



oscar peñas

BY JAKE HERTZOG

HAILING FROM SPAIN, THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE modern guitar, Oscar Peñas' approach to guitar playing and composition is transcontinental, combining contemporary jazz with traditional Spanish music and music from Latin America.

After graduating cum laude from the Berklee College of Music, Peñas returned to Barcelona, and recorded two albums for the Fresh Sounds label that showcased a mature, reserved style. In 2005, Peñas' search for fresh forms of inspiration brought him back to the U.S., where he earned a masters degree in Jazz Studies from the New England Conservatory, studying with such luminaries as Danilo Perez and Charlie Banacos.

Peñas then relocated to Brooklyn, New York, where he teaches and performs regularly. The guitarist's third album as a leader, *From Now On* (BJUR), features an international cast of musicians that includes legendary jazz pianist and composer Gil Goldstein on this track. Peñas plays a 1960s Fender Telecaster.

OSCAR PEÑAS

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the recording, a collection of sublime compositions that delve deeply into his Spanish heritage while simultaneously honoring his jazz mastery.

What guitars did you play on the new album?

I played a Prudencio Sáez Cutaway nylon-string acoustic and a Gibson ES-175 through a Fender Pro Junior amp.

Are those the same instruments that you play live?

No. Live, I play a nylon-string Frameworx Modern Classic model through an AER Compact 60 amplifier, and my electric is a Klein Custom, which I use along with a Pro Co Rat distortion pedal and a Lexicon LXP-1 reverb and delay processor.

Were you an electric or acoustic player first?

My first guitar was a nylon-string. I was trained to play classical as a kid, though after a while it got a little boring. I also discovered that when playing other genres you could choose your own notes! I switched to jazz and got my first electric when I was 17. Studying classical guitar in Spain was pretty rigid, but I'm happy to have gone through that because it really helped my fingerpicking, which is kind of my signature. I wanted to play nylon-string on the new recording because that was my first guitar and it is a part of me.

I've seen you play fingerstyle and solo with a pick. What's your usual approach?

I usually hide the pick in my fingers, so I can combine both styles when needed. I feel more confident playing lines with a pick.

The compositions on *From Now On* draw more from Spanish music than those on your previous albums. What caused your sound to evolve in that direction?

Every album is a product of the moment, and at the time I recorded my first two albums I had just graduated from Berklee, where I had been exposed to all the music from the late '90s, like that of Kurt Rosenwinkel and Mark Turner. It may seem kind of weird, but when I was living in Spain, I was playing music that was rooted more in America, and since I moved to New York, I've been playing music more rooted in Spain and Latin America. It's not a matter of feeling "homesick," that was just the music I wanted to do at the moment.

What made you decide on the instruments and musicians?

There was Fender Rhodes piano on my

previous albums, which blends really well with guitar, but for this album I didn't want to play with keyboards anymore. Gil Goldstein played piano on one track, but he's a monster who has worked with the pioneers of merging jazz and flamenco, such as Carles Benavent and Jorge Pardo from Paco de Lucía's band, so I knew he would be sensitive enough to give me space and complement what I was doing. Moto Fukushima's 6-string electric bass playing gave me a unique harmonic pillow, and Richie Barchay can play drums and percussion at the same time. There's also a ballad that has a flamenco-like harmonic and rhythmic vibe, so I asked Gil to play accordion on that song, which really added a lot.

How do you decide whether to play acoustic or electric on a particular piece?

I don't decide until the last minute, though I usually work out ideas and practice them on the nylon-string first, because that gives me more strength that I can later transfer over to the electric if I choose. My approach to playing both instruments is essentially the same, and if I'm comfortable playing something on the nylon-string then I'll also be comfortable playing it on the electric—at least most of the time.

Which Spanish or Latin American songwriters, composers, and guitarists have influenced you most?

Lately, I've been listening to a lot of vocalists and piano players. But as far as guitarists go, of course Guinga, Lula Galvão, Tohino Horta, Egberto Gismonti, and the Aca Seca Trio would be among my influences. I love all of these players, though I have never transcribed their music or tried to figure out what they are doing on the instrument—I just meticulously listened to them. Some pianists won't transcribe Monk because he is so one-of-a-kind, and it's the same way with these guitarists for me, because they are so particular and so personal.

Who are some of the guitarists that inspired you to study jazz?

When I first started jazz guitar I had two heroes: Joe Pass and Pat Metheny. I was crazy about Joe Pass' solo work and the way he accompanied Ella Fitzgerald. And the way Pat Metheny has imparted so much to music in terms of different styles and technology is also amazing. Later, I got into Bill Frisell and Jim Hall. I had a chance to meet Hall personally, and since that time I've loved him even

more. I think he's one of the most musical people on earth.

Do you have a different approach to accompaniment in your Spanish and Brazilian playing as opposed to your jazz playing?

I try to play with musicians that have a very solid groove so I don't have to take care of that part [laughs]. That way, I can focus on

the creativity and interaction with the soloist. When I was learning genres like choro and samba, I would just focus on learning the groove and feeling it with the metronome. When I was in school I tried to practice with percussion players and pick their brains to find out what they do. There's also a great book by Nelson Faria called *The Brazilian*

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OSCAR PEÑAS

Guitar Book. At some point you have to understand the groove; you have to listen to it and then try to *feel* it. In straight-up jazz it's different—my goal is *not* to focus on a pattern, not to do anything repetitive, and just react.

Do you see merging styles as inevitable given your musical background?

Living in New York, I realized that if I tried to play standards or "pure jazz," I wouldn't be as authentic as people who were raised here, because that's part of their culture. I know the techniques because I studied the greats here, but I have to say something that is part of my own persona and culture. When you devote your life to music, your intention is to move people. If I want to say something of my own, it makes sense to play something from my culture.

What do you think about when you are improvising?

I don't like the "lick" approach to improvisation. What I aim for is motivic development. If you simplify everything, there are two approaches: vertical and horizontal. Vertical is when you think about the chord scale of the moment, and horizontal is trying to develop a melodic idea and then feed that idea into the changes, which is what I'm trying to do. But before I do that, I write the music and I think, "Wow, these chord changes are not so easy." Then, like a puzzle, I put the pieces together, finding common tones, chromatic connecting lines, chord scales, and arpeggios—and after that I practice them. When I'm improvising, though, I try to forget about all of that.

Have you begun thinking about your next album?

The next album probably won't be as acoustic, and I'd also like to experiment with different instrumentation, including violin and vocals. I'll also probably incorporate some non-original music, for example, from a composer from Catalonia named Federico Mompou.

As a teacher, what advice can you offer to young players?

Seek out lots of different music, but don't necessarily try to play like your heroes—try to play like yourself. And you should write music, because writing all the time nurtures your creativity, aids your ability to improvise, and provides a way to develop your own voice. Again, don't be afraid to play your own music. Everything is doable, and not everything has been done yet. ■



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