

VIENNA CALLING

Colombian bassist Juan Garcia-Herreros, aka Snow Owl, isn't just a master musician — he's also a man on a mission. Kate Puttick caught up with the man himself to find out what he's up to, and how his latest educational venture will genuinely benefit the bass community

Many readers will recall the debut feature we ran last year with the Colombian-born, Austrian-resident musician Snow Owl, also known as Juan Garcia-Herreros, in which he explained his long career as a sideman with legends such as Elton John, his nomination for a Grammy, and his solo career.

We caught up with the great man recently to discover that not only is he continuing to blow minds worldwide with his solo tours and his amazing signature Neubauer Phoenix bass — he's also offering a very special opportunity to the wider bass world.

What are your projects right now, Juan?

Worldwide, the main project has been Snow Owl. It's going really well. Of course, as a sideman I'm also very fortunate to have some big names inviting me along. The best label I can find for my music is world jazz. Music that involves improvisation, and a high level of musicianship, but which also always includes roots from every member of the ensemble. I always feature something from each of their countries in my music. Every country I visit, I see something and want to have it. On my latest album, *The Blue Road*, it was an honour that members of the Vienna Philharmonic were performing — on a world jazz record. There's an unbelievable tradition of classical music in that city.

How do those two worlds combine? Vienna is the site of very studied music. How have people reacted to you bringing non-classical elements there?

I find it especially groundbreaking that we have had a master balafonist from Burkina Faso in Africa, speaking the *bambara* language underneath a wall of sound from the Philhar-

monic strings. To see those cultures in the same spot, performing together, is a statement for the world we're living in now. It's a sign of tolerance of acceptance: 'Let's work together and celebrate the human spirit'.

How did you enjoy the London Bass Guitar Show back in March this year?

The LBGS is extremely important in the bass world. What you guys are doing for the bass community is unbelievable. I see fathers bringing their children along and I find that unbelievable. I was there to present my signature bass, my 10-year anniversary bass with Andreas Neubauer. We call it the Phoenix, not just because of the 10-year collaboration but because last year he survived his battle with cancer. He has risen from the ashes. It was also a dream come true to see David Ellefson of Megadeth, just to see his mastery of picking bass. I was so excited about that.

How did you get into bass playing? Did other instruments come before it?

Flute was my first instrument, and then the piano. My brother was learning drums and needed a bass, and he said 'You'd better play bass'. I didn't want to — and look at me now! When you master any instrument you will find ways to cross borders with it. What fascinates me is the idea that you can take something and try and use it in ways it has never been used before.

What do you love about the bass?

It's the one instrument that influences the style of music, harmonic changes and the groove the most. It's unconsciously affecting people the most. As soon as the bass gets going with the drums, people start dancing. It doesn't matter what style of music it is, it can be orchestral, it can be anything that has a body. It's like a womb that everybody feels comfortable in!

What other gear do you use?

As far as gear goes, I'm very grateful to all of my endorsers. I never use any other strings other than Thomastik-Infeld strings, because they are designed especially for the bass. I use Vovox cables, because the transmission of the signal is never compromised, and DNA amplification from David Nordschow. It's an amazing handmade amplifier. Last but not least, everything from Basswitch, which is Jacques Ruppert in Luxembourg. Those guys are all my brothers.

Tell me about your charity work.

We have an organisation that used to be called Snow Owl, but now we call it Unity Through Arts. It's focused on helping refugees to integrate into whatever country they're in, either through music or language or whatever they need. If we can receive people with open arms, later they will not turn around and attack you. Music is always something that will heal that pain.

What are the JAMMUSICLAB University Scholarships that we've heard about?

Well, there's a new music university in Austria, the Jam Music Lab. It's a private university that specialises in jazz and pop music and I'm a teacher there. You can do a bachelor's degree there and the education you'll get will be fantastic, but of course it's expensive, so they're offering scholarships to gifted students who might otherwise not be able to afford to study there. One of the scholarships is going to a bass student from Colombia, who will be able to study with me, and they're going to offer places to students from other countries too. So please, if you're reading this interview in *BGM*, and you think you've got what it takes, get in touch. ■

Info: www.the-snow-owl.com. Musicians who are interested in applying for a scholarship are invited to send an application via www.jammusiclab.at.

