



# GUITAR

## And Now, Another Guitar Player That You Have Never Heard Of

by Jason Vanselow

I have a couple of touchstone phrases that I use with my class throughout the semester. One of them is: “There are as many ways to play guitar as there are people who play guitar.” The other is: “My job is not to teach you the right way to play, but to put enough tools in your guitar toolbox so that when this class is over you can start to play whatever you want.”

And in the spirit of those two statements, one of the activities I consistently use in my guitar classes is entitled, “And Now, Here’s Another Guitar Player That You Probably Have Never Heard Of.” This, of course, consists of playing video performance clips of guitarists from all different styles of music.

This serves a couple of purposes. The first is to counter the stereotypical ways in which people normally come in contact with the guitar: as a player who is a member of a rock band or as an instrument that accompanies a singer. There’s nothing wrong with these views of the guitar. These are the places that most of us found and fell in love with the guitar. But so often the guitar music that we encounter goes no further than those two images and one of the things that is so amazing about the instrument is the way that it spans history and musical genre.

These performances are also a great way to start a discussion that can compare what they are learning to play in class versus some of the things that they hear and see in other performances. This can serve to both reinforce what you are teaching in the class and also get students to start thinking about how they want to play beyond the scope of the class.

As the title suggests, I’ve found it’s worthwhile to really stretch out beyond what we normally think of as guitar music. For instance, while the guitar as we know it didn’t take its familiar shape and sound until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its ancestors were some of the earliest instruments.

The Arabian instrument known as the oud, for example, is one of the first guitar ancestors and is first mentioned in literature

in Iraqi and Iranian texts from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. The oud looks and sounds a bit like its descendant the lute (in fact, the translation of “oud” from Arabic is “lute”); it has no frets but is played with a pick rather than with fingers.

The oud is still a healthy part of the music scene in the Maghreb and the Middle East. One player whose performances are easily found on YouTube is Rahim Alhaj. Born in Iraq but now living in New Mexico, Alhaj’s story of leaving Iraq during the Saddam Hussein era is fascinating and worth sharing with students. And while he is a fine example of traditional oud music, some of his compositions, such as *Horses* are notable for mixing the traditional sound of the oud but using western harmonies rather than emphasizing the quarter tone laden middle eastern harmonic language that can throw off new listeners.

Classical guitar maverick Julian Bream also offers a historical look at the progression of the guitar from its beginnings. In his eight-part television mini series titled *Guitarra: A Musical Journey Through Spain* (1985, distributed by Kultur Video), Bream traces the guitar’s Spanish roots from the 1500s by performing works in Spanish environs on the baroque guitar, the vihuela, and the renaissance guitar, as well as the modern classical guitar.

The performance that inspires some of the most lively conversation in the class is *Death Letter* performed by American blues original, Son House. This live performance, recorded in the 1960s during the folk and blues revival can be found on YouTube. Son House’s idiosyncratic style of playing goes against almost everything that I teach in my class, and yet is one of the most entertaining performances to watch.

Some of the most interesting and unsung playing that has been done in the last ten years or so has been done by finger-style guitarists. Players like Andy McKee and Kaki King have redefined how to play guitar by using a number of extended techniques like right hand fretboard tapping and other percussive effects. Andy McKee’s

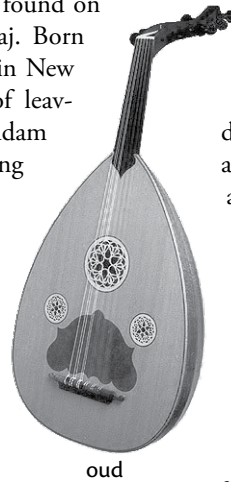
*Drifting* video was one of the first of this wave of experimental acoustic guitar players to bring this new style of playing to a younger audience.

This is the first performance that I show during the class in order to give students an idea of what’s possible technically and also of the beauty of the sound the guitar can make.

My favorite performances to show are Brazilian guitarists Yamandu Costa and Luiz Bonfá. Bonfá, one of the musicians who brought bossa nova to the United States in the 1960s, is an incredible example of how to blend melody and accompaniment together on one guitar and even in some performances imitating a percussion section. There are a wide variety of television performances of his available on YouTube, including duets with Perry Como. The musical performances are wonderful although sometimes you have to deal with the technical flaws of ’60s and ’70s television.

Yamandu Costa is a Brazilian player who is currently producing incredible work. His playing is exuberant and full of personality and he is fun to watch as well. He plays a seven-string guitar (with one extra bass string) and often plays with other musicians who play guitar and sometimes folk instruments such as the cavaquinho. Showing these performances to my students has been a great way to give them great examples of how to play and to expose them to music that is outside of the mainstream but deserves their attention.

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