

MATTHEW FAGAN



The expressions eclectic and brilliant are bandied about a lot in music these days but few players have the diverse influences, musical skills and broad vision of this month's musician Matthew Fagan. I've known Matthew for years, watched his plans come to fruition and marvelled at his virtuosity. He has stunning skills on the classical nylon string guitar but more unusually is equally at home on steel strings, resonators and even 12 string and banjo. He has a great new album *Voyages And Journeys* and what's more he's signed to none other than Steve Vai's label Favoured Nations. It's quite an accomplishment and now finally he's taking his truly world music adventures on the road.

It's unusual for a classically trained player to be an improviser. How did you arrive at this point where I guess you're a meeting of worlds?

The core of my music has always been Spanish classical guitar. My first teacher was into all sorts of music styles though, acoustic and electric, which led to a love of rock, blues improvising as well as of course, traditional Spanish melodies. So the two worlds have always been there. I played piano by ear before I played guitar and I've always thought that playing by ear has a great advantage over purely sight-reading. Studying great works has always inspired my own creations. Up until the time of Beethoven classical musicians were expected to improvise, it's just something that's been lost through time. Indian music, one of my big influences, has perhaps the longest continuous history of improvising and in their music you have to master all the Ragas, each of which can last twenty minutes or more.

When you're improvising, which I'm guessing is a primary driving force for you, are you thinking scales, modes, standard changes, clichés? I'm interested in how a classically trained musician thinks through this process.

It was either Bird or Coltrane who said, "first you learn your instrument inside out then you forget the training!" From the study of Indian music and other non-Western music, capturing the mood and passion of the music is the primary inspiration, and each mode, scale and chord suggests to me a certain mood. Even certain rhythms imply moods and energy. After nearly thirty years of listening, I'm realizing the connections between all genres and traditions. A perfect example is the similarities between flamenco

rhythm and Indian rhythm. It was illustrated to me when my flamenco guitarist Juan and my tabla player Raju immediately understood each other's music. This is what *Voyages And Journeys* is all about.

Did you grow up in a musical environment?

My grandfather and his two brothers (Milton Parkes and his brothers Cecil and Kingsley) were famous classical musicians who toured America in the '20s with Dame Nellie Melba, so there was always great musical appreciation in my family. But my real inspiration came to me by going to concerts. When I was 16 I saw John Williams, Leo Kottke and Paco Pena in one year.

It must be exciting to be associated with Steve Vai's label. What's the story behind that development?

You're responsible! You suggested to go to Winfield (Walnut Valley Festival KS) so last September I went and through my publisher, Gus McNeill, I made contact with Tommy Emmanuel and his management and they recommended me to Favoured Nations, Vai's label, who auditioned *Voyages And Journeys* and invited me to join the label.

The new album has been a long time in the works, so what sort of new directions and ideas are inspiring you now?

I think I'm actually getting back to the roots of what I love – Spanish Flamenco, Celtic steel string and Brazilian guitar music. I have been heavily involved in orchestral composition in the recent past but now I've fallen in love again with pure guitar.

You have a very fine and diverse array of instruments. What are your main tools of trade?

I'm best known for my "James Keith" 10-string Spanish classical guitar. I also play a "David Churchill" steel string, a "National" Tri-Cone resonator, and Billy Connolly's five-string banjo! (Which he gave to me!) and my electric ukulele! I also have a PRS electric (the Santana model). I recently acquired a beautiful Alhambra concert classical and I also have a Maton 12-string. All of these feature on the new album.

There appears to be a large floating line-up that presents your music. Who's involved in the current project?

My current group is called The Voyages World Music Group, the core of which is Raju Sharma on tabla and djembe, Conrad Henderson on electric bass, Juan Martinez on flamenco guitar, Romana Geermans on gypsy violin, Rahdey Gupta on sitar, Ting on Chinese water mouth organ and finally "Big Al" Harriss on didgeridoo. Quite an eclectic mix!

Where to in the world now?

Obviously the "big" dream is to take this project overseas to showcase my music and the brilliant musicians we have here in this country. I'd love to write for film too, as well as have my music reach concert stages everywhere on the globe. In the short term I'll be returning to the USA in June for the Guitar Foundation of America Festival in Austin Texas. I'm hoping to develop my network in the states and also to meet Steve Vai in LA. Later in the year I'll be returning to Winfield to compete again and make more musical friends! I'm certainly writing again and looking forward to new and exciting projects and collaborations with some special friends. Stay tuned!

**For information on Matthew visit www.matthew-fagan.com.
Voyages And Journeys will be launched in Melbourne at
SpensersLive on Sunday May 16.**