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If there's one thing that listening to Pierre Bensusan's career-spanning live album, *Encore* [DADGAD], makes clear, it is that he had already fully established himself as a singular voice in the world of acoustic guitar playing at the time of his earliest performances. And, like a fine Bordeaux wine from an outstanding vintage, his artistry has only increased in depth and complexity as he has matured.

The music comprising *Encore* includes material from a 1975 show with banjo innovator Bill Keith (Bensusan's first professional gig), two duets from 1998 with Dream Theater keyboardist Jordan Rudess, pieces showcasing the guitarist's pioneering use of live-looping and other effects processing, and a wealth of solo steel-string work played in *DADGAD*—Bensusan's tuning of choice since 1978, and now practically synonymous with his name.

In addition to releasing *Encore*, Bensusan will celebrate his 40th anniversary by performing worldwide throughout 2014, as well as collaborating on a 40th Anniversary Pierre Bensusan Signature Model guitar with esteemed luthier George Lowden, whose guitars he has played throughout his career, and who, coincidentally, is celebrating his 40th anniversary as an

instrument builder. Bensusan will also host students in his home in the north of France for a week-long Residential Guitar Seminar beginning August 5, 2014 (visit [pierrebensusan.com](http://pierrebensusan.com) for details).

#### **Briefly describe the genesis of *Encore*.**

I had wanted to release a live recording for a long time. I did a live-performance DVD for Stefan Grossman in 1996 [*Pierre Bensusan in Concert*], along with two workshop DVDs [*The Guitar of Pierre Bensusan Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*], and a couple of years later there was the live duo recording with Didier Malherbe [*Live in Paris*]—but there was no testimony to my presence onstage for the past four decades. So, when my French manager, Jacques, said that I should do something special to celebrate my 40th anniversary, I suggested a live album, and he loved the idea. Then, the challenge became to find enough material to fill a CD, and at the end of the selection process I was very grateful to have discovered that there was actually more than three hours of music that I was happy with, including some from 1975, recorded just a few months before I began work on my first studio album.

#### **Where did the material come from?**

Occasionally, live sound engineers would record a show without my knowledge and then give me the master afterward. So, when I would return home from a tour I would have several recordings, which I would just put away. It was very rare that I would listen to them, maybe because I felt like they represented the past, and there was nothing I could do about it, so I should just forget about them and not spend time listening.

There were also more than a dozen recordings from shows I played at a club in Charlottesville, Virginia called The Prism. I knew that the shows were often recorded for the radio, so I contacted them and found out that they had saved everything.

When I started listening to the recordings, I could not believe how I played. I kept thinking, "My God, this is musical. Things are coming through." I put aside everything that I liked, and eventually there was enough material for two CDs, and then three. The Celtic Medley alone runs 18 minutes.

#### **Describe the process of selecting the material.**

I took notes. My wife also helped a lot, and I had input from others occasionally. Early on, I trashed a lot of things. I'd think, "No, that's not good. And the sound is not good," or, "The sound is okay, but the guitar is a little too much out of tune, it's unbearable." I remembered why I hadn't wanted to listen to all these recordings previously [laughs]. The main consideration, of course, was the strength of the music—the playing, the feel, the fortuitous accidents—and the sound was secondary. Overall, though, the sound was fine, and in some cases excellent. The audio engineer, Rich Breen, did a fantastic job of unifying everything, as well as helping to make the music flow naturally and coherently from piece to piece.

#### **While you were reviewing all these recordings, did you sense a linear development in your artistry or was the story more complex than that?**

Probably more complex, although I feel that in some ways there has also been a linear, upward evolution. I departed from my folk period into something much more original and probably deeper—further away from the instrument and much more into the kingdom of music. My aim is to have people forget the guitar, forget me as a musician, and just relate to the music.

#### **And yet, the tracks also show that you had established an original voice early on.**

Right from the start, especially when you listen to those tracks from 1975, before my first recording. The genesis of my sound and my playing was already there and then it grew as it went through a lot of different phases. It received a lot of earth and water, a lot of sun, a lot of rain, a lot of angular looks—looks above and underneath—so that I could evolve as an artist and as a human being, and I could enrich my expression as I was enriching my life. Forty years is a long time, and I think some people will be very touched by this progression. There is nothing more real, more true, than to say this was recorded live and this was who I was and who I am. That's what I like about listening to a concert without seeing the artist. It's all between the ears, the feeling, the heart, the sensations, and the music.

#### **Your earliest musical training was as a pianist. How did that foundation affect your approach to playing the guitar?**

It really helped physically, because playing the piano made my hands suppler. I can see this when I work with students who have some challenges with their hands. It also gave me a notion of chord voices and colors and took me to a beautiful musical world of great composers, such as Beethoven, Bach, Schumann, and Mozart. Being

exposed to them at an early age helped my sense of music and my understanding of musical expression. This is something that you cannot describe with words, but you can recognize it when you hear it.

**You also played mandolin in the early days.**

I was in a bluegrass band that needed a mandolin player, and when we couldn't find one, I agreed to learn it and began playing the instrument. I had been listening to bluegrass artists like the Country Gentlemen, the Seldom Scene, the New Grass Revival, and Bill Keith. I was a huge Bill Keith fan, and when he was putting together a band to tour Europe, his manager asked me to play mandolin. I was about 17. Bill created a style of banjo playing known as the "Keith style" or "melodic style," which involves playing the consecutive notes of a melody using as many strings as possible, and that really resonated with me. While we were on the road, Bill discovered that I also played guitar, and he asked me to play three solo numbers each night, which were well-received by the crowds. The next year, all of the promoters invited me out on my own and that was the end of my bluegrass years. I never touched a mandolin again.

**Doc Watson encouraged you when you were young. How did you cross paths with him?**

A promoter friend of mine played Doc my first album, and he told me that Doc had been blown away and would like to meet me. Doc and his son Merle were playing at the Olympia Theater in Paris the following night, and I was invited to go backstage after the show. He said, "I'm so happy to see you," which was amazing for me. He's blind, and blind people don't see, but, of course, he does see. Then he said, "You have invented a new form of acoustic music—a new form of playing acoustic guitar, and I'm very touched, and I want to encourage you to go on."

**Jumping ahead a few years, you were one of the first artists to incorporate looping into your shows. How did that come about, and what gear were you using?**

My road manager at that time was Rob Griffin, who is a technical wizard, and he introduced me to the TC Electronic 2290 Dynamic Digital Delay, which could record 64 seconds of audio and loop it. In addition to enabling me to accompany myself, looping forced me to be very demanding with my tone, and also more rigorous with my playing, because I was recording on the spot and it had to be right. Looping also helped me find new voicings and harmonies. From there I gravitated to using effects to get lots of new sounds. I went all the way—flanging, chorusing, overdrive, pitch-shifting, different reverbs—and at one point my sound checks lasted three hours, because I wanted to adjust the sound to match the acoustics of each new venue. Then, after doing that for about 15 years, I was preparing to leave for a U.S. tour, and at the last minute I decided to leave everything behind except my guitar.

**Did you have any second thoughts once you got to the U.S.?**

Oh yeah. I felt like I was not playing well. I had to rediscover how to respect my guitar. I had to learn again how to touch her. I also completely changed my right-hand technique: I stopped playing with a thumbpick, and suddenly it was as if my two hands were speaking the same language. I began to play with more nuance, more expression. I rediscovered that the nature of the acoustic guitar is to be intimate, to be proximate, and to deliver something that people have to come close to hear. That said, I am using looping again, but only little bits, almost imperceptibly.

**What looper are you using?**

A Boss RC-50.

**What are the tradeoffs in focusing exclusively on a single non-standard tuning, such as DADGAD?**

There is not much difference between DADGAD and standard tuning because it's not the tuning I'm focusing on, it's expressing music on the guitar. The tuning has to be overcome. It has to be tamed, studied, known, so that you can know your fretboard. What kind of music are you going to play if you don't know your instrument? You're not going to play your instrument—it's the instrument that is going to play you. And after a while the instrument will be bored with you because you are not communicating with it. So, I don't know, with DADGAD three strings are tuned down, and you obviously have to compensate with bigger stretches, which is an issue for some people. But I do not encourage anyone to play in DADGAD. For one thing, it is addictive [laughs]. And, again, if you want to get much satisfaction, you need to spend time and really study. You need to have technique, to learn the chords, the harmony, the scales, etc. For me, once I had done that, DADGAD had become my standard tuning.

**But if it doesn't really matter what tuning you choose, as long as you apply yourself, what makes you prefer DADGAD to other tunings?**

Early on, I played in standard tuning and experimented with many open tunings, and you can hear some music from that period on *Encore*. At one point I decided to focus exclusively on a single tuning, and I intuitively felt that DADGAD would have the fewest limitations, because it sounded great open but didn't have the sort of strong identity that you get with a major or minor tuning like you use for bottleneck, for instance. But even with DADGAD, the inherent qualities of the tuning can be heard when you play the open strings, particularly if you just sort of float above the tuning without really penetrating it. There was music inside my imagination that I wanted to play, and I forced the tuning to work. It had to work. Instead of having a personality, it became a tool—my tool. The worst insult to me is when someone says, "Wow, you play really well for a DADGAD player." Why should my artistry be reduced to that?

**What percentage of your repertoire is in the key of D?**

That is a trick question! [Laughs.] For the first few years, a lot of it was. And, because I didn't know the tuning, I had to sort of cheat and say, "Okay, I'm going to play with a capo on the first fret when playing in *E<sub>b</sub>*, and on the second fret when playing in *E*, etc." But I was also very attracted by other tonalities within DADGAD, such as *F*, *G*, *G<sub>m</sub>*, *B<sub>b</sub>*, *B*, and *B<sub>m</sub>*, and I realized that whatever the tonality, I still had to deliver the song—so I also learned how to play without open strings, using lots of stretches, barres, and organist fingerings.

**What is organist fingering?**

It is a term used by classical guitarists and lute players for when you switch fingers while playing a held note, to prepare to play the next chord or note, but you don't hear it. The note continues to play undisturbed. I use that technique frequently because I incorporate a lot of significant stretches into my playing. I also think about the pedals found on pianos, and how they are used. For example, the sustain pedal, which lets everything resonate. Resonance is a very important quality when playing guitar, especially a steel-string. Of course, it is one thing to initiate sound, and another to stop the sound so that you can really focus on the notes that you want to hear, without any interference from other notes. And that involves developing techniques to stop some strings from resonating, which is mostly done with the right hand, but also with the left hand. In the beginning, although I had some tricks to dampen bass notes with my thumb, I rarely used them. Then, I became fascinated with the ways in which classical guitarists would initiate and stop sounds using right-hand techniques, and I began to apply some of those techniques to steel-string. On *Encore* you can hear examples of before and after.

**With few exceptions, you have played Lowden guitars throughout your career.**

I played a Gurian guitar for a couple of years before I got my first Lowden, which I call the "Old Lady," in 1978. At one point I played a Kevin Ryan signature guitar for four or five years, but other than that I have played the Lowden. In 1999, George Lowden modified the Old Lady by adding a cutaway and widening the neck. In 2009, George built a signature model, which I'm playing now, and because we will both be celebrating our 40th anniversaries next year, we are collaborating on a 40th Anniversary Pierre Bensusan Signature Model. I have also played an archtop built by Michael Greenfield called the *Altiplanos*, and a nylon-string built by Juan Miguel Carmona—but the steelstring is my means of expression, my home.

**How will the 40th Anniversary guitar differ from the Old Lady?**

We are still discussing this, but as it will be an anniversary model, it will be a remake with some innovations and enhancements. It will have mahogany back and sides, and a cedar top. And although the original didn't have a bevel, I love the bevel, so it will be offered as an option. We still haven't decided if it will be a jumbo, or if it will be smaller, like my new signature Lowden. I am very tempted to make it a jumbo, as the sound is great, but the jumbo is too big and hurts my back and neck, so I will either have to come to terms with that, or choose a smaller body.

**If you go with a smaller body, will it be deeper than usual to compensate?**

Probably, although I've seen guitars with smaller bodies that sound absolutely phenomenal, so maybe not.

**Have you ever experimented with fretless guitar?**



Yes, I have, and I love the sound, but I'm lost on a fretless guitar. There are ways to give the impression of being fretless, however, which has to do with going deep into the essence of your guitar. You can find some of those same qualities in your playing if you look for them. You have talked about becoming part of the universality of music, rather than working within a particular tradition.

**Where are you currently along that trajectory, and where are you headed?**

I'm on my way. I'm not sure where to, but I'm on my way. Musical traditions are based on models that originate from composers, ethnic groups, historical times, etc., and those references and clichés may be used to create new tapestries. I feel that I'm a free electron and a schizophrenic musician. I belong to a lot of different disciplines and traditions. But music is so immense that it transcends traditions, borders, styles, and genres—and it dictates its own language. My goal is to write music, which will probably be orchestral music—but also to make it work with my guitar and my six strings—and my ten little fingers—that captures a sense of the ancient, the familiar, and the new at the same time.

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