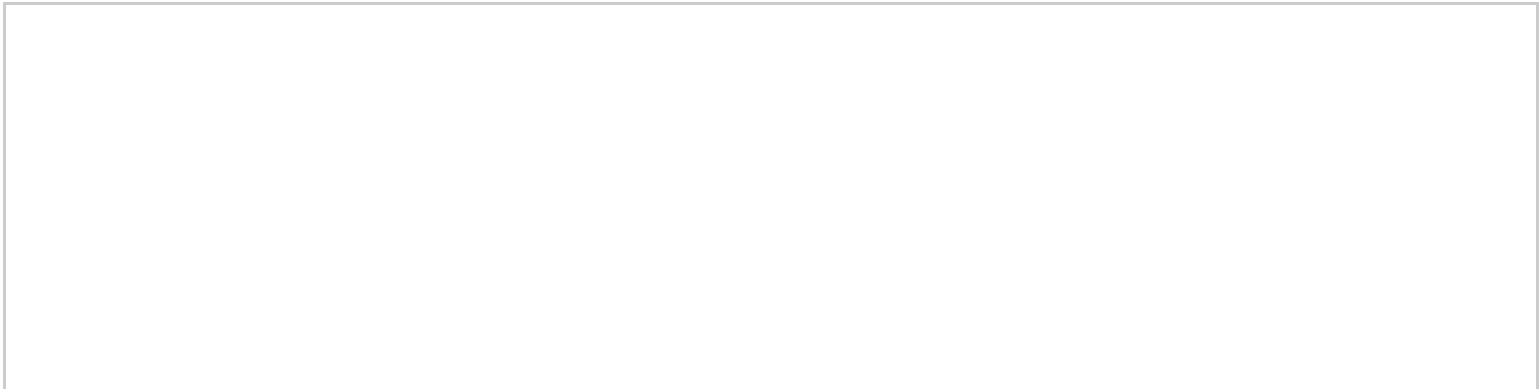


# The Vancouverist



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Today we had the great pleasure of talking to guitarist extraordinaire, Jesse Cook about his sensational new album, *The Blue Guitar Sessions*. Here's what he had to say.

tV: You've created a much more intimate and personal album with *The Blue Guitar Sessions*. Can you talk a little about that?

JC: It's something that I've wanted to do for a long time. I love the fiery rumbas and the albums with lots of percussion I've been known for and I've always tried to be the Phil Spector of sound: the wall of drums and wall of guitars and big world music but on this album I wanted to go in the other direction and leave as much space as possible which is something I hadn't done in the past. It's something that Miles Davis has spoken about: it's not the notes you play it's the notes you don't play. I wanted to do that: leave enough space so when you play a note it has more significance.

Over the years there have been albums that I've loved: Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* was certainly an influence for this record hence the album cover which is kind of a throwback to the Blue Note records or Prestige Jazz Collection albums. Another artist who has influenced me for this record is Ihasa de Sela. She did a beautiful album called *La Liorona* which was kind of an underground hit: immediately people all over the planet loved it though I don't think she ever received mainstream attention. Her album is very moody and it sounded like a cross between Chavela Vargas and Edith Piaf. There are a lot of elements of almost circus music almost Kurt Vile at times. You can certainly hear those influences in this album. Adele's *21* was certainly an influence as well.

tV: You mentioned Miles Davis. Track six in particular sounds like a tribute of sorts to *Kind of Blue*.

JC: It was actually sort of a tongue-in-cheek title. I usually sit with a guitar and improvise until I find something that I find compelling and then I'll try and orchestrate it or arrange it into a song. Once I've done that I'll record it into my

computer and as soon as you record it you have to name it. In this case because I was writing something that felt a bit like a tribute to *Kind of Blue*, I called it *Miles*. Later I did a shorter arrangement of it and called it *Miles Shorter*, which then sounded like a pun on Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter.

tV: I was thinking of the tone of the song itself.

JC: Oh for sure. It's probably the most jazz sounding piece on the record.

tV: This record is a departure from your usual style so why was it important for you *now* to make that switch?

JC: That's an interesting question. I guess because right now is the time I actually had the courage to do it. I wouldn't say it was a switch: it was something I wanted to explore. I'm probably going to go back to doing big and bombastic pieces because I love them but this was something that I wanted to explore. I'd wanted to do it the last three albums but other things caught my attention: or I wasn't sure I was ready to do it; I wasn't sure my audience would be interested. For whatever reason I just didn't do it. This time around I actually had to write two albums in order to convince myself that this was the album to make. I actually wrote a whole lot of music for another album which would have been, had it come out, a loud and bombastic, world music album. Then I wrote a whole bunch of other music that I called Plan B, which was all of these quiet little songs. I played them for a friend of mine and asked him which he preferred: he said he liked Plan B. That was how I felt as well but sometimes you need the validation of somebody else because when you write these things you're too close to them. That was all the encouragement I needed and from that point on it was Plan B all the way.

tV: It's quiet and more intimate. Was there something specific you were trying to express?

JC: The beauty of instrumental music is that it doesn't really have to mean anything: it's wide open for interpretation. When you write an instrumental piece it can be about anything. Maybe for me a particular song feels like that feeling that you get on an autumn day when it's raining outside and you're

looking out the window going, “Where has the time gone?”, or “Where has my life gone?” or whatever (laughs), but for somebody else maybe it’s something completely different: maybe it’s that uplifting feeling of driving to the horizon. It’s up to each person to find their own meaning in the songs.

tV: What was the most challenging things about making this album? You mentioned not wanting to fill the space.

JC: Oh my god, for me that was probably the biggest challenge. I had to fight my own inclinations all the way because I’m an arranger and my motto has always been “more is more.” You start arranging these things and they lose that space. If you fill that space suddenly it sounds like a big, dense arrangement. In order for it to have that intimacy you just can’t load it up. The more instruments you have the more it starts to sound epic and I really didn’t want to get there: I wanted to keep it personal.

All of the songs were written for two guitars, in fact they sounded beautiful with just two guitars and it was one of those things where I would add an instrument and listen to it and think, “No, I prefer it with two guitars” and off the instrument would go. I’d try out a violin or a cello and, take out the violin and leave the cello. You’re feeling your way through. I had to keep removing more than adding: anytime I’d add something there was an 80% chance it wasn’t going to end up in the final version.

tV: How has this album affected your choice in venue? Are you finding you’re trying to book smaller, more intimate venues because of the nature of this album?

JC: No. I don’t think there is a correlation between the size of the venue and how loud the music is or how many people you need on stage. The other thing too is when you tour a new record, if you only play songs from that new record they’re going to hate you. People come because they want to hear their favourite song and the more albums you have, the more difficult it is to make sure you get everybody’s favourite song. What we try to do in any concert is play music from right across my discography. Certainly on this tour there’ll be a focus on the music from *The Blue Guitar Sessions* but I’ll be surprised if it’ll be a third of the concert.

tV: What was the biggest thing that you yourself took away from this experience? For example, was there anything that you discovered you'd like to do more often?

JC: There were a number of things like that. I engineer my own albums and with a few exceptions I've recorded all my albums in my own studio. For me sound has always been important: the way my records sound and the production on them. On this album, because I was trying to make a record that sounded like a BlueNote record, I did a lot of research on how they recorded them. They didn't record the way we do today. Nowadays people will have a mixing room with a computer and a little booth where the musicians record one-by-one, and then they mix them all together later. In the old days they had a great big sound stage. They'd put out these really expensive mics, have the band play all at the same time, and they'd lay down an entire record in a four hour session. Nowadays to modern engineers that's terrifying. There are all sorts of complicated things that happen and if you do that, suddenly the drums are bleeding into the bass microphone etc., and it starts to sound awful. It's a difficult process to record that way but somehow they did it and there was a very organic, real sound to it and a bigness.

I did a lot of research on the mics they used and the way they recorded and the way they mixed and I ended up searching all over the planet for the best microphone. I did a huge number of test recordings on most of the modern mics that are available and started doing tests on old vintage mics and ended up finding this one mic, which I can't tell you about because it's so fantastic and it took me so much work to get it that I want to keep it as my own secret (laughs). It's probably the greatest mic that was ever made. I found one of them in London England and another in Los Angeles and they cost as much as a small house because there are very few of them to go around. I recorded most of the record on them and I couldn't believe that these old mics sounded better than the new mics. To me that just seemed counter intuitive.

tV: That's the way though, isn't it?

JC: It is. And the old mics were made by hand so you think, "How accurate can that be." The fact is they weren't accurate and maybe that was part of their

that be. The fact is they weren't accurate and maybe that was part of their magic.

tV: You said before that you were planning on going back to your original style but would you consider making another album like this at some point?

JC: I might. I certainly enjoyed it but after a year of music that has that blue mood to it, I was kind of looking forward to some happy rumbas. Honestly, I'm not sure what the next record is going to be or where it's going to take me. I try

to make each record a little bit different. One record I went to Cairo and recorded with Egyptian musicians and the record before this one I went down to Columbia and recorded with Columbian musicians. Each record tries to find a new sound and I hope that the next record will too. Whether or not it's a quiet sound, who knows.

Jesse Cook will be in Vancouver at the [Orpheum](#) Theatre, Sunday December 16. Check out Jesse's [web site](#) for other tour dates.

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