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AG LETTER

From the World Guitar Congress

Dear guitaristas,

As I drive through Baltimore, Maryland, I expect to find a gigantic helium guitar balloon pointing the way to the first World Guitar Congress. Instead, I'm greeted by a droning veil of cicadas circling up the pathway to the Towson University Union. Their fierce buzzing hijacks nearly every conversation in town and leads some newcomers to believe, at first, that something is wrong with the electricity in their hotel room.



JULIA CROWE

Jim Hall, Howard Alden, and Jimmy Bruno cut loose on cartoon and TV theme songs.

An entirely new kind of thrumming, of the six-stringed variety, has invaded the area for the first World Guitar Congress, June 2-9, 2004. Inspired by the success of Towson's third World Cello Congress in 2000, which featured Yo-Yo Ma as a guest artist, World Music Congresses Executive Director Helene Breazeale decided to hold a similar event that would explore all that the guitar has to offer. Fifty world-class guitarists from all musical styles and genres have come

together for this event to teach master classes and clinics, share their secrets in symposiums, and give dazzling concerts for seven sleepless days.

We participants indulge in a catered feast at the Gibson Gala opening dinner reception, which is followed by a daily schedule that begins at 8:45 and features an array of symposiums that's impossible to choose from, including "Choosing the Right Guitar for You," with Fine Guitar Consultants' Richard

Glick, "Past Masters on Film" with legendary Toronto classical guitar instructor Eli Kassner, and "A Conversation with Les Paul." During the week, we'll get the chance to hear John Hammond, Andy Summers, and Wolf Marshall share their advice on and experience with recording the guitar; Bob Benedetto, Bill Comins, and Roger Sadowsky talk about guitar building; and David Russell, Marija Temo, and Tuck and Patti discuss how they pre-

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AG LETTERCongress

pare, both physically and mentally, for a performance.

The symposiums offer a great combination of anecdotes and practical advice. Paco Peña speaks of the importance of watching a dancer's footwork while playing flamenco guitar. Ben Verdery demonstrates his curious use of a curling iron to straighten out hooked nails. While I sit with Aaron Shearer, he tells me that, as a farm boy growing up during the Depression, he exchanged six white geese for his first guitar, which was virtually unplayable. During their clinic, "Comping: The Art of Accompaniment," jazz guitarists Howard Alden, Jimmy Bruno, and Jim Hall astonish the audience with an informal improv session of seamlessly intertwined cartoon and TV show themes. At his master class, Ralph Towner says, "I don't know what Pat [Martino] was talking about when he mentioned being 'in the zone.' I mean, when I play, it's with this stupid look on my face, and it's nothing other than a stupid look on my face."

In his clinic, Marty Friedman, the guitarist from Megadeth, displays a comprehensive knowledge of all things Barney

Kessel and afterwards moves to the hallway to demonstrate heavy metal riffs and correct his fans' finger positions with all the patience of a sweet camp counselor.

Performance opportunities abound, with daily open mic sessions at the student union lounge and dining facility. This is also where clusters of guitarists noodle on lobby couches, swapping and comparing each others' guitars, busking for video cameras, and drawing up impromptu sign-up sheets for late-night jam sessions in the dorms. Approximately 65 exhibitors—luthiers, music and magazine publishers, specialty wood suppliers, amplifier and accessory manufacturers—display their wares in the student union hall.

A light rain on Wednesday offers momentary respite from the summer heat and leaves waterlogged bugs plastered to the pavement. By day, many guitarists walk in a bow-legged sidestep that isn't the result of sitting for hours of practice but rather is choreographed to avoid stepping directly on the little winged corpses.



David Russell performs sleight-of-hand tricks at the pub.

In the first evening's concert, Ben Verdery plays a whimsical, rocking arrangement of Prince's "Kiss," followed by a sonorous, bell-like original composition, "Be Kind All the Time." Ralph Towner plays an exquisite "Falling Petals" on the same program. Later on, at the Towson Center Arena, Dick Dale performs a thundering "Miserlou" duet with his 12-year-old son, Jimmy. Tuck and Patti, filling in for Adam and Laila del Monte, join Dušan Bogdanović for his "Jazz Sonatina" on Friday night. This concert ends with John Hammond's homage to Robert Johnson's Delta blues. That same night, David Russell performs an impeccable Albeniz piece on

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the same bill as Les Paul, who cracks jokes between songs with Frank Vignola.

At the first Meyerhoff Symphony Hall concert on Saturday, Sharon Isbin performs Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* and is followed by Jim Hall's premiere of his jazz opus "Peace Movement." Not to be outdone, the Brazilian Guitar Quartet debuts Ronaldo Miranda's *Concerto for Four Guitars and Orchestra*.

Sunday evening, the LAGQ thrills the audience with three pieces from their new *Guitar Heroes* album, and Andy

Summers' jazz trio fills the hall with a richly textured set of Charles Mingus-flavored melodies. Paco Peña and his flamenco dance company present a passionate interplay of staccato footwork and fiery *rasgueados*. Albert Lee closes the evening with a roof-raising rockabilly storm that includes Fats Domino's "I'm Ready" and Sonny Curtis' "Rock Around with Ollie Vee." Just when I think I can't take any more, on Monday evening, Sheryl Bailey performs a head-bobbing cool jazz set, and Johnny Hiland unleashes his tornado alley-style fingerpicking.

This is guitar paradise, an alternate universe of nothing but music and a pleas-

ant escape from the relentless evening news. I can vouch for the paradise aspect: the line to the men's bathroom was longer than the line to the women's at Meyerhoff.

Still, it can be overwhelming. On the third day, a friend finds me passed out in the middle of the student union and reminds me of a garbled message I'd left on his cell phone promising to meet him here. Given another cup of coffee, I swiftly return to full form.

Without question, the place to be at the end of the day is the small pub at the Berkshire Marriott, which serves as a haven for those who were able to squeeze their way in. David Russell entertains us all with his sleight-of-hand antics; his ability to replace a quarter with a penny on someone's palm with the mere slap of a hand leaves LAGQ's John Dearman astonished. When Andy Summers examines my right hand and declares my nails are too short, Juan Martín advises me to dip them into an olive oil-drenched salad, preferably when no one is looking, and then follow up with an application of superglue to strengthen the nails.

Jimmy Bruno joins Marija Temo to swap gut-busting tales of some of their worst gigs. Odair Assad hushes a table with his tragicomic story of eluding an angry swarm of bees and watching them beset a businessman at a bus stop who lost all the papers inside his briefcase when he swung it wildly in defense.

Toward the end of the week, the Congress experiences a sad countdown of artists packing and leaving town for other gigs. By the last night, the sparkle dust has started to fade, and the only good conversation I overhear at the Marriott is the omelet chef's assistant consoling herself with a halo of virtue to excuse her timidity for not requesting an autograph or two. The morning breakfast faces gradually return from jet-lagged, late-night revelers to the ruddier, well-rested look of corporate conventioners.

While dragging the wheels of my own suitcase over the pavement, a lone cicada alights on my shirt and hitches a ride. Then it takes off in a lazy but graceful blur, leaving me to think of Johnny Hiland wrinkling up his nose and asking, "Do these things serve any dang purpose?"

You bet. After hearing their rattle and hum all week, I've realized their purpose is to tell us this: life's short, make music.

Yours truly,

JULIA CROWE

Julia Crowe

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