

LIFE

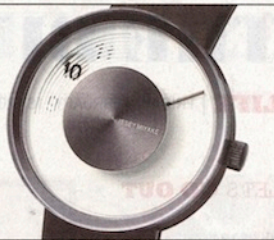
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Strumming the STRINGS OF CULTURE

FIESTA BRINGS CLASSICAL, JAZZ AND FLAMENCO RHYTHMS TO BANGKOK



GUITAR FESTIVAL

DAVID SEIDLER

Hucky Eichelmann is serious about guitar. You can see it in his fingernails. Those on his right hand are long but finely manicured. He is also fiercely protective of his five "picks". "Oh, I wouldn't let a manicurist touch these," he laughs, "I do it myself."

You can see it in his fingers. Those on his left hand wear lines and calluses, speak of decades of dedicated strumming. But more than anything, you can see it in his eyes.

When he talks about next weekend's inaugural Bangkok Guitar Fiesta, his eyes come alive. Over three days, it will take in performances by the Grammy-nominated British jazz guitarist Martin Taylor, Australia's foremost classical guitarists Slava and Leonard Grigoryan, and Spanish flamenco legends the Victor Monge Serrano Quartet, as well as intimate workshops with each of the artists.

The fiesta has been a long time coming for its artistic director. A stalwart of the guitar movement in Thailand, Eichelmann says that over the past 30 years, the country has come to embrace the instrument.

"When I got here three decades ago, there were maybe three people who could play classically," he says. "They didn't understand what this thing was."

Eichelmann has since taken his craft to universities and other venues across regional Thailand, and the guitar has finally made inroads into the Thai zeitgeist.

He has been involved in concerts and festivals before. For the first festival he hosted in Thailand, in 1984, he remembers walking into the Bangkok Bank and asking to speak to the president.

"What do you want?" the secretary demanded. "It's time for you to give back to society, to culture," he answered. Half an hour later, he had his meeting and his sponsorship.



Hucky Eichelmann

It is this spirit of cultural progress that underscores almost all that Eichelmann does. He derides the term "music business" — a phrase he labels discordant. "The attitude to music today is fundamentally flawed. The music business sees business ordering what artists do. You cannot order art. It has to develop individually, separate from other influences."

For years, he's had record executives and industry types tell him that the Thai market doesn't need good music. They're happy with sugary ballads and mindless pop, the suits cried, so let them have it. Eichelmann disagrees. "If you give people rice and nothing else, they will eat rice. But," he smiles, angling his big hands upwards, "if you give them chicken just once, trust me, they'll be ordering that from now on."

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