

*Review*

C. The Republican

Springfield, Mass.

Feb. 17, 2007

## Esteban tugs at crowd's heartstrings

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

With his trademark dark shades and black leather bolero hat, the guitarist Esteban has become a ubiquitous icon of the home shopping age, first selling his music to the masses and more recently selling the dream of musicality to would-be guitar players.

To his audiences worldwide, it seems he is everything at once: the dark Latin lover who always hits the right note; the virtuoso guitarist whose fusion of musical styles has translated into 24 recordings ranked near the top of the Billboard charts.

But there is something beyond mere musicianship that entralls audiences like the crowd who heard him in concert on Valentine's Day at the Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, Conn.

In a word, it can be found in the title of one of his recordings.

*Pasión.*

Passion for the music. Passion for the dream of music.

"I want to wish everyone from my heart a happy Valentine's Day," said Esteban shortly after picking up the blond, well worn classical guitar that seemed to wait on its stand for his touch. "I'm going to be playing love songs from my heart for you tonight."

Backed by a seven-piece band that includes 28-year-old daughter Teresa Paul on electric violin and 26-year-old Stephanie Paul on electric cello, Esteban played a nine-song, 95-minute set that began with the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," segued into the love theme from the 1968 film "Romeo and Juliet" and ended with a medley featuring George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun." Displaying the mix of genres that first made his music a top hit on the Home Shopping Network, he also played his signature version of the classic Spanish song "Fuego Malaguena" as well as Elvis Presley's "I Can't Help Falling in Love With You."

Like the guitar that is worn down to bare wood from the movement of his nails over the strings, Esteban's musical style wears well with his fans. With recordings that often soothe rather than stir the soul – Esteban's soft musical renderings have most often shown up under the New Age category on Billboard's top hits – the man's love for the music and its transcendent power in his own life imbues his performances.

Maybe that's because Esteban knows something about making dreams come true. The son of a Pittsburgh steel worker who got his first guitar from an uncle at age 8, the boy named Stephen Paul has often told the story of how he became a student of the late Andrés Segovia, the world renowned Spanish classical guitarist. After majoring in English and music at Carnegie Mellon University, he hounded Segovia for years with notes begging him to take him under his wing, telling the master his life would be meaningless if he could not study with him.

Esteban credits Segovia, whom he finally met in 1972, not only with teaching him the art of classical guitar music over four years but with giving him his new name, which means Stephen in Spanish.

While some classical guitar purists fret that sheer Segovia-influenced genius is secondary to showmanship in Esteban's musical manipulations, the man has used his talent to bring the art form to hundreds of thousands of grateful fans.

Whether he is playing flamenco, jazz or the Brazilian born bossa nova, Esteban employs a mix of musical styles to the delight of audiences. And there is nothing like the blur of deft fingers across the strings of a guitar to evoke the exquisite highs and lows of love, even amid a Valentine's Day snow storm that left the 350-seat Cabaret theater at Mohegan Sun only about two-thirds full. Esteban will play through Sunday and tickets at \$25 each are still available through the Mohegan Sun for upcoming shows.

With a set list that his daughters say changes almost every night, not every song can be perfectly in sync. At the opening of the show, there were times when the two sets of drums – traditional and bongo and conga – seemed to overwhelm the guitar or the musicians didn't immediately pick up on Esteban's cues. But the talented band – including Ray Nelson on trumpet and flugel horn, Raul Yañez on keyboards, Joe Morris on drums and percussionist Emilio Santiago – built momentum along with Esteban. Song after song opened with notes plucked as if they were petals and ended in the storm of a powerful rhythm.

Some of the most beautiful melodies were actually interludes shared by Esteban and his daughter Teresa on violin. If the show left something to be desired it was a song that featured just these two beautiful instruments from beginning to end.

The show also featured a first: Esteban's daughters singing harmony together on a classic Scottish immigrant song set to the tune of "Greensleeves." Although the two musicians seemed hesitant to unleash the power of their vocal instruments, both displayed fine voices.

Esteban, whose band also includes bass player Mike Frost, has released some 21 CDs over the years, including last year's "The Best of Esteban." Incredibly, for a man whose music has appeared near the top of Billboard's charts, the Sony-released disc is his first recording with a major music label.

Esteban was over 50 and a featured Hyatt Regency hotel lounge act in Arizona when his music captivated millions via his 1999 appearance on QVC and, later, the Home Shopping Network. Esteban, who reached a new audience via his appearance in a 2005 Geico insurance ad, can often be seen hawking his trademark guitar and lesson package on late night infomercials.

Like any good performer he is also the consummate storyteller, opening the Middle-Eastern influenced "Mediterranean" with the tale that it originated some 4,000 years ago and was adapted by him after it was discovered written on papyrus.

Before performing "Unchained Melody," he revisited the 1980 accident with a drunken driver that robbed him of the ability to play for 10 years and moved him toward popular music.

But the most popular story was the one he kept telling over and over again in his renditions of classic love songs. By the end of the show's one encore, the audience was on its feet.

After all, as Esteban says, "There's nothing more beautiful than romance."