

Vol. 47 No. 1 March 2021

Soundboard

THE JOURNAL OF THE GUITAR FOUNDATION OF AMERICA



*Women
of the
Guitar*



Soundboard

THE JOURNAL OF THE GUITAR FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

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AN INTERVIEW WITH LIONA BOYD

By Kami Rowan

Liona Boyd is a force. Her guitar career is colorful, exciting, and accomplished. She is a passionate woman who lives life to the fullest, seeking adventures that have reached every corner of the world. Liona has awakened a love and appreciation for guitar in remote and unique spaces with new audiences, and considers her life a love affair with the instrument. Earning an impressive list of successes, including twenty-eight albums, five Juno Awards, five Honorary Doctorates, and a touring career that has lasted forty-four years, she has forged new pathways and explorations as a powerful influencer and maker of history for our instrument. After reading both of Liona's books and listening to almost everything she has recorded, I interviewed her by phone on February 19, 2020, from her home in Palm Beach, Florida, where she had just received her award for Lifetime Achievement by the National Guitar Museum.¹

Kami Rowan (KR): *Julian Bream was a huge early influence on you. He was the first guitarist you saw play and your first masterclass some years later.*

Liona Boyd (LB): Yes, I loved Bream's repertoire and the early music he played. But I had a particular affinity for the Spanish and romantic, like Albéniz and de Falla. He's one of my guitar gods. As a teenager I had photos of him stuck on my bedroom walls. I studied the Chaconne with him in Stratford, Ontario. I called him "Bream the Supreme," and he was my absolute hero. I was lucky to get to perform for, and work with, many great players and teachers, including Segovia, Kassner, Lagoya, Díaz, Yepes, Artzt, and Brouwer.

KR: *You write in your autobiography No Remedy for Love that one aspect of your midlife crisis was to really dive into your passion for things Latin. What do you think drew you to Latin culture? And what informed this love affair with Latin music?*

LB: My father was born in Spain and his mother was born in Linares, the same city where Segovia was born. I met some of Segovia's old friends when I went



Liona's second autobiography, 2017.



Liona Boyd, 1975.

there to visit my relatives. So maybe that somehow seeped into me. When I was 16 my father, who was an art teacher, was granted a sabbatical, and we traveled to Mexico. While I was there, I fell in love with the music. This year was critical and instilled a lot of Mexican romanticism in my soul—the Mariachis and trios, and just being immersed in a different culture. I've always loved poetry, so I was very privileged to meet Pablo Neruda at one of his poetry readings, when I was a guitar student in Paris. Many years later, when I played two concerts in Santiago, Chile, I had a free day and asked the driver from the embassy to drive me to Isla Negra, where I visited his wonderful house on the cliffs overlooking the sea.

I went back to San Miguel as an adult and filmed a couple of videos, and all that love for the Latin culture came surging back, so I recorded *Camino Latino*, which was heavily influenced by nuevo flamenco style. I had players like Steve Morse and Strunz & Farah as guests on the

¹ Liona Boyd's two books are *In My Own Key: My Life in Love and Music* (1998; reis., Toronto: Dundurn, 2017) and *No Remedy for Love* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017).



With Canadian jazz master Ed Bickert, 1988.

album. I've had the good fortune throughout my career of being able to invite amazing musicians onto my albums, including Eric Clapton, Jesse Cook, David Gilmour, Yo-Yo Ma, Zamfir, and Olivia Newton-John.

But I've always had the attraction to Latin culture, and I love the language. I've written dozens of songs in Spanish. When I was living in Los Angeles, I was so much a part of the Latin culture. I ended up getting divorced and moving to Miami so I could immerse myself even more in that culture. It was a serious love affair; I was smitten.

KR: *So many players my age remember you most for the infamous white horse cover. Can you tell that story?*

LB: In 1982 CBS Masterworks in New York wanted to release a compilation album they had titled *The Best of Liona Boyd*. For the cover I suggested a whimsical photo that renowned photographer, Robert Vavra, had taken of me in the poppy-carpeted fields just outside Sevilla in southern Spain. It was not a cheap photo session, and I had paid for it myself. With determination I had tracked Vavra down, after being captivated by a book I had bought of García Lorca

poetry that used his artistic images. Clutching my guitar and a handful of wildflowers, I sat astride a white stallion in a skimpy, diaphanous, pale mauve tunic wearing no bra, and showing bare legs and feet. It was exactly the romantic image I had imagined, and I was delighted. But CBS in England and France refused to release the LP, claiming it was far too provocative and that classical artists must look serious. One irritated executive told me that if his Lady



From *Best of Liona Boyd*, 1982.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIONA BOYD: (cont.)

Godiva insisted on sitting upon a horse, I should at least have worn a proper riding habit. Obviously, he missed the point. Nevertheless, my insistence paid off, the album fast “went platinum,” and for years has sold well around the world. Fans still remember those posters that CBS printed for the windows of record stores across North America. I had been a trailblazer for women without realizing it! Only a decade later did labels begin to market classical artists in sensuous poses.

KR: *You were discouraged early on by a lot of men because you were female. As I was reading your autobiographies, I couldn't believe how many times you were taken advantage of or propositioned over the course of your career. How did you deal with that and overcome those obstacles? And what advice would you give to females who might face the same challenges?*

LB: My advice to young girls is to always keep on guard. As you read in my book, I cleverly escaped a rapist in Paris when I was young and foolish, and found myself in a locked and bolted room. I do believe times have changed for the better, but I was alone in a male-dominated guitar world for many years, and of course I lost opportunities. Thank goodness women now have a voice and can speak about their situations with aggressive men. As I said in my book, I missed certain opportunities because of being a woman, as the price was just too high. I was told that I never received any of the grants in Toronto that male players did because they never actually believed I would go on to have a career. The juries thought I would get married and have kids instead. However, I do admit to having some advantages as a woman when it came to PR.

Sometimes, after a bad experience, I would go back to my hotel room and cry or call my parents. I think I had an inner drive because I wanted to accomplish things. I took “a big bite out of life.” I wanted to experience everything I possibly could, and my guitar was the most important thing in my life. When something negative would happen, I just moved on to the next project because I always had so many things going on in my career. I must have had inner strength. Maybe it was my mother, who was pretty feisty and came along on a few early tours.



Liona's reissued first autobiography, 2017.

KR: *I'd like to ask you about a specific paragraph from your book In My Own Key:*

In contrast to the high sales of *A Guitar for Christmas*, my first digital recording, *Virtuoso*, recorded in 1983 and containing more substantial selections—works by Berkeley, Torroba, and Villa-Lobos—had the weakest sales of all and was far outstripped by *The Best of Liona Boyd*, a 1982 release that fast achieved gold record status. It was obvious, and not surprising, that most people preferred accessible melodic pieces to more complex contemporary works, but despite *Virtuoso's* meagre sales, I was happy to have recorded the more demanding repertoire. As expected, the classical reviewers embraced *Virtuoso*. In my career, rave reviews have always occurred in inverse proportion to the number of records sold. I can please either the public or the critics, but seldom both. I have always believed, however, that the most important thing for an artist is to please oneself... I like to think my listeners leave the concert hall uplifted, having touched some of the purity and ephemeral beauty conveyed by the guitar notes as they resonate in tune with their inner spirits. Whether music speaks of despair, loneliness, anger, and frustration, or of happiness and love, it is the language that is most able to probe our very souls—be it through a Beethoven symphony or a simple Carcassi étude. Like all forms of art, the effects of music are universal, without boundaries, timeless, and almost impossible to define. (182)

An example that backs up this statement is your YouTube video of Bach's Prelude, BWV 995, which I find to be exquisite, yet it only has a little over 7.3 thousand views compared to one of your "non-classical" videos, which have 4.9 million views. So how did this inform your choice of how to program on live concerts and recordings?

LB: I always chose a good variety of pieces. I received great reviews on many of my albums including the *English Chamber Orchestra* and *The Guitar*, but *Classically Yours* didn't sell as well because it didn't have well-known pieces on it. It was all my own music and one of my favorite albums. But music critics don't always like guitar. One critic said my speaking voice too, and even the chair I sat on. There was jealousy and chauvinism. They didn't like to see a successful woman who would sell out big concert halls. There were critics who just loved to put me down. Sometimes I would do a concert where I felt like I just barely scraped by, and I was upset at myself, yet I would receive a rave review. And others I knew I played my best—I was in the zone and was acing it—and then I would read a terrible review. It's a very personal point of view, and it reminded me never to take people's reviews too seriously. I got some good and bad reviews, but my audience was always great. I've had fantastic audiences my whole life. I'm just very, very grateful to the public.



On tour with Gordon Lightfoot, 1976.



With Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, 1996.

I think people like the pieces where they recognized titles, ones they had heard before, or ones that say “best of.” I don’t think *The Best of Liona Boyd* really is my “best of,” but that’s what happens when the record company has control. I’ve been signed with several managers and labels like Columbia Artists Management and CBS Records, which became Sony. Mostly I was allowed to do my own thing though, and of course now I own my own label. The good news is that I can do whatever I want; the bad news is that I have to pay for everything.

KR: *Your touring life has been dynamic and diverse. You took classical guitar to parts of the world that had never heard it. Where are some of the more remote places you performed, how did you feel people responded to this exposure, and what meaning did this have for you? Is there anything you learned in visiting those places that you used to add to, or inspire, your music?*

LB: Every place added something to my life and enriched me to no end. And what I learned is that basically everyone loves the guitar...from the Puerto Rican fishermen I serenaded who had probably never heard any classical guitar, to Moscow where I played in the Kremlin. I played in a small town called Moose Factory way up in northern Ontario, and I guarantee you they had never heard a classical guitar. And then I played for little prairie towns out West, where they said they had never even presented a concert before. Once I performed for Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, India. In fact, even the Indian critics in New Delhi said they’d never heard classical guitar. When a friend of mine asked, “Wanna do a concert in Kathmandu?” I said, “Yes of course!” In Jakarta, Indonesia, they had an amazing level of guitar playing, and I gave several masterclasses in many of these places. I toured in Singapore, Seoul, had a great fan base in Japan, and the Ministry of Culture invited me to play in China. I always make an effort

to learn a bit of the language and culture when I travel to different countries. I also like to learn a regional piece, so when I played in Istanbul I commissioned my associate to arrange a Turkish folk song and performed it when I was there.

When I opened for Gordon Lightfoot and Tracy Chapman on tour, we played in large stadiums. I’m fortunate to have done such a variety of different concerts. I did hundreds and hundreds of radio and TV shows all over the world. And at that time in my life, I could just roll out of bed and play! It was so easy for me back then.

I like to be able to do unusual things, like the O. J. Simpson experience. Judge Lance Ito was a fan of mine and the jurors were very bored, so they snuck me into the courthouse. I took lots of CDs, and they gave me a standing ovation and kept wanting me to play and play some more. And I had to sign the CDs with numbers because they couldn’t give their names out. So that was certainly one of my more interesting experiences!

KR: *I believe your career trajectory was unique and groundbreaking and could be a positive study for younger players. You went outside of the box and played for everyone who would listen; mostly a non-guitar audience, which landed you tons of exposure and made you relevant as a classical guitarist. You found things that hadn’t been done and forged new paths. You took the guitar to different people, different places, and different scenes. What would you say to younger guitarists who are trying to make a living with the instrument?*

LB: The interesting thing is that when I was the opening act for Gordon Lightfoot, I was not playing pieces like *Malagueña* or *Granada*. I was doing Debussy, Bach, Albéniz, and some flashy South American pieces. I was playing Bach

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIONA BOYD: (cont.)

in front of ten to twenty thousand people a night. I just played the repertoire that I had and knew. But this was in the late '70s and the audiences were fantastic. They really listened when Gordon would bring me out and introduce me.

Then I did the album with Chet Atkins, and that was a whole different scene. I loved being in Nashville and meeting the country guitarists; and I had previously played for the local guitar society. When you appear on shows like *Good Morning Tokyo*, *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, and NBC's *Today Show*, millions of people see you. I met so many wonderful people along my journey, from famous

actors and politicians to farmers and housewives. And as you know, I played for many heads of states and also the Royal Family. Prince Philip is ninety-nine, and we have maintained a correspondence for thirty-seven years. I got to play a private concert for Fidel Castro in Havana, the King and Queen of Spain, and for the President of Mexico. I was even invited by Liberace to open a classical series he started at the University in Las Vegas, and we shared the same manager for a while.

I always wanted to do things differently. I mean, there was no internet. Having no internet was an advantage and a disadvantage. Without it I could never create my music the way I do now with my producer in Canada, Peter Bond. But I actually made a fortune selling millions of cassettes, albums, and CDs because there was no YouTube or Spotify. I know that some of my audience is probably dying off, but I'm very gratified when I see young people coming because they've discovered me through YouTube.

I would tell young players to try to write some original music, play in hospitals, play in jails, or on the street, or put things on video. I think it's really hard for kids to succeed right now because it's more competitive than ever. You see so many amazingly talented players on the internet, and hundreds of universities around the world are teaching guitar. Everyone has to find their own path, but I think it must be very frustrating to be starting a career as a classical guitarist these days. It's so tough and takes tremendous perseverance, talent, packaging, and marketing. My advice is to think outside the box as much as possible. Play in different places and play simply for the love of it, which is what I did. Play the pieces you love, compose new ones, and if you've got music in your soul, you'll feel fulfilled. But as far as making a great living at performing, I don't know. It's only one in a thousand who will be able to do that.



With Beverly Hills neighbor Ozzy Osbourne, 2002

In the beginning I thought I'd be playing only for small guitar societies. I had no idea I'd end up playing big arenas or doing major TV shows, and I didn't even think I'd be making a record. If I had been told I'd be performing for the President of the United States (Ronald Reagan), or the Prime Minister of Canada, Margaret Thatcher, and all of those heads of state, and even playing for Segovia, I would never have believed it.

KR: *Where do you see the future of or trajectory of classical guitar heading? How do you think we can remain relevant in this difficult economic and cultural reality?*

LB: Guitarists just keep inventing new things. There are new types of guitars being developed and being played, more interesting pieces being written—for duos, trios, quartets, and guitar orchestras. The guitar *is* relevant! There are millions of videos on guitar. It would be lovely to have classical guitar heard on more film soundtracks. The only one I did was with Maurice Jarre conducting me on *A Walk in the Clouds*. My God, that was a fantastic experience! Guitar is perfect for films. Stay fresh and think of new avenues, like doing charity work, bringing music to the people, forming a band. Maybe that's what I'll do more of in the future.

The guitar is the most beautiful instrument in the whole world. And like Beethoven said, it's an orchestra in miniature. I admire anyone who plays the guitar well because I know what it takes! It's good for the soul, and we guitarists can touch other people's souls through music. We've got to keep playing and writing and promoting the guitar. The astronaut Chris Hadfield is a friend of mine, and he played guitar in space! There is no limit to what we can do as guitarists.

KR: *It seems even when you were at your lowest points in life—focal dystonia, breaking your knee and shoulder—you have always been able to find a positive attitude and change course to adapt. Where does that strength come from? Can you let us in on your secret, and also talk a little about your experience with focal dystonia?*

LB: There are thousands of musicians on different instruments with focal dystonia. It's heartbreaking when you think that throughout history most had no idea what was wrong. I had no clue what was happening, and for six years I thought it was something physical affecting my fingers. I went on a whole journey to try and find out what in the heck was wrong with my hands. And it was only when I was able to start using the internet, I discovered my condition wasn't something physical; it was the brain maps that had changed due to overplaying. Dr. Farias, an expert in

focal dystonia from Spain, who now lives in Toronto, is absolutely convinced it's a mislearning program. And I got into bad habits. I'd be watching TV with my husband when I was married and played at the same time just to keep my fingers limber, or so I thought. But in the end, it was slowly rewiring that part of my brain. It was basically the middle finger of my right hand that was affected. They say it's the virtuosos, the ones that have the more "plastic" brains, that can instantly do tremolo. And I was famous for my tremolo. But I hate to tell you, I can't play it smoothly these days. Complex arpeggios and tremolo were the problem, but luckily my rest stroke always worked. My middle finger was raising up too much and flexing by itself. It happens mostly to obsessive compulsive personalities. You can't do the same things over and over again. Once the brain is locked, it's really difficult to undo the brain map. MFD (Musician's Focal Dystonia) is a very confusing subject, but at least there's education now and people know more about it. When I developed the condition, there wasn't much known about it. My heart breaks for the thousands of musicians going into a tailspin, because the more you practice the worse it gets.

I believe one door closes but another opens. And personally, I just had no choice but to reinvent myself. I added singing, which I never ever thought I'd be able to do. And now I can sing in front of thousands of people. I thought, "Either I'm foolish or very brave! Fools rush in where angels fear to tread"; isn't that what they say? But MFD opened up a fantastic new career that I think was probably my destiny all along. I'm one of the lucky ones who *could* reinvent myself.

I'm grateful for focal dystonia now because I know it opened up what I always should have been doing. I had always loved to write poetry, and I love lyrics, especially about things that I care deeply about. "A Prayer for Planet Earth" is about global warming. It's devastating our planet, and if I can have even a tiny impact, I'm grateful. I think all these things happen for a reason, and there must be some spiritual connection from a great universal intelligence that I can sometimes tap into, that has guided me in life.

I've composed two guitar concertos, *Songs of My Childhood* and *Concerto Baroquissimo*, and commissioned *Concerto for the Andes* from Richard Fortin. Unfortunately, there are no decent recordings of any of these concertos, but you can hear two movements of my *Andes* performance with the Costa Rica Symphony Orchestra on YouTube. I'm sad I don't have recordings of Bach's Chaconne that I used to perform in concert and many other beautiful classical transcriptions I had made over the years, but I'm happy to have recorded all the pieces I did. Last year PBS and CBC

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIONA BOYD: (cont.)

broadcast my hour-long Christmas concert called *A Winter Fantasy*, and they plan to show it again. I'm very proud of this live video in which I sing as well as play my guitar, accompanied by a choir, flutist, and Andrew Dolson. It was nerve-wracking, of course, but great fun, and I composed almost all the music we played.

KR: *You penned your first autobiography in 1998, which became a bestseller in Canada and also recorded an audio-book version for Audible. Your second autobiography was published in 2017. Can you tell us about your books?*

LB: Well, my schoolteacher parents read poetry to me when I was a child, and I read voraciously when I was a teen. I especially loved poetic writing. I had to decide between studying English literature or music when entering university.

I started writing my first book in the '80s, when I was sick in bed with the flu. I wrote it all by longhand, and my patient mother typed it up for me and mailed back the drafts. In those days, publishers had big budgets, and they sent me on a two-week book tour that probably helped it become a bestseller. My second book publisher obviously didn't have that kind of budget, but it's sold well in Canada.

I initially had written mostly for my fans, people who had followed me for years. I'm not saying I'm a great writer. I just wanted to share my interesting life story, but I discovered how much I loved writing. *In My Own Key: My Life in Love and Music* had ended in 1998, and I wanted to write another book that dealt with focal dystonia, explain why I had quit touring for six years, explain why I was no longer living the fairy tale life in Beverly Hills, explain the change in my career, and how I added singing. My second book basically focuses on how I reinvented myself as a singer-songwriter and the struggles I had during that process.

If people can only buy one book, I'd recommend the first one first because it focuses on all my incredible adventures around the world. I tried to write about the shenanigans that people don't know about. There are a couple of stories I haven't told in my book, but I do tell almost everything! It got me into trouble with the critics because they asked why I had to reveal so much in my book. But I wanted people to know what goes on behind the scenes in a career in music. It's not just gliding onto the stage. It's a life full of triumphs, joys, adventures, struggles, heartaches, and often people dangling opportunities and then letting you down. But I wouldn't trade it for any other, and my guitar has been my passport to the world.

KR: *Liona, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to sample a few tracks from your upcoming instrumental album. It's a complete 360-degree turn in some ways. Your music is epic with soaring melodies, multiple textures, and layers upon layers of vocals. What inspired you here?*

LB: Thank you so much. I was thrilled to meet Vangelis last summer in Paris. He's been a big influence on some of the most recent pieces I've composed. I watched him work with his engineer, and for two nights we talked until 3:00 in the morning. Somehow these epic musical ideas had come to me, and he was extremely complimentary. It's completely different from anything I've done, and no one has heard these types of pieces from me. They're massive with my vocals layered over many tracks. It sounds like a big choir. (Laughing) it's rather epic, like "Vangelis meets Enya meets Lord of the Rings"! There are fourteen instrumentals I recorded, and not all are so grandiose. They all have beautiful romantic melodies. It's titled *Once Upon a Time*, and it will be distributed in the fall by Universal Music. CBC is considering using two pieces at the Olympics for the Canadian Broadcast, and I'd be thrilled if that happens.

KR: *In No Remedy for Love you wrote that you always viewed your life as a series of adventures. So, what's the next big adventure?*

LB: I'd like to know that too! It depends on who comes into my life and where life takes me. I've never really planned things out. I have a children's story inspired by my late cat, Muffin, that I've written in poetry called *The Cat Who Played Guitar*, and I found a fantastic illustrator who just started working on it for me. I love her sketches. I'd love to write a How-to-Play-Guitar book. I want to complete this album I'm currently working on. And a film producer I know is working on getting funding for a documentary of my life, so that would be exciting. I'd also like to create a foundation for music to support underprivileged children. Maybe that's something for the future. And I've also always supported animal charities. I was raised a vegetarian and still am to this day.

A promoter has offered me concerts in Western Canada, but I doubt I'll accept. I have a lot of options, which is sometimes very challenging. I've been very lucky, and I've also worked hard; so maybe I should take more time to smell the roses a bit, but maybe I won't be happy doing that. It's in my nature to always want to do things, to get up early, and charge into things. I enjoy going to the farmer's market, yoga, riding my bike, listening to audio books, reading blogs, podcasts, and I've been reading some autobiographies lately. I love movies and documentaries on PBS. I especially love watching films about music and about the planet and how

tiny and insignificant our lives are after all. So, we have to fill them with as much beauty as we can, enjoy each moment and make beautiful sounds on the world's most perfect instrument. That's such a privilege. I feel very privileged to be able to do that and to have received such recognition. I count my blessings every night before I go to bed. I don't really know what my next chapter will be. I've lived in England, Canada, Mexico, France, California, Florida, and Connecticut, and I am never sure where I might be living next. But I do know which instrument will always be accompanying me.

Liona's website is www.classicalguitar.com.

Professor of Music at Guilford College, Kami Rowan received her DMA and MM from Shenandoah Conservatory, her undergraduate work completed under Aaron Shearer at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Dr. Rowan is a respected clinician and performer, GFA board member, and president of the Piedmont Classic Guitar Society. Additionally, she sits on the board of the Aaron Shearer Foundation and directs the Guitar Program at the Eastern Music Festival. Kami also co-created and directed the first US Guitar Orchestra, which performed at Carnegie Hall followed by a tour of France in 2019.



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