from a mirror and tape recorder, and a few lessons with Julian Bream and Segovia. I studied five summers with Oscar Ghiglia at the Aspen Music Festival, and discovered just how male the field was: one summer 50 guitar students showed up and only two of us were girls. It made me work harder because I had to defend both gender and instrument, and become good enough to compete on all levels. Thanks to an invitation following a concert my brother Neil had arranged in Houston, I began touring Germany the summer after high school.



Insets top to bottom:
Sharon with her Grammy 2001
Sharon with Joan Baez
Sharon with Mark O'Connor
Sharon with Tan Dun





And then came the big break. After freshman year at Yale University, I won the Toronto Guitar '75 competition. Tours and recordings followed in Japan, and the next year I won the Munich International competition. Three years later as a winner of the Queen Sofia competition in Madrid, I began a 20-year friendship with Joaquin Rodrigo when he invited me to his home after hearing my live broadcast of his *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

During my last two years at Yale, frustrated by a lack of guidance in playing Bach, I began studying baroque performance practice with the great Bach scholar and keyboard artist Rosalyn Tureck. It meant starting from the beginning, with discipline and much patience – we spent an entire year

on just one suite! I performed that suite in my New York debut in Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in 1979, and signed shortly after with Columbia Artists Management Inc. After ten years of study with Tureck, I recorded the complete Bach lute suites for EMI/Nirgin Classics – the first of several CDs with the label – and published two of our collaborative editions with G. Schirmer, Inc.

By the time of my New York debut, composers had begun writing for me, creating what would become a catalog of concerti, solo and chamber works by some of the finest musicians of our time: John Corigliano, Tan Dun, Christopher Rouse, Lukas Foss, Aaron Jay Kernis, Joseph Schwantner, Joan Tower, Howard Shore, Ned Rorem, David Diamond, Leo Brouwer, among many others. My *American Landscapes* CD, the first ever recording of American guitar concerti, was launched in the space shuttle *Atlantis* and

presented as a gift to Russian cosmonauts during a rendezvous with *Mir* in 1995. As a former rocket enthusiast, you can imagine my excitement when astronaut Chris Hadfield phoned every day the week of the launch with updates re NASA's approval for the CD and a Soloette Travel Guitar for the ship's band to be carried aboard.

In the 1980s, I was invited to perform with bossa nova legend Laurindo Almeida and jazz guitarist Larry Coryell. Our Guitarjam trio lasted for five years, and we were at the vanguard of what came to be known as crossover. Though in those days crossover was a risky concept and I had to defend myself against narrow-minded purists who believed classical players should never step outside the box. Now everyone is racing to do it! Also during this time, Carnegie Hall asked me to create their first ever guitar festival, *Guitarstream '85*. I assembled 40 musicians and an

orchestra for seven themed evenings of music from classical, Sephardic, folk, bluegrass, rock, jazz, Latin and flamenco genres. I adapted a smaller version of this festival for several years at the Ordway Theatre in St. Paul MN, and created and hosted a radio series for National Public Radio. I also worked with Brazil's musical icon Tom Jobim, recording his music and opening his Avery Fisher Hall show in duos with Carlos Barbosa-Lima.

Beginning in the late 1980's, I made the first of several trips to visit rain forests in Costa Rica, Ecuador and Brazil. Floating down the Amazon in Ecuador, in a dugout canoe with piranhas, electric eels, and glistening crocodiles afoot, monkeys, sloths, toucans, macaws, and an occasional python in the foliage overhead, I felt as if in the Garden of Eden. In the Galapagos, I traveled by boat from island to island, witnessing what had so captivated Charles Darwin, from sea lions and iguanas, to exotic frigate birds and red-footed boobies. In Tortuguero, Costa Rica, I watched huge leatherback turtles arduously make their way from the safety of the ocean's edge to the beach where they would lay their spherical eggs.

I had no idea then that these experiences would come to figure in my music as well. Back in New York, I met the composer/organic percussionist Thiago de Mello, an Indian from the Maué tribe of the Brazilian Amazon. He shared with me his compositions which describe the legends of his people, and evoke the sounds of the Amazon and its inhabitants with an array of exotic instruments, from turtle shells and cocoons to toenails of a tapir. We formed a trio with saxophonist Paul Winter and recorded our Grammy-nominated *Journey to the Amazon* (Warner Classics), a collection of Latin American music from countries of the Amazon and its tributaries: Brazil, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Colombia.

Dreams of a World followed and won a 2001 GRAMMY for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance, the first GRAMMY for a classical guitarist in 28 years. The album features folk-inspired music from eight different countries with eight world premieres, including *Appalachian Dreams* written for me by the late British composer John Duarte.

More projects followed: a 2002 GRAMMY winning disc of concerti composed for me by Christopher Rouse and Tan Dun; *Baroque Favorites* with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra; a Latin GRAMMY-nominated disc of concerti by Rodrigo/Villa-Lobos/Ponce with the New York Philharmonic, their first ever recording with guitar; and the Howard Shore score soundtrack for Martin Scorsese's Oscar winning film *The Departed*. I then signed with Sony and made the 2010 GRAMMY winning *Journey to the New World* with guests Joan Baez and fiddler Mark O'Connor (ranked as a #1 bestselling classical CD on Amazon.com and iTunes, it spent 63 consecutive weeks on the top Billboard charts.) My latest and most creative project, *Sharon Isbin & Friends: Guitar Passions*,

is a tribute to my guitar heroes with amazing guests from the rock, pop, jazz and Latin worlds: Steve Vai, Stanley Jordan, Nancy Wilson of Heart, Steve Morse, Romero Lubambo, Paul Winter, Thiago de Mello, and Rosa Passos. You can watch the two videos from the CD - *Asturias* and *Making of Guitar Passions* (with Vai inventing beef yoghurt)



Other landmarks include: writing the *Classical Guitar Answer Book* based on my four-year column for *Acoustic Guitar Magazine*; performing at the White House in 2009, a thrilling experience with President Obama and his family in the front row along with 300 of their friends and colleagues; and a documentary on my life and work to be released in 2012 filmed over a period of three years with guests as diverse as Martina Navratilova, Joan Baez, to Carlos Santana. The truly transformative experience, however, performing at Ground Zero for the first 9/11 memorial, televised live throughout the world. If ever there were a defining moment in my life, it was walking onstage before 24,000 family members and survivors, feeling the healing power of music as never before, and appreciating what it meant to all of us, that day and forever.

© Sharon Isbin



Photo: J. Henry Fair



This Month: Sharon Isbin is the November cover story feature for Classical Guitar magazine, and she is featured in the November issue of Guitar Player magazine. BBC Radio 4 profiles her November 29 at 15:45 (GMT) with music and interview on "Joan Armatrading's Favourite Guitarists" series.



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