



ERIC HARPER: *Instrumental Health*

by David Morrison

Four days before I was due to chat with Nanaimo-based singer-songwriter/guitarist Eric Harper for this article, I had the opportunity to watch him perform for the first time, albeit in fairly unorthodox circumstances. In support of the Nanaimo Community Hospice Society, the event at which he played was hosted by Nanaimo's Newcastle Nissan dealership. Against a backdrop of Mt. Benson at its broadest aspect, the stage was set up right next to the Island Highway. Vehicles roared past in both directions, yet the noise from them proved to be curiously unobtrusive. Then again, when a musician as compelling to watch and of the calibre of Eric Harper is playing, bombs could be going off all around and all those in attendance would hear and see is him.

Harper began his set with a strident flamenco-style instrumental entitled "Mi Locura," his dazzling skills as a guitarist immediately grabbing everyone's attention. It is as good an example of 'nouveau flamenco' or contemporary instrumental Fado as you could ever experience, and his wondrous playing a key reason for Harper's acclaim to date. While "Mi Locura" is an older commissioned piece that does not appear on it, Harper's brand new release, "Ribeira," is entirely instrumental, yet a project that the musician withstood for quite some time.

"I resisted it because I guess there's a certain bias in my being, because I just love to sing, and I suppose I see myself more as

a singing artist than a purely instrumental one" Harper tells me. "But the requests (for such an album) were coming so frequently that I thought perhaps it was time to do something about it."

Not that there is anything remotely wrong with Harper's singing voice or lyrics, which are strong and affecting respectively, as a listener I find it natural to home in on the man's virtuosic guitar playing. He has won awards for it and is as soulful a player as he is technically brilliant. In my opinion Harper should make a habit of dropping instrumental collections from time to time, "Ribeira" representing Volume 1.

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to this new release all of Harper's talents as a guitarist are on display: there is passionate, quicksilver material such as "O Cigana" and "O Ladrão," evocative balladic tunes like "O Guitarrista e o Ceguinho" or "Perdido No Mar," and blends of both styles as in "A Bófia." It is truly beautiful stuff, taking the listener to the Portugal of Harper's youth, or evoking any hot Latin territory for that matter. In writing about this new collection on his website, Harper describes the memories that inspired the music. "Ribeira" is, he says, "an artistic journey back to my Portuguese roots where I originally learned how to play that stickler of all guitars – the nylon," and for the sake of flow his summation appears here in edited and condensed form:

"In the bustling city of Porto you'll stumble upon a nook called 'Ribeira'... a place of cafés where ripened old men sit at the bar philosophizing life... the delicious smell of restaurants cooking up the traditional Tripas à Modo do Porto... birds chase the table scraps, the dogs chase the birds, and the toddlers chase whichever they can catch... the musicians play in the restaurant with a tip jar on the piano, while the blind man sits outside begging for alms; the music reminds the old man of better times and brings encouragement to his harder days... the fishermen's boats can be seen lazily rocking back and forth on the shore... beautiful young women in their summer dresses who catch the eye of every man, married or not... the maze of cobble-stoned back alleys that could get you lost for days."

Isn't that lovely? Although I have never had the good fortune of visiting Portugal and the magnificent, ancient city of Porto, I have travelled in Spain and other Mediterranean countries and can qualify Harper's observations as typical of the images and atmospheres I encountered. Yet, as he

explains, Harper's mention of the fishing boats is particularly relevant and poignant in respect of how the "Ribeira" project developed.

"It's quite interesting how it came along, because originally these songs were written for my music catalogue. I'm writing a song a day, the intention being to create such a large catalogue that I can license the songs for TV, commercials, movies and so forth. The musical licensing world has been good to me, so I thought I'd take it really seriously and focus on getting up to about 800 songs in the next four years. So, I had the songs composed, and because of all the requests I thought it would be neat to put them all together as an instrumental album, and I began searching for artwork. I came across this painter named Vakho Kakulia from (Tbilisi) Georgia, and he had some of the most beautiful art I had seen in a very long time. It was so inspiring, and when I saw his painting "Moonlight Boat" I was immediately transported back to my days in Porto, and it all began to make sense. I went back to the album, for which I originally had twenty songs, and started cutting away the fat, trimming the album, and suddenly a story started to come together, happening organically based on that painting. It was reverse osmosis, if you will."

Harper is greatly encouraged by the response to "Ribeira," and after originally resisting the idea now appreciates the commercial and artistic sense in delivering more instrumental projects in the future. "Yes, having done it now I can see a particular niche that would sort of make sense for a Canadian audience, so to speak," he says. "I guess it's hard to pinpoint exactly what I do, as I'm all over the map, but the Jesse Cook style would be a lot easier to market." Indeed, Jesse Cook is the prime example of what can be achieved by musicians operating in Harper's

instrumental sphere: 1.5 million albums sold worldwide, including six gold and one platinum studio albums in Canada, eleven Juno nominations, including one win. It's a proven market in this country, with other Canadian talent such as Oscar Lopez and Robert Michaels meeting similar acclaim and healthy sales on home turf.

However, there are always hurdles for independent musicians to overcome, so it may surprise Harper's expanding fanbase that "Ribeira" is available only as a digital download. "It was purely a financial decision," Harper explains. "I simply didn't have the \$1200 it would have taken to fabricate some CDs, even though the demographic that would be into such a CD would be more likely to buy a physical copy."

While this type of release may generally reflect consumer trends, in using the excellent online music store CD Baby in Portland, OR, Harper is selling the new 16-song opus via a distributor that genuinely cares for musicians. "Oh, they're great," he says. "CD Baby have improved their distribution cut, so for a CD costing say, \$10, I get \$9.90 with them only taking 10c."

In the pipeline for Harper is a multimedia project he teasingly will only describe as "a huge undertaking with various dynamic elements." Whatever it is we will see in due course, but in the interim we can certainly expect plenty more music from this prolific songwriter. Maybe "Ribeira: Volume 2" will be next?

For more information about Eric Harper please visit www.eric Harper music.com. To purchase "Ribeira" and other music by Eric Harper, please visit www.cdbaby.com/Artist/EricHarper. Catch Eric Harper playing live every Friday and Saturday evening at Fibber Magees (321 Selby St., Nanaimo). No cover.