

Eli Kassner's 80th Birthday Celebration

**CLASSICAL
GUITAR**

**2004 Encuentros
de Alma Festival,
Paraguay: A report by
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April 2005

www.classicalguitarmagazine.com



Badi Assad

Brazilian guitarist and singer

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BADI ASSAD

By JULIA CROWE



Badi Assad.

LAST November, Badi Assad visited New York, during a week when post-hurricane rains were pummeling the coast, to perform a series of shows at the Jazz Standard with legendary jazz guitarists Larry Coryell and John Abercrombie. The trio had flown in from Germany on a tour to promote their album, *Three Guitars* (Chesky Records.)

'I brought the weather with me,' she laughs, remarking on the abrupt drop in temperature. For this story, we slogged through curbside puddles and wet brown tree leaves pasted heavily over the sidewalks before settling into a dark-chambered, elegant restaurant on the Upper East Side. In the midst of this fashionable gloom, I spot the glint of an engagement ring on Badi's hand. She tells me the ring will shift to her left hand after her December wedding to her boyfriend, Dimitri, who is preparing to move from Chicago to Brazil. Badi is also celebrating the release of her new album, *Verde* (Edge Music/Universal), which showcases the considerably widened expanse of her singing in contrast

to her first release of *Danca Das Ondas* (Dance of the Waves) in 1989.

'When I recorded *Danca Das Ondas*, a few musicians were invited to help me create a sort of new environment for the not-so-classical pieces composed by those musicians who came to perform with me,' Badi says. 'One month later, I had my first solo concert and I was worried about how I would be truthful to the recordings if I was all by myself. This opened up the possibility of trying to imitate some of the sounds those musicians had recorded.'

'I found the flute or other wind instruments could be easily done with my voice and a percussion sound could be made by clicking my tongue. So suddenly I realised I was already developing a way of combining a lot of my voice into my music and creating a style that ended up receiving the sweet nickname of "one woman band."

'Later, when I started to study percussion (drums, *kalimbas*, shakers, *berimbau* and the mouth harp) those instruments began to have a role in my live performances as well, sometimes

by themselves, sometimes played at the same time I was singing or playing the guitar.'

Badi feels that in the beginning of her career, she considered her voice to be little more than an accompaniment to her guitar playing. 'But slowly, it became more equal,' she says, 'to the point where I am even invited for projects where I only sing. The singer in me has taken a much stronger place but I would say my relationship with music is neither that of a guitar player who can sing nor of a singer who also plays guitar.'

'I consider myself an artist who happens to have a wide variety of tools available in order to express myself. If an inspiration comes to me for the guitar, I will let it be. However, if it comes to the voice first, then that is going to be the avenue for me to play it. There are no rules but for the one that allows me to always be a performer who lives through my music.' With her scat style of singing I ask if she has been listening to any of the great jazz singers, like Billie Holliday or Ella Fitzgerald, for inspiration.

'I don't listen to a lot of jazz singers, actually,' she tells me. 'Some of my greatest influences with singing come from the pop world, like Tori Amos, Bjork and Ani DiFranco.'

Badi grew up hearing her mother Ica's singing and her father Jorge's mandolin, not to mention

her brothers Sergio and Odair Assad on the guitar. She began studying the guitar at 14 and soon won a competition in Rio de Janeiro. Four years later, she won the Villa-Lobos International Guitar competition and went on to the Viña del Mar competition in Chile and as one small example of her playing, in *Danca das Ondas*, Badi delivers a spirited and beautiful rendering of Leo Brouwer's *Huida de Los Amantes Por el Valle de los Ecos*.

Badi believes that her early, intense pursuit of perfection as a guitar player might have contributed to her bout of *focal dystonia*, which, at its worst point, left her believing she would have to relinquish the idea of ever playing again. The condition causes the fingers to become paralyzed and incapable of the fine motor function required to play. Focal dystonia affects many professional string players and has no official cure, at least in terms of Western medicine. For Badi, the disability turned out to be a godsend.

'The whole experience allowed me to rediscover my connection with myself and with my music and art as well,' she says. 'I saw it as an opportunity for growth, both spiritually and mentally. On the physical side, I did everything you can imagine, from massage therapy to acupuncture,



Badi Assad.

Chinese medicine, the Alexander Technique, Feldenkreis, body talk, just to name a few.

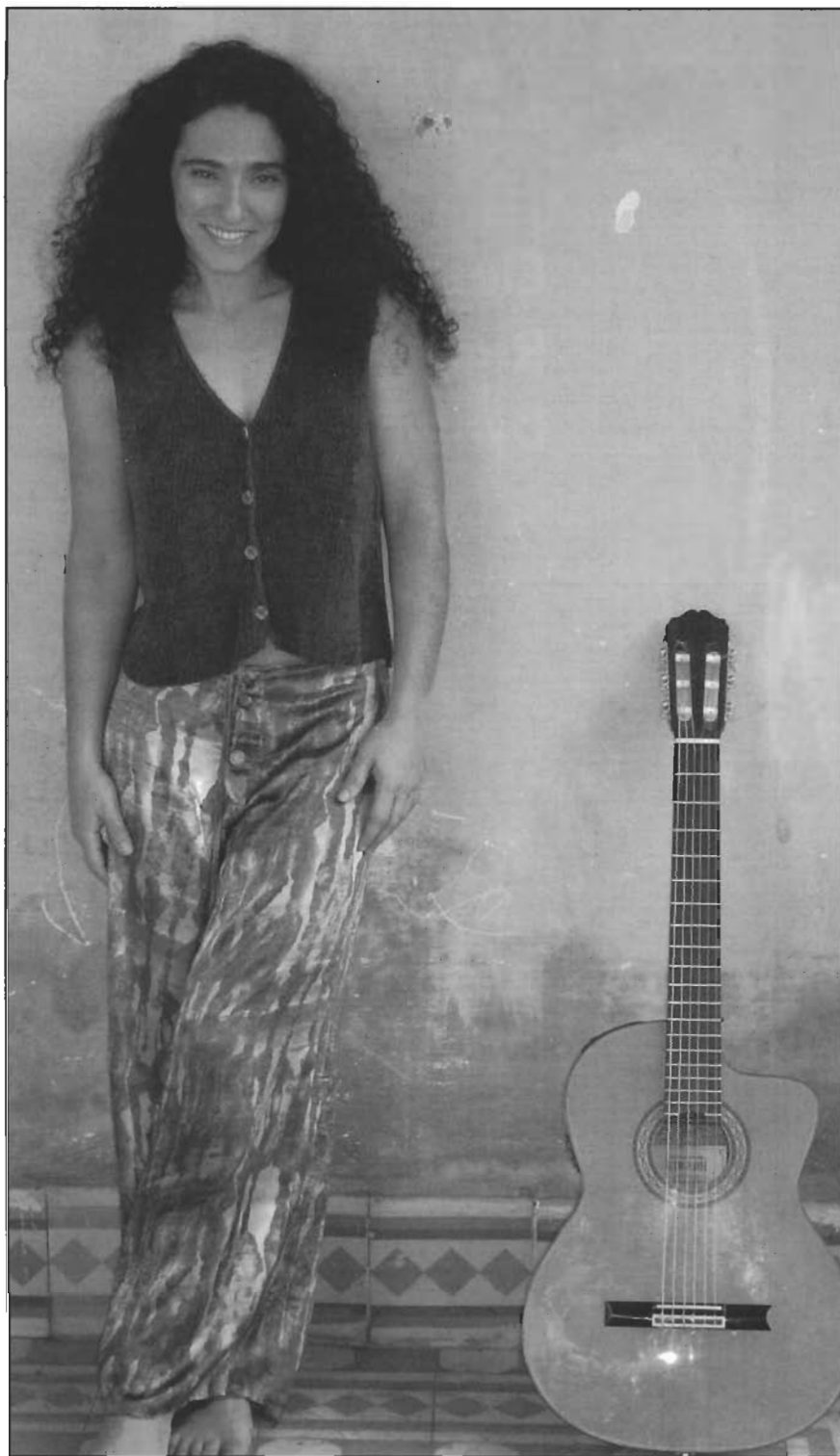
'The combination of all this plus my own internal journey allowed me to find a way out of the problem by developing a much more mature interaction with life. I no longer have the physical problem but I will never forget those difficult moments when I could barely touch the guitar. Because of those moments, I will always feel grateful toward those who helped me to understand life a little better and helped me see that life is nothing but a beautiful and miraculous gift'. Badi pauses for a moment to retie her generous tangle of long, thick curly black hair.

'Nothing comes to you that wasn't supposed to. Also, nothing comes to you that you can't handle. If something too big comes to you, it is because life knows you can handle it. The present time is really what matters. When I reached the point of accepting I might never be able to play the guitar again, that was when the miracle came and left me be free with the instrument once more. Nowadays, the guitar plays a much lighter role in my life. I don't need to be a virtuoso anymore in order to feel complete as an artist.'

It is clear from watching Badi perform that she has found a seamless style of expressing the music and rhythm. Onstage, she morphs into an inventive, multi-instrumental Shiva who never skips a beat, alternating between the guitar and voice and percussion with such homemade devices as a long skinny copper tube fitted with a plastic whistle taped heavily to a microphone stand. She also manages to sing a melody while maintaining a percussive effect of tongue clicking as her fingers travel easily up and down the fretboard.

Badi believes that *Verde* is the most Brazilian-sounding music of all her CDs. 'The album was totally conceived and recorded in Brazil after living four years in the US. Besides my first album, *Danca das Ondas*, which was recorded in Sao Paulo, my other CDs were recorded in the US with local musicians.

'*Verde* has all Brazilian musicians, a Brazilian producer, a Brazilian studio, Brazilian partners and Brazilian sleep in between sessions, which is very important. My relationship with music at



Badi Assad.

present has been to enter a more popular avenue, especially as my singing has assumed a more meaningful place inside. In *Verde*, you will find some compositions I did alone and with partners, some traditional Brazilian songs from the middle of the last century and also, new arrangements for some international hits, such as a bossa nova version of the U2 song *One* and a tango version of *Bachelorette* by Bjork.

'I enjoy gaining a new perspective of things,' she says. 'I can say that I love playing solo and with others because each experience brings different emotions and I am always happy with freshness in my life.'