



Levon Ichkhanian: hot ticket

He plays five different instruments in Monty Python's Spamalot

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Toronto - Jazz guitarist Levon Ichkhanian used to lead a double life. Monday to Friday, he wore a suit and tie and worked as an optician in Toronto. Saturday and Sunday, he shed the stuffy clothing and performed musical gigs in cities such as Montreal and Detroit. And never did the twain meet.

Now 44, the Canadian-Armenian musician was 32 when he made a life-changing decision to pursue music full-time. He has never looked back. And with good reason.

The reputation of the Toronto-based multi-instrumentalist and composer as a master of stringed instruments precedes him not only in Canada but abroad.

His earliest memory takes him back to Lebanon, where he was born.

"My dad would take me with him while rehearsing his band in Lebanon, where he was a musical director," said Ichkhanian, a third-generation musician.

Because of his father's career, Ichkhanian and his family traveled to countries such as Yemen, Jordan, and Cyprus. As a result, the precocious youngster developed an ear for continental music and jazz.

"I was intrigued by the whole process - how a bunch of musicians come together with a singer, work out a song, play it a couple of times, and it sort of takes its own shape," he recounted in an interview in Toronto.

Ichkhanian's early memories also include boisterous parties that went into the small hours of the night. His uncle, "a very social kind of guy," would often host soirees for visitors from countries like Spain and France.

"Not just musicians," Ichkhanian said. There were "people who were dancers, painters, poets. It was a gathering of [artists from] many different disciplines. I used to watch very carefully and absorb."

Rounding out his early musical education, his uncles also introduced him to classical and flamenco guitar music.

"As I got a bit older and picked up my guitar through my uncles, I got a bit more serious because I was practicing a lot," he said.

By the time Ichkhanian and his family immigrated to Canada when he was about 12, he had his heart set on

picking up the electric guitar.

"My dad knew once I got the electric guitar, things would never be the same. And that's what happened, because guitar became my life," he recalled.

Ichkhanian was a mere 13 when he scored his first professional gig - with famous Armenian pop singer Adiss, no less.

"I was very nervous," Ichkhanian said. "I was hoping and praying that my emotions wouldn't get the better part of me."

To add to the pressure, he was friends with Adiss' son and knew he would be stepping in big shoes to play with the iconic performer, who always hired the best musicians.

"I heard these songs over and over and over in many forms and permutations and when it was time for me to play them, it was very natural for me," he said.

Ichkhanian's talent was recognized through his formative years, leading him to win the Canadian All Star Jazz Award at the tender age of 16. He received various other awards and scholarships and trained privately with many teachers. Today, with years of study and experience behind him, Ichkhanian shares his knowledge in clinics and master classes.

Ichkhanian is also recognized as one of Canada's foremost guitarists and musical ambassadors, being a recipient of the governor general of Canada's acknowledgment for musical excellence.

During the 2008 Summer Olympics, Ichkhanian traveled to Beijing to perform in the Marriage of Excellence Tour, an historic event uniting Western and Eastern musicians.

One of only three Canadians invited to participate in the tour, Ichkhanian said it was a thrill to join artists such as Dee Dee Bridgewater, Oliver Jones, and Taylor Dane.

"There were 15 of us from all over the world and each one of us represented a certain style, if you will," he said. "Imagine: you go down in the morning to have breakfast and you're surrounded by all these artists, and then you see Olympians who won something or are about to go to a match. There was great conversation - that's for sure."

International scope

Ichkhanian has toured throughout Canada, the Middle East, Europe, Brazil, India, and the United States, playing in clubs, concert halls, and at international festivals such as Peter Gabriel's WOMAD, MIDEM (Cannes), Chet Atkins' Musicians Days Concerts (Nashville), and the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Ichkhanian's music is showcased on several recordings, including film soundtracks and Juno-Award-nominated projects. The artist has also had appearances on major Canadian television networks.

Ichkhanian's debut CD, *After Hours*, blended Armenian and Middle Eastern melodies with contemporary jazz and featured instruments from around the world, including the duduk, bouzouki, and accordion. The CD was an Armenian Music Award nominee for Best Jazz Album, and reached number 1 Indie and Top 10 Jazz on HMV

Charts.

Ichkhanian's follow-up CD, *Travels*, won the jazz/fusion category at the 2002 Armenian Music Awards.

Indeed, his travels have very much shaped the musician he has become. "What fascinates me is that some rhythms are very common in cultures that are not even close in any way but through music," he said. "When I went to India, sometimes I played with musicians who didn't speak English. But within a couple of minutes we were already playing together."

It was the global language of music that eased his transition into a new life in Canada, Ichkhanian noted. When he first arrived in Canada, he didn't speak a word of English. However, his love of music gave him the confidence to join the guitar club and music classes at school.

"And that's how I made friends and that's how I learned English," he said.

Currently Ichkhanian is playing five different instruments in the musical comedy *Monty Python's Spamalot* - a solid-body electric guitar, archtop electric guitar, nylon string classical guitar, banjo, and ukulele.

"It's a great trip, as they say, because each instrument has its own character," he said. "That's the thing about these shows: you never know until you hear the music, you really don't know, what the parts are and what the instrumentation might be. It's a challenge; it keeps you on your toes."

Ichkhanian's dance card for the near future is already full. He recently received a call to perform in a concert in Shanghai and he will be traveling to several cities to play in the *Spamalot* production. Next year he is off to the United Arab Emirates and India.

Ichkhanian is also putting the finishing touches on his next CD, which will feature him playing a multitude of stringed instruments in a variety of group settings.

Music in every room

It appears Ichkhanian is passing on the family tradition, as music is alive and well in his household. He and his wife are the proud parents of three budding musicians, ages four, seven, and nearly 12.

The oldest plays the guitar and wants to pick up the drums, while the middle one sings and dances "like you wouldn't believe." The youngest is always banging on the hand drums Ichkhanian collects during his travels, he said with a chuckle.

A typical day in the Ichkhanian house is "chaos," he admitted. "We all have dinner, everyone tells their stories, sometimes we jam - we play music, they sing, they write lyrics... they show me what they've written. There is a lot of music here."

And he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Most days I wake up in the morning and I'm really looking forward to playing music. Most days - 99 out of a 100," he said. "It baffles me how in society we've made the weekend our reward for working hard. Musicians are rewarded all the time. They are really in touch and close to their souls and hearts."

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