

ERIC HARPER: EMBRACING THE WORLD



by David Morrison

Suzanne Teresa photo

Although it may not seem so when despairing over the global news headlines most days, there are millions of people out there committed to somehow establishing and maintaining lasting peace in this world. Indeed, as I write, the International Day of Peace (September 21) is fast approaching. On this day, said millions will have done their all to spread a message of hope that soon we will finally put down our weapons, throw off our prejudicial shackles, and get on with the not-so-insurmountable task of living in harmony. In the cold light of day this might appear a hopeless fantasy built on naïve idealism, but as a friend of mine is wont to say, “Momentum begins with the first step.”

Via both his flamenco/Fado-tinged songs and his faith, one young man in my community who has, and continues, to fervidly do his bit towards this grand aim is Nanaimo singer-songwriter-guitarist extraordinaire, Eric Harper. In 2004 Harper took part in an extensive US and Canadian tour under the banner, ‘Embrace the World.’ The tour was organized by the American record producer/musician, K.C. Porter, who boasts a shelf full of Grammy awards for his work with the ilk of Santana and Ricky Martin. Of the aims for ‘Embrace the World,’ Porter said, “In a world still divided by race, religion and class, our goal was to celebrate the oneness of humanity by bringing artists from all corners of the globe together onstage.”

Like Porter and other participating musicians on that tour, Harper is of the Bahá’i Faith. Founded in 19th century Persia (Iran), Bahá’i is a religion for which the “spiritual unity of all humankind” is front and centre. Other than world peace, Bahá’i principles

include the equality of men and women, the elimination of all forms of prejudice, and the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. If concentrating on these issues alone, I’d say that’s a solid platform from which to build, wouldn’t you?

As Harper explains, through the Bahá’i community and his involvement in the ‘Embrace the World’ initiative, he has come into contact with some extraordinary people. And as a consequence of these encounters, doors of professional opportunity began to open for him.

“Yes, the tour was with a mix of people from all over the world – Colombia, China, Ecuador, Iran, Scotland, the States, Canada – and we all got out there singing songs promoting peace and whatnot. Lin Cheng, the Chinese representative, was actually China’s first pop star, something like the Madonna of China, but she also happened to be a Bahá’i and we became really close friends on that tour. Then I came into contact with her friend, Dayyan (Eng), who is also Bahá’i and directed the Kevin Spacey movie, ‘Inseparable’ (2011). I composed the score for Dayyan’s movie ‘Waiting Alone’ (2005), then got (to score) the Kevin Spacey movie after that.”

As amply displayed on his current, self-released eponymous CD (2010), Harper’s lovely, mainly acoustic sound subtly reflects his embracement of global cultures and music. Yet it is the culmination of a musical journey that began when hearing a song on the radio at just seven years-old, taking various circumstantial twists and turns along the way.

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"I don't remember the actual song," he chuckles, "but I do remember the feeling. I think it's more important to know what that feeling was concerning my development as a musician than that it came from a single source – from there I eventually moved into multiple styles. Anything from Irish music to West Ghanaian music, Indian music, Japanese Noh theatre, Andean music... just lots of sounds from around the world, because reaching as wide an audience as possible became my goal. I never had any other dream but to become a musician. I started taking piano lessons, then drum lessons, and eventually guitar came about around aged twelve. That became my passion and it's been non-stop ever since."

In respect of personal, cultural and musical evolution, the turning point of the teenage Harper's life came via the seismic shift of a move overseas. "I was 15 years-old, living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when my mom, who is a concert pianist, was given a job opportunity in Europe," he recalls. "So we moved to Portugal and lived there for five years. When we got there, mom sat me down and said, 'Do you want to go to a normal school or a music school?' So I signed up for music school, which I thought was going to be a rock 'n' roll music school; I was a heavy metal kid at the time, with full-on long hair and the whole shebang. To my surprise it was a classical music school, so I was forced to go from

Metallica to Mozart! It was really hard, as I was a kid who never learned how to read music or study music theory; I just knew how to play guitar. And I was stubborn kid who would argue with my teachers every step of the way. They weren't used to that kind of behaviour, but once I adapted to the culture and learned the language, it became the best thing in my life."

Harper graduated with a Diploma in Classical Music from the Professional School of Music in Porto, then returned to live in the US. Regardless of his classical training, however, he had set ideas of what his musical future should hold.

"Back in the States, my mom wanted me to go to college and I said, 'Mom, I'm going to be a rock 'n' roll star, so what do I need college for?' She said, 'I think you should go to Berklee (College of Music in Boston, MA.) as it would suit your lifestyle, because I was mixing all these different styles back then - classical guitar with pop and rock elements - so she said I should just try it for a semester and stick with it if I liked it. So I went for a semester and had a great time, as it's a fantastic school. In two-and-a-half years I got a (Magna Cum Laude) degree in film scoring, as I wanted to improve my composing skills."

Ever keen to test himself as an artist, Harper's next two projects could hardly be more diametrically opposed or

intriguing. "I have a classical guitar album coming out," he reveals, "and I'm currently working on a very large project which will probably take me another couple of years to finish. It's going to be – how can I put this? - a 'variety show,' incorporating much more than music. It's something that not only stimulates the audio senses, but also the visual."

Classical guitar music, a massive multi-media project, working with the 'Chinese Madonna,' scoring Kevin Spacey movies and, oh, I almost forgot, collaborating with his friend and fellow Bahá'i devotee, actor/comedian, Rainn Wilson ('The Office,' 'The Rocker,' 'Six Feet Under')... it's all part of life's rich tapestry for Harper. And as a man who observes the humanist philosophies of Bahá'i, seemingly a religion of tolerance and unity, every day for Harper is an International Day of Peace.

Eric Harper will be performing in Nanaimo at Acme Food Co. (14 Commercial St.) on Friday October 12; Fibber Magees (321 Selby St.) on Friday October 19, and (opening for Alex Cuba) at Nanaimo Entertainment Centre (46 Nicol St.) on Wednesday October 24. For further information please visit www.eric Harper music.com

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