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MAGAZINE

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*~Michael Diamond,  
Music and Media  
Focus, April 2013*

WITH THE GRAMMY® NOMINATED COMPOSER, ARRANGER,  
PRODUCER AND MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST

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TOP MUSIC INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS – BUSINESS ISSUE 2013

WITH THE GRAMMY® NOMINATED COMPOSER, ARRANGER,  
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# Al Conti

Interviewed By Sarah Golden

Introduction By Christine L. Aldridge

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Up for a musical adventure? Then travel WITH THE GRAMMY® NOMINATED COMPOSER, ARRANGER, PRODUCER AND MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST, Al Conti, through his musical landscapes of sound. Visit with *Scheherazade* as she tells her 1000 stories over 1001 Arabian Nights. Go with him on a Nordic adventure across the icy *Northern Sea's* to the lands of ancient gods, or in his newest telling, go along to the Orient and envision with him the tale of the Asian princess whose love can only be saved by *The Blue Rose*.



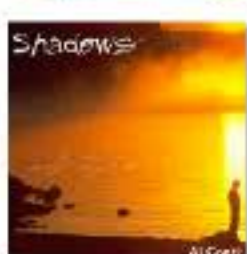
"... Conti uses the ethnic musical influence as a jumping off point for his infectious, engaging blend of new age romanticism and chill-out rhythms. The resulting hybrid manages to sound new and yet familiar, contemporary and ages old...."

~Bill Binkelman, Zone Music Reporter, August 2013

## The Art of Music

**A**l Conti, is a masterful storyteller in his own right, but his creativity and adventurous musical spirit may also be genetic. His grandfather was a concert pianist, his mother a professional ballerina, and his father an architect, published poet and university professor. Further back, he is descended from famous Argentinean writer and politician Miguel Cané, and is also a relative of the Necchi family that founded the famous sewing machine company.

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From his first album *Shadows* (2006) on the Shadowside Music label, Al Conti's musical talent has been recognized as outstanding. His second album *Poeta* was used as part of NPR's fundraising efforts in 2007, and his recording 'Quest for Orpheus,' from the same album, received a "Best of 2007" Award from Mystic Soundscapes Radio. His third release *Scheherazade* (2008), topped the ZMR Top 100 Chart at #1 for three consecutive months, garnered four ZMR Lifestyle Music Awards nominations including Album of the Year, and won Best World Album of 2008. *Northern Seas* (2010), garnered a GRAMMY® nomination, made Amazon's Top 10 list for Best New Age Albums of 2010, and reached #2 on the ZMR Top 100 chart for October 2010. His most recent release, *The Blue Rose* (May, 2013) debuted at #1 on the ZMR Top 100 Charts in both May and June, 2013.

In addition to his music, Al has also been seen as an actor on the CBS daytime drama, *As The World Turns*, in films, in numerous radio and television commercials, and on-stage in theatre productions. He was recently featured on a 2013 ASPCA poster, together with his dog Digby (adopted June 2012), emphasizing the importance of pet adoption.

In 2008, Al joined Kevin Bacon, Jessica Alba, Will & Grace's Shelley Morrison and other celebrities lending his name to the Until There's A Cure foundation to help raise funds for HIV/AIDS awareness and research. Al is also a member of Artists For Human Rights, an organization founded by actress Anne Archer.



Sarah Golden, associate editor of Shine On Hollywood Magazine talked with Al Conti about the power of music, the ups and downs of creating an album, and his latest album The Blue Rose.

## Where were you born and raised?

I was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I spent my early years there, but also in Italy and the USA.



## What was it like growing up in a musical family?

It was really wonderful, there was always music in the house. My family's creative side is really broad from my mother, who was a classical ballerina and danced on the stage at the Teatro Colon, which is a world renowned venue on the level of the Metropolitan Opera, to my dad who is a published author and poet.

**"My family always had a deep appreciation for the arts. When I announced at an early age that I wanted to be an actor, no one ever discouraged me from following my dreams. Music eventually took over my life and while my other siblings went on to other things, I remained the artist of the family."**

## What music artists inspire you?

There are really so many! I don't think a day goes

by that I am not researching some artist or piece that I heard somewhere. In my genre however, there is one artist - who also happens to be a dear friend - who is not only a phenomenal artist, but also a wonderful person, Chris Spheeris.

## What's the best piece of music you have ever heard? What makes it the best for you?

If you think my iPod has over 22,000 songs, I could go on all day! I don't have one specific piece, and any song can touch me deeply at any given time. In fact, I was just telling another artist friend of mine how gorgeous I found the arrangements for Paul Williams' "The Rainbow Connection," which Kermit the Frog sings at the start of The Muppet Movie.

## How did you get into the music industry?

**"While I was acting professionally, I was also doing some music work for a production company in Germany. People often asked me if I had an album of my own music and of course I didn't."**

Over time, I came to the realization that there was a message here for me - and that something creative inside of me wanted to be heard. Seven years, five albums, a Grammy nomination and lifetime friendships ensued. I never looked back.

## Do you have a favorite piece of music or a piece you are most proud of?

**"As an artist, it is sometimes really hard to step back and listen objectively to your own work - I know so many artists who can't even listen to their own work for months after a project is completed. That said, there are a couple of my songs that I am really proud of - and for different reasons."**

'Bamboo Night Garden' from my recent album, The Blue Rose. I am also very proud of 'Daughter of the City' from my album Scheherazade. I think this is because both represent an artistic quality I always strive for. A radio interviewer recently referred to the latter song as 'legendary,' so I guess it works!

## Have you ever come across a challenging piece of music? If you have, what was challenging about it, and how did you overcome the challenge?

**"Great question, and one that brings back some real struggles for me. I don't think any project has been without at least one creative challenge."**

I had such a piece on my recent album, The Blue Rose. It was among the last songs I composed - not the last song on the album, because often that order changes as the project progresses. In this particular piece, while I loved where the percussion work was going, the song itself just did not 'feel' right - it wasn't coming together. My release deadline was looming and I was under tremendous pressure, so I made the decision to dump the melody and start over from scratch, keeping only the percussive elements I had arranged. It turned out to be one of my favorite songs on the album! Sometimes you just have to break something and rebuild it.

## What is music to you? Do you have your own specific definition for it?

Music pretty much permeates my life. Since I was a child, music has constantly played in my head. A friend of mine who is a painter compared how I hear music to how he sees the world - everything for him is a paint stroke, every tree and cloud become a mixture of pigments. For me, everything is music - always.

**"As a kid, I would drive my parents crazy because I would constantly be playing music - I even stole my sister's record player.... But that is another story. Playing made the music come outside of my head for a while, and I still have to do that to this day."**

No matter what I am doing through the day, music keeps playing in my head. It can be too much sometimes, you can't turn it off. But ultimately, this is how I compose an album - the music needs to come out of me, almost like I have to empty a full vessel every so often so it doesn't overflow.

## Do you believe music should tell a story?

**"My albums always tell a story - I see them in a very cinematic way. Each of my projects is based on a world myth or legend. In fact, a recent reviewer commented on how this approach to an album is almost lost in the age of digital music."**

Maybe I approach my work in this way because of my past life as an actor - for me an album is not unlike a film. Each song is arranged and placed in a specific location to carry the narrative and to build the listener's emotions through to the end - the moment of revelation - the "denouement." And, while listeners can now more readily pick and choose the songs they want to experience and place them in any order, many listeners have told me how much they appreciate how I musically weave a tale from beginning to end.

## Do you have a specific muse to inspire your music?

I do, but cannot really explain it. With each album, I feel a certain 'energy' that takes over. With Northern Seas, I experienced the strength and power of the Norse guiding me - strong, masculine and elemental. With The Blue Rose, it was an almost Zen-like feeling that carried the album through; and the fact that people have told me they use some of the tracks for meditation reinforces my early experiences crafting this album. What is

"...interesting is that whoever the muse – they also let me know the album is finished and I can step back. Inspiration shuts off like a faucet and I intuitively know the album is done. Suddenly, that force that was with me throughout the entire process, is gone."

**What is it like to record an album?**

That experience is quite different for every artist, from love to hate and every degree in between! For me, it can be a difficult experience. I go through a lot of emotions.

Each album puts my artistic abilities to the test and challenges me to grow. Like many artists, I often battle that 'inner saboteur,' the one that constantly says, "What are you doing, you're no good at this!" Even after reaching the top of the New Age charts, receiving awards and a Grammy nomination, I can still question my abilities as a musician. I do not think this will ever stop. But, I like to say that I use this to my advantage, to keep growing as an artist and to better myself.

**Can you tell us about making *The Blue Rose*?**

The Blue Rose is a lovely Asian legend I read as a child. In fact, I still have the childhood book where I first read the story. I had often entertained the idea of composing an album with an Asian feel and this presented a wonderful opportunity. The Blue Rose is the story of a princess whose father wants to see her married, but she refuses. She sets a stipulation that she will agree to marry, but only to a man who will bring her a blue rose. She knows such a rose does not truly exist in nature, so she feels confident that she will be able to chart her own course, independent of her father. Many suitors appear, each bearing their idea of a blue rose, but all are turned down. Eventually, the princess falls in love with a minstrel and wants to marry him, but she is now caught in a trap that she herself created. Of course, love conquers all and the story ends well. What I liked about this story is that it

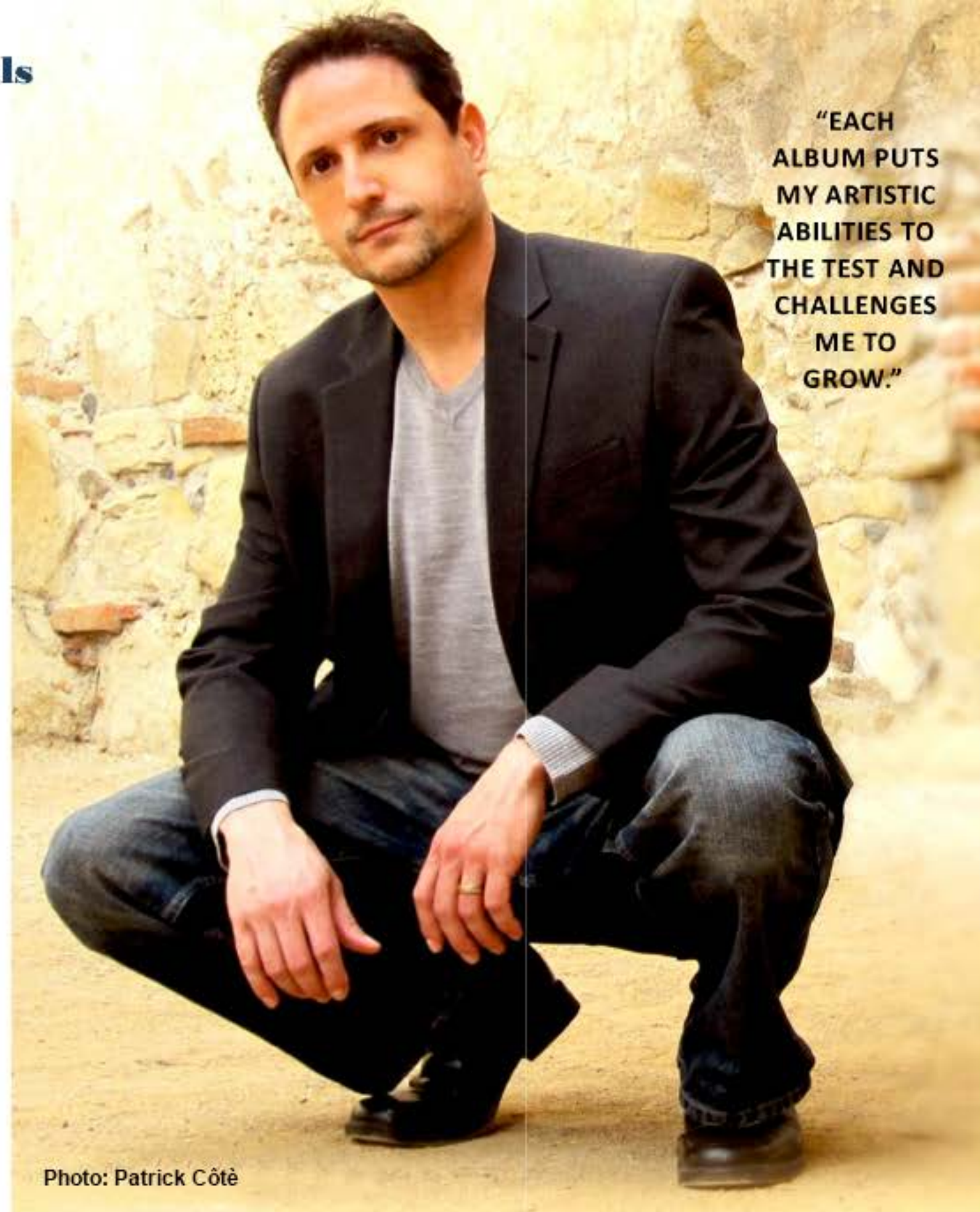


Photo: Patrick Côté

"EACH ALBUM PUTS MY ARTISTIC ABILITIES TO THE TEST AND CHALLENGES ME TO GROW."

represents profound hope and the reminder that we can all achieve what we dream of, which sometimes may seem unattainable. I feel the world needs a lot of hope.

Composing the album itself proved to be, as all my albums are, a personal challenge. I worked with some wonderfully talented people such as New

Age artist Ann Licater, violinist Hannah Beth Cray and master engineer André Maquera.

**Does every album teach you something new about the world of music?**

Definitely. Even more so because each album I compose explores a different culture, so I learn quite a bit about that culture's

fascinating instruments and I explore other myths and legends to provide context. While working on Northern Seas, for example, I read two huge books on the myths of the Norse.

"I also feel I learn much about myself as a person and as an artist with each album. I test my limits and come through to the other side with the scars that show me that I have grown as an artist."

**Aside from music, you've also been an actor. Would you say there are similarities or differences between acting and creating music?**

"I think, for me, there are many similarities. I approach each album as an actor and director. Each story I tell in an album represents a play or a film in my mind, and the characters are very real."

In *The Blue Rose*, the princess was very much alive in each song I composed, as were all the other characters. I can almost say that the musical 'choices' I make are similar to the choices I would make as an actor.

**What was it like to be an actor in *As The World Turns*?**

At the time, it was just another job for me. But, I still remember the happy, early (very early) morning calls over the dressing room loud speakers greeting us all with, "Good morning, World Turners!" That, and also a young, regular cast member, who showed me where the lounge was with the best coffee and pastries, made the experience memorable! That show is such an icon of American television, so it is wonderful to have been a part of it.

**You are also a member of Artists For Human Rights. Can you tell us about it?**

Artists for Human Rights is an organization founded by actress Anne Archer, whom I have always admired. I was invited to be part of this organization by a fellow artist and I jumped at the chance because I truly admire what it stands for, which is raising human rights awareness around the world. I also support The Leukemia and Lymphoma Foundation, the ASPCA and

the Until There's a Cure Foundation, which raises HIV and AIDS awareness.

**You've traveled to many places. Is there one place in particular that seems more inspiring, or meant the most to you?**

I think I am inspired by every place I have visited, or lived in. Argentina is still very dear to me, since I grew up there and I still have family and many friends, but I have also lived in Italy, where I have family, and that place is dear to me as well. Yet, I sometimes feel that I belong nowhere and everywhere at this point in my life, because wherever I am, I carry deep in me the other places and cultures that I have touched and have touched me.

**What characteristics do you believe a music artist should have to be successful?**

**"Humbleness is a big one for me, as is professionalism. I see a lot of misplaced ego in this business, and it is a big turn off for me."**

The line between promotion and self-promotion is a fine one, yet I see people stepping over it all the time. Some people lose perspective as to why they create music to begin with, and at that point, I believe people can lose something very precious.

Awards and nominations are great, and they represent what can be an energizing form of recognition, but for some people, these become the goal. Recently, someone said to me, her lifelong wish was to win a Grammy. I remember thinking at that time, "What happens when you get it?" For me, lifelong dreams are having a wonderful family, healthy parents, a great life partner, dear friends, my dog Digby, who we rescued from a shelter, and lots of love. Even if I was ever lucky enough to win a Grammy, I can still carry all those dreams with me until the day I am no longer on this planet.

**Do you have any advice for future music artists?**



At the risk of repeating myself, being humble is key.

**"If you want to be a celebrity, forget being a musician. I believe true artists are not looking for fame and fortune, but only to express with the world, the art that lives within them."**

We love what we do and we love sharing it. In this day and age, where anyone can make an album, the competition is gigantic. You have to be really good at what you do and that comes with practice, professionalism and persistence. •

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