

Earl Klugh: Soft, sweet acoustic stylings from a jazz great

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 29 November 2010 09:45



Grammy-award winning guitarist Earl Klugh (pronounced Clue) credits his mother with starting him on a musical path, but it was Chet Atkins who helped him choose the instrument that would vault the Detroit native to superstar status.

“My mother wanted both my brother and me to play something,” Klugh said during a telephone interview from the home in Atlanta that he shares with Denise, his companion of 16 years and their poodle. “So, I took piano lessons for about five years.”

It was after seeing Chet Atkins (1924-2001) on television that the 13-year-old Klugh set his sights on the guitar.

“I was hooked,” Klugh explained. “I bought all kinds of Chet Atkins and jazz guitar records, and even though I took lessons for about a year, I am pretty much self taught.”

Atkins took notice of the youngster, sharing the stage with him many times over the years and using his talents on albums.

“He was my friend,” Klugh said. “He was a wonderful person and was my guitar hero from the beginning.”

Although he admired Atkins’ style, Klugh settled on the acoustic guitar, rather than the electric.

“There’s something about the sound of a nylon string guitar,” said Klugh. “I did try to play an electric guitar and it was completely foreign. It’s like the difference between the piano and the organ, particularly in the feel.”

Earl Klugh: Soft, sweet acoustic stylings from a jazz great

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 29 November 2010 09:45

Klugh's famous for his soft stylings and "sweet" sound – a sound he says is as individual as each player.

"I think it's all about the player's personality," he said. "If you're an aggressive player, it's going to sound that way," he explained. "Personality comes through your instrument, especially an acoustic instrument."

As Klugh developed his skills, he relied less and less on other players like Atkins and legendary Wes Montgomery (1923-1968) because he wanted to develop his own style. When it comes to technique, Klugh says he uses a "modified classical technique, with a contemporary slant."

"I'm not so stuck on how I hold my hand and how I play," he said with a laugh. "I do a lot of things that are probably a bit unorthodox in playing a nylon string guitar."

Chet Atkins wasn't Klugh's only fan in the industry. When he was just 17, Klugh recorded with jazz greats Yusek Lateef and George Benson.

"One of the first recording sessions I did was with George [Benson] and [trumpet player and record producer] Creed Taylor," Klugh remembered. "Creed didn't think I had any talent. I was lucky George brought me in or else they would've thrown me out."

Two years later, he joined Benson's band on tour.

"George is absolutely the greatest jazz guitarist that ever happened – him and Wes Montgomery," Klugh explained. "He's also one of the most generous people you could ever imagine. He really, really took me under his wing and helped me get involved."

Since 1971, Klugh's been nominated for 12 Grammys, winning for Best Pop Instrumental in 1981 for his work on the album "One on One" with jazz pianist Bob James. He's recorded more than 30 albums, including 23 that have made the top ten charts.

Earl Klugh: Soft, sweet acoustic stylings from a jazz great

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 29 November 2010 09:45

The soft-spoken artist plays between 50 and 60 dates a year. He also tours internationally. This year, Benson and his group will make their 33rd trip to Japan. Traveling with acoustic guitars is no easy task.

“In the earlier days you could bring them on and put them in the overhead,” explained Klugh. “Now, you have a lot of restrictions with airplanes. I use military-like cases, but five or six instruments are pretty banged up.”

One of his favorite gigs is the Weekend of Jazz he’s hosted for the past seven years at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs (April 7-9, 2011). This year’s lineup features jazz icons Al Jarreau and Madeleine Peyroux.

Klugh brought a Weekend of Jazz to Kiawah Island in South Carolina earlier this month.

“It’s really nice because we try to make the events really artist-friendly,” Klugh explains. “Being a player, I kinda know what everybody would like to have happened. It think it’s caught on because all of the artists we bring enjoy the experience. It makes it easier for them to say ‘Yes’ the next time we ask them to play.”

Klugh says he practices five to six hours a day. His collection of acoustic guitars numbers between “40 and 50.”

When Klugh gets inspired to write, he heads for the piano in a Pro Tools studio just across the patio from his bedroom.

“I actually write a fair amount of my music at the piano,” he said. “I’m not that great a player, but I use it to get started.”

Earl Klugh: Soft, sweet acoustic stylings from a jazz great

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 29 November 2010 09:45

Klugh likes to stay current, listening to new artists like bassist Esperanza Spalding, but it's classic jazz that he returns to for inspiration.

"I have to confess, I listen to a lot of older music," he said. "I find myself going back to artists and music I've enjoyed over my lifetime like Johnny Smith, Wes Montgomery, George Van Epps and bossa nova great Antonio Carlos Jobim."



On his 2008 CD, "Spice of Life," Klugh laid down an arrangement of "Bye Ya" by jazz legend Thelonious Monk.

"I always liked that song by the Thelonious Monk Trio," Klugh said. "Then I thought, 'This would be really good if I did it kinda like a bossa nova.' It really changes the whole thing completely. That was a lot of fun for me. I really enjoy keeping the essence of the song and then making it into something else."

Here's a clip of Klugh and his hero Chet Atkins doing "Goodtime Charlie's Got the Blues."

Here's Klugh with George Benson doing "Living Inside Your Love."

And here's a clip of Klugh performing solo in "Morning in Rio."

Earl Klugh: Soft, sweet acoustic stylings from a jazz great

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 29 November 2010 09:45

For more information on Earl Klugh, log on to www.earlklugh.com