Howard Heitmeyer (aka “The Great Unknown”)

October 4, 1923 – April 26, 2020

Howard Heitmeyer passed away peacefully on April 26, 2020, while residing under hospice care at the home of his brother Lloyd Heitmeyer, in Yucaipa, CA. Born in Sunnyslope, AZ (a Scottsdale suburb,) Howard had 2 sisters and a brother. Howard was the only musical one in his family. His sister was a bank president, the other owned an antique shop, his brother was an engineer. Howard lovingly jokes "he was the only failure in the family!"

At age 16, Howard Heitmeyer (HH) saw a guy walking down a Scottsdale street carrying a guitar. His interest was piqued and he struck up a conversation with the lad and learned his name was Howard Roberts. They stayed lifelong friends. After WWII, HH returned to the Phoenix area and decided to get really serious as a self taught, working-guitarist musician. Years later on the advice of Howard Roberts, HH said he came to Los Angeles and applied for a Local 47 union card. Knowing this would take months to be approved, he returned to AZ to work a long hot summer playing a guitar gig in a Yuma, AZ night club. Success - his Local 47 card was issued! So in the late 1950s HH moved to Los Angeles and became roommates with his old friend Howard Roberts. Howard Robert’s success and fame as a studio, jazz guitarist was taking off. Soon HH also had plenty of live gigs and recording studio work with his Fender Telecaster, Gibson L5, 1939 Martin 00-18, and Hauser classical guitar. When Howard Roberts was over booked, HH got many gigs including the gig with Bobby Troupe (Get Your Kicks on Route 66.) HH became sought after as a studio musician and played on Phil Spector recordings, Rod McKuen recordings, movie studio recordings including "The Green Leaves of Summer" featured in the movie The Alamo, and The Great Race scored by Henry Mancini. HH was friends and workmates with most all the guitar greats of Los Angeles (see photo of guitarist working on Tommy Garrett's 50 Guitars record.) This group was eventually given the name "The Wrecking Crew." HH played gigs at the Local 47 Union Hall and told me he wrote out many guitar duets to play there with Jimmy Wyble.

As the 1960's music scene moved into the "English Invasion" and "Summer of Love," filled with fuzz-tone distortions and ultra high frequency madness, HH decided to exit the realm of paid studio musician. HH dedicated himself to the nylon string instrument played exclusively in classical style of Sor, Tarrega, and Segovia. While focusing on this demanding realm of music, HH remembered an evening in Phoenix while on the gig, he was approached by a man named Earl Brown. Mr. Brown said he was very successful in the field of heavy construction and earth moving equipment, but his real passion in life was the classical guitar. He told HH that he owned 4 very high quality Hauser instruments. Earl Brown told HH if he was in LA, he should look him up. Upon finally remembering this, HH did contact Earl and a very fruitful friendship was born. Earl Brown, with his financial situation, his palatial home up Coldwater Canyon, and his passion for the classical guitar, was able to attract significant dinner guests such as Laurindo Almeida, Rey De La Torre, Julian Bream, and Andres Segovia. When such persons would concertize in Los Angeles, Earl Brown would extend post-concert dinner
party invitations to these artists and most accepted. It was during an Earl Brown post-concert dinner party in the mid-1960s that HH was introduced to Andres Segovia. At the American Guitar Society meeting on August 1, 2015, Mark Achuff interviewed HH where he gave three charming accounts of time spent in the unforgettable presence of Andres Segovia.

1) At one gathering, Earl Brown told Maestro Segovia that guest HH was a quite capable and interesting guitarist who was also a proud owner of a Hauser instrument. Then host, Earl Brown turned and asked HH if he would play for the maestro. HH was eager to oblige and said later that he thought he played his little composition, quite well. Of course the room was hushed when HH played his final note. Eyes turned to focus on the maestro who then turned to host Earl Brown, and said this as he stood up: "When do we eat?" Upon reflection, HH knew there was really nothing else the maestro could say or do. A compliment to an unknown during a casual, unthinking gesture of kindness, could be dangerously misconstrued as a professional endorsement, etc. Segovia knew his word was sterling.

2) At another occasion, HH said he was present when Maestro Segovia had mentioned to Earl Brown that he needed transportation to his Sunday afternoon "community concert series" event at Whittier College. Seizing this opportunity, HH immediately volunteered to be a personal valet and driver for the maestro. Earl Brown allowed HH to have one of his multiple black Cadillacs accommodate this need. Upon arriving to the concert hall, HH graciously and nervously carried the maestro’s guitar as they strolled to the front door. Upon realizing they were quite early and the door was locked, HH said eagerly "Maestro, I will go to the back of the building and find a worker to open the front door for us." HH quickly strode away still clutching the maestro’s guitar when he heard a loud “ahh hem.” When HH turned he saw Segovia glaring at him in dismay as he heard this: "Young man, leave the guitar HERE." What could HH say except “Yes maestro, right away maestro, so sorry maestro…” HH said he realized later that his attempting to do a good deed while holding on to a most valued instrument, must have been seen as a common maneuver that the Spanish know as the “standard gypsy disappearing act.”

3) HH had been a guest at Earl Brown’s home numerous times and knew the layout of bedrooms and bathrooms and the drawing room, the dining room and kitchen, etc. On one occasion Maestro Segovia arrived and was granted use of a downstairs bedroom to accommodate his bag and guitar and coat. HH had noted on multiple occasions that Segovia carried a green velvet satchel-type bag close to his guitar. On this occasion, mischief and curiosity completely overwhelmed HH and he plotted a means to know firsthand, what secrets the maestro held inside his green velvet satchel. Could the contents be a key ingredient to the Segovia mystique and magic? As the party got going, HH excused himself from
the drawing room. Once in the bathroom next to the bedroom where Segovia’s items were resting, HH knew that the other door in the bathroom would lead directly into this bedroom. What secrets would he find? And so he did it. He knew if he had been caught he’d be killed… he opened the green velvet satchel and discovered some simple and common nail files, and various emery cloths, mundane cuticle crème, … nothing mysterious, nothing the sorcerer’s apprentice could get in trouble with. And so in his moment of discovery, HH wisely concluded that Segovia is just as human as the rest of us… any mystique or magic we attribute to this hard working guitarist, is only in the figments of our minds. Segovia was only human and he worked very hard to be the best in his field.

During the late 1960’s, HH began collaborating with Frederick Noad on teaching the classical guitar. HH created many of the student exercises in the famous Noad “Solo Guitar Playing” text book. HH performed in and arranged the music for the Hollywood Guitar Trio, featuring Vince Terry, and Ron Purcell. HH also started teaching at the Jose Oribe Guitar Shop in Inglewood, CA. Here, HH met Vince Macaluso and Robert Torres and they began to be booked and promoted by Jose Oribe at many LA concert settings. In 1974, HH purchased the Oribe Guitar Shop and renamed it the Howard Heitmeyer Guitar Shop. His shop hosted many famous visitors and students including Chet Atkins, Carlos Montoya, George Benson, Earl Klugh, John Collins, and Johnny Carson’s son Cory. HH retired from retail in 1995 but remained active in the guitar world by arranging duets for Leslie Lewis and himself to perform. In 2010, Robert Torres initiated a project to have as many hand written HH solo guitar arrangements as possible, typeset into the TABLEDIT notation program. Thanks to Larry Kuhns, a TABLEDIT programmer residing in Ohio, well over 600 typeset pieces of music arranged, transcribed, or composed by HH are now publicly available to us all.

HH loved the American Guitar Society and remembered performing at early meetings hosted at Vahdah Bickford’s home. In 2003, AGS awarded HH a Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to guitar education, live performance, and a truly prolific archive of guitar arrangements and original compositions.

HH loved people and had a true passion for life and laughter – he was loved by so many for his musical gifts, gifts that he gave generously to all. RIP dear friend.

Picture: Howard and many other well know LA guitarists playing on “50 Guitars.”
Photo from Scotty Moore’s web site. (The name Professor Elloriagia should be Luis Elorriaga.)
Howard with esteemed colleagues during a union break at Liberty Records recording studio. (Feb 1961.)

Kneeling L-R: Milt Norman, Bill Pitman, Vito Mamolo at United Western Recorders Studio A, Sunset Blvd.
Hollywood, CA - Feb. 1961

Professor Ronald Purcell presented the AGS Lifetime Achievement Award to Howard at the 80th Anniversary of AGS.
Howard and pop-duo partner Robert Torres performing at a concert sponsored and promoted by Jose Oribe. (July, 1969)
THE CLASSICAL GUITAR...Today
SATURDAY JULY 12, 1969
Howard Heitmeyer...Soloist

Passacaille and Giga..................DeVree
Prelude-Sarabande-Gavotte...........J. S. Bach
Two Sonatas..........................Szadzki
Minuetto.............................Sor

*PAUSE*

Preludio-Marieta-María................Tarrega
Granada..................................Albeniz
Charo Tiplon..........................Villa-Lobos
Chanson and Valse.....................Ponce
Madronas..............................Torrado

INTERMISSION
H. Heitmeyer & R. Torres...Duets

A Man and a Woman....................Lat

Girl from Ipanema
Someone to Light Up My Life
One Note Samba........................Jobim

A Musical Journey

Pobrecita de Mi Alma..................Mexico
Valse Criolla...........................Venezuela
Pena....................................Ecuador
Vidalith.................................Argentina
Batoque................................Brazil

Romanza.................................Tarrega
Casinos and Ballet....................Alfonso
Refa.....................................Heitmeyer

Manha de Carnaval
Samba de Orfeo.........................Bossa