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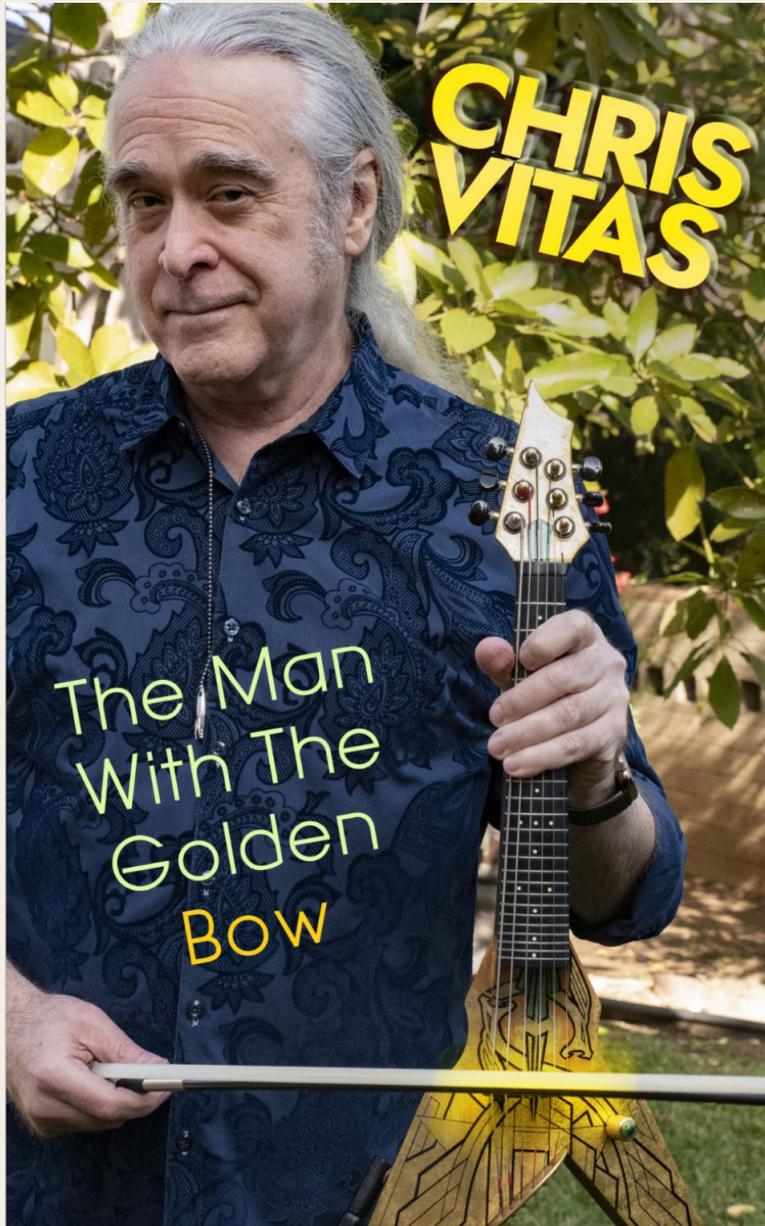
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COVER STORY

CHRIS VITAS: The Man with the Golden Bow

By Wayne Riker, January 2022



IT IS RARE TO CITE ANY MUSICIAN playing any instrument that can truly hold his own on stage performing in a multitude of musical genres. San Diego County native, violinist Chris Vitas, fits that bill. A professional since 1969, Vitas has graced every stage from the Old Globe Theater and the San Diego Chamber Orchestra to rock clubs, country bars, and jazz venues. His versatility on violin is evident as he lists his myriad influences to include violinists Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith, Richard Greene, Stephane Grappelli, Vassar Clements, Byron Berline, and Jean-Luc Ponty. As Vitas states, “By transcribing as many solos as you can by others, their ideas become yours.”



Young Vitas with his accordion.

EARLY YEARS

His musical journey began with accordion lessons at age five at Bertolino's Music shop in San Diego, the same shop that future bandmate and accordion maestro Lou Fanucchi took lessons as well. "I still have an accordion that I use nowadays to accompany my students," Vitas said. At age 12 he showed an interest in violin and commenced study with Jaroslav "Jerry" Kasals, with full support and encouragement from his parents. "My father would get up at three o'clock in the morning to drive me down to my school so I could be in the marching band," Vitas fondly remembers. He made the orchestra at both Spring Valley Junior High and Monte Vista High School where he graduated from in 1970. Simultaneously he spent a seven-year run with the Civic Youth Orchestra. During this time period he realized he had developed perfect pitch (the ability to recognize the pitch of a note by name after hearing it). "One of my teachers in seventh grade discovered that," Vitas recalls. "He was doing a joke by playing some random notes on piano and I was able to correctly name them...it now comes in handy for transcribing songs...I save a lot of money that way," he quipped.

EDUCATION AND TEACHING

Vitas, who has never had any ambition for a career move outside of the San Diego area, earned a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree in music from UCSD (University of California San Diego) with a minor in science in 1975. "Although their music program was extremely avant garde, I fortunately had some good teachers there," he recalls, "especially Mary Gerard...I still take lessons from her every now and then." In 1983 he earned a degree in elementary education at San Diego State University, which later paid off when he was hired in 1997 by the Santee School District, culminating in a seven-year position through 2004, teaching fourth through eighth grades. "It was so cool," Vitas recollects, "because the administrators said that I'd be in charge of the music...they said just do whatever you think best."



Vitas in 1978.

During this time he noticed some hoarseness in his throat, which was eventually diagnosed as recurrent respiratory papillomatosis (RRP), a viral condition in which benign tumors grow in the respiratory tract. "Although I exacerbated the condition during my daily teaching routine, I was lucky I had a doctor who knew what she was doing and fixed it...an operation cleaned it out back then," he continued, "although I still go in every two years for laser treatment to manage it."



Vitas and Fred Benedetti, 1980s.

Concurrently, Vitas offered private lessons at New Expressions music store in the North Park section of San Diego during the 1980s and 1990s, where he had a full schedule of students and where he would eventually meet his future wife, Dr. Merri M. McMahon, a cardiologist at Scripps Clinic, whom he married in 1999 until her passing in 2018 after a 13-year battle with cancer. "She was my rock and was always encouraging and supportive of my musical endeavors," he reflected back. Additionally, in 1989, Vitas was hired to teach an improv class at Grossmont College that ran for a couple of years. "That was cool, an open-ended class with over a dozen violin students, winding up in a lot of call and response moments," he fondly remembered. Vitas' living room and music studio space at his

home prominently display his full assortment of violins, ranging from traditional to space age looking models, some the conventional four string violins, others the more unconventional five- and six-string variants. “The Steinberger CR5 violin (a five-string model) is the best sounding electric violin I have,” he states, “although I like using my six-string Viper model fretted violin, too, in performances as it gets a rise out of people because it’s so strange looking,” he exclaimed, “much like a Gibson Flying V guitar model.”

ON STAGE WITH THE STARS

It is always an honor to be hired as part of an ensemble to perform on stage with musical legends. Vitas has had numerous opportunities as he reflected back on a few of those moments.

With Lyle Lovett: “Very nice guy, was at the Fox Theater here in town...introduced and acknowledged the string quartet I was part of...really easy to play with him and we got to meet his wife at the time, Julia Roberts, after the show.”

With Johnny Mathis: “That was at Humphrey’s outdoor stage...great guy, gave me a big thumbs up during the show...to have someone of that stature acknowledge you is a great feeling.”

With the Page and Plant Band during their mid-1990s tour: “That was their concert at the Sports Arena,” Vitas recalled...“they were the nicest guys...here, I was playing the Led Zeppelin tune, ‘Kashmir,’ when I suddenly realized I wasn’t listening to it on my home stereo but I was right there in it playing that tune on stage with them.”

With the Moody Blues: “Oh yeah, that was at the Open Air Theater at San Diego State, two shows...the sound was amazing, a huge around-sound aura.”

With Smokey Robinson: “That was at the Del Mar Fair...great show, he gave me a big bear hug after the show. I also did a show at the Grandstand Stage there with Dionne Warwick,” he continued. “Very nice to work with...these shows come together very quickly, rehearsals in the day and then you’re on stage with them that same night, lots of fun.”

With Frankie Lane: “After I took a particular solo backing him up, he walked clear across the stage and shook my hand... overall, that’s the thing that I’ve learned about playing with big names,” Vitas summarized, “is how gracious so many of them are.”

Locally, Vitas was part of the orchestra backing up the popular and successful Beatles Alone/Together show at the Poway Performing Arts Center in 2018. **Drummer/vocalist Larry Grano commented afterward:** “A consummate musician and appreciated by his peers!”

BAND HISTORY

Vitas was fortunate to be an original member of Montezuma’s Revenge, formed in 1969, a legendary San Diego musical troupe of outstanding musicians with a huge following known for their original novelty tunes and on-stage



Vitas with Montezuma’s Revenge, early 1970s.

props and costumes. “I spent six years with them up until I graduated college in 1975.” Vitas recalled. “We played memorable concerts as well as the bar scene, county fairs, and stuff.” Guitarist and bandmate Jim Soldi recalls a memorable moment when the band was playing a series of pop concerts, sponsored by Monte Vista High School. “Chris was an excellent music transcriptionist,” Soldi said. “He had transcribed the violin solo from the song ‘White Bird’ by the band It’s a Beautiful Day. When he wasn’t able to make one of the performances, he gave the music to my dad, Andrew, a veteran professional violinist, known to many as Cactus Soldi. It was a special moment for me as I got to play in the



Fastrax with Vitas (top left) and Jim Soldi (bottom right).



Hot Club of San Diego at the Museum of Making Music (Alain Cola, Vitas, Patrick Berrogain).



Keltik Kharma with accordion great, Lou Fanucchi (far right).



Swing West band.

same musical setting with my father. Chris is a kind soul albeit often quirky with that trademark deadpan performance look,” Soldi concluded. From there Vitas hooked up with the Dallas Collins Band, another crowd favorite in the local club circuit. “That was a really great situation because I could play anything I wanted,” he recalled, “as they had a wide concept of tunes...they were great.” A short-lived band, Fastrax, which included Soldi, was next, along with pianist Gary Narramore. “That was a cool band, yes, short-lived but a challenging repertoire of eclectic tunes,” he remembers.

A local search for a violinist that could play rock by the late blues-rock singer, Laura Shawen, landed Vitas in his next band where he got to use his Barcus-Berry electric violin, hooked up to pedal effects including the wah-wah pedal. “We played some cool gigs at a bar near Belmont Park in Mission Beach,” he recalled. “I got to rock out with my pedal board plugged in. She died in 2012, but I’m still in touch with her guitar player, Judy Quinlan.”

The group, Primasi, was a collection of high-level classically trained musicians that Vitas fit in comfortably with. “That was guitarist George Svoboda’s group...we played a variety of tunes in 7/4 and 5/4 time,” he recalled. “It was a really good experience and I enjoyed that.” In 1995, the Cool Club Quartet and the Hot Club of San Diego groups threw Vitas into the Gypsy jazz limelight, where he got to showcase his jazz chops in tandem with guitarists in each setting, à la Stephane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt. The Cool Club quartet’s guitarist was the late Art Johnson, who he cites as helping him learn how to play stylistically in that genre. “We did a concert at the Horton Grand,” Vitas recalled, “that brought the concert’s producer, Holly Hofmann, to tears during our performance.” That group morphed into the Hot Club of San Diego after Johnson moved abroad and was replaced by guitarist Patrick Berrogain. “It was so much fun playing that music,” he stated, “having studied many of violinist Grappelli’s solos.” In an appearance at the annual NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) show in Anaheim, Vitas got to play and purchase the aforementioned Steinberger CR5 violin, which he used to perform with that day.

Then there was Swing West, which featured a father-son combo on guitars, Dave Dekker and his son, Matt Dekker, a musical setting that Vitas could play freely behind their vocal arrangements. “When you would put a chart in front of Chris,” Matt Dekker fondly recalls, “you could have all the confidence that whatever he came up with was going to be fantastic.” Also, Checkfield, a New Age ensemble, founded by Ron Satterfield (guitar, keyboards, synthesizer, vocals) and John Archer (guitar, keyboards, synthesizer), who had four albums released with American Gramophone between 1986 and 1992, asked Vitas to join them. “We played a memorable concert at the American Gramophone headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska,” Vitas recalled, “in addition to concerts at Humphreys locally.”

KELTIK KHARMA AND BEYOND

After many moons as an accomplished sideman, Vitas established his own group as leader and composer with his own baby—Keltik Kharma—in the late 1990s, producing eight CDs between 2000 and 2013 and joining forces with longtime musical cohorts, guitarist Fred Benedetti and bassist Jeff Pekarek, who stated, “Chris’ arrangements had a unique style, which I thought of as Celtic-Jazz fusion.” Their history of performing together goes back to 1988 when Vitas was a member of Pekarek’s group, the Transylvania Quartet. “Some wonderful sounds from Chris in that band,” Pekarek fondly recalled. Benedetti, whom Vitas



At 98 Bottles with Sky Ladd, Jeff Pekarek, Vitas, Fred Benedetti, Duncan Moore).

has known since 1990, has teamed up with Vitas in a number of performance settings since, including playing under the moniker of the Midi Brothers. “We would have our midi (musical instrument digital interface) instruments plugged in, playing jazzed up classical arrangements,” Vitas recalled. “But after a while we realized how cheesy the flute and clarinet sounds were...it lost the sound of our instrument’s natural tone quality.”

Vitas’ compositions were intentionally written in a New Age nuance. “I thought the future was this New Age music thing, but it really wasn’t, but that’s okay,” Vitas reflected. “Looking back, though, it was a great time playing with those guys and producing those recordings.” Vitas says of his 2009 disc, *iKharma*, as his personal favorite along with *Cocktail Kharma* in 2013. Renowned flutist and pianist, Lori Bell, whom Vitas studied theory and

improvisation with for five years, co-wrote and arranged some of the tunes on *Cocktail Kharma* in addition to playing flute and piano on most tracks. “He’s a wonderful guy—quirky, and a hell of a violinist,” said Bell recently in praise of Vitas’ character and musicianship.



His 2016 CD, *Willow Weep for Me*, an entire album of jazz standards, featuring a host of such top-shelf jazz folks as Peter Sprague, Sky Ladd, Bob Magnusson, Justin Grinnell, Duncan Moore, and Bell, became a seminal album for Vitas in terms of how he measured himself as a competent jazz violinist, especially in improvising. “I started to improvise more around the melody as opposed to just improvising over the chords,” he said, “a valuable tip I learned from Bell’s tutelage along with similar advice from violinist Nora Germain. That approach opened up a whole new world for me,” he continued. “Even my wife, Merri, began to hear the difference when I would practice at home. It gave me the confidence to perform my own concerts,” he concluded, one that showcased the compositions of violinist Jean-Luc Ponty and another showcasing the compositions of saxophonist Wayne Shorter.

Playing bass for the Ponty concert, Pekarek remembers well the intricate arrangements: “Some of the most demanding music I’ve ever played,” he exclaimed.

These experiences became a stepping stone for Vitas to come full circle and commence performing solo with recorded backing tracks. “I started performing shows once a week on my front porch in April of 2020,” Vitas said. “I’d play a combination of jazz and New Age material...one time I had around a hundred people from the neighborhood gathered around to listen.” It was his way of thanking many of his neighbors for supporting him during his time of grief after losing his wife to cancer and also to offer live music during the dark days of the pandemic.

HIS PEERS WEIGH IN

So many fellow musicians that Vitas has worked with have great respect for the man with the golden bow. “Chris is one of the greats and he’s got the chops and can improvise, too,” said guitarist **Peter Sprague**, “and he’s a funny fellow, too, and that helps keep it cooking along... Chris Vitas for president.”



At Dizzy's (Duncan Moore, Lori Bell, Vitas, Chuck Perrin).

- From guitarist **Fred Benedetti**: “Chris and I go WAY back! Lots of gig history there and we have so many shared interests well beyond our music connection. It’s without doubt that Chris is a great musician, but he is more to me than that; he is a wonderful, unique friend to hang out with... Viva Vitas!”
- From fellow fiddler **Tom Cunningham**: “He is an amazing musician on fiddle and jazz violin... I always loved being on a gig with Chris. On mutual gigs we would work out some twin fiddle harmonies; he has a great musical sense of humor as we would throw in little punch lines, fitting in a lick from Popeye the sailor or some other cartoon in the middle of a solo. He is a unique individual and a San Diego treasure!”

- From **Delene St. Clair and Barry Cahill** of Hot Pursuit Music Entertainment: “A brilliant player! He taught us a lot about the feel of Irish and Celtic music... Chris is always ready to help his fellow musicians and always professional! He’s witty, funny, and lovingly quirky! That’s why we love Chris!”
- From bassist **Rob Thorsen**: “Chris has been an important part of our San Diego music scene for many years. He was showing up almost every week at my duo gig and adding his talents. It was always a treat and the audience loved him... quite a character!”
- From singer/songwriter/author **Cindy Lee Berryhill**: “Chris has more than just an ability to make any kind of violin playing look easy. He’s like a savant of the instrument, one minute not knowing what to play, the next full of ideas and spectacular riffs. Chris has played on two of my albums and shared the stage a good number of times. He’s got a theatrical flair and got that bit of something in music we sometimes call genius.”
- From violinist **Nora Francesca Germain**: “Chris Vitas loves creating, loves music, and has a tenacious spirit. He is a generous person and cares deeply for his community.”
- From musician and musical promoter **Loren Smith**: “My opportunity to work on stage with Chris came in the ’90s when he joined the group I was in called the Jackstraws! From our pirate crew to our cowboy roundup, I could always count on Chris to add the ‘jelly in the doughnut’ to whatever musical theme we presented!”
- From cellist **Renata Bratt**: “Chris and I were musical buddies and played in a couple of different ensembles together. He inspired me to play Celtic and later American fiddle tunes as well as jazz and rock—his musical eclecticism has led many of us musicians to aspire to that same love of diversity in musical styles.”
- From multi-instrumentalist **Yochanan Sebastian Winston**: “I’ve played hundreds of gigs with Chris, traversing classical, jazz, Irish, Jewish—you can pretty much name it and we’ve done it. Chris doesn’t categorize music, he just brings his incredible soul and musicianship to every performance and leaves the music better than he found it.”

- From this author: “I’ve known Chris since 1982 and learned a lot from him in working weddings, corporate and musical theater gigs together in addition to both of us teaching in adjacent studios over many years... a great friend and musical sage that can play effortlessly over any style of music.”

WORDS OF WISDOM

Some final words from Mister Vitas for those studying and or performing music, or both. “Practice, practice, practice, but have fun... Learn the music 110% and then play it 100%... Learn by always listening to others’ input... write down and file new ideas and concepts you learn.” And, in closing, some words to live by from this soon-to-be septuagenarian Chris Vitas: “Grow up but never grow old and LIVE LONG AND PROSPER!”



Vitas, playing on his porch, during the shutdown.