

Guitar

My College Journey

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Introduction

This project is a celebration of one of my largest areas of growth in college: learning the guitar. Much of this project speaks to the question, “How does the guitar, an ancient, multicultural instrument, interpret jazz, a novel, fundamentally American art form?” A holistic answer is sought from three angles: (1) reflecting on my study of classical guitar (and other pre-jazz genres), (2) creatively arranging jazz standards, and (3) performing these arrangements.

The guitar is perhaps the most historically significant and ubiquitous instrument across cultures. When guitarists interpret contemporary music, they are bridging the eastern and western musical diasporas, as well as the past to the present. As a first-generation American, this project is of deep personal interest. While primarily exploring how the guitar interprets jazz, this project also sheds light on smaller, more personal questions: “How did the 20th and 21st century’s most notable jazz guitarists lead their lives?” “From where did they draw their musical inspiration?” “How did they balance their various cultural and professional identities in the composition and playing of this norm-defying music?”

Background

I was drawn to the guitar from an early age, largely due to my pre-school Spanish teacher Ms. María. She played a beautiful, yellow-golden classical guitar with nylon strings. I remember how magical it was to watch her effortlessly strum the strings. Unfortunately, my father refused to buy me a guitar at age 3, and my musical origins instead took root on piano.

My childhood was devoted to learning piano and bass guitar. When I began college, I was proficient at these instruments but felt that my heart was elsewhere. I first seriously laid my hands on a guitar in the fall of 2017 and immediately fell in love. That summer, I had been listening to Joe Pass and was determined to replicate his sounds. I figured out a few jazz voicings on my roommate’s acoustic guitar and learned how to “walk” a bassline while playing accompanying chords.

I enrolled in Prof. James Wilder’s *Guitar I* course the following summer, in which I gained dexterity and grew more comfortable playing solo. I also enjoyed learning about the cultural aspects of the guitar--its history, pedagogy, and evolution. I continued this journey by enrolling in Dr. Madriguera’s *Guitar II* and *Guitar Ensemble* courses the following fall and spring. By the end of the spring 2019 semester, I began to feel more confident expressing myself on guitar.

Then, my guitar journey took a wonderful turn: overseas. I [traveled to Spain](#) with members of the UTD Guitar Ensemble to study classical guitar for two weeks. I treasure every moment of this experience. Spain is the birthplace of the modern classical guitar, and I learned so much about the history and building of the instrument while there. I also learned a lot about playing guitar in different contexts (solo, band, ensemble, duet, etc.). I made such wonderful friends in Spain (and am still in touch with them today) and enjoyed many late-night jam sessions.

When the COVID crisis materialized in the spring of 2020, I was forced to give up playing bass in various DFW-area bands and jazz groups. With nobody to play with, I felt my motivation shift away the bass to the guitar. Over the next several months, my guitar skills sharpened tremendously. I developed my own right-hand technique, inspired by George Benson. My comfort with bebop vocabulary grew, and I taught myself many new voicings. I also explored blues guitar during this time and recorded a collection of songs called “[Blues in June](#).” Towards the end of the summer, I was also growing competent with other styles of guitar, including playing in open tunings (which resulted in the project “[Ode to Friends](#)”) and [playing lap-style](#), like my friend Stephen Houpt.

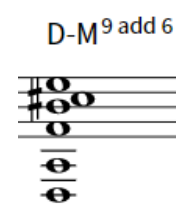
Finding My Voice

A musical voice is defined by repeated musical thoughts: “musical character.” This “character” is something of a sum of our many influences. I discuss a few of my influences below.

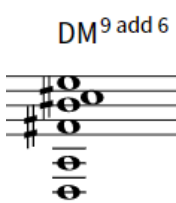
Charlie Byrd has influenced my approach to arranging pieces for solo guitar. He prioritizes rhythm in his improvisations, compelling the listener to engage in the creative process by imagining accompaniment. The strong sense of time makes his arrangements “easy on the ears,” unlike the arrangements of more modern jazz guitarists. You can hear many of his blues-influenced lines in my playing.



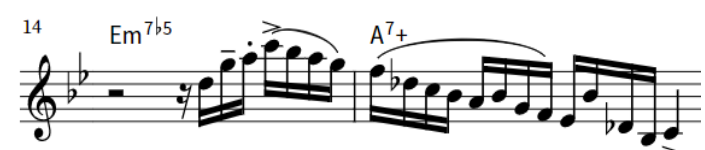
While the Gypsy jazz tradition is not a large part of my vocabulary, I have been influenced by the grandfather of this genre: Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt’s improvisational palette is dark, focusing on the minor 6 sound. Many of his voicings have a bittersweet, haunting quality that I add to my improvisation for a change of taste.



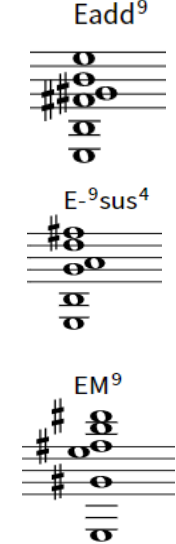
Bireli Lagrene mastered the Gypsy jazz style as a child and was widely celebrated in France as “the next Django.” Although he went on to explore bebop, rock, and fusion, he carried bits of the Gypsy tradition into this larger arena, introducing the world to the sound of this distinctive style. Sometimes, Lagrene adapts the Gypsy voicings to fit a more conventional palette, as shown below.



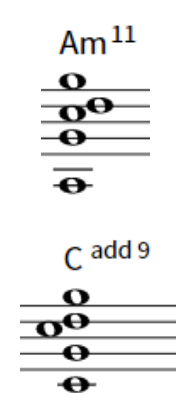
Lagrene’s improvisations are tremendous, and I admire his empowering, flowing bebop lines. His solos are constructed with utmost clarity.



Since the guitar’s lowest and highest strings are both tuned to the note E, guitars tend to resonate strongly in this key. Many of my favorite chords are based on this note. Below are a few of them:



My friends have been my most valuable teachers on this journey. Below are chords I learned from friends.



Sound samples of all the above lines and chords can be found at http://chiragokani.org/capstone_project.html#Finding_My_Voice.

Performance

The full performance can be found on this project’s associated website: http://chiragokani.org/capstone_project.html#Performance. An MP3 download of the entire performance is also available. The performance was recorded by Paul Osborn at Audio Dallas Recording Studio. Below I describe the selections performed.



Stompin' at the Savoy is a classic by Edgar Sampson, made popular by Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Art Tatum, and many others. While I was familiar with this tune and played it with my high school jazz band, I did not appreciate it fully until hearing [this incredible concert](#) featuring Sylvain Luc, Richard Smith, and Tommy Emmanuel. The call-and-response riff-based melody made it easy to adapt into a solo guitar arrangement.

Ate A Vista is a bossa nova found on *Brasil*, a CD by Detroit-area bassist Rich Kowalewski. I found this CD at the [Richardson Public Library](#) as a high school student learning about the music of other cultures. The orchestration and performance on this CD is very true to the Brazilian style and has influenced my approach to this culture’s music. Percussionist Mike Camerata helped achieve this level of authenticity in our performance. My other influences in the Brazilian genre are the legendary Antonio Carlos Jobim, João Gilberto, and Charlie Byrd, as well as DFW-based musicians like Tony Hakim and Tom Burchill.

Continuum is a piece by bassist Jaco Pastorius. This was one of Jaco’s signature compositions, and I have heard many recordings of him playing it. One of my favorite versions features Jaco with John McLaughlin and Tony Williams, under the title, “Trio of Doom.” I have used McLaughlin’s voicings and pay tribute to Jaco by including a bass solo in my performance. Mike Camerata adds light percussion to this recording.

Wicked Game is a late 80s hit by Chris Isaak. It is an unforgettable song that my mother associates with her first few years in the United States. Isaak’s version features the inspiring reverb-heavy lead guitar work of the late James Calvin Wilsey. My performance is inspired by Greg Reiter’s cover from his album *Flamenco Fusion Guitar*. This recording was my “theme song” when I traveled to Spain in 2019. Mike Camerata’s hand percussion plays a central role, adding a fusion/world dimension to the performance.

Isn't She Lovely is a Stevie Wonder classic from *Songs in the Key of Life*. It is a favorite among many, including the incredible guitarists Bireli Lagrene and Sylvain Luc. My orchestration is inspired by their duet performances of this tune.

Spain is the final track on Chick Corea’s *Light as a Feather*. It is another favorite among guitarists. I dedicate this track to Chick Corea, who passed away on February 9, 2021.

Lil' Darlin' is a jazz standard composed by trumpeter Neal Hefti for the Count Basie Orchestra. One of my favorite versions of this tune is a bootlegged recording of George Benson’s quartet performing it live in the early 70s. My approach is inspired by Benson’s tasteful solo, as well as Charlie Byrd’s general approach to playing ballads on solo guitar. I also like Joe Pass’s trio recording of this tune.

What I Learned

The guitar speaks of peace and beauty. The sound, touch, and smell of the guitar immediately brings peace to my heart, and the guitar always seems to convey its own message, “We live in a beautiful world.” When I am aligned with these values, I find that the guitar “plays itself”—that truly *playing* the guitar is effortless.

Due to its size and portability, the guitar, more than any other instrument I play, is like a friend who will never leave you. While music is formless, the guitar helps us grow closer to music by giving us the easily accessible forms of company, warmth, and support.

Playing the guitar has indeed enhanced my relationship with music and has brought me closer to who I want to be. I have learned that if I make myself “available” by letting go of *my* ideas, *my* chords, *my* melodies, etc., music will fill my heart with whatever it is that needs to be said. This deeper connection has shown me that music is always eager to fill us with its love, but first requires that we let go of our desires and expectations. I have always felt that music is a big part of me, but now I am seeing that music is actually *bigger* than me. Indeed, we suffer when we try to guide the music and find bliss when we are guided by music.

A Glimpse into the Future

My college years mark what is only the beginning of a lifelong journey with the guitar. While I plan to return to playing bass guitar with jazz and world groups after the pandemic, I will always think of myself as a guitarist. The guitar was the first instrument I ever wanted to play, so it was meant to be this way.

The guitar has led me to prefer the duo and trio formats over larger groups, so I will begin pursuing performance opportunities that welcome these smaller formats starting this fall. I am particularly interested in guitar duets and accompanying vocalists.

This summer, I will be teaching guitar to children ages 5-16 in Pennsylvania. Since many students will be interested in learning rock guitar, I will have the chance to dive deeper into this genre on the electric guitar. I have been inspired by Stephen Houpt and Sylvain Luc to continue using my classical-guitar right-hand technique on the electric instrument and do not plan on playing with a pick.

Since I am now joining the ranks of four other guitarists in my family—Jaymin Sanghavi, Sanjay Vora, Rahul Vora, and Finn Schwartz—I will be able to engage with them in a more immediate musical dialogue. I look forward to traveling across the world to play with them after the COVID pandemic. I will always bring my guitar with me wherever I go. My cousin Rahul is left-handed, which makes it impossible for me to play his guitar when visiting Mumbai. I also look forward to playing lap-style guitar on Sanjay’s new music this year.

Acknowledgements

I did not own a guitar until a month before I began this project. So almost everything I have learned was on the guitars of my generous friends: Roma, Michelle, Christian, Evan, Ben, Cameron, Stephanie, Dany, Mikey, Nathan, Benji, and Ella. Thank you!

Thanks to Dr. Madriguera for providing timely and constructive feedback on my playing via email, and for supporting me on the associated independent study. Thanks also to Prof. Wilder, my teachers in Spain, and, of course, Mrs. María, my first musical hero.

Thanks to the amazing friends I have made along the way: Dany, Mikey, Nathan, Leo, Jesús, Finn, Holly, Solvay. I never knew I would meet people like you when I came to UTD. I wish I had known you from the beginning.