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November 6, 2007

Hucky Eichelmann Talks about Guitar Culture in Thailand

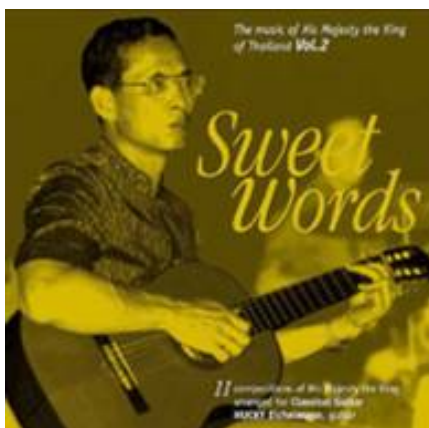
by [Tom Watson](#).

On November 8, 2007, AMI Events presents the Guitar Heroes UnPlugged concert, an evening of acoustic guitar featuring eight powerhouse players. While the show promises world class playing in a wide variety of styles, don't tune in to MTV or line up at Madison Square Garden. O-Olarn (rock), Golf T-Bone (jazz), Pop Chakaran (speed metal), Boonchob Thanomwongthana (fingerstyle), Chai Somchai (Latin jazz), Hucky Eichelmann (classical and world), Ohm Chatri (pop) and Chai Blues (blues) will pull the plugs in Bangkok, Thailand.

It was the inclusion of fingerstyle, blues and speed metal in the upcoming show that prompted *Modern Guitars* to speak to one of the performers and key organizer of the event, Hucky Eichelmann, about the state of guitar culture in Thailand. Eichelmann, a German expat, has become deeply entrenched in the Thai music scene since his move to the country in 1979. The classically trained guitarist has performed numerous concerts throughout the region and organized many events featuring both Thai and foreign guitarists, and multi-instrumentalists and composers such as Richard Harvey and Pandit Ravi Shankar. Eichelmann's association with Shankar prompted the sitar master to collaborate with Hucky in the re-scoring for guitar and orchestra of Shankar's well known "Sitar Concerto No. 1."



Hucky Eichelmann



But, it's most likely Eichelmann's recordings of music composed by the King of Thailand that has endeared the guitarist to Thai music lovers. Born (1927) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated in Switzerland, the King of Thailand, His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej, is the longest reigning monarch in the world, the only living royal sovereign to hold a patent, and the only king that's sat in with Benny Goodman, Jack Teagarden, Lionel Hampton, Maynard Ferguson and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Eichelmann recalls moving to Thailand in '79 and listening to Friday night radio shows that featured the King's band with H.M.

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Bhumibol soloing on sax.

Modern Guitars spoke with Hucky Eichelmann on October 19, 2007, about the general state of guitar culture in Thailand and the upcoming Guitar Heroes UnPlugged concert.

* * *

Tom Watson: What took you from Germany to Thailand?

Hucky Eichelmann: I was born in Germany and studied classical music in Stuttgart [*Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst*]. One day after my final examination, I took my first job as an exchange professor in Manila [Philippines]. They kept a position open for me at Stuttgart, but after two years in Asia, Stuttgart was a bit too heavy. [*Laughs*] At that time in Germany it was sort of very serious. It was the time of Boulez's serial music and 12-tone music, very conceptualized music, very mathematical. I liked it better than the purely traditional music, but then I went on a trip to Asia and over here there are so many guitar-like stringed instruments that sound fantastic and I thought about how that music could sound on the guitar. In Germany at that time, in the contemporary music circles, there was almost a prohibition on enjoying rhythm and melody, but in Asia, people were very happy to listen to melody and rhythm, so I didn't have to feel ashamed of going to a Tchaikovsky concert. [*Laughs*]



Hucky Eichelmann

During my time in Manila I did concerts in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and all the neighboring countries and then I met a group of people in Thailand who were just about to open the first Western-style music academy in the country. In those days, there were no guitar programs at the university level. There were only three classical guitar players in Thailand when I first came here in 1979.

The choice was either go back to Germany at the age of 22 and be one of the German guitar professors and spend the rest of my life trying to teach people without knowing if they'd have a future playing or not, or start at zero here in Thailand. I've never regretted my decision because in Germany I never would have had the opportunities I've had here, such as playing in stadiums for thousands or tens of thousands of people, and things like that.

After I came, the academy arranged some concerts for me and the halls were full. Everyone gazed at me and thought, "Very nice, but it would be better if we could understand it." [*Laughs*] It reminded me of going to the local pizzeria in Germany and hearing Italian kids sing - it was fantastic but it would be better if I could understand them. That was the same situation for me in Thailand.

A couple of my friends then suggested that in Thailand we have the Revered King and they suggested that we arrange his music. To my surprise, we got the permission, made an album, and sold over 500,000 copies right away. I really enjoy this crisscrossing between the West and the East because there are so many valuable things in both cultures. Why not pick the raisins from each?

Tom: How did you feel about Thai culture in general?

Hucky: The culture, for a long, long time, was really Thai until the Chinese influence came and then the Western influence. At the moment, Bangkok and Thailand are two totally separate things, culturally. Bangkok is a modern city, with only maybe 40% of it reflecting more traditional Asian culture, while the countryside is almost totally the same as it was 30 years ago - maybe not totally, but say 90%. So, as often as possible, I'm not in Bangkok but in Thailand.

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[Laughs] The traditional Thai way of life is so nice.

Bangkok is a city in transition where many of the old values are sort of slipping away and the new ones have not been firmly established yet. But, having been here for almost 30 years, I'm in the middle of it and can't just run away.

Tom: What genres of guitar music are popular in Thailand today?

Hucky: Like everywhere, the most popular is pop music. First it was Thai pop music, a Thai country-folk type of thing, and about 15 years ago it slid into Western pop music. Later on came the niche markets like rock music. People started to organize concerts and all the big bands came in. Then, about five or six years ago, all of a sudden there was a big wave of jazz madness. It started with calling Kenny G, jazz, [laughs] and has come to the point where last year we presented Pat Metheny who had a fantastic crowd and people really seemed to understand what he's doing.

So, overall, it's meant more and more of a Western influence. To me, it's important to find a balance between this Western influence and Asian culture. After all, I'm here because I was fascinated by Asian music.

Tom: How are things for the working guitarist in Thailand? Is most of the club work in Bangkok?

Hucky: Yes. A large number of clubs have opened in Bangkok and the scene is getting bigger and bigger. In other big cities like Chiang Mai and Phuket you also have clubs popping up now.

Tom: What types of music do these clubs offer?

Hucky: You have dance clubs and discotheques where there are live performances also, then you have jazz clubs and what you could call fusion clubs where you have jazz and rock and everything mixed together - one night you'll have rock 'n' roll, the next night you'll have jazz - sort of catering to the entire range of interests.

Tom: How are recording opportunities for guitarists in Thailand?

Hucky: There were a couple of labels that were almost monopolistic, but in the last five years or so more and more indie labels have appeared. That's actually very good, because when there were only the two or three big companies they demanded too much a particular style, which was mostly a copy of Western music. The indie labels come up with much more interesting things, so it's very important to have them.

There have been plenty of recording studios, but, lately, everybody does it at home with a computer and it's been amazing how good the quality is sometimes.

Tom: Take, for example, a jazz guitarist. Is there much work available?

Hucky: A lot of them also do commercial work. Many will have a studio and a small production company and they might do jingles or film work; films are very popular here. And they'll play as studio musicians here and there - there are plenty of recordings being made by the big labels. And, of course, they do their own albums and concerts.



Hucky Eichelmann

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People stay busy. Last week, I had a concert with some players who have been my friends over the past 28 years and it was extremely difficult to get them together for one evening because they're all so busy. Some had to play at the beginning of the concert because they had to rush off for another gig they had afterwards.

Tom: What's the status of guitar education in Thailand today?

Hucky: At every major university you have a music department and all of these departments teach the guitar. They started with classical guitar and some of them now also teach jazz and popular styles. There are also a huge number of private music studios and schools that teach the whole range of styles and genres. There are at least 100 schools in Bangkok.

Tom: And the radio situation?

Hucky: Mainly pop music, of course. One or two stations offer classical music and maybe three of four play jazz. I hope this will improve. There are TV cable stations now that offer better programming - they try their best to support new, non-mainstream movements.

Tom: What guitar brands are popular in Thailand?

Hucky: Among electric guitars, it would be the big name brands like Gibson and Fender. One Thai guitarist, O-Olarn, who will be in the Guitar Heroes Unplugged concert, has his own signature Fender guitar, so Fender is very popular here. You can find any brand you like in the big stores, any guitar or amp.

Tom: Tell me about the group of guitarists who will perform at the Guitar Heroes UnPlugged concert.

Hucky: They are all basically guitar legends here in Thailand. Normally, of course, they play electric guitar except for Boonchob, they call him the Thai Chet Atkins, who's amazing. If you didn't see him, you'd think Chet Atkins was playing.



O-Olarn

In addition to myself, seven guitarists will perform at Guitar Heroes UnPlugged. Ohm Chatri [Kongsuwan] is the most famous pop guitarist in Thailand. You can hear him on almost every major release from the big Grammy label [a Thai record company that operates a number of sub-labels]. Chai Somchai [Kamlertkul] is an all rounder - blues, jazz, rock - and especially Latin jazz. He lived in the States for 30 years. Pop Chakarin has been voted the best Thai guitarist for years now. They compare him to Yngwie Malmsteen. He's incredibly fast, precise and musical, and he's still quite young. Golf T-Bone [Nakarin Teerapinand] is usually associated with reggae, but he's pure contemporary jazz. Boonchob [Thanamwongthana], as I mentioned, represents the Chet Atkins fingerstyle. Chai Blues [Wanchai Tangtipanit] is an extremely well known and respected blues player, and then there's O-Olarn, the godfather of them all. He's a real rock 'n' roller with a lot of depth in his playing.

They have all been friends of mine over the past decades. I thought, let's tease these guys and pull the plug. I have a long list of friends here, but once you pull the plug you narrow down the list because for some it just wouldn't work. The guys playing this concert are the real thing - whether you have an amp for them or pull the plug, they're great players.

I try to get everyone to play solo, then in duets, trios, quartets, and with a band. The show will

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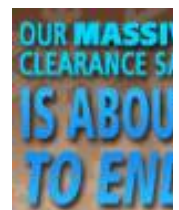
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offer a huge variety.

Tom: Are the blues popular in Thailand?

Hucky: Well, it's a niche. There are some nightclubs that offer mainly blues. Chai's family name has been changed to Blues, so they call him Chai Blues. [Laughs] That signals some sort of establishment of the blues.

Tom: How large is the venue for the Guitar Heroes show?

Hucky: The venue's not a very big one, it holds about 1,200 people, but, it's very cozy and I think for an unplugged concert to go any bigger than that it's hard to keep the atmosphere.

Tom: How does the King of Thailand feel about the growth of the Western influence on Thai music?

Hucky: That's difficult to answer because, of course, I can't speak for the King.

Tom: Let's put it this way, does the King seem to have an open attitude about the Western musical influence?

Hucky: Oh, sure, completely. He's very open-minded and enthusiastic, especially about jazz and [Western] classical music. I have a little quote from the King on one of my albums of Royal music [*Candlelight Blues*, 1999 AMI Records]: "Whether jazz or otherwise, music is a part of me. It is a part of everyone, an essential part of us all. To me, music is something fine and beautiful. I think we should all recognise the value of music in all its forms, since all types of music have their place and time, and respond to different kinds of emotions."



Candlelight Blues - photo on the album cover is H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej

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