

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

THE American Institute of Guitar (AIG) recently celebrated their 30th anniversary, which also happens to be the first anniversary of operation for its new owner Michael Barry. Founded in 1975 by Andrew Nitkin, AIG opened a space in midtown Manhattan to serve as one of the city's first learning centers for classical guitar. The present-day school sits near 54th and Broadway, around the corner from the gothic entrance to the old Ed Sullivan Theatre Building, where The Beatles made their first U.S. debut.

'I came to the school in the early 90s as a student and took lessons with Yasha Kofman,' Barry says, adding that Kofman is the main classical guitar teacher at the school. 'I recorded my first album *Inscape* with Yasha's help and then began teaching at the Guitar Study Center at the New School. I left there in 1995 to teach here at AIG and also did a two-year stint as its assistant director.'

'Around 2001, I had started doing a lot of producing so I leased space from the school to set up a small recording/production room for acoustic guitar, using Pro Tools HD. In 2002, I leased more space and built a full studio, Laughing Buddha Productions, to house both the studio and record label of the same name while continuing to teach both rock and classical students.' (His most recent release is Tali Roth's *Tango Nuevo* CD and he is planning a new album of lullabies and another of world guitar music.)

The late night comedian David Letterman, who tapes his television programme next door, has been known to frequent the studio. 'I see him dropping all sorts of stuff off the roof as pranks for the show,' Barry says.

In winter of 2004, Nitkin asked Barry if he wanted to buy the school and Barry accepted the offer with the aim of combining the businesses under one name, The International Studio of Music (ISM), of which AIG is their flagship guitar department. His goal is to create a high quality learning center for a variety of instruments and ethnic music in a setting that does not require the matriculation or expense of a degree program.

Barry plans to host international exchanges and overseas workshops for guitar next summer with the hope of making the school a destination for a solid education in world music from all cultures. He will be sending several of the school's teachers to Japan and France to teach American jazz, blues and folk music and is looking to bring flamenco guitarists, African, South American and Asian music teachers to New York.

Currently, the school is running a summer camp for young musicians between the ages of 9 through 16, in addition to offering group classes and private instruction. Barry is also developing a scholarship program for young musicians who show promise on the guitar yet cannot afford lessons.

The school has 22 instructors, including 4 classical guitar teachers (Yasha Kofman, Tali Roth, Anthony Bez and John Lehmann-Haupt) and two flamenco guitar teachers (Jose Ramos and Basilio Georges). The school also teaches other styles of guitar as well as bass, piano, strings, voice, brass, winds and percussion.

Student recitals tend to be informal affairs held in a back room of an unpretentious Irish pub called Dillon's: a refreshing holdout known for its burgers in the midst of the ever encroaching from Times Square to the neighboring theatre district. During this particular evening celebration, a father sat on stage with his thirteen-year-old son and eleven-year old daughter and praised the teachers for the progress he felt his son had made since starting lessons two years ago—in addition to offering thanks for his own ongoing adult lessons which have deepened his lifelong appreciation for the guitar. Together, father and son played John Lennon's *'Across the Universe'* as the daughter sang the lyrics with a preternatural grace.

Moments like this show why the school has managed to endure through the years. 'It's one thing going from being an administrator to being the actual owner, who watches all the finances and screws in the light bulbs,' Barry says wryly. 'Nitkin had wanted to keep the school 'within the family' instead of selling it to an outside buyer who might not feel the same dedication to the teachers and their roster of students.' Barry's optimism about the possibilities for the future of the school are also grounded with quiet conviction.

'It's funny, even with all the difficulty this city and its businesses have gone through with 9/11, that is the year we saw a considerable spike in student enrollment. People have said, 'Playing the guitar is something I've wanted to do all my life but never got around to doing. They've walked by this place on their way to work and thought maybe I'll give this a try.'"

For more information on the International School of Music, the American Institute for Guitar and its recording studio, their websites are <http://www.ismnewyork.com/> and <http://www.laughingbuddhamusic.com/>.