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By Derek Maness

Nessa Marquez has made a career out of overstepping bounds. Emerging as one of Colorado's most prominent classical guitarists, Nessa enjoys the unique position of being able to effect change in what some consider to be a stodgy, outdated genre of music. And she revels in the task, seamlessly integrating funk and R&B flavors into traditional flamenco structures without compromising her mastery of the accepted style of classical guitar. Her resume is extensive, and includes pages of performance credits in not only guitar, but also television, film and theater work.

I recently got the opportunity to spend the afternoon chatting with Nessa at her south Denver home. I had intended to stay for maybe an hour, but a combination of fascinating conversation and Pepperidge Farms Milano cookies kept me for 4 times that. Nessa was kind enough to provide insight on her versatile career thus far:

Riff: It's an obvious question, but how did you get into music?

NM: "My parents used to watch some of the variety shows back in the late 60's early 70's, and they had musicians on the shows. I remember being 5 or 6 and I'd pick up a truck or a doll or something and I'd pretend I was playing a guitar to it. As the months and years went by, they kind of started to think, "Maybe Nessa has a knack for this." I was about 7 years old when Dad bought me a little plastic toy guitar. I remember we would come home from church on Sunday morning and while the rest of the family would go eat breakfast, I would go in my bedroom and pick up the guitar and play for a couple of hours. There was a little book with a little 45-rpm record that came with it. It was just a little piece of plastic that you could almost make a fan out of. I remember putting that little 45 single on and playing to it. (Then one November) Dad went to the Sears, Roebuck & Co. in the old Cherry Creek mall and he bought a full size guitar for me. It was kind of difficult...I mean, it was BIG. The guitar was almost as tall as I was. Miraculously, I stuck with it.

"At the time of my Father's passing, my family was basically falling apart, so I kind of took to the music. That was a significant turning point in how much music would mean to me. Music soothed my soul, with all the turmoil that was going on. It was particularly the music of Earth, Wind and Fire that kept me going. It was sophisticated, it was fun to listen to, but the message and the words were positive: "Live a Brighter Day", "That's the Way of the World." Their lyrics brought hope to me. They were a major influence on my musical endeavors for many years to come.

Riff: Did you take lessons?

NM: "Dad gave me lessons for almost a year. After that, I kind of lost interest in them because I was just learning some boring little songs like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and I wanted to play fun music.

"Then one day I was in my room listening to my radio...it was an old yellow radio, kind of funky...and I heard a song by Ricky Nelson called "Garden Party." I picked up my guitar and started playing along with it. I don't even remember if I played all the right notes. I didn't even know chords back then.

"From the first time I dropped out of my music lessons, I was basically self taught. I'd get some books with some popular songs in them and play the chords and sing, that kind of thing. Then I got to be a teenager. I was at my cousin's house and I heard an 8 track or a 45 or something of Earth, Wind, and Fire's "That's the Way of the World." That was 1975. I



heard that and it was like something magical happened. From there I just took off. When the other kids were out of school in the summer riding their bikes and playing in the park, I spent most of my time playing the guitar. I'd put in an 8-track or put on an old album and I would sit there with my electric guitar for 6 hours. I would play everything. I would play what the guitar was doing; I'd play what the horn was doing, the piano, and the vocals. I didn't have a bass guitar, so I tuned my guitar to some weird tuning...I don't even know what it was...but I played the guitar part and the bass part on my guitar."

Riff: What did you listen to?

NM: "My roots are actually in rhythm and blues. I grew up listening to a lot of stuff, but mostly what I was into was the classic soul and R&B stuff. Funk. Parliament and the Funkadelics and George Clinton and the Commodores. Then I started getting into the jazz-rock fusion stuff like Spyro Gyra and George Benson, Stanley Clarke and Al DiMeola. Along the way I listened to a little bit of rock, but I was never into heavy, heavy rock. I liked Elton John, I thought Pink Floyd was pretty cool. I liked Journey and Foreigner."

Riff: You're known mainly for your classical guitar work. How did you make that transition?

NM: "I went to college and started my official 'training,' if you will, and got a degree in music. That's where I studied classical guitar, where I learned to appreciate the works of the great masters, going back to the Renaissance period and up into the works of Bach and Vivaldi and so forth."

Riff: Tell me about your latest release, *Ready When You Are*.

NM: "As of late, I've been doing a lot of my own original classical.... I hate to use the word flamenco because a lot of my new rhythmic stuff isn't pure flamenco, although there's a lot of flamenco influences. In my songs "Taj Mahal" and "Don Pelayo" there's kind of a cross between funk, where I snap strings, and a groove-oriented rumba with some classical influence in there. And with the melody, some smooth jazz influences as well. It has a more contemporary sound."

Riff: "Don Pelayo" is unusual. What's the story behind that song?

NM (*who picks up a guitar for illustration*): "It's very interesting. Today the term "don" is kind of used loosely, but in the old days, it was a noble title, a lord. Don Pelayo was the last Visigoth king to rule Spain when the Moors invaded in 711 A.D. This whole song is about him, and every part of the song has a story about it."

(*Nessa plays a series of triplet rasqueados*) "These are the Moorish horses running into battle. On the CD we've overdubbed things. This (*she snaps the low E string like a funk bass player*) snap indicates where the swords are hitting. Then we took one note and elongated it digitally and reversed it and it goes 'whoosh.' Right before the snap there's this whoosh. That depicts the sword slashing through the air. The first time through the "A" section depicts the Moors winning the battle. Then, Pelayo retreats to a mountain fortress (*the middle section, quieter than the first*). According to Spanish legend, Pelayo began to pray and the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary threw the Moors into confusion as they were heading up the mountain."

"Then the "A" section comes back, which is the Visigoths winning the battle, and the snap comes back and the swoosh and everything. There's one other thing. I played very slow whole notes and then we digitally elongated them. It turned into this haunting, chant-like melody, but done with the guitar. When you play the CD, wherever you hear this melody...it's in the background, you have to listen very attentively...that represents the souls of the slain soldiers leaving their bodies and going into eternity."

Riff: You're known for your versatility in composing classical music with a modern edge. What are some other unusual techniques you used on the album?

NM: "On a song called "Pavane for a Dead Princess" I took a very thin Dunlop guitar pick and I raked the strings. One part of the tonality seems to be going lower while one goes higher, which is kind of interesting. While that was going on, I overdubbed a fretless guitar part."

"Pavane' was my chance to escape from all the tonal and modal stuff, working within a given key signature. When I wrote it I was at Palmer Lake, which is one of my favorite places to compose. The melody actually came from an orchestral piece I'm working on which I have yet to finish. It's very eerie. That's what I was looking for, unresolved dissonance. I've noticed people's reactions when I play it live. It agitates people. I can start hearing people moving in their chairs. I kind of like that.

"There's a poem that goes with it that I say. It goes, "Life is a river destined for the sea and on its journey it passes over flowers and weeds. And whence it comes to its journey's end life then begins again spiraling outward in a sea of time and space until all measurements have been fulfilled." And then the music starts in. The unresolved dissonances represent the hardships in our lives, the trials, the tribulations, whereas the more consonant parts are the good times. The snaps at the end depict the nails going into a coffin. The whole thing is a conflict between the good times and the bad. Then I end on a very soft, beautiful E major chord. It represents peace, no more pain, no more suffering, no more conflict.



Riff: It's not really what you'd call 'driving around' music, is it?

NM: "That one isn't. That one would probably get someone ticked off on the road." (*laughs*)

Riff: You're also an actress? How did that come about?

NM: "I did my first television commercial when I was in fourth grade. It was for National Nutrition Week. My part was to play the part of the kid who ate all the good food and was nice and strong and healthy.

I did a lot of plays in elementary school and junior high, not so much in high school. I don't do that much theater at all anymore, mainly because it takes too much time, and quite frankly it doesn't pay all that much. I enjoy the film and television medium more. Which is kind of interesting because from a music standpoint, I enjoy performing live. I key off the audience. But for television I enjoy being in front

of the camera more.

Riff: You once appeared in an episode of ER. How do you compare the experience of working in a film studio to that of a music studio, where there's often a lot of multiple takes to get things right?

NM: "When dealing with people of that caliber, seasoned regulars on shows like ER, they go in and do it within two takes. They're good. They're usually union players. They go in there and the lines are down, the character's down. A lot of time is actually spent prepping the set, having stand ins to set the lights, the camera angles, the distances. I think it's really rewarding...they feed you good, that's for sure.

Riff: What similarities are there in performing music and acting? Do they come from the same place inside you?

NM: "One of the key elements to good acting is you've got to listen, and it's got to be real. Morgan Freeman, in a book that I read, said the great actors are great listeners. When you listen to someone talk, it affects your reaction to what they're saying.

"It's kind of an advantage I have over musicians who don't have an acting background. Music, at least from my perspective, is more than just "check me out" (mimes playing a guitar) or "check out these chords". In music, as in acting, there's much more than meets the note. In acting there's a subtext, what is truly going on in that actor's point of reference. It's the same for music. If you're not real, the audience knows it.

"The sad thing is, you see that with a lot of famous performers. I was just talking with a (director) at a major satellite network here in Denver. He brought up a name of a very well

known classic rock guitarist whom I won't mention, but he's a household name (*Nessa pauses, noticing my pout*)...Eric Clapton, what the hell (*laughs*). He said the biggest letdown was that Clapton came out and sat on a barstool and the attitude that he communicated was, "Well shit, here I am again. This is, what, the 2,500th time I'm having to play "Layla"" and you could just see it on his face. Just a very boring show.

"There's a difference between just a musician and a performer. A performer is someone who really knows how to engage. There's a beautiful chemistry between the performer and the audience. The audience knows when you're genuine. There's times when you play the wrong notes, but you give them a great show, you give them all your heart and soul, and they'll say 'Man that was a great concert'."

Riff: You seem like you approach your craft with a great deal of passion. How do you keep things fresh, without losing that spark?

NM: "Focused spontaneity. I'm always trying to improve upon what I do. I try to find different ways of playing the same thing. Every time I play I feel different, and that comes across in the way I play. I might be playing "Malaguena," and I've had a bad day. It will come across very brash, angry. Or I might be having this very cool, easygoing, mellow mood going, so I'm more sensitive.

"A lot of it has to do with the fact that I don't have to worry about being commercial. I have commercial tracks on the CD, but it's not like I have a record label saying, "Nessa, we're rejecting all the songs from your album because they're not commercial enough." I could write all the commercial stuff and try to make tons of money. Then, once I've made it big, I have a little bit more freedom to do what I really want to do. But, to hell with it." (*laughs*)

"That's what it's like with a lot of the classical guitar stuff I'm writing right now. I'm tired of regurgitating the same old ...crap? It's one of the reasons I won't go back to college and get a graduate degree in classical guitar performance. Why should I be like all the myriad of classical guitarists who are learning the same old repertoire? Don't get me wrong, it's beautiful music, it's great music, but here we are 200-300 years after this music was written and from my perspective...it's old. Let someone else do it, I'm going to write my own stuff.

"I also don't have a stuffy university professor telling me how to play my own stuff (*laughs*). "You're doing it WRONG! It wasn't MEANT to be played that way!!" They stand up there and say "at measure 33, Mozart was thinking this." How the hell do *you* know? After I'm dead and gone, I'd like for my spirit to come back and go to some music classroom and there's some stuffy professor sitting there saying, "...and when Nessa wrote this, she was thinking *this*," and I'm going to say "I wrote that sitting on the damn toilet" or something like that. (*We both laugh for a good bit here...*)

Riff: Who are some of your influences as guitarists?

NM: "I'm a guitarist, but I don't listen that much to other guitarists. I listen to drummers, vocalists, sax players, trumpet players, stuff like that. I don't have a single Segovia album in my collection. I don't have a single flamenco guitar CD in my collection. I have a few things by Al DiMeola. I used to have an album by Joe Pass. As far as drawing inspiration from other guitarists...not really. I listen to mostly bands and other solo musicians, but not in my field.

Riff: If I were a beginning classical guitar student, what are some of the most important things I need to remember?

NM: "We live in a generation where we want instantaneous gratification. One of the things I think is crucial to studying classical music or flamenco is discipline and long-term focus. Part of that focus comes from a passion and a love for what you're doing. That drive has to come from within and not from manipulation. That's how I was able to spend six hours at a time when I was a kid playing by ear with album after album, as opposed to having my mommy and daddy saying, "Nessa, did you get your half hour of practice in?" That passion will translate into that focus and that drive.

Riff: Any other tips for success in entertainment?

NM: "There are a multitude of 'P's' to being successful in the entertainment industry. Practice. Persistence. Patience. Perseverance. Prayer. Promiscuity. No. (*laughs*) Pride.

Having pride in what you do. Actually, promiscuity...*(The tape runs out at this point, unfortunately).*

Nessa Marquez has trained under the likes of guitar masters Christopher Parkening and Rene Heredia, and she's also a composer, lecturer and educator. Now she can add *Riff's* Featured Artist of the Month to her list of accomplishments, a pinnacle in most careers, to be sure...but, in Nessa's case, we will be hearing a lot more from her.

For more information, visit www.nessamarquez.com.

