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**2005 Wall to Wall Guitar  
Festival, Illinois**

**Letter From New York**

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# WALL TO WALL GUITAR FESTIVAL IN CHAMPAIGN-URBANA, ILLINOIS

By JULIA CROWE

THE FIRST inaugural Wall to Wall Guitar Festival, sponsored by the University of Illinois, lived up to its name this last October with a four-day roster of concerts featuring outstanding guitarists from rock, blues, jazz, country, slide guitar, flamenco and classical genres. The main artists were: Taj Mahal, Pat Metheny's Trio with Christian McBride and Antonio Sanchez, Dan Zanes, Daniel Lanois, Sergio and Odair Assad, Bill Frisell, Rory Block, Andy Summers, Vernon Reid, Mamadou Diabate, Abdoulaye Diabate, Jesse Harris and The Ferdinandos, Banning Eyre, Vinicius Cantauria, avant-garde side guitarist David Tronzo and Steve Bernstein's band Sex Mob, early music master Hopkinson Smith, Eliot Fisk, Juan Martin, steel pedal guitarist Cindy Cashdollar, Austin Telecaster expert Redd Volkaert and Kaki King.

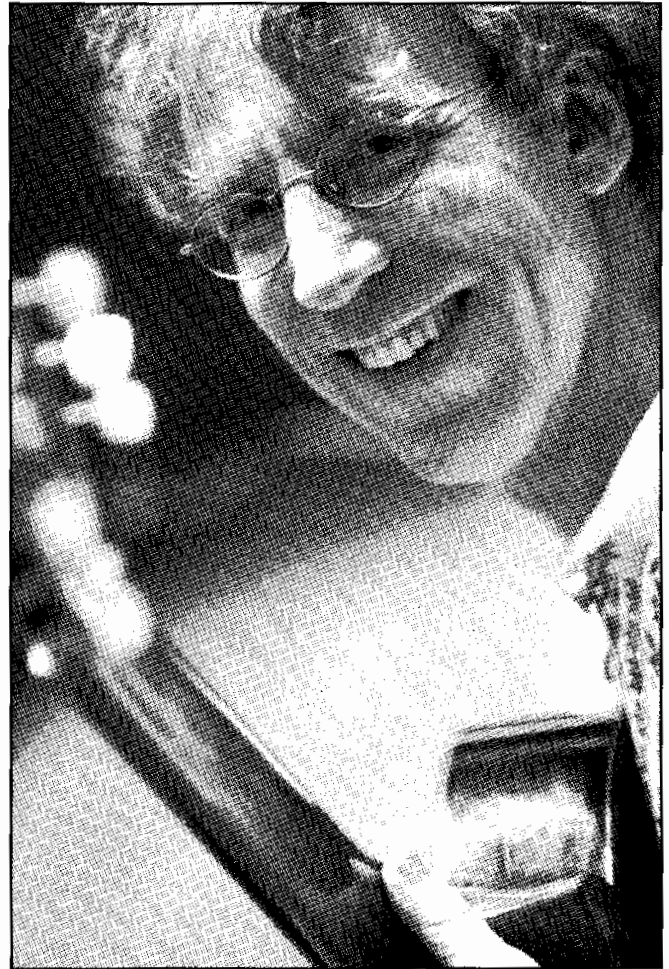
The project was a year long collaboration between Mike Ross, the Director of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the University of Illinois, and David Spelman, producer of New York Guitar Festival.

'The idea for the Wall-to-Wall Guitar Festival was the result of convergent impulses that came together over the course of several years,' Ross says. 'One impulse was to continue the pathway of immersive programming that the Krannert Center had embarked upon in recent years with projects such as the season-long Jazz Threads initiative. Another primary impulse was to further develop strategic programming that breaks down the highbrow/lowbrow aesthetic barriers: a core component of the Center's artistic philosophy. Finally, David Spelman and I had been juggling with the idea of doing something special based on the rich phenomenon of the guitar in today's world, and decided that we just couldn't wait any longer.'

'The success of this year's festival encouraged us to immediately begin planning for the next Wall-to-Wall Guitar Festival, which will be held in the fall of 2007 as the kick-off to the Krannert Center 07/08 season. The ideas have been pouring in, and I'm certain it'll be a successor to this year's eclectic blast. Stay tuned.'

'The Wall-to-Wall Guitar Festival essentially told the story of the guitar itself: where it originated, what countries it has visited, which genres it has impacted, and, to some degree where it is heading,' David Spelman adds. 'Of course, the story of the guitar is far too complex and interesting to tell in just four days but this was a great start.'

'Working with the Mike and the Krannert Center team was an awesome experience; they were so passionate, professional and open to new ideas. Their dedication and creativity was an inspiration



PHOTOS: DAN MERLO

*Eliot Fisk: on form for the festival.*

to me and I'm especially grateful to the artists who embraced this unlikely and ambitious idea of a guitar summit on the prairie. Without exception, each musician took a shine to the idea from my first phone call or e-mail. They came long distances to share their music and it was a thrill and an honour to work with them on this project. As I enter the hectic and exciting final planning stages of the 6th New York Guitar Festival, the experience of the Wall-to-Wall Festival is very much in my thoughts, and motivates me to do even better work.'

The extensive and expert planning was evident the minute I stepped off the airplane and spotted gigantic professional poster signage announcing the festival concerts. Its scope included guitar clinics, informal lobby jams, vintage instrument displays, podcasts and an exhibit and lecture of Andy Summers' photographic artwork and free tours of the John Lennon Educational Tour Bus, a complete recording studio on wheels. And thoughtfully enough, the daily schedule began at a reasonable hour (11 AM) with the proper assumption that no one would be getting much sleep.

Champaign-Urbana is a flat, bucolic landscape, comprised of two Midwestern towns, Champaign and Urbana (depending which side of Springfield Avenue you've crossed). Any conjectures about the place, based on the sight of a crowing rooster in someone's front yard, are immediately up-ended when one encounters the town's trendy espresso shops and a quaint hole-in-the-wall patisserie that could easily have been transplanted from the sixth arrondissement. When our table expressed shock over a restaurant menu that described fare in terms of 'frisees' and 'reduction sauces' instead of a simple, ground-up patty of Midwestern cow with ketchup on toasted sesame bun, the waiter gleefully explained that the chef had studied in New York with celebrity chef Mario Batali.

Wandering along the University of Illinois campus, I also couldn't help wondering why its students insisted on dressing in variations of bright orange and blue sweaters with the words 'Illini' boldly emblazoned across their chests and derrières. Hadn't admissions informed them already what school they're attending? Or, is it that everyone here is having such a good time here, they forget in the morning and need to be reminded when they dress? Eventually, it dawned on me that it had to do with a concept known as school spirit.

Similar enthusiasm prevailed at the Krannert Center, with the performing artists remarking afterward how smoothly run the entire programme had been, including a world class stage crew. Evening concerts were split among two stages within the great hall performing complex with free, informal concerts in the lobby along with a handful of exhibits run by various guitar and music related vendors. Audience members were giddy about being able to catch free lobby concerts to see popular artists like David Tronzo with retro jazz re-inventors Sex Mob jamming with In Living Colour's Vernon Reid, or Jesse Harris with his band the Fernandinos, or even Daniel Lanois, the producer of albums for U2, Bob Dylan and Peter Dinklage, with his multi-screen video rig complete with a Brazilian burlesque dancer who strutted and stripped down to a few fishnet threads and swinging sequins (nearly every male within photographic range lunged forward with their mobile phone cameras).

The classical guitar concerts were stealthier with their dazzle. Sergio and Odair Assad performed Albeniz' *Córdoba*, Turina's *Tonadilla*, *Segurías*, an Arabian composition, a traditional *Chorihño*, and a work by Piazzolla. The audience was abuzz afterward and what they could not have known was how particularly amazing the performance was, given that the Assads had just traveled from Baltimore to Chicago the night before and driven all the way to Champaign that same day.

Hopkinson Smith provided scholarly introductions to a mesmerizing programme of Luys Milan's *Fantasia 8*, *Fantasia 18 de consancias y redoblas largos* and *Pavana 4* on the vihuela, along with works by Luys de Narvaez, (*La Cancio del*



Eliot Fisk, Hopkinson Smith and Juan Martín.

*Emperador*, seven variations on *Guardame las Vacas*) *Una Baxa de Contrapunto* and Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contralege le harpa en la manera de Ludonico*.

Simon Shaheen, a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, performed several improvisations on the 1902 spruce-soundboard oud (Arab stringed instrument resembling a lute or mandolin) formerly owned by his father.

Eliot Fisk performed his own arrangements of Scarlatti (four *Sonatas in D major*), Alhcniz (*Sevilla*, *Cádiz*, *Torre Bermeja* and *Asturias*), E. Hallsfer (*Habañera*) and Pagannini (*Capriccio 24*), in addition to Regino Sainz de la Maza's *El Vito*, *Petenera* and *Zapateado*.

There were no other flash and curves to be found at this particular concert but for the actual guitars and the spectacular playing. It was enough to prompt jazz bassist Tony Scherr to take on a handdog look afterward and point a mock pistol to his head as a way of offering artistic compliment. And if it's any testament to the popularity of flamenco, the guys manning the CD table informed me that Juan Martín had immediately sold out of inventory after performing a programme of Linares (*Taranta*), Tueres la Fuente (*Rumba*), De Damasco a Cordoba (*Zambra*), La Chispa (*Alegría*), Al Galope (*Bulería*), *Rumba Nostalgia* and *La Féria*.

There is hardly enough room here to do justice to all the concerts but the notable jazz performances include Andy Summers, who performed a searing set with his trio while wearing a colourful tropical patterned shirt given to him by Ben Verdery. Bill Frisell's playing met with the lush, mood-ring colour shifts in backdrop lighting done by assistant lighting director Lisa Kidd (Frisell had also made sure to leave his cartoonish self-portrait scribbled in black marker on the newly established Cavern Club-style autograph wall downstairs). Pat Metheny started his programme with his signature 42-stringed, hydra-headed Picasso guitar, something Kafka might have played if he'd only woken up as a centipede instead of a cockroach. Vinicius Cantauria performed an elegant bossa nova on a mellow-sounding hollow-bodied

Yamaha. And for the closing party, David Tronzo tore up the lobby stage with Steve Bernstein's New York downtown band, Sex Mob, whose distinctively slinky and elastic, experimental free jazz propelled everyone onto the dance floor. Vernon Reid joined in toward the end of the set for a resounding, funk-ed-out version of the national anthem.

Much praise is due to the efficient stage crew at the Krannert Center. After sitting in on countless sound-checks in a number of towns and preparing for my usual enlistment by artists to advocate, plead, charm and beg on their behalf with stage and sound crews, none of that was necessary here. Hank Schroy from Vernon Reid's band had asked me later on the plane home, 'Was I imagining things?' He was not. I'd watched the IATSE union crew and Krannert stagehands spend the better part of a day patiently assembling a technically difficult multi-screen video rig for Dan Lanois' lobby set, complete with dry ice, lighting and four gigantic unwieldy balloons for backdrop. And they had pulled it off with perfect professionalism.

A lesser known, accompanying series of concerts of some note took place in the town's notoriously haunted 1920s Old Lincoln Hotel, a Bavarian-vampire-meets-English Tudor establishment with its décor of gory antler chandeliers, dark wooden paneling, flickering wall sconces and a knight in armour standing stoically in the lobby. An American menu slapped up in the lift, illuminated conveniently with photocopied Old English lettering, read charmingly, 'Please join us for Bubbles and Steak.'

Were there really any ghost sightings? More like close calls. After receiving my room key, I did mutter something under my breath about the resident ghost needing to suck in some girth when the doors to the lift stuttered and took their time to close. Moments later I had to return downstairs when the key mysteriously refused to fit the lock. And apparently, my unexpected presence startled the night desk clerk. I did find Andy Summers looking like a ghost the next morning. But this was due to lack of sleep from being given a smokers room, while someone's unattended brood had raced manically up and down the corridor all nightlong. The truth is everyone probably raised a ghost or two of their own from staying up till 3 AM every night, playing in the basement conference rooms.

Juan Martín and West African kora player Mamadou Diabate launched the late night jam sessions with their unexpected duet in the hotel lobby in front of the stone fireplace on the very first evening, just as Dan Zanes' band was loading in. Martín played flamenco melodies as Diabate improvised accompanying Malian rhythms upon 21 adjustable strings of fishing line looped in a harp-like cascade over the neck of his kora. David Spelman was later seen tapping studiously at his laptop to record an impromptu session with Dan Lanois. Whatever



*Odair & Sergio Assad: wow the audience.*



*Simon Shaheen: adds middle-eastern flavour to the festival.*

else happened next, I have no idea because sleep beckoned at 3:20 AM, right as we were on the verge of discovering the tuning to cure cancer (for those wondering if a Hilton, Hyatt or a hip W Hotel would have let us get away with any of this, the answer is no, sorry, never).

The inspiration quickly degenerated on the successive days with people splitting up into various conference rooms into smaller parties of sonic havoc. I'd joined a Beatles sing-along with British author Tim Brookes, who let me baptize his new tiger maple and steel string guitar by instantly breaking my index fingernail on it. His book, *The Guitar: An American Life* (Grove Press), chronicles the construction of this particular guitar interspersed with chapters that lovingly detail every conceivable and obscure scrap of the guitar's entire history. It's a good read and Tim is an equally adept plucker who knows all the lyrics to oldie Slim & Slam tunes, while remaining a painfully astute observer of guitaristic foibles.

'I'll bet you that at any moment now someone with an electric guitar in one of the other rooms is going to start playing 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door,' he said.

His timing couldn't have been more perfect.

The only appropriate response we could think of was to battle them back with a loud acoustic rendition of 'All Along the Watch Tower.'