

Guitarist Jason Vieaux with Julien Labro and A Far Cry

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From concept to recording: the coming together of Azica Records' *The Music of Astor Piazzolla*

By Mike Telin and Daniel Hathaway



Sometimes re-recording projects evolve over months and years. In the case of Azica Records' new Piazzolla CD, featuring Cleveland guitarist Jason Vieaux, Detroit bando-

neón player Julien Labro and Boston's A Far Cry Chamber Orchestra, all the stars aligned so neatly that rehearsals and recording sessions took place in the space of ten intense days. "The whole production of the CD happened very quickly", Vieaux says. "Two rehearsals, two concerts, and then you started recording". As violinist Jae Lee recalls, "We didn't even have time to sit down and have a beer".

The assembly of those artists took a little longer. One evening several years ago, Jason Vieaux dropped by Nighttown to hear Hot Club of Detroit, where he met the band's accordion player Julien Labro. "His improvisations that evening just blew me away. I'd always wanted to play Piazzolla's double concerto, *Hommage à Liège*, so I asked him, 'do you ever play bandoneón?'" Julian was familiar with the piece and at the time was seriously studying the bandoneón. "It's very different from playing the accordion. The sound and the way we shape the phrase and control the bellows is very different. But when Jason asked me, I said, well, we can always start something!"

Julian got things moving by arranging the piece for string quartet, adding a double bass, and he and Jason recorded a demo version of it with the Linden Quartet. "They were still very young", Jason said. "They hadn't even won the Fischoff Prize yet". The demo was intended to be sent to presenters to generate future concert appearances. At the same time, both Jason and Azica Records were looking for an orchestra for a recording of guitar concertos. That project never happened, but the demo CD introduced Jason and Julian to A Far Cry and led directly to the Piazzolla recording.

A Far Cry's Jae Lee said, "Literally the project showed up on my lap. The way we do projects is that we start with an individual tie or personal association, then we'll start the germination of the idea, bring it to the group and vote on it. We vote on everything right down to the pieces we're playing. Everyone OK'd the Piazzolla project".

Lee was particularly drawn to the idea of a new version of Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons*. "I've loved Piazzolla's music from the first time I heard the tone of his bandoneón. I always sort of lamented the fact that Gidon Kremer had made *The Seasons* into a violin concerto. When I heard the idea about making a new version and that Jason and Julian were going to be involved, the project became very appealing. I think you can hear that in the recording. It doesn't sound like any version you've heard before even though all the music is there".

Artist Management

Neither Jason nor Julian had known about A Far Cry, but “Alan Bise just called one day and said, ‘I think I’ve got something for you guys. I think I can put together a recording and a couple of concerts in Boston’”, Jason remembered. “He found a date that we could all agree to, he set up two concerts before hand and we had time before them to rehearse, then we had two days to record last December. It was like a blur for me. It was amazing”.

Julian’s life was suddenly a bit of a blur as well as he scrambled to make arrangements for himself, Jason and the orchestra. “I’ve written for strings now quite a bit. And I’ve played with a lot of guitarists but I didn’t really know how to write for the instrument. Like a lot of musicians, we always run late. I emailed the parts maybe a month before the session last year. I think Jason was touring, Japan maybe”.

Jason recalls that period. “I was in the middle of my typical touring madness and I started getting all these parts and I freaked out! One had twenty-six pages of really fast guitar passages, some of which were a direct transcription of Piazzolla’s bandoneón improvisations, so the notes couldn’t be changed. It was a terrible couple of days. I cancelled lessons and appointments and lived like a monk in my condo for three days, practicing seven hours a day — and I got over that hump. It was stressful!”

Meanwhile, in Boston, Jae and A Far Cry were busy trying to capture Piazzolla’s style. “Some of the extended techniques were definitely not so conventional, but they’re definitely idiomatic. Kudos to our friend Jeremy Cohen of Quartet San Francisco, who has tutorial videos on his jazz violin website. We went on and learned how to do the chicharra — bowing on the fabric of the strings behind the bridge to make a sound like an insect. We’d been hearing the old Piazzolla Quintet recordings and all the sounds were in my ears. We practiced on our own for a couple of weeks, but when Jason and Julian came into town it added a whole different layer”.

“It was crazy”, Julian remembers. “I always regret that with recording projects I don’t have more time to spend with the music. But I feel we got to the essence of the music a lot quicker and a lot deeper than with many projects. We captured a lot of what Piazzolla is about rather quickly, and I’m really, really proud about that. It’s not easy to do”.

Jason is quick to add, “I want to second that. I’ve never been in a recording session that was like living that music for a solid month with no letup. As a player, as a musician, I was just consumed with the music, and it definitely has a different kind of effect on the recording process”.

Though Piazzolla has sometimes been vilified for taking Tango into places far from its origins, Jae Lee is convinced that his legacy will endure on its own merits. “I think it’s always hard to make a bold statement in your own Zeitgeist, but thank God that he did. Other artists understood his intentions and where he wanted to take music. The form just happened to be close to Tango because his instrument was the bandoneón. If it had been something different, I don’t think he would have been so heavily antagonized”. Julian added, “We really tried our best to do justice to the man. Not just what people think of his music but to capture what the man really is. We hope listeners will be pleased with what we tried to do. We tried to give Piazzolla the same respect you would give to Mozart and Beethoven”.

Jason has the last word: “We want people to feel this music, not just hear it. The violence, tenderness, the heavy extremes are part of the impact of the music”.

The Music of Astor Piazzolla, featuring Jason Vieaux, guitar, Julian Labro, bandoneón, and A Far Cry Chamber Orchestra in *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*, *Hommage à Liège* and *History of the Tango*, was released by Azica Records in October.

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