

Fingerstyle Fire



BRUCE SCHOCKETT

Michael Gulezian reignites his muse with *Language of the Flame*.

Around 1974, Michael Gulezian walked up to fingerstyle guitarist Robbie Basho before a concert in Colorado. "I asked him if I could play his guitar," recalls Gulezian. "I was 16 or 17 and didn't know anything about protocol. But he was incredibly humble. He handed me his guitar, I played a couple of songs for him, and he said, 'I need to bring you to John Fahey's attention.'"

A few years later, after Gulezian had released his own, self-produced album *Snow*, Fahey called him. Fahey's Takoma Records had just signed a deal with Chrysalis Records to provide major label distribution for Fahey's

indie imprint. When Gulezian's next album *Unspoken Intentions* was released by Takoma/Chrysalis in 1980, it seemed to be perfect timing. The acoustic guitar revival was cresting. Players like Fahey, Leo Kottke, and Basho had spawned a second generation of instrumentalists that included Will Ackerman, Alex de Grassi, and Michael Hedges. But new commercial acts like Blondie, Pat Benatar, and Huey Lewis quickly became Chrysalis' priorities. "The specialty, artsy label, which was supposed to get the attention of the big major label, was pretty much ignored," recalls Gulezian ruefully. *Unspoken Intentions* sold a

few thousand copies and was forgotten, then buried when Takoma went under in 1985. But that wasn't the end of the trail for Gulezian.

Born in New Jersey in 1957, Gulezian grew up in a musical family. His Armenian-born father was a virtuoso of the oud. "My father specialized in ancient music of the Middle East," recalls Gulezian. "So I heard everything from Armenian folk songs to music from the reign of the pharaohs around the house." But it wasn't the oud that inspired Gulezian to start playing at age seven. "I saw the Beatles," he says. "The guitar was similar to the oud, and I said, 'I want to play guitar.'"

He began classical guitar lessons but stopped when his family moved to Arizona. So he taught himself by listening to records by Mississippi John Hurt and Robert Johnson. Then he heard Fahey. "I was listening to Leadbelly and Doc Watson, and I heard Fahey when I was 12; it just opened me up," Gulezian enthuses. "He had absorbed these styles and made them into his own style that was different from anything that had been done before." Taking that as a cue, Gulezian began forging his own approach. Besides blues and the Beatles, he drew on Motown, Led Zeppelin, and eventually jazz musicians like Keith Jarrett, Ralph Towner, and Bobby McFerrin. "These are not just guitar players," he admits, "but it's the freedom from convention on the instrument that's really important."

Although *Unspoken Intentions* seemed to sink without a trace, the LP garnered a coterie of seminal musician-fans, including avant-garde and global music exponent Henry Kaiser, Twin Cities guitar iconoclast Steve Tibbetts, and Michael Hedges, the late, two-handed tapping icon. Gulezian's *Unspoken Intentions* had been released a year before Hedges' 1981 debut, *Breakfast in the Field*. Like Hedges, Gulezian mixes rapid strums with fingerpicked filigree, rhythms that shift within a phrase, tapping, and startling dynamic percussive effects. But while Hedges ascended to

guitar godhood and Tibbetts went on to record for ECM, Gulezian faded from the music scene. He got a business degree, traveled Europe, and worked as a ranch hand back in the States.

Gulezian returned to recording in the '90s, releasing *Distant Memories and Dreams* (1990) and *The Dare of an Angel* (1994) on his own Timbreline Records. "There is an open, expansive airiness in my music now that wasn't there before that ranching experience," explains Gulezian, who now lives in Nashville. After a nine-year hiatus during which he relentlessly toured the country, Gulezian returned with a more aggressive sound. "People kept saying I'd lost it, that I was making pretty music but couldn't really play guitar with any virtuosity anymore," he says. So on his newest album, *Language of the Flame* (Timbreline, www.timbrelinemusic.com), Gulezian rips angular storm clouds on "The Room of Doom" and deftly navigates the tricky patterns of "I'm No Seismologist." Chortled the Metronome."

"There's some teeth, some spine, a statement to be made," Gulezian asserts, "and I believe I made it." But for all his virtuosic ferocity, Gulezian never loses sight of the melody or the drama of his compositions. And he can still play sweetly, as a track like "Little Meggie" attests. At this stage in his career, Gulezian

What They Play

Michael Gulezian has two guitars: a scuffed and scratched 23-year-old six-string built by Tom Beeston, a luthier from Oracle, Arizona, who died a couple of years ago, and a Guild F-212XL jumbo-body 12-string he's had since the mid-1970s.

For amplification, Gulezian uses a Sunrise magnetic soundhole pickup, which he runs through a Sunrise tube interface preamp; an under-saddle Highlander pickup; and a pair of Trance Audio Acoustic Lens transducers run through an Amulet preamp. Gulezian doesn't use any mixers or blenders onstage, opting to send three separate signals to the PA. He runs the signal of the Sunrise through a T.C. Electronics SCF pedal, which he keeps in pitch-modulation mode. "Depending on the song, I may also run this signal through a Lexicon LXP-1 reverb unit," he says, "but I will almost always keep the other guitar channels free from any signal processing."

doesn't need to prove he can play, he just needs more people to hear his expansive and original sound.

—John Diliberto