



Bhagavad Guitar

By RICHARD GEHR

Where does music come from? Musicians are like radio receivers, proposes one theory, transforming sounds already zipping through the ether into the sculpted air that eventually tickles our tympanic membranes. Turn 'em on, tune 'em in, and stand back. But besides emanating a certain false modesty, doesn't this theory subtly shortchange the individual creative spirit? I used to think so, until a friend directed my own antennae toward guitarist Tisziji Muñoz.

A self-taught guitarist who practices rarely, if ever, Tisziji (pronounced tis-see-gee) Muñoz's musical signature can be recognized clearly in about three notes. It's an ecstatic yet slightly scratchy singing voice of a guitar sound that borders on feedback like a harmonic disturbance interfering gently with the aforementioned cosmic radio waves. Like John Coltrane, in whose tradition he most definitely lies, Tisziji's cable connection plugs in directly to the source, the *mysterium eternalis*, the inner mounting flame from which music doth flow.

Coltrane was the first major Western player to adjust his internal rabbit ears to the universal broadcast spectrum. Guitarists John McLaughlin, Carlos Santana, and Allan Holdsworth all eventually hopped on the Trane, extending his modes and metaphysics in a variety of contexts, while the late Sonny Sharrock took Coltrane's methodology to the harmonic outskirts of an altogether different country. But none of these guitarists' music ebbs and flows as naturally out of the void, pure spirit, whatever you want to call it, as Tisziji's.

Most of the time you'll find Tisziji Muñoz teaching astrology and serving as spiritual guide to a Schenectady sect known as the Illumination Society. "The Bhagavad Guitar Player," Muñoz wrote in one of his many tracts, "is One Who, born Awake to Being the Sound of Light and the Light of Sound, Is Now Awake as the very Soul and Mind, Feeling and Heart-Source of Music, as That may Represent or Express the simple yet profound Love, Thought, Feeling-Tone and Free Action of One Who Is Its Own Sound." Muñoz is only invisible insofar as he has managed to avoid critical radar.

Since recording *Rendezvous With Now* for India Navigation in 1978, he has released eight albums and four cassettes. During the past two years, he has been dropping by Rashied Ali's Survival Studio in Soho, recording hours of material with fellow Coltrane acolytes: drummer Ali, saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, bassist Don Pate, and pianists John Hicks and Bernie Senensky. He recently released a trio of albums—*River of Blood*, *Present Without a Trace*, and *Spirit World*—from these sessions (on his own Anami Music label: P.O. Box 712, Schenectady, NY 12301; www.tisziji.com). He expects to release five more in the near future.

A Nuyorican born in Brooklyn in 1946, Muñoz joined percussionist Mongo Santamaria's rhythm posse at age 13. After leaving the army in the early '70s, he lived for a while in Toronto, where he became a musical mentor to keyboardist Paul Shaffer, who phoned me unexpectedly on Tisziji's behalf. "Tisziji's the real deal," attests Shaffer, who is all too familiar with the other kind. Muñoz played in Pharoah Sanders's band for several years during the '70s. And although he has performed live only sporadically since moving from New York City to Schenectady in 1984, he has gigged since then with the likes of McCoy Tyner, Dave Liebman, Idris Muhammed, and Cecil McBee.

Muñoz's music hits the ground running. "Ready or not," says some one at the outset of *Present Without a Trace*'s "Dearly Responsible," as the group erupts into a free-time, "Ascension"-like orgy. Tisziji has described his music as a "divine catastrophe" for good reason: his ultimate goal is to unhinge himself from structure and cruise on undiluted energy. His early recordings pick up where Coltrane left off, eventually circling back in the early '90s to recapitulate such standards as "My Favorite Things," "Giant Steps," and "Kind of Blue." Having transformed such standards as "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" and "If I Only Had a Brain" into tension-and-release pleasure bombs on 1995's *Spirit Man*, Muñoz returned the following year with the portentously titled *Death Is a Friend of Mine*. My favorite Muñoz album to date, this double CD bids a fond adieu to the past (i.e., other people's music), most notably in an epic meditation on Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Dindi," while setting the stage for whatever the hell he's doing now.

His three new albums contain 25 Muñoz originals spread over four discs (*Spirit World*'s a double), most of which he reportedly scribbled down in the studio just prior to the three in tense sessions in which they were recorded. *River of Blood*'s title refers to the "racial stream" that provided Muñoz with his affinity for Afro-Cuban and salsa rhythms (he plans to record with pianist Hilton Ruiz soon), and much of the album can be heard as a struggle to escape even those loose fetters. Muñoz spills clusters, often bushels, of rapid notes, which even with his metal pick retain a warmth that quickly rises to a searing sustained heat Ali's flowing polymetrics dissipate smoothly. The other band members—even Sanders, sounding as though he cares—play solid tech crew to Tisziji's extended space walks. He's a man on a mission, and I feel grateful knowing Tisziji Muñoz is out there in the catastrophic cosmos, generating countless megawatts of spiritual power on our collective behalf.