

Antonio Forcione

From busking in London's Covent Garden to playing on the world's stage, Antonio Forcione takes a multicultural approach to playing acoustic guitar

Words David Mead Photography Joby Sessions

When Antonio Forcione first came to the UK, he busked in Covent Garden, winning a *Time Out* busking competition in the process. Since then, he has become a fixture at the Edinburgh Festival, as well as travelling the world, absorbing new musical cultures along the way. But he cites his recent concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with a full orchestra as the highlight of his career so far.

When we caught up with him he was in the process of packing his bags for a month long visit to Cuba, hinting that an album was probably going to follow shortly afterwards. His current project is a duo recording with singer Sarah Jane Morris, but first we asked where his travels had taken him to recently?

"I've been going to Bulgaria for seven or eight years now, and they asked me to be the artistic director of a quite unusual project." Forcione explains. "There was a flamenco singer called Arcángel – he's quite famous in Spain – who liked my song *Alhambra*, which is inspired by the beautiful palace. We were trying to incorporate old Bulgarian songs with old flamenco songs. I must say that I've been playing for over 40 years now that was probably the toughest one to try to put together and not have it sounding a bit of a mess. I didn't sleep for a few days because I had to find a way to make it work. But, in the end, I changed a few things harmonically and melodically and I rearranged certain things.

"We ended up doing a big performance at Sofia's wonderful theatre and it was a huge success that led to a big tour in Spain, last year. I must say, one of the highlights of my entire life was performing *Alhambra*, one of my songs, and hearing voices arranged for the tune and Arcángel singing and performing it inside the Alhambra. It was a dream come true and I felt privileged to have done that. So that was one project, called 'Estruna'. They're pushing now to go to the Edinburgh Festival."





Meanwhile, there's your new album with Sarah Jane Morris...

"Sarah and I have been crossing paths for about 30 years, but I hadn't seen her perform until we were both invited to play at a charity concert here in London. We turned up early and so we had a bit of a chat in a café and I let her know that I really loved her voice, loved her persona on stage and I wanted to collaborate with her. I made her listen to one of my songs from *Sketches Of Africa*, the song dedicated to Zimbabwe. I think she was quite impressed with that song and she wanted to do something with me. So we did a couple of rehearsals and literally, on the first day, we wrote four songs. It was so prolific and fast we were both stunned, we couldn't believe it. So we met about four times and wrote the whole album. I've never had such an affinity with a singer/songwriter that fast. Everything seemed to work really well, so we ended up recording *Compared To What*."

What guitars did you use on it?

"I am using a Yamaha GCX 31C and an APX 1200 and then I'm also using a Taylor for some things because the Yamaha has got that cheeky, bluesy sound and the Taylor's is rounder. So for some tunes where I need a sweeter tone I use the Taylor."

Are you using any alternative tunings on the new album?

"On a couple of numbers I use the tuning I used on *Heartbeat*, one of my old numbers, which is bottom D, then A, D, G, C, E. Then on *The Sea*, the tuning is one tone down and the bass is C. Then there's another tuning on *All I Want Is You*, which is bottom C, G, C, G, B, C. I like to try different tunings."

You're just about to leave for a month in Cuba. What's the attraction there?

"I've been going to Cuba for the last couple of years, exploring the wonderful culture of that amazing, contradictory country. The moment I landed in Havana I just felt thrown back to my childhood – I had tears in my eyes, it was so amazing. I started playing with musicians from the streets, venues and bars. I was fortunate to meet some amazing musicians, amazing people and now I'm going back there to absorb as much as I can and, who knows, there might be *Sketches Of Cuba* in the pipeline."

Why do you feel so at home there?

"When I was aged 10 I had a little group with my brother and a few people in my village, on the east coast of Italy. This wonderful man called Nicola Scatozzo, a farmer who played guitar, a very humble,

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wonderful person. He used to play tunes like *Bessem Mucho*, *Quando Callientasole*, all these old South American songs. So I learned them when I was that age and they all came back to me when I went to Cuba. It’s not just to do with the music, it’s to do with my past, trying to capture something of my childhood. Maybe it’s all of that; I just felt in the right place when I was in Cuba.”

So what would you say you were able to take from the Cuban experience and absorb into your own playing?

“It’s their physicality while they’re playing. When you mean something and you’re expressing it, your body language changes. They wrap up their notes with a rhythm and a dance that comes out as a whole package. For me it’s fascinating – striking a string and physically meaning it. And they’re always teaching me; it’s like a big lesson for me because, in the West, we’ve lost the physicality, maybe we express things more from the brain. I think I just wanted to regain that physicality which I think I had when I was little. I saw this girl playing double bass and dancing at the same time and playing rhythm that way. For me it’s beautiful. You can’t play double bass out of rhythm if you are dancing with it!”

A few years ago you visited Africa – that was a profound experience wasn’t it?

“It fascinated me because it’s easy to get lost in the intricate intellectual part of the music. It’s important, but it’s not a one-sided thing, you’ve got to watch the other side, sometimes. The body wants to

celebrate life and it’s that celebration that comes across in those cultures.”

How does your playing alter depending on who you’re collaborating with?

“When I’m doing certain things with a bigger ensemble my behaviour, my guitar playing, is different, it’s not the same. I think when I perform solo it’s perhaps the hardest because I come from playing in duos and I’m used to playing with a pick, so I always needed someone to accompany me. But, when I started playing fingerstyle, I don’t think I did a good performance until I made silence my friend. Usually when you play by yourself you’re kind of slightly nervous and you tend to fill up gaps, which I think is very wrong. Gaps are a blessing if you make them your friends. The music has to speak and when I play solo I have to take that into consideration. Not to rush, not to try to fill up gaps all the time; you’ve got to keep really cool. I started performing much better when I dealt with that problem.”

One of the more unusual instruments that you use is your oudan – a fretless nylon string guitar. Could you tell us about it?

“I haven’t used the fretless guitar on this album because I think it has more of a world music tone to it – with Sarah it’s more soul, acoustic soul, I would call it. So it would have changed the tone of the whole album and I didn’t think it would fit, though I love that sound of the guitar. I will probably use it on my next album, the Cuban album, because it gives that kind of Middle Eastern feel.”

Where did you get the idea for the oudan?

“That was many years ago when I was listening to the oud. I completely fell in love with the oud because I was listening to music from Turkey. I bought one when I was travelling in Spain and for two or three months I was struggling to get some sound out of it – I had a big problem with the spacing of the strings. It looked like I would have to change my technique and that threw me. So I got a beautiful Admira Sofia model and went to [guitar tech] Bill Puplett and asked him to take off the frets and add eight more strings and he came up with the oudan and I’ve loved it ever since. A guitar without frets is like a world with no borders, which I find fascinating.”

Could you talk us through your live rig?

“The nylon-string guitar goes through a Fishman preamp, where I can tune the frequency a bit, and then to the Strymon BigSky reverb, then out. My steel-string guitar goes to a distortion pedal – I use a little, just slightly sometimes for maybe for Motown stuff, or Stevie Wonder just to give a little bit of an edge. It’s custom made, I bought it in Italy. I tried so many, but this doesn’t change the sound of my guitar too much. Then I go to LR Baggs Venue preamp and a Boss OC-3 octave pedal. I sometimes add bass on the bottom string, it’s really great when you’re playing solo guitar. The steel string and the nylon are using the same reverb because it’s stereo. My tuner at the side is a TC Electronic PolyTune. It’s small; I love small things because I can still take it on the plane!”

Fretless Wonder

Antonio's Oudon

Fascinated by the sound of the Arabian oud, but unwilling to adapt his right hand playing style to suit one, Antonio decided to create his own version of it by having guitar tech Bill Puplett remove the frets of an Admira Sofia nylon-string. Not only that, Bill also extended the fretboard at the nut so that it's possible to play in the middle of the frets instead of on the lines, fretless bass style. Another customisation was the addition of the sympathetic strings on the guitar's upper bouts. For this, the top of the guitar had to be reinforced in order to take the extra pull on the soundboard. The result is a magical instrument that can be heard on many of Antonio's recordings.

