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Artist smashes stereotypes of classical guitar

By **WAYNE BLEDSOE**, bledsoe@knews.com
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William Kanengiser has a different view of classical guitar. It's Kanengiser who, with his group the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, adapted music by jazz greats Pat Metheny and Ralph Towner, rock icon Frank Zappa and fingerstyle guitar legend Chet Atkins for a Grammy-winning album titled "Guitar Heroes."

"Some people might think this is a stuffy, old-school experience," says Kanengiser. "I think they'd be surprised that they can be moved by it."

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you want to go in a different direction."

It was classical-guitar great Andres Segovia who first steered Kanengiser to classical guitar.

"When I was 7 or 8 years old, my parents took me to see Segovia," he says. "It was this 3,000-seat hall in Los Angeles. I remember when I sat down, I thought there was no way I was going to sit through this. This little dot walks out on stage, and there was no amplification. You could hardly hear him. But by the end of the show, he seemed huge, because I'd focused in on him."

As far as playing, it was Kanengiser's older brother who provided the means.

"My older brother had a guitar and a method book, and he wouldn't let me try it," recalls Kanengiser. "Finally, he got frustrated and let me. I learned the entire book in about three

Kanengiser is talking on his cell phone while driving to a classical-guitar festival in Tijuana, Mexico.

Both with the LAGQ and as a solo artist, he's shattered a lot of stereotypes of classical guitar.

He performs both as a solo artist and with the LAGQ (he's performing solo at his Knoxville show).

"As a soloist, you can go with whatever the moment inspires you to do," says Kanengiser. "With the quartet, I feel like I'm part of a big steam train, but it's hard to steer a train if



William Kanengiser keeps his classical style while dipping into many other types of music.

WILLIAM KANENGISER

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weeks, and he said, "Well, just keep the guitar!"

Kanengiser performed both rock and classical music as a teenager and eventually attended the University of Southern California, intending to focus on both classical and studio guitar ("studio" was the term that encompassed genres other than classical).

He studied classical guitar under Pepe Romero.

"Once I found out how much there was to learn, I sold my electric guitar and just focused on nylon strings," Kanengiser says.

The Los Angeles Guitar Quartet formed because students in the USC guitar program were required to take ensemble classes.

"Pepe helped get the group together," says Kanengiser. "Then we got a few small gigs, and a little later we became semiprofessional. I guess after all these years, we're still finishing our homework."

While Kanengiser was a champion in competition, he considers his accepting the opportunity to act as guitar coach and double on the 1986 film "Crossroads" as a pivotal moment in his career. Kanengiser trained and stood in for the film's star Ralph Macchio. While Kanengiser only appears onscreen for approximately 45 seconds, the film became an inspiration for many future guitarists.

"I worked for two or three weeks on it," he says. "I met Ry Cooder and Steve Vai. I took it to be a lesson in flexibility and answering the door when opportunity knocks. I learned you don't have to do it the old-fashioned way."

Throughout his career, Kanengiser has raised eyebrows. His second solo album, "Echoes of the Old World," included arrangements of music from Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

"It was completely off the beaten path for what most classical guitarists would do," he says.

Being recognized as a maverick at least earns an artist notoriety - even if it takes a back people who consider themselves purists.

"At the root of it, I'm a classical-guitar player," says Kanengiser. "But if it's good music, it doesn't matter what style it is."



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