

**Ike Issacs**  
**Burma**

Interview.

'Something new every day.'

Published in *Guitar International* magazine.

(Formerly *Guitar*). June, 1989.

Venue: London.

**Lance Bosman**



## Ike Isaacs

### ... Something new every day

by Lance Bosman

Photos by George Clinton

To fully appreciate the playing of Ike Isaacs' solo jazz guitar, you really need to hear him close up. Though some years back now, an impression lingers of such an occasion, a fireside evening with Ike's interpretations on fingerstyle electric guitar. Drawing on evergreen tunes and torch songs, *Funny Valentine*, and *Here's That Rainy Day*, Ike revealed his mastery at weaving melody around chord and counterline. Conveyed with a spirit of improvisation, the part-movements still emerged with conclusive shape and purpose. For Ike, attaining a balance between spontaneous flourish and deliberation is an enduring challenge, even after fifty years dedication to the jazz guitar.

"Yet do you know," reflected Ike, "those arrangements have never been played outside these four walls." Was this then because other things came up, or perhaps that the style of those arrangements was out of phase with their time? Thinking back to that occasion and decade, with its prevailing atmosphere of surging jazz fusions and 70's rock spectaculars. Well, the brand of jazz may have seemed just too bound in nostalgia for current tastes. Though hearing those arrangements there in the solitude of his room, it was a treat to witness Ike sketch out at a moment's call any standard mentioned, spontaneously ornamented and rounded off. Also too, he would exercise his dexterity at modulation, imperceptibly shifting the course of the arrangement into any named key. Far more than displaying musical acrobatics, these exchanges at the fingerboard showed the rich harmonic and melodic palette of the jazz guitar.

Through the years Ike has played alongside Tal Farlow, Wes Montgomery plus a fair stint with Stephan Grappely. And being an old hand from the big band era, he worked regularly with the erstwhile BBC Guitar Club, between doing orchestral dates, recording sessions and residencies with Ted Heath and John Dankworth bands. Despite these credentials gained in session and on set, the well seemed to run dry for Ike in recent times. It could be that his line of jazz guitar evoked an idiom suspended between its past, while awaiting the novelty of its revival. So to strike anew Ike moved to Australia, where he presently heads the Jazz Guitar Department of the Australian Institute of Guitar.

In a recent visit to his former home here he recalled an older country still, Burma and Rangoon where he was born in 1919 and first set his hand to the jazz guitar.

"Yes, Burma in the mid-Thirties and an old guitar lying around. Even as a kid of seven I was aware of a natural harmonic sense, able to sing the melodies and part-movements of songs. Anyway, I started doodling chords to the popular tunes of the day. I learned by ear those songs in every key on the fingerboard over the first year. Mind you, I always regret missing out the roots of jazz, Dixeyland, to my loss; because the spirit of jazz lies there. Consequently I think I became too intellectual about it, too interested in harmonic development. But listening to Lionel Hampton, Art Tatem and Benny Goodman, I really enjoyed that. Then I learned a few Django choruses by ear. By the age of sixteen I really got cheeky and sought out a job arranging for guitar Glenn Miller's *Serenade in Blue*."

A seasoned player, adept at fingerstyle jazz guitar in solo and ensemble, Ike's session work has touched on classical music, pops and jingles too. With this amalgam of experience, how does he view the classical and jazz guitarist, one gaining from the other?

"Well, I admire the classical guitarists, their scholarship; but now the jazz guitar too has well established traditions from which scales and chord changes are taught; but the main advantage that the jazz guitarist has is that the player creates his own music instead of what's written.

"In the first place the classical player interested in jazz should let go more and rely on the ear. But it's first grasping an understanding of what jazz is. First, it's improvisation of a single line, and to be able to do that, you've got to have command of the guitar: to know the fingerboard and be able to play a fragment of any scale at any point; to know all the triads and recognise the sound qualities of these chords; and know all the cadences and play them. For jazz you have to listen to players and see what they're doing, what makes them tick. Most players have their own devices, and you can recognise them by their tricks, like personal intonations of speech.

"Let me generalise with a simple initial exercise. First set up a tempo and rhythmic pattern to a phrase around the chord C major. You can experiment until you learn ways over and around that chord, a scale run on C, an arpeggio. From there broaden to take in G7. So you widen your doodling to create a phrase that embraces the progression. It's a question of learning to play what you hear an instant beforehand, to sharpen your aural awareness. From there extend the cycle through the standard progression by sequence, G7-C-F-B flat and so on. Relate these progressions to standard tunes, and compose tunes on them."

Turning to arrangements, the present upsurge of jazz evergreens set for the classical guitar, Gershwin, Jerome Kern, augers well for the instrument. Apart from the increasing variety of repertoire, these jazz tangents may also encourage more of us to have a go at arranging our favourite tunes.

"Arranging gives different images of the same composition, revealing different personalities. It shows a player's way of thinking, their individual response to that piece. Arrangements vary so much, which is the beauty of them. You can get wonderful pictures from few colours, like your own things Larry. I think the way you personally arrange is nice, you don't use so many chords, and having a classical guitarist background, you don't tend to enter so many wide block shapes on the fingerboard; consequently there's more horizontal movement. I can play a different chord to each

melody note but on your guitar that would be pretty hard. Generally though, there are so many devices of classical music that can be utilised for jazz; using inner parts, a running bass line, or just a simple setting of bass and treble only. Then from the bass chord sequence you can depart this way and that. It's such an exciting thing. Of course, you begin by writing out the melody and chords in an accessible key on the fretboard; but you've got to know substitutions, and chord extension, decorations. You've got to make a study of it, to know what a major 7th is, a 9th is. Learn these substitution chords and you know where to enrich the harmony, to augment and replace common changes."

These chordal tricks are of course now well tested and documented, much the same as conventional harmony is established. Culled from the bebop period, they also form the essence of Ike's style. His own slant on these techniques may be followed in his tutor, *Jazz Guitar School*, a series of jazz scale and chordal explorations and exercises, published by IMP. For the novice these received jazz resources offer a foundation for systematic learning of harmony and improvisation.

"As a springboard, they do so in fact. They came into their own during the bebop period with Charlie Parker as its figurehead. That era represents a great harmonic leap, of extended chords and their substitutions. Let me take a couple of examples of fundamental jazz chord techniques: if a D minor chord is written, this will comprise notes D, F, A. I can decorate this with an additional note B natural, hence D minor 6th. As it happens this chord has the notes of G9, being G, B, D, F, A. So a dominant 9th and its respective minor 6th chord are interchangeable.

"Again, say the song sheet states an E7 chord. I add an embellishment, a raised 9th; hence E-G sharp-B-D for the E7 plus its raised 9th, F double-sharp or G natural. If I ignore the E and rename G sharp as A flat, I have the makings of B flat 13th: B flat-A flat-D-G."

What this amounts to is that alongside or in place of E7 can be entered a B flat 13th chord or its less colourful relative, B flat 7. As a quick formula for calculating the letter name of the substitute, it may be determined from the flattened 5th note of the original chord: in the case of E7 its 5th, B, when flattened as B flat is also the letter name of the substitute chord, hence B flat 7th. From there the resolution is A major/minor. In short, the trick is to play the substitute dominant chord a semitone above the resolving chord. From B flat 7th to A.

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"Ike" teaching at the Australian Institute of Guitar.

"Then there's the post-bop period epitomised in the music of John Coltrane. This marked a new departure, where there was more intervallic use of melody than reliance on chordal frameworks. In post-bebop they tended to shift the whole phase a minor third away or semitone up or down which they called 'playing outside'. It works basically like this: say you have a chord of three basic notes, a triad of C major. To play over that chord you normally use its scale and insert chromatic passing notes to decorate. Similarly if the next chord is D minor, you play the D minor scale over that. But in returning to the chord C you can displace the C scale a semitone immediately after the departure from C by entering the scale of D flat, from which you sideslip back into C again. You may also swerve into the other adjacent scale to C, that being B major, and back into C again. Alternatively you can ascend on C and return on D flat or B, hopping smartly to the focal C at the close of the descent. It sounds great over fast passages.

"Outside playing shocked the system, and it's interesting because you can play a phrase, and deflect it to another position and then gravitate back to its original tonality. It gives the music a seesaw motion. That can be done in so many ways, over a melodic span or through an implied chord."

With his intimate knowledge of these resources, Ike has learnt to channel them into immediate arrangements, charged with flair and dazzle or softened with refining shading. Even so, as the years pass he has striven more for concision, edging out the superfluous, and at the same time enlarging his scope.

"When I set an arrangement I don't want to feel limited by the guitar. I was so influenced by Art Tatem and his wide-ranging keyboard playing. So I thought to myself I won't restrict myself to the normal limits of the guitar, I want to reach beyond them. What I used to consider before was *making* an arrangement; today I'm more concerned about *presenting* the arrangement in a controlled and more musical way. I used to play a lot more notes, self indulgent. Now I'm more concerned with listener response. It's the same as when you're talking fast—they are liable to miss the point. If you want to communicate musically, you've got to dress and present it well. I've heard people overplaying, and I think that if I'm being critical about them, then maybe I'm doing the same thing. So how can I get through. And now when I get the

chance to play a solo gig, I think I won't overdo it. There was a time when I used to overcome a difficult passage by playing it fast. Now it's a question of playing more notes with less tricks—not so much just to play the guitar but to produce music well."

Between the gigs are the regular session engagements. Aside from the routine of these and long waits between calls, there are the precarious moments too. "You walk a tightrope. Sometimes it's a walkover, other occasions are the most difficult you can imagine. I remember at one session they told me I wasn't needed until the end of the day, twenty minutes before finishing time. Then they called me up to four pages of music, full of modulations and with written out arpeggios in twelve-eight time for finger style guitar. Someone gave me a folk guitar which had such a high action it was unplayable, you couldn't bar it. The conductor, a Frenchman, was watching me attempt this, and said, 'Please be serious'. Me, I was never more serious in my life! So I used my Gibson and cooked up an acoustic-like sound. As for all those written out arpeggios I made them up as I went along. I tell you at sessions you either die of boredom or fright."

Despite the disenchantment that has crept up on Ike after years of not receiving full recognition, does the guitar still sustain its attraction? "I really miss the group 'Velvet' I had going in England with fellow guitarist Denny Wright, Len Skeat and the outstanding trumpeter, Digby Fairweather. We had a good all-round sound going there. Also I wanted to teach, but nobody wanted to know. Then at that time Peter Calvo offered me a job in Sydney. There didn't seem to be anything here, nobody wanted to know. I'm not a pushy type, I don't go chasing for work. I like a calm, quiet lifestyle, I'm a researcher so it didn't bother me that much. There's always so much more about the guitar, picking up what other individuals are doing, how they get round the changes. You are constantly widening your basis of comparison. It's one great adventure, it's thrilling really, a never-ending source of research. I learn something every day, thinking as I come across it, well that's nice, why didn't I think of it before? Jazz playing is great fun."

#### NOTE

Readers please note that the next article in the series Y Gitar Gymreig, Jeffrey Lewis, on the sound world of 'Spectra', will appear in the July issue of *Guitar International*.

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