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LOVELY LIONA

Internationally recognized classical guitarist Liona Boyd is launching a new career as a singer and songwriter

BY KERRY DOOLE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDER GONZALEZ

Liona Boyd has been conspicuous by her absence in recent years. Her loyal fans around the globe may well have believed that the Canadian classical guitar virtuoso had chosen a quiet retirement. Far from it. Boyd is re-emerging into the spotlight with not one but two new albums, both slated for a September release. Even more remarkably, on one of these records, *Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love*, she is embarking on a brand-new musical career as a singer/songwriter.

For Boyd to summon up the courage to sing on record and, soon, on stage is a major feat, given a long-time lack of confidence in her own vocal ability. "I tried for choir at eight years old and was told I couldn't sing," says Boyd from her Connecticut home. "I was traumatized."

Equally traumatic was her discovery that she was suffering from a condition in her hands called task-specific focal dystonia. "Focal dystonia is a neurological condition where you basically wear out the neuro-receptors in the brain and they don't give the right message to the fingers. I must have done billions of the same notes. This happens to a certain percentage of musicians especially because we do all these repetitive things.

"There's no physical pain, but there's total emotional anguish. I was devastated to get the definitive diagnosis. They tell you it's incurable and will continue to get worse. That's why I finally quit the concert stage in 2002. One of my big missions now is to warn musicians that too much practice is actually not a good thing."

Boyd says she is "learning to position my hands in a different way and am making progress. But all this is how the singing started. I was wondering what in the world I was going to do with my life if I couldn't play the guitar. Then I thought, 'Well I've

always loved writing lyrics. Maybe I'll learn how to sing.' I'm not a great, talented singer but I think I'm a good songwriter."

As a guitarist, Boyd has little left to prove. Her prowess has brought her multiple gold and platinum records, five Juno awards, the Order of Canada and induction into *Guitar Player* magazine's Gallery of Greats (she topped their prestigious poll for top classical guitarist five times). She has earned the respect of her peers, performed around the world, played private concerts for the British Royal family, multiple presidents, prime ministers and world leaders, and compiled an extensive discography of highly praised and musically eclectic albums.

Her "coming out" as a singer is charmingly showcased on *Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love*. The album reveals a clear and unaffected vocal style that complements her bright and melodic material. "I want to send a soft and soothing message, so I guess it makes sense if my voice and my songs sound like that," she says.

On that CD, she teams with Croatian guitarist/singer Srdjan Gjivoje on a sweetly romantic collection of 17 love songs, all but one written or co-written by Boyd. The record also includes Croatian tunes to which Boyd added English lyrics, as well as vocal versions of "Lullaby" and "If Only Love," two songs that earlier helped bring Boyd success as an instrumental artist. "I wrote 'If Only Love' 25 years ago, on a box of Kleenex in my hotel room during a blizzard in Winnipeg," she says. "It became an instrumental single off *The Romantic Guitar of Liona Boyd*."

Though a vocal novice, Boyd has long written lyrics. "Writing was always my passion, so songwriting, where you can tell a whole little story in three minutes, is quite a challenge. I often go for walks in the morning or late in the evening, and that's where I get my ideas."



Liona Boyd with guitarist-singer Srdjan Gjiwoje.

Boyd credits her friend **Gordon Lightfoot** with “first encouraging me while on tour with him to write my own pieces. He set me on the path to become a classical composer, as none of my guitar teachers had ever encouraged me to write anything original.” One big fan was Pierre Trudeau. “He just loved my songs. He said, ‘Why can’t you make these hits?’ and I said, ‘Because I can’t sing.’ Plus I was a classical guitarist and classical guitarists don’t sing.”

Boyd’s compositional skills are also displayed on her second new album, *Seven Journeys: Music for the Soul and the Imagination*. Stylistically, it’s in striking contrast to the pop-folk leanings of *Songs of Love*. Jointly credited to Boyd and **Peter Bond**, the album is a creative partnership. Bond is listed as producer, arranger, engineer and mixer, and he co-wrote all seven pieces with Boyd. Each contributed vocals and guitar parts, with Bond’s electric-guitar stylings meshing neatly with Boyd’s classical work.

The result is an adventurous, atmospheric, primarily instrumental record that fuses new age, ambient, world and film-music elements, with cited inspirations including Enya, Vangelis, Mikis Theodorakis and Ennio Morricone. Boyd explains that “the record just evolved from something that was going to be like a go-to-sleep record, soothing and sort of new age-y without being corny. I’m thrilled it turned out to be something bigger than either of us had first thought. There was an amazing creative synergy that was an incredible experience for both of us.”

To Bond, the album title is fitting. “Each song is a journey and they often take unexpected turns,” she says. “For us, there were quite specific visual images that came out of it.” For Boyd, “The record is full of surprises. It’s like going down a river and you

don’t know what’s around the next river bend.”

Bond is a noted engineer/mixer/producer who has worked with the likes of **Pavlo**, **Jesse Cook** and Charlotte Church. He engineered and mixed Boyd’s 2002 album, *Camino Latino*, and she hired him for that role for *Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love*. “I got a co-producer credit as my involvement went beyond mixing,” says Bond. “We refined the work Liona had originally done in Connecticut [with co-producer **Joanne Perica**] a great deal.”

Boyd’s dedication to her music has remained constant, overriding other opportunities in her life. “Pierre Trudeau [with whom Boyd had a long and well-publicized romance] said, ‘Come and live with me in Montreal and have a child.’ I turned that down. I almost became a socialite in Beverly Hills, but that became frustrating. Having to dress up all the time, attending or performing at one fundraiser after another, wasn’t really what I wanted to do. It seems I’m always turning down these opportunities, but music has always been the driving force in my whole life.” **WM**

KERRY DOOLE IS A TORONTO-BASED JOURNALIST AND FREQUENT WORDS+MUSIC CONTRIBUTOR. HE WAS IMPRESSED TO LEARN LIONA BOYD PLAYED IN HIS SMALL NEW ZEALAND HOMETOWN IN 1978.

FYI Publisher: **Mid-Continental Music**

Selected discography: *Liona Boyd Sings Songs of Love* (2009), *Seven Journeys* (2009), *Camino Latino* (2002), *Dancing on the Edge* (1991), *The Romantic Guitar of Liona Boyd* (1985), *The Guitar Artistry of Liona Boyd* (1975)

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