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Making Music

Liona Boyd's life in chapters

Music has been a driving force for award-winning classical guitarist Liona Boyd for most of her life.

Now a five-time Juno Award winner, she won her first music contest when she was eight years old. At that point, she was playing *The Bluebells of Scotland* on a treble recorder aboard the ship on which she and her family crossed the Atlantic as they emigrated from Great Britain to Canada.

A few years later, her mother took her to hear guitarist Julian Bream in concert in Toronto — and that, says Liona, was the moment she fell in love with the guitar. “I knew I wanted to play like that. Julian Bream changed my life when I was 14.”

Her parents gave her the guitar they had purchased during a family visit to Spain some years earlier (Liona's father grew up in Spain) and arranged for her to take music lessons. Thus began an enduring relationship with her instrument of choice.

The guitar was to be the reason she travelled the world as a student and performer. Her virtuosity on the instrument earned her the unofficial title of First Lady of the Guitar. The guitar also had a profound effect on her personal life. Through it and the travels associated with her studies and concerts, she found and lost love and eventually, because of a condition associated with repetitive action, needed to refocus her career.

“In life you get all kinds of surprises,” says the 64-year-old musician, composer, and singer. “For instance, it's a miracle that I am singing. After being thrown out of a choir when I was eight, I was very insecure about my singing, even though I have always been attracted to words and poems.”

She explains that adding the vocal component to her repertoire came about after she was diagnosed with Musicians' Focal Dystonia in 2003 and had to stop performing for six years.

Focal dystonia is a neurological condition that affects a muscle or group of muscles in a specific part of the body, causing involuntary muscular contractions and abnormal postures. Excessive motor training and repetitive movements may contribute to the development of the task-specific “miswiring” in the cortex of the brain. Typically, those who rely on fine motor skills, such as musicians or surgeons, are most likely to be affected. At one time, the condition was considered incurable.



An impromptu meeting with Canadian singer-songwriter, Jim Cuddy, during our photo shoot in Ottawa.



“At first,” says Liona, “I thought that having focal dystonia — I had one finger that wouldn’t behave — was my personal tragedy. Now, I think of it as one of the best things that happened to me, because it enabled my singing.”

“For two years, I played with a pick and gave my brain a bit of a rest,” she adds, noting that she normally prefers to use nature’s picks (fingernails) in guitar playing. “I was still playing the guitar every day of my life. I was struggling to find a solution, and I did — the answer was to rework my technique.”

As well as changing her approach to playing her instrument, she developed a new facet of her career as a singing musician. Her teacher was “a wonderful Croatian man, Srdjan Gjivoje, the Simon in the Croatian equivalent of Simon and Garfunkel,” she says. “He helped me launch my career as a singer. We even did an album called *Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love*. I’m still very proud of that record and the 17 love songs on it.

I wrote all the lyrics and a lot of the music except for *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. And that was a song I would have loved to have written.”

She made this album shortly after the breakup of her 14-year marriage to John B.

Simon and her move from Los Angeles to Miami.

“I wanted to leave LA and have a different life after getting divorced,” she says, in explaining her move to Florida. “I lived in Mexico many years ago and am fluent in Spanish, so I had visions of Miami as Buenos Aires north. I did have three fantastic years there, but after living through four hurricanes and finding the music business there very crooked, I did a complete 180 degrees and fled to Connecticut to live in a little town.”

But eventually she found that lifestyle too quiet and returned to California. “My parents moved just about every year of my childhood,” she says, in explaining her restlessness. “So I have this gypsy blood in me.”

Her big Spanish-style house in Santa Monica suited her for a while, “but it was cold and damp and I was no longer in a relationship and was lonely,” says Liona. Therefore, she decided to return to Toronto. “That’s really my home, where I grew up and where my parents were.” Sadly, she adds that her father died two years ago, but her mother and sister are still nearby.

Soon after her homecoming — after close to two decades in the U.S. — she was commissioned to write a theme song for her hometown — *The Toronto Song*, which was released August 5, 2013. She also met “the right duo partner” in Michael Savona. “I now tour with him,” she says. “He’s the perfect accompanist for me. It’s rare to find a classical guitarist who can also sing, plus, he’s very good-looking — the ladies love him.”

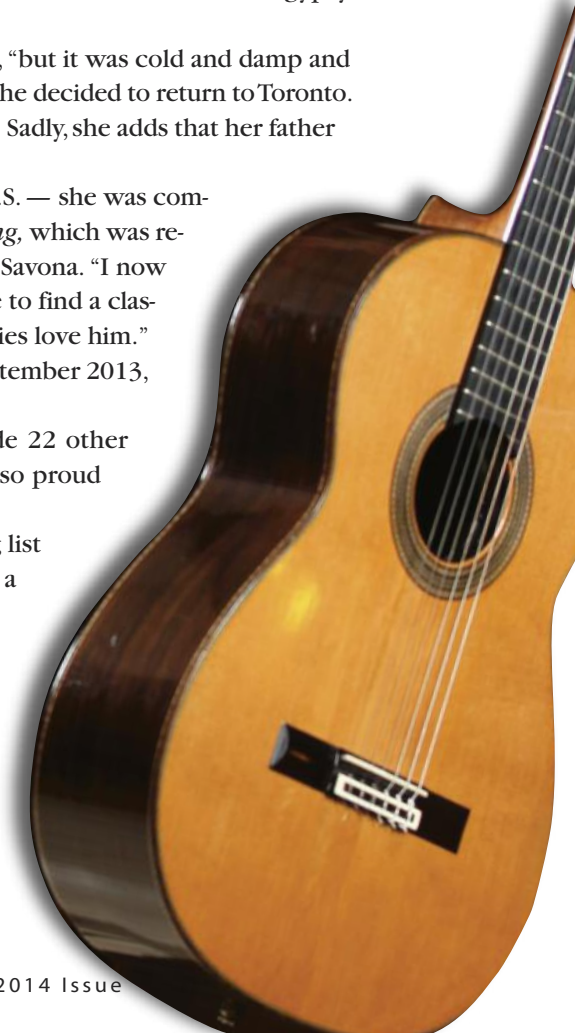
He accompanies her on her most recent recording, released in September 2013, *The Return...To Canada With Love*.

“It’s my most ambitious project ever,” says Liona, who has made 22 other recordings, a number of them achieving gold or platinum status. “I’m so proud of it.”

She explains that the album features guest performances by a long list of Canadian artists, as well as phrases in First Nations’ languages and a complex format that features up to 180 tracks.

“I’m working with the same genius of a producer, Peter Bond,” she says. “And the result is a very inspired album that took almost two years to complete — something like Enya meets Leonard Cohen with a lot of classical guitar in-between. Phillip told me he thought it was brilliant.”

The reference is to His Royal Highness Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh. “I’ve been friends with him for 20 years,” she explains. “He’s my pen pal and I’ve played for the Queen and stayed at Windsor Castle.”





That, she says, was during an earlier chapter of her life, much of it recounted in her autobiography, *In My Own Key - My Life in Love and Music*.

"I wrote it with pen and paper and my devoted mother typed the whole thing up," she recalls. "It became a bestseller when it was released in 1999, but it had me living happily ever after in Beverly Hills, so I need to update it a bit. I'm going off to Venice soon to finish writing the sequel, so I won't be doing another album for a while."

She acknowledges that some of the popularity of *In My Own Key* may have sprung in part from public interest in her personal life and the aptness of the title in terms of reflecting her individuality. For example, while studying music in France in 1973, she busked on the streets of Nice. Two years later, she followed the unusual route of opening for Canadian folk-pop singer Gordon Lightfoot at a number of summer festivals. And during her wedding reception at the Regent Beverly Hills Hotel in 1992, she played her guitar to the 200 guests, while still wearing her wedding dress.

But it is probably the chapter on her well-publicized eight-year affair with former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau that created the greatest interest. Although, she says, he did ask her to live with him at one point during their relationship, "he didn't want to marry me and I wasn't truly in love with him. I was waiting for someone I was really in love with. I didn't find it with the man I lived with after Pierre, Joel Bell either. I found it in my husband."

The reason that her marriage finally ended, says Liona, was because "Jack wanted a full-time wife and I just couldn't give him that. He was jealous of my guitar. That's why we divorced 10 years ago. But he understood I needed my freedom. We're still good friends and I'm

friends with his four boys. Our marriage was a wonderful chapter in my life and I lived a glamorous life in the house we built together in Beverly Hills."

Liona frequently speaks of her life as a series of chapters, and, she says, each one has been filled with excitement and challenges. For this chapter, she is very focused on *The Return... To Canada With Love*.

"I didn't have children of my own," she says. "When Jack and I got married, he already had four sons and two grandchildren and didn't need any more. My kids are basically my 23 albums, especially the last one. Every one of the songs has a story behind it."

"I'm in a perfect position to write about Canada, having been away and having travelled so extensively in Canada," adds Liona, who has also made a point of giving back through fundraising concerts across North America throughout her career. "I've lived a very unusual life, travelling all over the world and representing Canada at many music festivals. I seem to be on an anthemic gig these days, but who better to write a patriotic song for Canada than someone who has travelled so much and dated the prime minister for eight years?"

She recognizes that the professional bridges she has built as a musician are also unusual. "What I have done is very rare," she says. "I was completely in the classical world — except for one foot in the pop world when I toured with Gordon Lightfoot — but even then I was strictly playing classical music. I did one other album that was a little more crossover, but basically I was a classical guitarist. I don't know any other musician who has gone from being completely classical to being all pop."

Yet this is the latest chapter in the life of Liona Boyd. ■



PHOTO: DON DIXON

Liona Boyd's Discography

Title	Year
<i>The Return... To Canada With Love</i>	2013
<i>Seven Journeys: Music for the Soul and Imagination (Liona Boyd and Peter Bond)</i>	2009
<i>Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love</i>	2009
<i>Camino Latino</i>	2002
<i>Whispers of Love</i>	1999
<i>Classically Yours</i>	1995
<i>Dancing on the Edge</i>	1991
<i>Paddle to the Sea</i>	1990
<i>Highlights</i>	1989
<i>Christmas Dreams</i>	1989
<i>Encore</i>	1988
<i>Persona</i>	1986
<i>The Romantic Guitar of Liona Boyd</i>	1985
<i>Liona Live in Tokyo</i>	1984
<i>Virtuoso</i>	1983
<i>The Best of Liona Boyd</i>	1982
<i>A Guitar for Christmas</i>	1981
<i>Spanish Fantasy</i>	1980
<i>Liona Boyd with Andrew Davis and the English Chamber Orchestra</i>	1979
<i>The First Nashville Guitar Quartet</i>	1979
<i>The First Lady of the Guitar</i>	1978
<i>Miniatures for Guitar</i>	1977
<i>The Guitar Artistry of Liona Boyd</i>	1975
<i>The Guitar/Classical Guitar</i>	1974

Excerpt from *Memories of Pierre Trudeau* by Liona Boyd (As published in *classicalguitar.com*, 2004.)

Pierre Trudeau loved philosophy, the literature of the classics, the lakes and rivers of the Canadian wilderness, the challenges of politics, the transcendence of classical music...and, of course, he loved women.

I was one of the women Pierre loved, and, for eight years, I loved him in return. Ours was not an amour fou that inspired the poetic outpourings of some of my other romances, but it was like the man himself — rational, gentle and interspersed with moments of risk and humour. How could I not be infatuated by his attention and affection? I, the daughter of immigrant parents who had chosen the gypsy life of a concert artist, and he the brilliant idealist, the dashing leader of our adopted country...he with three children to raise after a failed marriage, and me, the young romantic, fresh from living in Mexico and Paris — both of us pursuing grandiose dreams fueled by unswerving ambition. For years, we were a perfect match, with no strings attached except those of my Spanish guitar that serenaded him in the chill of winter on fireside nights at Sussex Drive, and soothed his soul on those languid days we shared every summer at the lake....

