

# Alex de Grassi

Alex de Grassi has been a unique voice in the world of acoustic guitar for over 30 years; his innovative approach to composing and arranging for solo steel-string guitar has influenced generations of players. From his first solo performances in university coffeehouses and as a street musician to his engagements at prestigious venues like Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and the Montreux Jazz Festival, Alex has followed his own vision and helped lay the foundation for contemporary fingerstyle guitar. Inspired by American and British Isles folk and blues artists in his early teens, Alex's musical pursuits soon expanded to encompass classical, jazz, and world music. He has since become known for his evocative compositions and arrangements, and for his sheer virtuosity. Using a broad palette of techniques and timbre in conjunction with his ability to weave together melody, counter-melody, bass, harmony, and rhythm into a highly orchestrated canvas of sound, Alex's performances take the listener well beyond the instrument. The Wall Street Journal has called his playing "flawless" and Billboard hails his "intricate finger-picking technique with an uncanny gift for melodic invention."

Alex's career has drawn acclaim for numerous studio recordings as well as for live performances as a soloist and within ensemble settings. His 1978 recording, *Turning: Turning Back* (cited by Acoustic Guitar magazine among their top ten essential fingerstyle recordings), the subsequent recordings *Slow Circle* (1979) and *Southern Exposure* (1984), and his GRAMMY® nominated recording *The Water Garden* (1998) are considered classics of the genre. In 2006, he collaborated with Quartet San Francisco leader and violinist Jeremy Cohen to premiere an original concerto for steel-string guitar, string quartet, and string orchestra, commissioned and published by String Letter Publishing for their 20th anniversary celebration at Herbst Theater in San Francisco.

He has twice been commissioned by the New York Guitar Festival to compose and perform live scores for the festival's Silent Films/Live Guitars series. Festival director David Spelman says "Alex de Grassi is a treasure... his technical wizardry as well as his vibrant and poetic music-making make him one of the most distinctive steel-string guitarists performing today."

Alex's most recent solo guitar recording, *In Concert* (Mel Bay Records), was recorded in front of a live Nashville audience featuring compositions and arrangements spanning the length of his career. His latest solo studio recording, *Now and Then: Folk Songs for the 21st Century* (Tropo Records), features contemporary arrangements of treasured melodies from the American standards repertoire. "In rediscovering these songs," he explains, "I came to appreciate the maxim that folk music is a 'living' tradition, and that each generation will find relevance and a way to reinterpret these songs. In that spirit, I have arranged traditional melodies to reflect the musical idioms and social climate of today's multicultural landscape, and to tell a few American stories whose threads reach through time to unite the present with the past."

Such a broad and creative vision has come to be expected from de Grassi. Born in Yokosuka, Japan, and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, Alex was exposed from his earliest years to a variety of musical influences. His grandfather led a string quartet and was assistant concertmaster with the San Francisco Symphony. His father was trained in classical piano and his mother was a lover of jazz. "The two recordings I heard the most as a child," de Grassi recalls, "were Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 and the Louis Armstrong/Ella Fitzgerald version of Porgy & Bess." His first instrument was trumpet, but at age 13 de Grassi

switched to guitar.

De Grassi is largely self-taught, but briefly studied jazz guitar with noted teacher Bill Thrasher while at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Since embarking on a recording and concert career, Alex has continued to study classical guitar. He has also studied jazz piano with Bay Area great Mark Levine as well as composition with renowned teacher, pianist, and author William A. Mathieu.

Over the last three decades as a soloist and collaborator, de Grassi has explored a variety of musical directions and has stretched his repertoire to include interpretations of jazz classics with *Bolivian Blues Bar* (Narada Jazz 1999), and *Tatamonk*, a collaboration with Chilean folk musician Quique Cruz. His recordings *Clockwork*, *Altiplano*, *The World's Getting Loud*, and *Beyond The Night Sky: Lullabies for Guitar* (Parents' Choice Gold Award Winner) feature such guest musicians as Patrick O'Hearn, Zakir Hussein, Luis Conte, Paul McCandless, and Mark Egan. Alex's latest foray into collaborative works is the deMania trio with bassist Michael Manring and percussionist Chris Garcia. Their first recording, *deMania*, was released in 2006.

Alex has toured extensively on the concert and festival circuit, performing in Europe, Latin America, Japan, and throughout North America. He has also traveled to Bolivia (inspiring the title track for his RCA/Novus recording, *Altiplano*) studying and gathering Andean music and helping bring about the Arawi recording of the Contemporary Orchestra of Native Instruments for New Albion Records. In 2008 he made his classical guitar debut with a performance of Rodrigo's *Concerto for Aranjuez* in Ukiah, California with the Ukiah Symphony.

In addition to recording and performing, de Grassi keeps active with other projects. He scored music for *Mirrors of the Heart* for the television series *Americas*, and was the subject of a PBS concert/interview television show, *Alex de Grassi: The Artist's Profile*.

In addition to the GRAMMY® nomination, Alex's tenth recording, *The Water Garden* garnered an Indie Award nomination and was named Crossroads Magazine's Best Acoustic Instrumental Recording of the year. *Shortwave Postcard* (Auditorium) was picked as one of Acoustic Guitar magazine's Top CDs of 2002.

A frequent guest teacher at the National Summer Guitar Workshop, Alex has also taught master classes at the Interlochen Institute, Berklee School of Music, the Milwaukee Conservatory of Music, and the Omega Institute. De Grassi penned the introduction to the popular coffee table art book/reference tome, *Custom Guitars: A Complete Guide to Contemporary Custom Guitars* (String Letter Publishing). His guitar transcriptions have been published with Hal Leonard, Stropes Editions, String Letter Publishing, and numerous guitar magazines. Alex is currently writing a reference book on the fundamentals of acoustic guitar technique, and he has recorded instructional videos for Homespun, Tropo Records, and most recently, the Hal Leonard DVD, *Acoustic Fingerstyle Guitar* (2010), which features a dozen lessons on acoustic guitar technique. In the spring of 2006, Alex was artist-in-residence at the nation's first steel-string guitar degree program at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. He also conducts his own summer workshop in Los Gatos, California and he is currently Artist Advisor and teacher for the guitar faculty at String Letter Music School in San Anselmo, California. He serves on the advisory board of the New York Guitar Festival.



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