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## WORLD BEAT

**Lawson Rollins**  
is a musical  
tour guide with  
nylon-string  
guitar in hand

By **Kenny  
Berkowitz**

**B**efore picking up classical guitar at 15, Lawson Rollins spent years as a drummer, keeping the beat in a series of rock bands. But all that changed the first time he heard Andrés Segovia, which led to John Williams, which led to the Chilean folk ensemble Inti-Illimani, which led to Paco Peña, which led to Antônio Carlos Jobim, which led to Miles Davis. And that led to exactly where Rollins is now: playing an acoustic world-fusion that embraces Latin, flamenco, Afro-Cuban, bossa nova, Middle Eastern, and classical music—sometimes in a single song.

"I was attracted to the guitar, almost like a primal attraction," says Rollins, talking from his home in San Francisco. "I finally took it up after checking out some Segovia records from the library and starting lessons. I learned some études by Fernando Sor, which are very beautiful and very playable, and within a few months, I was obsessed with classical guitar. I stuck with it for another two or three years, but by the time I was 18 or 19, I was more interested in fusing all these styles together, rather than

becoming a dedicated classical guitarist. I realized my passion was for composing, trying to do something that's unique to me, and that's what still drives me."

On *Traveler* (Infnita), his newest, best, and most fully realized album, he's constructed a travelogue of all those influences, from "Berlin Bossa," which surrounds Johann Sebastian Bach's "Bourrée in E Minor" with one of Rollins' bossa melodies, to "Café Paris," which opens with Django Reinhardt and closes in some imaginary world between Gypsy jazz, klezmer, Middle Eastern music, and swing, courtesy of three members of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. In between, there are echoes of Britain ("Across the Moors"), California ("Marching West"), Catalonia ("Barcelona Express"), Louisiana ("Beyond the Bayou"), and a futuristic, pan-global metropolis ("The Urban Trilogy"), complete with keyboard synths, electric bass, and drum programming.

From start to finish, *Traveler* is an incredible journey across an enormously broad canvas, where the sound is impeccable, the compositions dynamic, and the technique dazzling.



Lawson Rollins, left, with *Infinite Chill* remixer/co-producer Shahin Shahida

"Every album needs a story, something that emerges over time," says Rollins, who has released five albums since leaving the neo-flamenco duo Young & Rollins in 2007. "I never start with a concept, which would feel contrived. At the start, I'm just grasping for ideas, trying to catch some momentum in the song writing, and I don't even title songs until I'm headed off to master an album. With *Traveler*, once the album was almost complete, there was an 'aha' moment when I suddenly realized the songs formed a kind of travelogue. It became apparent that the songs came from places I'd been, and from my own interpretation of being in those places, and that became the story."

**T**he compositions begin their evolution in Rollins' home studio, where he practices four hours a day, five days a week, keeping up his technique with standards like Agustín Barrios' "La Catedral" and Francisco Tárrega's "Recuerdos de la Alhambra." As a composer, Rollins likes to alternate between two or three new pieces at a time, improvising over chord changes, playing on top of a beat from Pro Tools, or using an older piece from the classical repertoire to spark something new. He'll keep refining the guitar parts, measure by measure, detail by detail, and once he's satisfied with the home demo, he'll go into a professional studio to record the song again with live session players.

Over the years, his main guitars have remained the same: a Pedro Maldonado custom cutaway, which was the only guitar used on *Full Circle* (2013); the pair of Lester DeVoe flamenco blancas that color *Traveler*; and a classical SoloEtte travel guitar, which he takes on trips around the world. Now, having released *Traveler*, he's gone back into the studio to finish his sixth solo album, which will be called *Infinite Chill* (The Remix Sessions). Co-produced by Shahin Shahida, *Infinite Chill* will be Rollins' first venture into electronica, re-recording some of his older bossa nova compositions with new players and new electro-ambient settings.

"As you mature and become more comfortable in your own skin, that maturity comes through in the conviction of the melodies and the

commitment to the performance," says Rollins, who's been working on *Infinite Chill* for the last few years. "That's definitely something I hope is taking place in my playing. In terms of the music itself, the last solo albums have a core interest in all these different styles, so I can blend sounds in a more seamless way. In the earlier albums, there was an excitement of exploring different worlds, and one song would be radically different from the next. There's more consistency now, and a confidence in the melodies that comes from stripping them down, then building them back up." AG

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