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All that jazz

Ever since he began studying classical guitar and music composition at the Athens Conservatory of Music, where he obtained his Master's degree, **Spiros Exaras** was bitten by the "jazz bug". So, it's no wonder that the "itch" brought him eventually in 1992 to the "hub" of the jazz world, New York City, in pursuit of his "jazz dream" which he has been living and exploring for the last sixteen years. "It was more of a fantasy than a dream. I always wanted to play like my jazz idols. I always wanted to be able to play next to the biggest names in jazz."

And play he did, next to famed artists such as **Randy Brecker, Harvie S., Mark Egan, Philip Hamilton, Mike Pope, Andy Middleton, Sal Giorgiani, Donny McCaslin, Charles Blenzig, Etienne Stadwijck, Richie Morales, Joel Rosenblatt, Tom Schuman** and the Grammy Award winner **Dave Valentin**. He even crossed over into pop by playing the guitar solo in **Mariah Carey's** single hit "My All" produced by Sony Music.

Recently, Exaras reached another milestone when the Queens Symphony Orchestra (QSO) performed in a world premiere his new work featuring his band, the Spiros Exaras World-Jazz Ensemble, accompanied by the symphonic orchestra. The event marked the second concert in the orchestra's Masterworks Concert Series "Bernstein & Friends," entitled "New Sounds", coinciding with what would have been Leonard Bernstein's ninetieth birthday.

"It is always great to perform as an artist with a huge ensemble such as a symphony orchestra. I was very honored when the acclaimed conductor, **Constantine**

Kitsopoulos asked me to perform my music along with the Queens Symphony Orchestra. This is something I had never dreamed of; maybe it was too early for me as a composer to have this kind of appreciation and I feel humbled by this opportunity."

Kitsopoulos, the orchestra's director, describes his programming philosophy as trying to create new musical forms and genres, combining disparate musical elements with the orchestra to make a sound that is new. "The fact that Spiros's music mixes together jazz, fusion, and rhythmic and tonal elements of traditional Greek music made him an ideal candidate for our experiment," he says. "I think that Spiros will be viewed as a visionary in terms of his willingness to expand the vocabulary of sounds available to jazz musicians as well as those that work in other genres."

Exaras calls his jazz style "World-jazz" and more specifically "Balkan jazz" since his main musical influence is derived from the Balkan Peninsula. "Jazz is very open to experimenting," he says. "I use musicians from Turkey, Greece, Haiti, Europe, the United States, or any other country who contribute their own ideas into my music. I take music elements from Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, Turkey, to name a few, and put them into jazz ambience. Many times I decide to groove in an 11/8 or 9/8 rhythm (traditional Greek and Balkan rhythms) instead of a typical 4/4 jazz swing. Or, I use a *makam*, a scale that is used in Balkan and Arabic music, in my jazz solo, adding a 'Balkan' spirit into the improvisation. Or, sometimes I would have a Greek clarinet improvising over jazz harmonies. This is Balkan-Jazz."



photo: Maria Karamanos

Spiros Exaras performing with the Queens Symphony Orchestra and its musical director, Maestro Constantine Kitsopoulos, and the Spiros Exaras World-Jazz Ensemble.

Clarinetist and reed player **Lefteris Bournias**, a member of Exaras's ensemble says "Spiros is a very interesting 'cat'. He has managed to couple this Balkan influence with his strong sense of jazz harmonies and create a unique Spiros Exaras style, which is very lyrical. It paints a picture and transports the listener back to long forgotten times in Ancient Greece and Macedonia."

Exaras's American ensemble members, world-renowned jazz musicians **Henry Hey** and **Philip Hamilton**, contribute their craftsmanship to the final product. "In the best creative situations there is a give and take between the group leader (most often the composer as well) and the musicians who are playing with that leader," says Hey. "The leader, Spiros in this case, steers the concept of the group and directs the energy and musical essence, while at the same time allowing the other musicians to contribute their own personality and vision."

Hamilton adds: "I just think that it is good music that everyone is looking for and this fusion that Spiros writes and performs is catchy and tells a story that is appealing to everyone. All of us love to experience the same thing from music: we want to move, smile, and think."

Exaras is now pursuing new horizons. He is currently working with Cuban pianist **Elio Villafranca**, hoping to go on tour together and possibly a new recording. His first jazz record, *Phrygians*, received great critical acclaim and he is now working on his new CD titled "Orpheus and Eurydice".

"It is the first time that I fuse so many different musical styles together," he explains. "Firstly, Greek music, the music of my native country, then classical, the music I studied for eleven years, and, of course jazz, the music that I have always loved and that brought me to New York in the first place."

"Besides having great personal integrity as a human being, Spiros Exaras is the kind of musician who you never get tired of hearing play," says legendary recording producer **Mike Millius** who signed Cindy Lauper in the Eighties and now represents Exaras. "In fact, each time you hear him play it's like witnessing a miracle."

Alexandra Spyridaki