

In a recording career that spans 30 years, Antonio Forcione has developed an enviable reputation as a virtuoso guitarist and composer playing jazz, rock, flamenco, Latin and the folk music of his native Italy – with an improbable sideline in musical comedy that won him a fringe award at the Edinburgh Festival in 1991. He counts both Paco de Lucía and Paul McCartney among his fans.

But his current album finds Forcione joining the growing number of Western musicians who have turned to Africa in search of fresh inspiration and vibrant new rhythms. Recorded in Zimbabwe, Johannesburg and London, *Sketches of Africa* is a fine, elegant recording, an acoustic African jazz hybrid with precise ensemble playing.

The accompaniment to Forcione's inventive guitar playing includes cello, double bass, flügelhorn and an exotic team of African collaborators including Seckou Keita on *kora*, Juldeh Camara on the *rititi* (single-stringed fiddle), the Zimbabwean singer Chiwoniso Maraire, who died tragically young in July this year, and the South African vocalist and Makeba protégé Zamo Mbutho.

On November 12, *Songlines* will present Forcione playing music from *Sketches of Africa* in concert at the Elgar Room in the Royal Albert Hall. When I catch up with him at his London home to discuss the album and concert, he opens the discussion with a lengthy explanation of his unease with the term 'world music,' his own preference is for the description 'music of origin.'

"Everything is world music in a way, so it's a funny, uncomfortable term," he says. "When I went to Africa I felt I had to find an alternative to describe what I was doing. What I mean by 'music of origin' is something with a story that links it to the people making it and where they live. It's music that has some kind of traceable geographic map to its historical roots.

I have always searched for people who tell a story through their music and I've enjoyed travelling around the world. Those journeys have helped mould the way I write, perceive and play music. In recent years I've found myself increasingly gravitating towards music of origin."

*Sketches of Africa* was recorded between 2011 and 2012, but the project was in gestation many years prior to that. He recalls his first, distant but dramatic sight of Africa in the 80s from Tarifa, the southernmost tip of Spain. "That profoundly affected me, thinking about the mystery that lay beyond. And I discovered African music through Paco de Lucía and flamenco. I wanted to play like Paco, and when I realised that a lot of the influences on flamenco came from Morocco and northern Africa that was an inspiration," he recalls.

One of the tracks on *Sketches of Africa* is titled 'Tarifa' and features Forcione playing guitar and a hybrid instrument of his own invention, which he calls the *oudan*. "I bought an *oud* but after 40 years of playing the guitar I struggled to adjust my technique to an unfretted instrument with different spacings," he says. "So I took some frets off a guitar and put them on the *oud* – it's like an entirely new instrument."

Further inspiration came from playing with African musicians living in London, including *kora* player Seckou Keita and the Malagasy guitarist Modeste, with whom he played weekly six-hour jam sessions for many years – just the two of them and a couple of guitars. "Playing with Modeste and these people enriched my life. It made me want to

visit the source and taste Africa in its undiluted form," he says.

His first trip to sub-Saharan Africa came in 2006 when he was invited to perform at a festival in Zimbabwe. "I was struck by the wild beauty, the unforgettable sunsets, starry skies and the warmth and generosity of the people. I was taken with the simplicity and optimism in the face of hardship." On that visit he met Chiwoniso. "I still can't quite believe she's gone. I was taken by her spirit and so moved by her strength and determination. She gave me a CD that was just her voice, *mbira* and stories. And so the second time I went to Zimbabwe in 2011, I saw her and told her about *Sketches of Africa* and asked her to sing on a track. About a month later she came up with the most amazing words for her people to sing on top of my guitar. I called it 'Song for Zimbabwe'. It couldn't really be called anything else."

A brace of visits to South Africa in 2010 and 2011, where he did some charity work and teamed up with the Soweto Gospel Choir, produced further tracks, including 'Madiba's Jive', a lovely poignant tribute to Nelson Mandela. "I have never met him but I was deeply moved by his

life, choices, and what he represents."

It has been a long and winding musical road for Forcione, since he grew up playing Italian folk music on guitar and mandolin as a child on the Adriatic shore of the Molise region in southern Italy. "I've got two uncles who play accordion and I had to accompany them when I was 11 or 12. They'd say 'waltz in F' and I had to busk it. That was my biggest training."

By the age of 13 he was touring with his own band and cites Carlos Santana, Jimi Hendrix, John McLaughlin and Pink Floyd's Dave Gilmour as his guitar heroes. After studying in Ancona and Rome, he came to London in 1983, where he busked on the streets of Covent Garden. Within months he had been plucked from obscurity to support

prog-rockers Barclay James Harvest at Wembley Arena – and there was no going back. "I came for two months and 30 years later I'm still here."

Since then he's recorded 17 albums (four of them in collaboration with the Spanish guitarist Eduardo Niebla), and toured the world performing solo or in various duos, trios and quartets. For a time in the 90s he also cultivated a parallel career working with the music-comedy act Olé. "When they asked me to work with them I was a bit shocked – it was throwing guitars in the air, juggling and all kinds of off-the-wall stuff," he explains. "We did the Edinburgh Festival, where we won awards and were on TV. I look back at it with a smile. But some people didn't know how to take it and asked if I was a clown or a serious musician. Even my manager asked if I wanted to fool around or play serious music. So after six years I gave it up."

He may have returned to 'serious' music; but the *joie de vivre* remains and fills *Sketches of Africa* with a warm, celebratory impulse. So what's next on his serious musical horizon? "I've just been to Brazil and that was amazing," he enthuses. "My percussionist and bass player are from Bahia and I'm really keen to go back there. So there might be a *Sketches of Brazil* coming soon..." ♦

✦ **ALBUM** *Sketches of Africa* was reviewed in issue #89

✦ **DATE** Antonio Forcione will be performing at the Elgar Room in the Royal Albert Hall on November 12, see *Gig Guide* for details

## Fame & Forcione

**Nigel Williamson talks to the Italian guitarist and composer who will be bringing his latest album, *Sketches of Africa*, to London in November**

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