

The festival with strings attached

The renowned New York Guitar Festival has spread its wings to Adelaide, writes **Penelope DeBelle**.

THE guitar is so inherently cool it outsells all other musical instruments combined. In Western culture its predecessor, the lute, was the most popular instrument until Bach's time, when keyboards took over.

The guitar resurfaced last century as a classical instrument in the deft hands of Spanish artist Andres Segovia. It was already musically established when the Beatles propelled the guitar-based format to the heart of popular culture, pushing guitar sales ahead of piano, probably forever.

The idea of holding an international guitar festival in New York in 1999 might have seemed like an idea well past its time, but eight years later it has spread to Australia — the first Adelaide International Guitar Festival in late November.

South Australian Premier Mike Rann, a baby boomer who four years ago reinstated the lapsed Adelaide Film Festival, met the artistic director of the

New York Guitar Festival, David Spelman, in New York to talk about an Australian connection. Months later, Spelman had a \$2 million line of credit for four years and an inaugural program of 130 musicians, that will attract an expected audience of 45,000, figures comparable with other South Australian national music events, the Cabaret Festival and Womad.

Spelman, a classically trained guitarist who ran his own publicity agency in New York for 10 years but could never quite leave the guitar behind, was one of the founders of the New York festival. He said the first festival was little more than a modest little music lovers' gathering, but it gained momentum and credibility because it was picked up by the influential American broadcaster, radio WNYC's John Schaeffer, who Spelman compared with ABC Radio National *The Daily Planet* host, world music guru and former *Asleep at the Wheel* steel guitarist Lucky Oceans.



"I sheepishly shared with (Schaeffer) this little hazy dream of a guitar festival and he said, 'Hey, if you get it off the ground, man, we'll broadcast it live on the radio'," Spelman said in Adelaide last week.

"We had some really cool artists involved, but the fact it was broadcast through his auspices made it seem more important than it was. It gave it a lot of credibility."

The focus of Australia's first major festival of the guitar will be part Womad — a free concert is planned with a yoga session followed by a performance from

V. M. Bhatt on the mohan veena, who collaborated on *A Meeting by the River* with American roots guitarist Ry Cooder — part educational with workshops and school outreach programs and part blazing artistry with 40 events to be announced.

"I think what we are doing here is probably more ambitious than anything I have done elsewhere," Spelman said. "Getting some kind of local thing going seems like the natural thing to do but here we have taken that mantra very seriously."

Spelman leant on his heavy US guitar friends to support the

project — the lure of sandy beaches, warm weather and Barossa Valley wines helped. The festival program features in his first Australian visit by the great Jorma Kaukonen, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee who began his career in the late 1970s as a founder of Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna, and who has devoted his life to blues and roots music.

Kaukonen and Australian guitarist Jeff Lang will be artists in residence who will be in Adelaide before the festival, and will be involved in performances and workshops throughout. Other stars include Vernon Reid,

the guitarist with hard rock band Living Colour, who in the mid-1980s founded the Black Rock Coalition and the Saints guitarist and songwriter Ed Kuepper.

Reid, who was in Adelaide for the program announcement last week, will give workshops and perform in *Kiss the Sky*, the festival's tribute to the man who made the guitar cooler than anybody, the late Jimi Hendrix.

Adelaide International Guitar Festival, November 23-December 2.

LINK
▶ adelaideguitarfestival.com.au

David Spelman pictured in Adelaide last week. The New Yorker has lent his considerable clout to the Adelaide International Guitar Festival.
PICTURE: DAVID MARLIZ