

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE



Gene Bertoncini: always he has a joke in hand as well as a guitar.

JAZZ AND CLASSICAL guitarist Gene Bertoncini recently treated the New York Guitar Society to a guest lecture and performance of arrangements from his new CD, *Quiet Now* (Ambient Records), on his amplified Buscarino guitar.

Bertoncini studied with legendary jazz guitarist Johnny Smith (who inspired Pat Martino and Chet Atkins) and also with Chuck Wayne, who used to play with the George Shearing Quintet. It was Wayne who recommended to Bertoncini that he listen to Julian Bream's RCA red seal album, the *Art of Julian Bream*.

'From that point on, classical guitar became an important part of my career,' he says. 'I started applying the technique and scales to jazz harmonies.'

'My classical guitar teachers were Albert Valdes Blain, Alexander Bellow and Leonid Bolontine. Because of my work as a studio guitarist, the biggest thing I found with studying classical guitar was learning how you can use the guitar in so many different ways.'

Bertoncini, who was born in the Bronx, attended Notre Dame and earned a degree in architecture. He worked with Frank Lloyd Wright's protégé, David Henkin while playing his guitar on weekends. (Henkin is well-known for designing the famed Blue Note recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder's studio in New Jersey).

'I recall doing a TV interview where the host asked me how I went from working with a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright to playing the guitar full time. My bass player, Michael Moore, told him I'd quit because the bridge collapsed.' (Note to readers: Gene is rather swift with jokes, as you'll find out at the end of this article).

He eventually fell into studio work in New York, describing his playing as 'mostly utility work on the guitar, wherever it was needed.' During the mid-60s, he landed work on staff at NBC Studios in midtown, playing guitar regularly on programmes such as, *That Was the Week That Was*, *The Merv Griffin Show* and Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. 'The studio guards all knew me because I used to practice in the storage rooms,' Bertoncini says. He also played with Benny Goodman a few floors up at NBC in the city's renowned Rainbow Room.

'I gave Johnny Carson a few guitar lessons. He really loved music. He played a couple of solo items including, 'Here's that Rainy Day' by Jimmy Van Heusen. Tony Mottola (Mottola worked frequently with Perry Como and Frank Sinatra and also played on the *Tonight Show*) helped him with that. Johnny played a nylon string guitar. I recommended it him.

'The recording scene in New York is pretty much a wash now,' Bertoncini says. 'I used to be in the

studio all the time and now so much work is done in people's homes with computers. All the glamour that went into seeing Columbia studio's full orchestra with Tony Bennett is long gone. The guitar is now largely more in a pop venue, with rock and blues being prominent. There are lots of little venues for solo jazz players in town that will give you a chance to play and of course, there is always work at parties. You have to create your own demand and find your own place to play it. People have to hire you for what you do instead of for being a guitarist.'

Bertoncini is proud of his work with Tony Bennett in the 70s, performing with Lena Horne and recording with Burt Bacharach, Hubert Laws and appearing on Nancy Wilson's album, *But Beautiful*. He has also performed with the New York Pops at Carnegie Hall and with Dave Brubeck on his *Fiesta de la Posada*, a traditional Mexican Christmas song. 'However it's my own solo work that I am most proud of,' he says. 'I have this calling to play solo jazz on the classical guitar.'

And not without continued success. William Kanengiser of LAGO performs Bertoncini's arrangement of 'My Funny Valentine' on their Grammy-winning *Guitar Heroes* album. Also, Bertoncini recently played to a sold out house at The Jazz Standard in New York's hot Flatiron District to mark the release of his new solo album, *Quiet Now* (Ambient Records). This includes the beautiful *Olha Maria* by Jobim, which he played for the guitar society.

Bertoncini explains that he uses his annular finger frequently in his playing, along with the rest stroke. Before he sits down to work out a song arrangement, he will play several Villa-Lobos pieces as a preliminary arpeggio exercise.

His informal playing for the guitar society included *East of the Sun* by Olha, Bach Lute Suite No. 3 melded with *How My Heart Sings*, a Chopin piece in E minor neatly looped into a Baden Powell piece and a beautiful rendition of *Canto de Osshana* (*Let Go*).

As mentioned earlier, Gene is adept at recounting a good joke and this is one that he told to the New York Guitar Society: An older abbot asks a young monk to rewrite the monastery's rule book. The young monk suggests they go into their library archives and seek the original illuminated manuscript to use as reference. The abbot agrees this is an excellent idea so he descends into the candlelit passageway and into the library, where he disappears for some time. Concerned by the abbot's rather long absence, the young monk traces along the abbot's footsteps into the library and finds the older man bent over the original manuscript, howling and wringing his hands in agony. 'What is it abbot? Tell me. What is wrong, sir?'

'What is wrong?' the abbot answers. 'I'll tell you what is wrong: the word was *celebrate*.'

For more information on his album and upcoming performing calendar, Mr. Bertoncini's website is: <http://www.genebertoncini.com/>

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