



# COSMIC TRAVELER

## SHARON ISBIN CONTINUES HER MUSICAL JOURNEY WITH *TROUBADOUR*

BY MATT BLACKETT

### IN THE CURRENT DOCUMENTARY, *SHARON ISBIN: Troubadour*,

First Lady Michelle Obama is seen saying, "Sharon's father promised her that if she practiced guitar for an hour, she could go outside and launch her model rockets." Apparently she put in that hour of practice, because the next scene shows a young Sharon Isbin in a field, sending a rocket skyward. But Isbin didn't stop practicing there, and eventually her amazing classical guitar talents would get her music onto *actual* rockets, on the NASA Space Shuttle as well as the Russian space station Mir. Talk about a trajectory.

Of course there was a lot that happened during Isbin's journey from toy rockets to real ones. Along the way she released 25 albums, won a couple of Grammys, became the only guitarist to ever record with the New York Philharmonic, and founded the guitar department at a little school called Juilliard. It's an astounding list of accomplishments that she continues to add to, with cross-cultural and genre-obliterating collaborations with composers and musicians as diverse as Steve Vai, Christopher Rouse, Joan Baez, Steve Morse, and many others.

The documentary, which is a fascinating overview of Isbin's musical life, will enjoy a 200-station public television broadcast this winter (go to [sharonisbin.com](http://sharonisbin.com) or contact your local station for dates/times) with a subsequent release on DVD/Blu-ray, and it promises to be an important addition to the history of classical guitar. In addition, Warner Classics just released a 5-CD box set titled *Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums* for basically the same price as a single CD. For the uninitiated, there has simply never been a better time to discover why so many people call Isbin "the world's premier classical guitarist."

### What does this documentary represent to you?

I think it represents an expanding of the boundaries of the instrument. The collaborations with composers and other performers, disciplines, and genres of music create new perspectives and creative projects that are exciting.

### What are some milestones that were captured in the film that you view as pivotal to your journey?

One landmark the film documents is my work with the first composer to write for me, Ami Maayani. The producer found television footage I'd never seen before of me premiering his concerto at age 21 in Israel. The journey continues to my work with Rosalyn Tureck, who guided me towards an entirely new approach to Bach performance on guitar, which we published and I recorded. There's footage at the Grammys, including when I received my first award, a surprising experience because it was the first time in almost 30 years that a guitarist won a Grammy in classical, and I'm still the only woman. When Juilliard asked me to create their first guitar department in 1989, this was another milestone. I've had students from over 20 different countries, and I'm shown teaching several. The film inspires viewers to immerse themselves in their passions and to pursue their dreams. I've been told this by writers, scientists, musicians—not only guitarists. And that to me is very gratifying.

### You've said that in the guitar world you've had to fight as a woman and in the music world you've had to fight as a guitarist. Do you still feel like you're fighting those battles?

I think on some level it probably never stops. For example, there still may be concert series where I perform with an orchestra and they've never had a guitarist before. The recording I did with the New York Philharmonic is still the only recording they've made with a guitarist. And at Juilliard—you might find this very strange—but in the 25 years since I created the program there, I've not had a single female student from the United States. All my female students have been from other countries.

### Why do you think that is?

Traditions are slow to change. It's true, I take very few students and only the top. But if you look at role models in the guitar world, certainly in flamenco, it's still pretty much guys, right? And I think there's a difference between the U.S. and foreign countries in that in the US, a lot of kids



# FRETS

SHARON ISBIN

came to classical guitar having played in rock bands. They heard a classical CD and thought, "Oh, that's cool. Let me try that." But how many girls were playing in rock bands back in the '60s, '70s, '80s, or even the '90s?

**When did being a female classical guitarist work in your favor, do you think?**

Some of my male counterparts say they're jealous because I can wear very colorful outfits and they're stuck in black and white. I think that is an advantage [laughs]. I've never seen it as a disadvantage. Instead, I've been motivated to become the best I could be to avoid any question of gender. Being a pioneer and paving new roads; that's exciting.

**What does classical guitar have to offer players who don't have the time or the desire to truly study it and pursue the technique?**

In my conversations with guitarists like Steve Vai or Steve Morse, or jazz players like Romero Lubambo and Stanley Jordan—all of whom I've collaborated with—they've noted that a classical background helps in their own genre by giving extra training for the fingers and the ear. Reading music isn't unique to classical, but it can be a benefit. Steve Vai does things someone who couldn't read music would have a harder time doing. He composes works for orchestra, and is a brilliant arranger and composer in various styles of music.

**What's the best way to get non-classical players interested in it?**

A lot get hooked on Bach. The Bach Bourrée, for example, is familiar to many non-classical guitar players, and Bach is one of my specialties. I created the first performance editions for classical guitar of all the Bach lute suites during my ten years of study with Rosalyn Tureck, who was not a guitarist but a pianist, Bach scholar, and keyboard artist. If you listen to my recording of the suites, it's hard not to want to do something that really stretches your imagination and technique on the instrument. There are not only a lot of fast notes, but also beautiful lyricism. Bach's music was considered the jazz of its time and there is an improvisational quality to embellishing it and filling in notes that aren't on the page. There are many possibilities for tone color and multiple voices, with levels and layers of counterpoint.



**How did you choose what would be included in the box set?**

I did six CDs for Warner Classics and they chose five to include in the set that represent a wide range of my work. My recording with the New York Philharmonic includes three Latin concerti, one of which is Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez." Another that's unusual is *Journey to the Amazon*. On that, I'm joined by Paul Winter on sax and composer/organic percussionist Thiago de Mello, an Indian from the Amazon Rainforest. He performs on handheld percussion instruments, many of which he created—from cocoon shells and toenails of a tapir to a hollowed-out turtle shell. Bach and Vivaldi are on display in *Baroque Favorites* where I play solos and am also joined by a chamber orchestra from Zurich. Another album features two concerti written for me by Chris Rouse and Tan Dun. It shows the modern, exotic side of things and it won a Grammy. The Rouse is like listening to a Dalí painting, with surreal impressions of Spanish music. The Tan Dun is a beautiful melding of the ancient Chinese lute and its folk tradition with that of a Spanish guitar. The fifth CD—also a Grammy winner—is *Dreams of a World*, folk-inspired solo music. Among the world premieres is a suite written for me by John Duarte called "Appalachian Dreams," which uses as its inspiration music from the mountains.

**How do you challenge yourself as a guitarist? Do you still practice?**

I still do scales and exercises. It's a great warm-up and ideal way to keep your chops intact. I enjoy the challenge of always trying to do it somehow better. When I learn a new piece, there are new technical challenges that make me grow. When I ask a composer to write for me, it's unpredictable what I'll get and I have to be willing to take that huge leap and fly with it. That's thrilling, scary, and exciting. The next is in April 2015 when I premiere a new concerto with the Maryland Symphony that Chris Brubeck is writing for me in tribute to his late father, Dave Brubeck.

**There is a great scene in the documentary about how your dad said that if you practiced your guitar for an hour, you could go outside and launch model rockets. That actually led to your guitar playing finding its way onto real rockets and spaceships.**

One advantage of this film is we had access to early home movie footage from when I was a kid. You see me as a 12-year-old launching these rockets. That interest in science impacted my whole perspective on learning the guitar. Later, you see my CD, *American Landscapes*, floating weightless in the Space Shuttle with the Earth outside the window. It's pretty wild—you can't make this stuff up! 🚀