

Articles

BY KENNY HILL

THE FIRST CLASSICAL GUITAR CRUISE

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December 7 - 14, 2003 - It was guitar festival on a ship. It was a surprising idea and a surprising pleasure. There were concerts, master classes, a guitar making demo, body work, good meals, good friends, late night revelry and grand excursions onto the beaches, waters and restaurants of western Mexico - the so called Mexican Riviera. It was one of those "Firsts" that will stick with all of us who were lucky enough to be there for a long time.

I would do it again in a heartbeat. I really hope it happens again.

The Classical Guitar Cruise was conceived by David Rona in Los Angeles, out of a desire to do something positive and meaningful in the doldrums of ugly world affairs, sad economics and the general frustration of much bad news. David wanted to do something strong, proactive, to motivate himself and others to have something good happen, to build community and shake some of out of us our routine.

It worked. Although David had no experience whatsoever in doing something like this, he had this idea, and he threw himself into it completely, to the predictable point that it took up pretty much his whole life.

He used his cell phone to go knocking on doors of artists and possible sponsors from all over the world, and he covered a lot of territory. That's how he got to me.

He came on strong, hustling me as a sponsor for concerts, advertising and such. His enthusiasm wore me down, to the point that I donated a guitar for a prize on the cruise. I was having a hard time visualizing the whole thing, but eventually he pumped me up to getting excited about taking a working vacation with my lovely girl Roberta, and I joined the cruise as guest artist and as a cruiser. I had no idea what to expect.

At first Rona came up with a program roster that could have fleshed out two or three guitar festivals. It looked fantastic, but in hindsight it would have been way too much. He got some good marketing advice from Richard Glick and from Leon Atkinson, and ultimately wound up downsizing the lineup to something more realistic, well rounded and satisfying.

The guitarists headlining the 7-day event were David Tannenbaum, Adam Holtzman, Muriel Anderson and Dmitri Diachenko. This was a good line up, good contrast, each of them bringing their unique artistry and experience to the program. I was there in capacity of Luthier on Board, and there was special guest Pamela Blanc, who practices the Alexander Method, which is a marvelous body working therapy aimed at the use of posture and the whole body to improve any activity, including, and especially, guitar playing. There were around fifty guitar cruise participants from all over the US, Europe, and Latin America, every one there to enjoy the guitar and the vacation.

On the ship the artists and the cruisers are all in it together and for the duration, so a lot of sharing of music and social life both at sea and in the ports happens. Good friendships both new and old are made and deepened.

I had never been on a ship before and I was anxious about it. My first concern was the motion. Nobody wants to go on vacation to be sick. I wasn't. I got my sea legs soon enough. Our cabin had a wonderful little balcony facing out to the wide, alluring sea, and with the huge open air decks on top of this thirteen story floating city, I was soon seduced by the vast dream of the open sky and our deep mother sea.

I am a big fan of the Pacific Ocean, and this was more of it than I had ever known. The motion is there, and once adjusted to is constant and comforting. The endless play of the waters and waves, the sky and clouds, and the clear, smooth comings

and goings of the sun and moon pulled me right back toward the womb that my busy life had numbed me to.

I was also worried about being stranded on a floating island with three thousand of my fellow homo sapiens. Don't get me wrong; I like people. I just wasn't sure that a floating Las Vegas was exactly my demographic. But, as with many untried experiences, I was happily surprised. Our little classical guitar entourage was only about sixty people out of this huge population, but the ship was huge too, so with all the choices of places to move around, it all worked out just fine. We may have seemed like so many felines at a dog show, but the spectacle was amusing, and the narcotic of the whole package worked just like it was supposed to. I and my fellow guitar heads all wound up wishing that it would never end.

We left Long Beach on a Sunday afternoon and sailed for three continuous days before the first docking at our southernmost destination. This first three days was scheduled with the majority of our guitar activities, the concerts, master classes and presentations. David Tannenbaum was smart. He asked for his performance to be scheduled first, so that he could get it done and be able to do some serious relaxing for the remainder of the trip. On Monday he did a fine evening concert with a master class the following morning, setting up the format that would be followed by each of the other performers, Dmitri Diatchenco, Muriel Anderson, and wrapped up on the last day of the trip with the final concert by Adam Holtzman.

My part of the program was scheduled as a talk about guitar making, and I also took a guitar with me that was all done except that the neck was completely uncarved. I used a few knives, chisels and files to carve this guitar into completion, leaving a pile of chips sawdust that must have been puzzling to the housekeeping staff. For me this was a fun demonstration. I carved that neck into playability; and seaworthiness filling the cabin with the aroma of fresh Spanish cedar from the Caribbean rain forests, just a little way around the world.

Pamela Blanc's presentation was a satisfying surprise. She explained and demonstrated the Alexander Technique, a body alignment practice, and then throughout the cruise she offered individual treatments and consultations, treating

many cruisers to some of the most long-term life improvement to come out of the whole trip.

As everyone on the trip got to know each other and the ship took over our lives, the whole thing became natural, and everyone seriously relaxed.

The concert performing experience was a unique challenge for each of the guitarists. The performance hall used for the concerts was in the very forward part of the ship, down close to the water line. This is basically where the bow of this thirteen story tall ship is cutting into the waves and the sea. This means the stage and the hall are rising and falling in a trance like motion, and though it could be comforting to those lounging in the audience, there's no doubt it gave each of the players one of the more challenging on-stage distractions of their careers. Adam Holtzman was last to play, and although everyone had become adapted to life on a ship, he got the biggest seas of the trip to play on. He did great, played beautifully, but I know it was strange for him. It's just a good thing he's not a dancer.

The excursions off the ship into out three ports of call; Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan, and Cabo San Lucas; were a heady break from the sea travel. The variety of excursion options offered through the tour was wide, enough to fill up several visits, but most of our group wound up going body surfing, snorkeling and finding good meals in the local restaurants. The thought of these small towns being engulfed with a wave of flat footed tourists several times a week seemed a little bizarre, but getting away from the swamp of tourism wasn't that hard to do, and each day was great fun. Our last port stop was Cabo San Lucas, and a group of us chose to take a water taxi out to the famous waters and rocks at the tip of Cabo the very end of California. Beautiful. Some of the group was set up to go snorkeling, but I was abstaining. I'd never done it before and I guess I was nervous about drowning or something. About half way through the afternoon David Tannenbaum came trundling up out of the water and said "Kenny, you have to come out. I paddled all the way back to get you. You WILL thank me." He told me that he had found a rock (he named it Tannenbaum Rock) that was definitely the best. So OK, I went, with he and David Rona, and it was magnificent. I didn't know how beautiful those reefs could be, and there were zillions of magnificent tropical fish, right up close and personal. Unbelievable. Of course David Rona's first instincts were to try

and organize them, but he had to leave some of that work for next time. And I DID thank Tannenbaum.

What was interesting to me was that, in the ports of call, when the day was done I found myself very anxious to get back to the ship. This was probably for two reasons. One, on the ship you are relieved of the need to make real decisions bigger than selecting from choice of soup, salad, entree, desert and entertainment. That is part of the plan of the cruise; part of what makes it a vacation.

But there was a second, more elemental urge at work. The sea was pulling me back. I began to understand why a lifetime sailor could get restless after just a little while in port, and why once your sea legs are awakened they don't want to let go. The sea is a tremendous goddess whose embrace is long and seducing. To be floating above its profound and unknowable depths has a powerful pull, one that doesn't let go willingly.

The very last order of festival business was to give away the guitar I had donated. After Adam's concert we put raffle tickets for each of the cruisers into a hat, and with such a compact group the odds were pretty good. An eight year old picked out the winning number. The winner, a gentleman from Germany came up, the crowd exhaled and gathered their things to leave.

"But wait," he whispered to me "Am I allowed to refuse it?" Huh? You don't want my guitar? He said he had more traveling to do before returning to Germany, and he had many nice guitars already, so ceded the instrument and picked another ticket. And it was Bob.

Now Bob is from Kentucky, and the airlines had lost his guitar flying out to Long Beach, so he had been borrowing my guitar during the whole week for the classes and all. He really wanted this guitar, and he got it, so in the end, the guitar went just where it belonged. Cool.

In my life the guitar has been a grand commitment in many ways; by playing for over forty years, being shaped and enriched by music and sounds, and by making many guitars and learning some of the fascinating detail the guitar offers and demands.

But even more importantly the guitar has served as an axle around which the world turns, always spinning toward new places, projects, events, people. This Classical Guitar Cruise was another new and marvelous turn of the world spun by the guitar. It's about people and relationships. David Rona set out to create a community building event, and hats off to him, he did it.

To learn more visit: www.classicalguitarcruise.com

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