

# 2007 Thomas Humphrey Millennium "Le Sacrifice"

By Sharon Isbin

Thomas Humphrey, who passed away at the age of 59 last April 16, was one of the most influential American classical guitar makers. His guitars have been played by artists including the Assad Brothers, Michael Chapdelaine, David Tanenbaum, and myself, and luthiers the world over have integrated his ideas in their own designs. Starting his career as an apprentice to Michael Gurian in the early 1970s, Humphrey never stopped searching, experimenting, and dreaming about advancing the instrument.

Humphrey's landmark Millennium design came to him in a dream in 1985. Morphing elements of the guitar with those of a harp, Humphrey designed a raised fretboard and forward-pitched neck, causing the strings to pull the top at a steeper angle than on most guitars. The design met the goal of increasing volume, and it also improved playability in the upper registers.

Among Humphrey's last projects was a collaboration with artist Tamara Codor ([tamaracodor.com](http://tamaracodor.com)), who painted the backs of three of his guitars, including the beautiful 2007 Millennium "Le Sacrifice" shown here. The subtlety and magic of the image of two singers derives from the cascading hair which emerges unpainted from the natural undulating waves of the grain. Built with a cedar top and Brazilian rosewood back and sides, the guitar's sound is warm, dark, resonant, and lyrical, with deep rich basses and bell-like trebles. I inaugurated the guitar on my new album of music ranging from the Renaissance to bluegrass on which I was joined by guests Joan Baez and fiddler Mark O'Connor (for release details, see [sharonisbin.com](http://sharonisbin.com)).

Just ten days before his untimely death, Humphrey was in the audience when I used this guitar to perform the *Concierto de Aranjuez* with the Hudson Valley Philharmonic. Afterward, his wife, Martha, told me that during the performance Humphrey had tears of joy running down his face. She told me she'd "never seen him so happy, moved, and relaxed, as if in a state of grace." She realized that night, for the first time, the profound meaning of Humphrey's artistry. We visited the next day at their farm, admiring the horses, handcrafted swimming hole, and marvelous landscape. I never guessed this would be the last time we would be together.

Tom was a beacon of light and joy. His voice will live for an eternity in the instruments he crafted so lovingly, born anew each day in vibrant harmonies. **AG**



MILLENNIUM BACK—COURTESY TAMARA CODOR; ISBIN AND HUMPHREY—COURTESY MARTHA HUMPHREY; MILLENNIUM FRONT—COURTESY SHARON ISBIN.