

Nessa Marquez: An Independent Guitarist Breaking Ground In Colorado

by Beto Hale

Which composers and guitarist have influenced you the most?

This may come as a surprise but I have been influenced mostly by Al Mackay the former guitarist of Earth, Wind and Fire. I really do not listen to classical, flamenco, jazz or rock guitarists enough to say I have been influenced by them. I have been influenced more by Ramsey Lewis, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Maynard Ferguson, the late, great Jaco Pastorius, Ron Carter, Wayne Shorter and Stanley Clarke.

As far as composers are concerned I love the works of Luís Milan, Guillame de Mauchaut, Giovanni Palestrina, Tomás Luis de Victoria, Antonio Vivaldi, J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Debussy, Samuel Barber, and Richard Rodgers.

What can you share about your method of writing music? Do you for example play and record some ideas to later develop them? Do you write everything in notation?

I leave Denver and put away all the distractions when I'm inspired to compose. My two favorite places to go are Palmer Lake and a little place just west of Idaho Springs. In the initial stages I write from the soul and do not concern myself with the technical aspects. I just let it flow. I apply the theoretical aspects about song writing and composing to make a song better only after the creative process has been completed. Sometimes I start with a melody, sometimes chords and other times I have a theme. I think a songwriter and composer has to leave enough room in the music so that the listener can participate by using their own subtext. Most people do this even if they don't realize it. If music is too busy a listener cannot participate and as a result they can't relate.

I use pencil and paper during the initial stages of composing, notating mostly in standard notation and sometimes chord charts. Once I am finished I take the hand copy and notate it using computer software. Then I record it on a CD and send it off to my publisher.

Guitar is my first instrument of choice for composing but I also use the piano for other instrumentation. For instance on my first CD Grand Adventure the songs Opus One and Summer Sunset were composed on the piano. On my new CD Ready When You Are all the songs were composed and performed on the guitar. Pavane For A Dead Princess from my new CD was

written out on chord charts. I played a fretless classical guitar on this song. I used a haunting melody from an orchestral piece that I am working on and used it throughout this piece. The first two songs on my new CD were both improvised in the studio. It took me an hour to record both these tracks. Taj Mahal, Allemande, Lament for a Lost . . . , and One More Tear were notated. Take Me Home and Don Pelayo were not improvised they just have not yet been notated. On my CD Grand Adventure the title track was improvised and Noches No Brazil was scripted and improvised. So basically when I compose I either script the song, improvise, or I combine the two. Many of the songs on Ready When You Are incorporate elements of funk, jazz, classical and flamenco.

I am writing and performing my music these days. I am at a point in my career where I am tired of listening to solo guitarists rehash the same old repertoire. The way I see it, going to a guitar concert is like going to a museum to see artifacts. They are lovely to look at and appreciate but they really do not speak to this generation. The same holds true for classical music of the past. Modern music with classical styling can be just as beautiful and meaningful as is the music of the great masters. We are in the 21st century and I feel new music with classical styling is needed.

What types of exercises do you practice to keep your technique polished?

I practice both classical and flamenco rasqueado exercises such as triplet rolls, five and four stroke rolls, full rolls, various rumba patterns, five, four and three finger tremolos and three octave broken scales. I also practice various arpeggios, and slur exercises for the left hand. I occasionally practice rudimentary technique, artificial and natural harmonics and tambour. I then apply exercises to songs. I also do a lot of sight reading and playing by ear.

If I am having a problem with a particular passage in a song I isolate it and work it out. I practice to learn and practice to perform. Practicing to learn involves the early stages of learning a song then once I get all the correct notes, fingering, rhythms and phrasing.

I practice to perform. Practicing to perform involves the understanding of the subtext, mood, feel and the communication of the music to the audience. Practicing to perform also deals with stage presence. Because of my background I am theatrical with my presentation. I think about lighting and props. As a guitarist I just don't sit on a chair and play songs. I might sit on a piano bench for a few songs, then move to a bar stool and sing a song and then sit on the

edge of the stage and get intimate with the audience. A lot of musicians even the pros think it is about the music. Well it is not only about what the audience hears but also what they see. A great show is 60% visual and 40% about the music. Audiences want to be entertained they do not want to be given the Chinese water torture. The questions a performing artist should ask is, do all my songs sound the same and do they all look the same.

The Chinese water torture is when the artist never changes the pressure on the audience and the show is boring. I was speaking with a student just yesterday about this and I asked what was one of the most boring concerts you have seen. She responded, Eric Clapton from about twenty years ago. I ask why. She said, he just sat there on a bar stool and sang songs for a couple of hours. I compare that to the Earth Wind and Fire, shows and there was is comparison. If the audience has an artist figured out after three songs that artist is in trouble.

Technique is good as long as it is not the end of all things. There are many musicians who are just that, musicians but they are not performing artist. It is not enough to play the notes correctly, a performing artist must be moved by the music. In the process allow the audience to participate.

I like to quote Constantin Stanislavski a famous acting coach from the previous century when he said, "There can be no art without virtuosity, without practice, without technique and the greater the talent, the more they are needed. Amateurs reject technique not because of conscious convictions but out of unbridled laziness... Indeed, among professional actors 'musicians' there are many who have never changed their amateurish attitude towards acting 'music'". When I was younger and not in school during the summer months I used to play the guitar and the bass guitar eight hours a day. Now because of my busy schedule I spend four hours a day practicing.

What was the most challenging aspect of recording your latest CD?

One of the most challenging aspects of recording my new CD was knowing when to stop recording and producing. There comes a time when I have to say, "Ok, that's a wrap". Selecting the songs was not that difficult. You see, I believe that a great CD has peaks and valleys. Creating peaks and valleys is a major factor in the songs that I select and the order I place them in. I like a CD that has fast and slow songs. I like songs that make me dance, cry, and ponder. I like to mix it up for the listener and I think I have done this with "Ready When You Are". The

important thing to keep in mind is that a CD cannot be totally without order. Too much variety is also not good, there has to be balance.

There were a couple of things that I had hoped to do on this latest recording but was unable to do. On Don Pelayo I was never able to get the licensing for using some ancient Mozarabic chant from Spain. There was another track called Preludio de Andaluz that I was unable to get clearance on so it was never included on the CD.

What can you share with our readers about your teaching methods and philosophy?

Students learn different ways and I have to be careful not to teach all my students the same way. I don't always teach them the way I learn. Some students are oriented visually, others are auditory, still others are kinesthetic learners and others are a combination. I try to make it fun for my students by making the things we do meaningful and relevant to them. With my young students I also play music games and we read stories about famous composers. I even suggested a student read my biography. We both got a chuckle from that. My students work on exercises, scales, technique, and songs. I am detailed in all that I do including teaching. My piano students learn how to read standard music notation. My guitar students learn how to read standard music notation, chord charts, playing by ear, and a little tablature. My bass students learn how to read standard music notation, playing by ear, and a little tablature. All my students work on sight reading and theory. I am patient with my students because they have not played musical instruments as long as I have.

What are your plans for the next year?

My goals for the next year are to continue to write great material. I also hope to get my material on radio networks across the United States. I hope to win several independent music awards in 2003 for album of the year and in the latin, new age, album art, and music for film and television categories. I am planning to be a guest musical artist for symphony orchestras. I am in the early stages of writing a guitar concerto. I am also co-writing a novel with my executive producer that we hope to have made into a screen play. I also hope to get label representation and tour. I also plan to use my music career as a springboard for pursuing my interest in television and film acting. When my audience is happy I am happy.