



The Panache Orchestra Crosses Oceans and Genres

by Mike Alvarez

The Panache Orchestra encapsulates their musical approach with the enigmatic phrase "Bringing classical sensibilities out of the ivory tower and down into the street!" and the acoustic guitar and violin duo does indeed create that impression at first blush. Yet as with all things in their world, things are much more complex than they appear. Brenda K. Spevak-Saito, a San Diego native, is actually a classically trained violinist who has an appreciation for the likes of Sergei Prokofiev and Yehudi Menuhin. She confesses to being "indelibly watermarked by my upbringing and former career as a classical player." Yet she also cites influences from such unexpected sources as Lou Reed, Herbie Hancock, Eric Satie, and Rush as well as Javanese and Balinese Gamelan music. An accomplished bassist, she also admires Jaco Pastorius and Ron Carter. Her husband, Takashi "Chi" Saito is a multi-instrumentalist who is a seasoned veteran of the Tokyo music scene. He began his professional career at the age of 15 as a bassist on the Tokyo cabaret circuit. As such, he was called upon to back a diverse collection of performers including folk singers, pop artists, jazz musicians and even strip shows! Among his musical favorites are the Beatles, Eric Clapton, King Crimson, Neil Young, Johnny Cash and traditional Japanese music. Being a mostly self-taught musician, he very colorfully likens his musical education to "eating out of the garbage bin of a world class hotel."

Anyone attempting to categorize the Panache Orchestra is taking on a huge challenge because they have a single-minded determination to pursue their muse across many genres. Their instruments of choice might lead casual listeners to call them a folk act, but they have also been described as everything from Gypsy Jazz to New Age to World Music.

And just to make things interesting, much of their material was initially written for a rock band but has been adapted to their current configuration. Brenda admits that "it's taken an enormous amount of effort on Chi's part to re-educate me on how to make that work within the context of his music. The addition of the unmistakably classical influence completely alters the character of his compositions, which were originally conceived as straight-ahead rock and pop pieces intended to be performed by a rock band with the melodies sung by a vocalist. I learned not too long ago that he had never worked professionally on the acoustic guitar before he began playing with me, since he is principally an electric player."

An act as unique as the Panache Orchestra could only be borne of the most improbable of circumstances. Obviously, they hail from opposing corners of the planet, not to mention the musical spectrum. It just so happened that at the time of their chance meeting at a Tokyo sushi bar in 1998, they were each taking an indefinite hiatus from music. Chi was making a decent living as a musician until the end of the '80s, remarking that the rise of karaoke "quickly displaced live music in nightclubs and restaurants." Unlike many other musicians who shifted their professional focus to recording backing tracks for karaoke tapes, Chi took a day job at his father's advertising research firm in order to support his family. Although he initially accepted a night gig as a guitarist in a Ginza show club, the hours and demands conflicted with his day job and he eventually decided to quit the band. Nevertheless, he still harbored hopes of some day forming a group to play his original music and opening a nightclub to serve as its home base. Brenda graduated from SDSU in the mid-'90s and pieced together "a sketchy livelihood composed of a combination of musical



Brenda K. Spevak-Saito and Takashi "Chi" Saito are the Panache Orchestra

theater, church gigs/weddings/events, session work, teaching private students, and fine art modeling, none of which paid extraordinarily well." Realizing that this mode of existence was unsustainable and would never give her a satisfactory quality of life, she decided to scrap it all and go back to Japan where she had spent a year as a college exchange student. Once there, she landed a good job in project management with an engineering consulting firm. "It lasted for a few years until I hit my tolerance for the toxic corporate treadmill and quit that too."

Describing their initial sushi bar encounter as "love at first sight," the duo recorded a five-song EP titled *Neo* (which has since been reissued with bonus tracks). Their live debut was billed as *Brenda and Me* at a major Tokyo venue called Club Cay and they made subsequent appearances at many festivals and clubs. In late 2000 they jointly realized Chi's dream of running his own nightclub. Naming their new venture *Asagaya Drum*, they hosted live music and multimedia events. During this time, Brenda and Me expanded into a full band lineup

that they called *Strange Dream*, which continued to perform on the club and festival circuit. In 2004, before a *Strange Dream* album could be recorded, Brenda and Chi relocated to San Diego, and then to Los Angeles shortly thereafter. They initially performed as *TheXiles*, but because they were exploring a new acoustic instrumental sound, they eventually renamed themselves the Panache Orchestra, a moniker which has caused a few raised eyebrows when people realize that they're a duo.

As the Panache Orchestra, Brenda K. and Chi Saito are gaining a reputation as a one-of-a-kind act that successfully combines classical and rock sensibilities seasoned with Eastern and Western touches. As Brenda pensively recounts, "Chi is still at the steep end of the learning curve with the English language and while I can communicate reasonably well in Japanese, my command of the language is far from perfect." To make matters worse, "the modus operandi of rock vs. classical musicians are just as alien to each other as Japanese is to English/American, so we've had an awful lot of

epic communication failures." Yet through it all, they've managed to make a very engaging double CD called *10 Strings* that succinctly captures their live sound. It was recorded live in the studio with no overdubs, performed exclusively on Chi's acoustic guitar and Brenda's violin, hence the title. They have a sophisticated web presence and a growing list of live performance dates that they hope to expand beyond the L.A./San Diego area. Congruent with this is their ambition to diversify their sound through collaborations with other musicians and ensembles. To supplement Chi's talents as a guitarist, bassist, and drummer, Brenda is making rapid progress learning the cello so they can feature it in future projects and performances. Most working musicians will readily identify with their goals: to generate sufficient interest in their recordings and live shows and to become financially sustainable while maintaining artistic autonomy. They are also looking to get their music synched with various media like film and TV soundtracks. It has already been well-received in healing and holistic health circles as well as by the artistic community. Chi has been particularly struck by the reaction of very young children to their music. "They seem to get it immediately although it is not 'kid music' by any means." While their broad musical palette makes them hard to pigeonhole, it's this very diversity that may prove to be their greatest asset. By putting their stamp on every style that inspires them, they are bound to appeal to fans of many musical genres.



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