

A MUSICAL ODYSSEY



■ BY SHAZIA MALIK

TORONTO - A recipient of the Governor General of Canada's acknowledgment for musical excellence and the International Association of Jazz Educators Award for Outstanding Contribution to Jazz Education, Levon Ichkhanian, already knew at age five the career he wished to pursue, that of a guitarist! Son of Edouard Ichkhanian, renowned music director of Middle Eastern artists, nephew of Professor Joseph Ichkhanian, founder of classical guitar program in Beirut, and cousin of Hovhannes Darbinian, world's leading scholar and performer of the Armenian Tar, Levon fell in love with music at an early age and wanted to follow family tradition. In an exclusive interview with Midweek newspaper, Levon, recognized as a music ambassador to Canada, shared his experiences of working with music stalwarts and the incredible journey of success. Brimming with a unique melodious heri-



tage, Levon claimed that from an early age guitar ignited a unique sentiment in him and the music maestros of his family contributed to his tuneful journey and made him a person who "wonders, discovers and loves new experiences." Born in Beirut, Lebanon Levon is of Armenian descent and a third generation musician and artist of great versatility.

Besides guitar, he plays oud, bouzouki, mandolin and banjitar with overtones from the Armenian, Arabian, Iranian, Indian and Western tunes. Levon said: "As I grew up in a musical family, I was always surrounded by great music from a variety of styles. My dad played piano and my two uncles played guitar. Uncle Joseph was a graduate of the Royal Superior conservatory of Madrid who started the Classical guitar program at the Conservatory of Beirut. He would host art soirées at his house that featured not only musicians, but also, poets, dancers and painters. My uncle

Jacques was a master Flamenco guitarist and often stayed at our house."

Talking about his uncle Joseph's passion for music Levon claimed: "He liked to play till the sunrise. I would wake up and sneak into his room, hide and listen. And, my father, being a Jazz pianist was always touring the world, so we traveled with him as a family and I got to hear music and experienced new cultures from Jordan, Cyprus, and Iran."

Though an avid explorer of music, Levon is a great humanitarian and believes in giving back to the community he operates in. He added: "I believe in giving back and often volunteer my services to fund raising events - too many to mention and each one equally important that I don't want to single any one out above the next. However, I will share the story of one that was truly inspirational. I produced a concert featuring luminaries from world music scene in Toronto with all the proceeds going to support a field trip to allow 150 underprivileged theatre arts students see a Broadway touring show in Toronto."

He said it was the students' first time to see a live professional theatre production. He also arranged for a separate meet-and-greet opportunity after the show, so the children could pose questions to the cast, crew and musicians. Levon recalls: "The look on their faces at the end of the day will stay with me for a long time." Currently he is working on another project close to his heart - a music school project in Armenia. He considers music as a life-long journey of learning and has already added a long list to his repertoire of expertise. "I am fortunate that I have been able to work in many aspects of the music industry - from live performance and studio work, to CD production; from orchestra contracting and music co-ordination for theatre to concerts and events," he stated. "I am inspired by each new musician I work with and am fascinated by each new project I am involved with. Every situation is similar and different at the same time. I have grown personally and professionally with each new experience - from my very first proficient gig at the age of 13 with pioneer Armenian pop music pioneer Adiss, and since then have worked with the critically acclaimed personalities such as Barbra Streisand, Elton John, Paul Anka, Brian Wilson, David Foster, A.R. Rahman, Hariharan, Ustad Zakir Hussein, Shankar Mahadevan, and Peter Murphy to name a few."

Levon's recording studio has all the instruments he plays and ready for music composition. "This makes it feasible to record and share music files without traveling, so I am constantly creating new works and collaborating on new projects." When Levon was growing up, his mother and her circle of friends loved Bollywood cinema that was very popular in Lebanon. He tasted Bollywood music while watching movies from an early age. He proclaimed: "The music stayed with me as I got older but only recently I had the opportunity to play in A.R. Rahman's Bollywood projects and most recently on Flutist Naveen Kumar's Fluterionics CD."

Levon enjoys immensely composing melodies for films and got the golden chance of his life when asked to work with acclaimed Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan. He exclaimed: "My canvas is open - with adeptness in all genres - classical, rock, world and jazz, coupled with extensive experience in playing an array of string instruments, and access to orchestras, I can offer a unique perspective to any soundtrack. Recently at an Ustad Zakir Hussein concert, I created a short video tribute to all the musicians, including Ustad Zakir, while greeting my friend Percussionist Sivamani on the release of his recently composed soundtrack. I would love to compose music for a Bollywood films whenever the opportunity arises."

He shared the stage with Dee Dee Bridgewater, Oliver Jones, Taylor Dane for a 2008 Olympic Tour of China. He has toured extensively throughout North America and Europe, performing at festivals and concerts of the likes of Peter Gabriel's WOMAD, MIDEM (Cannes), Chet Atkins Musician Days (Nashville), All Star Guitar Night (Los Angeles), Montreal Jazz Festival and Pizza Express Jazz Club (London, UK) and the International Guitar Festival of Great Britain to name a few.

He has also toured with international notables as Peter Murphy (of Bauhaus fame), Marisa Lindsay (singing sensation from Barbados), Svika Pick and Yehoram Gaon (Israel), Sattar and Aghili (Iran), Yanni Katevas and Florentinos (Greece), Alka Yagnic, Kailash Khair (India), Alfred Gamil (Egypt), Paul, Harout, Hovig, and Levon Katerdijan (Armenia and the Middle-East). At home, in Toronto, Levon is called upon to perform at events such as Broadway and Beyond concert featuring Marvin Hamlisch and last year's Fashion Cares Concert featuring Elton John.

As a session musician, Levon has played on over a 100 diverse commercial recordings including The Canadian Idol's gold selling CD, singer Hariharan's Waqt Par Bolna, soprano and multiple Juno Award winner Isabel Bayrakdarian's Tango Nottumo. He also performed on numerous soundtracks for films, commercials and television, including environmentalist David Suzuki's Nature of Things, the CBC documentaries Daughters of Afghanistan and Robbing the Cradle of Civilization (New York Festival's Silver World Medal winner for Television Documentary - International), and A.R. Rahman's Guru, Sivaji and Rang De Basanti and Slumdog Millionaire. He has composed for the Nashville Chamber Orchestra and the Atlantic Jazz Society. After performing in Toronto stage production of The Lord of the Rings, Levon ventured in the musical theatre world. He founded Global Village Creative Inc, offering music contracting, coordinating, performing and extending production services. Credits include: The Lord of the Rings, award winning Toronto show Jersey Boys, Miss Saigon, Rogers and Hammerstein's South Pacific, Disney's The Lion King, Wicked, My Fair Lady, Donny and Marie, Colm Wilkinson, Chantal Kreviazuk, 3 Mo' Divas, Spamalot, Toxic Avenger, Robin Hood, Chicago and TV projects as CBC's Over the Rainbow, CTV's Rick Hansen: A Concert For Heros, CITY TV's Canada's Got Talent, Global TV's Canada's Walk of Fame, and the Canadian Tenors Gemini award winning special Seasons of Song with David Foster, Sarah McLaughlin, and Paul Anka. Levon arranged and coordinated music for Andrew Moody's Language of the Heart, was part of the creative team for Twyla Tharp's production Come Fly Away to the music of Frank Sinatra, and music contractor for Shirley Jones, Brian Wilson's Reimagines Tour across Canada, Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa for Barbra Streisand's Back to Brooklyn Tour.

He has released two CDs - After Hours with special guests, Paquito D'Rivera and John Patitucci, and Travels (special guest Alan Caron) and Kickn Jazz co-led with master drummer Bernard Purdie. Levon informed: "As to contributing to CDs of other artists - it's over 200. Such amazing experiences - I feel honored that I have been a part of so many CDs, where I get hired to add my own voice." Both CDs received rave reviews in aAI Music Guide to Jazz, Jazztimes, The Jazz Report, Canadian Musician, Guitarist, Horizon and Nor Gyank magazines to name a few. Levon concluded: "Currently I'm working on two new CDs: one that will have me playing an array of stringed instruments such as the Oud, Bouzouki, Banjitar, Mandolin and of course guitars. The second will be on the Armenian church mass to commemorate the Armenian Genocide Centennial."