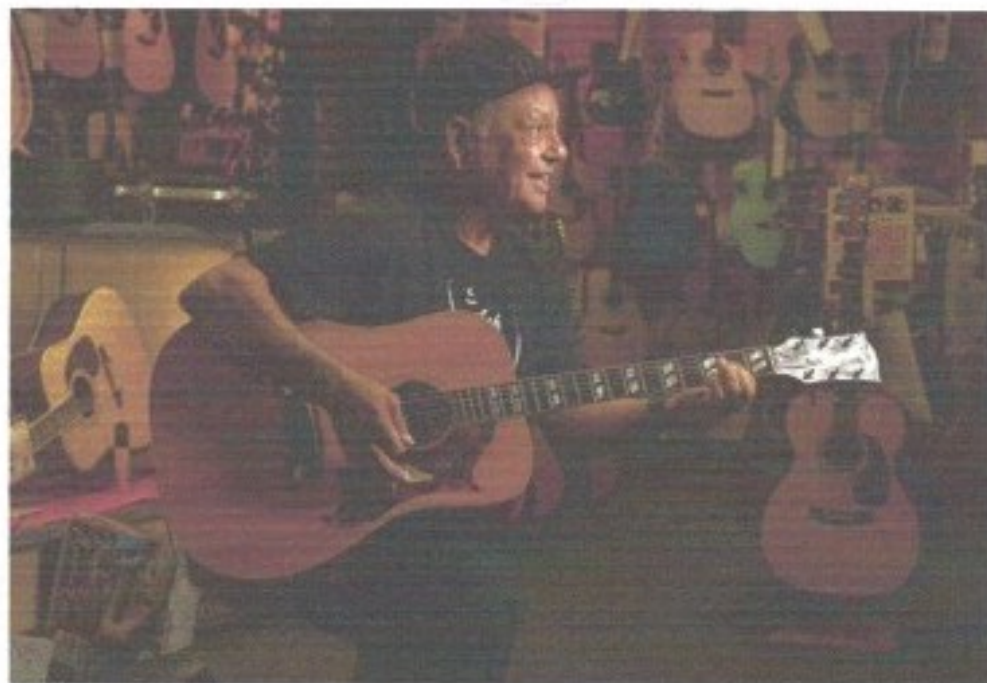


INTERVIEW MAGAZINE

CHEECH MARIN DEBUTS HIS BLAZING CHICANO GUITARS ART PROJECT

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This is an excerpt from the all-new SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2015 issue of Guitar Aficionado magazine. For this story, plus features on Paul Weller, the late B.B. King, Guitar Salon International, the Paul Reed Smith Dragon models, and much more, pick up the new issue of Guitar Aficionado at your newsstand, or online by clicking anywhere in this text.

BLAZING HEART: How Cheech Marin's love of Chicano art led to the Blazing Chicano Guitars project.

By Dan Epstein | Photos by Jeremy Danger

"Chicano is an evolutionary term," Cheech Marin explains. "It's a sensibility that's always changing, always in motion."

Today, Marin himself is in constant motion, flitting back and forth between the eye-popping hand-painted guitars hanging on the wall of the high-end guitar room at Sam Ash's Hollywood location. "I love this!" he exults, reaching for "De Una Nalga a La Otra," a Fender Standard Telecaster painted by El Paso artist Jari "Werc" Alvarez to resemble a tattooed female posterior in a skimpy swimsuit. "You got the Lady Guadalupe and the Monopoly guy," he says with a laugh, pointing to images emblazoned upon the left and right butt cheeks.

He then turns his attention to "Lester William Polkuss," a Gibson Les Paul Studio covered with ribbon-like graffiti lettering by Los Angeles artist Charles "Chaz" Bojorquez. "This is a badass guitar, but I have no idea what it says. Chicano writing is worse than psychedelic writing, man!" he laughs. "But Chaz Bojorquez is like

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the originator of graffiti art in L.A., so it's very important to have him be a part of this."

The axes painted by Alvarez and Bojorquez are part of Blazing Chicano Guitars, a new art series curated by Marin, which features guitars customized with one-of-a-kind artwork by both prominent and up-and-coming Chicano artists, including Carlos Donjuan, Adrian Fernandez, Jasmine Marin, Joe Peña, Alex Rubio, Ricardo Ruiz, John Veladez, and Jaime "Germs" Zacarias. The painted instruments range in price from \$5,000 for Fernandez's "Cry of Soul," an Ibanez ukulele with a haunting eye-and-spider illustration, to \$25,000 for "Sombrero Hornigas," a Gibson Les Paul Studio bearing Veladez's surrealist painting of ants dancing amid flames and sombreros. "John's one of my favorite artists," Marin enthuses. "He's my hero."

The idea for the series came to Marin a few years ago while Schechter guitars were in the process of making a limited-edition "Cheech & Chong" guitar for Sam Ash. "My manager, Ben Feigin, had an association with Sam Ash," he explains, "and we were doing some deals with them. I'm a collector of Chicano art, and the suggestion came up: 'Why don't you put some of your favorite Chicano artists together with some guitars, and see what they can do?' The only direction I gave the artists was, 'Go! Do your thing! Be artistic! And this is the result.'"



Though he's best known as one half of the world's greatest stoner-comedy duo—not to mention his prodigious list of film and television credits, including *Nash Bridges*, *Lost*, *Cars*, *Machete* and *The Lion King*—Marin is also an art connoisseur whose passion for fine art dates back to his childhood in Los Angeles during the Fifties.

"I was self-educated in art history," he recalls. "I went to the library, look out all the art books, looked at all the pictures, and found out what was what. It was like a portal into another world." Once Marin became successful with Cheech and Chong, he began collecting art. "I was buying art nouveau and art deco, stuff like that," he says, "but I had a gap in my knowledge where contemporary art was concerned. I kind of knew some names of modern artists, but that was it."

One modern development that had completely eluded Marin's notice was the Chicano art movement, which was kind of ironic, considering that much of it grew out of L.A.'s Mexican-American community, of which Marin was a member. "Chicano art didn't exist back in my younger days," he explains. "It didn't really start until the late Sixties, but by that time I was already up in Vancouver, where I'd gone in 1967 to avoid the draft. When I got back to L.A. in 1970, I wasn't paying much attention to what was going on in the artistic community."

It wasn't until 1985, when Marin began working on *Born in East L.A.*—his first film without longtime comedic partner Tommy Chong, with whom he'd recently parted ways—that he first became enchanted with Chicano art. "I was going to a lot of galleries in L.A. and started discovering all of these Chicano artists," he



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remembers. "I was knocked out. I knew what good painting was, because I'd seen it all my life in museums and books. It was like discovering a new band that can really play, like, out in the middle of Joshua Tree or something. It was like, 'Who the fuck are these guys? They're really good!'"

Though many of the artists had been working since the Sixties, Chicano art was still a fairly underground movement when Marin started getting hip to it. "The artists had been developing kind of in silence, without a lot of pressure from the market," he says. "That was good for their art, but they weren't getting much recognition outside of L.A. or San Antonio, Texas, which were the two places Chicano art was really happening at the time."

Bitten by the Chicano art bug, Marin began obsessively collecting pieces, gradually amassing the largest private collection of the genre. He also became a tireless advocate for Chicano art and artists, organizing and curating numerous touring exhibitions of Chicano art, including the current *Chicanitas: Small Paintings* from the Cheech Marin Collection. For Marin, *Blazing Chicano Guitars* represents a new way of drawing well-deserved attention to the work of Chicano artists. And it's a good way to get them paid. "We want to sell these guitars, so that the artists make money and they don't starve," he says.

The combination of art and guitars is especially appealing to Marin, who has been playing guitar since he was 11 years old. "Guitars just looked cool to me, man," he says, and laughs. "I was like, 'Play guitar? Sure, that sounds good!' I took lessons for about a year from an old lady teacher in my neighborhood, learned some basic shit from her, and then went out on my own."

Marin says that one of the sweetest perks of his stand-up years with Cheech & Chong was getting to share stages with some of the world's greatest guitarists. "We used to open for the Allman Brothers a lot in the early days, both with Duane and after Duane," he recalls. "I hat band cooked! They were the best live guitar band, ever. We also played four or five times in different situations with B.B. King opening for us. He was so great, and he always had a great band."

"Years later, Cheech & Chong did a photo shoot for the 50th anniversary of the Grammy Awards. They had everybody there, like Glen Campbell and Henry Mancini. B.B. King comes up to me and says, 'Hey, I'm B.B. King -- remember me?' I swear to god that's what he said, man!" He laughs. "And I go, 'Uh, yeah. I remember you!'"

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