

La Femme Guitara

by Dan Ouellette

PATTY LARKIN turns the spotlight on women guitarists with *La Guitara*, a wide-ranging collection of captivating performances by female instrumentalists. She and tour mates **KAKI KING**, **MURIEL ANDERSON**, and **MIMI FOX** talk about the inspirations and experiences that have helped break down gender and genre barriers.

LARKIN—JANA LEON



FOR EVERY PLAYER IN ANY STYLE

ACOUSTIC GUITAR

5 SONGS TO PLAY
CREAM "Strange Brew"
JOHN DENVER "Take Me Home, Country Roads"
LEO KOTIKE "Cherry County"
 "Open String Blues"
 "Rhythm of January"

LEO KOTIKE
 Exclusive Lesson with the Fingerstyle Icon

CUSTOM GUITARS
 How to Find Your Ideal Ax

Patty Larkin & La Guitara
 Spotlight on Women Guitarists

LESSONS
 Easy Blues Solos
 Country-Rock Licks
 Tips on Fingerstyle Arrangements

HELP YOUR KIDS LEARN TO PLAY

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ACOUSTIC GUITAR

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 Along with Peter Dinklage, Neil Young, and John McVie, Leo Kottke learned contemporary fingerstyle guitar in the early '70s. After nearly 40 years as a soloist, he recently began teaching the trade to a duo with former Fleetwood Mike Gordon. In his exclusive interview, Kottke talks about learning to play with other musicians, using improvisation and getting feedback. With tracks to "Cherry County" by Leo Kottke.

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 Patty Larkin runs the 100% female instrumentalists collective La Guitara, a wide-ranging collection of inspiring performances by female instrumentalists. She and her mates Kaki King, Muriel Anderson, and Mimi Fox talk about the inspirations and experiences that have helped break down gender and genre barriers. By Dan Ouellette.

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La Femme Guitara

When Patty Larkin first started thinking about compiling a collection of songs by women guitarists, she had no idea that she would not only break new ground but also start what could become a franchise of releases showcasing female guitar virtuosos. The first CD, *La Guitara: Gender Bending Strings* (Vanguard, www.vanguardrecords.com), is a remarkable 14-track collection that crosses stylistic boundaries on the contemporary landscape—from the opening pipa/electronics track, “Invocation,” by Wu Man to the heavy-metal rocker, “Whammy Dance,” by Jennifer Batten—and includes archival tracks by Elizabeth Cotten and Memphis Minnie, as well.

In the album’s liner notes, Larkin, who co-produced the collection with Bette Warner, writes, “It is my belief that women guitarists of the past played a part in the evolution of the instrument and that their story is largely untold. I also believe that there are women guitarists today who are actively changing

“I remember being asked who my main guitar influences were when I was learning how to play. I responded, ‘Any woman who was holding a guitar.’”

—PATTY LARKIN

our preconceptions about gender and guitar heroes.”

In the first of what promises to be a series of concert showcases featuring *La Guitara* contributors, Larkin, who has expanded her singer-songwriter folk style with soundscape experiments, recruited fingerstyle rocker Kaki King, jazz guitarist Mimi Fox, and classical virtuoso Muriel Anderson for a 16-city tour that touched down in New York City in early November. The youngest of the foursome, King has experienced a meteoric rise after signing to a major label (Epic). Fox’s singular style has earned her a roster spot on Steve Vai’s Favored Nations imprint, which will release her new double-CD, *Perpetually Hip*, in April. The first woman to score a national fingerpicking championship, Anderson is a virtuoso on six-string and harp guitars and is adept at styles ranging from classical to Japanese koto music.

After Larkin and King were interviewed in the studios of WFUV-FM, they were joined by



Kaki King was raised on rock but is getting into different styles every night.

Fox and Anderson for a roundtable discussion of the project, which has been successfully challenging misconceptions about young girls and women and their relationship to the guitar. (Because of a prior commitment, King stayed only for the early part of the conversation.) Pleased with the response to the tour, after five performances, Larkin said, “It’s good that girls can see a woman playing the guitar onstage.” Then, in a reference to the new TV drama *Commander in Chief*, she added, “It’s like getting used to the idea of a woman being president.”

How did each of you get hooked into the *La Guitara* project?

KAKI KING I was at the Vancouver Folk Festival, and I saw Patty perform for the first time. I went to get a signed copy of her CD, and she said, “I have to talk with you. I have this idea for a guitar album with all women.” I asked her to email me. She did, and explained what she was doing, and I said yes. I think the album is a great idea. It’s a long-overdue project.

MURIEL ANDERSON Patty emailed me too, and I wondered why this hadn’t been done before. I thought, perhaps this will be the answer to that perpetual question I’m faced with—“Why aren’t there more women guitarists playing at such a high level?” Now I have the answer. I can just hand them this CD.

MIMI FOX There was a lot of synchronicity to this project for me. I had performed a concert at Sweet Rhythm [in New York City] with Jane Getter and Leni Stern. We called ourselves the Triple Play, and we were thinking that this kind of thing should happen more often; three women guitarists go on a tour, record an album. But then you get on with the other things in your life. That’s around the time Patty and Bette contacted me about *La Guitara*. I agree with Kaki. This

CD is so overdue. It’s such a positive way to present women players.

Patty, why did you decide to put such a range of performers and styles on the CD?

PATTY LARKIN At first, Bette and I thought about getting some singer-songwriters together—snag some friends and have some fun. But once we started thinking about how many wonderful and talented guitarists there are, it became clear we couldn’t be bound by genres.

What has surprised you, either on the album or on the tour?

FOX The album as a whole surprises me. It has so many beautiful things, like Muriel’s song and Badi Assad’s. Then there’s Memphis Minnie. When she comes on, it sounds like an old 78. But the way she plays those little ornamentations. Wow. When was that recorded? 1932?

And I love folk and funk, R&B, and jazz, but I’ve never been a rock fan. Hearing Jennifer Batten play “Whammy Damage” shattered that conception.

KING Everything on this tour is such a turn-on. Mimi’s bringing in such a new take on jazz. I was raised on rock ‘n’ roll, but now, Mimi, I’m completely turned on by what you’re doing. Muriel, I’ve been listening to your music for years. My dad was into guitar music. And Patty, your playing is flawless and diverse. So every night, I’m getting more into the different styles and the different people. It excites my little musical nerve endings. It’s a thrill.

So much else has changed for women. Why didn’t this kind of project happen before?

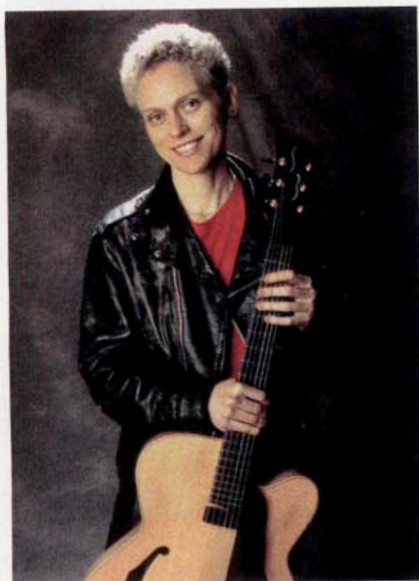
LARKIN I’m not sure, but I remember being



Muriel Anderson smashed preconceptions by winning the National Fingerpicking Championship.

KING—IAN ALLEN, ANDERSON—RUSTY RUSSELL

La Femme Guitara



Mimi Fox, steeped in folk and jazz, was blown away by Jennifer Batten's rock 'n' roll.

asked in interviews who my main guitar influences were when I was a young girl learning how to play. I responded, "Any woman who was holding a guitar." When I went to Berklee [College of Music, in Boston, Massachusetts], I was the only woman guitarist.

That's not the case today.

LARKIN That's right. There are five women guitar instructors in the department. That's extremely exciting. I remember teaching guitar at a private grade school in Boston. Some of the kids wanted to learn rock 'n' roll, which I had limited knowledge of, so I asked a friend to come along. He was going to teach the young guys who wanted to rock, and I'd teach fingerstyle to everyone else. So one day on the drive to school, we had that discussion: why aren't there any major women guitarists? No Janey Hendrixes. I said, "They're practicing right now." And this guy, who was otherwise enlightened in so many ways, said, "Maybe it's genetic."

FOX Things that were once male-dominated aren't that way today.

LARKIN That's true. *La Guitara* is all about something that's already happened.

FOX I do clinics all over the world, and I've been seeing the girls getting up onstage. They're good, but many are timid, like they're still facing self-esteem issues. It's a societal issue that parents, families, and communities have to address to nurture young women. They need to have the opportunity to have a guitar in their hands, stand onstage, and be

able to say, "I have something to express," no matter what the genre is.

LARKIN It's different if you're a singer-songwriter. That was a no-brainer for me, because I was a songwriter as a kid, and I put together a band around what I wrote. But as a guitarist, Mimi, you told me that in San Francisco you'd show up for a jam session and people would say, "Hi, sweetie, what are you going to sing?"

FOX And I'd have the guitar on my back.

LARKIN You at a jam session, Muriel at a concert hall, Kaki in a club or opening for a band. But you all blow people away when you play. That's what's great about this tour. It's the technique and the depth of the repertoire. Peoples' jaws drop. It's almost as if they expected us to all sing the same note and strum the same chord.

ANDERSON It took me awhile to figure out there weren't more women guitarists. My first

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—MIMI FOX

guitar teacher was a woman. That just seemed the normal thing to do—eat, sleep, and play music. I'd run home from school every day and play my guitar. That wasn't unusual in my mind. I'd been playing professionally for a while when someone asked me, "Why aren't there other fingerstyle women guitarists?" and I said, "Of course there are." But I couldn't think of any who were doing it full-time. Now,

THE GENESIS OF LA GUITARA



Sharon Isbin.

La Guitara: Gender Bending Strings was partially inspired by an exhibit of guitars five years ago at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston related to the book *Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar*. Only a few women were represented. "I've been thinking about this project for the last seven or eight years," Larkin says. "I'm constantly blown away by the depth of women guitarists I've seen and heard over the last 20, 25 years. I knew that someone at some point was going to showcase it, so I figured it should be me."

Larkin and her project co-producer Bette Warner set out to track down women guitarists for an all-instrumental album. They listened

to dozens of CDs they solicited from musicians, including some they knew, such as Rory Block and Sharon Isbin, and others they had just heard of, including Mimi Fox and Wu Man. Quickly they realized that the end product would not only be gender-bending, but also genre-bending. "Wu Man plays the pipa, the lute-like ancestor of the guitar from Central Asia," says Larkin, "but she plays it with an adventurous spirit. We wanted to have Badi Assad, who is flamboyant and amazing.

In contrast, Muriel Anderson is a National Fingerpicking Contest winner. And then we wanted a rock player, which is why we got Jennifer Batten doing her 'Whammy Damage.'"

Larkin notes that *La Guitara* is essentially "Vol. 1" with more to come. "We had hundreds of women guitarists we were looking at and listening to," she says. "And as we tour, we're finding even more."



Wu Man.



Badi Assad.



Rory Block.

ISBIN—J. HENRY FAIR, WU MAN—ROBIN HOLLAND, BLOCK—SHONNA VALESKA, ASSAD—EDSON KUMAFKA

DAVID BELOVE

of course, that's changed. Back then I'd get my picture in the newspaper, and everyone assumed I was a singer-songwriter. Nobody would say, "guitar playing at a proficient level." I had a hard time getting that across, which is why I went into competition at the National Fingerpicking Guitar Championships [at the Walnut Valley Festival, Winfield, Kansas]. I won, and that solved the problem. Winning the championship was a special moment. When I was announced the winner, all the other contestants put me on their shoulders and carried me out onto the stage.

So, you educated a lot of people that day about the talents of female guitarists. How do you think La Guitara and the tour will educate audiences?

LARKIN People are extremely curious about *La Guitara* and are inspired by it. I overheard some people saying that this project is historic. Plus, we're involved with the group Guitars in the Classroom [www.guitarsintheclassroom.com], which helps teachers who want to teach guitar in schools. Getting kids involved is crucial, letting them know that the guitar is a hip instrument with a hip overtone and that you can play any kind of music on it that you want to.

FOX I've done work with this group called Little Kids Rock [www.littlekidsrock.org], where we also go into schools. But doing this show and getting the message out about women guitarists has really inspired people. When I was ten, my role model was Mike Nesmith of the Monkees. It's nice that young women players today can also have women role models.

GUITARS IN THE CLASSROOM

"It's subversion," says Jessica Baron Turner, founder and director of Guitars in the Classroom, a Santa Cruz, California-based nonprofit organization dedicated to getting music education back into public school classrooms via the guitar. "This is all about giving children a voice in this high-paced world that makes kids sit in front of a screen," says Turner. "We're like a blood transfusion. We're feeding the souls of teachers who then feed the souls of children."

The brilliance of the program, Turner says, is that GITC doesn't try to reach every student in the schools it serves. Instead, its guitarists train classroom teachers to play the guitar. After four to six weeks of instruction, the teachers, with donated guitars in hand, return to their classrooms with song and guitar skills, as well as curriculum. GITC operates independently of school districts and is funded by grants from various organizations and musical instrument manufacturers.

Turner is "not exactly sure" how she got hooked up with the *La Guitara* project. She and Muriel Anderson were on the faculty together at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, Illinois, and have been friends for 25 years. "But," she notes, "Patty and Bette said they did an exhaustive search of nonprofits that were getting music into the schools. They just found me." For the *La Guitara* tour, Godin Guitars donated new instruments to be raffled off at each venue, and a portion of the proceeds from the sales of the *La Guitara* CD also benefits GITC (www.guitarsintheclassroom.com).

"Getting kids involved is crucial—letting them know that the guitar is a hip instrument and that you can play any kind of music on it that you want to."

—PATTY LARKIN

How familiar were you with the music of Memphis Minnie and Elizabeth Cotten?

LARKIN Coming from the folk world, I was very familiar with Elizabeth's music. I knew of Minnie, but I had only listened to bits and pieces of her music. Digging into her music was extremely important to me. She was a really striking and powerful character. She won a guitar-off against Big Bill Broonzy. We chose her to be on *La Guitara* because of her personality, as well as her playing.

ANDERSON Elizabeth Cotten was very important to me as a child. My guitar teacher gave me her song "Freight Train" and said that if I learned it I could graduate from beginner/intermediate to intermediate/advanced. That was a big deal for me.

LARKIN We've learned that song for the tour.

ANDERSON We do it much differently than the original.



Elizabeth Cotten's classic "Freight Train" has become a *La Guitara* platform for bebop jamming.

FOX We start traditionally, then Muriel picks up the tempo into a boppish romp. I was aware of both women over the years, but I had never heard "Let's Go to Town" on *La Guitara*, so that was cool. I hadn't heard the Minnie piece, either.

LARKIN That was intentional. I wanted to use nonvocal pieces with strong guitar soloing.

With the four of you touring together, have you been influencing each other musically?

LARKIN Yes. It's been exciting. We each play our own sets, then come together onstage for duos and then the whole group. Playing together like this has definitely influenced me to get back to the guitar, which I've been increasingly interested in lately. My next album will definitely be more guitar focused. Like Kaki was saying earlier today, we're watching what each of us is doing every night, such as what gear we're using. There's a lot to absorb from each other.

FOX I started out playing folk. Listening to Patty's wonderful meshing of brilliant songs and solid, warm guitar playing takes me back to those folk days. I also studied classical guitar, so listening to Muriel has also been special. We joke with each other: she hears me and says that's why she stopped playing jazz—because it was so hard. And that's the way I feel about classical and why I quit it. So, what's happening on this tour is a lot of mutual admiration. There's a lot of cross-pollination. It has influenced me already. Good music is going to come from this. ■

WHAT THEY PLAY

Although they all own several guitars, the *La Guitara* participants were traveling light on the tour—there was only so much room in the van.

MURIEL ANDERSON

- **Guitars:** Custom-made Paul McGill classical guitar; Mike Doolin 13-string harp guitar.
- **Strings:** GHS La Classique high tension. Anderson is currently working with GHS on a signature set "for improved longevity and great tone."
- **Amplification:** D-TAR Timber-Line pickup and Equinox EQ. While shopping for a new mic to replace the Neumann SM185 that disappeared on a previous road trip, she uses the mics provided by the venues.

MIMI FOX

- **Guitars:** Custom S3 hollow-body archtop built by Steve Saperstein, with antique maple back and a single Bartolini pickup.
- **Strings:** Thomastik-Infeld Jazz BeBop Series steel-and-nickel round-wound mediums.
- **Amplification:** Roland Jazz Chorus amp or direct to house PA.
- **Picks:** "Tiny" teardrop-shape Fenders.

KAKI KING

- **Guitars:** Charcoal-gray Ovation Adamas prototype; Gretsch Electromatic lap steel.
- **Strings:** Elixir light gauge.
- **Amplification and Effects:** Ovation: Built-in preamp and L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic D.L.; Gretsch: Boss RC-20 Loop Station, Digttech DigiVerb, and Ernie Ball volume pedal.

PATTY LARKIN

- **Guitars:** 1993 Jim Olson SJ cutaway with a spruce top and rosewood back and sides, custom designed to match the neck width and length of her 1946 Martin D-18; Fender Stratocaster.
- **Strings:** John Pearse 80/20 bronze-wound medium gauge. Any brand heavy-gauge electric on the Strat.
- **Amplification:** Olson: Baggs LB6 pickup and sometimes an AKG 460 condenser mic run through a Pendulum SPS-1 preamp with three-band parametric EQ. Fender Hot Rod Deluxe for the Strat.
- **Picks:** Fender 351.
- **Capo:** Kyser.