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# ANDREW YORK

Interviewed by JULIA CROWE

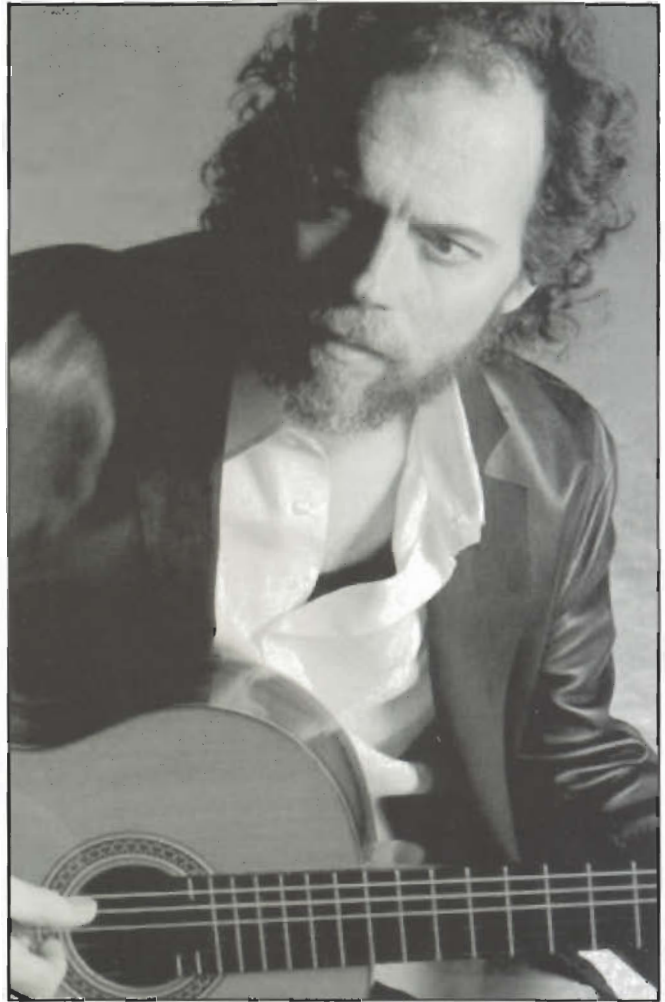
GUITARIST and composer Andrew York announced his departure earlier this year as a member of the Grammy-winning Los Angeles Guitar Quartet with the intent of devoting himself fully to his own creative projects. Given the quartet's success, his departure appears to come as a surprise, possibly because it is easy to think of the very best guitar quartets as being the sum of its parts - a kind of four-headed, eight-handed, 24-stringed mythological beast producing a seamless, unified sound. It is also easy to assume that members of such a group, with their fully-packed concert schedule, must not have any time left over for a solo career. But as York points out this is an illusion also. 'The fact is, I've never stopped going solo,' he says.

And another fact is, this is just one of the reasons behind the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet's level of success, each of its musicians is capable of standing alone as a solo performer. (This may be stating the obvious, but many times I've heard conservatory graduates tell me their main impetus for pursuing a chamber music career, over playing solo, is because they perceive sharing the stage with others as taking the heat off them personally).

York, who is known for his fingerstyle jazz background, started his studies as a classical guitarist before he was a jazz player. He points out the technical differences between these two playing styles.

'I never moved away from playing classical,' he says. 'I started playing guitar when I was six years old. My dad plays guitar and had found a teacher for me, a German woman in Virginia named Greta Dollitz, when I was 8 years old. In junior high, I discovered rock n' roll and was playing electric in bars when I was 16 or so. Then, when I was 17 I heard the Air Force jazz big band playing on the steps of the Capitol building in D.C. I was floored - I thought it was the coolest thing. It just knocked me out. I liked all kinds of eclectic stuff. Even the great guitar player, Rick Whitehead. I still liked rock but I really wanted to play jazz and get serious about that.'

'I was a flute major first in college. But when I got there, there was no guitar programme. Don't ask me why. I'd auditioned on guitar and got accepted. Then when I showed up on the first day of school and asked where the guitar department was, there was none. I was very confused, telling them I'd auditioned on guitar and got in on guitar. They asked if I played anything else. I told them I played some flute and worked very hard at it that first year, eventually winding up with a minor in flute. I had shamed them into forming a guitar department because I was backing all the flute players and singers by playing Dowland,



Andrew York.

this and that on guitar. As a freshman, they asked me whom they ought to hire. They had closed auditions for faculty but would invite me to sit in on them. Afterwards, they asked what I'd thought of the person auditioning. I basically got the guitar teacher there his job.

'I was playing jazz in a big band, jazz and bebop on the side. So I was very much in the current musical stream, which is rare because most classical guitarists have one focus. I've been lucky enough to have explored many kinds of music in-depth and would say this created a fertile ground for when I returned to playing classical guitar.'

'Now here is a generalisation about classical guitar: if you ever listen to some of the older players performing pieces which required a certain kind of rhythmic groove, they sound stilted or uncomfortable. I think it's because they had no experience playing music of a different nature. Classical music mistakes playing electric guitar as turning up your amp to 11. Playing electric actually requires a lot of thought and practice.'

'Jazz, for example, is extremely intellectual - it requires a harmonic understanding few classical



players ever come close to having. All these things certainly helped my playing and allowed me to develop an organic rhythmical groove. Other playing styles livened up my **interpretive** abilities.

York points out how his jazz-playing **skill** helped contribute to the success of the **Los Angeles Guitar Quartet**, whose members have had eclectic playing backgrounds as well.

'Sometimes as I wrote a piece or someone else wrote a piece, it would be interesting to see how the subtle interpretations we had could **make or break it**,' York says. 'Interpretation is another musical sensibility. We talked about out what we heard and included all interpretive ideas. It's difficult for most people to make sudden **stylistic** shifts but everyone in the quartet caught on to this very quickly. And, by virtue of being such monster classical players, they brought up my own level of classical playing. There was a lot of give and take within the group. We helped each other.'

'I would say my contribution was helping us move into cross-over music, which helped us grow in terms of popularity - because as a Romero clone, the group would have had no future. We're all American, not Spanish. What we created was really unique and I'm proud to have been part of that.'

York has known Scott Tenant, William Kanengiser and John Dearman for over twenty-three years and considers them to be like brothers.

'I knew these guys as soon as I'd moved to LA in 1983, before I even joined LAGQ. I didn't know Bill Kanengiser right away but I was always hanging out with Scott Tenant and John Dearman. Scott and I played the lute together, doing early music programmes.'

Three years later, in 1986, moved out of LA and went to live in Europe for a while. That's when I met John Williams and played the piece, *Sunburst* for him. After a little while, I sent him *Lullaby* too, which he ended up recording as well. Then the record label Windham Hill became interested in having me play on part of their guitar series CD in the late 80s which sold *tons* of copies. It's almost difficult to remember what it was like then - people were incredibly excited about acoustic music and a recording like that was an incredibly visible product. It attracted *huge* amounts of attention. Windham Hill doesn't exist anymore but as a result, my playing came to be very well known in the fingerstyle guitar world as well.

This horrified a lot of people in the classical world - which I *loved*. They couldn't imagine how you could be both classical and fingerstyle and be labeled new age. All this said to me was that critics were not really listening closely to my work because my music is inevitably contrapuntal and **much more advanced** harmonically speaking. It kills me when people react like this when you go

out of the box because, as a creative person, I cannot imagine *not* going out of the box.'

It was in early 1986 when the LAGQ started to gel in terms of bookings and personnel changes.

'Bill called me up while I was in Virginia to say they'd just landed a contract to do tons of school concerts in the LA area - mostly elementary schools where they teach about guitar and music,' York describes. 'One of their quartet members was not interested in this but it was too good of an opportunity to pass up. I'd just got back from Europe with my wife and we had no idea where we were going to live, no house - we were staying with my folks in Virginia for a little while until we figured things out. We had stuff in storage in LA. So I thought, OK, it's a gig.'

'We did hundreds of these school gigs that year. I didn't officially join the quartet until 1990, when we did a full on sub-tour. I had a lot going on before all this with commissions and other pieces - so when the guys asked me to join the quartet, I really had to think about it. I'd already decided at that point to move to the Tufnell Park area of London. I'd originally hoped to move to Spain but my wife voted for London because they speak English there and we also had a friend who had found a flat for us there. We'd thought we would wind up living in Europe and perhaps gain an artist residency. It was a wonderful experience.'

'Also I was concerned, because while the group was great, it was still a new group at the time and a bit conservative and a little bit Romero-esque. I had been leading a heavy jazz period, studying with Lenny Breau while he was alive and Joe Diorio. I had put that away and was concentrating mainly on writing for nylon string guitar. I knew I could play in the quartet and I enjoyed playing with them so the issue for me was, is this the direction I really wanted to take? I thought, sure, I'll do it, but I'm moving to London.' So I joined the group and immediately left town.

'I was in London for six months before immigration difficulties prompted me to return to the U.S. - but it was a fantastic six months. The spooky thing is, the quartet did not have a single American or Canadian concert within those six months - but they had three European tours. That has never happened since. So my living in London at that time actually worked out very well.'

'But as I kept leaving and re-entering the U.K., I constantly had to convince immigration that I was not working within the U.K. but just living there. It all eventually became too much and I had to say good bye and ship our stuff back to LA. That is when I started playing with the boys in earnest and we figured out what it was we wanted to accomplish musically.'

'Writing my own music has always been my real love. The quartet has been fantastic but it was a very specific kind of presentation. Finding time to do both my world and the quartet's world was difficult. We both were rather busy. I was gone a lot



and there were definitely moments where each of us in the quartet missed out on a really cool solo gig because we were all playing as a quartet somewhere else. It was a compromise but it was a good one because the quartet was doing so well. By leaving the quartet, my aim is to open my schedule up to other creative possibilities. That's what it's all about.'

York has issued two new CDs fairly recently. One of them, *California Breeze* (Sony Japan) features York's original music performed by a young guitarist named Dai Kimura, whom he describes as 'a fantastic player' with percussion and bass included on some tracks. His other new CD is self-released *Hauser Sessions*, featuring his own compositions recorded upon a 1931 cedar-topped guitar built for Andres Segovia by Hermann Hauser I.

'I also performed recently in a documentary called *Primal Twang* - multi-style presentation on the history of the guitar,' York says. 'I'm the nylon string guy in one segment of the film. Also included is [Austin-based, Grammy-winning rock guitarist] Eric Johnson, Albert Lee, Mason Williams [of 'Classical Gas' fame] and others. Dan Crary a great bluegrass player is the charismatic narrator. The documentary itself was filmed as a theatrical performance in San Diego in 2006 over the course of four nights with a live audience. I played *Sunburst* and two other pieces, *By Candlelight* and *Letting Go*. Opportunities like this might not have been available if I was still with the quartet.'

When it comes to composing, York does not use paper anymore but prefers to use standard tape cassettes for reference when it comes to capturing the basic idea for a new piece.

'It's quicker and clearer than writing it down,' he says. 'I keep stacks of cassette tapes which I can peruse for ideas. Sometimes I'll have the guitar in hand when I am sketching and putting a piece together - it helps to get things flowing because I will ask myself, "How many ways can I possibly interpret this little fragment?" To me, this is the creative process, which can also become a little obsessive because usually I'll fall asleep dreaming about these musical themes.'

'Then there are those times where I will write music directly from my mind. For example, I just wrote a piano piece, a commission for a lady in Japan who is a beautiful player, Mitsuko Kado. I wrote a piece for her called *Pray & Dance*, which she has issued on her third CD. I don't play piano anymore. I had studied it with flute in college. I wrote the piece in my head and typed it directly into notation software program, an older program called Mosaic. It's a program which predates Finale but I like it because I can write music incredibly fast on it. You can fully program the

computer keyboard to input the music any way you like - whereas I've found newer programs like Sibelius do not give you these options.

'I also have some ideas - of making field recordings of the ocean, fountains, rain - and making a computer programmed player similar to Mindchimes, of soothing background sound. I don't know if I'll do it, but the idea is attractive. I like to be collaborating with other players, as I did in the documentary. I've had other commissions too. Recently I was asked to write a six movement suite for Robert Bluestone, a guitarist who tours with his wife, who is a master weaver. Her beautiful pieces are displayed on the stage while Robert plays. They commissioned me to write a piece which would somehow combine the concepts of weaving and guitar music. Obviously,

there are similar connections, given the strings of a guitar, strings of the loom, the warp and weft of the weaving.

'I'm doing more concerts now and making decisions about what I want to do and not want to do.'

When asked of his predilection for using the word 'sun' as the title for many of his pieces, York confesses to some Californian influence.

'There are a lot of pieces of mine with the word Sun in the title. Light is beautiful. The sun suggests itself for certain titles. It wasn't premeditated! However, I had a commission from Japan for a sequel to *Sunburst*, and they suggested the name 'Sunset.' I found that a bit too predictable, so I suggested *Moontan* instead. It was recorded by Dai Kimura for Sony Japan a number of years ago. I haven't recorded this piece myself yet, except for a live version I did on a CD with the International Guitar Night on Favored Nations, the record label owned by Steve Vai. *Sun Dog* was a piece I'd written for my dog, a Lab mix, who lived to be about fifteen years old.

'I also like to write pieces for students to give them something a little more contemporary, as an antidote to so much 19th century student material. Sor and Giuliani wrote great stuff, but I find students have a real hunger for music that is more connected to the musical currents of today's culture. I have some of these books of pieces self-published on my website.

York has many other creative interests beyond the guitar which he also hopes to pursue.

'I have just started painting,' he says. 'It feels very much like composition. Painting is the same kind of emotional and psychological process, but the process translates to a different medium. When it comes to the visual aspect of painting and the sonic aspect of music, in terms of where they lead as sensory input, the nexus where they meet is in our soul. The fact that I don't conjure images in my mind while writing music is

**"If people do not write new music and take it into the future, the guitar will die."**



because that particular process delves deeper for me, directly to an emotional centre. It doesn't matter whether it's music or painting because they come together at the source, which is the drive.

I've also written some audio software that mimics natural sound sources, like wind chimes or ocean waves. Writing this code required creating complex algorithms to make the sounds believable and realistic. Again, a lot like composing in certain ways. The little company I sell the software through is called Mind Chimes. I had to create the mathematical curves and contours which would make everything sound musical and realistic like real wind chimes. This, however, was a creative endeavour filtered more through the intellect. Musical, intellectual and visual - it all comes from the same emotional source for me.

When asked how he might address those malcontents in classical music who sniff at terms like 'cross-over popularity' and rue that this is abandoning tradition, or worse, evidence of musical pandering, York says, 'Popular is a loaded word. I don't believe that musical accessibility denotes inferiority in any sense. It can, in some cases. But then there's also some bang-slap music, academic music which is also very poor and non-creative, hidden behind the cloak of sound effects. Anything in the paradigm is possible: there's crappy popular music; there's really great popular music; there's crappy classical music; there's good classical music.'

'What I think about this is - and I'm rather a nonpolitical animal in most ways - my time here on earth is to create new things,' York says. 'This is what gives me joy and excitement. This is not for everyone. When you create something new, you inevitably offend those with a lesser creative ability. I know this sounds really elitist and it is. Not everybody can be really creative - so you're going to have these people who seethe and try to defend the turf.'

'Even the word *purist*, to me, is very insulting, because in my mind, to call someone a purist means they've got deep blinders on because this person is refusing to acknowledge new directions and, in guitar, they're often "protecting the Segovia tradition." Which is hilarious because this new CD I've made, performing on Segovia's Hauser, is all new music.'

'What was Segovia doing during his life? He was working with new composers, pushing the envelope. He was trying to make the guitar respectable enough to be played in concert halls. You couldn't study the guitar at universities then. There were no guitar programmes. No one was going to hear guitar programmes. The guitar was considered a folk instrument you strum around a campfire. Segovia changed that. He was a maverick. He was extremely creative and I'm sure, a tough guy to hang around as he had concrete opinions. But look at what he was



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doing. He was groundbreaking. He was nothing if he was not controversial. So it amuses me when I hear people say, "We're going to protect this guy who was creating new music and arrangements. We're going to freeze it in time." There are other artists like Bream and other great players who were also continuously creating new music and commissioning composers. Williams has never been afraid to go way out of the box. A lot of the really cool artists are not purists - they're just artists.'

York sums up: 'This again is very bluntly stated. My point is, some people are quick to put up walls, especially by saying "We're not rock, we're not fingerstyle, we're not pop music but classical guitar only." If you put a butterfly in the freezer, you've protected it. But what you have is a frozen butterfly. Music needs to dynamic. Art moves inexorably forward. Some people don't understand this because they can't understand it. I can't help but express this passionately. If people do not write new music and take it into the future, the guitar will die. In my heart, music is very rich, spiritual and beautiful so whenever I encounter people fixated on tradition for tradition's sake? I'm offended.'

For concert tour dates, discography and more information visit: [www.andrewyork.net/](http://www.andrewyork.net/)