

MTV NEWS

GUITARIST TISZIJI MUÑOZ TAKES FLIGHT UNDER THE RADAR

ASTONISHING BUT SELDOM-HEARD GUITARIST PLAYS WITH THREE NEW RECORDS OUT ON HIS OWN LABEL.

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Right now, Tisziji Muñoz is probably the most amazing guitarist you've never heard of.

That surely would change if his three new releases (on his own Anami Records), *Presence of Joy*, *Presence of Truth* and *Presence of Mastery*, were available in stores or widely disseminated.

But the reclusive Muñoz doesn't travel, play gigs or care that his music isn't reaching the masses.

"I don't have a self that is concerned with what people think about what I play," explained the guitarist (whose name is pronounced Tiss-see-jee Moon-yos). "So I really have no interest in gigging a lot or looking for distribution for my CDs."

With his white jacket and '70s-style moustache, Muñoz looks like Andy Kaufman's nightclub-entertainer parody Tony Clifton. But Muñoz is no joke. When the 54-year-old picks up his guitar, it's as if the ghosts of saxophonists **John Coltrane** and **Albert Ayler** and guitar wizard **Jimi Hendrix** have come back in a singular, human form.

Muñoz's lack of "a self" may be traceable to his spiritual practice, which the guitarist speaks of through his Web site and liner notes. It involves a theory of astrology that he developed called "time mastery." He lectures on this and other spiritual matters to the Illumination Society, a group that, like Muñoz, is based in Schenectady, N.Y.

"Basically, we started recording my talks and publishing them. The Illumination Society is really just a publishing company. It's a loose-knit group of people who feel drawn to me," Muñoz said.

Prime-Time Players

On his three new records, Muñoz is joined by a stellar cast of musicians that includes former Coltrane drummer **Rashied Ali** and pianist and "Late Show With David Letterman" musical director **Paul Shaffer**. The *Presence of Joy* disc finds him with saxophonist **David Liebman** and bassists **Cecil McBee** and **Don Pate**.

Muñoz is reluctant to speak about his specific musical compositions, but he described a few selections from *Presence of Joy*. " 'Happy Sadness' (**RealAudio excerpt**) was part of a feeling I had about my daughters. I felt they needed the prayer. ... 'Presence of Joy' was just total

spontaneous playing. Everyone knew what to do, there was one take, and not a word was spoken."

Muñoz's style comes from the same 1964–67 Coltrane period that has provided inspiration to guitarists **Sonny Sharrock**, **John McLaughlin** and **Carlos Santana**. On *Presence of Truth*, the leader covers Coltrane's "Miles Mode" ([RealAudio excerpt](#)) with a band that features pianist **Hilton Ruiz**.

Muñoz has a raging, single-note style — "playing straight into the fire," as he calls it. (Chordal playing is painful for him as a result of an accident to his left hand when he was a child.) On the new releases, he alternates splurges of manic soloing with New Age-like interludes.

"He really doesn't repeat himself, which is incredible," guitarist **Henry Kaiser** said. "I've played with him and recorded with him as well. He doesn't go back to licks or patterns. He is really an improvising guitarist."

Muñoz was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. He received a drum set at the age of 3, and by the time he was 13, family members had introduced him into the circle of percussionists surrounding conga master **Mongo Santamaria**.

Tisziji taught himself to play guitar while serving in the 440th U.S. Army Band, where he performed as a featured percussionist. During his military stint, Muñoz met such musicians as **Eric Dolphy** and began a serious study of the music of Coltrane.

All Together Now

"I hear Coltrane's record *Meditations* with saxophonist **Pharoah Sanders** and Rashied Ali as everyone being absolutely free," Muñoz said. "The guys are playing in sympathy with each other, and they are more psychically in tune. When you listen to it carefully, you hear the harmony and the unity."

In 1969, the guitarist was active in the Toronto music scene. One morning, while he was playing guitar on a stoop, a York University theology student walked by and was struck by what he heard.

That student, Paul Shaffer, recalled the incident: "I was just blown away by what he was playing. He's been a source of inspiration for me. He really is a unique and totally improvisational musician, and his playing today sounds as strong and fresh as ever."

Shaffer plays on all cuts on *Presence of Mastery*, joined by Pate and Ali. When asked why Muñoz had never appeared with the Letterman band, Shaffer laughed. "It wouldn't make too much sense to have Tisziji sit in on a cover of a **Stone Temple Pilots** tune, would it?"

After touring with former Coltrane sideman saxophonist Pharoah Sanders and recording *Rendezvous With Now* for India Navigation in 1978, Muñoz moved to Schenectady,

where he records whenever the mood strikes. *Aesthetic Healing*, the next release tentatively scheduled for late summer, will feature Muñoz with friend and musical partner Kaiser.