

Guitarist Gary Lucas Blends Chinese Pop With the Blues

By Jim Fusilli

On his latest album, "The Edge of Heaven" (Indigo), guitarist Gary Lucas, who's best known for his work with the avant-garde rock composer Captain Beefheart, explores mid-20th century Chinese pop music, specifically the songs of Bai Kwong and Chow Hsuan, vocalists who were based in Shanghai before World War II and remained musical icons in the region for decades.

The definition of a cross-cultural exercise, "The Edge of Heaven" is an extraordinary work. Mr. Lucas's sophisticated, hybrid style on guitar, which relies on

THE EDGE OF HEAVEN

Gary Lucas

Indigo (Harmonia Mundi)

open tunings, string bending, blues finger-picking and slide, seems to strip away the gloss from the music, leaving its emotional core exposed. When he's joined on six songs by vocalists Celeste Chong, a TV star in Singapore, or Gisburg, the Austrian vocalist, the music is deeply moving—tender-hearted, romantic and mature; sugary yet not at all cloying.

Its effect on Western ears is not unlike what Mr. Lucas experienced in 1976 when the then 22-year-old Yale English major moved to Taipei to join his father Murray's import business by day and play music by night.

"I had only a vague idea of that music," he recalls. "I mean, what did I know from Chinese culture? But this was a complete revelation to me. There was a

sweetness to the singing, an innocence, and it evoked a fantasy of pre-war Shanghai. I was completely spellbound."

The music, says Mr. Lucas, has elements of Chinese folk, U.S. western-swing music, Billie Holiday-style blues and Broadway show tunes.

"Shanghai was a cosmopolitan city before the war," he says, "with a lot of Americans, particularly Jewish-American musicians.

These guys introduced people to jazz and swing and klezmer. Chinese pop eventually reflected all of that; the music of the period, at least in Shanghai, was sort of the Chinese take on jazz and blues."

It wasn't until almost 20 years later that Mr. Lucas got around to playing the music he'd heard back in Taipei. By then, he had come home to New York, performed with Captain Beefheart, Jeff Buckley, Lou Reed, Patti Smith and Joan Osborne, and developed a reputation as a strikingly original guitarist. Some of his best work can be heard on the recently released "Operators Are Standing By: The Essential Gary Lucas 1988-1996" (Knitting Factory).

His gig with Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band shaped his approach to music and indirectly influenced "The Edge of Heaven."

"I thought he was the most compelling conceptualist I'd ever heard," Mr. Lucas says of Captain Beefheart. "He'd taken the structure of the jazz and blues and rebuilt it like no one else had. To play his songs, I had to relearn the guitar. It was pretty rigorous training."

Spurred on by what he had to learn to play Beefheart's compositions, Mr. Lucas developed a knack for rearranging other challenging music for solo guitar—he's reworked Wagner, Sun Ra and traditional Jewish music. When friends asked him to play the music of Bai Kwong and Chow Hsuan at their wedding in New York's Chinatown, he agreed and set out to build arrangements based on the pentatonic scales essential to Chinese pop and American blues.

Without using sheet music of the original compositions, Mr. Lucas assembled the songs harmonically and decided to approach them as if they were country blues while remaining true to the music's ethnicity. It worked, he says.

"The bride's mother, who flew in from Hong Kong, had tears in her eyes," he recalls.

Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth was among the guests at the reception, and

he encouraged his fellow guitarist to play the material in concert. Mr. Lucas added a few Chinese tunes to his repertoire and included two of the songs on his '97 release, "Evangeline." He recorded the new album in 2000 with members of his "Gods and Monsters" band, adding Ms. Chong and Gisburg for vocals.

From the outset of "The Edge of Heaven," Mr. Lucas seems intent on making the music of Chow Hsuan and Bai Kwong accessible to Western audiences by reinforcing its affinity with American country blues. The opening number, "Old Dreams," is a mélange of guitar loops and delicate notes tapped on the strings before opening to a reflective folk tune reminiscent of the music of Appalachia; later, "Where My Home Is," a solo number for electric slide guitar, sounds like something Muddy Waters might've played down in Rolling Fork, Miss. "I Wait for Your Return" is offered as an easy flowing country ballad.

When either of the two female vocalists enter, "The Edge of Heaven" becomes sublime. Gisburg, who Mr. Lucas met in the New York Downtown music scene (and is, Mr. Lucas says, "the only Caucasian I knew who speaks Cantonese"), has a smoky voice, steady and assertive, while Ms. Chong's birdlike vocals effortlessly soar into the upper register. Their complimentary styles bring out the romance in the songs Mr. Lucas has adapted, so much so that translation of the lyrics is unnecessary. Thus, Mr. Lucas's poignant and daring cross-cultural hybrid works not only as a homage to Bai Kwong and Chow Hsuan, but as a tribute to the tenderness of the human heart.

Mr. Fusilli last wrote for the Journal on Patty Larkin.



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