

REPORTERS ONLINE

Gary Lucas: A man, his guitar and the world - part 2

C. Cornell Evers 17 February 2021

Yes he played with music legends Captain Beefheart and Jeff Buckley. However, the career of guitarist Gary Lucas encompasses so much more and reads like a fascinating "who's who" in rock, jazz, and even classical. On the double album "The Essential Gary Lucas" he's collected highlights from his guitar-agenda of forty years of encounters.

The double album 'The Essential Gary Lucas' consists of two mutually very different parts: CD 1 offers an overview through the years of Lucas's own avant-jazzrock band Gods and Monsters, of which he is the leader, guitarist and passionate (part-time) lead singer.

CD 2 is entitled 'Solo, Rarities and Collaborations'.

The latter includes contributions from the Chinese singer Feifei Yang, Haydee and Suylen Milanes and Los Van Van, Nona Hendryx, our own Metropole Orchestra, and Suicide's Alan Vega.

For an in-depth review, read "Gary Lucas: A man, His guitar and the World - Part 1"

BUBBLING WITH MUSICAL ENERGY

I speak to him in New York City, during lockdown but brimming with musical energy. There, in his apartment in the West Village NYC, he puts a live-streamed performance on his Facebook page three times a week under the title 'A Journal Of The Plaque Years'. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 3 p.m. EST, Gary plays some of his favorite performances solo acoustically. With a PayPal tip jar for those who want and have a warm heart for the musician.

In the first part of my interview with the guitarist, "Gary Lucas:

A man, His guitar and the World - Part 1', I—we spoke amongst other things, the collaboration with Jeff Buckley and his fascination with the dark of the night. And a whole series of stories and anecdotes from his musical life.

JEWISH IDENTITY

An early high point in Gary Lucas's career was his role as lead guitarist in a performance of Leonard Bernstein's legendary "MASS".

In 1973 he traveled with the Yale Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Maestro John Mauceri, to Vienna, for the European premiere of Leonard Bernstein's 'MASS', which was previously commissioned for the opening of the Kennedy Center in 1971 and was notable for its 'innovative' shape. Although the liturgical passages are sung in Latin, the Mass also includes additional English lyrics written by Bernstein himself, Broadway composer Stephen Schwartz, and Paul Simon.

The guitarist remembers the Vienna performance as "a rather tumultuous event".

Gary Lucas: "Austria is such a super Catholic country and there is a Jewish person like Leonard Bernstein, who was a hero to many Austrians and very famous, who made an adaptation of the Catholic MASS and mixed it with rock elements, and things like 'Hair' and 'Godspell'. I think it's a very nice piece. I'm a big fan. There are great melodies in it. Some parts give me goosebumps when I hear them. But the MASS was attacked there and I think about seventy-three Catholic bishops wrote a letter of protest about the broadcast."

You mention Bernstein. Let's talk about your own Jewish identity. Did it become more important as you got older or has it always been a significant factor in your life?

"It has always been important, even though I am not a religiously-practicing Jewish person. I am secular and usually don't adhere to the rituals. Judaism was always important to me culturally as my identity though.

Especially when I first heard about Anne Frank through my mother. In 1958 her diary was published. Look Magazine had her on the cover. So my mother took me - I was five - and my brother and two sisters and read out to us excerpts from Anne Frank's diary. She then explained the story of what had happened to the Jews in Europe. I was shocked.

Even at that young age I thought: But when did this happen? It happened in 1944, and now it 's 1958, so that's only fourteen years ago. And I knew in 1958 that it had happened virtually yesterday. It wasn't ancient history or anything. So I got a little anxious and wary and sensitive about anti-semitism, and I have been like that all the rest of my life. And yes, I embrace my identity. But I do not think I am better than anyone else because I am Jewish. That kind of Jewish pride is foreign to me.

There are, and must be appreciated, certain qualities that characterize my Jewish identity.

Like intellectual curiosity, that's an important one, and a sense of irony, always crucial. I wrote a poem about 9/11, like a haiku, called 'The Death of Irony'. It ran in the Jewish Forward weekly paper.

THE DEATH OF IRONY

September 11th we are told signalled
the death of irony

A Jew
without
irony
is
nothing
but a
religious fundamentalist

A Jew without irony is nothing but a religious fundamentalist. This kind of gallows humor, looking at the world with an ironic spirit, is very Jewish.

I'm not constantly on it, it's not the first thing I think of when I get up. But I have been interviewed about this by Jewish newspapers and magazines. I have made Jewish-themed albums. So I embrace my identity but not blindly. For example, I have quite a few problems with some of the policies of the State of Israel. I hope to God that a settlement with the Palestinians will be reached soon before the situation there explodes again.

TRANSFIGURED KRISTALLNACHT

I have always stood up for who I am, but I tried to do so with integrity, and I think I influenced quite a few people who were involved with the contemporary Jewish music scene, so to speak.

I played a piece at the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1988, which I composed on the spot. I saw that it was the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the pogrom against Jews on November 9 and 10 1938, by SA paramilitary forces and civilians across Nazi Germany, an event Schwarzenegger mentioned recently in his speech to the American public after January 6th. He referred to the Kristallnacht "the night of the broken glass" in 1938, when they raged in Germany and Austria, the Nazis and their followers smashing shop windows and murdering many Jews. It was the beginning of the real Holocaust. And he mentioned that in connection

with the storming of the Capitol in D.C., which really shocked me, where rioters wore t-shirts with Nazi slogans from the camps, like "Camp Auschwitz", or 'six million weren't enough', a Proud Boys shirt. It does scare me.

Anyway, at the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1988, I made a piece, 'Verklarte Kristallnacht'. It was a play on Schönberg's 'Verklärte Nacht'-- "Transfigurrd Kristallnacht.' "

On the website SoundCloud, where the recording of 'Verklarte Kristallnacht' - Gary Lucas Live at the Berlin JazzFest 8/11/89 can be heard, you can read:

On the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht November 8th 1988, Gary Lucas closed his debut solo concert in Europe at the Berlin Jazz Festival with this original composition, which was broadcast live on German national radio WDR - one of the first musical commentaries on the Holocaust by an avant-garde musician from NYC Downtown - the first expression of what became known to stand as Radical Jewish Culture.

Never forget-- Gary Lucas

"'Verklärte Nacht' by Schönberg is one of my favorite pieces of music. But it is really creepy, mysterious. It is not that these areas of the mind or soul attract me or settle in my consciousness as much as they do with someone who wants to lift the veil and find out what is happening on the other side. It's more of an intellectual curiosity. I am not a morbid person. I don't dress like a goth. I wear a lot of black it's true--but I do not go all the way, I am not particularly drawn to dead things. And I love life. But it just happens so often. I used to make music for television documentaries, ABC News, and then I noticed they were always asking me for my music on topics like the sinking of the Exxon Valdez, the tanker that ran aground in Alaska, which killed the environment in a massive oil spill. Or for a documentary called 'Judgement At Midnight', about a man on death row, his last days before he went to the electric chair. And then the Unabomber. I did a piece of music about that guy who was the anti-tech terrorist and who blew up a professor with a letter bomb.

"THE WORLD IS NOT A PERFECT PLAYGROUND, but I'm on the side of the angels"

It was my job as a composer, I guess--but I am to this day not sure why when I was called for music, the subjects always seemed to have been associated with death and dying. It seemed like when these topics came up, someone up at ABC would say 'Gee, I wonder what Gary is doing?' Let's ask him to cooperate on this. It may have something to do with the fact that I am a very expressionistic guitarist. I can, certainly with soundscapes, create an extreme mental state.

I recall once playing in the Netherlands. There was a girl, with her boyfriend, and they looked at me like I was completely crazy. In their view, my music had to be the product of a sick mind to be able to conjure these ghostly sounds from my effects. I can play beautiful, happy music, and in the blink of an eye switch to these dark demonic sounds with my guitar. But I embrace it all because that's what life is, isn't it?

If you want a comprehensive overview of the Essential Gary Lucas, you go out to try and cover the world of music--and that world is simply not a perfect playground, it is a spectacle full of wonders and terrible events, atrocities. But I'm on the side of the angels. I don't dwell on it. And I don't want to push on people's cynical mindset. I want to inspire people. The best thing that can happen to me as a performing musician is when someone comes up to me after a show and says, 'I felt really shitty today and I saw that you were playing, and thought I'd take a chance to hear you. Thank you man! You really cheered me up.' I have seen that happen often and it keeps me going. "

ANNE FRANK

You mentioned the diary of Anne Frank. Would it be possible for you to make a piece of music around that book, 'The Secret Annex', or is that sacred ground?

"I think I could, and I would, but I'm not sure the Anne Frank House would appreciate it. I mean, I haven't tried to do it yet. The closest thing to approaching such a project to tell you the truth, was a book by a Czech Jewish writer that I really liked. His name is Arnost Lustig*. He's dead now. He was a friend of Václav Havel and was part of the Czech literary renaissance. And I am of Czech descent on my father's side. Following his book, I have titled my second album for Tzadik Records (New York City record label specialized in avant-garde and experimental music and founded by composer and saxophonist John Zorn - CCE) after this book, It's called 'Street of Lost Brothers'. Many stories were told in the concentration camps where Lustig was incarcerated. I wanted to put one of them to music using voices. But John Zorn didn't think that was a feasible idea-- I had to leave that to him, he said. So I didn't get a chance through his label to realize that. But if you have connections in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam, with the Anne Frank House, and if I could get a commission to do this, I would be very happy to work on that, I would love it. I would be very proud to tackle the topic because it is meaningful to me.

I mean when I was a little boy, just to hear my mother tell that story (my mom died of COVID, by the way, such a horrible tragedy, in April in a nursing home in California)==I cried when I heard the Anne Frank story. The Knitting Factory had an office right opposite the Anne Frank House for many years. And I have been there. I have been to the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam as well. There is a very good Jewish community infrastructure in Amsterdam, where they have that museum and..."

He stops talking.

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART IN AFGHANSTAN

Oké, from Anne Frank to three girls in Afghanistan. You can watch a video on your YouTube channel entitled: Afghan Children invite Gary Lucas to work on Captain Beefheart's 'Hobo Chang Ba' with them 6/9/20. Explain.

(Video caption: Guitarist Lanny Cordola has been working with poor children in Afghanistan for several years to set up music education programs for them, along with a number of well-known pop singers and musicians who accompany them. Lanny invited Gary to perform Annie Lennox's 'Sweet Dreams are Made of This', with his students, along with Inari George, Lowell George's daughter, on lead vocals in LA. and Gary playing guitar in NYC. In the video, the students ask Gary if he wants to play the magnificent opus of Captain Beefheart from his 'Trout Mask Replica', 'Hobo Chang Ba', with them.)

"Lanny Cordola is a West Coast guitarist and a very nice guy. I have never met him in person, but we have electronic contact. He went to Afghanistan awhile ago, I'm not sure who for, but he found a sponsor to try and start a school in Kabul to teach music to children there, and to help rebuild the country after the devastation of the war and the fighting that was going on. And he got a lot of these kids to sing some Western pop songs, like a version of "Imagine" and so forth. He sent me that clip because he got the children all excited about the idea of doing a Beefheart song together.

He eventually went back to LA. because it looked like the US was going to withdraw from Afghanistan - which was the case - so he no longer felt safe there. But he sang there with those girls and I added some guitar in New York.

You know, I would have rather flown over there with my guitar if possible to do the recording directly if possible. I would love to play anywhere, but there are certain regions in the world....I don't think I'm ready to set foot in Pakistan right now, after Daniel Pearl**, or Afghanistan in the present moment, where I would always have to be on my guard."

One of the following titles of 'The Essential Gary Lucas' albums could be 'Rebuilding the World'.

"We will have to hurry. And I try and hope to be there, to contribute with positive energy to such an effort."

*Arnost Lustig (1926 - 2011) was a Jewish-Czech writer and journalist. He was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. He incorporated his experiences in the camps in the books 'Diamonds of the night' and 'A prayer for Catharine Horowitzová'. **Daniel Pearl (1963 - 2002) was an American journalist for The Wall Street Journal. He was kidnapped and later beheaded by terrorists in Karachi, Pakistan.