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Mark Sganga

Brazilian Trip

Mark Sganga's latest record, *An Evening in Rio*, was inspired by a look at his situation.

"I'd done a little assessment of my life and said 'What have I done with myself? My brothers have beautiful families, and I'm a single guy.' Sometimes, you plug away at music and get to feeling like you haven't done a lot."

Sganga realized he and his band should hit the studio. "We recorded two albums worth of songs, and I had a double album in mind, but was convinced that wasn't best."

The music they recorded fit two categories – Brazilian and Caribbean Afro-Cuban, and a friend in Rio de Janeiro told him that if he was releasing the record in Brazil, he should put the Caribbean stuff elsewhere. "He said Brazilians don't like the two mixed."

The guitar bug bit Sganga when he was eight years old and became fascinated with the Beatles. In his early teens, his parents saw he was serious about learning to play, so they enrolled him in a music school. "My teacher was a dyed-in-the-wool jazz guitarist, so I learned to read music along with the basics. One thing that really helped was when he introduced me to chord melodies." His parents listened to a lot of jazz, and the teacher gave him two bossa nova pieces to work on, including "Black Orpheus," an arrangement he has played ever since, and used in his winning round at the International Finger Style Championships. The win came after years of taking part in the contest. "It started when I saw an arrangement of 'Linus and Lucy' in a guitar magazine. It was one the winner had done at the contest, and I said to

myself, 'I'll be damned. This is almost the same arrangement I did.' I thought, 'If this guy is the national champ, maybe I could be.'"

He then attended, not really knowing what to expect. "It's a bluegrass festival, but really open-minded. I went thinking it would

be an easy win, and didn't even make the second round! But I had so much fun I had to go back. The year I won, I wasn't sure I'd get there. I made plans just two weeks in advance, and didn't have a spot; I was on the waiting list at number 77... only 40 compete. Well, just enough people dropped out that number 77 was the last name in the hat! Other years, I worked up arrangements and practiced, but that year it was just 'Oh, what the hell!'"

Sganga mostly plays nylon-string, with an occasional gig on electric, doing jazz, R&B, and blues. His main acoustic is a Pedro de Miguel, made in Madrid who by Pedro Perez and Miguel Rodriguez. "It's a cutaway nylon-string, and you'd think it was a classical, but it's actually a flamenco. It has Brazilian-rosewood sides and back and a slightly longer scale."

One of the highlights of *An Evening in Rio* is a cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Fire" with a Latin feel. "I try to take popular melodies and present them in a way that resonates. A lot of jazzers, like Miles or Coltrane, even Charlie Parker, interpreted popular songs of the day. If you're performing for a what's not really a jazz crowd, they have a connection. If I'm going to interpret, I start with music people have heard, so they can follow where I'm going." – **John Heidt**