

## **The Eight-String, Modified Bone Bridge Vintaur, One of the Guitarras de Maya**

I first encountered the modified Guitarra de Maya, or “Buzz Guitar” as it was then referred to, in September, 1970, when I first met John Newbern, known to me ever since as Malachi. Malachi had been publicly performing his composition based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and had invented his modified 12-string guitar as an accompaniment to his vocal incantations...At first hearing the sound and plucking a few strings, I knew I had to have one of these instruments for my own practice. Unfortunately, I didn't have a suitable guitar to convert at the time.

As luck would have it, I found a real beauty in Los Angeles. It was a 1963 Gibson J-200 acoustic. Unfortunately, I was on my way to South America, and would not meet up again with Malachi until October, 1971, when we met again in Santa Fé, New Mexico. He had opened a Temple for Inter-doctrinal Religious Practices on Water Street, in downtown Santa Fé. I had chosen Santa Fé as a familiar place to rest and gather resources, before trekking off to the Far East after Christmas, thus, clearly offering the opportunity to convert the Gibson big bodied flat top, into a sitar like instrument. What better to have in India, Afghanistan, and the Tibetan frontier?



After contemplating the various possibilities, I choose to create an 8-String Vintaur, or vina-guitar (The Vina is an Indian instrument, similar to an 8-stringed sitar and played by the Goddess Sarasvati, the Mother Source of Sound Itself). If memory serves, and it has been a while, I believe that the J-200 was the second 8-string flat top to be converted, (or, reincarnated, as we referred to the transformation at the time...). The first was owned by Jerry Ferris, a nice old Martin 000 series, as I recall.

The instrument came out beautifully. Working at Malachi's side, we stripped and sanded away the cherry sunburst stain, refinished it with 16 coats of natural lacquer. Next we employed two Grover banjo 5<sup>th</sup>-string geared tuners, placed on the maple and ebony neck at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> frets, which were tuned harmonically up the scale. Then we applied rosewood veneer to the headpiece, a spectacular, hand shaped, birds eye walnut burl pick guard and inlaid malachite, lapis and turquoise stones into the headpiece and the bridgework, and a fancy, gold plated tail piece, to match the other hardware. The finished product was indeed dramatically reincarnated. It was a joy to the eye and to the ear.

In early January, 1972, I left for Asia. In Amsterdam, I was invited to play at the famous government sponsored nightclub, de Paradisio, with a small ensemble I had formed, composed of myself on the miked vintaur, an Arp synthesizer and Fender Strat, tuned open, played by Montreal Morris, my collaborator, a great percussionist and world traveler named Armando on tabla, congo, timbale and a slew of other weird rattles and shakers...And, of course, Lea and Chandra, our two "exotic" dancers. They were teenage vixens from Copenhagen. Liv was a beautiful mulatta, the offspring of a black American jazz musician and a Danish lady, and Chandra was a classic, Nordic blonde. The band would play as the room filling psychedelic lightshow created phantasmagoric patterns on the walls and through the air which was filled with incense, tobacco and cannabis smoke. The girls would make a well choreographed entrance, dressed only in sheer, diaphanous strips of cloth, only a meter in width and three in length, dancing together, ala Isadora Duncan...It is always great to have so much fun, while making a buck, and Amsterdam was just the beginning of my voyage with my J-200 Vintaur at my grip.

Much transpired traveling far and wide, and twenty-eight months later, after fulfilling all of my desired destinations and unimagined miraculous meetings with remarkable beings, I returned to the U. S., without the J-200, which had been among a number of things stolen from my home in the South American Andes. I had become quite attached to the tuneful relaxation to be found in the guitarra de maya. So it was that one sunny Spring Saturday as I was wandering the Sausalito Flea Market, I saw, laying dejected under a table, sitting in a beat up and bedraggled, old faux alligator guitar case, an equally derelict looking old Gibson LG-1. The top was cracked through, and the guitar was thoroughly banged up, with a scratched dark, sunburst finish. Despite the fact that the LG-1 was Gibson's least expensive guitar, when introduced in 1947 (the same year as this guitar), the quality and materials were entirely up to Gibson's high standards at the

time. It was a real jewel in disguise, and worth every penny of the fifty dollar amount agreed upon.



Having reconnected with Malachi in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was excited about the possibility of “reincarnating”, truly, the old ’47 Gibson LG-1. After making a cursory examination of the guitar, Malachi kindly agreed to work with me and oversee the rebuilding and transformation of the guitar. Determined to create another Vintaur, we decided on the same basic configuration as on the original J-200.

Modifications to the LG-1 included the stripping of the old finish and repairing the fractured top by removing it and patching it with a rosewood veneer strip, (as seen below running up the middle of the guitar body). Rosewood was also chosen for the binding around the guitar’s top. Grover tuners were used to replace the old and much worn originals. Rosewood was also applied to the headpiece and a significant Buddhist symbol was inlaid at the crown. Perhaps the most unusual modification made is the scalloped

neck, which was inspired by, and first introduced by jazz/fusion guitar great, John McLaughlin, in 1972, and played extensively with his East/West acoustic band, Shakti.



The 1947 LG-1 Vintaur de Maya was completed in May, 1974. It was entered in Mill Valley, CA's annual 1974 Prune Music (famous home of the original Mesa Boogey guitar amps) Guitar Show, where it took first place in the "eclectic instrument" category. I still own the guitar, and can not imagine departing with it.

My thanks go out to Malachi (John M. Newbern) for his contribution to musical culture.

Roger Ralphs

Santa Fé, New Mexico

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