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Latin guitar 'Chaos'

Andrea Daniel / Special to The Detroit News

Jazz guitarist Al Di Meola believes that if God gave him anything, it was the gift of playing Latin rhythms as if he were born in a Latin country -- a somewhat uncharacteristic talent for an Italian-heritage native of Jersey City, N.J. Solo since 1976, Di Meola's unique jazz, rock sound hinges on the world music side and is heavily influenced by Latin stylings and rhythms.

"My connection to this sound is something that I can't really explain," says Di Meola, by telephone from a San Diego tour stop. (His San Diego tour dates, which had just begun at the time of the interview, were canceled because of the wildfires.) "I know it came from an early love for the music and from hanging out in New York," he says.

Di Meola, who easily alternates between electric and acoustic guitars, showed his dexterity on two recent releases, the 2006 "Consequence of Chaos," on which he plays electric guitar, and 2007's "Diabolic Inventions and Seduction for Solo Guitar, Volume 1, Music of Astor Piazzolla."

"'Consequence of Chaos' is in the direction I'm moving in as a composer today," Di Meola says.

The CD is a pleasing selection of 15 original compositions displaying his lightning-speed fingering, complemented by tracks with gorgeous melodies. "Diabolic Inventions" highlights the music of Astor Piazzolla, the father of modern tango music and a big influence in Di Meola's music.

"The music reflects what I learned from him," says Di Meola, who has been on a steady rise career-wise since his 1974-76 period with Return to Forever, the popular jazz/rock fusion group led by pianist Chick Corea. The group's 1975 album "No Mystery" won a Grammy Award for Best Performance by a Group. Di Meola joined Return to Forever at age 19 and considers Chick Corea his first musical father. "I looked up to him," Di Meola says. "He's the best, not only in the way he plays, but he's an incredible composer. I wanted to be like that."

Through the years, Di Meola's list of musical affiliations reads like a "Who's Who" in music: Paco De Lucia, Santana, John McLaughlin, Larry Coryell, Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius, Jean Luc Ponty, Stanley Clarke, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Paul Simon, Phil Collins, Stevie Wonder and Astor Piazzolla.

During the interview, Di Meola revealed his next move. "My next big entry back into the scene will be a reunion with Return to Forever June through August of next year," he says. "It's a big, big thing that fans have really been asking for."

Andrea Daniel is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

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