

**Roots of Modern Minstrelsy: Islam**

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**Jorge  
Morel**

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**Tony Morris**

**Stephen Cadney**

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# JORGE MOREL INTERVIEW

By JULIA CROWE

ARGENTINIAN-BORN Jorge Morel - easily considered a guitarist's guitarist with a career spanning over forty years as a performer, composer, arranger and recording artist - does not hesitate to speak of his love for New York: 'Some may believe that composers need to work by the seashore or within view of a beautiful and inspiring vista. As for myself, I do all my writing and composing in my apartment on Queens Boulevard.'

Morel lives in a building with graceful arching hallways down the block from a movie theatre on a busy street with a wide, open sky north of Manhattan. The inviting fragrance of chicken fricassee with lamb and potatoes *a la Morel* envelopes his apartment with a cozy warmth as we wait for Tony Acosta of Luthier Music to join us. On the coffee table, an old 45 of a young, dark-haired Morel sits propped up on a small photo stand. In one corner of his living room hangs a beautifully hand-calligraphed diploma signed by his teacher Pablo Escobar and illuminated by a three-lantern cast iron streetlamp which Morel had taken a fancy to at the Home Depot and managed to drag home in the boot of a cab.

'Escobar was a tough teacher but he was good,' Morel tells me. 'I had studied first with a student of his named Amparo Alvarisa but once I learned everything she had to teach me, I studied with Escobar. His wife taught me theory and I learned a bit of composition with him. Both of them are now gone but when I was in Argentina last November, I'd had the chance to speak with their daughter, Selma.'

Morel explains that not long after he had married his wife Olga in Puerto Rico, he was performing outdoors at the Caribe Hilton Hotel when he'd met Vladimir Bobri and Martha Nelson of the old New York Guitar Society. 'Bobri had stayed at least one hour to listen and introduced himself to me afterward,' Morel says. 'He gave me his card and invited me to New York to play for the society because no one had ever heard these arrangements of South American and American composers on guitar before.'

'First, I came to New York in 1961 to play on the same billing as the Kingston Trio at the Carnegie Hall in front of three thousand people. I remember there had been a comedian on the billing and the emcee had given me an introduction before I played *American Fantasy*, *Mosaico Español* and *La Misionera*. The *New York Times*



Jorge Morel.

had given my concert a very nice mention the next day.'

Morel also acknowledges Bobri for introducing him to Art De Lughoff, owner of the famous New York jazz club, The Village Gate.

'My audition for De Lughoff had been a little odd. He asked me to play a couple of pieces in front of a microphone. Then abruptly, he said, "Ok. That's it."

'I didn't think he had liked it because he had asked me to stop playing after two pieces. This was a Tuesday or a Wednesday. He then asked, "Can you come and play this Friday?" He booked me to play for the weekend and paid me \$75, which in those days was great money. I stayed at the Village Gate for three or four years. One time he booked me to play at the Five Spot Café and I played there for fourteen weeks in a row. The other regular was Max Roach, the great drummer.

'At the time, I was accustomed to playing in clubs but had always wanted to play concerts. I'd thought, "Maybe I don't belong to the concert hall



Jorge Morel, Mario and Maria Maccaferri.

because of my repertoire." If you were thinking of playing in the Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall or Wigmore Hall, the mentality in those days was, this meant you had to be playing Bach, etcetera. I had to be me and play what made me feel like myself. I could play Bach, yes. But not many people knew this because I played all these other arrangements.

'It took a number of years to happen but when I started to compose, that is when things changed,' Morel explains. 'I did a tour around the country at smaller venues and included Villa-Lobos pieces. I thought: if I can do it here, then why not these larger halls? I did not have so many original compositions then, but I did have arrangements. I arranged Gershwin and Bernstein for the guitar and all the things I wanted to play. If I could come close to the orchestra's idea, then why not?'

Morel discusses his approach for arranging, prompted by his lifelong love for George Gershwin's music. In fact, the first time he heard Gershwin's music it was in a matinee movie, *Black and White*, and the young Morel was compelled to stay for the second and third showings to hear it again. 'In those days, they did not kick you out of the theatre. My father, however, was alarmed, wondering where I had been all that time!'

'I tried arranging certain pieces: *Rhapsody in Blue* did not work for the guitar but his *Three Preludes* did, the number *Two*, especially. A few years after, I took Gershwin's *Prelude #2* back and worked harder and got it to sound the way I wanted. Then I wrote my own variation of *I've Got Rhythm*, based on those eight bars. I found Bernstein's music was more suitable for the guitar when I took the three Latin American pieces from

*West Side Story* - *Maria, I Want to be in America* and *I Feel Pretty*.

'Some people in the guitar world can be quite snobbish when it comes to arranging popular music for the guitar. I say, why not? What is wrong with this? What I did to arrange these pieces was listen to them as if it was the very first time, as if I had never heard them before. I listened closely to the melody. People later told me they thought these pieces sounded as if they had been originally written for the guitar, which was a very nice compliment.

'And that is why I survived as a guitarist. I didn't want to play traditional repertoire because so many do that so well already. I did not want to compete with anybody. If you can do something different, then why not? Try it. And if it works, wonderful. This is why after so many years I am doing what I am doing, though now, perhaps, I'm a little more intellectual in my approach. Intellectualism in the arts is important, but not by that much. You have to follow your bliss and your heart first because it is the only way you can communicate with the

audience. I could write the most difficult piece in the world but then nobody would play it. Not to mention, everybody would *hate* me for doing that,' Morel laughs.

'My music is not very difficult, but rhythmically it is a little complicated. I think the music of Barrios is very difficult. The extension Barrios had in his left hand was incredible. It's good for me that I never gave way to becoming a commercial player. For example, when the *bossa nova* came out, I didn't have any work or a job in Sausalito, California and this man said to me, "Jorge, I want you to form a group. I have the guys already and have arranged everything. You can play the Brazilian *bossa nova*."

'I said to him, "I like that music but it is not me." I turned it down because I didn't want to do something that did not feel good. We moved to Puerto Rico and that's when I started playing at the hotel where, fortunately, I'd met Vladimir Bobri and accepted his invitation to play in New York. My wife and I then moved to New York in 1963 and my daughter Francesca was born in 1965.'

Morel signed with Columbia Artists in 1970 through the recommendation of fingerstyle guitar great, Chet Atkins, who would become a lifelong friend.

'Chet was an incredible guitarist and human being,' Morel says. 'Chet had heard my record and our actual first meeting came during one of my trips to Nashville. Up to this point, we didn't see each other often but talked by phone. He arranged for me to record with RCA Victor and they released an LP of solos and orchestrations of mine. That was the kind of special man he was. He had a special regard for friendship and respect for fellow artists.

When the record came out, he had it in the office and a year later, a manager from Columbia Artists, Charlie Jones, went to Nashville to look for someone like Chet to book for concerts. Chet was already big and turned the offer down. Instead, he took my album and told him I was the man he was looking for. I subsequently worked for Columbia for six or seven years, doing concerts all over the place.'

It should be noted here that the author and guitarist John McClellan, who performs in a duo with Kirk Hanser, is in the process of writing a biography of Jorge Morel with accompanying sheet music and personal photo album in the same format as McClellan's already-published biography of the legendary Chet Atkins (Mel Bay Publications). The

Morel biography, which will also be published by Mel Bay, is expected to be sometime later this year.

When asked what music projects are important to him at this point in his career, Morel divulges, 'I like to write more than I like to arrange. The ideas do not happen every day. If I like a piece by Paul McCartney, I'll sit and arrange it. I especially like writing for two guitars. I've recently arranged some pieces by Piazzolla - *Triunfal*, *Melancolico Buenos Aires*, *Contratiempo*, *Adios Nonino*, *Verano Porteno* for one, two and four guitars. In Argentina, when I went to record my new CD, *Suite Del Sur* with producer Tony Acosta, I made acquaintance with a new family of guitarists that I didn't know before.

There they have a programme on Radio Nacional de Buenos Aires that has been running for 21 years. *De Segovia a Yupanqui*, with host Sebastian Dominguez, which presents guitar from all over the world. Yupanqui is a great poet and artist himself who passed away ten years ago. I had met Sebastian Dominguez through Maurice Summerfield and did a radio interview by phone. In fact, it was a live broadcast from my house in Queens all the way to Buenos Aires. When I went to record the *Suite del Sur*, we met Omar Cyrulnik, a very good guitarist and we also played at the Embassy of Poland with Krzysztof Pelech. [Pelech has recorded Morel's *Fantasia De La Danza*, *Romance Criollo* and the premiere recording of Morel's *Concierto Rapsodico* on the Luthier Music label.]

In the old days, a lot of the arrangements, the type which Segovia may have played, were nice but not accurate. They were not good enough for the guitar. Then you read the piano part and find it's completely different from what is written for guitar. If you listen to Manuel Barrueco, Manuel has

more knowledge of the music or more care in his approach. Manuel created a masterful arrangement of *Sevilla and Majorca, Torre Bermeja* in the early 1970s. In the early 1990s, the arrangements were very good but simple compared to what can be done today.'

Hanging on one of the walls of Jorge Morel's living room is a large framed photograph of his



Andrés Segovia and Jorge Morel.

younger self circa 1985 in the company of the 92 year old El Maestro, Segovia, both men bearing genial, beatific expressions, clearly enjoying the moment.

This photo was taken at Rose Augustine's house in the Village after a performance at Avery Fischer Hall. Rose said to me, "You must meet the man now at a reception at my house." Segovia was so nice to me and asked where I studied composition. I

was happy because this meant at least he knew I wrote music. He never played my music but he knew of it. In the photo, he is holding a double scotch on the rocks and I'd just had a beer.

'Segovia was there with his wife and son and I was sitting with him while other people were far away. There was a big beautiful platter of giant shrimps and he said to me, "Jorge, please bring me a plate of those shrimps but I don't want anybody to see what you are doing. They don't let me eat that. My wife tells me they're not good for me." I brought him a big plate of shrimps while keeping the shrimps hidden. That was a great moment. We managed to speak for about thirty or twenty minutes over the shrimp.

I said: "Maestro, I'm sure there are some people here who would love to talk to you." He said, "Don't worry, they will." I would have loved to have met him thirty years earlier from when he passed away. It was a good feeling to meet him and he couldn't have been nicer. Somebody took a picture and Rose Augustine sent it to me. My son-in-law had the photo blown up to this size and framed. It was a moment that was very important in my life. You meet so many people in your life but when you meet someone that great, how do you save that moment?

'We spoke in Spanish and I'd told him that I'd heard him play in Buenos Aires when I was a boy. This was for Radio el Mundo in 1952. A friend of mine who was a soccer player could get tickets because he was well-connected. My friend had said to me, "Jorge, even if you pay \$100, they won't let you into the concert. It's a very special event, broadcast all over the country but very few people can come because the hall only sits three hundred people." He gave me his ticket. My god, I was so

happy. I was about 21 years old at the time. Segovia played *Sevilla* by Albéniz and when I heard that I ran out the next day to get the music. My father heard me trying to play it and said, "You can't play this! It's too difficult. Take it easy." Of course, I couldn't obtain the exact arrangement Segovia was playing.

"Whether you have a good moment or not with Segovia, you're going to remember it. Two years after meeting him, I was in Stockholm, Sweden, doing a radio programme *en español* when we received a telegram cable. We were talking about the guitar and the radio personnel stepped in to say, "Mr. Morel, we've just received a cable from Madrid saying that Mr. Segovia passed away." Segovia did so much for us and the guitar in general. I hope his name lives forever."

Morel is also frank about the difficulties of a career in music and does not shy away from a frank discussion on this topic. "A friend of mine, Rodolfo Spalla, an insurance man, rescued me in Bogotá in 1958. I was at a point in life where I needed to pawn my guitar to pay my bills and he interceded and literally saved my life because he took me to his house, gave me food and a place to stay. He paid my bill in the other place that I had owed. Somehow, after this, I had met a director of a TV programme at a private party, *Penieranda*. He asked if I would like to play on his programme. I started to do this programme on TV every day. Through it I landed a job at this beautiful, elegant restaurant, *As de Copas*. I wish we had something like this here because I would go every night. It seated maybe one hundred fifty people. The owner gave me a good salary and food. "You can eat anything you want," he told me. He regretted that last part. The restaurant served the most expensive paella and I would eat the whole thing! "You know, Jorge," the owner told me, "if I knew the way you ate, I wouldn't have offered."

"How can an artist or anybody in this profession forget about these kinds of pasts that are beautiful, sad sometimes, but I'm still here with good friends and good people. That's life. Artists have to be able to suffer a little in order to express themselves. I don't regret one minute of this life. I would do it all again the same way, maybe a little different here and there, but this is what I wanted to do."

Over a delicious chicken fricassee with lamb glazed in a wine and Marsala sauce followed by chocolate ice cream with jerez, Morel and Tony Acosta raise a toast. "In the last few years," Morel says, "I have met a new generation of great young guitarists like Rene Izquierdo, Jorge Caballero, Elina Chekan, Michele Ramo, who is a jazz fingerstyle guitarist, and an 18 year old student of mine, Joshua Bavaro, who is also a student at the Manhattan School of Music."

Morel says, "I've written a few concertos but what could be more emotional and



Jorge Morel with Krzysztof Pelech.

incredible than the Adagio movement of Rodrigo's *Aranjuez* you would have to go to heaven and come back to write something comparable. This is something many people don't know and that is *why* they like a particular piece of music. Why I like music, I don't know - and that is good enough for me. But when you're a musician, you *must* know why you like something. Of course, everything sounds better when you have a glass of wine. Cheap wine ruins everything. Mozart and Beethoven drank wine when they wrote and listened to music. The Germans are not so good with the reds but the whites, yes. The best reds are Spanish, Argentinian, Italian and French."

Tony Acosta interjects to say, "The best white wine was the one I drank in Paris. We went to a little shop and my friend said, "Tony you must have this wine, it's very nice." So I have a glass



Jorge Morel, Maurice Summerfield and Tony Acosta.

and wow, it's fantastic! Where is this from? The answer? California.'

Morel is currently making a television programme with guitarist Freddie Vasquez, playing three solos for Queens Public Television. 'We play four duos and I play three solos, including one piece by my former teacher, Pablo Escobar, entitled *Chopt*.'

And of his latest compositions, Morel says, 'I wrote the *Fantasia Latina* in 2002-3 and have written other solo pieces, *Dansa de Mayo* for two guitars. I've written a sextet for two guitars and a string quartet, entitled *Aquarelle Latino*. Rene Izquierdo is recording a piece of mine called *Rhapsodia Latina* for cello, flute and guitar. The *Millenium Duet*, dedicated to Chet Atkins, was commissioned by John McClellan and he and Hanser have recorded it beautifully.

I would like very much to mention Ricardo Iznaola, a great artist and a great performer who worked with me on *Two to Tango*. As an arranger, Iznaola is fantastic and he is a very good composer. We made this CD a couple years ago and Tony put out the album. Ricardo had suggested doing my arrangements. When he teaches, students always want to come back to him. This is what a fine teacher he is.

I have just written a chamber music piece with wind instruments. I like the sound of the vibraphone because I like how it combines with the

guitar and wind instruments. I would also like to mention two publishers that have really distributed my music around the world: Ashley Mark (Maurice Summerfield) and Mel Bay (William Bay) are both doing a great job.'

Morel, who will be turning 75 years old this year, also has the satisfaction of knowing that his most recent CD, *Suite Del Sur* (Luthier Music Corp), featuring his performance with the Artis Orchestra of Buenos Aires conducted by Marta Luna, was under consideration for a Grammy nomination. And David Russell's 2005 Grammy Award winning CD, *Aire Latino*, opens with three of Morel's works: *Danza Brasileira*, *Romance Criollo* and *Sonatina for Guitar*.

#### Discography

*The Warm Guitar*, DECCA  
*The Magnificent Guitar*, DECCA  
*The Artistry of Jorge Morel*, RCA VICTOR  
*Virtuoso South American Guitar*, GUITAR MASTERS  
*Jorge Morel Plays Broadway*, GUITAR MASTERS  
*Latin Impressions*, GUITAR MASTERS  
*The Very Best of Jorge Morel*, GUITAR MASTERS  
*The Art of Jorge Morel*, LUTHIER  
*Two to Tango*, (duo with Ricardo Iznaola) LUTHIER  
*Suite Del Sur*, LUTHIER

*Jorge Morel Y Su Guitarra*, Panart (Cuba)  
*Guitar Moods*, SMC (N. York)  
*Guitar Holiday*, Sesac (N. York)  
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*Fantastico*, Village Gate (N. York)

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12. Echo of the Blues
13. Little Rhapsody
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15. Sonatina

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