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Q&A with French Guitar Guru Pierre Bensusan

by Casey Phillips
A&E Reporter

Chattanooga Times Free Press entertainment reporter Casey Phillips spoke Algerian-born French guitar guru Pierre Bensusan about how he discovered the DADGAD tuning, what drives his stylistic exploration and taking his audience on a musical journey.



Q: You first picked up the guitar at age 11 after studying the piano. What was it about it appealed to you, initially?

A: My father bought me my first guitar. He loved Django Reinhardt and the Hot Club de France as well as swing in general. I guess he hoped maybe that he could dive into jazz, which I did but much later also, thanks to him and my friend, the banjo player, Bill Keith, who introduced me to Charlie Mingus, Duke Ellington and John McLaughlin.

Q: DADGAD is a tuning I most readily associate with Celtic music. What about that particular configuration appeals to you, as a guitarist?

A: Saint Patrick and I have something in common: We both brought something to Ireland. I brought that tuning to Ireland for the first time in 1977. One year before, I made the decision to only play in DADGAD and make it my "standard tuning." The drone aspect of DADGAD was the first thing that spoke to me. Maybe due to my African roots, this was what triggered my drive. When I started to study DADGAD in a more academic way, I realized that anything could be played in that tuning - chords, scales, modes - with a very different color than standard tuning. I am now navigating using the best of these both worlds.

Q: How did you first discover DADGAD?

A: I am self-taught. Nobody ever told me how to tune the guitar, so I made my own experiences and came across that tuning totally by chance in 1973. That coincided with listening to the harp music of Alan Stivell, the Irish group Planxty and the uilleann pipe of Seamus Ennis. DADGAD was meant to be used to play that music on the guitar.

Q: You do quite a bit of international touring, and your family has roots in many different places, including in Africa and Europe. Do you feel like your own global background and experiences contribute to how you play?

A: Very probably. I am also open-minded, curious and respectful of all different cultures. I always keep that respect in mind when I use all these different inspirations in order to expand my vocabulary.

Q: Where do you look for inspiration?

A: In the eyes of my wife, of my son, of the people, all around me in the world I live in, in books, movies, and in my imagination.

Q: Your musical approach is very wide ranging, with elements drawn from jazz and new age and Celtic music. What is it that drives you explore such a wide variety of styles?

A: To me, there are no styles but just different angles, lightings and approaches to the language of music. That has always been driving me as long as I can remember, and the more I go, the more this sentiment is reinforced.

Q: Are there still styles of music you'd like to explore or are actively exploring that you've never tried before?

A: Yes, all the things I haven't tried yet but that I silently imagine and can hear inside all the time. Sometimes, it will pop out in a concert, in a composition, on a record, but more is still to come.

Q: Who were you listening to growing up? Who were some of your early musical touchstones?

A: Django, John Renbourn, Bert Jansch, Martin Carthy, Doc Watson, Ry Cooder, Jimmy Hendrix, James Taylor, Cat Stevens, Georges Brassens, Graeme Allright, Leonard Cohen, Simon & Garfunkel, CSN&Y, Arthur Rubinstein playing "Moonlight Sonata," Ziffra playing Chopin, Dinu Luppatti playing Bach's "Partita in B-flat" and chorals, Led Zeppelin, Stivell, Bob Dylan, The Country Gentlemen, The Stanley Brothers, The Byrds, Seldom Scene, Rev. Gary Davies, Jewish and Arabic music from Algeria and Mahreb, Carlos Gardel, opera, Argentinian Tango, The Beatles, Elton John, ...

Q: What do you want listeners to take away from your music? Do you have a musical philosophy you want to convey through your work?

A: I would like to take them to a journey, lift them up, bring them a smile and have them wondering where they are.

Q: Your work tends to use a lot of effects, but your 2001 album "Intuite" was a purely acoustic project. What compelled you to take that approach and were the results worth the effort?

A: I used a lot of effects but in fact not any more since 15 years really. The best sound I have ever got was by playing in halls with great acoustics without any PA system - just guitar and voice free in the air. These experiences led me to record the album "Intuite" and keep that quality in mind in all my works since. It is not always possible to play in such halls, so I try to recreate that environment with electronics, but discretely, just a bit of EQ and reverb. The other colors are in the instrument and the

Q: Do you tend to bother much with set lists or allow the venue and audience dictate what you end up playing?

A: I don't have a set list but I more or less know how to pace the pieces. I also like to surprise myself and keep under my fingers more of what I perform and improvise.

Q: What has been showing up in your sets lately? Are you pulling from "Vividly," new material or a combination of current and past work?

A: On a two-hour concert, I play most of the albums "Solilai," "Spices," "Wu Wei," "Intuite," "Altiplanos," "Vividly" and even some earlier material in a 15-25 minute long medley.

Q: What are you working on now, recording wise?

A: I am in a touring mode until most of 2013. I work on some ideas, polish my little canvas of colors and techniques, sounds, approaches and improvisation. I am always thinking of the people I will share that music with, either live or on a recording. I have some ideas for a new album, but my mind is not set yet. Maybe a live album will be the next thing to pop out.

<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2012/may/11/q-french-guitar-guru-pierre-bensusan/>