

## **THE NEW WORLD FLAMENCO JAZZ STORY**

### **An interview with composer, guitarist and recording artist Tomas Michaud**

#### **You often get likened to like Ottmar Liebert. How do you feel about that?**

I hear often people's first impressions when I'm performing "is that an Ottmar Liebert song" or "I thought I heard Ottmar Liebert". I like Ottmar Liebert's music very much and consider him one of my big inspirations. I feel honored to be likened to him. I also think that when people are more familiar with my music they hear some of the uniqueness and different influences.

#### **Who are some of your other influences?**

Santana in one of my earliest influences. The first album I really loved was the Santana album with "Samba Pa Ti" and "Black Magic Woman". I played that album over and over until practically wore it out. I credit Santana and that album with inspiring me to want to play guitar. It's strange how things work out. I actually got to see Santana and Ottmar Liebert perform together at the Concord Pavilion and my current band lineup includes David Margen who played with Santana for 6 years.

Another big influence is the Gipsy Kings. I first heard the Gipsy Kings on a bus in Zamora, Spain. I remember asking the bus driver "who are those guys" (yes - in Spanish) and he showed me a Gipsy King tape. Since then I've seen them 3 times at the Greek theatre in Berkeley and the Concord Pavilion.

#### **Why did you choose to play guitar?**

My first instrument was trumpet. I played trumpet for about three years as a child. I never really had much passion for the sound of the trumpet. At 14 I started to play mandolin. I enjoyed that and then my friends talked me into playing bass. Someone also gave me a guitar around this time and while I was playing bass in bands I would go home and practice what I saw the guitar player doing on the guitar. It was at the same time I was listening to guitarist like Santana. Within a short time after I started playing guitar I knew I had found my instrument or "voice".

I feel like I can express subtle things with the guitar that I could not express with any of the other instruments or with words. Sometimes I struggle with the "right" notes but on my best days the strings and notes feel like they are directly connected to something deep inside me and beyond my decision making process. They just seem to flow.

#### **What is New World Flamenco Jazz and where did this term come from?**

New World Flamenco Jazz is a blend of world beats from South America, Central America, the Middle East and Spain. Throw in some Smooth Jazz and Flamenco guitar and this is what you get. I couldn't find a label out there that really fit so I made one up with the help of my fans. In some stores I find my CDs filed under New Age along with Ottmar Liebert. In others they put me under World Music. A few of the artist that could be categorized as New World Flamenco Jazz might be Ottmar Liebert, Strunz and Farah, Gipsy Kings, Shahin & Sepher, Armik, Jesse Cook, Govi, and Peter White.

#### **What inspired you begin to write this style of music?**

I played rock for many years while growing up and played in rock bands. I began to realize as I got older that the music and the environment really wasn't syncing with

my personality, interests and values. Meditation was and is a important part of my life and I couldn't reconcile this and a rock'n roll lifestyle. I began play and writing music for church. This worked for awhile but didn't fully express what I was feeling. Then I began traveling, first to Spain, and then other Latin American countries like Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Peru, Mexico, and Guatemala. This music and rhythms that I heard along with discovering the Gipsy Kings and Ottmar Liebert and some deep introspection set me on my current musical path.

**Do you consider yourself a "Flamenco" guitarist?**

No, I would never call myself a flamenco guitarist. I studied and learned some flamenco guitar techniques and have integrated them into my own style of music.

**Where do you get your inspiration to write your music and what attracts to composing instrumental music?**

I get inspiration from traveling, listening to other great musicians like Marc Antoine and Peter White, taking walks at the beach, meditation, reading, watching movies, dreams, watching people and everyday life. I often compose while I'm traveling. I take my guitar everywhere often write songs in beautiful places.

I feel with instrumental music that I'm able to bypass the intellect and affect people in a less cluttered way without as much baggage as with the different meanings and connotations of words. People often write or tell me wonderful things like my music relaxes them or helps them feel better about themselves and life or deeply affected them in some way. It makes my day when people tell me that I touched them with my music.

**How long does it take and what's it like to create a CD.**

After spending over a year of writing and arranging the songs for each CD I hand pick each top notch, very talented musician to rehearse the arrangements for that particular project. Then we go into a professional studio to painstakingly record and refine the songs using the best equipment and modern digital recording techniques available. At the same time we are recording, I am working with an artist to create the artwork for the cover. This alone usually takes months of going back and forth, creating different versions and working to get it just right.

When the recording is done, Don Turney (the recording engineer and my co-producer) and myself spend days mixing the recorded music until it's ready to go to the Mastering Lab where each CD is mastered by the world class mastering engineer Kenneth Lee. Kenneth uses super sophisticated mastering equipment and a process called HDCD to get the highest audio quality possible. Finally the whole thing goes to the manufacturing plant where they print the artwork, manufacture the CDs from the master and put the whole thing together.

Each CD takes me from 18 to 20 months to complete and approximately 1200 hours from inspiration to finished CD.

**How is your newest CD different from previous ones?**

One thing that's different is instead of recording one instrument at a time I recorded the rhythm section "live" in the studio and then overdubbed my melody and other instruments. I've never done this before and it took some extra rehearsal with the

musicians. I wanted to capture some of the "live" sound and use some of the incredibly talented musicians I've been performing with.

This CD is a little more "jazzy" than my past CDs. I've been listening a lot to Peter White and Marc Antoine lately and I think it has rubbed off on me. The CD still has a Spanish influence. One of the songs I like best on the CD I wrote while I was in Seville, Spain. I had a dream in Seville that I was listening to this song on my CD and I realized that I hadn't written the song yet. I woke up in the middle of the night and went into the bathroom of my hotel room with my guitar so I didn't wake my wife up. To my surprise I could play it right away and I decided to name it Seville.

**What about your live shows are the musicians you perform with?**

I am blessed and honored to be surrounded by incredibly talented musicians that are a pleasure to be around. Obie Butterworth is a great guitarist that plays a mean flamenco guitar. David Margen played with Santana for 6 years and is a monster on the bass. Phil Thompson, formerly with Pete Escovedo, is a master at keeping the time and playing just enough. On sax, Wayne Ledbetter provided the body and warmth that the flamenco guitars just can't provide. Occasionally Brian Rice, who played percussion on my last 3 CDs, sits in with us and brings his talent for color and decoration.

**What other things do you spend your time doing besides write music and performing and what do you consider your main passion?**

I believe strongly in the value of learning music. I own a music school and store called [Starland Music Center](#) in Alameda. I developed my own unique system of teaching guitar and hire and train teachers in my system. When I first started Starland it took a lot of my time. Now I have an excellent support staff and management. This allows me time to create, perform and record as well as continue to improve my teaching methods and materials. Having two sources of income helps me to put more focus on where my inspiration leads me instead of how commercially viable the music will be. I have had to learn good time management.

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