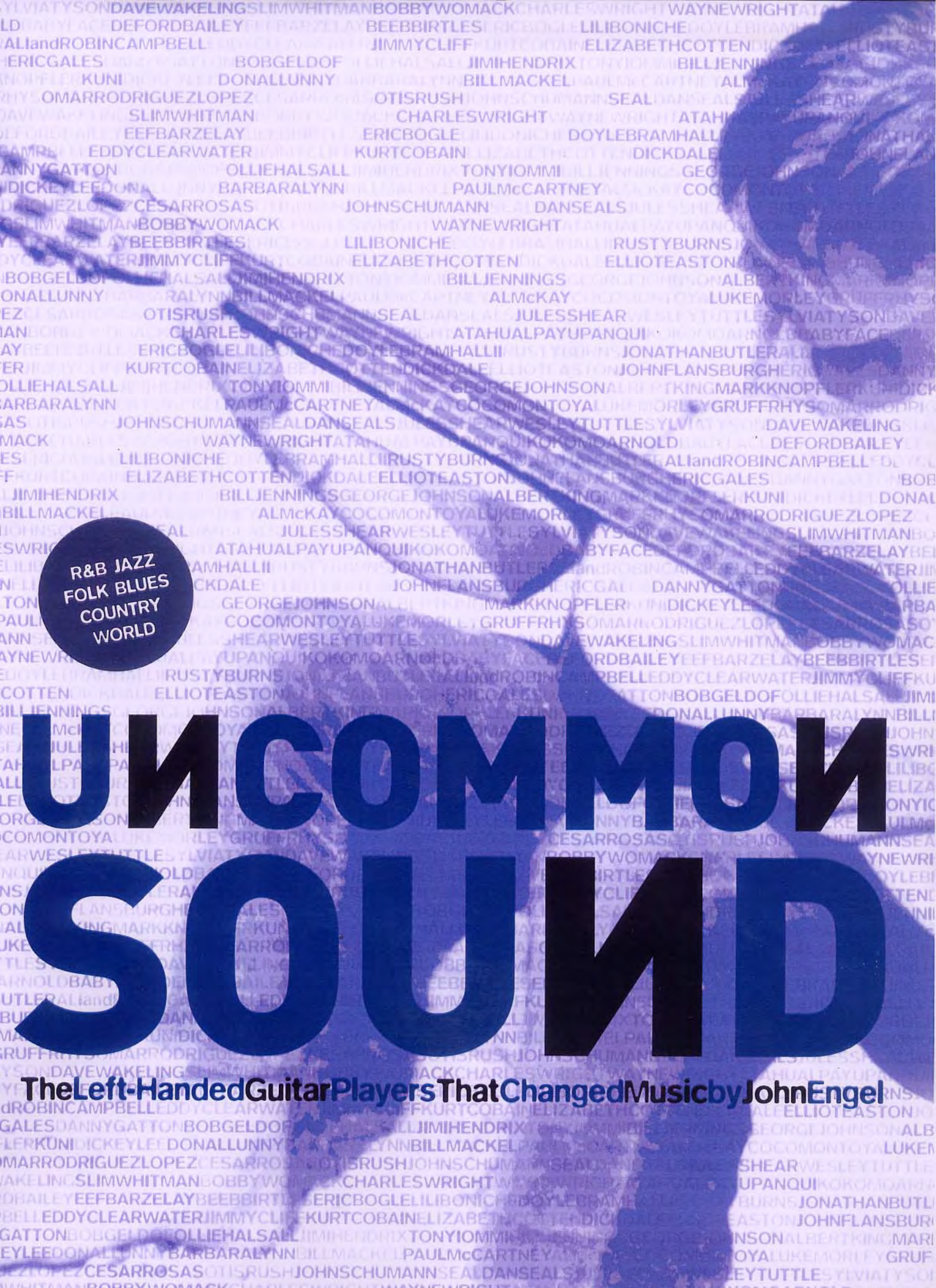




R&B JAZZ
FOLK BLUES
COUNTRY
WORLD

UNCOMMON SOUND

The Left-Handed Guitar Players That Changed Music by John Engel

PERE SOTO

Born on November 20 1958 in Badalona, Spain

Pere Soto takes great pride in the fact that he taught himself everything he knows and does. Equally comfortable in pure bebop, Django jazz and rock, he never tires of exploring the outer reaches of his creative universe.

The diminutive guitarist has had a prolific and colorful career as an audacious musician, a refined composer in both jazz and contemporary orchestral music, and a fervent exponent of Reinhardt-style gypsy jazz with his combo, Django's Castle. Dizzily busy, Soto has recorded and, especially, performed with many jazz musicians and vocalists in different countries, including organist Big John Patton, vocalist Fay Victor, keyboard player Bill Gerhardt, bop alto saxman Lou Donaldson, and singers Vania Nazaré and Cráneo de Jade.

"I started playing [guitar] when I was four or five – upside down. I didn't know what I was doing, but my first gig was when I was eight. I played a Beatles song and sang – badly, but I was singing. Then when I was 12, they had music classes after school, like optional workshops. That's when I switched my strings over. The teacher was a pianist and, after a few weeks, he kicked me out. 'You'll never be a musician,' he yelled, 'get out!' About 15 years later I had to find a piano player for a big concert. A few guys came and the piano player who ended up accompanying me was him – the teacher who had kicked me out!

"At 12, I met a girl who played guitar and she introduced me to classical guitar. She started to teach me and I took it seriously after that. At my first paying gig I was 15. It was at a discotheque, I played in a blues trio, stuff like Eric Clapton... I was a rock and blues player 'til I was 22, 23." Whereas some left-handed kids are reasonably free to develop in the way that suits them best, circumstances were starker for Soto, growing up in a Spain ruled by dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco. The authoritarian regime did not permit left-handedness in schools – it was treated as a deviant trait and suppressed by force if necessary.

"I got into serious problems because I am left-handed. I was not allowed to write with my left hand in school. When they keep beating you, you adapt, you save yourself. I had to learn to play guitar right-handed too and I didn't want to do it, it wasn't comfortable for me. At the conservatory they said, 'You can stay and come to the class but we will not give you a degree. You have to play right-handed for that.' At the time, it was Franco's regime. There was no democracy. Bullshit like that happened a lot.

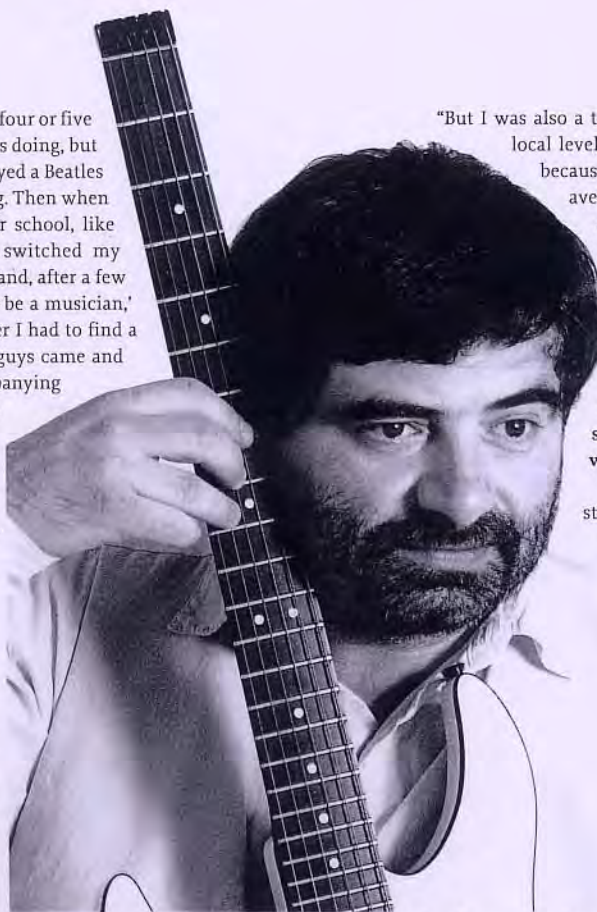
"But I was also a table-tennis champion, playing left-handed, on a local level. Overall, being left-handed can be a good thing because you have to make more mental effort than the average person. That's the reason many left-handers are really good at different things. If you are left-handed, you are a stronger person because you fight against the normal rules all your life. I want to stress that point, because I'm really against conventions, against rules. I believe rules have to be natural rules, but the world is becoming more and more restrictive."

Soto overcame these contrary conditions seemingly unscathed and went on to thrive as a willful, versatile, left-handed artist.

"When you're really young, like I was when I started, you feel like the guitar is the prolongation of your body: I was not thinking about notes – where is B, D or whatever; I just thought and my fingers went there. It's like 100% communion. It is something very special. The guitar belongs to you. It's more connected to the soul. I think the guitar is more soulful than a piano. The guitar has no limits. You are not limited to each note. You can do everything. On the guitar you feel the contact with the instrument fully. If you play eight hours a day for six months, you feel like the strings are almost inside your body. That's very fulfilling."

Through his teens, Soto's attention was galvanized by music. After high school, he played a steady flow of gigs. But, trying to accommodate his father's demands, he also held two day-time jobs. The pace was untenable and he got fired from one job – a fortuitous incident for someone who only wants to play music.

"The first big tour I did was when an important guitar player from Argentina named Miguel Palo came up. [He had played in the James Last Orchestra in the early 1970s.] He was working in an orchestra playing



Brazilian music in Germany, and was on holiday in Barcelona. He came in the room where we were practicing and really liked what I was doing. So he signed me up and took me to Germany with him. He said, 'I want to teach you everything I know. You have good potential.' That was my first experience with Brazilian music. It was every day, studying ten to twelve hours a day: samba, bossa nova, Jobim, everything. Brazilian music became my biggest influence, really.

"Miguel Palo was a strange guy. He had been in the secret police in Argentina or something like that. He escaped out of there and was hiding out in Europe. He was a virtuoso, an incredible guitar player. But then, he always got into trouble and fights. He was very violent, a total schizophrenic. One day, he just disappeared."

After his return from Germany, Soto applied himself to playing blues and blues-rock. His heroes were Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Alvin Lee (of Ten Years After), Johnny Winter, and the Allman Brothers. Prog-rock also held his interest, especially Robert Fripp of King Crimson and Steve Howe with Yes.

"Blues was especially big for me. But then I got a record of Barney Kessel playing in Copenhagen. I was amazed. Not far from blues, but not blues. That's when I got into jazz. I dove into Barney Kessel and Joe Pass, and after that there was no stopping me.

"During the time we were doing blues gigs, I was never sure about myself on stage. I would play and then get really depressed because I'd made some mistakes... One time I got drunk at a gig and broke two strings – the two high strings – while playing. I had to finish the music, so I improvised. Because I was drunk I was looser. And when I stopped I thought they would lynch me, but it was the other way around: everybody went crazy. I was shocked. You're trying to do the best you can and nobody reacts, and here you are being crazy, doing whatever you feel, and people react great and love it. That's because you're playing with your soul, nothing else. That was a turning point for me. It changed my mind about the music. Once you are on stage you shouldn't use



The Pere Soto Trio and Melva Houston.

Soto with Font del Balg at Gironella, Barcelona, Spain, 1995.





your mind. Music is art, it comes from inside, from the soul. If you use your mind, then you're not able to open the door."

While playing jazz in his 20s, Soto made another discovery that would change his life: Django Reinhardt. Electrified by the great *gitan's* musicianship, Soto founded the group Django's Castle, which is still going strong today. He went as far as emulating Reinhardt's playing technique, interpreting some of Reinhardt's compositions by fretting with only two fingers: the master's other two fingers were paralyzed as a result of a burning accident. To this day, Soto still performs "Nuages" live with two fingers.

But, alongside his forays down the acoustic-jazz path, Soto led two other jazz formations, Paper Vegetal and the Pere Soto Group, which regularly performed and recorded in Catalonia.

"Paper Vegetal was Indian music. The percussionist had lived in India a long time. He played tablas. We were a little bit like Shakti, with John McLaughlin. Then the percussionist went back to India and the flute player moved to California and the band just stopped. But we had a really good time. I was also teaching at a school during this time. After that, I put a jazz band together. In 1988, I formed the Pere Soto Group with the most famous Catalan musicians. We did commercial jazz music, somewhere between Brazilian and fusion, very funky. We had a lot of success on radio and television."

The Pere Soto Group's 1989 LP, *Coincidencias* (Berman), was the most successful jazz record ever produced in Catalonia. It played on the radio twice a day there for two years and was named best record of the year by Radio Nacional 4.

Right after the fall of the Wall, Soto went to live in Berlin, Germany, for about a year. Unhappy there, he moved to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where he stayed for three years. There he met the American pianist Bill Gerhardt with whom he started a fruitful creative partnership. They recorded a first album as the Pere Soto & Bill Gerhardt Quartet in Amsterdam, *Metanoic* (1992, Riff), made up of 14 original compositions divided equally between Soto and Gerhardt.

The album was voted best CD of the month in February 1993 by the Southern Arts Federation's Jazz South Radio Program and got a lot of air play on jazz stations throughout the U.S. *Metanoic* offers a classic jazz form, with soothing and highly melodic pieces performed by a relaxed and cheerfully bonded quartet. Among Soto's compositions, "Pluvent" is especially engaging, while "Memories of Grandma Isabel" uses a more modern sonic palette. Except for the solo acoustic "Eternal Princess," Soto employs his Les Paul throughout. His distinctive soloing style alternates between compact, tender melodic lines and fast emotive bursts over one or several bars.

In 1992, just as Barcelona was hosting the summer Olympics, Soto was invited to play with Gerhardt at a jazz festival in Charlotte, North Carolina. Soto's short stature, his joyous disposition and passionate, left-handed playing style were an instant success with the festival crowd. By popular demand, he was invited to sit in with four different groups in a row, jamming in various jazz and blues forms.

"Then in 1994, I went to New York to record our CD *Particular Vernacular* [1994, Planet X]. I stayed at Jeff Ballard's place, who is Chick Corea's drummer now. New York is the place but it's almost impossible to live there for me, and one of the things I don't like about the music in New York is that too many things sound really aggressive. That's because life there is really aggressive." *Particular Vernacular* is an exciting album, peppered with surprises and subtle intricacies. It continues the 50/50 composing approach of the previous album, but the music here is far more expressionistic. Recorded in a Manhattan studio, the ten tracks ebb and flow along bluesy lines, bebop structures, and free jazz rides. "Terrible Parable," written by the two co-leaders, provides a fascinating play between a strong melodic theme and nervous instrumental escapades. Even with the mad crescendos of Soto's "Reina Reflexia" or the free-bop-blues spirit of Gerhardt's title cut, a classic melodic flair is never far behind — as heard on Soto's searching "Born Again" blues and his fittingly titled "I Dream of You." "Per Elisa," by Soto, offers a captivating saga of fluid melodic explorations and hectic clusters of colliding instruments.

"In 1996, I went to San Francisco. I arranged a concert with three singers, two Americans and one Catalan. We called it the Super Vocal Meeting. We did a tour in Spain and then I talked Delta Airlines into sponsoring our tour and

they paid for the tickets for the vocalists, some musicians and myself to fly anywhere we wanted in the States. I didn't know where to go. I knew New York but I'd never been to the West Coast, so I decided to go to San Francisco because a friend of mine lived there. Man, I really loved San Francisco. I bought my left-handed U.S. Steinberger there for \$500. The salesman said it was really difficult to find a left-hander who liked that guitar!"

Going back to 1983, when he formed his gypsy-jazz band Django's Castle (taken from the title of a tune by Django), Pere Soto didn't simply choose to replicate the Hot Club classics. From the start, true to his headstrong approach to the arts, Soto wrote originals that were presented alongside Reinhardt covers. His knack for melodic constructions and sensitive compositions proved well suited to this passionate musical genre and the group's CDs contain many sympathetic, catchy tunes.

Django's Castle has fluctuated between a trio and a quintet. In tribute to its primary inspiration, the group has kept its name, though it is essentially synonymous with 'Pere Soto and his group.' After many personnel changes, the current trio formation counts Joan Marti (upright bass), who joined the fray in the early 1990s, and Josep Traver (rhythm guitar), who came onboard in 1999. On the group's first album, *Nuages* (2001, Satchmo), Soto contributed only four originals, including the lovely "Ballad for Django" and swinging "Pastel Blues."

The covers are all imbued with Soto's imagination and character, from the dreamy title tune to Reinhardt's muscular, frenetic "Appel Indirect," where certain guitar passages must clock in at eight notes a second and some progressions border on cubism. Whereas the piece is under two minutes long on the album, Soto has been known to keep the furious volleys flying for more than four minutes on stage.

Soto's original compositions on the Castle's second outing, *Prisoners of Love* (2002, Chetman), account for eight of the 15 tracks. Highlights are



many, among them: the melancholy, tuneful title track, the breathless "Minor Swing," the joyful "Menor-K Blues," the captivating "Django's Dream," and a very personal and vivacious take on Reinhardt's "Djangology."

As worthy as all the albums are, *El Caliquenya Del Califa* (2004, Taller) is the outfit's most accomplished. Nine of the 13 tracks are by Soto and they are stellar illustrations of his romantic verve and unerring good taste. The opening title track sets a tone of instinctive elegance, tuneful bonhomie, and exquisite musicianship. The emphasis of the album is more on mood-setting pieces and sophisticated melodies than on technical sparkle. This said, there are plenty of fresh soloing turns on offer and a few swinging and hopping cuts, too, like his "My Amigo 'Jazz,'" though the fancy-free tunes are otherwise covers. Soto's winning originals include the magnificent and lush "Bolero Para Arely," with dancing strings (sampled though they are) reminiscent of John Barry's in an uplifting vein. There are also the tender "A Second Love" and mesmerizing "El Tio Sam Y Su Primo Pelagatos." The album

closes with two solo-guitar pieces – the delicately woeeful "Deje Mi Amor En Salina Cruz" and "Por Fin Te Encontré," whose complicated runs give its hopeful theme a nervy edge.

Soto's versatility, both in composition and performance, is all the more awe-inspiring given that he never took lessons of any kind. Beyond being an accomplished artist in blues, rock, fusion, bebop and classic jazz, he has mastered the intricate and spirited stylings of gypsy jazz; he has also



"You have to work for nothing but your soul, to make your soul grow. You need the aptitude, sure, to put one stone on top of another one, on top of another one, and so on. But in jazz, you get on stage and you shouldn't think anything – just keep your mind open. If your mind is busy with thoughts, it's really hard to come up with interesting things in your playing because you are already putting up walls. Have an empty mind and a full soul. I believe in that."



learned to play classical music and composes harmonically complex classical and contemporary works for chamber formations and large orchestras.

"I'm entirely self-taught in everything I do. The theory was quite heavy. I took five years to study composition. I wrote things for orchestra that have never been performed, but my String Quartet [Nº 2] got played. I went to Mexico in the summer of 2000 because they performed one of my string quartets over there. They say the music has some connections to jazz, the rhythms maybe. It's somewhere between Bartok and I-don't-know-what... It's atonal music. I tried to find people to perform it here in Spain but everybody was saying that it was too difficult, too complicated. Then I put it on my Web site and the String Quartet of Mexico City contacted me and said they liked it and wanted to perform it. I couldn't believe it. None of the quartet members were Mexican, actually. They were German and American; really good players. They play in the symphony in Mexico City. Amazing level of musicianship. I stayed around there playing jazz for a couple of months."

Soto's "String Quartet Nº 2" in four movements, which was performed by the Cuarteto de la Ciudad de México on June 3, 2000 is a riveting and passionate work. The instruments join and interweave, turning deceptively challenging music into a brisk array of emotive and accessible scenes.

Soto has composed many classical works as well as experimental, atonal pieces. Among these varied forays, one finds an opera, a saxophone quartet, a 3-movement suite for large orchestra, which was performed live in Catalonia in 1998, and chamber works for quartet, trio, and duet forms in assorted instrument distributions.

"The things that make people intelligent individuals are culture and music. Music is not only technique. For me, it is spiritual. In all civilizations, music has always been spiritual. Music is about having something to say, not something to show off. It's good to simplify sometimes, not to be in the middle of the best players, but to develop yourself instead."

Pere Soto's eclectic inspirations have all filtered into his musical vernacular, manifesting themselves in his diverse projects: The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Robert Fripp, Carlos Jobim, Django Reinhardt, John Coltrane, Charles Ives, Johann Sebastian Bach, et al.

His guitar style is incisive and fraught with emotion. While study and craft underlie his work, technique never obscures a prevalent fondness for melody. In classical, blues or jazz, he may hurl into dizzying cascades of notes and keep a sense of surprise within a relaxed structure. In a free-jazz or atonal framework, he will release tension with a harmonious coda or a tuneful leitmotiv. While it is often romantic, his music is never maudlin. A spirited solo takes preference over a clean one, as empathy, not prowess, guides his esthetic choices.

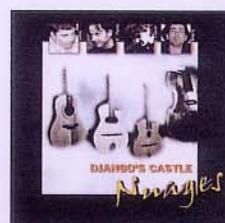
"The most important thing is to understand what function a chord has. Once you know that, you just practice. When you teach yourself, and you have enough energy to keep your concentration, you don't learn what you don't need, so it goes fast. But the difficult thing is to know what to filter out what you don't need. And that brings us back to the spiritual. Every day is different. You're going to do different things every time you play, always change. You have to get to the essence.



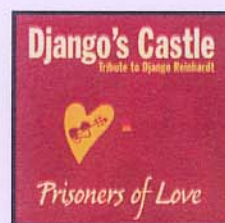
Pere Soto & Bill Gerhardt
METANOIC
1992, Riff (NL)



Bill Gerhardt & Pere Soto
PARTICULAR VERNACULAR
1994, Planet X



Django's Castle
NUAGES
2001, Satchmo Jazz



Django's Castle
PRISONERS OF LOVE
2002, Chetman

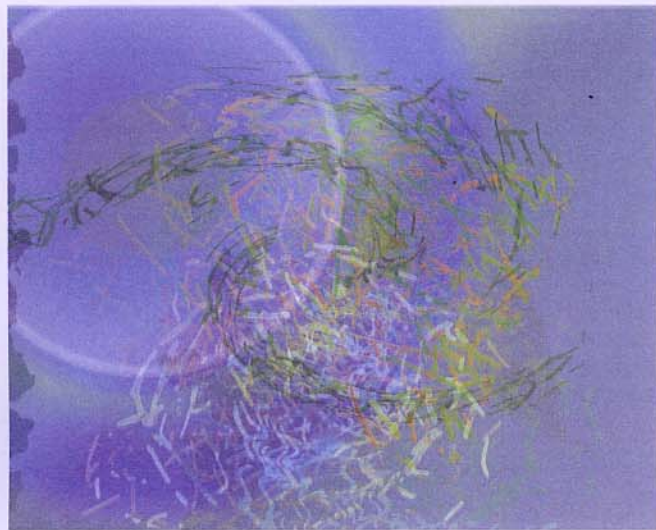
"My music is usually 80% improvisation, 20% written on paper. But it depends on the tunes. Some tunes are really free, open. On other tunes the melody is written down. In jazz it's different. The complicated thing in jazz is to keep the structure for the whole length of the song. Somebody who is mechanically and theoretically minded can't understand that because he cannot figure out when the next guy is coming up again. You have to have great imagination and a good ear – that gives you the capacity to do it. That is improvisation. But classic jazz is about keeping the form, the structure: do five times the chorus, and then comes the end and that's it. Easy to remember. But when you try to improvise on a higher level it gets more complicated.

"If I want to go farther in music now, the solution for me is not to look at the music but to look at other things in my life, like my relationships. I need to be surrounded by compatible people. I also need more smiles in my life and to see more people, other things than what I'm used to seeing now. Then, this will help me transfer a new energy into my music and spark new inspirations."

Although he displays a deep and eclectic technique and builds all his music around his guitar, Pere Soto does not consider himself a guitarist as much as an artist. Moreover, as if he were not busy enough with his varied composing and performing engagements, Soto also paints and is a keen computer graphic designer – all of which, again, he has taught himself.

"I enjoy playing with unpredictable forms and colors. For me, music and painting are more similar than they are different. It's like searching for meanings... Music has tones, colors, even light. Sometimes it is as if light were just another dimension of sound or both of them belonged to one same, greater dimension."

His pictures generally explore abstract, deconstructed or cubist combinations of shapes and colors. While his music is most often emotionally direct and intuitively comprehensible, his pictorial art makes no attempt at realistic representation. However, like the music, it evokes many moods and creates a dense yet inviting sphere into which the observer can let his imagination wander – just as the artist has let his instincts take over.



Django's Castle
EL CALIQUENYU DEL CALIFA
2004, Taller de Músicas



Vania Nazare
BRASILEIRA MENTE
1996, Crossover



"I play guitar but I'm not a guitarist. I need to put my energies out in whatever ways I can, and I mostly use the guitar, like others might use paints. Music is the one thing I know best, but it's just the way I am. It's spiritual, it's about the way you are. I am an individualist. I believe in the individualist attitude, because we are all individuals; it's natural. If everybody was a good individualist, then you could talk about having a global community."

With and without *Django's Castle*, Pere Soto has performed at numerous festivals in the U.S., England, Israel, Mexico, Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and Spain. He has also taken part in other artists' recordings, such as vocalist Fay Victor's *In My Own Room* (1998, Timeless) and the Brazilian singer Vania Nazare's *Brasileira Mente* (1996, Crossover).

An uncompromising musician and an ever-searching artist, Pere Soto is just as adept at soothing as he is at challenging the listener. One minute he distills a beguiling tune, the next he unleashes an array of notes out of left field. His vigorous, appealing music is frequently punctuated by impulsive surges that give it relief, like the wind's ripples on a serene lake – questioning, boisterous or simply life-affirming.

