

## Biréli Lagrène & Giuseppe Continenza “Virtuoso Jazz Guitarists and more...”

by Paul Becker



Biréli Lagrène

Giuseppe Continenza

The sparks fly when the Gypsy and Italian guitarists get together. But there's more than just blazing guitar heroics here, there is a lot of great music and melodic playing. A wonderful high class duo of prime rank jazz guitarists. Biréli Lagrène is a wonderful musician, a magician of the guitar's most dazzling, a “choreographer” of the six-string as the current account on the fingers of one hand.

From the beginning, music was his language, that of Reinhardt's school. Destiny inevitable when we are born, like him, in Alsace (1966), one is from the great gypsy family, and the chance identifies you as gifted in this area. Quicksilver spirit, Biréli will catch on quickly to the story. Beyond rigor which was his apprenticeship (with his father and with his brother), from this incredible blend of strength and precision, Lagrène will never miss the point: “Django helped me to see what was happening elsewhere” he likes to recall. From this great lesson of freedom, he knew how to capture like no other. His first major public shows (including Montreux, 1981) offer a striking testimony.

But soon the call of the sea leads him outside the family clan. To stay true to himself, and walk according to his own artistic star Biréli did not hesitate to make a break. Out with the gypsy cocoon, to embark on the adventure of fusion. Jaco Pastorius (ex-Weather Report) has been there. Jaco with which Biréli shared the stage in 1986, and whose influence on our guitarist (now, in the meantime, a amazing bassist) go into mimicry (were, moreover, the enormous adaptability and other instrumental facilities he has shown since the man may also

need to be transformed into a remarkable keyboardist, and it feeds a growing private passion for the violin). So far this extraordinary taste and affinity for music material meets an insatiable curiosity Biréli then multiplies experiences and encounters with all that which in the jazz world has unique and compelling personalities (Stéphane Grappelli, Larry Coryell, John McLaughlin, Joe Zawinul, Al Di Meola, Miroslav Vitous, Lenny White, Dennis Chambers) not to mention its hexagonal partners among the most prestigious: Didier Lockwood, Richard Galliano ... or more recently Jean Luc Ponty and Stanley Clarke.

Giuseppe Continenza is a refined jazz guitarist based in Pescara, Italy. His interest in jazz music began at the age of seven years. Son of a jazz guitarist and having studied classical music, he moved to California to study at the Musicians Institute in Hollywood.

His wonderful style is a crossroad between modern jazz, bebop and mainstream-jazz and he feels at home in every kind of music.

He has been described by critics as one of the best European jazz guitarists of the new generation. Giuseppe's talent and preparation have allowed him to be known and appreciated at the international level, with prestigious collaborations alongside Joe Diorio, Martin Taylor, Jimmy Bruno, Vic Juris, Jack Wilkins, Gene Bertoncini, Gary Willis and many others.

In 2000 he toured with the legendary guitarist Biréli Lagrène, followed by other successful tours since then.

As an esteemed teacher, following the American experience, he returned to Italy and founded in Pescara the

European Musicians Institute (EMI), considered one of the most advanced schools of music in the European scene and he is also a teacher of modern guitar at Conservatory "Luisa D' Annunzio" in Pescara, Italy.

After the success decreed by critics on the album "Journey" (in duet with Vic Juris), subsequent albums include "Seven Steps to Heaven," with Dominique Di Piazza, Vic Juris and Pietro Iodice. The album reached 4th place among the top ten best-selling jazz albums on iTunes for several weeks while the single "Stella by Starlight" was in 2nd place.

"Giuseppe's music rises above the ordinary. Most of today's players would give their soul for his gift..." - Pat Hicks (Founder of Musicians Institute, Hollywood, California).



Giuseppe Continenza

**PB- The first thing I would ask is how did your collaboration start ?**

Biréli- We just met in a festival many years ago and we talked for a long time about music and guitars! We got some musicians friends in common .

Giuseppe- It was in 1998 and I remember we felt won-

derful talking about our taste in music. Then I sent Biréli my record and right after that we planned our first tour in 2000. Playing with Biréli for me was just a blessing, I love his playing and he is a wonderful person as well, kind and humble. He is a genius of our time and I feel honored to collaborate with him. He is always an inspiration and I've learned so much from him.

**PB- Biréli and Giuseppe when did you start to play guitar?**

B- Well, I grew up in a family of musicians, my grandfather was a musician, my cousin, my father, my brother, almost everybody in my family was into music. My father just taught me at the very beginning how to put my hands on it, then all the fingerings, chords, and all that stuff and suddenly I picked up the rest all by myself.

So for me it was natural to pick up an instrument, there was a guitar around so I started to play it and that's where it started. I remember always playing with my brother when I was back from school, he used to play chords and I was improvising over them. My father used to come in our room and check it out and give advice once in while. I was so motivated to play music that he loved that.

I had a regular guitar, and as I am told by my mother, I would sit on the floor and I would just use the neck and the rest of the body would lay to my right. I would just put the neck on my legs and just use the neck.

G- I was around 7 years old when I started playing guitar, I grew up in a family of musicians, my father was a wonderful jazz guitarist and I was always surrounded by guitars and jazz music. My brother Gianfranco is a great fusion composer and guitarist. My father was teaching me the basic chords and he was listening to a lot of jazz. I remember that he had a Jazz Encyclopedia and I was always reading the biography of jazz musicians as well as listening to the tapes. Then I was around 16 when I won an audition with a great hard rock band and we started to make concerts and we recorded 2 albums.

After studying classical guitar for many years I decided to move to Hollywood, California in order to attend the Guitar Institute of Technology; there I had the chance to study with incredible musicians like Joe Diorio, Don

Mock, Scott Henderson, Ron Escheté, Howard Roberts and many others.



Biréli Lagrène

**PB – Which songs did you learn at that time?**

B- I think it was all the classical standards like Nuages, All of Me, Minor Swing and many others. I used to be confident with the changes even at that age. I used to work a lot to make it sound good and I did not know even what chords or scales I was playing at that time. I just played all by ear.

G- I started to play mostly classical music and by myself blues and rock songs and then I start being interested in jazz around 14 and began to study chords, scales and learn some simple tunes like Blue Bossa and Summertime trying to figure out the changes. At first it was pretty hard.

**PB- Did you start to tour very young?**

B- Yes I was 12, as far as I can remember and I recorded my first album. Then I was on tour for the first time with my quintet. All the other members were already in their thirties, my brother was 22 years old. I remember playing gigs that started around 9:00 PM and went to bed really late sometimes.

G- I began to play concerts very young around 16 and it was more rock concerts at that time, even if jazz was always in my soul.

**PB- What kind of projects have you done together? What are your solo projects?**

B- With Giuseppe we have a duo project as well as a quartet. He's a wonderful musician and I love to play with him. We can play jazz in many different styles and we do a lot of interplaying with no limits. We also play in a quartet and it's been a long time since we star-

ted playing together. I've got a project with my quartet with sax, organ and drum and my Gypsy Project and I've just recorded a new album with Jean Luc Ponty and Stanley Clarke. It will probably be out next September.

G- It's a lot of fun to play with Biréli. We always create different textures in a duo setting and you never know in which direction we'll go. In quartet we play with Gary Willis on bass and Michael Baker on drums. Gary was playing with Wayne Shorter, Scott Henderson (they are co-leaders of Tribal Tech) and Allan Holdsworth. Michael Baker is a fabulous drummer who played with Jimmy Smith, Joe Zawinul, Al Jarreau; we loved to play all together since the first time we met. I think as soon as possible we'll record an album all together. With Biréli we already played in many important jazz festivals and theatres. I'm sure we'll continue to tour together. I have a new album with Gene Bertoncini, Dominique Di Piazza and Pietro Iodice "Tribute to Jobim" coming out soon and a book/dvd about my Bebop Method and Chord Improvising.

And I've a duo with Daniele Bonaviri ( a great flamenco/jazz guitarist who recorded with Gino Vannelli, Andrea Bocelli) and we mix jazz with flamenco and it's interestingly fun. Soon we'll record our first album and I would love to play again with Vic Juris a wonderful guitarist and a great person. I remember Joe Diorio told me about him and he said we should play together. We did two albums and it was just magic to make music together.

I think that now in Europe, there are many great musicians and if we acknowledge our roots, we should put them into our music. There are players like Martin Taylor, Ulf Wakenius and Louis Stewart and many others-many great and original composers.

**PB- Do you play other instruments?**

B- Yes I do, I play violin, piano, drums... I'm trying to put into my guitar playing different elements taken from other instruments. You can find many elements taken from classical violin for instance. Chord-wise I try to get the most from piano playing.

G- I do. I play bass and I love to play it, it really helped me to get the rhythm and time; and I still play it when I can.



**PB- Any advice to young musicians who want to be jazz guitarists? How did you practice?**

B- Well, I used to practice and play a lot during my early years learning new songs and phrases off of the records, I'm self-taught and at that time that was the only way to do it. Now of course it is different. Sometimes I don't play guitar for many days and when I take it back I get more inspired, that thing really worked for me. But usually when I practice I do it for one/two hours a day but I just play I don't practice scales.

I think classical musicians are in need to always practice even on vacation, but a jazz player is different. If we have already gotten all the tools and skills, we need much less time.

I simply advise youngsters to hear a lot of music not only jazz. Of course jazz is very important, like classical music, pop and all other styles and study hard during their early age.

G- My way of practicing guitar changed in the years, I started to practice seriously around 14 years old with classical music and then I was practicing guitar 8 hours a day. There were times when I fell asleep with the guitar close to me. After my experience at G.I.T. In California I had so many things to study that I was going crazy but I remembered the wise words of Joe Diorio and Don Mock. They always said to learn step by step and not overload myself with scales, chords, intervals and so on.

Then I started to review my way of practicing and I came up with my method; I was lucky to spend several hours every week with incredible musicians like Scott Henderson, Ron Escheté, Gary Willis and many others. Scott Henderson really made greater emphasis on how important it is to know the fingerboard harmony.

Joe Diorio and Don Mock were just two genius and I remember spending countless hours in their room asking so many questions. They really helped and supported me to find my voice on the guitar.

I've been teaching guitar for many years now and I advise new students to first of all listen to all kinds of music and second to really know the instrument they are playing. I often see Conservatory guitarists who come for an audition sometimes don't know the instrument and it's like speaking a new language-knowing just a few sentences that we repeat over and over.

So learn and practice scales, arpeggios and intervals in all the keys and all over the fretboard of the guitar so that you are comfortable with them and you just think about music as a language to speak. When you speak a new language you want to express your emotions and thoughts without thinking of grammar, etc.

**PB- Which kind of music were you listening to in your early years?**

G- I was into classical and rock like Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Van Halen and then I discovered the blues and I was playin' a lot of blues. I love Albert Collins, Albert King, Johnny Winter, Eric

Clapton and many others too. I like Jeff Beck, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Gary Moore, Peter Green, Robben Ford and Larry Carlton. It was great to transcribe their solos for my ear training. Then came the fusion time and I was into John McLaughlin, Al DiMeola, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Weather Report and many others too. I listened a lot of Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Tal Farlow, Jim Hall, Attila Zoller, Kenny Burrell, Jimmy Raney and then Pat Metheny, Scott Henderson, John Scofield, Larry Coryell, Joe Diorio and so many others the list will be too long.



I love composers like Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, and Chick Corea. I like Billy Childs as he mixes a lot of classical and jazz in such a wonderful way.

B- A lot of Django Reinhardt but my father also listened to a lot of classical music like Bach, Chopin, Stravinsky, Mozart and classical music is still a big influence in my music even today. Later on I listened to all the music possible from rock to jazz.

**PB- Biréli when did you start the Gypsy project? And when did you play with Stéphane Grappelli?**

B – It was around 2000. I really felt up to making a project around gypsy music and trying to put some new elements in it like sax that usually is not used in this kind of music. I felt like I just wanted to do it again, because I hadn't played this music for over fifteen years.

Gypsy jazz is a music that people love. If you think that when Django and Grappelli started to play this great music it was just so famous among people all over the world and people even dance to this music. Sometimes they used to play in big halls where people dance to the music.

It seems like that kind of music is coming back very much now in Europe but it's been around for so many years and it didn't really take off. I think that after all this electronic music people love to listen to some acoustic music played with wooden instruments.

With Grappelli we met around 1980 when he came to play in Strasbourg. He was playing there with Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen on bass, Larry Coryell and Philip Catherine on guitar.

I remember that I went to see his concert with my father and during the 1st set break we went backstage and some gypsies advised me to go to him with my guitar and introduce myself. So I did it and I played for him backstage and a few minutes later I was on the stage with him for all the rest of the concert.

**PB -When you were learning new tunes did you think about the structure or the changes?**

B- For my opinion it is very important to know the neck very well and to know where every chord is and where every note on the neck is in order to get the total control of the guitar fretboard. I was really focused on playing the scales in all the 5 positions on the neck and I did the same process with arpeggio and chords. I was working really hard.

G- At first I was very confused in how to learn a new song and then I realized that it is important before playing the melody in different ways and most of all interpret it. Then of course I think of the structure, the changes and I practice to make them under my finger and make them comfortable.

**PB- Biréli have you ever approached theory, harmony, chords and their relationships? Giuseppe how do you teach them?**

B- Now I know much more. I can read the chords symbols but I can't read music at all. Of course I know the scales and arpeggios but in my way.

G- I teach as I said before simply as a new language. I want to be sure that the student really knows the scales, arpeggios and chords all over the fretboard and then I make them apply them to changes and tunes. I do a lot of skype lessons and it's great to see jazz guitar students from different countries appreciating my method of teaching.

**PB- Which kind of instruments do you use for your concerts and recording?**

G- I've been playing my Benedetto Cremona since 2003 and I just love the acoustic sound and the sustain. I never played a guitar even close to my Benedetto; the neck is incredible comfortable and the guitar is very light. I think Bob Benedetto is a genius and I'm glad to be part of his family for so many years. For some acoustic situations I use my Buscarino classical guitar and an acoustic guitar made by american luthier Ronald Ho. For amps I use DV Mark and I just love them; there is a new model called Jazz 12 that is dedicated to archtop guitars and the sound is just unbelievable and is loud as well! I also use the DV 40 combo and the Multiamp for more electric situations and they both do their job at top levels. I use Eventide effects for reverb and delay and LaBella Strings for so many years now and I love them.

B- I play Yamaha electric and classical guitars but I also love to play Gibson, I was using Super V, Johnny Smith and others too. Now I use DV Mark amps since I've played them in a concert with Giuseppe and I'm really impressed about the sound. I've some different ones and I like them all.

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Photo by Bob Barry

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JUST JAZZ GUITAR • P.O. Box 76053 • Atlanta, GA 30358

Ph: (404) 250-9298

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