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**HUCKY
EICHELMANN**

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HUCKY EICHELMANN

In conversation with
PAUL FOWLES

TO describe a musician as 'difficult to categorise' is a tired journalistic cliché. This said, I've often come perilously close to applying it to Hucky Eichelmann.

Born in Germany and trained as a classical guitarist, Eichelmann now enjoys something approaching rock star status in his adoptive home of Thailand – a unique career path achieved through a combination of ability, chance and, let it be said, business acumen. In the email interview which follows, it is without irony that Eichelmann describes record sales of 30,000 as being less than a commercial success.

If there has been a price to pay, it is the relatively low ranking Eichelmann has attained within the world of the classical guitar. There were even some members of the usually liberal Australian fraternity who turned up their noses at his 1995 debut in the Darwin International Guitar Festival, although this was merely a sotto voce sour note in the face of an enthusiastic reception from Darwin's concert-going public.

Whatever the critics say, Eichelmann's mainstream popularity has not prevented him forming creative partnerships with some very prestigious names, as will be revealed.

Can we begin with your career before you went to Asia?

Well, I guess it all started pretty much like the standard story. I studied at the State Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Stuttgart, majoring in classical guitar. I eventually became a student of Dr Mario Sicca, graduating in 1979. Though understanding the importance of studying the



Hucky Eichelmann.

classical repertoire, I soon started watching out for alternative music and working with composers who wrote works for me. Among them were Uros Dojcinovic and Georg Lawall. Then, during a trip to the Philippines, I became acquainted with the rich diversity and beauty of Asian music. The incredible range of stringed instruments overwhelmed and fascinated me from the beginning.

And the permanent move to Asia?

After a brief trip back to Germany to complete my examinations, I returned to Manila as an exchange professor for two years. I then accepted the permanent post of guitar professor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University and St Cecilia Academy of Music, not knowing this journey would lead to an everlasting love affair with Asia, its people, culture and music.

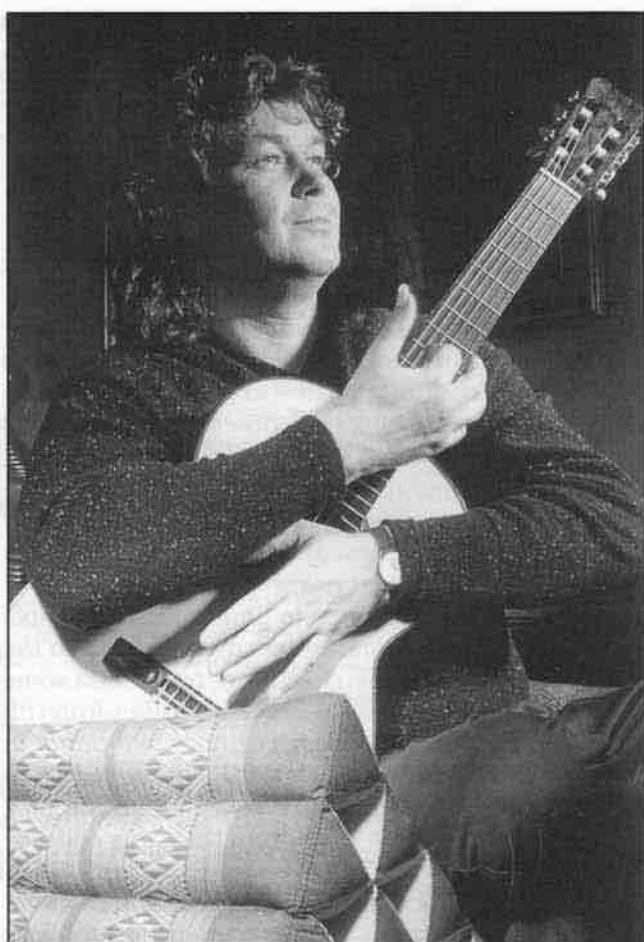
Following the advice of my Thai friends to perform



In Royal audience with Thailand's Crown Princess Sirindhorn.

music that is more familiar to the local ear, I discovered that the country's beloved monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is a musician and composer himself. His compositions are known to every Thai person, so for my first album 'Kuen Nueng - The Music of His Majesty the King of Thailand' it was not necessary to promote the music itself, but rather the new sound of the classical guitar. I had the honour to present the album to the Thai Royal Family during a Royal Command Performance, and this turned the classical guitar into a fashionable instrument almost overnight. The album was a big success - close to half a million copies were sold - and this opened the doors for my next step, the creation of the Bangkok International Guitar Festival. The festival was the only Thai musical event in those days, filling all venues and featuring some of the world's best guitarists. Among them were Siegfried Behrend, Michael Tröster, Robert Brightmore, Sonja Prunnbauer, Georg Lawall, Carlo Domeniconi and David Russell.

During this period, WEA released my album 'Gumgah-Gumgah', a collection of Asian works dedicated to me. Despite the fact that this album was not in the easy listening category and sales of 30,000 were not considered a commercial success, it became known throughout the country, probably because a foreigner was playing original Thai music. Since the normal categories of Western music did not exist in Thailand at that time, the album was promoted during huge pop concerts, sometimes held in stadiums where my guitar was hooked up to high power amplification. The first few concerts were rather scary, but as time went on I enjoyed it more and more. After all, would I have got such exciting opportunities if I'd chosen the career of a classical guitar professor at a German university?



Hucky 'Going disco'.

All this came at the time when the Thai pop music industry started to boom and I was asked by Grammy Entertainment, the country's most powerful record company, to produce two albums with instrumental versions of the company's most popular songs. These albums sold like hot cakes and changed my life dramatically, to the point where I couldn't walk down the street with-

out being recognised by fans. After touring for another couple of years and at the same time seeing the Thai music industry grow rapidly, I pursued my old dream of presenting a huge multicultural festival right in the centre of Bangkok. Until then, Thailand did not have its own arts festival like those of Singapore and Hong Kong. With the co-operation of several international companies, plus the TV and radio networks, we were able to launch the biannual Thailand Festival of the Arts in 1997 and the Thailand Festival Series in 1998.

You obviously like the Asian scene because you stayed there - what advantages does it have compared with Europe?

Twenty years ago, Asia had no scene at all, so it was necessary to



Hucky with John Williams and Tim Kaine in Darwin.

create a scene from scratch. In Europe, you had a clearly structured music business with such convenient institutions as copyright protection, which is just about to be established in the East. The drawback of a developed music scene is that it's too crowded, with too many people doing too much of the same thing.

Two major names you've worked with recently are Ravi Shankar and Richard Harvey. Can you tell us something about these collaborations?

At the end of 1998 I had the great honour to start work on a project with Ravi Shankar, centred on his concerto for guitar and orchestra. The work is now finished and should be recorded sometime soon.

I met Richard Harvey five or six years ago while he was passing through Bangkok after his Chinese tour with John Williams. They congratulated me on my recording contract in China and sales of over a million copies of 'With Love from Asia' throughout China. I'd never even heard of this contract's existence! After a fact-finding trip to China with my lawyer, we were advised to make the best out of the situation by acknowledging the whole story as an effective PR campaign. As you can see, copyright laws in this part of the world still have some space to improve.

The friendship with Richard has developed into regular performances and a forthcoming CD by Hucky and Harvey. To most people, Richard is known as a composer, but he's also one of the most astonishing multi-instrumentalists I ever met. (British readers may recall Harvey's recorder and crumhorn virtuosity during his time with Gryphon in the early 1970s - PF)



Hucky working with Ravi Shaukar.

With a few exceptions, even the most successful classical guitarists rely on teaching for a regular income. Do you still teach?

Very little - just one or two masterclasses per year at the university.

Performing and recording keep me too busy to follow a regular teaching schedule. Directing the Thailand Festival of the Arts, the Festival Series, plus the Markgraefler Gitarrentage in Germany, demand a lot of time as well.

Although your technique is obviously the result of a classical training, your programmes certainly don't follow a strict classical pattern. Would you still describe yourself as a classical guitarist?

This question is difficult for me to answer - I guess you would have to ask the audience.

© Paul Fowles 2000



Hucky with Grammy Award Winner Georg Winston.

Discography

(All titles on CD unless otherwise stated)

Kuen Nueng - HM The King's Music (Peacock - cassette only) (1981)

Love in Strings (Pacific - cassette only) (1983)

Gumgah-Gumgah (WEA 84008 - LP and cassette) (1986). Reissued on CD as ONPA 84008 (1988)

Huang Come Nung Vol.1 (MGA 083179) (1990)

Huang Come Nung Vol.2 (MGA 113187) (1991)

With Love from Asia (Sunflower C339422025) (1994)

Falling Rain (BSO 5-96-2) (1996). Reissued on cassette as EMI MC 07243-5-56419-46 (1997)

Candlelight Blues - The Music of HM the King of Thailand (AMI 1999-01) (1999)

With Love from Asia (AMI 2000-02) (2000)