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# guitar

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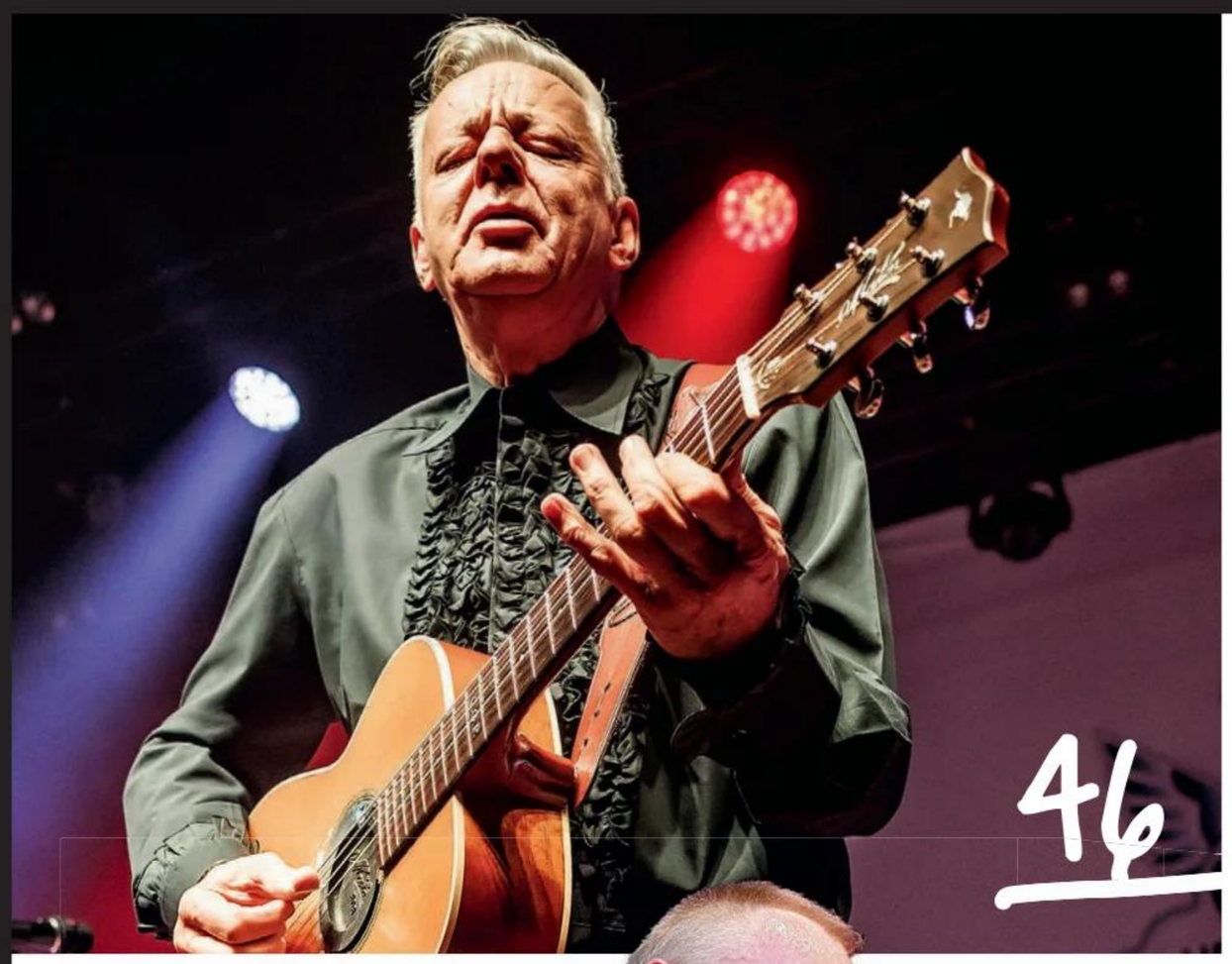

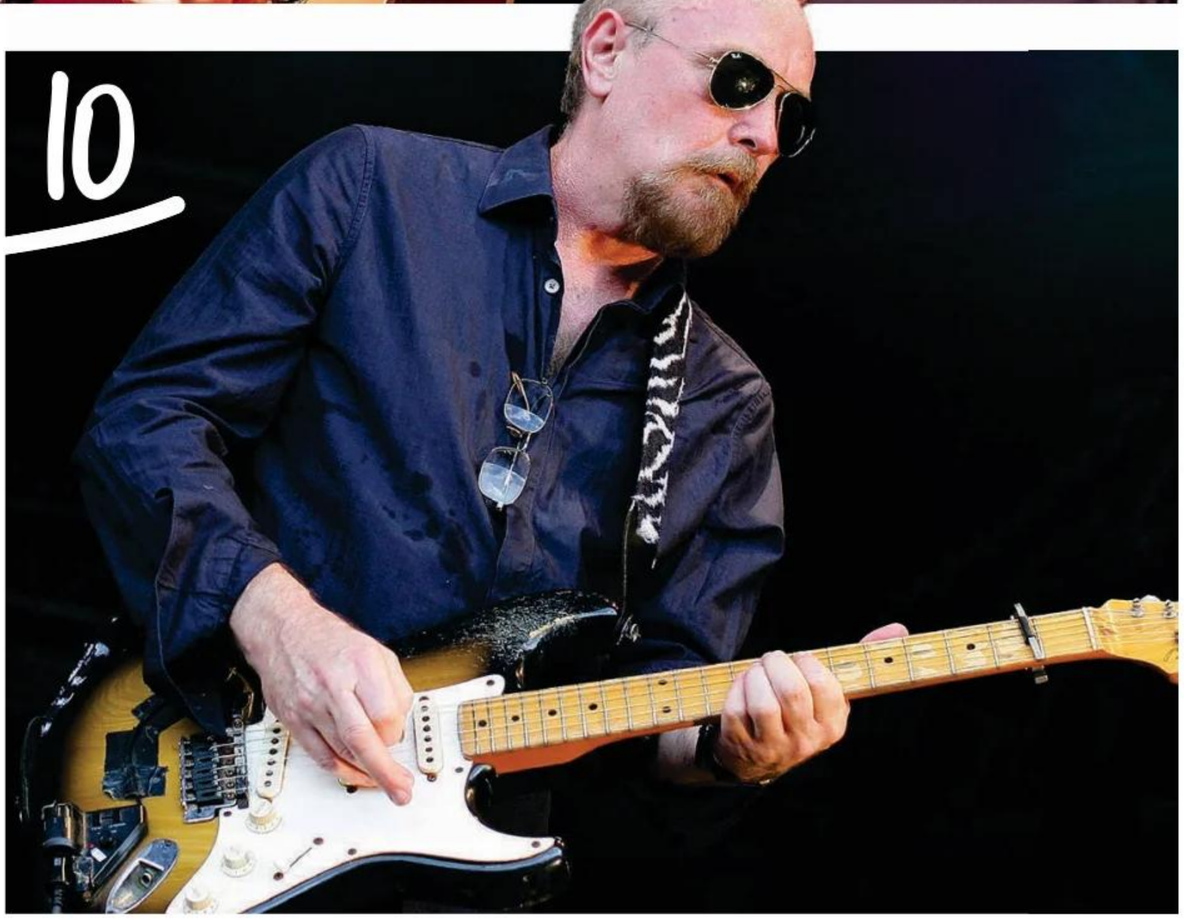

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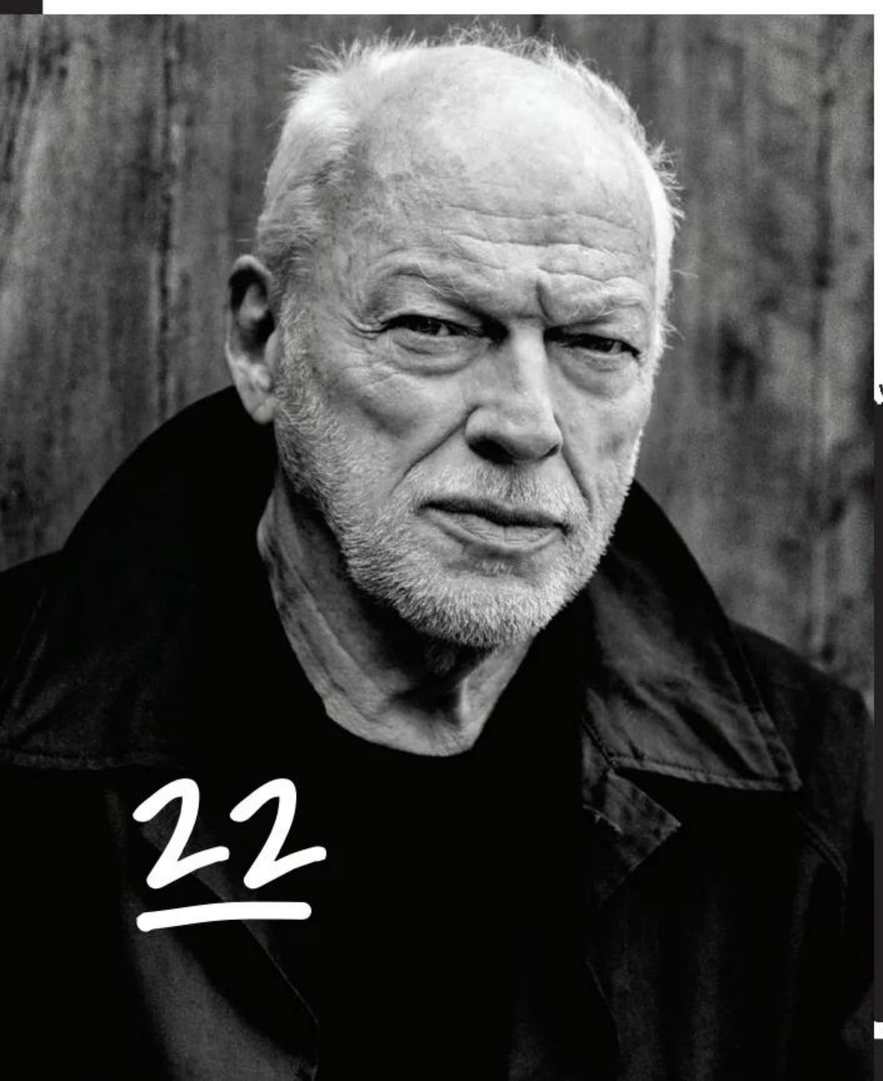

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## DAVE MUSTAINE ISSUES AN UPDATE ON HIS LONG-AWAITED GIBSON LES PAUL

Dave Mustaine is continuing to build on his relationship with Gibson, as the Megadeth founder has confirmed that a signature Les Paul is definitely in the works.

"I love what's going on with my Gibson relationship. I look at a lot of that stuff," he told our sibling magazine Guitarist. "We're doing some models, like the Flying V with 24 frets, and we've talked about a couple of others and are making them perfect. One of those is the Dave Mustaine Les Paul. It will play like a beast, be a 24-fret guitar, and have the heel shaved down."

Mustaine previously teased the release of the Les Paul in a 2022 interview with Songfacts, saying, "We're working on the Explorer, and we have a 24-fret Les Paul I finished creating, but this is something for next year, maybe the year after." His guitar tech, Bryan Jones, also hinted at a signature Les Paul, posting a photo of what we can only assume is this guitar on social media in November 2022. The post has since been removed.

The guitar has similar black hardware and inlays to Mustaine's signature Flying Vs, with added witch-hat knobs. It sports 24 frets, his signature Seymour Duncan pickups, and a black finish. It'll join the existing Dave Mustaine collection, which includes the flagship Flying V EXP model with Seymour Duncan Thrash Factor pickups, the limited-edition and higher-end Flying V EXP Rust in Peace (currently sold out online), and the Songwriter, the first-ever Gibson acoustic with a 24-fret fingerboard.

In addition to these Gibson models, Mustaine has a more affordable line of signature guitars with Epiphone and Kramer: the Epiphone Dave Mustaine Flying V Prophecy, the Custom, and the Kramer Dave Mustaine Vanguard. These models were released last year after being initially announced back in February 2021. **Words by Janelle Borg**

SUPPLIED

## OVER 40 ICONIC GUITARS ON LOAN FROM THE NATIONAL GUITAR MUSEUM ARE ON THEIR WAY TO AUSTRALIA THIS YEAR

A major exhibition showcasing the history of the guitar from the dark ages to the present will hit Australia later this year. Medieval to Metal: The Art and Evolution of the Guitar will run from October 12 to February 2 at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, and as the name implies, it covers everything from the ancient oud through to the modern Strat.

At hand will be 40 "iconic" guitars, ranging from a reproduced oud dating back to 3000 BC (!) and a 1600s style baroque guitar, through to 20th century instruments by Fender, Gibson, B.C. Rich, Ovation, Ibanez and much more. All are on loan from the National Guitar Museum, which is based in the United States.

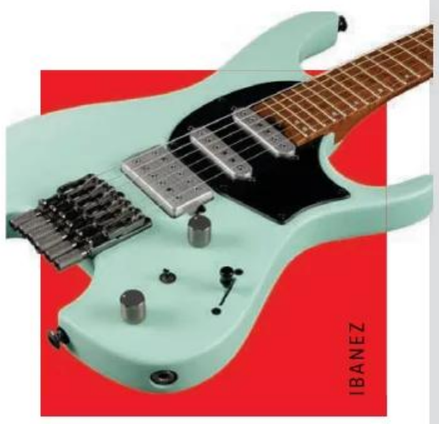
The exhibition is accompanied by paintings, objects and photographs related to the guitar's history, with the latter featuring work by veteran music photographers including Australia's Tony Mott and the United States' Neil Zlozower.

"With 40 different instruments that show how the guitar has evolved in various forms around the planet, this exhibition explores the guitar's role at the centre of both pop culture and art, and why it became the definitive musical icon of the last hundred years,' said National Guitar Museum executive director HP Newquist.

In addition to the exhibition, the Art Gallery of Ballarat is running a huge events program. Highlights include gigs by Civic, The Hot Lemons, RVG and Pyrex, while Adalita and Henry Wagons will appear in conversation. Classical guitar is covered by an event featuring Slava and Leonard Grigoryan, while National Gallery of Victoria curator Laurie Benson will discuss depictions of the guitar through the history of art.

Tickets to Medieval to Metal start from $20 ($10 for children; $15 for gallery members), while events usually cost more. Check out the Art Gallery of Ballarat website for full details and pricing. **Words by Shaun Prescott**

## STUDY CLAIMS TO HAVE IDENTIFIED THE LIGHTEST TONEWOOD OF THEM ALL – AND IT'S NOT ONE YOU'D EXPECT



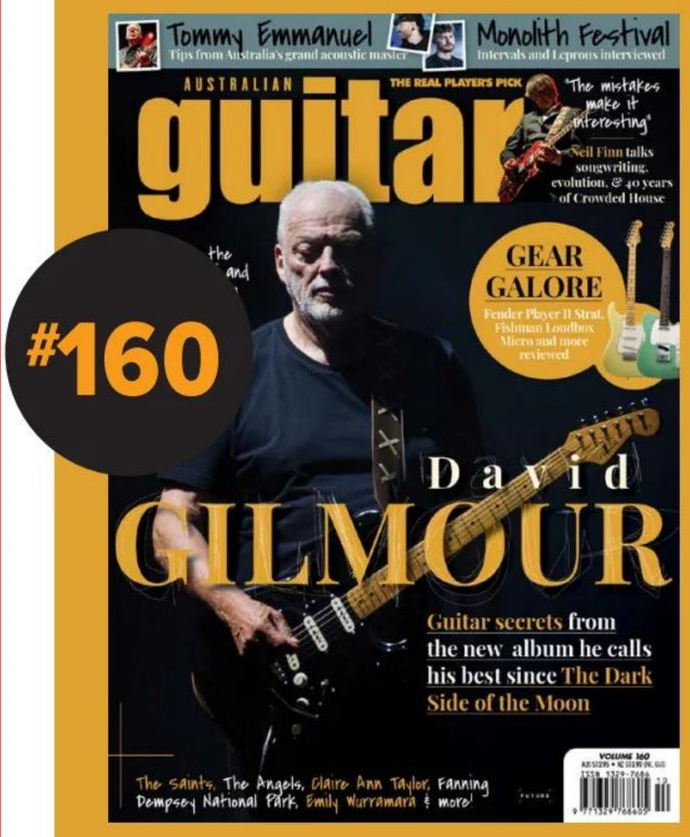
IBANEZ

Another day, another footnote added to the annals of the great tonewood debate – the ever-raging conversation around whether the woods used to construct an electric guitar or acoustic guitar actually make a difference to its overall sound. This time, though, the development isn't concerned with the crux of that debate, but a recent study that has shed new light on what it claims is the lightest tonewood of them all.

Find My Guitar analysed a whole range of the most popular tonewoods on the market and has concluded that nyatoh is the lightest option, edging out basswood and poplar, which both complete the top three. These are followed by ash and limba, with the usual suspects such as mahogany, maple and alder cropping up ahead of okoume and – apparently the heaviest tonewood out there – pine.

Nyatoh, notably, is commonly found on Ibanez guitars – the recently revamped Quest series, for example, utilized this particular wood – with the study suggesting it's "versatile for various musical genres".

**Words by Janelle Borg**




**On the cover:** THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS - JULY 6TH: English guitarist Eric Clapton performs live on stage at the Statenhal in the Hague, the Netherlands on 6th July 1989. (photo by Frans Schellekens/Redferns)


### EDITORIAL

**EDITOR** Shaun Prescott
**EDITOR AT LARGE** Corin Shearston
**GROUP ART DIRECTOR** Troy Coleman

### CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Bird • Joe Bosso • Dave Burrluck
Andrew Daly • Chris Gill • Steve Henderson
Denny Ilet • Amit Sharma • Corin Shearston
Stuart Williams • Jenna Scaramanga

### ADVERTISING

**NATIONAL ADVERTISING MANAGER**
Lewis Preece
**EMAIL** lewis.preece@futurenet.com

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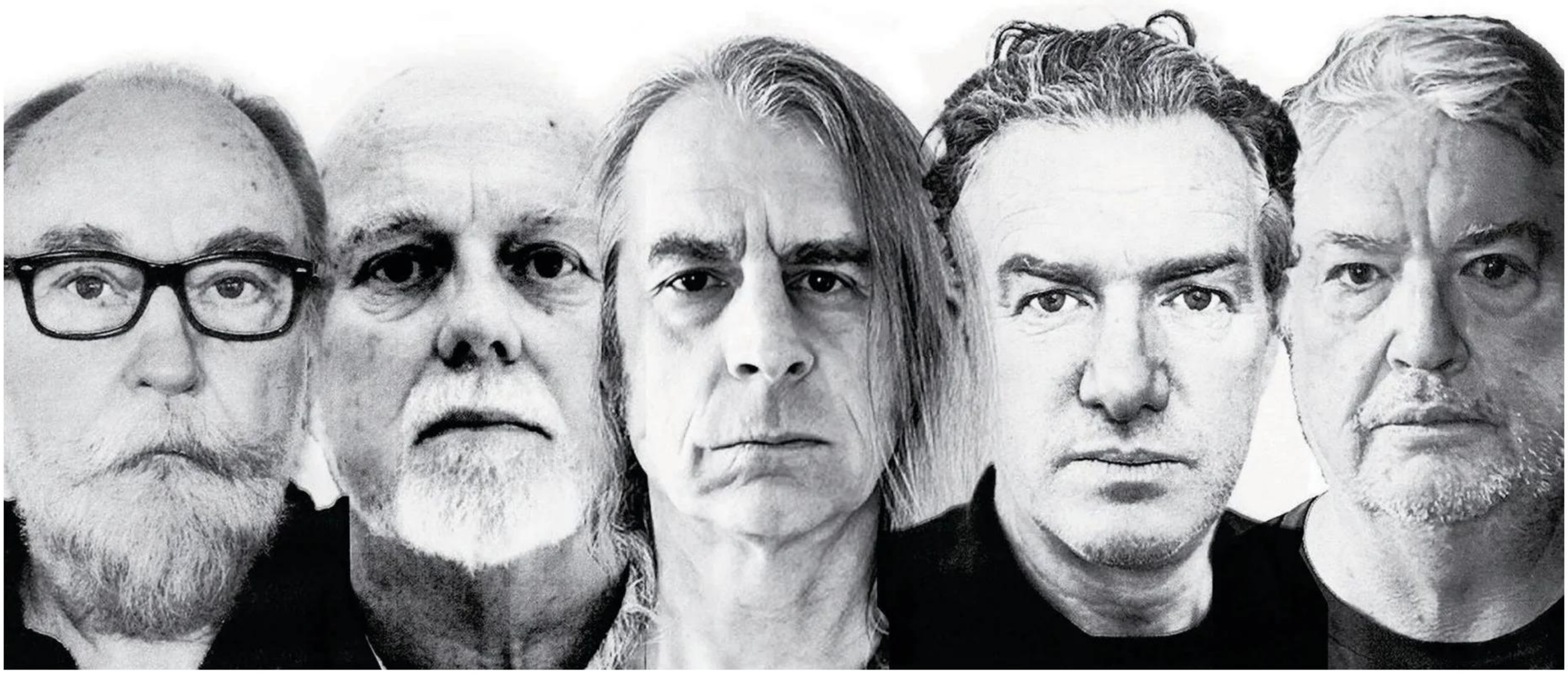
# DELVING BACK TO THE ROCK SHACK

STEMMING FROM ED KUEPPER'S RECENT PITCH TO DRUMMER IVOR HAY, UPCOMING TOUR **THE SAINTS '73-'78** CELEBRATES THE FIRST THREE SAINTS ALBUMS AND THE WORK OF DECEASED MEMBERS CHRIS BAILEY AND ALGY WARD. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR GOT STRANDED.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** PHOTO BY **MARK METCALFE**



At the start of a long gone decade marked by sociopolitical upheaval, The Saints began to blaze their trail as one of the world's first punk bands. Like The Stooges and MC5, they were another young group distilling their adrenaline, anger and anxiety into songs that hit speakers like sledgehammers to the hippy movement. After becoming schoolmates in Brisbane, vocalist Chris Bailey, guitarist Ed Kuepper and drummer Ivor Hay first collaborated in 1973 - the same year AC/DC were formed. With Hay back on drums after Jeffery Wegener departed, bassist Kym Bradshaw joined. The first and most famous iteration of The Saints began to capture their lightning in a bottle in 1976. Through a few abrasive minutes of buzzsaw guitar and snarling vocals, palpable feelings of Aussie alienation were distilled into their debut single, 'I'm Stranded'.

The group's speed was honed in Hay's backyard shed opposite the local cop shop, during Queensland's two long decades as a conservative police state under premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. "We were around before punk was a thing in Australia", Kuepper says. "We weren't part of some revolutionary movement - as far as [the police] were concerned, we were just some absolute deadshits that couldn't play". Despite initial local apathy, the single gained acclaim from the UK. Apart from its titular opening single, their 1977 album *(I'm) Stranded* also contained razor-sharp originals like 'No Time' and 'Demolition Girl'. It was released by EMI in mid-February 1977, coming out a few days after The Damned's first album, with debuts from The Sex Pistols and The Clash arriving later that year.

Apart from "maybe wanting to start developing more quickly", as he says, UK punk didn't influence Kuepper, who didn't like its conformist fashion sense. After their debut, The Saints' rapid development yielded two more albums during 18 months - *Eternally Yours* and *Prehistoric Sounds*. Recorded in late 1977 and released in 1978, *Eternally Yours* gave us the Motown-style horns of 'Know Your Product' and the nihilistic stomp of 'This Perfect Day'. The unconventional, innovative songs on *Prehistoric Sounds* were released later in 1978. When the group first broke up in that year, Kuepper formed Laughing Clowns, Ward joined The Damned before forming NWOBHM act Tank, and Hay joined The Hitmen. Bailey remained until his death in 2022, working with a total of 40 different members to oversee more rock-centric explorations in brass, orchestral and synthesised arrangements, acoustic tracks and singles including 'Just Like Fire Would'.

The Saints '73-'78 have now formed with a handpicked trio of notable musicians joining Kuepper and Hay: guitarist Mick Harvey of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, Sunnyboys' and Aints' bassist Peter Oxley, and Mudhoney frontman-guitarist Mark Arm. Some of the songs they'll perform will be live debuts, while others will be replicated with horns and acoustic guitars. Most attendees will get their kicks from the speed and attitude of The Saints' classic punk songs, dripping with venom. Australian Guitar had an in-depth chat with Ed Kuepper.

**You haven't played Saints songs on stage for about 15 years. Did you ever imagine playing them live again?**

There's a couple that I sometimes put into my solo set, or with bands that I play with. I did a record with Jim White, which is coming out early next year. We do 'Swing For The Crime' [from *Prehistoric Sounds*] on that. We had a couple of Saints songs in our touring set, but there's a lot of material that hasn't been played on stage. Some of it's never been played on stage. We're trying to do a fairly broad cross section. We're focusing on a number of songs off the first album to coincide with the boxset, but we're presenting the musical depth of the band, because we're drawing from three albums.

**For the idea of The Saints '73-'78, did you and Ivor have the same idea simultaneously?**

I asked if he was interested, and he was.

**How does it feel to return to old-school punk without focusing on singing?**

It feels good. I didn't want to do it and be the vocalist, so I thought I had to get a singer that I knew would be able to do it. There's a sort of guitar intensity that is difficult to maintain, and do the vocals properly with. When we recorded those records, I double-tracked most of the guitars. I would put down an acoustic rhythm and an electric rhythm, so with Mick Harvey on board, we're going to have that sonic texture. It's never really been presented like that before.

**Have you known Peter for a while? He was in The Aints and The Sunnyboys.**

I've worked with Pete for almost 20 years. He played bass on my album Jean Lee And The Yellow Dog, which we're hoping to reissue on vinyl next year.

**How long have you known Mick?**

We'd bump into each other while touring in the early '80s, when Laughing Clowns and The Birthday Party were playing. We did shows together. I also did an appearance at this Rowland S. Howard tribute thing, in Melbourne. Mick was the director of that. I was asked to take his place in the Bad Seeds, which I did for two tours.

**About the new box set, hearing it on vinyl will be a treat.**

Yeah, it's a new mastering, mastered specifically for vinyl, which is different. I've heard what the mastering should sound like and it'll be great. It comes with heaps of extras.

The high point for people might be the book that comes with it, a 28-page photo essay thing. Lots of stuff never seen before. We did our own posters, so there's a handful of those in there. Then there's the alternate mix of the first album, which hasn't been released before. It's more stereo. The mix that Chris and I did of the album, that was released, is much more mono. We've also got the audio for the live at Paddington Town Hall show taking up one side of an LP, with all the 45s that weren't on albums. On the other side, we've got the Live From The Hope & Anchor in London, officially available for the first time.

**What guitars are you taking on the November tour?**

One SG, because I used an SG on all the original Saints records. I might take a Stratocaster, but I'm not sure, because all the Saints stuff was recorded using an SG.

**It was crazy to discover Rod Coe, who co-produced I'm Stranded, was a bassist for Slim Dusty.**

Rod was a lovely guy. I haven't had any contact with him for a long time. He was the in-house producer at EMI. They needed somebody; I don't think they trusted us alone in the studio. Rod was a very agreeable fellow. He was good for a new band to work with.

**UK radio DJ John Peel's love for the 'I'm Stranded' single played a part in EMI commissioning Rod to record the album, right?**

Yes, we got some really good reviews in the UK, and later in the US. Our first Australian review was a real shocker. It was because there was such a good response from the UK, that EMI got really enthused.

**Going to the UK in the midst of the '70s punk movement must have been a strange scene to enter into.**

When we first got to London, that hadn't happened. There was a small group of people in London, but as soon as we got out of London, the fashion aspects of it hadn't caught on at all. The first tour there was really great. It was on the second tour later in the year, that the uniform kind of punk thing really kicked in, in a big way. I don't think we were ever into the fashion aspect of it, it was all a bit stupid to me. There was a conformity to it, which I don't think anyone in The Saints was particularly attracted to. We'd been going for a few years, we weren't just people jumping on a bandwagon. We kept true to what we were doing.

**How did you guys react to being popular in England while being ignored in Australia?**

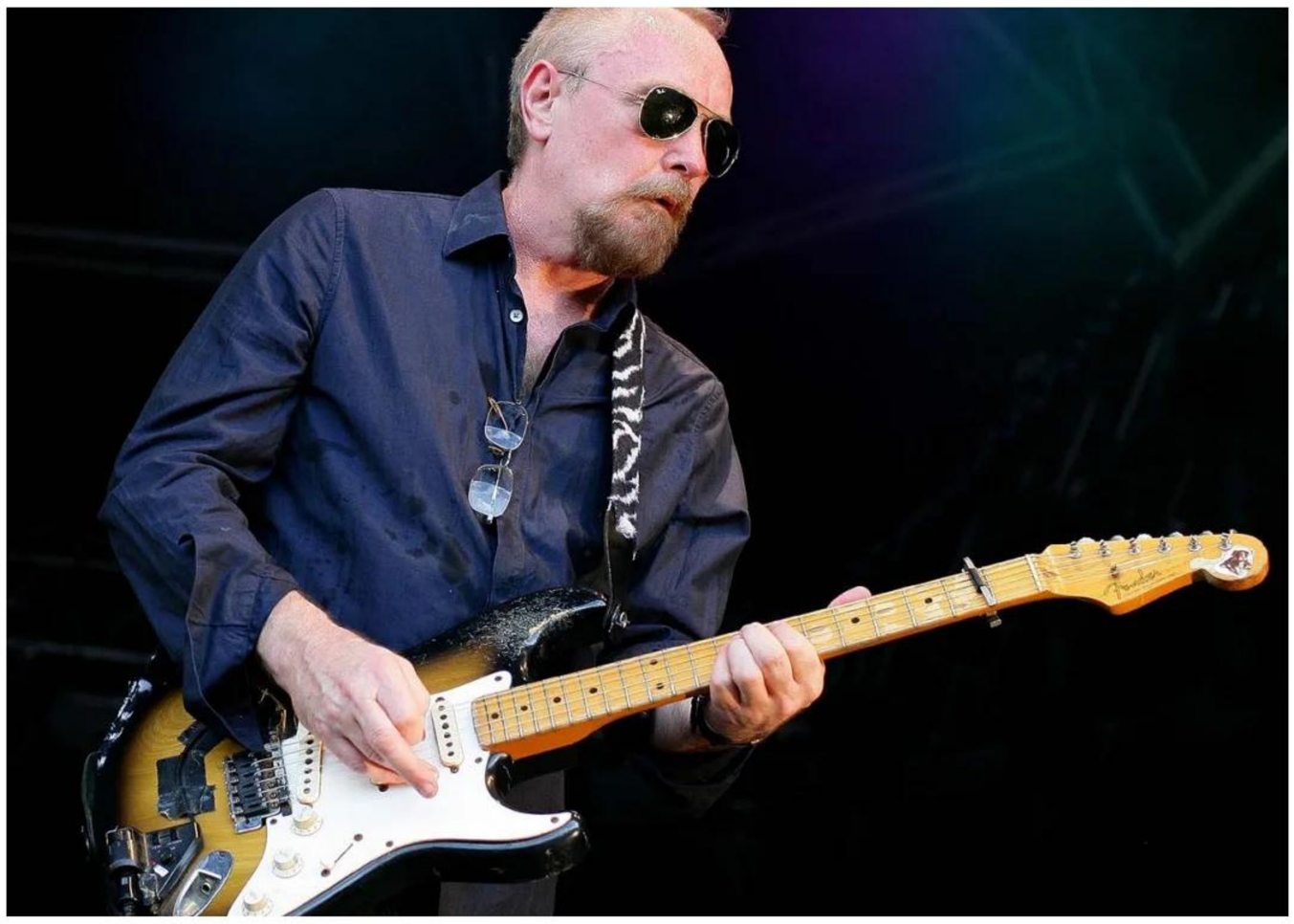
We felt vindicated. We had enough knowledge [to navigate] the music business. After the band had split, that's where our lack of rigour with the legalities kicked in, but that's a long story.

**Was '70s Brisbane a wild place for a young rock 'n' roll band?**

There wasn't actually anything in the city itself. All the shows that we put on were in rural suburban halls. The city itself was pretty much dead after dark, like a big country town. It was rough, but that was more the suburbs.

**I heard you guys opened up your own venue because you were sick of getting rejected by other venues.**

We started one because it was more convenient than booking halls. Often we'd book a hall and then lose our deposit because something was damaged. People would drink a lot at the shows and be boisterous. So, we [converted] a residence on a busy corner in Brisbane, close to the centre of the city. We started rehearsing there because it didn't cost us anything. More and more people came along, then a hostile neighbour threw a brick through a window we boarded up, then I wrote 'Club 76' on it, and we turned our rehearsals into shows. That went on for a little while. It started attracting a whole bunch of people, and it got rough. We were looking at knocking it on the head ourselves, but we had a visit from the City Council Health Department, who said 'you can't have that number of people in this environment'. We got closed down. This was happening in late '76. By early '77, we were about to head to Sydney. Everything was in motion by then, so it didn't affect us that it was closed.



"WHEN WE RECORDED THOSE RECORDS, I DOUBLE-TRACKED MOST OF THE GUITARS. I WOULD PUT DOWN AN ACOUSTIC RHYTHM AND AN ELECTRIC RHYTHM, SO WITH MICK HARVEY ON BOARD, WE'RE GOING TO HAVE THAT SONIC TEXTURE. IT'S NEVER REALLY BEEN PRESENTED LIKE THAT BEFORE."

**Have you experienced intense cultural times since?**

That was a fairly unique time for us. There's something unique about every era. [The place] where we started wasn't a particularly musical environment, and there was a fair amount of hostility. We didn't get the brunt of how bad it got. We were around before punk was a thing in Australia. We weren't part of some revolutionary movement. As far as [the police] were concerned, we were just some absolute deadshits that couldn't play.

**Do you remember the last time you spoke to Chris Bailey?**

Yes, during COVID, shortly before he died. We were talking about the box set, and trying to get back as much of the rights to the material as possible, which has been an absolute shitfight.

**I saw footage of you guys from 2007; the stage presence was very compelling.**

[Chris was] a really great singer.

**Are there any Saints songs you're most looking forward to playing live again?**

We're doing a 90 minute performance, which is longer than The Saints ever played in the old days. I'm looking forward to playing 'Know Your Product'.

**How are you maintaining your picking speed?**

I've always had a down-and-up thing happening. I'll continue with that. I like to throw in high notes when I'm doing low notes.

**Have you noticed a younger demographic shift in Saints fans?**

That would be great. I don't take anything for granted. The Saints got bigger after we split up. It took years for that to spread, which is a shame in a lot of ways, but it is what it is. Hopefully there'll be new fans there to check it out. ag

**The Saints '73-'78 will tour Australia in November. Check out www.feelpresents.com for full tour dates and ticket details.**

# NOT SO HOLY

AUSSIE HARD ROCK LEGENDS **THE ANGELS** RELEASED THEIR 14TH ALBUM *NINETY NINE* IN JUNE - THEIR FIRST ALBUM IN TEN YEARS. THEY'VE SINCE EMBARKED ON A 50TH ANNIVERSARY TOUR TO SEE OUR FACES AGAIN. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR JOINED THE CHOIR.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **GARY BRADSHAW**

"I love a sunburnt country", proclaims Doc Neeson in an acrid croak at the start of The Angels' 'Northwest Highway' from 1998's *Skin & Bone*. A pummeling guitar riff from the Brewster brothers kicks in, sending Dorothea Mackellar's opening line to dusty antiquity. Now a thing of the past itself, the album it opened was the last Angels release to feature Neeson, who was killed by a brain tumour in 2014. Many tributes came flooding in for the Belfast-born frontman, who is remembered for his towering stage presence, his theatrical performances, and the songs he helped to write. One year prior, longtime Angels bassist Chris Bailey also died, from cancer.

Back in 2008 after an eight year break-up, legalities about band name rights were quelled with an uneasy reformation of the group's classic lineup, complete with Neeson, Bailey, lead guitarist Rick Brewster, rhythm guitarist John Brewster and drummer Buzz Bidstrup. After being chronicled in a 2008 documentary, *No Way, Get F*#ked, F*#k Off!*, *The Angels: Kickin' Down The Door* was released two years ago as a new on-screen look at the 50-year old band. Later tales gleaned in the film detail the twelve years in which The Screaming Jets' singer Dave Gleeson fronted the band, providing lead vocals for two albums, before leaving in 2023. After touring last year with the Brewster Brothers, Nick Norton moved from the drummer's seat to front the group, while John Brewster's sons Sam and Tom provide bass and drums respectively.

In Australian Guitar's recent conversation with John Brewster, he reflected on five decades of rock that began with a zany jug band called The Keystone Angels, who changed their name after befriending AC/DC and meeting George Young. Their new album...rocks, so we became geologists.

**Congrats on the new album!**

I'm really proud of it. I wasn't in the studio much because of a health scare, and the boys finished it. I played most of my guitar parts in hotel rooms during the Red Hot Summer Tour [Feb 24-March 23].

**The Angels' current lineup is exciting.**

Nick Norton, out the front, is knocking everyone out. Having my sons in the band is amazing. This album is a shot in the arm for us all. It's great to do something new, though we know fans want to hear 'Marseilles', 'Take A Long Line', 'Shadow Boxer', 'After The Rain', or 'No Secrets'. We'll also do the new single, 'Ninety Nine', written by my son Sam, and Nick.

**The album sounds fresh and urgent.**

When anyone had an idea, the boys recorded it. Some of it was before COVID. Since COVID, the band has been busy. I joined [the process] later, and the young guys had some wonderful stuff. Nick's a great songwriter. 'Heartbeats' is his. I recorded on that in the tent backstage at the last Red Hot Summer show.

**I'm impressed by Tom's in-the-pocket feels. How long has he been drumming for?**

Tom has never worked in music. He's a project manager for a big landscape firm in Sydney, building $30 million jobs. He just swings. He reminds me of the original lineup. Sam and Tom have a special feel that suits my playing. If you get those three things right, Rick can do whatever he wants, and he does brilliantly. I'm thrilled he's in the band, not just because he's my son. Rick's son Jody played the sax solo on 'Follow The Red Thread'.

**'Hue And Cry' was built from an older riff. Does that date back to the Doc Neeson days?**

Yeah, early days. We did it at the 2 Double J concert in Sydney at Wentworth Park, which was a breakthrough for us. We knocked everybody out there, and radio started to play us after that concert. That track was a live thing with me on harmonica. I'm a reluctant harmonica player, but everyone liked it, so we decided to include it.

**Is Nick a screamer like Doc Neeson, or does he have a smoother voice?**

He can do it all. He belts it out.

**The Brewster Brothers did an electric Angels hits show last year. Was this the first time Nick sang these songs?**

That's right. It wasn't hard for him because he'd been on drums, singing high harmonies. Those shows were great, with rarities like 'Moving On' from the Skin & Bone album, Doc's last with us. I think that's one of our great records.

**Did you use Les Pauls on Ninety Nine?**

I bought an ES Gibson Les Paul, a lighter semi-acoustic. The ES is gorgeous. It's a great sounding guitar.

**Is that your main live guitar for the tour?**

I think so. I look at my guitars and think, 'I'd like to take the Tele, but there's the gold top or the '56 Gretsch Gerogia.' I used the Gretsch on a few of the new tracks.

**Who produced *Ninety Nine*?**

Rick and I have produced so many of our albums. We still do, but we've encouraged ideas from Sam and Nick. The more we encourage those guys to get involved, the more they stake a claim in The Angels. One day they'll probably take over.

**With three guitarists now, it must be one hell of a sound when you guys kick into certain riffs. It must damn near blow the roof off.**

Musically, it's incredible. For example, I might do the 'Devil's Gate' harmonica solo, and I've still got two rhythm guitars behind me.

**Speaking of lead singers, Doc used to say to the crowds, 'I know you're out there, I can smell you'. Have you encountered rowdy crowds lately?**

It's changed. The wider response is still rowdy, and I love that. Back then, we used to put ridiculous numbers of people into venues. A lot of festival halls, but the term 'pub rock' is great because that did happen. At the Bondi Lifesaver, which was licensed for 800, we packed in 1800. The Stage Door, a basement venue, was licensed for 400. Our support bands were Midnight Oil and Flowers, which became Icehouse. We had 1956 people that night, 2000 with guests. I know because I used to handle the band's money. Back in the late '70s, early '80s, it was crazy...dangerous. We got away with it.

**I saw a picture of Doc standing next to Angry Anderson. He was almost double his height.**

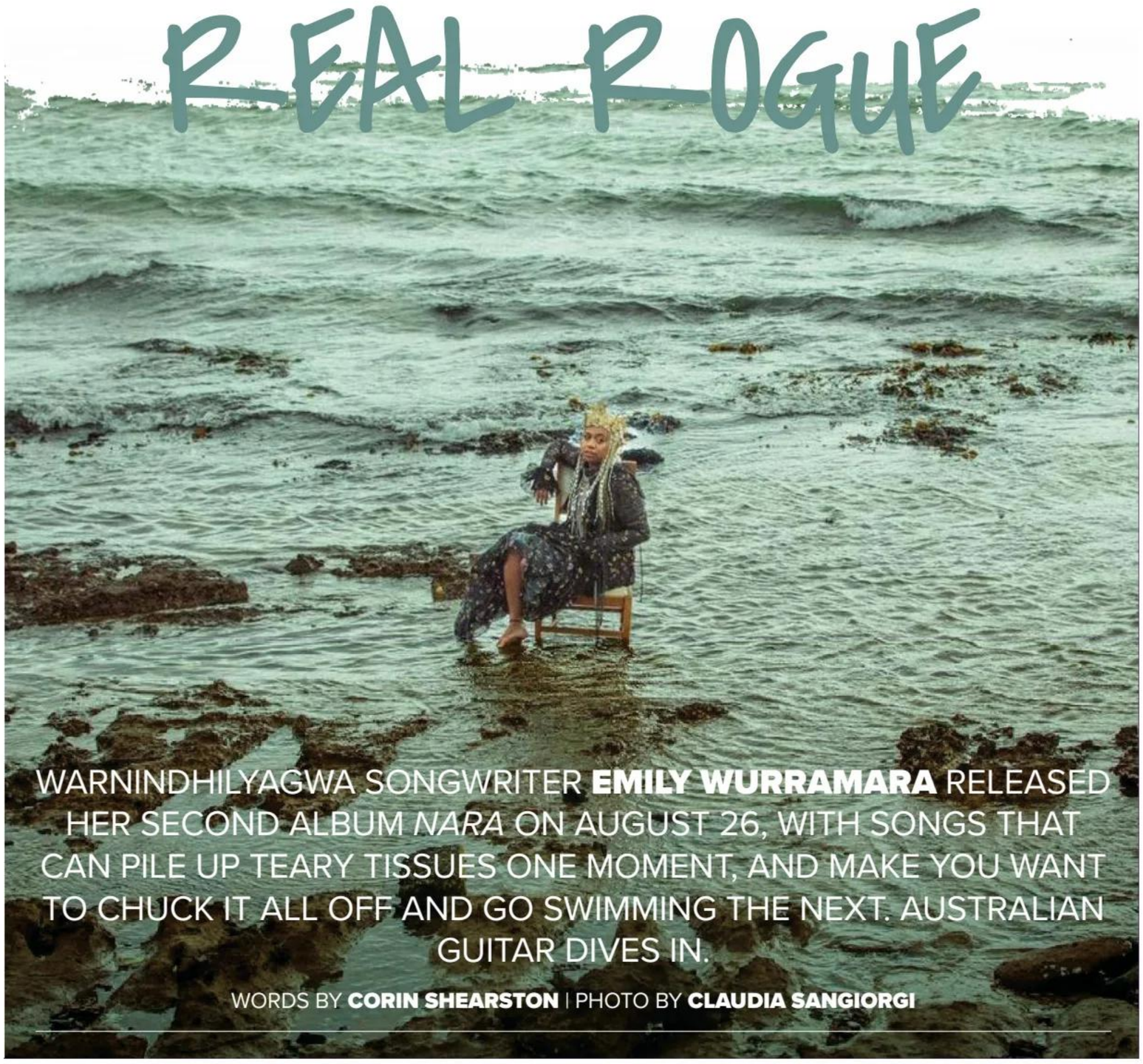
Doc was six foot four I think. He hated traveling. We did a lot of road miles, still do, but the roads and cars are a lot better now. I remember we were in Rick's Peugeot 404, Doc was in the backseat, saying, 'stop the car, I can't stand this anymore'. He spent the rest of the trip lying in the boot. We knocked on the wall, then he'd knock back. We wanted to make sure he was still alive, because there might have been carbon monoxide in there. He was so tall. He couldn't get comfortable.

**It's strange he's been gone ten years now.**

Yeah, it was really sad to lose Doc. We love Doc, the memory of Doc. It wasn't the happiest of times with Doc towards the end, in terms of our relationship with him. There was also a lot of manipulation of Doc going on by other people. Rick and I started the band with him, and brought a lot of songs that Doc contributed to. He was one of the world's great frontmen. ag

**The Angels' 14th studio album, *Ninety-Nine*, is available now.**

# REAL ROGUE



WARNINDHILYAGWA SONGWRITER **EMILY WURRAMARA** RELEASED HER SECOND ALBUM *NARA* ON AUGUST 26, WITH SONGS THAT CAN PILE UP TEARY TISSUES ONE MOMENT, AND MAKE YOU WANT TO CHUCK IT ALL OFF AND GO SWIMMING THE NEXT. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR DIVES IN.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **CLAUDIA SANGIORGI**

Tender yet urgent, with a slight smokiness for enhancing her darker lyrics, the singing voice of Emily Wurramara is rapidly maturing. Peppered with worldly wisdom and desires from the life of the proud Warnindhilyagwa woman from Groote Eylandt, NT, Wurramara's latest batch of songs was released on August 24 as her second album, *NARA*. It represents a new artistic chapter. "I'm ready to let the songs go out there in the world and do what they need to do", she explained to Australian Guitar.

Wurramara grew up around the free form musical traditions of her family, brought up on a steady diet of R&B, blues and funk. As she explains it, the improvisational traditions of these genres bestowed upon her a "real rogue" approach that influenced the making of *NARA* with co-producer Kuya James (Daniel Johns, Gurrumul, Briggs). Friends of hers who joined her in the recording studio around the time of the album's creation, such as Tasman Keith and Lisa Mitchell, (Mitchell being a teen favourite of Wurramara's), were invited to get up and sing on her tracks, which further enhanced the cathartic attitude of her soul-baring songs.

This openminded approach led to many special moments throughout the album, as heard in 'STFAFM', Wurramara's blunt duet with little brother Arringarri, a poet, and the wistful 'WWGBH', with Velvet Trip's Zeppelin Hamilton. Sonically, more synth and electronic elements are present, while the soulful purity of Wurramara's folk-roots tendencies from her past releases Black Smoke and Milyakburra are also retained. After singing alongside Peter Garrett, authoring her own kids book and becoming ARIA-nominated in 2018, Wurramara still has a heap of unfinished business to attend to. As she says so herself, "I'm not here to fuck spiders". She joined Australian Guitar from her Tasmanian greenhouse.

**What does 'nara' mean?**

In my language - Anindilyakwa, spoken by the Warnindilyakwa people from Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island in the Northern Territory - 'nara' means nothing.

**Do you think *NARA* reflects the next step in your creative journey?**

Definitely. *NARA* is a celebration of my true self - the ugly things and the beautiful things. It's what I've been wanting to do for a very long time. I feel liberated, now that people can see me for the person and the artist that I am. It was really fun to play around with the Moog and think differently about my creative art. This whole record was a let-go for me. We didn't put too much pressure on ourselves to make it sound or be like something.

**Songs like 'Verandah' and 'STFAFM' feel very free and expressive. Did you create them by writing about what you were experiencing at the time?**

Pretty much. I'm a storyteller, so I detail things with story. There are no metaphors, no fucking around with the truth. I embrace the rawness and authenticity of the moment, while hopefully just creating a safe space for people to feel what they need to feel.

**'WWGBH' is a duet with Zeppelin from Velvet Trip, who also has Indigenous heritage. It's a lovely song about wanting to steal a boat and sail away for some peace of mind. How long have you known Zeppelin for?**

A couple of years. This ABC TV show called *Going Country* had asked me to sing a song. I was like, 'alright, but I need a guitarist, and I'd really like this guitarist to do backing vocals'. One of the friends I contacted got back in touch saying, 'oh, I know this amazing young brother who lives in Sydney, he's a guitarist and a great singer', so we met, hung out and covered Uncle Bob Randall's 'Brown Skin Baby', which is a song about his own experience in the Stolen Generation. I think that was in 2020.

**Who is Arringarri, who featured with you on 'STFAFM'?**

Arringarri is my little brother. He's a poet. I've always wanted to get him on a track of mine. The reason why he's on 'Stay The Fuck Away From Me' is because we both went with my daughter to Bickerton Island, our ancestral home, two years ago. We call it 'Milyakburra', which is what my first record is called. This was before we recorded *NARA*. I was supposed to be supporting Kate Miller-Heidke on her tour, but I was like, 'no, I need to put myself first, and my mental health'. My brother was in a similar headspace too, so we went on country, turned our phones off, ate off the land, camped at the beach and swam in the sea and that's where [the song] kind of stemmed from. It felt right that he jumped on that song, as he was there for the creation of it.

**There are some interesting lyrics on this album - on 'DTMN', you sing "don't go whistling, you'll lure them inside". What is that about?**

With my mob, you don't whistle at night because that calls in spirits that you can't see. The whistling frequency attracts them, whether they be bad or good. So, 'Don't Tell Me Nothing' is about 'don't tell me nothing about the night, don't tell me nothing about the sun'. The sun and the moon have been present throughout all of history. They've seen everything. As a First Nations person, this land has seen everything and that's the entity that you cannot lie to.

**That's such an important perspective to be conveying, and discussing in print.**

Thank you. When you sit and feel, you understand that the big picture is much deeper and bigger then we are as artists. It's our future.

***NARA* begins with 'Midnight Blues', which hooked me in immediately. It's got a lovely, catchy and simple melody in it. There are also lots of different voices swirling around in that track. With the songs on *NARA* that contain multiple singers, how do you decide who sings what, roughly?**

I'm so loose in the studio. If you're there, you're there, and you can either jump in and have a sing, or if not, that's cool. We just create a good vibe to call people in. With everyone who ended up being involved, you can feel their joy of release. 'Midnight Blues' is a very liberating song. It makes me very emotional because it's my own personal story, but also because it now gets to help other people. It's about the bigger picture.

**Absolutely. Did you play guitar on this album, like you did on *Milyakburra*?**

I didn't. Ben Edgar played guitar on this album, and Zeppelin played guitar on 'WWGBH'. Ben's incredible. He's played with Gotye, Angus & Julia [Stone] and Missy [Higgins]. I first met him when we were on tour with SummerSalt festival, and Missy and I and the Teskey Brothers were playing up in Darwin. Kuya James, who I co-produced NARA with, was like, 'why don't we send Ben some songs and see if he'd like to add some magic'. He added his magic alright. I love what he did with 'Lordy Lordy'. He gave it a summery vibe.

**Do you think you're working with more musicians now than you were in your early days?**

Definitely. I have a main band that I play with. Kuya James is also my musical director, and plays bass in my band. Because I come from a roots, blues and funk background, I understand the meaning of collaboration and improvisation. My childhood [involved] growing up in the music and around great artists. When I collaborate with people, it's usually real rogue. That's just who I am. ag

**Emily Wurramara's *NARA* is out now.**

# RURAL ROOTS OF RUGGED RHYME

TASMANIAN SONGWRITER **CLAIRE ANNE TAYLOR** IS OFFERING A BREATH OF FRESH AIR TO AUSTRALIA'S ROOTS SCENE WITH HER THIRD ALBUM *GIVING IT AWAY*. AFTER A 36-DATE ALBUM TOUR, INCLUDING FESTIVAL APPEARANCES AT WOODFORD AND GUM BALL, SHE MET UP WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**

"Vulnerability can be your greatest strength", explains Claire Anne Taylor. The eleven songs on her third album *Giving It Away* exemplify this. While songwriting for this album, Taylor's world was rocked when her 14-month-old son was diagnosed with Angelman Syndrome. While the genetic condition isn't life-threatening, it's incurable. In the depths of her resulting depression, having written a few new songs, the album's titular track first arrived in her mind. It became a means to shed her drinking to cope, the guilt this resulted in, and her former sense of childlike innocence in a world that always seemed to work out for the better.

"There's a part of me that's broken now since we found out the news", croons Taylor on the song, alone at a piano, with characteristically riveting huskiness. A lyric heard earlier in the song hints at a sliver of hope - "maybe one day the sun'll shine through". Optimism is most evident in the song 'Keep On Truckin', whose title came to Taylor as a piece of reassurance that her brother ended a phone call with, after the death of a cousin. Its lyrical substance was inspired by her experience briefly working with troubled and homeless youth at a Hobart school.

Elsewhere on the album, 'Stuck Around' is a tribute to a departed guitarist friend of hers who took their own life. While bearing such heavy backstories, Taylor manages to balance darkness with instrumental tenderness and heartfelt grooves, expertly executed by her seven-piece band. The resulting album traverses traces of blues, rock and country to folk and R&B. Australian Guitar spoke to Taylor shortly after the release of *Giving It Away*.

**The album's 'making of' video on YouTube highlights some personal experiences you were going through at the time, inspiring the record's themes of grief and loss.**

I didn't realise how important it was to acknowledge our personal story until we did so. Before making that documentary I was in such a fragile place, not that far on from the diagnosis of our son having a really full-on lifelong disability. I'm really glad that I shared that story. Every time I would get on the stage and perform, I feel like I was spilling a little bit of that grief and pain and sharing it with an audience. There were people crying in the audience, because they could feel that pain. It creates this beautiful feedback, where you're healing together.

**Is 'Giving It Away' one of the first songs you wrote for this album?**

It came along when I was in the depth of the grief from the diagnosis. I had a handful of songs written beforehand, then I wrote a bunch afterwards. When I wrote 'Giving It Away', I was drinking too much and in a dark place. There was the literal sense of giving away my vices to be a better mum and have a clear headspace and drag myself out of that depression I was in, but of also giving away guilt and innocence. It's almost a grieving of my younger self and looking back at my younger self, who looked at the world with such childlike wonder. I used to have this karmic idea that life would always work out, before the diagnosis.

**In the doco you mention you wrote 'Stuck Around' on a banjo. What were the main instruments that you wrote these new songs with?**

I like starting with different instruments to see what comes out. I wrote a couple on the banjo, the piano, and then acoustic or electric guitar, depending on the song. 'Lay You Down In The Cold Hard Ground' started from me on the drums, banging out a basic beat, and singing this melody. Without a melodic instrument directing your vocal ideas, it's freeing.

**When you were recording in Hobart, I heard you had to access MONA's Frying Pan Studios through an underground tunnel. What was that like?**

You almost feel like you're going caving. It's crazy. We did a lot of pre-production and arranging at Jethro's studio in Glaziers Bay in the Huon Valley, this big old barn over the water. To then land in MONA, where it's all brand new and underground, I did feel a bit out of place. I recorded my last album at home, then this album was recorded in this brand new studio because I wanted to have the experience of that. I was ready for battle. I took the time to properly workshop the songs with the band, so that I didn't waste any time when we went into the studio. I think I'd like to record in the bush next time.

**In in the 'making of' doco, I noticed a beautiful dark red guitar with an F-hole and giant cream pickups. What was that?**

That's a vintage Guild Starfire that belongs to Chris Townend. It's got a really unique, woody tone. It's beautiful.

**Jethro's lap steel on the album adds a nice country flavour.**

It just comes down to what the song needs. Jethro would often try his Tele or his Gibson and go back and forth, but sometimes it had to be pedal steel. There's a bit of country, a bit of soul, rock 'n' roll influences, folk storytelling and blues. It's quite a mixed bag.

**About your upbringing, I loved discovering that you lived with a family of Tassie devils under the floorboards of your childhood home, next to Tasmania's Tarkine rainforest. Is it true that listening to them growling influenced your future vocal style?**

That was an embellishment of the truth, but I definitely listened to them at night. Whether I try to growl like them in my singing, I'm not sure, but the devils lived under the floorboards in front of the fireplace. They built their den underneath our fireplace area. At night, we'd be sitting in front of the fire and you could hear them going crazy underneath us. We thought it was the best thing ever when they moved in, because it was like having Tassie devils as pets. We'd hand feed them. One time I was having a bath and the mother devil came in, sniffed around and checked me out. I was keeping really still and quiet. We used to have this old Datsun that mum would pick us up from the bus stop in. If there were any dead wallabies on the road, we'd chuck them in the back of the Datsun and take them home so the devils could eat them.

**Rural features are referenced in the lyrics of new album: ghostly gum trees, rivers, and highways. It looks like rural Tassie has a special place in your heart, which filters into your songs.**

Exactly. You can't help but be inspired by the world around you. Why not feed it into words. Sometimes it's so much easier to think of lines and lyrics when you're immersed in all of that. ag

**Claire Anne Taylor's new album *Giving It Away* is out now.**

# CATHARTIC CHEMISTRY

INSPIRED BY A DIVERSE ARRAY OF ARTISTS INCLUDING THE EAGLES AND VAN HALEN, THE ROCK 'N' ROLL PROWESS OF **THE SOUTHERN RIVER BAND** KEEPS IGNITING STAGES WORLDWIDE. THEIR LATEST STUDIO ALBUM *D.I.Y* SHOWS THEM LIVE AT THEIR BEST. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR DUG IN.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **ALEXANDER MILLER**

Named after a river near the house of their frontman-guitarist Cal Kramer, in the sleepy Perth suburb of Thornlie, The Southern River Band were placed in the global limelight last year by Justin Hawkins. In a video on his popular YouTube channel, The Darkness' frontman praised the group as 'a proper fucking rock band'. They've now performed with The Darkness at Warwick Castle in the UK. As Kramer explains with immense gratitude, "it's not something that happens every day...especially to a bunch of fucking idiots from Thornlie".

Returning to Australia in mid-July after touring rigorously through the UK and Europe, The Southern River Band released their second studio album, *D.I.Y*, on August 16. Suitably, it was a homemade job recorded by the quartet's other guitarist Dan Carroll at Rada Studios - Carroll's own setting for his group's second 'live' album in 2022. Using the way in which they've always wanted to make a studio album, *D.I.Y* was also tracked live. Its cathartic energy is evident in heavier re-recorded songs such as 'Cigarettes' and 'Chimney', two of six older songs that have now received their ultimate sonic treatments. Backed by the rhythm section of Pat Smith and Tyler 'The Hawk' Michie, *D.I.Y* showcases the eclectic longer progressions of 'Chimney' and 'Vice City III' to the blue collar blues flavours of 'Second Best' and the country rock vibes of 'Do You Miss Me When I'm Gone?'.

The band has also provided some acting chops for their mini-movie featuring one of their two new songs, 'Vice City III', a crime-laden throwback to Scarface and the Grand Theft Auto game of the same name. While backstage in Adelaide, Kramer and Carroll had a yarn with Australian Guitar.

**Who was the producer for *D.I.Y*?**

**Cal Kramer:** The man sitting next to me here. One Daniel Carroll.

**Cool, that's D.I.Y as.**

**CK:** He's recorded all of our stuff. This is the first album that we were able to get in the studio together for as a band, the same way we do on stage. We capture the vibe if we do it in that classic sense.

**Dan Carroll:** For various reasons in the past, the process was fractured. This time, we were able to do it in the way we've always wanted.

**CK:** That's why we re-recorded some songs.

**Did this recording happen at your own studio, Dan?**

**DC:** Yeah, Rada Studios.

**Where S.R.B's second 'live' album was recorded?**

**DC:** Yeah, same room. A really important part of our current chemistry is that we've had a stable lineup for a while and we've been able to get out and gel as a unit. To be able to capture that on record is something that we've wanted to do for a long time.

**Cal, I take it you're the lead guitarist, or do you guys swap leads?**

**CK:** It's about 50-50. We try to make the other guy do the solo, because we both just want to be rhythm guitarists.

**DC:** We tend to shy away from that role, but it's part of the job.

**I like the tight, dry punchiness that the new album has.**

**DC:** Cal and I are both pretty heavily influenced by '70s stuff, and that dry punchiness is something that we both gravitate towards. Playing live with minimal overdubs tends to keep quite a bit of clarity in the mix. In the past, we would layer up guitars a little bit more, but this entire record was basically done live, with the exception of overdubbing solos and vocals.

**Are you going to serve the '70s quality of *D.I.Y* by getting it out on vinyl?**

**CK:** Yep. I sit there and really ponder what the best track listing is. I like an album that comes in hot, stays there a bit, then goes down, comes back up and peaks right at the end. It's sort of put together for vinyl.

**Do your gigs follow a similar trajectory as well?**

**CK:** Absolutely. All my favourite albums have that too.

**DC:** Contrast is always in the front of our minds, just so we're not stuck in one gear the whole time.

**CK:** When I'm writing songs, I'll be drawing from this massive well of music over the last 50 years. The world's so big that you can get so much from so many different things.

**What axes were you slinging in the sessions for D.I.Y?**

**CK:** I've got an endorsement with Ormsby guitars from Perth. Perry Ormsby's built me two of my dream guitars. They're custom models, one's like a super Strat with a humbucker in the bridge and a '59 Strat pickup in the neck and it's my dream guitar. The other one was a double cutaway with a single P90 in the bridge. I used those two for for the record.

**DC:** I was using a Les Paul Jr style guitar, and a Tele.

**The album has some longer, proggier songs - 'Chimneys', 'Stan Qualen', 'Vice City III'. How do you guys throw ideas around to build these longer songs?**

**CK**: I put them together myself. Essentially I'll have a bunch of riffs or ideas and I'll go, 'what if we tried putting them together'. I try to make them climax at the right point. Because I've got 1000 riffs going round in my mind at all times, I'll go, 'yep, that one will go with that one, that one will go with that one', and that's essentially how the proggy ones go. Then it's like 'alright, I better put some words on it'.

**I heard a bit of bluesiness on the track 'Second Best' that reminded me of Cold Chisel.**

**CK:** Oh, thanks man. Mossy's guitar playing and Chisel's songwriting are one of my biggest influences. When you mention bluesiness, my earliest living memory is watching Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble's Live At The El Mocambo video, so that's sort of where the bluesy stuff comes from. That's the seed to everything we do.

**DC:** It's a highly relatable concert for Cal and I. That's one of my earliest recollections as well. 'El Mocambo' was on a VHS tape at our local video shop, so it was one of the most-rented videos from the Bayswater Blockbuster.

**You guys got a good boost of notability when Justin Hawkins repped you on his YouTube series, and you've also played with The Darkness now. He describes you guys as 'a real fucking rock band'. You must be grateful.**

**CK:** Absolutely man. I used to thrash [The Darkness album] *Permission To Land* while catching two trains from Thornleigh to TAFE, and they were always one of my favourite bands. I saw them twice when they came to Perth, and then when we got the gig to support them, we instantly became friends. Justin, in a way, has singlehandedly launched us to the world. He won't admit that but we know that's true. We've become great mates with all of them.

**DC:** They're consummate professionals as well, it's such a privilege to see the level that a rock 'n' roll show can still be. ag

**The Southern River Band's *D.I.Y.* is out now.**

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# SERIOUS MOONLIGHT

FANS OF **POWDERFINGER** AND **SOMETHING FOR KATE** RECENTLY RECEIVED AN INTERESTING SONIC OFFERING TITLED *THE DELUGE*, AN ANGULAR SYNTH-HEAVY ALBUM WRITTEN BY THE RESPECTIVE FRONTMEN-GUITARISTS OF THESE BANDS, BERNARD FANNING AND PAUL DEMPSEY. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR ENTERED **FANNING DEMPSEY NATIONAL PARK**.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **CYBELE MALINOWSKI**

Bernard Fanning and Paul Dempsey have known each other for 25 years. Since emerging from their respective hometowns of Brisbane and Melbourne in the early '90s, they've performed around 70 shows together with their bands Powderfinger and Something For Kate and also as solo artists.

They didn't start directly collaborating until 2019. The opportunity arose when Something For Kate came to record their most recent album, *The Modern Medieval*, with American producer Nick DiDia (Powderfinger, Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam) at Fanning's LaCueva Recording Studio in Byron Bay. Fanning was recruited on vocals for the track 'Inside Job'. After the sessions wrapped, Fanning and Dempsey chatted about their upcoming plans before toying with the songwriting partnership that led to the creation of *The Deluge*.

It's not the first recording from the duo, though. In 2021 they covered David Bowie and Queen's 'Under Pressure', in a live show titled Celebrating David Bowie. Hinting at the icy and angular sonic progressions of Bowie's Berlin period and his forward-thinking contemporaries, *The Deluge* is a cool, lean trip, harking back to the late '70s-mid '80s, a time "where synthesisers were starting to edge out guitars", explains Fanning.

The album's ten tracks were all composed in uniquely different ways. Its title track emerged through Fanning's experimentation with monochromatic rhythm and vocal melody, peppered with Dempsey's spasms of treated guitar and synth. Elsewhere, 'Never Pass This Way Again' brings a monstrous rock eruption, while 'Strangers' cools things down with propulsive, noodling synth and closing ballad 'King Of Nowhere' is inspired by wartime Ukrainian poetry. Recording sessions spanned across Norway, the UK, San Francisco and Byron Bay. Australian Guitar further examined the artistry of *The Deluge* with Fanning and Dempsey.

**It was quite a globetrotting venture this album - I heard that parts of it were tracked in Norway, the UK, San Francisco and Byron Bay.**

**Paul Dempsey:** All the songs were recorded live with the band in San Francisco - friends of ours who were based there. We tracked all the guitars, bass, drums, sax and keys there. The Byron session was more about adding the vocals and other guitar stuff that we hadn't got to in the basic tracks, along with extra synth.

**As for the other musicians in the band, Michael, Craig and Adam, had you guys worked with them before, or not?**

**PD:** I knew Michael Urbano (Lindsay Buckingham, Smash Mouth) and Craig McFarland (M.I.R.V.) from touring with Celebrating David Bowie. I knew Michael was an incredible drummer, and Craig, likewise, on the bass guitar. Excellent guys as well. That's how Bernard ended up in San Francisco too, because they both live there. Michael is managing 200 Studios. Then we said to them, 'it'd be cool to have a keyboard player, so we can do everything as live as possible', so they got us in touch with Adam MacDougall (The Black Crowes). I called Adam one day in Los Angeles, at 2PM. He knew I was going to call. He answered the phone, and I was like, 'Hi Adam, this is Paul Dempsey, calling about the session', and he's like, 'oh yeah man, cool, can I call you back? I just gotta get out of this bath'. Straight away, we were like, 'this is our guy - you're hired'.

**BF:** Two in the arvo bath, he's our guy for sure.

**PD:** The day he turned up, we'd been in the studio for a couple of days. We're all sitting there in the control room, then suddenly there's this dude who looks like Gandalf with long white hair, a white beard and big glasses, standing in the doorway of the control room with this gigantic glass jar of weed under his arm. We all looked at him, he just looked back at us, and we were like, '...Adam?'. He was amazing. They're all incredible musicians. It was so much fun. We felt like a band immediately.

**BF:** He's a super mellow guy, and it was a really good group of people. They were into it and wanted to be part of it so they were given license to be as creative as they wanted to be.

**What guitar, or guitars, were you using to track your parts on this album, Paul?**

**PD:** I play mostly Fender guitars. I'm a longtime Jazzmaster and Telecaster devotee, though for this album I got my first Strat, after 35 years of playing guitar. The tones of the music that we love, from a certain era, is a lot of neck pickup Strat stuff, so I used a lot of Strat. There was also this Silvertone guitar that got a lot of use because it's got such a weird, dead tone. That was perfect at times. It doesn't have any sustain. The other departure, for someone who often uses a Fender Twin or Princeton, was to use a Roland JC-120. There's a flatness to the transistor amp and the chorus circuit in those amps as well. It's such a particular sound, so that got a bit of workout. A lot of weird sounds were on 'The Deluge', and 'Dunning Kruger National Park' has a big guitar moment, where I was using this old Boss pedal called a Super Shifter. It's like a weird pitch modulation thing and you can plug an expression pedal into it, so I was going nuts on the expression pedal to make the octave keep jumping up and down.

**Bernard, I heard you handled some sequenced bass on this album. Did you handle some other keys too?**

**BF:** A little bit. I mostly did singing on this. During the writing process, I played little bits of everything, but a lot of the parts I was writing were just starting points to set a tone. However, I played a little bit of acoustic guitar, using one of those mini Matons. They record so nicely. When you've got a big Martin Dreadnought or something, it kind of eats everything else, because it's got such a wide range, whereas those little Matons just sit in a spot. I was using that. We weren't going for beautiful James Taylor kind of sounds anyway, because if you sit that against a Juno-106 it doesn't sound right. You have to find the spot for the acoustics. There's not a lot of acoustic guitar on there; there's a little bit, but it's mostly Paul's electrics. With that Roland JC120 thing, like Paul was saying, the transistor isn't warm, so that suits all of that synth stuff, which has that coolness to it. It sits with it.

PD: There's no bluesy or soulful guitar playing, so it doesn't warrant a warm, rich tone.

**Right, more angular.**

**PD:** Yeah, I've always been more attracted to that.

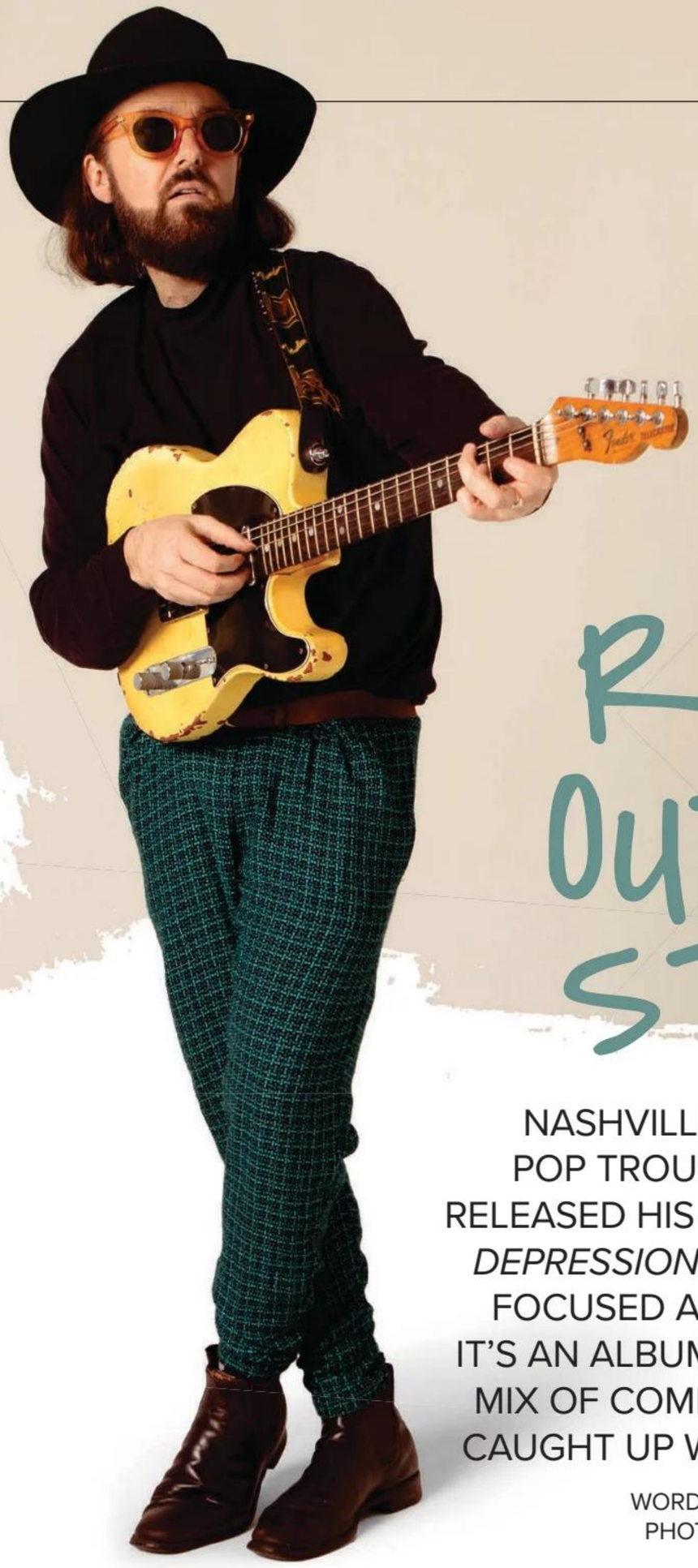
**For the October tour, will the San Fran guys come with you?**

**BF:** No, it's an all-Australian lineup.

**OK. Who else is in the mix?**

**BF:** Adrian Stoyles, who plays with Paul in Something For Kate and in Paul's solo band, he was also in The Gin Club. He's playing guitar and keys. The keyboard player is Carolyn Schofield, she has an act called Fia Fiell, and she makes synth compositions. She's a synth specialist and a great keyboard player. Then there's Matt Engelbrecht, who plays in my band on bass. He's been playing in my band since [2005's] *Tea & Sympathy*. David Williams from Augie March is playing drums. They're really good musos. It's gonna be great fun. ag

**Fanning Dempsey National Park's *The Deluge* is out now. For tour dates visit fanningdempseynationalpark.com .**



# RIDING OUT THE STORM

NASHVILLE-BASED AUSSIE FOLK-POP TROUBADOUR **JORDIE LANE** RELEASED HIS FOURTH ALBUM *TROPICAL DEPRESSION* ON AUGUST 16. THOUGH FOCUSED AROUND HEAVY THEMES, IT'S AN ALBUM INFORMED BY AN EQUAL MIX OF COMEDY AND HONESTY. LANE CAUGHT UP WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**
PHOTO BY **BREE MARIE FISH**

After independently recording his last two albums, *Glassellland* and *Blood Thinner*, in hotel rooms and Airbnb's across the American south, the making of Jordie Lane's fourth album *Tropical Depression* was a little less idyllic. As a travelogue of sorts, the creative seeds that inspired *Tropical Depression* were blown through a severe tornado that narrowly missed Lane's house in Nashville, in which he's lived with his collaborator-partner Clare Reynolds and their dog since he left Australia around late 2019. While his homeland was experiencing the devastating bushfires of Black Summer, their alarming near-miss occurred while they were inside a closet. "One out of three houses was completely flattened, all around us", explains Lane. "That was when COVID hit".

These wild weather events essentially became metaphors for Lane's inner storms, engaged with via song, and presented on *Tropical Depression* with a demeanour of self-aware (but very enjoyable) irony. After going 'cabin fever crazy' during a year of lockdowns, Lane cheaply rented a new building in 2021. While living through the sweltering Tennessee summer in a place with no air conditioning or running water, the building became Lane's musical 'office'. Inside, he sat and waited for new songs - 50 drifted out of the ether and through his hands in 30 days.

While he's turned cutlery into percussion and children's bunkbeds into vocal booths, Lane hadn't properly sat around waiting for songs until he started writing most of *Tropical Depression* - the album's title being terminology for the pressure system that births tornados in the Atlantic. Soon after wrapping production on the gross-out music video for his new single 'Biscuit House', Lane shot the breeze with Australian Guitar.

**In your video describing how you made 'The Changing Weather' video, you mention that *Tropical Depression* contains themes of denial and personal accountability. How did you land on these themes?**

This all started with the tornado that just missed our house, which started this storm anxiety for me. When I started writing the songs for this album in late 2019-early 2020, crazy weather events were happening in Nashville, and we'd had the bushfires in Australia. These things were turning into metaphors for my own personal demons. That's why it's fitting that the songs became happy-go-lucky, trying to deny the truth. I've always loved that trick in music.

**I love going into the backstories of their lives and how it filters into their process.**

The one thing I'd say about the guitar is that I got this 1970s classical nylon string from a Japanese brand called Domino. The high E string snapped, it sounded great with five strings, and when I put the high E back on the intonation went out so I took it off. The album was written on the classical guitar, with five strings. Because it's a softer instrument, I had to sing softer, which made my harmony and melody different. I like to fret as few strings as possible because I want things to be as open and rich as possible. I play electrics, but all the acoustic [on the album] is a nylon string.

**When did you start writing *Tropical Depression*, and how long did it take for these songs to accumulate?**

They mostly all came in one. I wrote 50 in a 30-day stretch. In the middle of 2021. I was going cabin fever crazy. I needed to get out, so I rented a cheap place off my landlord, that had no air conditioning. It was the middle of summer so it was a sweat lodge. With pencil, paper and the acoustic guitar, I was like, 'we've already been sitting at home for a year, I'll just sit here and see what happens'. Something would happen, you'd hear a bird or a car go past, which makes you think of something, then I'd let everything come, before editing it. It was a real learning experience for me and I wrote and recorded a huge amount of songs. I didn't sleep there. I just went there and made it my office. I'd never practiced music as a craft during daylight hours. The acoustic demos that weren't going to be on the album were released as this thing called the *Empty House Tapes*. I found this awesome producer-bassist, Jon Estes (Dolly Parton, Duane Eddy), in Nashville. We tracked the band during COVID lockdowns in 2022. It's taken me the last two years to finish the album. A lot of that time was when the concept of it really took shape. I didn't know it was called *Tropical Depression* when we recorded the band. What I've realised now that I don't really know what I'm doing until the end.

**The songs I really liked on *Tropical Depression* are 'Biscuit House', 'Internal Dialogue' and 'Been Lucky'. What's a 'biscuit house'?**

A 'biscuit house' refers to the name of a diner called The Nashville Biscuit House. It's a dingy down-home diner with really straight-up breakfasts. Biscuits in the South look, and almost feel, like scones in Australia. The song itself comes from having a revelation. Sometimes in Australia, you'll hear a loud, obnoxious tourist with an American accent. Here in Nashville, I would hear that same voice, but it would be in an Australian accent. I'm like, 'oh, my God, we're all doing the same thing'. It made me think of myself, and I wrote the song [in one go]. The song is about learning how to feel OK in your own skin. It was a co-write with my partner Clare, from 2017. It's funny, the group of songs you've chosen are all the ones I see as the most unique. There's a comedy element to it, which is a part of my family as my mum [Denise Scott] is a comedian - making fun of the situation. Then there's trying to be honest, as 'Internal Dialogue' is a confessional song about being a jerk.

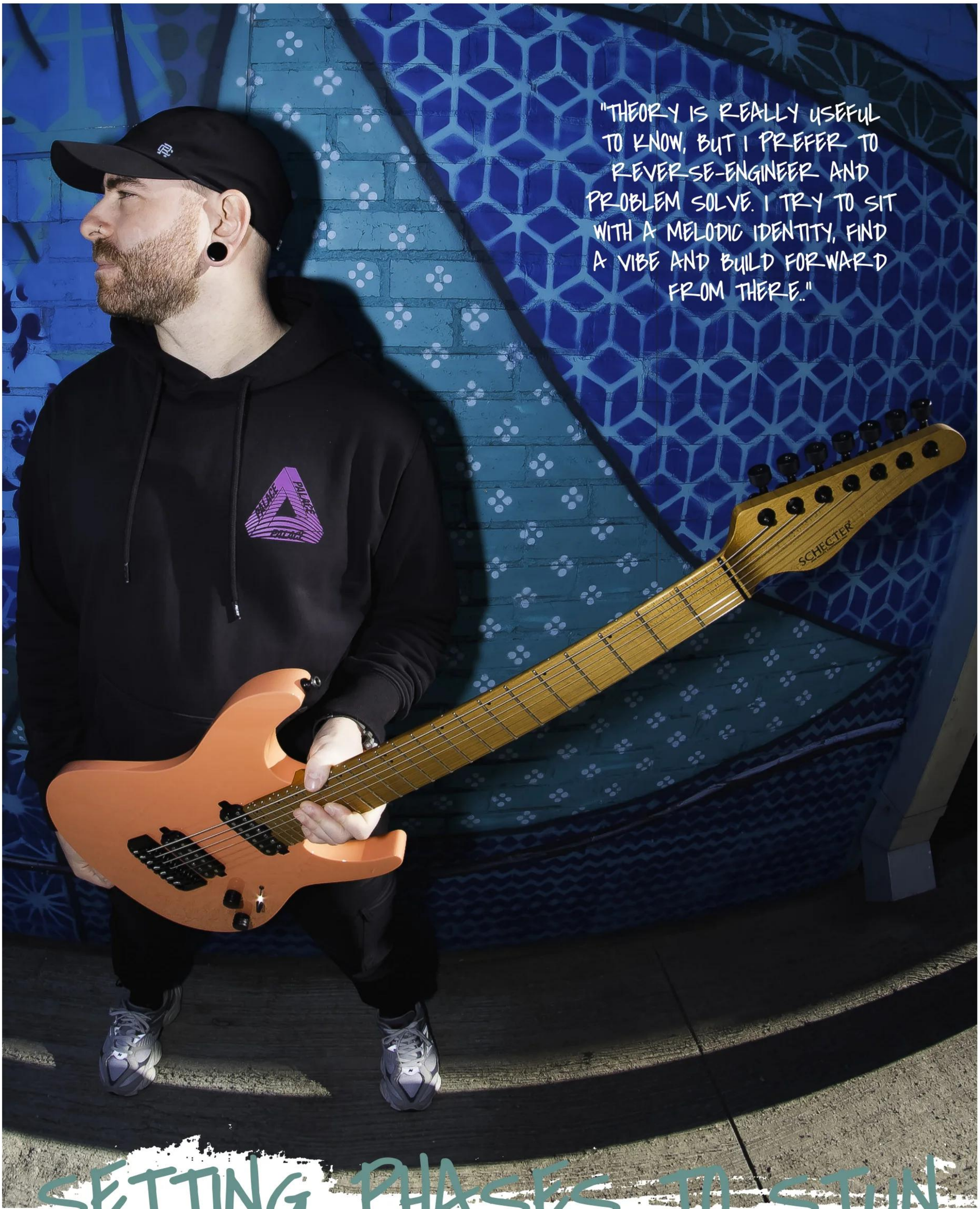
**It's also about partying in Carlton, in Melbourne?**

Yeah, a lot of the stories in the album are me thinking about Australia. At our house party, everyone started crowd surfing and one girl climbed up into the corner of the room like a spider, looking down at everybody with nothing holding her up. It was an absolute mess, but nobody got hurt. That song is about thinking back on being drunk and probably not being so great to some people. 'Internal Dialogue' is a nostalgic song, which is basically saying 'back then, I didn't have a care, I didn't overthink things, I didn't have overwhelming anxiety'.

**When I saw 'The Changing Weather' video, I was laughing out loud at your zany comedic actions. Is some of that informed by your early upbringing around the circus?**

Definitely. This record is me trying to embrace my true self more. I don't have to try and be a cool rock 'n' roller, I like joking around and being a bit of a clown. I wrote the script for that, and we only had five hours to film that video, then a couple of editing days. 'Biscuit House' is even more off tap. Wait till you see some of the stuff in 'Biscuit House'. You won't want to have just eaten or be eating. It made me feel physically sick while I was on camera. ag

**Jordie Lane's *Tropical Depression* is out now.**




# SETTING PHASES TO STUN

CURRENTLY AT THE VANGUARD OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN MODERN METAL, **INTERVALS** WILL RETURN TO AUSTRALIA LATER THIS YEAR FOR SYDNEY'S MONOLITH FESTIVAL, BRINGING PIECES FROM THEIR LATEST ALBUM *MEMORY PALACE*. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR TAPPED INTO GUITARIST AARON MARSHALL'S GREY MATTER.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **RANDY EDWARDS**

Forging ahead with their creation of emotive instrumental tracks with an emphasis on the vocal qualities of lead guitar playing, the Canadian prog metal collective known as Intervals released their fifth album *Memory Palace* on May 17. Conceptualised by sole remaining original member Aaron Marshall, a guitarist and composer who formed the group in Toronto in 2011, the thematic focal point for *Memory Palace* was an exploration of the human mind, including memory and its associated phenomena. It arrived after 2020's *Circadian*, which focused on concepts of balance.

Marshall recorded half of the album on his signature Schecter seven string with a low A, and the rest on his signature six string Schecter in drop C. The album was tracked at Sweetwater Studios in Indiana. Having first worked with Intervals for *Circadian*, Marshall's co-producer for *Memory Palace* was Sam Guaiana, a Toronto local with a background in producing modern pop punk along with post-hardcore acts like Silverstein. The strength of this pairing can be heard in the crushing riffs of 'chronophobia' and 'circuit bender', two of the album's heavier tracks. Meanwhile, tracks like 'galaxy brain' show a lighter side to Intevals' instrumentality, with silky lead lines backed by calming layers of synth.

One of the main benefits of working within the large confines of Sweetwater was always having microphones at the ready for recording Marshall's playing and the performances of his ferociously tight rhythm section: drummer Nathan Bulla and bassist Jacob Umansky. All rhythm guitars were laid down first in a multi-tracked process that took Marshall two or three days, before bass and leads were added. Bulla's drums were recorded last, due to their being the hardest instrument to replace upon Marshall's demos. Composed in isolation with the use of programmed drums, these demos helped provide a blueprint for the album for the first time in Intervals 13-year long history.

Intervals' core trio has now been active for seven years; their touring guitarist Travis LeVrier joined in 2019. *Memory Palace* places a lot of emphasis on ambient sound design, which was aided by Jesse Zuretti (Marvel Studios, Riot Games) and intricate EDM-based collaborations from KOAN Sound, OBLVYN, J3PO and composer-bassist Evan Marien (Mitski, Allan Holdsworth). *Memory Palace* was mastered by Mike Kalajian (A Day To Remember, William Duvall) and consequentially it bears a modern metal sound that is immensely heavy, but with a startling clarity that shines through deep, intricate layers. After tours with Tesseract, Hail The Sun and Mammoth WVH in support of the album, Intervals are excited to return to Australia in November after six years away. Before doing so, Marshall spoke with Australian Guitar about the making of *Memory Palace* and the themes that inspired it.

**Did you use a lot of music theory knowledge when you were composing these new tracks?**

Theory is really useful to know, but I prefer to reverse-engineer and problem solve. I try to sit with a melodic identity, find a vibe and build forward from there. I'm really trying to lean on intuition and be reactive to whatever is happening. I'm not trying to bust out the calculator or pen and paper unless I have to. Every once in a while, I feel the need to brush up on something, but I try to trust my intuition.

**Were the bulk of these new ideas gradually amassed as demos, or through playing sessions?**

Once I discovered programmed drums, 12 or 13 years ago now, that was the liberating factor for me being able to compose. Now it's evolved so much more. The idea is to start with me in a room with a desk or a MIDI controller. Then I'll pull some software sets up. A lot of the newer record came from that headspace. Starting ideas off on the guitar was pretty cool. Because it's guitar music, I'm certainly more liberated on the instrument to bring ideas forward, but it's been nice to start songs off on synths or an arpeggiator, then find a melody or some chords.

**The main theme that stood out to me on Memory Palace was a focus on the human mind.**

The album is referencing the art of memory. *Circadian* was like a metaphor for balance. On this one, I wanted to delve deeper into memory. The idea of a 'memory palace', of picturing the inside of your bedroom or living room, scattering information around that, and being able to recall details quickly and efficiently. It also dovetails with memory as it pertains to musicians, which is muscle memory. My mum always used to say, when I was getting going with music, 'how do you remember anything?'. That always stuck with me. I like everything to have a feeling. I really enjoy making this type of music because there are no expectations on what you're supposed to think and feel...because there's no lyrical content.

**With no lyrics to dictate the emotional content of the songs, it's almost like the way the instrumentation comes together conjures even more emotion than a lyric. That's another driving force in the music, wouldn't you say?**

Definitely. I get a vibe for it as I go. I'm reactive as I'm building these things. Once I start to listen to songs as they're finished, I let them tell me what they want to be called. On the last few records, I established the theme before the music came together. There's a story that I loosely want to tell, but I don't really know how I'm gonna get there. I get to imbue that meaning.

**The cool thing is, the more you listen to certain pieces on *Memory Palace*, the more things reveal themselves.**

There's a lot in there, for sure. That was a big focus this time, as well as a heavier focus on sound design. There are lots more textural, rhythmic elements, programmed stuff and synthesisers. The mix and the production has some some weight to it. We got to make it in Sweetwater Studios on a Neve 5088 console. I got to fly the whole team in and do it there. That was a really cool experience that we all shared there, and I think you can hear that in the music. We have a whole documentary series on YouTube, about what was going on. We were able to create something really special, especially considering a lot of *Circadian* was recorded remotely, given the time period.

**The production is phenomenal. It's heavy, but there's so much clarity in the mix. Are you happy with how it turned out sonically?**

Absolutely. I wanted to give the band its own unique sonic fingerprint. A lot of the same names get mixed by a handful of the same guys in the space that I tend to exist in, so we wanted to find a way out. The idea was to go to a nice, big room and spend some time together getting that dynamic of everybody being in the same room again, since *Circadian* was largely recorded remotely. Sam's also a freak when it comes to mixing. He approaches things in a way that's different - he's able to achieve a really big, clear, punchy mix that has some weight to it, but the guitars aren't overly abrasive. A deliberate choice. It's 40 minutes of guitar music, so you don't want to wear the listener out. We really try to consider frequencies, and where everything lives. Sam and I also started to find some cool tricks that make the guitar feel more vocal, especially the lead melody stuff - we approach it less like guitar solos everywhere, and more like lead vocal parts. That really helps draw a straight line through the music, as far as the content, and then the mix is clear, big and bold. I think it sounds different than a lot of the bands that do the kind of stuff that we do, and I like that.

**For the recording, I believe you were playing seven string Schecters?**

Six and seven, yeah. Half the record is seven string, which is cool. I felt like saying more in that register, but half the album is six string, tuned to drop C. The other is seven string with a low A.

**They're all Schecter axes?**

They're my signature guitars, for the most part. I also tracked with stuff from my collection. A couple of Abasis. I have a seven string Strat that's really dope, and a few custom builds, like a cool Gibson-ish thing from luthiers in Toronto called Frank Brothers. I also included custom shop Strats from Schecter, some of my Aristides. There's an Abasi Space T that we're using a lot, which is like a Tele on steroids made by [Animals As Leaders'] Toisin Abasi's brand. I also tested out my prototypes on the record as well. We were receiving those and laying down tracks. I like the cool futuristic stuff, but I also like conventional classics as well. I've got a range of everything, from things that are in the vintage spectrum up to more finely tuned modern shit. I like it all.

**Are you a fan of '80s synth and electronic dance music as well? They're two elements in the sound that stood out to me.**

Absolutely. This is the first release where I'm wearing more of that on my sleeve. However, a good buddy, Jesse Zuretti, who, at the time I started doing this was finishing up some work with Marvel Studios and now does a lot of videogame music, made a really nice contribution on sound design to fill in the gaps where some things escaped me. It's still a thing I'm sharpening my blade on. It was cool to bring in the mortar for the bricks I was trying to lay. He's filling in the gaps, using a mixture of software synths, hardware synths, and things like that. I have some software synths but I also have some hardware. I have a Moog Matriarch, but I also have a Juno-106 that's older than me, which was born in 1984. It's the real deal and I love it dearly. I've got a Prophet-6 and a Moog Sub 37. I'm into gritty, real analogues, so I wanted to push some of that into the forefront on these productions. In 'galaxy brain', my friend Julian [Waterfall Pollack], who goes by J3PO, is playing Rhodes electric piano, sound design elements and some analogue synth. 'neurogenesis' is a collaboration with a UK drum and bass duo called KOAN Sound. They're incredible, and I've been a fan for a long time. I'd like to take a step in the direction of incorporating some real drum and bass. I was brought up on KOAN Sound, Noisia, Pendulum and shit like that, but I'm also into more chill stuff, like Tycho and Com Truise. Bringing in those elements and pushing them forward was a deliberate approach. I wore that influence on my sleeve.

**What new songs do you reckon you're gong to bring to Monolith Festival?**

'neurogenesis', 'mnemonic' and 'nootropic' have all been in the set for a while now, but I'd love to debut 'circuit bender'. We never got to come to Australia since *Circadian* came out, so I want to do half the new record, some joints from Circadian, then reach backwards into the catalogue to get a well-rounded set. ag

**Intervals will tour Australia in November as part of Monolith Festival, featuring Coheed & Cambria, Periphery, Leprous, and more. For full dates and tickets visit destroyalllines.com.**

# "YOU SHOULDN'T OVERTHINK THE GUITAR"

With an eight-string in his hands, **Leprous** guitarist Tor Oddmund Suhrke is playing progressive metal by his own rules. As he says: "It's cooler not to try to show off."

**Words** Amit Sharma **Photos** Grzegorz Golebiowski, Tomasz Gotfryd

**The term 'progressive metal' often suggests the kind of indulgent, neoclassical futurism typified by Dream Theater and Symphony X, but Norwegian quintet Leprous – arguably one of the most exciting names operating in the genre today – have chosen moods and atmospheres over sprawling overtures.**

The group, formed by singer/keyboardist Einar Solberg and guitarist Tor Oddmund Suhrke in 2001, cut their teeth early on as the live band for Ihsahn, the man who famously pioneered the symphonic black metal sound through his work in Emperor. Such an opportunity during the band's embryonic years benefitted them greatly in terms of musical development and helped sharpen their collective tools of the trade.

"We don't sound like those technical progressive bands with all the fast leads," Tor says. "Our music is more about emotion. We focus on mood. It's funny, Leprous is like an overdue youth project. Myself and Einar started the band when we were 15. Most people start out in one group and then switch to other things as they develop, but we never quit our first band!"

As illustrated by their stunning eighth full-length *Melodies Of Atonement*, the band have come a long way indeed. And as Tor explains, these latest recordings were born out of a desire to evolve in different directions, a mission to make the complex sound simple…

**Who were your biggest influences when you started this band?**

The first ones I think about tend to be my early ones, when I picked up the guitar. That's when you really focus on your inspirations and heroes. After that, you start to develop your own sound through a whole bunch of guitarists. Mikael Åkerfeldt from Opeth was one of our biggest inspirations in the early years, and those guys still are our idols. Another big hero of mine is Ihsahn of

Emperor, which I guess is quite obvious given how much we've worked and toured with him.

**Ihsahn was also your guitar teacher for a while. Not many people can say they had one-on-one lessons with one of their biggest musical heroes!**

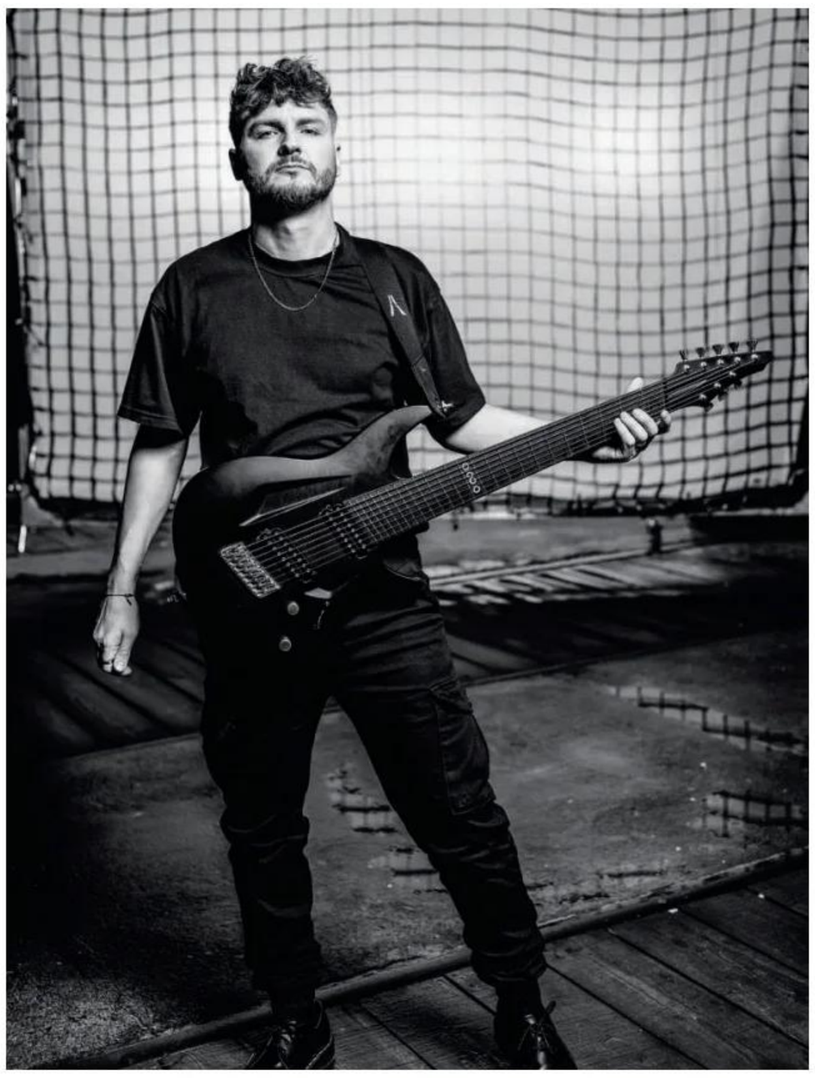
I took lessons for about year or so before we started Leprous. He's a really important mentor for musicians in Notodden, where we live. He helped people in my hometown by starting this youth project. Einar is his brother-in-law and also my best friend, which is how I joined. Eventually Ihsahn asked if we could be his backing band. That's how we ended up playing abroad and stepping up in terms of musicianship, performing at big festivals and getting experience.

**What exactly did you ask him to teach you?**

I remember he taught me how to play songs by Dream Theater, Iron Maiden and King Diamond. That was a good way to learn how to play metal guitar, though I remember giving up on some of the John Petrucci solos, like the one in *Pull Me Under*, which has fast bursts that are really hard. Maybe if I'd continued, I'd have ended up sounding more like a shredder. Those lessons taught me a lot, like how to hold a guitar pick. All those tips stayed with me. There are no rules in music, but there are always things that will feel more natural. You shouldn't overthink the guitar or feel you have to play in a specific way – in fact, that can ruin your progress. I had to be able to play Ihsahn's solo material perfectly, plus old Emperor songs with big chords being strummed fast. He would show me how to strum, and through that I ended up developing my own technique.

**You started out on regular electric guitars and ended up using eight-strings. What helped most with that transition?**

It was a necessity! I probably wouldn't have gotten an eight-string if we weren't playing for Ihsahn. They're like a mix between guitar and bass. I wouldn't recommend starting out on eight – fewer strings is easier. It's best to begin with rhythmic single-string ideas, like a lot of djent stuff. That will teach you how to handle the instrument correctly. Don't give up, because it will seem awkward at first but it does get easier. I now look at them as a tool for creating more dimension. Einar does most of the composing, but he isn't a guitar player. So he will write the arrangements and then it's up to us guitarists to find our role within those songs. I use eight-strings and handle the low frequency riffy stuff while our other guitarist Robin [Ognedal] does the leads, following the vocals higher up. We meet in the middle!



**You were using PRS guitars through Blackstar and Fender amps for a while, but on more recent tours it's been Aristides guitars going into a Kemper profiler...**

Yeah, I'm mainly using my Aristides models these days. The eight-string parts were recorded with my 080s, which is my go-to. When Ihsahn introduced me to Aristides, I was totally converted. It felt like another level of tone, sustain and playability. The chords felt easier and the neck was nicer. I also love the Aristides six-strings, like the T/0 Telecaster six-string that you can hear on the new album. There's a coil-split, which comes in really handy for our live shows. It took me several years to realise that my PRS guitars also had coil-splits… I never knew! Maybe it's because I was just a metal guitarist to start with, using humbuckers and everything on full.

**So what amps are we hearing on the album?**

Every single part was fine-tuned and tweaked, so we used different amps and settings for each part. But it was mainly a Diezel VH4. I'd never seen one until we recorded the Malina album in 2017 at Ghostward Studios. It looked so metal and strange, I didn't think I'd like it. But after some blind tests, we all felt the VH4 crunch channel sounded the best. It won the blind tests on every album after that, including this latest one. There was also a Hiwatt amp that got used in the studio a bit, with maybe a Fender Twin somewhere in there.

**A lot of songs you've recorded in the past have featured odd-time signatures. What's your approach for coming up with the more unusual ideas?**

I guess the general prog approach is to make things sound more complicated than they are. I'm not pointing fingers, we were guilty ourselves early on. We'd try our hardest to make music that sounded complicated. Later on, we switched to ideas that were complicated but sounded like they weren't. I think we managed to achieve that. Sometimes we see prog fans complaining that 4/4 is the Devil and not liking our more recent albums. They accuse us of cheating or going pop. But a lot of the songs they mention aren't 4/4 at all. People just think they are, because it's easy to nod along. This new album is all 4/4, but sounds more complicated because we use polyrhythms with Baard [Kolstad] on drums, who can make riffs sound all over the place. The old Leprous would have written an idea and then added or subtracted notes to make it sound odd-time. That's a cool experimental thing to do, just to see what happens. As we've grown, we've realised it's cooler not to try to show off. You almost keep the clever stuff to yourself.

**From the clean single-note lines on *Atonement* to the slide work on *Faceless* and *Starlight*, and then the big bendy riffs of *My Specter*, you've clearly mastered the art of building tension and momentum...**

While learning the songs for the tour, we noticed they're more intuitive and playable. We recorded live in the studio with bigger and longer takes. Before we used to do one part at a time and then reamp them to perfection. We used a lot of slide. I think Robin played slide the whole way through *Atonement*! He made it sound so different, people actually thought it was keys. He did such a good job, he didn't get the credit!

**The chemistry between the keys and guitars is fundamental to your sound. How can other bands blend these instruments with the same kind of cohesion?**

Einar will make songs on his laptop and program loads of things. It will start off as a keyboard part and then we'll evolve it into a guitar part. It's all about listening. The Electro-Harmonix POG got used a lot, turning the guitars into something more synthetic. I love that sound, though we had to filter out some of the weirder frequencies when mixing. I guess the POG tone can be a little too obvious. I can do similar things using my digital rig, but the POG is so unique. I'm actually thinking about touring with a POG in front of my Kemper, which handles everything else. My sound has really evolved on this album. We moved away from the metal elements on *Malina* and found not using distortion can create a lot of extra space. The sound is less compressed and more organic. But this time we weren't afraid of adding gain. We're looking to reintroduce things we'd thrown out. It's all about what fits! ag

***Leprous will appear at Monolith Festival in November.***

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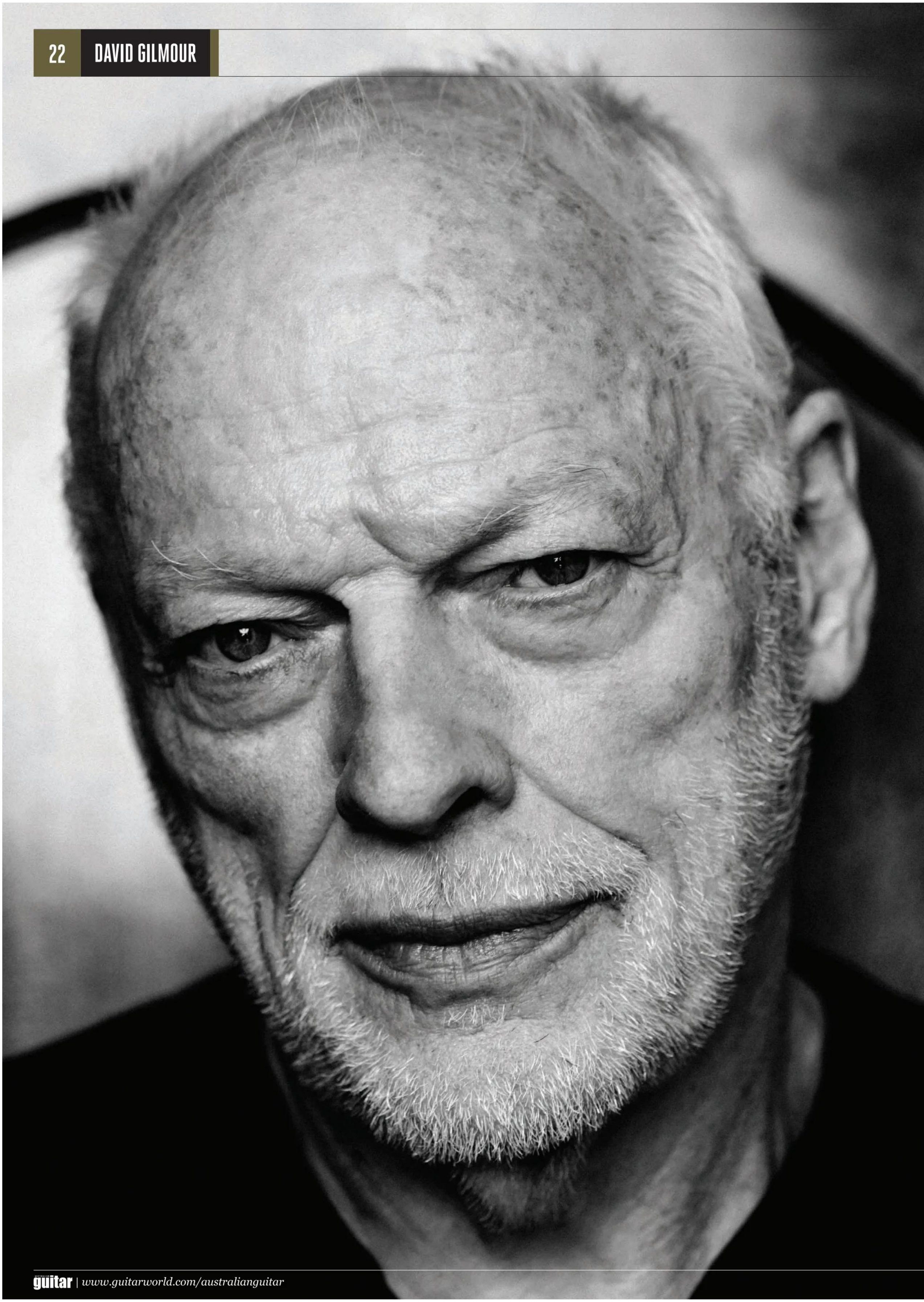


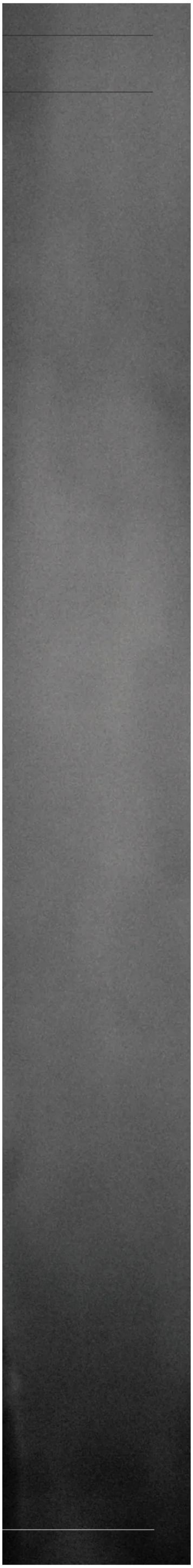
# ‘I’M 100 PERCENT HAPPY WITH THE WORK I’VE DONE WITH PINK FLOYD. BUT...

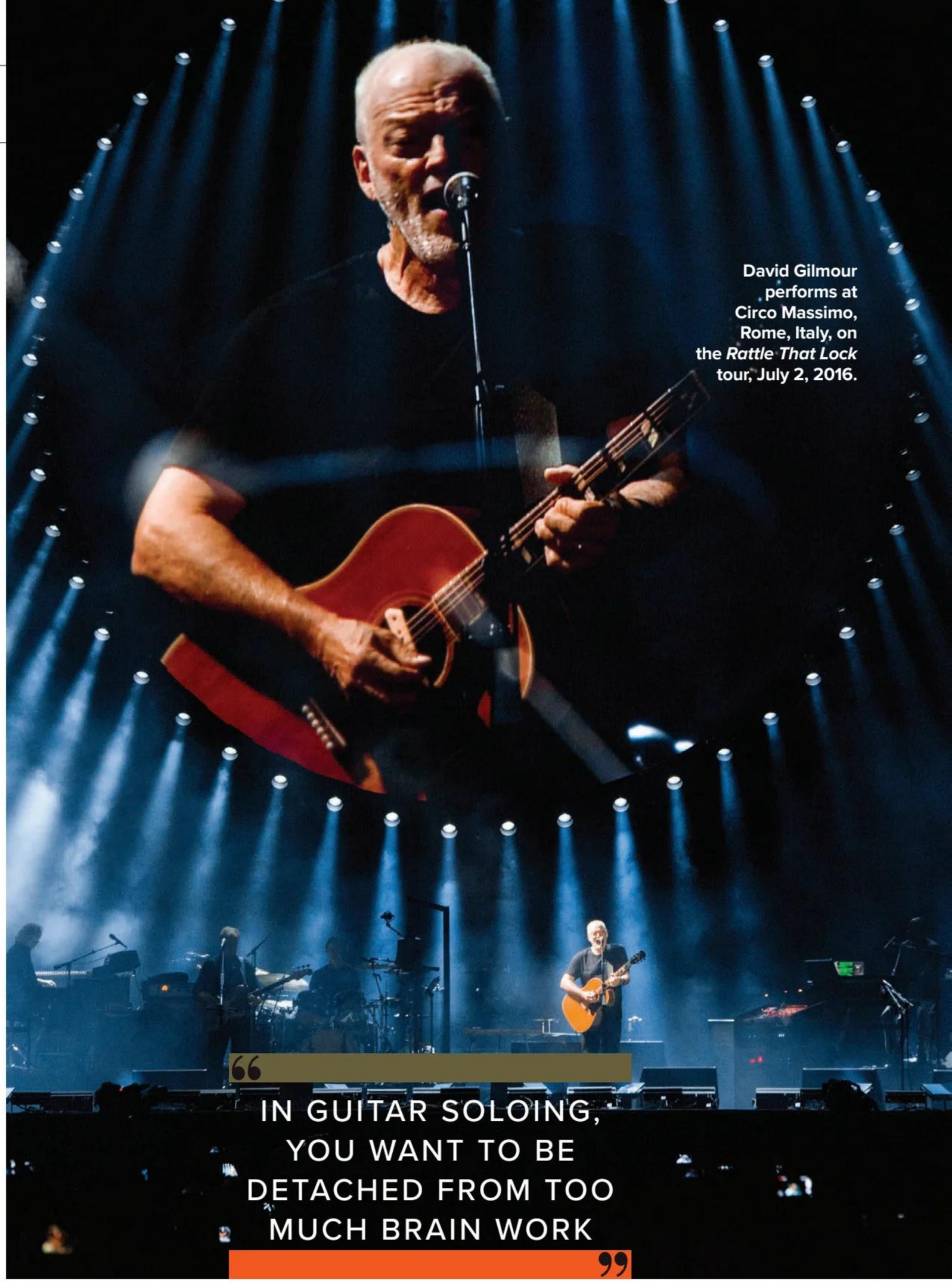
# ‘MY FOCUS IS DIFFERENT RIGHT NOW’

Leading a rock group and being a solo artist were “not what I asked for,” **David Gilmour** says. For ***Luck and Strange***, he assembled a team that shared the weight of his creative efforts. The result? “The best album I’ve made since ***The Dark Side of the Moon***.”

BY GARY GRAFF

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTON CORBIJN





David Gilmour performs at Circo Massimo, Rome, Italy, on the *Rattle That Lock* tour, July 2, 2016.

**PROLIFIC IS NOT** the word we use to describe David Gilmour, at least not when it comes to putting out music. His new album, *Luck and Strange* (Sony), comes nearly nine years after its predecessor, *Rattle That Lock*, which likewise ended a nine-year wait (although to be fair, he'd been working on the posthumous Pink Floyd set *The Endless River*, which came out the year before). Gilmour's never been one to crank 'em out, of course, and since Floyd's final tour, in 1994, he's given us just three studio sets.

"I don't have a huge ambition any more," Gilmour, now 78, told us during the *Rattle That Lock* campaign. "In past years there was a lot of thinking about the career and wanting to achieve success. It's sort of turned into something more calm and less ambitious in my later years. I'll get round to doing something again before too long, I hope, but I have no idea. I haven't planned anything."

Fair enough, but we'd like to disagree with the "less ambitious" part. When Gilmour does put something out, it *is* the product of great ambition and invention, and of a good deal of work that's gone on even before he and his team of choice get into the studio. It perhaps hasn't produced a substantial amount of music over the years, but it's always resulted in work that's vital and compelling, something new and interesting each time.

*Luck and Strange* is simply the latest case in point. It's Gilmour's fifth studio album overall. His first, a self-titled affair, came out in May 1978 while Pink Floyd were on a break prior to making *The Wall*, with Gilmour producing and leading a core trio that included bassist Rick Wills and drummer Willie Wilson from his pre-Floyd band, Jokers Wild. *About Face* followed in 1984, helmed by Gilmour with *The Wall* cohort Bob Ezrin, and featuring a rhythm section of Toto's Jeff Porcaro and journeyman Pino Palladino, with Steve Winwood and Deep Purple organist Jon Lord among its musical guests. The latter also set Gilmour out on his first solo tour, with Bad Company's Mick Ralphs riding six-string shotgun.

> "IN GUITAR SOLOING, YOU WANT TO BE DETACHED FROM TOO MUCH BRAIN WORK"

After a Pink Floyd resumption (sans bassist Roger Waters) during the late '80s and '90s, Gilmour took his own counsel again on 2006's *On an Island*, with Floyd keyboardist Richard Wright, Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera, David Crosby, Graham Nash, latter-day Floyd bassist Guy Pratt, Jools Holland and others among the illustrious company. Gilmour's wife, Polly Samson, after contributing to Floyd's *The Division Bell*, became his chief lyricist on six of the 10 tracks and provided piano on one and backing vocals on another. Gilmour teamed up with The Orb for the 2010 electronica outing *Metallic Spheres* before making *The Endless River* and *Rattle That Lock*, again co-producing with Manzanera on the latter and with many of the same cohorts, and Samson penning five more sets of lyrics.

Gilmour's Floyd-like touring extravaganzas were captured on album and video packages such as *Live at Gdansk* and *Live at Pompeii*, while he netted $21.5 million from a Christies guitar sale in June 2019. Music was still being made at home when the pandemic hit in 2020 and turned the world pear shaped, but it was a fruitful time for Gilmour, who, in helping Samson promote her novel *A Theater for Dreamers*, began doing virtual performances. Those helped bring their daughter, Romany, and sons Gabriel and Charlie into the musical mix, too, and when lockdowns lifted and Gilmour turned his attention to a new album, he was ready to rattle any locks that had become part of his creative world.

To that end, he and Sampson brought in new co-producer Charlie Andrew, a U.K. award winner whose credits include working with indie rockers alt-J (including their Mercury Prize-winning

ROBERTO PANUCCI/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

*An Awesome Wave*), Matt Corby, Marika Hackman, James, Bloc Party and more. He's of a different generation and a different sensibility. Gilmour's admitted that Andrew even questioned the need for guitar solos on the material.

"I did start by saying, 'Do we need another guitar solo here?'" Andrew acknowledges. "I just want what's best for the song." That said, Andrew agrees it's nice to have a big solo, "because that's what he does. I definitely came at it with an angle of 'We don't need to have things if they're not essential to the song.' Obviously, saying that, David is a truly exceptional guitarist, and it was lovely to have moments in the studio when he was trying to work out a part and all I had to do was sit there with my coffee and listen. I definitely have a greater love for guitar solos now. Well, *David's* guitar solos."

What's clear is that Andrew made Gilmour think fresh, and more new faces — drummers Steve Gadd, Adam Betts and Steve DiStanislao, and keyboardists Roger Eno and Rob Gentry, as well as old-hand Pratt — brought energy and an ensemble sensibility that made Gilmour even more excited about the proceedings at Mark Knopfler's British Grove studios.

The freshness fills *Luck and Strange*'s nine tracks, from the brief instrumentals "Black Cat" and "Vita Brevis" to a cover of the Montgolfier Brothers' "Between Two Points," sung by Romany and featuring a couple of Gilmour's trademark majestic solos. The title track dates back to 2007 and the jams Gilmour held with the band that had toured to support *On an Island*, including Wright. A lengthy "barn jam" version included on the album reveals how the track was winnowed from much broader ideas at the time.

Most of the songs are in a measured, midtempo manner, with "Yes, I Have Ghosts" mining acoustic-folk territory. The compact "Dark and Velvet Nights" is the album's most upbeat track. And despite any of producer Andrew's reservations, Gilmour happily solos throughout, taking flight on tracks that include "The Piper's Call," "A Single Spark" and "Scattered."

JOBY SESSIONS; POLLY SAMSON (INSET)

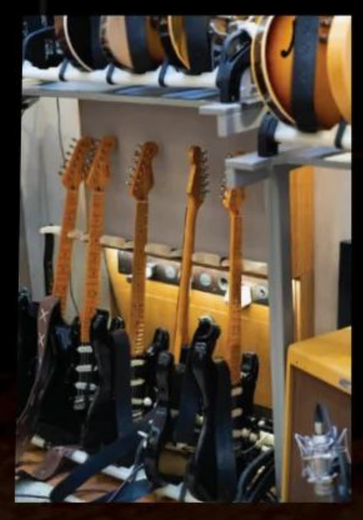
## GILMOUR'S GALLERY OF GREATS

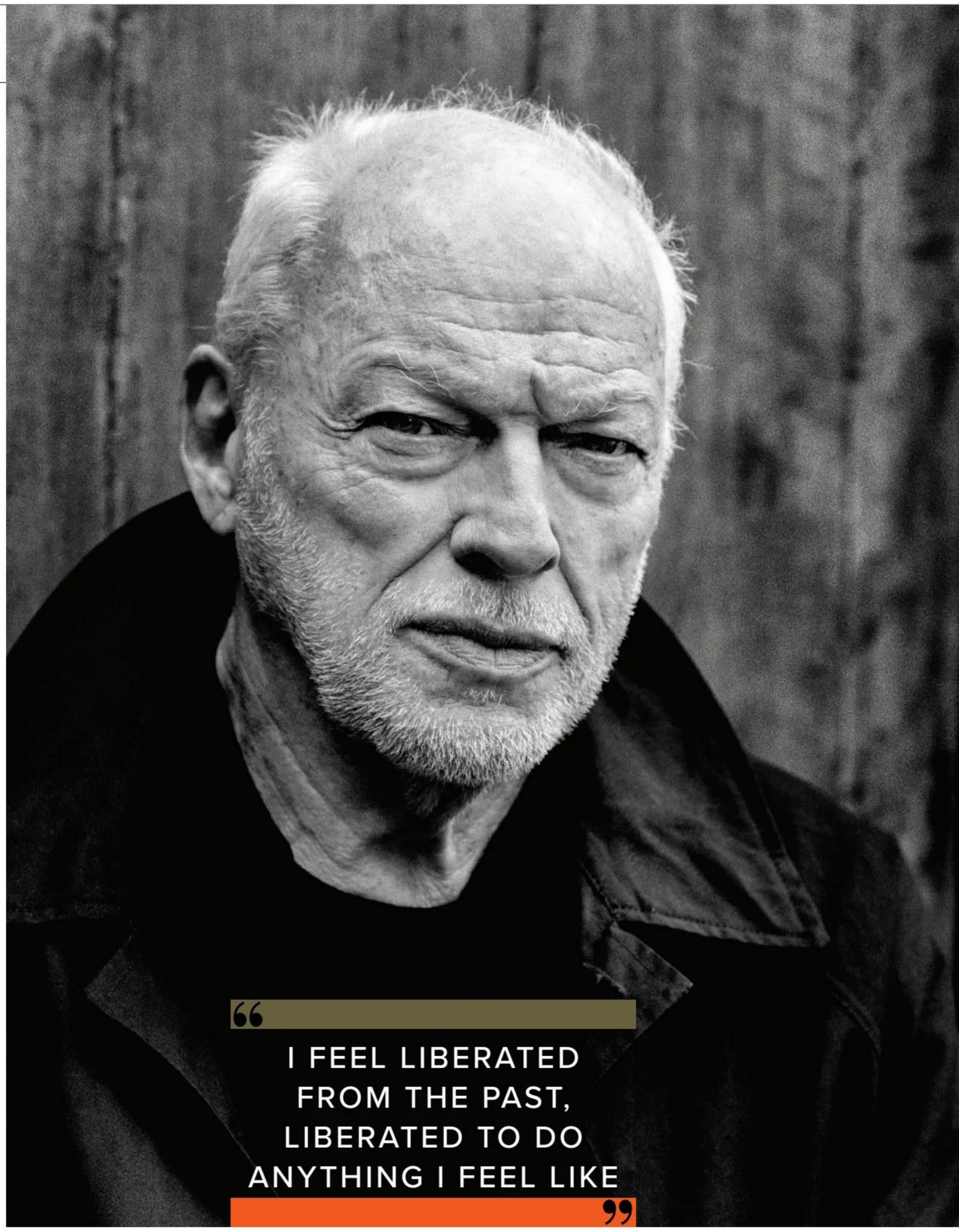
### The Black Strat

The most famous of Gilmour's guitars, the so-called Black Strat is a much-modded guitar that he purchased at Manny's in New York in 1970. It was originally a Fender 1968 to '69 alder body with black painted over the original sunburst finish. It had a Fender late-'60s maple neck (large headstock) and 21 frets, but a rosewood-necked version features on *The Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*. To muddy the waters still further, the guitar was later fitted with a Charvel neck. The Black Strat was on display at the Dallas and Miami Hard Rock Cafes until 1997, after which Gilmour played it for Floyd's 2005 Live 8 show and continued to make modifications.

The guitar can be seen in the concert film *Live at Pompeii* when it was new for Gilmour, and features on "Money," "Shine On You Crazy Diamond," "Comfortably Numb" and other Floyd classics. The Black Strat was the star of Christies' 2019 *David Gilmour Collection* auction, where it broke records when it sold for US$3,975,000. Judging by the recent photo below, Black Strats still figure in Gilmour's world.

— *Michael Leonard*






*Luck and Strange* has given Gilmour a great deal to talk about, of course, including a selection of live dates at London's Royal Albert Hall and in New York and California. On the day of *Guitar Player*'s visit, he's onboard the *Astoria*, his houseboat, which is docked on the Thames. Gilmour bought it in 1986 and outfitted it with a recording studio, where he made the final three Floyd albums and some of *Rattle That Lock*. On the day of our visit, his T-shirt is black, his tightly trimmed beard is white, and his satisfaction with *Luck and Strange* bubbles over throughout our chat as he considers this latest chapter in his long career.

**It's been a minute since *Rattle That Lock*. Do you feel the passage of time, and does it affect how you approached *Luck and Strange*?**
I don't know if it's the passage of time, but there have been lots of things that have gone on in our world in the last few years that have definitely impacted my thinking and approach to where this album grew out of.

**Some of those things would seem obvious.**
Well, I mean, first of all I'd have to say COVID and the lockdown, being locked at home with my family, with the thought, and the general, broader thought of experts, that old folks like me were liable to get wiped out any minute by COVID, and some vast percentage of the population was going to die. [*grins*] Those were real thoughts, real sort-of semi-accepted ideas in 2020, which proved to not be quite as dangerous as we thought at first. But I was locked down with Polly and with some of my kids, and the topic of discussion was often toward the aging process and the dangers of this COVID thing. So those topics are things that have surfaced, through Polly, in a lot of the lyrics on this album. And of course the other thing is family, working with family, indulging in a nice bit of nepotism.

**Which we got a first taste of in the virtual performances you did during lockdown.**
Polly's book, *A Theater for Dreamers*, was supposed to come out the week we had lockdown in England, and that was tricky for her, because the whole sale and promotion of her book was put in jeopardy, and she wants people to read her book, of course, as you do. It's a brilliant book.

Anyway, Charlie, our son, when we had to cancel some shows we were going to do around England — semi-literary, partly music — Charlie said, "Why don't you stream them from home?" This is not an idea we were used to, but we went there, and it started pretty much only on Polly's book as a focus.

But then it became broader. I was singing songs every week — usually Leonard Cohen covers, 'cause he's a character who appears in her book. Then we got our daughter Romany to sing along and play with me, and that showed me that we have got that lovely sort of family tonality that happens — the Beach Boys, Everly Brothers and other people. These are things that we loved in the past. So all these things came together to create a different mood and a different feeling for the making of this album.

**Kind of a clean slate, or a new palate?**
Liberated. Liberated from the past. These things, the COVID and the aging and the family — all these things left me feeling I don't need to stick with any rule book or anything that's gone before. I can be freer, liberated to do anything I feel like. I'm not tied to it sounding like this or that. That sort of became emphasized for me.

**How did that manifest itself in the album itself? You worked with a lot of new people, producer included. What did that allow you to do differently than before?**
That's all there in the music, and they're there in what Charlie [*Andrew*] brought to it and my acceptance of what he was showing me and the direction he was proffering. It all just helped move things in a different direction that felt like a liberation to me.

**This is a guy you've said walked in asking if there had to be guitar solos. You're David Gilmour — how do you answer something like that?**

[*laughs*] That's a very interesting thing about the whole situation. He's 43 or 44 or something — he's not a tiny kid or anything — but in his passage through music, Pink Floyd wasn't one of those influences. Amazingly enough there still are people like that. [*chuckles*] But he liked the music that I was working on, and I liked him. Polly liked him very much. She found him, really, and I thought it was an interesting and exciting way for us to move forward.

**Was there a different ensemble sensibility on *Luck and Strange* than you've had on your other albums?**

This feels like a team in a way that the other solo albums didn't. On those albums, I felt like there was a bit more of a burden on my shoulders in the writing and in the execution of the whole thing. I started off in a pop group, and I found myself eventually in the position of leading that group, not a position I was hoping for or looking forward to. And being a solo artist — also not what I asked for. I always preferred being part of something, and this album feels much closer to that than anything I've had over all those years. It all felt much more like a family, much more like a group of people working toward a common end, than I've felt in quite awhile. And it's exciting. It's fun.

**Did that burden being lifted allow you to do anything different as a player or singer or otherwise on the album?**

I don't know if I can go to concrete examples. It's just a general overall feeling of a weight being lifted and allowing you to just plow forward, with all the people around you putting their five cents' worth in and helping to get to where we got to. I couldn't be happier than working with this group of people. I will definitely do so again.

**You've said you feel this is the best thing you've done since *The Dark Side of the Moon* — a pretty heavy comparison. What makes it feel that way?**

## GILMOUR'S GALLERY OF GREATS

### The Red Strat

Like the Black Strat, the Red Strat has been extensively modded. Gilmour eventually replaced the single-coils with active EMG pickups — 1979-made forerunners of what became the signature DG20s. The EMGs feature an EXP control to boost treble and bass and an SPC control to boost the midrange, for a humbucker-esque tone. Gilmour also added his custom shortened 4.25-inch vibrato arm. As well as being used on *The Endless River*, it was featured extensively on *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* and *The Division Bell* albums and tours, and some of *On An Island*. It was also used in solo live shows for "Shine On You Crazy Diamond." The Red Strat sold for US$615,000 at Christies' 2019 auction.

*— ML*

## GILMOUR'S GALLERY OF GREATS

### Custom baritone Fender Telecaster

Gilmour owned a 1963 Fender Bass VI with a 30-inch scale length, but his guitar tech, Phil Taylor, wanted to have a new one custom-made to a shorter length. "I wanted it to be more like a guitar, shorter scale," he explained, "but it also had to have a vibrato on it. I talked to Fender, and they made two." Both were made to a 27-inch scale, but Taylor wasn't finished. "I put a Vibramate String Spoiler on the back-end of the Bigsby and replaced the electronics with Callaham Cryo electronics. I wanted to get as much detail out of the strings as possible. The strings were unbalanced on the regular Fender Tele pickups, so I got Ron Ellis to make some custom baritone pickups. I was very pleased, thought it was marvelous."

Despite Taylor's efforts, Gilmour took his time to put the guitar to use. "It sat here for a year before David even picked it up!" Taylor said. "Only for *The Endless River* was it played. We were here with [*album co-producer*] Youth, who said David maybe needed a more baritone sound. David shrugged and says, 'Okay... have I got a baritone?' Finally, he played it." The custom baritone sold for US$68,750 at Christies.

*— ML*

The album feels like a solid body of cohesive work that is a reflection of some of those things that I've tried to describe to you. It's the cohesiveness of the whole thing — the writing, the work, the thrill it still gives me to listen to it all the way through as an album. We're not talking concept album here, but there's a consistency of thought and of feeling that runs through it that excites me in a way that makes me make those sort of comparisons.

**You've produced your previous solo albums, or co-produced with familiar company such as Bob Ezrin and Phil Manzanera. What was it like turning it over to someone new and younger?**

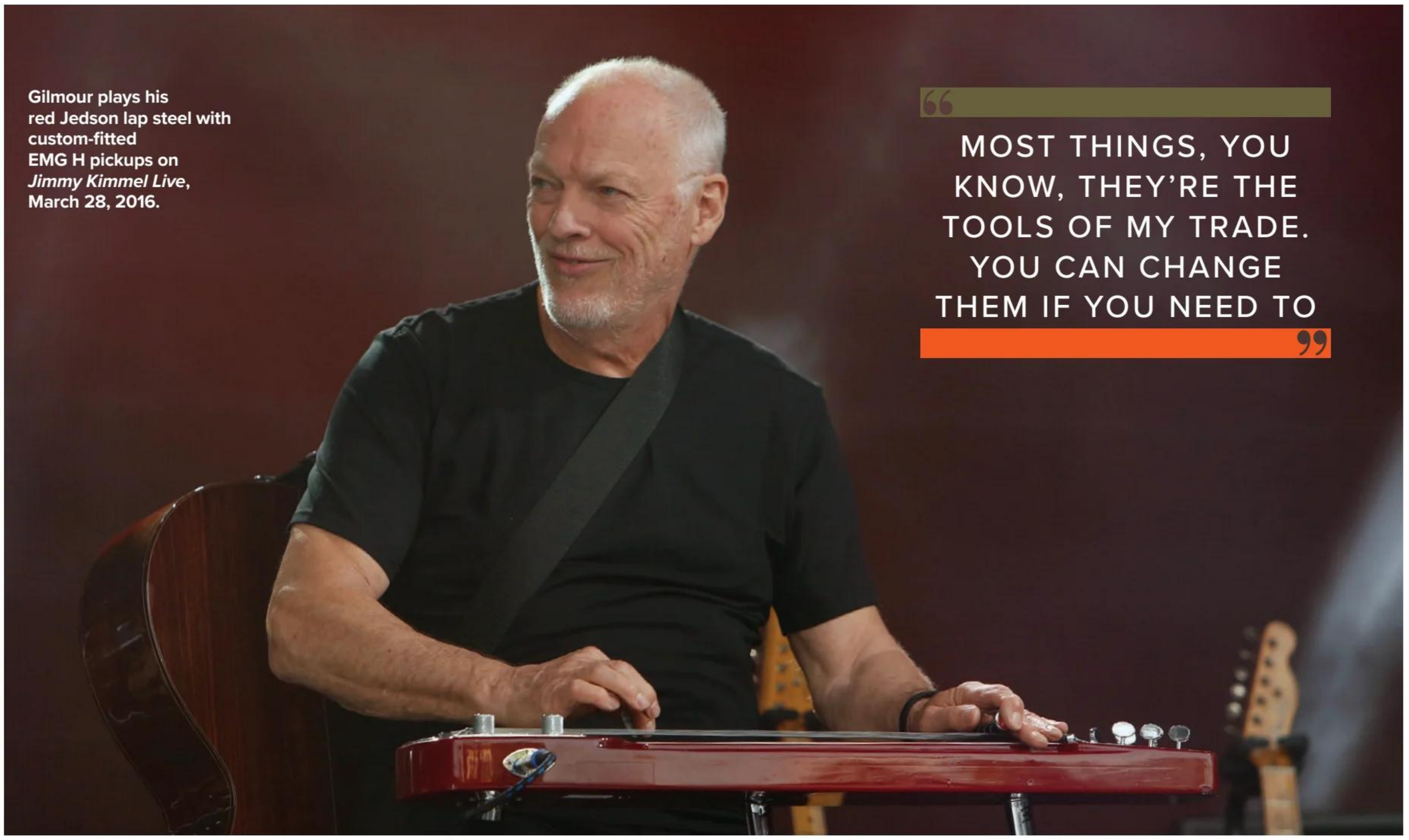
Charlie's lack of being overawed by my reputation was a big plus for me. Obviously in the position that I find myself there is likely to be too much... sycophancy, if you like; too many people saying, "What you're doing is wonderful." It's just a natural way that things tend to work out. But Charlie didn't have any of those particular, specific problems, and that was very refreshing. So when he's firm in his convictions on the way we should try to do something a certain way, you give it a go and you give it some time, and if you don't think it's right, you try a different approach. You can go to these things and try them one way, try them another way.

**What directions did he push you in that felt new, or even uncomfortable?**

There's things to do with the sound, the way he wanted to record, and how long I'd be willing to keep going at something until we got whatever it was he was searching for out of me or the other musicians. He worked us very hard, all of us. It was very good for me to be there while he worked some of the other musicians on the tracks before I got to the singing parts. I knew what was coming for me, and it was the same thing he'd done with Steve Gadd and people. So the sound was what he was going for.

The demo for the song "A Single

JOBY SESSIONS



Gilmour plays his red Jedson lap steel with custom-fitted EMG H pickups on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, March 28, 2016.

> MOST THINGS, YOU KNOW, THEY'RE THE TOOLS OF MY TRADE. YOU CAN CHANGE THEM IF YOU NEED TO

Spark" is one of the extras that's on the bonus CDs, and you can hear the difference that he brought to that. With that track in particular, it took me a little while to get used to the radically different approach he took from my version of the song, but now I couldn't love it more. So those things that he brought to us went right through the process, from the beginning of the album to the end.

**Did he develop a little awe for you by the time it was finished?**

I think he did learn to love guitar solos more by the end of the album than he did at the beginning. [*laughs*]

**Let's talk about solos, then, and how you approach them. The fact that someone else was doing some of the heavy lifting in the production, did that allow you to approach your playing, especially the solos, more unconsciously?**

In guitar soloing, you want to be detached from too much brain work. You want it to flow freely, like a spirit, and find exactly the right sort of mood for playing things. For some of the solos on it, that approach worked really well. There are other songs where you've got a plan for the solo and you're gonna work in a specific way toward achieving something that you've already got in your head. Sometimes when you're working on a guitar part or a guitar solo, you can already have the idea for it in your head and you really have to work at it. And there's another approach where you empty the head and you don't think. You just let the track take you wherever your brain, your fingers and the muse take you.

**Now that the album is done, when you listen back, what are the surprises?**

I don't know that I can answer that. I mean, every time I listen to it I'm surprised anew at how much I love it and how satisfying it feels to me.

**When *Rattle That Lock* came out, you mentioned that you still had a lot of ideas left that you planned to explore further. Do any of those ideas show up on *Luck and Strange*, or is it mostly newer material?**

I'm a bit of a magpie. I have lots of pieces of music, and I pick and choose between things. Sometimes out of nowhere I'm thinking of one piece of music and then I think of another one that's completely disconnected that's at the same tempo and same sort of feel, and I think, Well, could they work together? There's another track, "Sings," for example. I wrote the basic music for it not long ago — five years ago maybe — but I didn't have a chorus. I eventually remembered a chorus I'd done many, many years ago, in '97 in fact. The chorus comes from then, from a demo I did on a minidisc recorder, with my son, who was then two, telling me to sing — "Sing daddy, sing!" — and we actually put that demo on that track. He's now nearly 30. So I'm certainly not against digging back through the hundreds of pieces of music that I've got stashed away somewhere.

**On *Luck and Strange* you include a "barn jam" version of the title track, which has Rick Wright playing on it. How did the song transform from that to what we hear on the album?**

At the end of the *On An Island* tour [*in 2006*], I thought the band was really sort of hot and playing great together. So I took the core of the band — four guys, drums, bass, guitar and keyboards — and we set up in a barn at my house and recorded for two weeks, just jams. This was the first one we did on the first morning. I just started playing that little guitar piece and they all joined in.

And then, quite a while ago — I suspect it was some time before the *Rattle That Lock* album — I wrote and recorded bridges and choruses to that backing track. And again, I puzzled myself: I don't know why in 2015 or '14 I didn't listen to that track and go, "Yeah, let's go!" But this time it demanded to be heard and worked on, so we did.

**Does it mean a lot to you to still have Rick in your musical world?**

Yeah, it's wonderful to have a track that

RANDY HOLMES/DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT VIA GETTYY IMAGES

## GILMOUR'S GALLERY OF GREATS

### 1956 Gibson Les Paul "Goldtop"

Gilmour owned a 1955 hardtail Les Paul "goldtop" (since sold at Christies for US$447,000) and played it on "Another Brick in the Wall." As for this 1956 example, "We got this because it had an original Gibson factory Bigsby on it," Phil Taylor explains. "David wanted a Bigsby one. And he didn't want a modified one, with a later-added Bigsby. He played this a lot on *On An Island*. "It's got P90s. The only humbuckers David uses are on the Gretsch Duo Jet — and although they are humbuckers, they sound more like single-coil pickups."

*— ML*

he's actually a part of. Rick's unusual playing style pours out of it and makes me sad that he's not around to take more part in what I'm doing.

**With so many different things going on in the making of this album, did you bring out different gear for the occasion?**

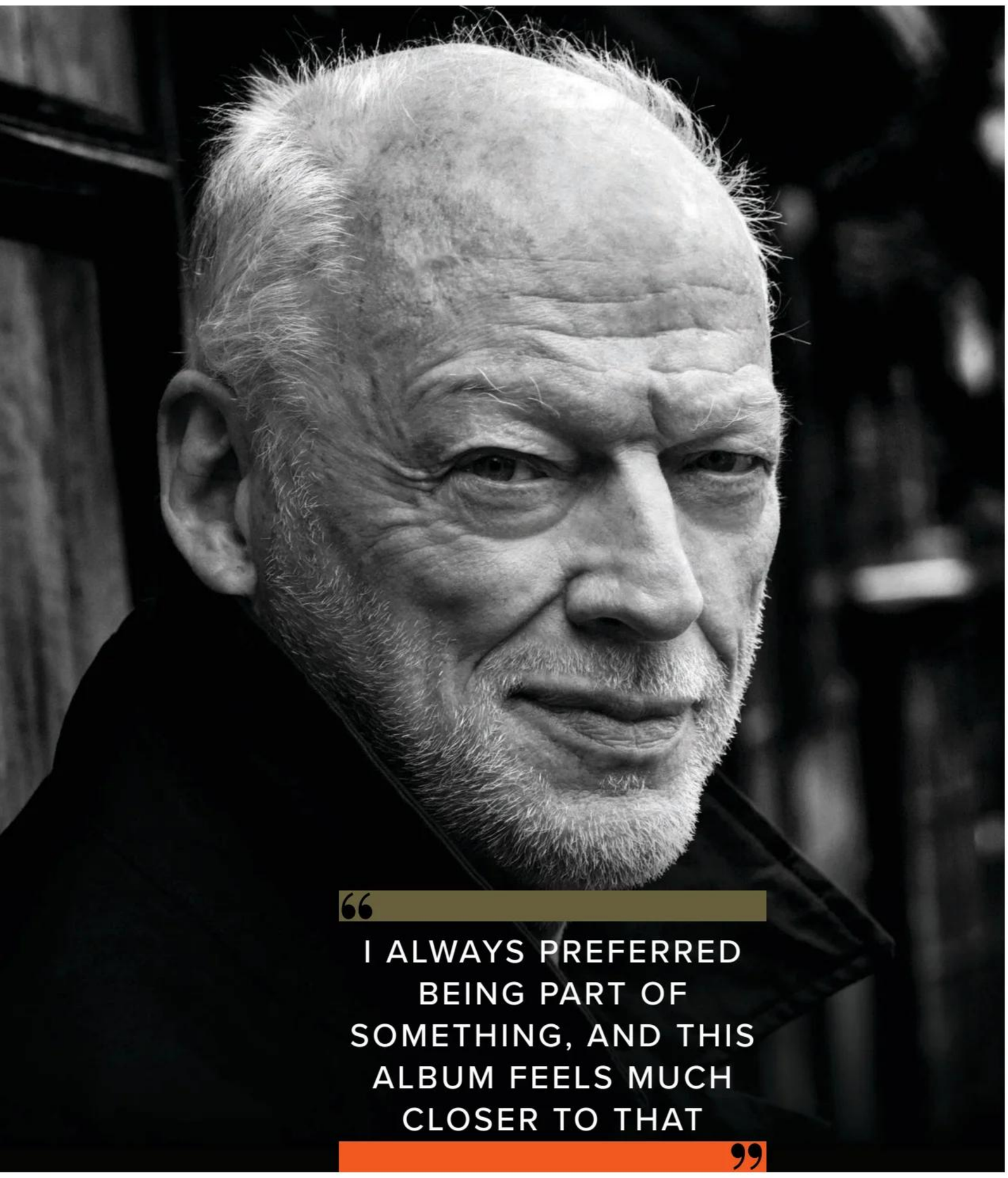
Er... probably. [*laughs*] I don't know. Phil [*Taylor*], my guitar tech, has a studio board that you can have 20 things [*plugged*] in and you stomp them in and stomp them out. But I'm not that precious about it. I know I use a lot of pedals and things all the time, but I don't have any sort of magic ones that I've got to use or that I don't use. I just fiddle until things sound right. I'm not that precious about it, really.

**The video for "Piper's Call" feels like a kind of primer to your approach. You do the solo on a Les Paul, rhythm on a Stratocaster, you're playing what looks like a [*Rickenbacker*] Frying Pan lap steel. The mix of instruments is you in a nutshell.**

Well, the song started with me strumming on a ukulele — a Martin '50s ukulele I think it is — and that's the two chords that I swap over at the beginning. There's a lot of Strat on there as well, going through my Zoom [*multi-effects*] processing box that I've used for 30 years; I can't even remember what it's called, but it's got a lower octave and a vibrato, and that's somewhere in "The Piper's Call." The other thing in there is a 12-string fretless banjo made by a guy in Turkey. I bought it there in a little shop in a coastal village. It's very tricky to play 'cause it's got 12 strings and it's fretless. It's got a very Eastern sound to it, which I love.

**You sold off a number of your guitars back in 2019. What do you still have that you'd never consider selling?**

Well, you know, I have my old beat-up Tele that I'm very fond of. I have a Gretsch Duo Jet that I love and wouldn't sell. I have a Martin D-18 from 1945 I wouldn't sell. But most things, you know, they're the tools of my trade. You can change them if you need to.




**Did having fewer "tools" have any impact on the choices you made for *Luck and Strange*?**
Not consciously, no, I don't think so. The black Strat that I now use — the Black Cat Strat, as we call it — I even forget that it's not the same one I used before on all those albums.

**Returning to *Luck and Strange*'s lyrical theme, especially on the title track, what is that idea about?**
It's the luck of the very strange moment that me and baby boomers in general — all of us who were born in the post-war period — have lived through, to have had such a fortunate moment, with so many positive ideas that we thought were moving us forward. This is a conversation that Polly and I have had and she has written about in those lyrics.

It's really a question: What's normal? Was that baby boomer era — what some people call a golden age — was it normal? Or is it these darker times — the wars and the politics, and the lunatic Trump that you've got, and the lunatic Putin over in Russia — is that the norm? That's the conversation, between which moment is the norm and what have we got to look forward to in the future?

**Writing lyrics with one's wife seems like it could be a bit... dangerous?**
[*chuckles*] Polly and I really are a team. We've been writing songs together for over 30 years now. We are very much in sync with each other in what we want to do, and this album is the result of that reaching a firm... er... better point in that process.

Polly's just a great person to work with, and having been a professional writer most of her adult life she's extremely good with words. Her influence goes as far as which pieces of music go on the album, to some extent. If there's something that she really likes and wants to write to, then obviously it stands a better chance of being on an album. She used to try very hard to imagine herself as me and to be writing things for me, but I think she's liberated herself a bit from that view and now realizes she can write for herself and it will still — because we share so many views, political or philosophical — work perfectly well for me. I'm singing them, so they come out sounding like me. I've got a lot of experience singing other people's words, but with Polly, it's working really well as a partnership, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

**What can we expect from the live shows this fall?**
Well, you know, I'm currently planning it. I haven't gotten that far in terms of the musical set list. I'm thinking more modern times than old times, but there'll be some songs from the '70s, '80s, '90s. All the way through there'll be some stuff, but I'm focusing perhaps a bit more on the new album and the newer material.

**Will we have to wait another nine years for your next album?**
My intention is to gather some of these people together and get back and start working on something else in the new year. What you want is a few things to get started with and hope it all starts flowing, and that's what I'm hoping will happen.

**Pink Floyd — dare we ask?**
I put the whole Pink Floyd thing to bed many, many years ago. I mean, it's impossible to go back there without Rick, and I wouldn't want to. It's all done. I'm very happy and satisfied with the little team I've got around me these days. We had a lot of offers to go and tour and so on and so forth, but I'm in this selfishly lucky position of having more than enough money and having had more than enough fame. I just don't need that stuff these days.

I wouldn't want anyone to get the impression that I am not 100 percent happy and satisfied with the work I've done with Pink Floyd over the years, which were productive and satisfying and joyful, mostly. It's fantastic. But my focus is different right now.

NEIL FINN

# NEVER BE THE SAME

Four decades in with Crowded House's ever-changing lineup, **Neil Finn** takes a trial-and-error approach to music — and guitar. "The mistakes make it interesting," he says.

BY GARY GRAFF

**CROWDED HOUSE'S RETURN** five years ago was certainly a welcome one. The Australian-formed group had been dormant since 2016, when it played four shows at the Sydney Opera House and was inducted into the Australian Recording Industry Association's (ARIA) Hall of Fame. So frontman and co-founder Neil Finn's announcement of resumption and a new lineup — with original bassist Nick Seymour, original producer Mitchell Froom on keyboards, and Finn's sons Liam and Elroy on guitar and drums, respectively — was greeted with great anticipation, even if the pandemic delayed the group's return to the stage.

"It does feel like it's got a really good future, because everyone is super excited," Finn enthused during the spring of 2021, when the new Crowded House released *Dreamers Are Waiting*, the band's first new album in 11 years. "We want to push it. We've got five people equally committed to exploring what it could be."

That he meant business is proven by the new *Gravity Stairs* (Lester/BMG), Crowded House's eighth studio album overall. Produced by the band with longtime engineer Steven Schram, its 11 tracks are brimming with the particular musical magic that Finn, Seymour and drummer Paul Hester — who committed suicide in 2005 at the age of 46 — began making in 1985 as the Mullanes, before Capitol Records insisted on a name change. The melodies are, as is Crowded House's wont, rich and memorable, usually by the second chorus. The soundscape is intricately orchestrated with nuanced layers of guitars, Froom's Hammond B-3 accents, and lushly executed vocal harmonies that have always been Crowded House trademarks but now boast a familial potency thanks to having three Finns onboard.

The House, of course, has a strong foundation. Construction began in New Zealand, where Finn grew up as the youngest of four children. Brother Tim's musical aspirations rubbed off on Neil, who started playing guitar at age eight, after Tim went off to boarding school in Auckland. They wound up playing together in the band Split Enz when Tim invited Neil to join during 1976 to replace co-founder Phil Judd. Neil quickly became a dominant force, sharing lead vocal duties with Tim and becoming the group's primary songwriter with tunes like the worldwide hit "I Got You."

Finn formed the Mullanes in 1984 with Split Enz drummer Hester and Seymour — the younger brother of Hunters & Collectors' Mark Seymour — as well as another guitarist, Craig Hooper, who left just before Crowded House recorded its self-titled 1986 debut album. The band was a hit out of the box — *Crowded House* was number one and six-times Platinum in Australia, and also a million-seller in America. The singles "Don't Dream It's Over" and "Something So Strong" were worldwide hits, and even though the set represented Crowded House's commercial peak, it established a standard of quality that's kept people paying attention ever since.

Along the way, Finn has guided the band through an array of sonic and stylistic adventures, deflecting expectations whether it was the artistic moodiness of 1988's sophomore release *Temple of Low Men* or the sophisticated constructs on 1991's *Woodface* (home of other enduring favorites "Weather With You" and "Fall at Your Feet") and 1993's *Together Alone*. The group took a couple

ABE MORA

of hiatuses along the way and made some membership changes — Tim Finn and Supertramp adjunct Mark Hart both logged time in the lineup, and Liam and Elroy Finn made their first appearances as guests on 2007's *Time on Earth* and served as touring members afterward.

Dad, meanwhile, has released four solo albums plus one collaboration with Liam (*Lightsleeper*, in 2018) and another with Paul Kelly (*Goin' Your Way*, five years earlier). The elder Finn and his wife, Sharon, also put together a side project called Pajama Club in which he plays drums and she plays bass in addition to their other instruments.

Crowded House's 2019 reformation was precipitated by Neil Finn's tenure with Fleetwood Mac — along with Mike Campbell from Tom Petty's Heartbreakers — during its final tour, in 2018–2019. Afterward, Finn recalls, "I was quite keen to turn around and do something creative, in the studio. I realized I had my own good band — maybe slightly more humble in terms of success, but equally profound in my mind. The day after the tour finished, Crowded House were in rehearsal in Los Angeles. It was fantastic. That energy went right into that [*rehearsal*] and making new songs."

That, of course, yielded *Dreamers Are Waiting* — which had to be finished remotely during the pandemic — and the tour that followed. And now we have *Gravity Stairs* and Neil Finn at home in New Zealand with "the little toys that are around me" — a piano, a microphone, a Mellotron and recording devices. "I bring a guitar and bass in here occasionally, and I just make things from scratch," he says. *Gravity Stairs* is only the latest of what he expects to be a lot of things that will be made by the current Crowded House, which he doesn't dream will be over any time soon.

**Was there any doubt five years ago that you were resuming Crowded House as a going concern?**

Not really. I mean, we were awash with possibility at the moment, and having done a lot of touring, we were feeling like we were just getting started. There's nothing like playing a lot of shows to make a band kick up a few gears and trust each other and just relish the prospect of what might be possible.

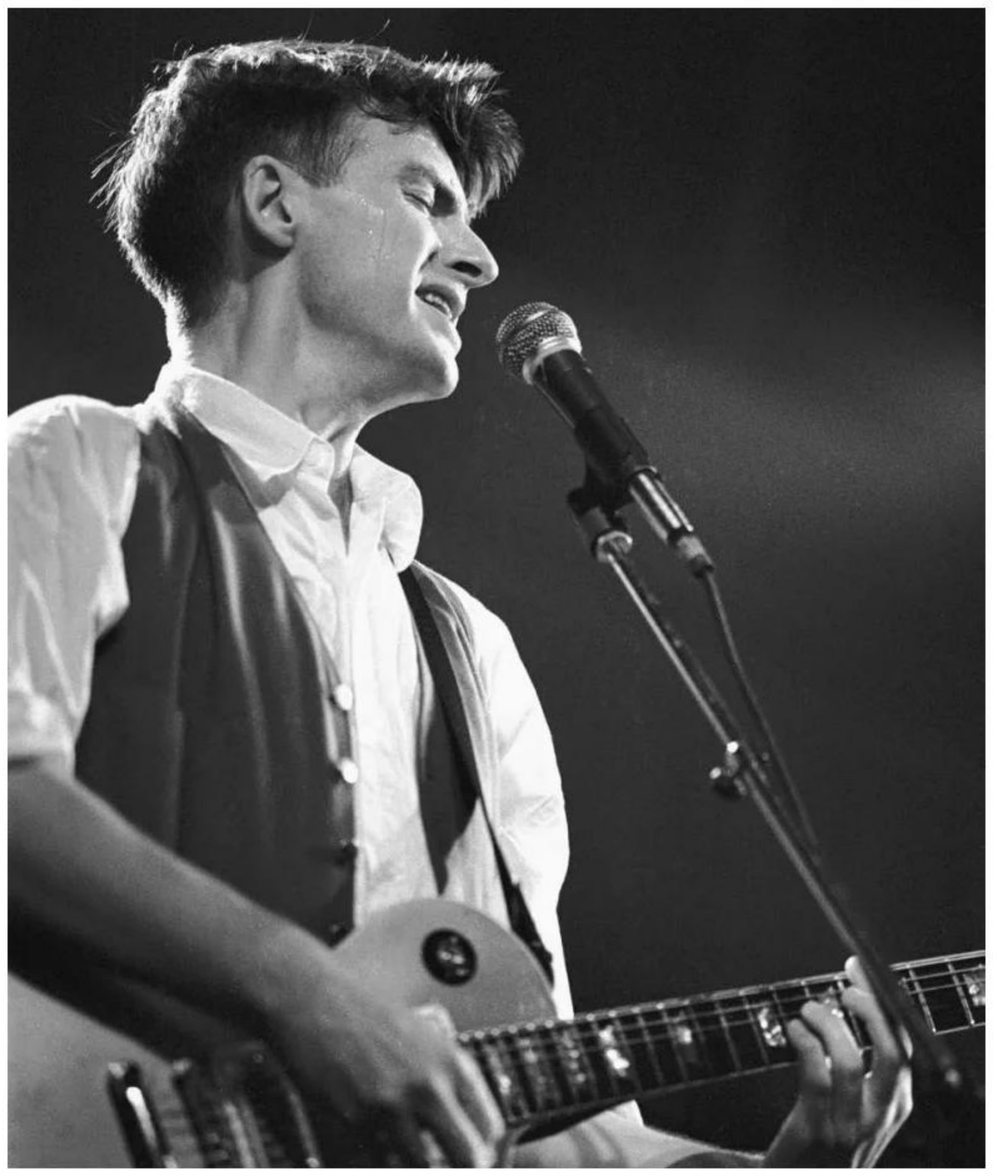
**Did it feel like yet another new era for Crowded House?**

It is, yeah. But it's got a strange feeling of also returning to the source because of the presence of Mitchell Froom. And even Liam and Elroy, who bring with them a fresh energy and vigor, they have a life experience from right at the beginning, in the tour bus, hanging out with the band, and at sound

**"WHAT BANDS BRING IS A SENSE OF DIMENSION THAT LETS THE LIGHT INTO THE ARRANGEMENT"**

AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES)

**A young Neil (right) and TIm Finn perform with Split Enz at Pier 84 in New York City, June 25, 1982.**



**ABOVE LEFT:** Finn strums an acoustic onstage in Melbourne, Australia, 1998.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Performing with Crowded House at the Paradiso in Amsterdam, July 21, 1988.

**LOWER RIGHT:** Crowded House in 1993. (from left) Paul Hester, Finn, Nick Seymour and Mark Hart, in Utrecht, Netherlands.

MARTIN PHILBEY/REDFERNS (1998); FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS (1988); PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS (1993)

checks. Liam was doing guitar changes for me at the age of three. Elroy, on the other hand, showed more interest in turning off the main power for the lights 30 seconds before we were to go onstage — he actually did that. So it's new, but familiar, and the ethos and the humor and the aesthetic of Crowded House is deeply ingrained in all of us.

**What's the greatest difference you hear in this version of the band?**

The presence of these two guys, Liam and Elroy. They've had a lot of experience as songwriters, arrangers, performers. I hear combinations in what they bring of things they've done on their own and their experience growing up with [*Crowded House*]. Elroy's drumming is really impressive, and onstage he's come into his own as a very dynamic drummer with a beautiful, steady feel as well. He learned a lot of the ways he drums from Paul Hester, both directly and indirectly.

And Liam will have ideas for subverting the sonicscape with pedals that wouldn't occur to me, but they're part of his thing. They've added quite a lot to it.

**What kind of evolution do you hear in the band from *Dreamers Are Waiting* to *Gravity Stairs*?**

That's a tricky question, because music just pops out in a very mysterious way all along, really. I think what bands bring is a sense of dimension that lets the light into the arrangement in a way you can't do on your own, 'cause anything you come up with is designed to paper over the cracks of your ideas and not expose them; whereas anything a band does is to sort of open them up to new possibilities. So you sit there and go, Okay, I wouldn't have done that, but I kinda like it, and it's letting a bit more light into my idea, so...

It's hard to point to specific tunes or a particular song, but there are some compositions Liam and Elroy have been involved with that are suggestive of a new direction. The youngsters — the comparative youngsters — are informing the process in a really cool way on songs like "Blurry Grass" and "Thirsty" and "The Howl." There's some indications of new directions there.

**So what are those things you hear on *Gravity Stairs* that feel new?**

Like I said, it's really hard to be more specific because my whole experience of music is very mysterious. I don't sit down, ever, really, and go, Okay, I'm gonna write a song today about this thing and I've got this feeling and I want it to be like an R&B song, or I want it to be like an English '60s kind of song. I never approach music like that. I always start with my headphones on — I start to build atmospheres and make things up from scratch. It's not a conscious process. I really rely on my subconscious delivering, and then I'll follow that thread, whatever it is.

**How do you tend to start that creative process?**
On piano, guitars... whatever. I often start with a drum machine or a loop or something that'll just keep me concentrating. It's like you're trying to sell yourself on the idea before you've even had it by creating an atmosphere in which to operate.

And I pore over old jams. Like, I'll jam on the piano for half an hour, or a guitar, and I'll go through and find something. It may only be for 10 seconds, but it pricks my ear up and I go, Okay, I'll separate that and put it into a new context and maybe make a loop out of it or add a few things to it and just try not to be too conscious or judgmental while I'm doing that. I'll make several demos, and at some point I'll sing over it, and at that point I'm on the trail of a song and I'll make a deeper demo.

**What on *Gravity Stairs* was drawn from things that you've had around for awhile?**
Well, they've all been in demo form at some point or another. For instance, the last track on the record, "Night Song," is actually quite an unusual song in that it slips between time signatures and things. But the whole thing came from a jam I had on a Prophet synthesizer. I don't know how to play synthesizer, but I found a sound on it that was really fun. It had overtones and was suggestive of different chords, and I just jammed over it for a half hour and actually made a 20-minute piece of music from it by adding guitars and piano before I even tried to make it into a song. And that delivered what is the closing track on the record. If you use headphones you'll hear in the background a woozy, curly little synthesizer sound that was the original impetus for the song.

**Once you have all that done, is there a methodology for how you layer in and orchestrate the guitars, which is a real hallmark of the Crowded House sound?**
It's often the next stage after I've done a jam and I've identified some things that are quite interesting or cool. My normal thing on guitar is to try and find blurriness and add that to whatever I'm jamming on, and through that to get an unusual combination of chords or something that suggests a melody. I really try and keep it in the blurry, abstract zone for as long as I can in those early stages so I allow possibilities to exist and just put myself into the ether somewhere so I can latch on to something.

I'm not really interested in defining things on guitar as much as allowing notes that ring over. I'll find a little recurring pattern that'll ring over the jam, and that'll give me a little extra atmosphere to go and try vocals. It's a textural device in some way; it becomes melodic sometimes, but the guitar allows me to switch my brain off from trying to understand the music. I like being able to not understand it.

**Does that explain why we tend to hear so many extended chords from you — the major 7ths and 9ths?** Yeah, I like

**BELOW TOP: Touring for the group's 1986 self-titled debut, Rockford, Illinois, March 14, 1987.**

**BOTTOM: The Finn Brothers launch *Everyone Is Here*, their first album in eight years, with a show in London's Regent's Park, August 8, 2004.**

PAUL NATKIN/WIREIMAGE (1987); JO HALE/GETTY IMAGES

Crowded House today. (from left) Finn, Elroy Finn, Liam Finn, Seymour and Mitchell Froom.

that. Sometimes I think, I've got to make some definitions here and actually play straight chords in order to make the songs speak, and that often comes later on. I can listen to those blurry chords forever, but it gets to a point where I don't know if I'm gonna take everybody with me. My wife sometimes comes in and she listens to what I'm doing, and you can tell it's sort of not apparent enough to her, and I take that as a sign. So then I'll strip away some of those extra notes and try to get the chords into a more understandable shape, and often that leads to a stripping down or an economy of thought that helps the listener, I think.

**"I'M NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN DEFINING THINGS ON GUITAR AS MUCH AS ALLOWING NOTES THAT RING OVER"**

**When you do find a place for a lead line, is that more organic than academic or cerebral?**

Pretty much, yeah. Playing lead guitar is a very interesting and mysterious process. I don't do many leads. I do a few onstage and they're always a little different every night, but I have a certain rough form that I might try to follow. It's just my way of doing things. In an ideal world I'd play it super melodic and be in complete control and have my brain tell me what the melody is and have my fingers obey. But usually my fingers don't obey. I rationalize that by saying the mistakes make it interesting and the lack of learning something allows lovely possibilities to exist.

But, like I say, that's just my way. I have been asked sometimes what advice I would give guitar players learning their instrument, and I have staked my rationale on the idea that to learn someone else's guitar solo at any point is probably not going to end very well, because you're gonna end up sounding like an imitation of somebody. You're better off to have it in your head, "Oh, I'm gonna slam it like Jimmy Page here," and get it wrong, and by getting it wrong your personality comes through. Personality is a hard thing to come by in music these days, and it'll be even harder once AI kicks in in a big way.

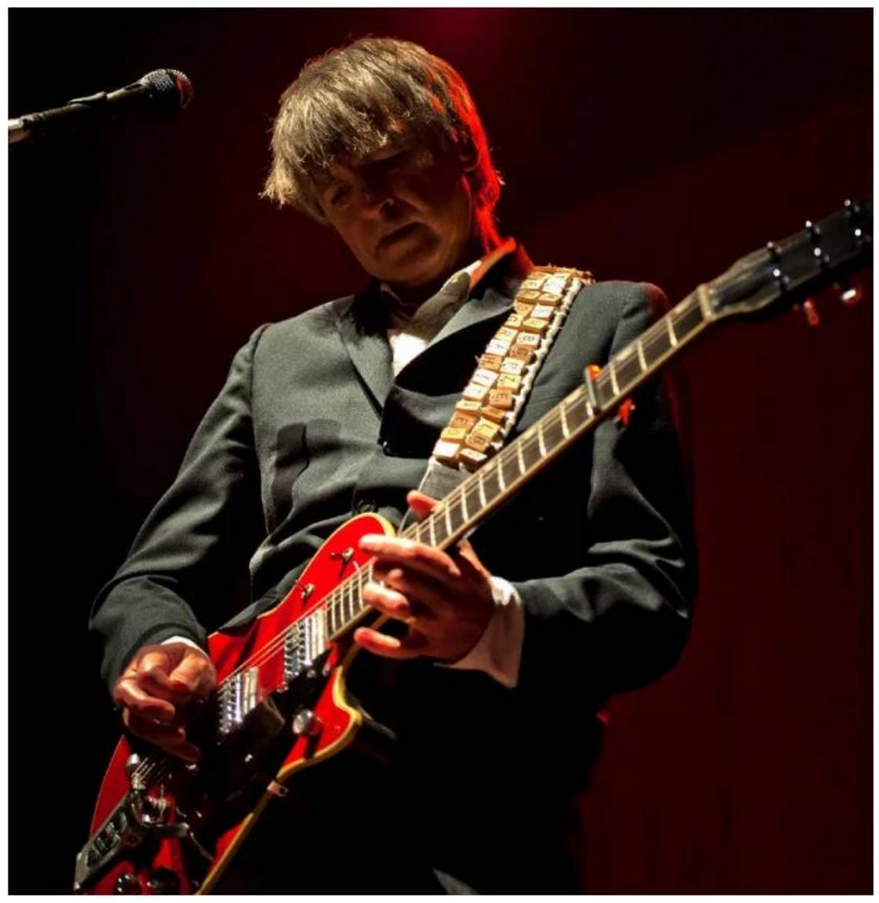
**Are there players you considered influences early on?**

I've got guitarists I would hold as absolute geniuses — Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Peter Green, among many others. There's a lot of guitar players I admire, but I've never sat down and tried to learn one of their solos. I can't even imagine doing it, but I have definitely at times gone, Oh, that sounds a bit like what Peter Green might've done, and followed that thread. And then got it wrong.

**What's changed most about you as a player now?**

I think I'm more tuned into finding accidents in the way I play. Back in those days, I was actually

MATTHEW T. ELLERY



trying to play properly and just making accidents. But now I'm more tuned into the interdimensional possibilities of making mistakes. When I'm talking about listening in jams, I'm almost usually going for a bar where I don't quite hit what I hoped to hit, and it becomes more interesting. So I guess I'm listening more — I'm finer-tuned to listening than I used to be. I can follow interesting threads more than I used to, I think.

**Who inspired your writing in any way?**

In my early years of writing songs, it was obviously the Beatles, but also Neil Young, Carole King, Elton John, James Taylor — those were the kinds of things I was listening to, and learning how to think about songs. David Bowie, very much — early *Hunky Dory*. That was when I was about 14. They were all on high rotation, those things. And Split Enz, with my brother, they were writing these magical songs I was influenced by as well.

**"THE GUITAR ALLOWS ME TO SWITCH MY BRAIN OFF FROM TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE MUSIC. I LIKE BEING ABLE TO NOT UNDERSTAND IT"**

**Do all of those sources have something in common that you recognize as part of your writing, or your philosophy of writing?**

I was a big fan of melancholy. Songs with yearning. I liked the odd upbeat rock tune as well, but I more was particularly inspired by songs that had a little melancholy attached to them, but perhaps a little redemption in the chorus. That was common to all the people I've mentioned, I think. Take for instance Carole King, "It's Too Late." It's a real upbeat song but it's a bad breakup song, so it's that kind of a counterpoint of introducing some joy or redemption into a sad topic that's always been of interest to me.

**How does that manifest in your songs now?**

Somebody said the other day that our early albums were exuberant and these [*recent albums*] feel more measured, which I sort of disagreed with. But when I thought about it later, I thought, Well, when you're 25 there's a sort of exuberance that you exude. But I much prefer the way I sound now as a singer, in terms of being able to be more nuanced about the

TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES (2007); JACO MARAIS/GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (2010)

**OPPOSITE TOP: Finn performs with his Gretsch G6131T Jet Firebird at the Grand Arena, Cape Town, South Africa, October 26, 2010, and with Seymour at Coachella, Indio, California, April 29, 2007.**

**ABOVE: Playing his Gretsch Double Jet with Mike Campbell in Fleetwood Mac, Las Vegas, September 21, 2018.**

KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR IHEARTMEDIA

things I'm delivering. I think it's a better form at the moment, but it's related to my age and the amount of experience I've had. I can't really try to be that guy that was 25 years old and bouncing around all the time.

**How is the experience of being in a band with your sons? It's one thing to be in the family business and quite another to be working in "the store."**

Well, it's a very deep connection now, musically. We obviously have a very deep connection as a family, but having done all these gigs we've learned to really trust each other and jam onstage. Initially there might have been some degree of, Oh, I better make sure I don't upset the apple cart here and let Dad do what he does and support that. But they're deeply embedded now, and it's a very complementary situation and a very collaborative situation.

But now there's a little bit of confidence to sort of take up the lead every now and again, and certainly if I start jamming and free-forming on something, everyone's just willing to jump in, and that just comes from spending hours together, just understanding the way phrasing should be or where to let notes off and all of that. The familial thing we have is just a beautiful underpinning to everything.

**How do you and Liam work together as guitarists?**

Liam as a guitar player is becoming extremely important in the sound onstage and takes the audience on some pretty epic adventures I wouldn't be able to. Even theatrically, throwing his guitar up in the air and catching it. He hasn't dropped it yet, put it that way. It's pretty exciting stuff.

**What does he do that you wouldn't?**

He's more interested in effects pedals than I am. He's got some really good effects pedals and he knows how to use them, and they are genuinely unhinged at times.

But we're quite complementary. We do some things similarly. He can be melodic, but he's got a spectacular sense of drama in his guitar playing that suddenly takes the song to a new place. I'm a little bit more of a keeping-the-groove-going and keeping-the-atmosphere-going guitar player, with an occasional flourish. So it's exciting when we're learning songs, 'cause it's sometimes wrong what he's doing, but it leads him to a really good place.

**Crowded House have a 40th anniversary coming up next year. Anything planned for that yet?**

We haven't really made any special plans, no. Anniversaries come quite often, so we should mark it in some form. But, yeah, I'll get back to you on that. If anybody's got any ideas, send 'em through.

# "THE KEY TO MY PLAYING IS LEARNING THE TECHNICAL STUFF – AND THEN FORGETTING IT!"

**The Last Dinner Party** are this year's hottest new rock band. Lead guitarist **Emily Roberts** reveals how their hit debut album was created, and how her unique approach to the instrument was shaped by jazz greats and one rock legend in particular...

**Words** Amit Sharma
**Photos** Cal McIntyre, Getty

**They formed only three years ago, but in that short space of time The Last Dinner Party have become one of the most exciting new rock acts of the modern age. Their first full-length, released back in February and titled *Prelude To Ecstasy*, ended up topping the UK album charts – becoming the first British rock debut to do so since Royal Blood burst onto the scene a decade ago. "It was very unexpected," admits lead guitarist Emily Roberts. "I never thought that would be a reality… it's crazy!"**

It only takes one listen to the album, however, to appreciate why it was such an important release for this year. Combining elements of Kate Bush, David Bowie and Queen into a sound that feels completely new and unique, they're the kind of band that seem to exist, as well as thrive, in a genre and class of their own – treading new ground with every song they've recorded to date.

They've supported The Rolling Stones and been signed up by American management giants Q Prime, who also represent Metallica, Muse and Greta Van Fleet. Following appearances at Glastonbury and the Reading/Leeds festivals, the quintet will be ending this year with a UK tour which culminates with three sold-out nights at London's Eventim Apollo, performing to 16,000 people in the capital alone.

In this interview, Emily discusses her guitar journey thus far, from a four-year course specialising in jazz to performing as Brian May in an all-female Queen tribute band, and gives us a closer look at the breathtaking tones on what will be remembered as one of the most striking albums of this year…

Photo Cal McIntyre

**Do you remember the moment you realised the guitar would be your true calling?**

I started playing really young, around the age of nine. I fell in love with it when I walked in on one of my best friends having a guitar lesson with the local teacher. They were just jamming, playing pop songs and strumming Beatles riffs on acoustics, and it made me think, 'These are the kind of guitar lessons I'd love to have!' Previously I'd had 'proper' lessons where you have to learn the notation and play upright. I guess I just wanted to have fun and play songs, so I ended up studying with the same teacher. I would say he's the reason I'm still playing. In high school I transitioned onto electric so I could play in bigger bands or jazz groups. Then I went to a specialist music school in Manchester when I was 16. That was probably the point where I realised music would be my life. I knew I had to start a band.

**So who were your earliest influences starting out?**

The first few songs I learned were *Tears In Heaven* by Eric Clapton and loads of Led Zeppelin stuff – all the classics! My original guitar hero has always been Brian May because I love being able to sing along to the solos. I didn't even learn them at that point, I was just listening and appreciating because Queen were one of my first musical loves. Then I started discovering more players through YouTube. I wasn't from a place where there was a big music community, I was surrounded by farms in the countryside, so I used the internet to find inspiration. I learned who Orianthi was, then I got into Jess Lewis, who I really looked up to.

**How much did your jazz training affect the player you'd go on to become?**

I specifically chose to study jazz guitar and it was a four-year course. So it was a big part of my life that I really enjoyed. Some of my jazz heroes were people like Emily Remler. When I discovered her, it felt like exactly how I wanted to sound like in a jazz context. Pat Martino was another big one, as was Wes Montgomery. I went through a big Pat Metheny phase. I also liked The Impossible Gentlemen and their guitarist, Mike Walker.

**Are there any things you wish you'd learned sooner?**

Definitely stuff like enclosures, because there are so many different ways you can chromatically go around a note.

**SPREAD YOUR WINGS**

"I like to absorb as many different sounds as I can," Emily says.

If you land on the important note on an important beat, it all sounds fine. That's how you can make outside notes that aren't technically in that scale feel like they belong. I would try to invent different ones that would mix starting above or below the right note, however many semitones away. There are so many different options. I feel like you can build melodic lines almost like Lego blocks. You can learn these tiny bits and put them together to make phrases that sound jazzy. Transcribing was also a big game-changer, because I didn't do any of that earlier on. I would just find the tabs online instead of using my ear. If you sit down and listen, it can make you a better player. Sometimes it's too fast to hear everything at full speed, so you can use apps to slow it down. That's how you can appreciate every aspect of how a person is playing – whether they do a

"MY GUITAR HERO IS BRIAN MAY BECAUSE I LOVE BEING ABLE TO SING ALONG TO THE SOLOS"

tiny slide up to the note, use octaves or legato for one line and then staccato for another. Wes Montgomery taught me a lot about those kinds of inflections. Even if you don't have a lot of jazz vocabulary, the way you attack notes can make them sound like jazz.

**There are some interesting effects on songs like *Caesar On A TV Screen*...**

Yeah! We used a lot of tremolo, plus a bit of phaser. We didn't use a ton of effects, there were just a few that we stuck with. I used my Fulltone OCD as the main overdrive. And I think there was some pedal called the Minotaur or Centaur that apparently cost around £5,000 (around $9,690).

**You used a real Klon Centaur?**

Yeah, that's the one. Our producer James Ford just had one lying around in the studio so we ended up using it for everything!

**There's one song, *The Feminine Urge*, that has an almost Spaghetti Western flavour, with more of that tremolo effect to create extra movement in your lines.**

There's definitely a Western feel. I think it came from Abbie [Morris], our singer. She asked if I had the effect they used on those kinds of films, because she's really into that stuff. It ended up on quite a few tracks, like this one and *Mirror*.

**We've seen a lot of footage of you with a Ernie Ball Music Man St. Vincent Goldie. Was that your main guitar?**

I would say so. I also used my 1963 Gibson ES-330. That was my main guitar all the way through uni and doing jazz gigs. It's probably the most beautiful guitar I've ever played. I'm very lucky to own it. I used it on the bridge pickup for *The Feminine Urge* and the choruses of *Caesar On A TV Screen*, along with a VI bass just to double everything up an octave lower. Our producer loved the sound of the Gibson, so we ended up using it a lot.

**What other pedals might we find on your 'board, then?**

I love the Intensive Care Audio pedals. They have a lot of character and sound really beefy and rock 'n' roll. I don't actually remember which tremolo we used on the record, sorry! It was something in the studio that's different to what I use live. For our shows, I use a Line 6 Helix with the Intensive Care pedals and my OCD plugged into the effects loop of my Fender Hot Rod. On the album, the amp was something similar like a Fender Deluxe Reverb.

**The solo in *Nothing Matters* feels like the big guitar hero moment of the record.**

There was another solo I used to play before we went into the studio. Then we were recording the album and I was trying to get it down. It sounded fine but it wasn't quite giving the song the lift it needed, it sounded too old-school. I asked myself how I could make it more modern and exciting, to fit the song better. So I went away and started jamming out ideas over Christmas. I would improvise for ages and stack up different takes on Logic. I ended up picking the bits I liked best and strung them together in a way that made sense. I took a few options to my parents and they felt one stood out, so that's what I chose. It was nice to have a fast run in there, given how it works against the slow bits. I like how it goes up with a bend and then a tap, like a climax within the phrase. It's a mishmash of styles… it even gets a bit funky towards the end!

**You have many strengths as a player. *On Your Side* has a completely different approach – what you play is more impressionistic, more Jonny Greenwood than Brian May in how you embrace ambience and atmosphere over melodic contour...**

I never really think about writing solos in a theoretical way, apart from maybe on *Portrait Of A Dead Girl*. It's usually like, I've got what key or scale under my fingers, and then I use my ear to improvise around it. I prefer to find the right energy or vibe myself, without thinking too much.

**Interestingly, your leads in *Portrait Of A Dead Girl* have a David Gilmour kind of feel. Is he someone you've ever listened to?**

Not really! I think it's a complete coincidence. Quite a few people have said that to me about the solo, which is really nice. I like his playing, but I just haven't listened to loads of it or tried transcribing any of it. Maybe it comes from that textural perspective. The song

## KILLER QUEEN!

### Emily pays tribute to Brian May – in more ways that one

Having grown up as a fan of Queen, Emily felt it was a no-brainer to accept the role of Brian May in a Queen tribute act, with plans to perform on cruises and beyond. And while she performed with them once before the pandemic put an end to their plans, eventually leading her to The Last Dinner Party, it was an experience that she learned from greatly.

"I was around 21 or 22 years old when someone messaged me on Facebook about being Brian May in that band," she explains. "I thought, 'Yeah, why not?' I loved Queen and knew it would be fun to learn all the solos and parts. Then the pandemic happened. We only did one gig in the end, at a Queen convention near Hull. It went great. That probably ended up influencing my rock playing more than anything else, because I spent an entire summer solidly trying to get inside Brian's playing, hearing all the little details. My favourite song to play was *Hammer To Fall*. That was always fun! *Don't Stop Me Now* has a really great solo. Then there's *We Will Rock You*, *The Show Must Go On*... there are so many. *A Kind Of Magic* was great, especially for those fast, staccato licks. I loved it all, to be honest."

May's influences can be heard all over *Prelude To Ecstasy*, from the soaring modal leads on tracks like *Nothing Matters* to a lot of the single-note riff ideas in place of the usual chordal approach favoured by many a rock band. It's all about the part that fits, rather than the part that's loudest...

"The single-note thing has massively influenced the way I write parts in The Last Dinner Party," she continues. "Listen to what I play on *Portrait Of A Dead Girl* or *Sinner* – it's all single-note ideas, which comes from Brian. I found out he used a sixpence and my Dad has a collection of old coins, so I asked him for the right one with the serrated edge. I ended up using that for while, which was a bit of a challenge!"

sets it up with this Pink Floyd-y outro with lots of vocals. It has that sound anyway, so yeah… I just wanted to do something that soared over the top in a euphoric way, keeping to the texture of it all. The jazz came in handy there, because the harmony kinda changes and it's a tricky one to follow!

**_Gjuha_ is one of the more exotic-sounding tracks, with a flamenco-ish Harmonic Minor meets Phrygian Dominant hybrid scale, using both minor and major thirds and sevenths in the same key.**

It wasn't a conscious decision to try and invent our own scale! The original idea was to do something inspired by Jeff Buckley's *Corpus Christi Carol*, a vocal aria in the middle of an album. Our keyboard player Aurora's family are from Kosovo, so she wanted to write something in Albanian. I'm not sure how it ended up sounding like world music, but we added mandolin and it sounded even more like that.

**The track _Sinner_ has a mixture of guitar heroics, from your leads duelling with the layered vocals to some more Brian May-esque staccato leads.**

I was going for a St. Vincent kind of vibe originally. There's a song on her album *Actor* called *Marrow*, which has this guitar line where she bends a note for ages and then goes to another note. It's quite discordant or atonal-sounding. I wanted a powerful guitar line to duet with the vocals. I probably wasn't expecting it to become such a big feature within the song. I was just messing around improvising, again doing that thing on Logic where you go round and round a loop, trying to come up with ideas. I think that motif came on my third go, then we improvised around it using jazzy ideas.

**_My Lady Of Mercy_ has some beautiful clean tones, with some clever usage of effects.**

The inspiration behind that song was Nine Inch Nails for the choruses, but with a choir-like vocal over the top. The song is about contrast because the clean verses feel sprightly, then we went for a heavy fuzz sound for the choruses. It was tempting to use more distortion in the breakdown but our producer told us to keep it chill, otherwise it could have sounded too metal! To be honest, a lot of the tones on this album came out cleaner than I expected.

**Given how multifaceted you are as a player, what do you think would be the best way of describing your approach to composing?**

I think learning the technical stuff and then forgetting it is key to my playing. I like to absorb as many different sounds as I can. That's what got me here. I like the technical aspect of playing, but there's more to me than that. I've had such a variety of teachers. When I was doing more session guitar stuff, I started having lessons with Phil Short who plays for Westlife. He taught me about wider vibrato and that whole Van Halen kind of vibe. Having such different teachers is probably why I ended up sounding so eclectic. Maybe we'll have a bit more shred on the next album, who knows?

***The Last Dinner Party's* Prelude to Ecstasy *is out now through Island.***

**24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE**
Last Dinner Party (from left): Lizzie Mayland, Emily Roberts, Abigail Morris, Georgia Davies and Aurora Nischevi

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Photo Per Ole Hagen/Getty

# “I’M ALWAYS LOOKING TO DO SOMETHING MUSICALLY DIFFERENT AND UNEXPECTED”

**Words** Andrew Daly

**Tommy Emmanuel** is arguably the most revered acoustic guitarist of them all. Here, he presents his guide to playing harmonics, alternating basslines and more

**There’s no denying that when it comes to acoustic guitar, Tommy Emmanuel is a master. And yet, at its core, his approach is simple. “I never think about technology,” he says. “All I’m looking for is good sound. Just give me one great sound, and I’m off. That’s all I’m looking for.”**

Tommy has learned a thing or three after nearly 30 solo albums, tons of guest spots and more accolades than you can shake a stick at. He’s a virtuoso of the highest order, but the beautiful thing is that he’s never stopped learning. What’s more, he revels in teaching.

“If you’re just picking up the guitar,” he says, “you better learn some chords, song structure, and as many songs as possible. You’ve got to learn how songs are constructed, how to count the beat, and when to change. Learn how to get that all together. People approach me and say, ‘I want to play *Lady Madonna* like you. How?’ I say, ‘How long have you been playing?’ They say, ‘Two years.’ And I’ll say, ‘Forget it!’”

Tommy reiterates that if you want to be the best, first, you’ve got to get down to basics – and never forget them. “It’s another world doing all the harder stuff,” he says. “So you’ve got to learn to do it all properly. Learn why the melody works against chords. Figure out how to make that feel like a singer. But all that comes with experience and time. I encourage young people to use tabs as a roadmap, but it all comes down to learning song structures, chords, and, most importantly, things you can work on with other people!”

**So, what’s the first step to getting it right – specifically, your style of cascading harmonies?**

If you want to get it right, you’ve got to break everything down into its slowest and easiest way and then work it up. There’s a lot of variations of how to use harmonics in music, but I’d say the best songs to showcase my Chet Atkins style of cascading harmonics would be songs like *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, *Michelle*, or *Secret Love* – songs that I’ve specifically arranged so they can be all around that technique.

**Break down that technique.**

I play the harmonic with my thumb, while my index finger is just barely touching the string up the octave. So I’m getting the harmonics up the octave and using my thumb to pluck the string. And then, if you look at my right hand, my middle finger is my balancing point. It’s like the central point of my hand, and I use that as my balance point.

**And then there’s the open notes you often have going on...**

Right. So then, with my third finger, I play the open notes. I make the harmonic and the open note kind of melt together. When you do it right, the ear can’t really tell which one is which until you hear the sound of the harmonic being picked. So I can get all kinds of sounds using that particular technique.

**So that all comes from things you picked up from Chet Atkins and Lenny Breau and then made your own? That's important, as a lot of people are nervous about copying their influences, but sometimes, it's not copying but a starting point. But you use other types of harmonics, like juxtaposing chiming chords.**

It comes directly from Chet Atkins and Lenny Breau. And then, there's other kinds of harmonics, where I might play a passage, or just hit a chord in the middle of a passage with the palm of my hand. I'll barely touch the string with my palm and hold the chord so the chord chimes up the octave.

**It's reminiscent of certain lap steel techniques.**

It actually comes from the Hawaiian technique of playing lap steel! When I was a kid, I learned all that because my mother played Hawaiian steel, and my sister played and she would play the melody. Then she would take a break, like the second time around, and quote the melody up the octave, using her palm to strike the harmonics.

**This is important for young players to know because it shows that there's not just one way to approach harmonics.**

Exactly. So, that's the couple of techniques that I use, and, of course, there are harmonics all over the guitar. Open harmonics, anyway. You've got to spend time looking for them and remembering exactly where they are so you can hit it dead in the middle of the passage.

**Another integral part of what you do is your use of alternating basslines. What's your crash course as far as that goes?**

The best thing to get you going on that is finding the song that needs a moving bass part. I remember when I first heard Chet Atkins playing *A Taste of Honey*, which is a song that The Beatles recorded. You know what? I'm going to put you on speaker and play it for you. Are you ready?

**Oh, absolutely. Let's hear it!**

Here's how the song goes [Tommy picks up his acoustic guitar and demonstrates how to play it]. In order to make that melody and make the bass move, Chet created this thing, and it's kind of what a bass player would play.

**So, how did you learn to make the moving bassline and that melody work together? It's almost like two people are playing, but it's just you.**

In order for me to work out how to play that moving bassline and have the melody, I had to learn everything at once. The best part about moving bass parts is they just keep the song moving along. So it's not necessarily about the technique, but finding the right songs that really suit that and need it.

**This is a good example of how sometimes the best technique applied to guitar has nothing to do with technique but incredible love and desire for the instrument. With that in mind, what's your best advice for those who are at the point of arranging songs?**

I'm a producer and arranger. I've always got those hats on. I'm not just a player, I'm everything, and I'm looking at it from every angle. Everything must satisfy me. When I find a song that needs the right kind of approach, I make sure that everything is covered and that the melody has a life of its own.

**Many people find it challenging to shift gears, step outside the music they've written, and look at it objectively. Do you find that to be the case?**

"LEARNING HARMONICS IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO DO REALLY SLOWLY - BECAUSE WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR IS CLARITY"

Photos Olly Curtis

There's a lot of things that a producer will do. He'll take a song, listen to the song, and say, 'Okay, instead of that chord, let's make it more interesting. Let's surprise the listener. When we hit that note, let's make it an unresolved chord and resolve it in the next bar'.

**So it's about creating interest through the unexpected.**

Right, it's unexpected. And then, there's little things that I've learned along the way a long time ago. I'm always looking for the element of surprise and the chance to do something musically different and unexpected. There are enough people out there just playing overs, trying to play it exactly like the record. I tend to do the opposite.

**That's another important point. Many players are fearful of altering something established or beloved. But sometimes, that's necessary.**

I tend to take a song, even if it's iconic, like a Beatles song, and I'm always true to the melody but I try to do something unique with it. That makes it sound like me, even if it's a Paul McCartney or John Lennon song. I always have a deep respect for the song, but sometimes, like John Lennon's *Imagine*, I try to interpret the song in the best way I can. But there are little musical bits along the way that are part of that arranger and producer's skillset I have.

**Getting stuck is another big part of playing guitar that isn't mentioned enough. No matter how long you play, it's inevitable.**

Oh, I'm always stuck! Just this morning, I was playing my very latest composition, and part of me wants to change it already, and I only wrote it a couple days ago! So I started messing with it, but I'm always waiting for inspiration. I'm always waiting for something to happen that will cause me to compose and have great ideas that I'm excited about.

**Do you have any tried-and-true tricks for getting out of a rut when you do get stuck?**

You know, it's not something you clock on and off. Sometimes I get the best ideas at the weirdest times, and I don't always have a guitar close by. So it's not something you can manufacture. I'm always looking for something to give me an idea. Just give me one idea – I'll run with it, you know?

**And sometimes those ideas come from unexpected places.**

Sometimes I get them from watching a movie or meeting somebody. Or maybe I'll get some idea one day, and it turns into a song, like a song of mine called *Drivetime*. I wrote that song a long time ago, and I had been seeing Stevie Wonder live, and when I got home, I got my guitar and started playing this little phrase. It's C# minor, and I just walked around the house playing that for hours. I really, really loved it, and then, I thought, 'Well, okay, that's the foundation. Now, I've got to tell a story. Where am I gonna go?'

**That piggybacks onto what you were saying before about embracing the unexpected.**

Right. So, from that one idea, came this song, some of the first bridge, and then, the second goes around again, and when you least expect it, it goes into a second bridge, which is different. I put that all together from just one good idea. But then, my arranging and producing skills take over, making the whole thing interesting and going somewhere unpredictable.

**You mentioned earlier that you've got a new composition and are already tweaking it. For many guitarists, overthinking is a problem, but finding a balance between the blueprint and the unpredictable is significant.**

A good example of that is my song *Angelina*. The harmonic ending of that song – when I first wrote the song, that was the introduction. But when I got to the studio to record, it all my instincts told me, 'Don't give away the harmonic ending at the start'. So, I came up with the introduction that we know to *Angelina* right there on the spot.

**Should players learn to trust their instincts?**

I think so. In that instance, it seemed to work. I recorded it, and everybody loved it. I brought the harmonic ending in at the beginning instead of giving it away too early. If you're an enthusiastic and excited composer, you'll know when you're onto something good. But eventually, when you record that's when you have to say, 'Okay, now we get serious about every little millisecond of this song'.

**As far as gear goes, there's so much of it out there. It's hard to know what's worth one's time. How do you navigate that?**

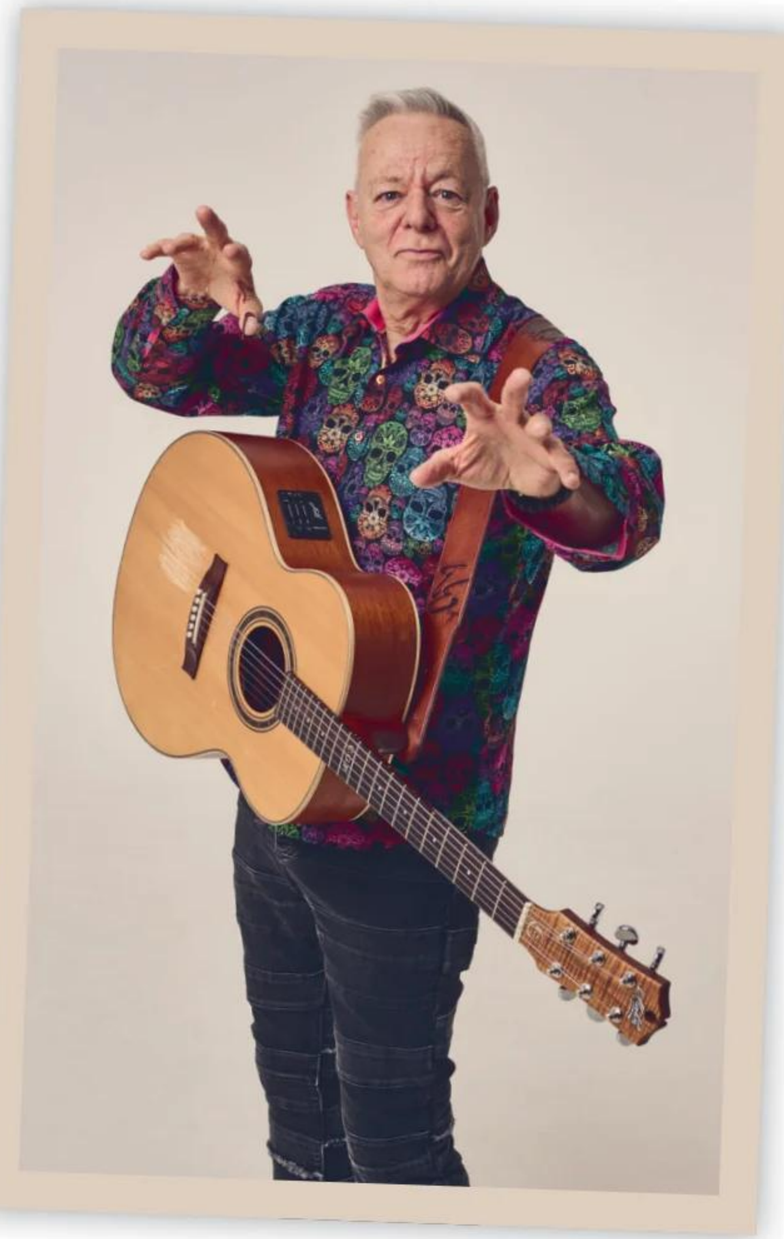
When I play a show, I have one pedal on stage. It's a tuner. That's it! I have no loopers, no chorus, no delays – all that is done for me by the sound person. The most important thing for me is good sound, and that's it. But when I go into the studio, I'm in heaven, and I'll tell you why – I wear headphones! I sit in front of microphones and play acoustically, and I can get the engineer to give me whatever I need into the headphones.

**So it's less about new gear and tech and more about pure sound?**

Right. We'll keep working on it until we get the mix and we monitor it. The sound in the headphones causes me to go deeper into my abilities and creative ideas. But when I'm on stage, it's a completely different beast – I'm out there to totally knock people's socks off. I'm there to give them the best time of their lives and to play the best I can. But when I'm in the studio, it's about getting the feeling right, diving into the song, and capturing a performance. My best advice is that if you can't get it in one or two takes, there's something wrong.

**And in terms of live performance, what's the best advice you can give?**

You have to have the right songs. It has to be something good. You want to play something with feeling that I can pour myself into, have fun with, and surprise an audience with. And you have to have a repertoire of different feelings, sounds and styles. You might come out guns blazing, and you're taking the audience with you, and when you finish that, you might go into something more traditional. It's about putting a smile on their faces and making them forget about everything. It's all about the songs. If you have the songs, then your instrument can help you be the painter.



"WHEN I'M ON STAGE, I'M OUT THERE TO TOTALLY KNOCK PEOPLE'S SOCKS OFF!"

# CERTIFIED GREATNESS

Fingerstyle master **Tommy Emmanuel** combines unique musical instincts and breathtaking technique to become an acoustic tour de force.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

**IN HIS BOOK,** *Outliers: The Story of Success*, author Malcolm Gladwell asserts that at least 10,000 hours of practice are required to excel at any given skill. If that's indeed the case, Australian guitar maestro Tommy Emmanuel certainly has a lot more than that under his belt. One of only five guitarists to be bestowed the title "Certified Guitar Player" by the legendary Chet Atkins — a "C.G.P." inlay marks the 12th fret of his signature TE series Maton guitars — Emmanuel is a master of precision, control, touch and tone, with a signature style honed by decades of writing and interpreting a vast array of songs, while relentlessly refining his technique.

It would be a daunting task to try to cover the totality of Emmanuel's style in one lesson, as he is both a master fingerpicker and flatpicker. So, here, we'll be exploring just some of the guitarist's favorite fingerstyle approaches and techniques. Lucky for us, one of New York City's finest fingerstylists, Gilber Gilmore (Instagram: @gilber_gilmore, YouTube: @1972f1972,), has graciously joined us once again to create videos to accompany all of this lesson's examples, which you'll find at the website of our sibling magazine guitarplayer.com.

As you'll see in these musical examples, fingerstyle guitar music is often notated with *opposite stemming*, also known as *divisi* notation, which allows two independent melodic or harmonic "voices" to be clearly shown and visualized for the reader. Up-stemmed notes are generally picked with the fingers, and down-stemmed notes are most often picked with the thumb. In addition, much the same way that fret-hand fingers are indicated with numbers, pick-hand

FUTURE

fingers are traditionally assigned a letter, based on the Spanish words for the various digits: *p* (thumb), *i* (index), *m* (middle) and *a* (ring).

Note that Emmanuel most often uses a thumbpick, but it's optional here, as is his use of the fret-hand thumb to play certain notes on the 6th string, indicated in the examples by the abbreviation "Th." Okay, now we're ready to discover just what makes this guitar genius tick.

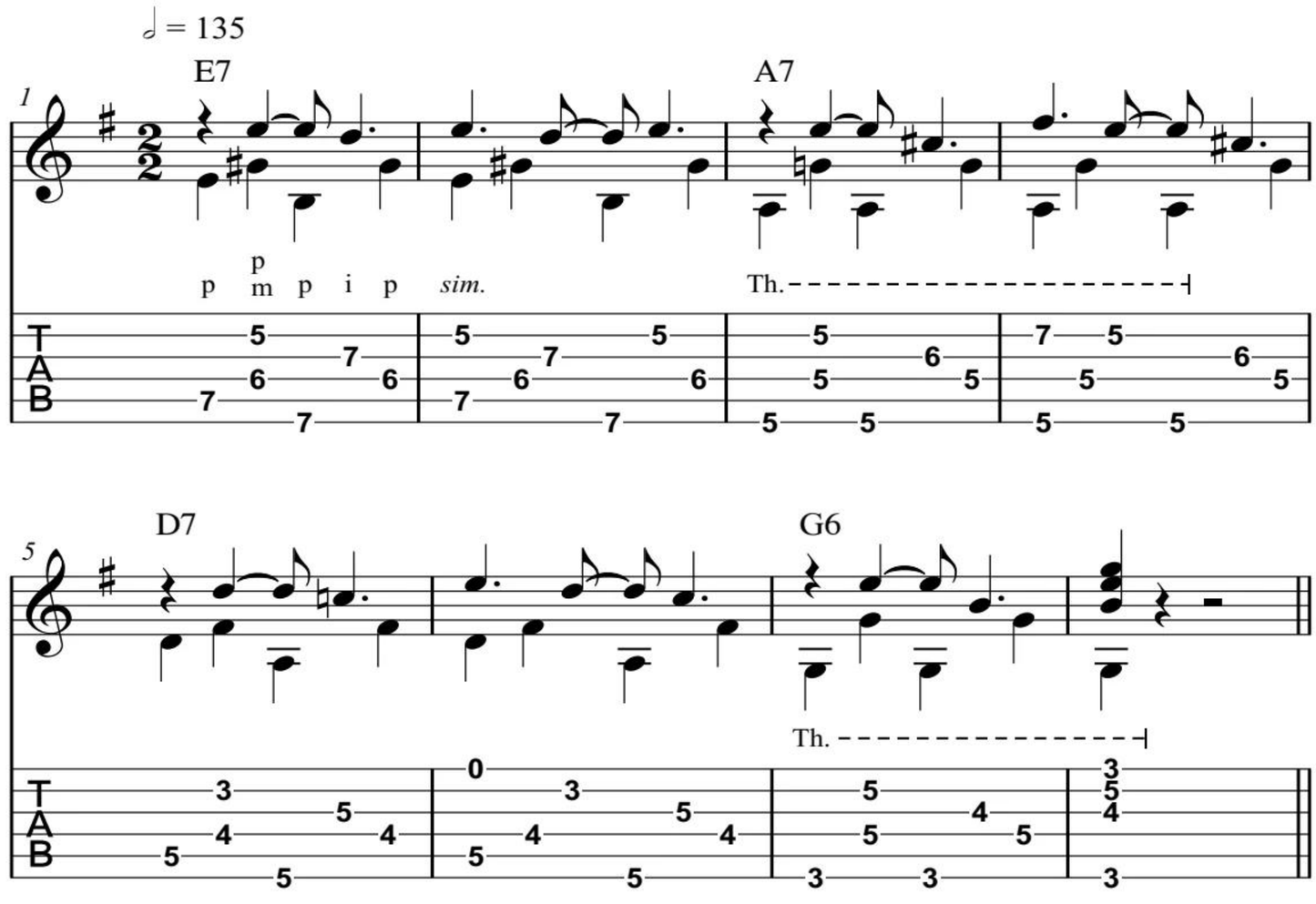
One of the foundational techniques of Emmanuel's style is *Travis picking*, named for Merle Travis, the iconic country and western singer, songwriter and guitarist. Its hallmark feature is the use of alternating bass notes on different strings, picked with the thumb, with a fairly consistent palm mute applied to the low E, A and D strings to prevent the bass notes from ringing, or "bleeding," into each other and keep the bass notes sounding tight and punchy while notes on the higher strings are allowed to ring. When Travis picking, you'll find that lightly palm muting the bass strings will additionally help you feel them more easily and better control your fingerpicking accuracy.

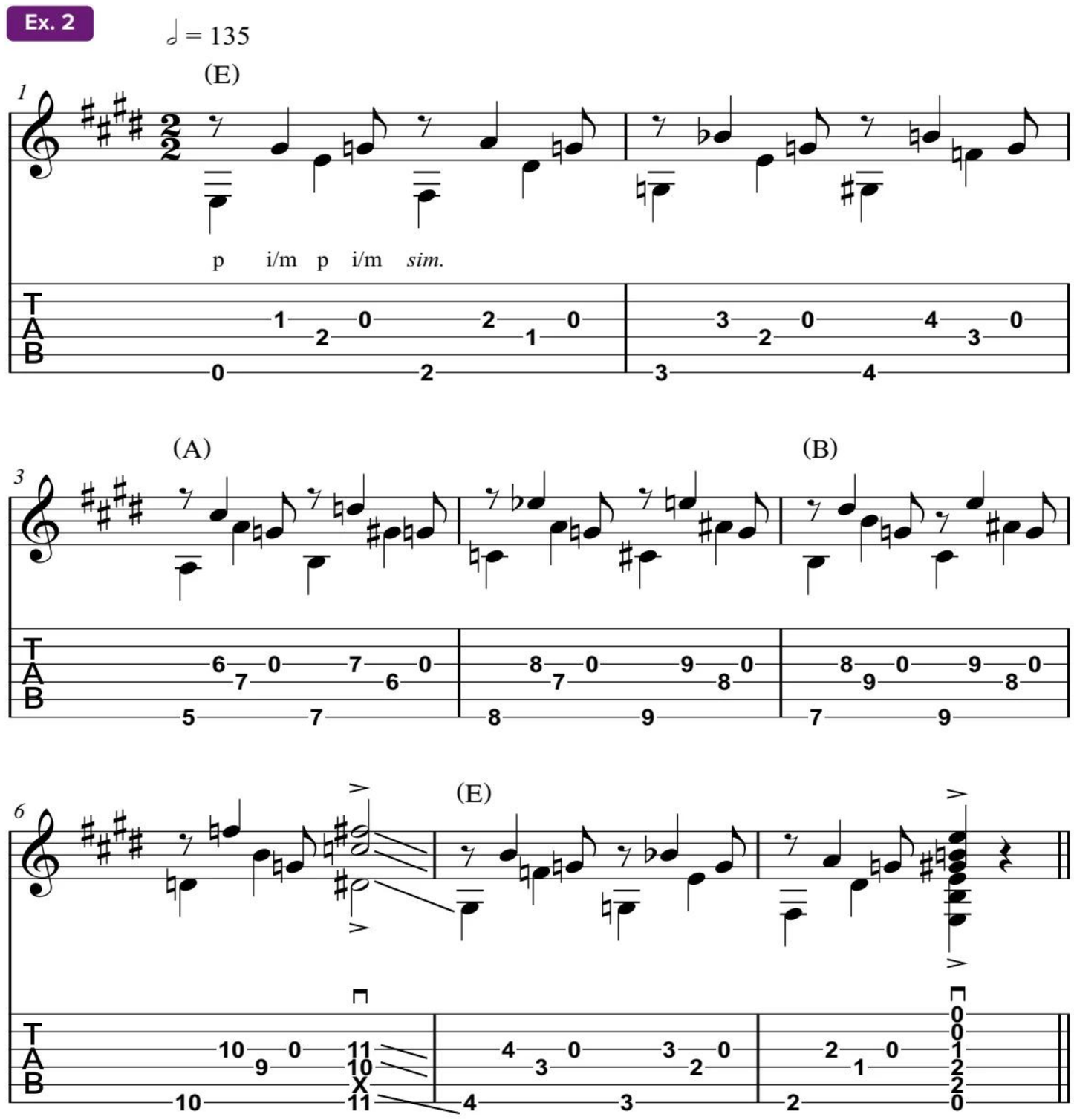
**Ex. 1** is inspired by Travis' classic "Cannonball Rag," which appears as part of a medley on Emmanuel's 2006 release *The Mystery*. To get a feel for Travis picking, start by playing only the thumbpicked notes while holding each of the full chord forms. Once you feel comfortable doing this, add the up-stemmed notes (picked with the fingers). Keep in mind that one of the "secrets" to TE's success has been repetition, taking the time to work out complex movements slowly, and with a metronome, before bringing them up to tempo. How slow? A good rule of thumb is to start playing something as slow as it takes to work your way through, while playing with good time and no mistakes, at least twice. This gives your brain time to absorb all the nuanced movements involving both hands.

**MORE ONLINE!**

For video of this lesson, go to **guitarplayer.com/nov24-lesson**

**Ex. 1** All examples performed fingerstyle on acoustic guitar

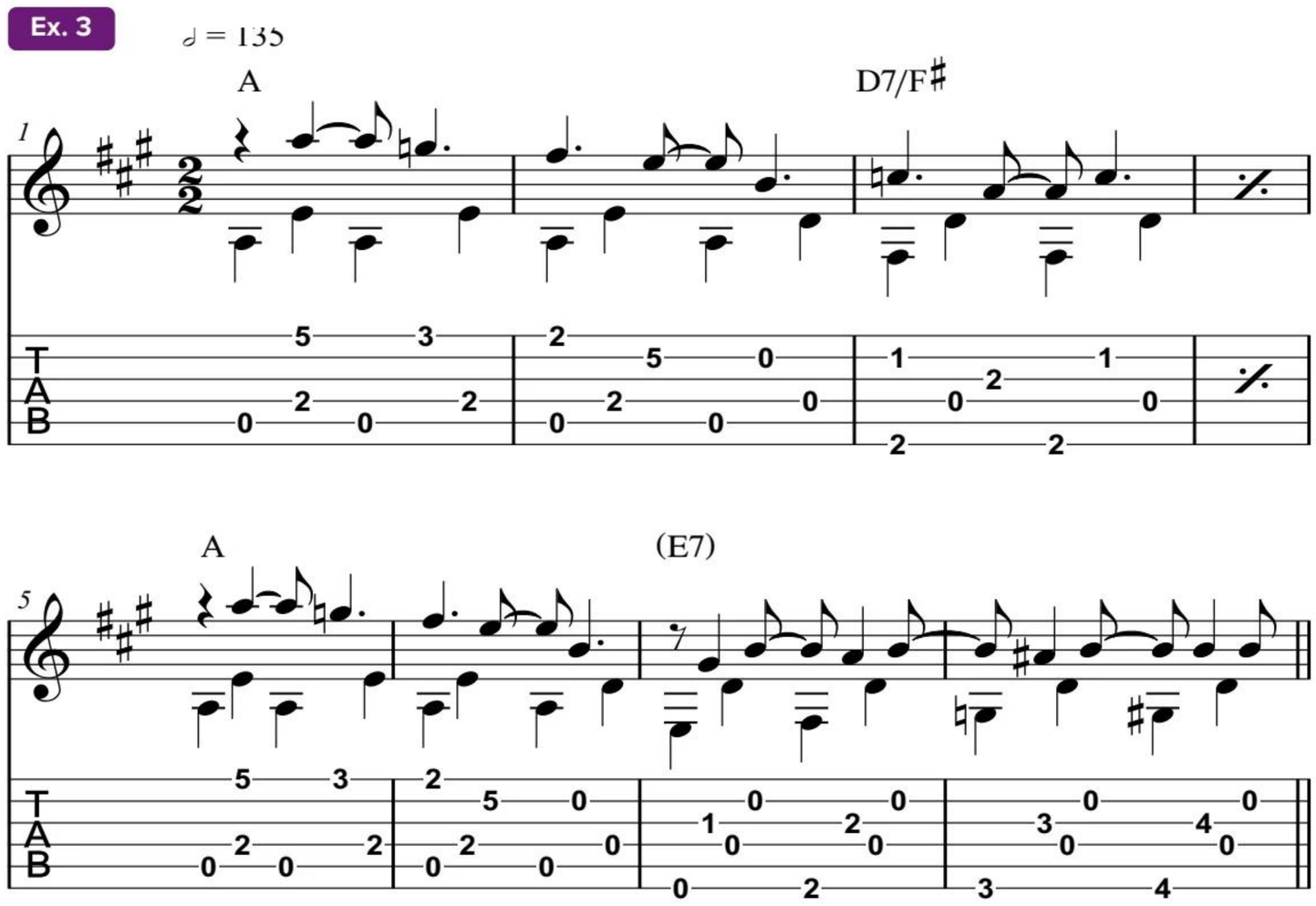


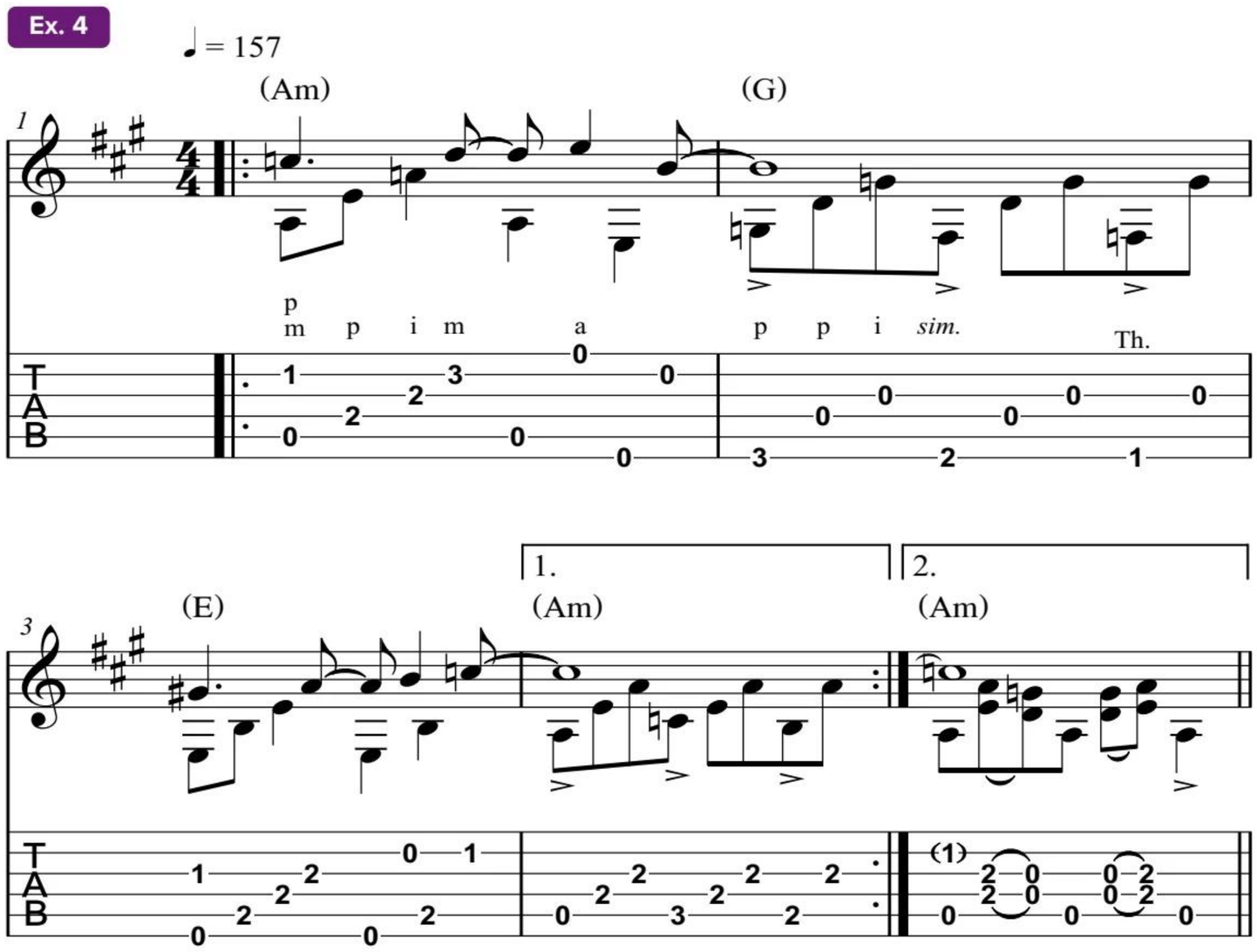

**Ex. 2**

**Ex. 2** demonstrates a nifty use of Travis picking to scamper up and down the neck. Notice there's an open G note between each chord form, allowing for more seamless position shifts, while adding a bit of a country "chicken pickin'" sound. The focus here is mainly on your pick-hand thumb, as your middle finger handles most of the remaining notes, which are generally found on the 3rd string. There are two spots, however, beat 3 of bar 6 and the very last chord, where TE would likely strum with his thumbpick, so as to accentuate these beats. (Notice the accent marks, indicating to play these beats a bit louder for emphasis.) No problem if you don't have a thumbpick; strumming with the backs of your fingernails will produce a similar bite.

**Ex. 3** is reminiscent of "Son of a Gun," from 2004's *Endless Road*. Written for Travis' son, Thomas Bresch, it has Emmanuel in full freight train mode. You won't find much new material technique-wise, but it does require working the different phrases up to a breakneck speed. To do this, repeat each two-bar phrase multiple times until you get the hang of it; then work on connecting them. Breaking music down into more digestible chunks is another effective way to learn parts more quickly.

Next up, **Ex. 4** is along the lines of classical guitarist and composer Mason Williams' "Classical Gas," which Emmanuel often performs. While it has some elements of Travis picking, there's a different interplay between the melody and accompaniment. Welcome to the art of arranging — creating a unique rendition of a song by melding the melody and accompaniment in a compelling way. This is at the heart of what Tommy has dedicated himself to, as he has forged his signature style by combining his adventurous musical instincts with a vast arsenal of blistering techniques. Notice how, in bars 2 and 4, the whole-note melody leaves space for the accompaniment to take over, allowing for descending bass lines to mingle with higher, droning notes. In similar fashion, Bar 5 introduces hammer/pull double-stops, giving our ears something new and unexpected.

Ex. 3




Ex. 4

Emmanuel introduces all kinds of ingenious techniques into his arrangements to pique the listener's interest. One example is his use of *banjo rolls*, via fingerpicking patterns more commonly associated with banjo players. **Ex. 5** is a great example; after getting it under your fingers, try playing it as an intro to Ex. 3 to get a sense of how TE uses different techniques to create musical drama in his arrangements and propel a song forward.

Another way the guitarist keeps things interesting is by employing lightning-quick single-note licks. **Ex. 6** uses clever open-string pull-offs to again tap into chicken pickin's bouncy quality. It's one of those licks that sounds intimidating, but in actuality is easier to play than it sounds. As indicated, you'll need only your pick-hand thumb and middle finger to create the repeating pattern, and note how the cagey pull-offs create darting, angular lines that really keep things moving.

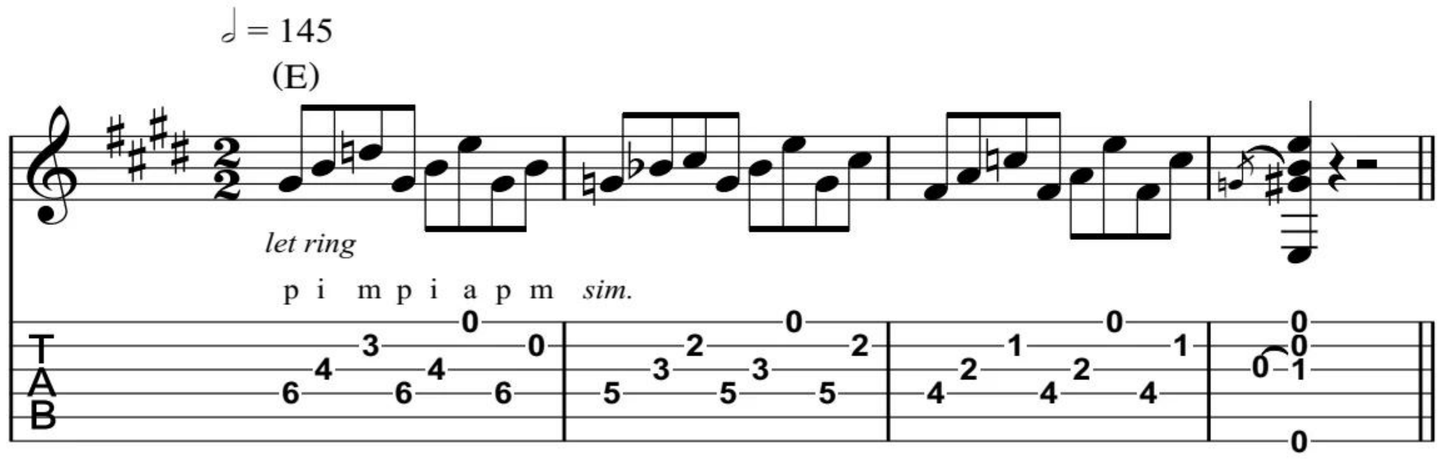
**Ex. 7** presents us with a different sort of challenge. Inspired by Tommy

Emmanuel's arrangement of the Beatles' "Day Tripper," part of his sensational "Beatles Medley," from 2005's *Live One*, it requires us to keep a steady quarter-note rhythm on top of a melodic bass riff. But before exploring this aspect of the figure, let's take a moment to notice how the first two bars have virtually no down-stemmed (thumb-picked) notes. This is a clever arranging technique to keep in your bag of tricks, as it creates a tangible anticipation, setting the stage for a dramatic entrance by the bass line. Listening to some of Emmanuel's arrangements, it quickly becomes apparent that they're chock-full of these musical signposts, keeping us on our toes. Note the staccato dots appearing above each beat, indicating to play these notes short. This is accomplished here by lightly resting your pick-hand fingers on the strings quickly after sounding the notes. Things really get interesting during the last two beats of bars 3 and 4, when your pick-hand finger independence and overall rhythmic equilibrium are both put to the test, as eighth-note bass lines are played over the static quarter-note pulse.

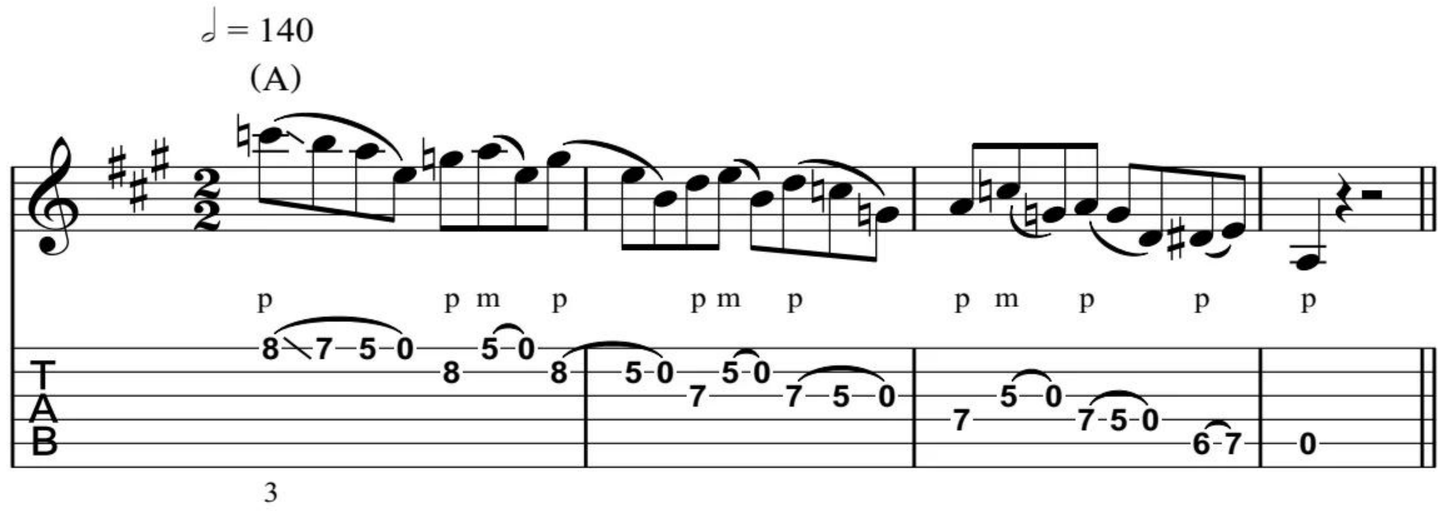
It's crucial to note that creating a compelling arrangement does not necessarily mean it has to be a complex one. Emmanuel has said that one of his main focal points when arranging is a song's melody and how best to interpret and convey it on guitar, both from a rhythmic standpoint and in terms of employing the guitar's articulation nuances, such as bends, finger slides and vibrato. A great way to do this is to actually sing the melody, then try to capture what you've sung. Let's look at the basic melody to the traditional song "Amazing Grace" and see if we can find a creative way to play it so that it sounds more natural and soulful on guitar. **Ex. 8a** is a bare-bones rendition of a snippet of the tune's melody, as you might find it in a beginner's fingerstyle method book.

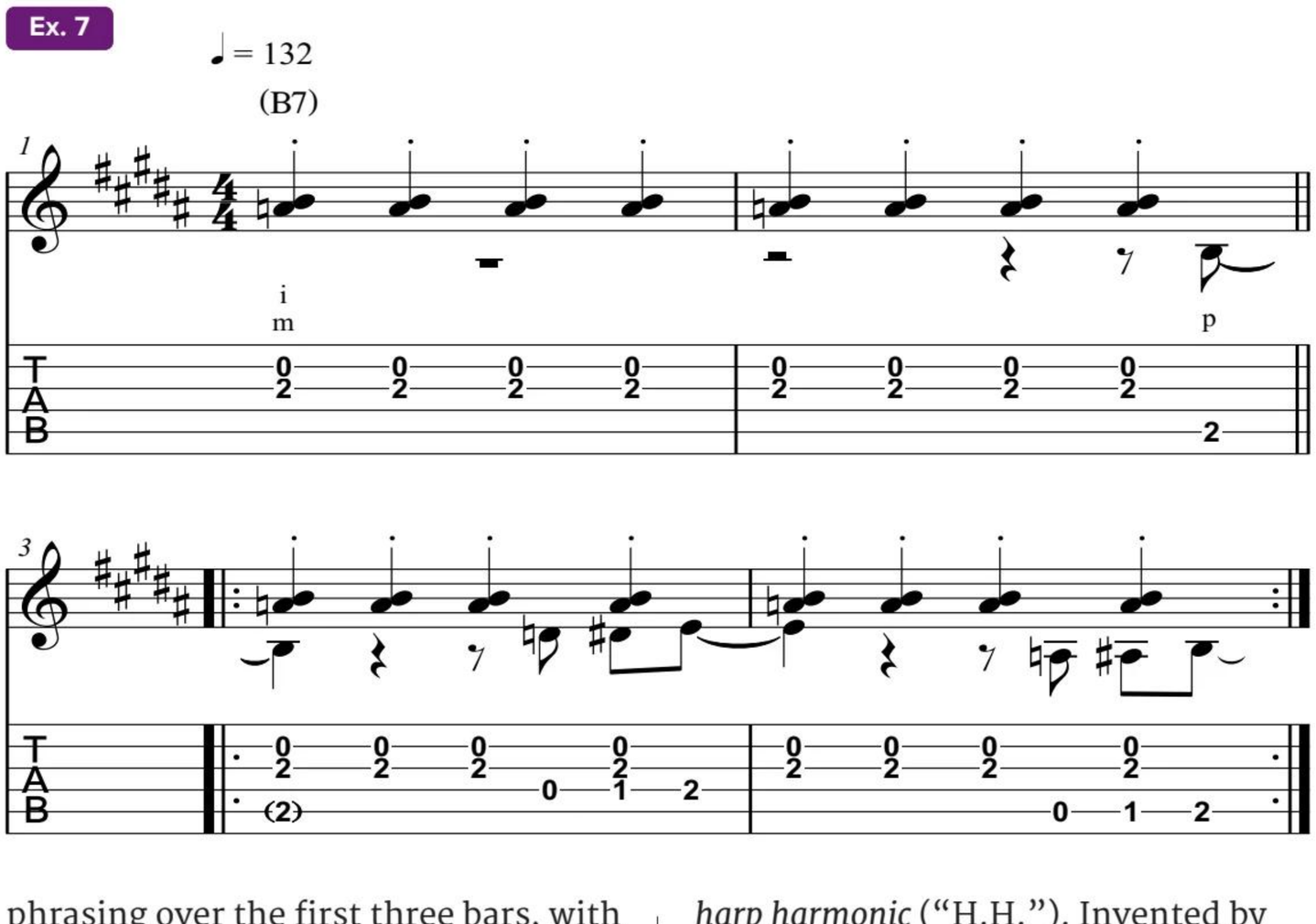
**Ex. 8b** brings the same melody new life by using some basic arranging techniques. Looking at the melody, now incorporated are a pull-off, finger slide and hammer-on, which ornament the articulations and

**Ex. 5**




**Ex. 6**




**Ex. 7**

phrasing over the first three bars, with grace-note finger slides added to beat 4 of bar 3. Note also how we've changed the rhythm on that beat, so that the G note now anticipates the final bar. In the accompaniment, notice how the chords are quickly arpeggiated on beat 1 of bars 1 and 3, and how some rhythmic motion has been added in bar 2. Finally, a gentle hammer-on rounds out the phrase in bar 4. Now you're playing music, instead of just notes.

Let's finish things off with one of TE's most favorite techniques, the *harp harmonic* ("H.H."). Invented by Chet Atkins and developed even further by Lenny Breau, a harp harmonic is sounded by fingerpicking a fretted note while touching the string very lightly with the tip of your pick hand's index finger at a *node*, typically 12 frets higher, to generate an octave-higher harmonic. While doing this, pluck the string with your thumbnail (or thumb-pick). The result should be a harmonic one octave above the fretted pitch, comparable to a 12th-fret natural harmonic on an open string. Note that, just as other, higher

natural harmonics can be sounded on an open string — for example, seven or five frets above the nut or "zero fret" — the same is true with harp harmonics.

**Ex. 9** employs these harmonics to an open D chord, adding some extra sparkle. Next to the initial tab number indicating the fretted note or open string, you'll find another number in parentheses, which indicates the fret above which you are to lightly touch the string as you pick it. Just as you would with a natural harmonic produced with open strings, be sure to touch the string *directly over* the fret indicated, in order to correctly target the harmonic node.

Like Breau, Emmanuel often mixes harp harmonics with regular fretted pitches, creating a lush, cascading effect. **Ex. 10** is inspired by his version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from *Endless Road*, which begins with a beautiful harp harmonics–fueled intro. The key is to let the notes ring over each other by having each chord form fretted *before* sounding the first note of each bar. Notice how incorporating harmonics into basic chord shapes produces a smooth, scalar line.

If you are to take just one thing away from having spent this time with Emmanuel's music, remember that it's how he plays the notes, by way of his daring arranging choices and masterful use of charismatic techniques, that contributes so much to his being a most exceptional player — a Certified Guitar Player, that is.

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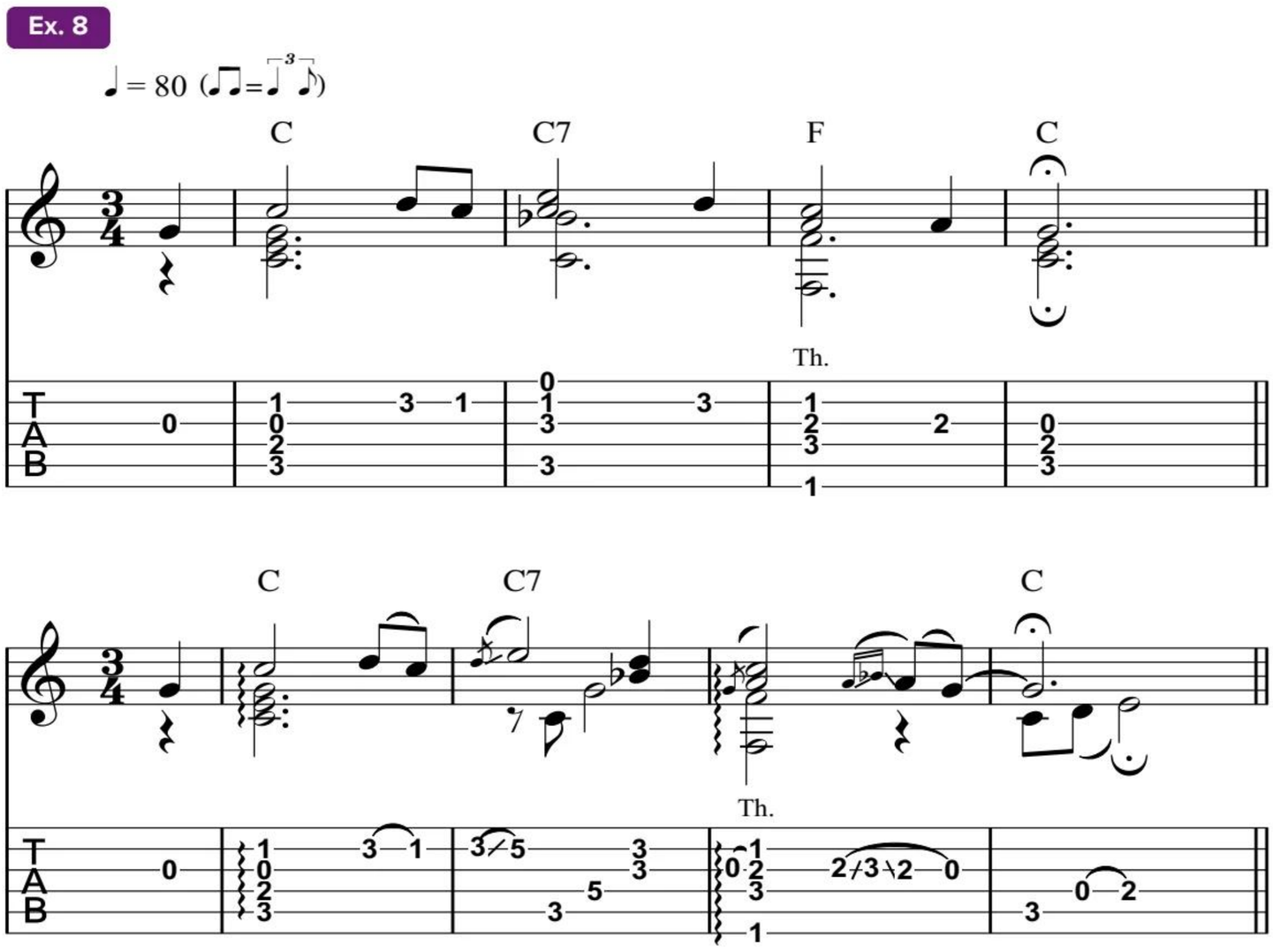
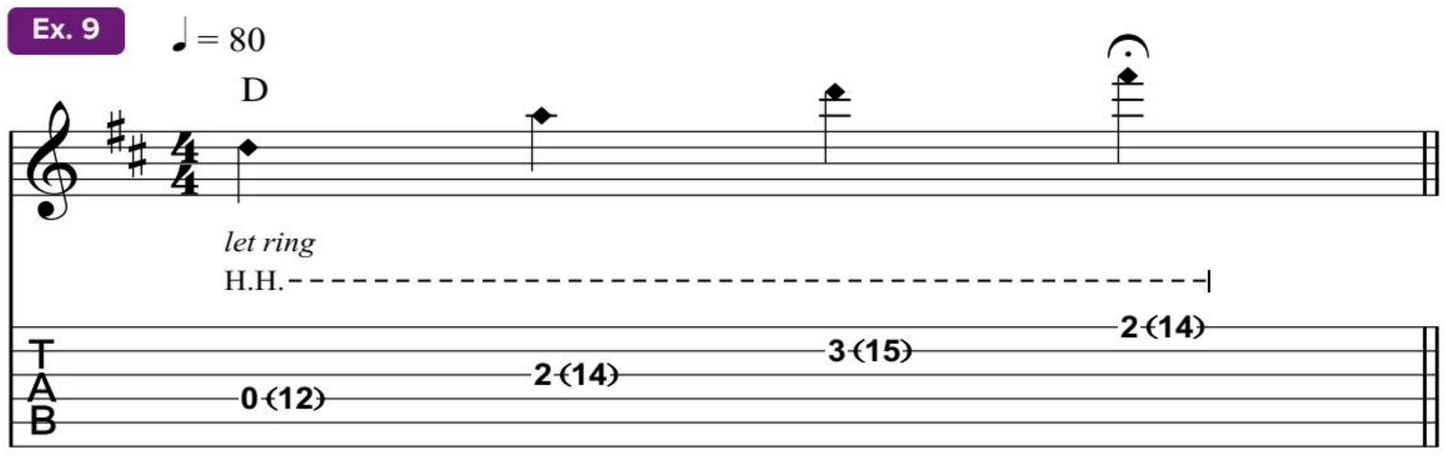
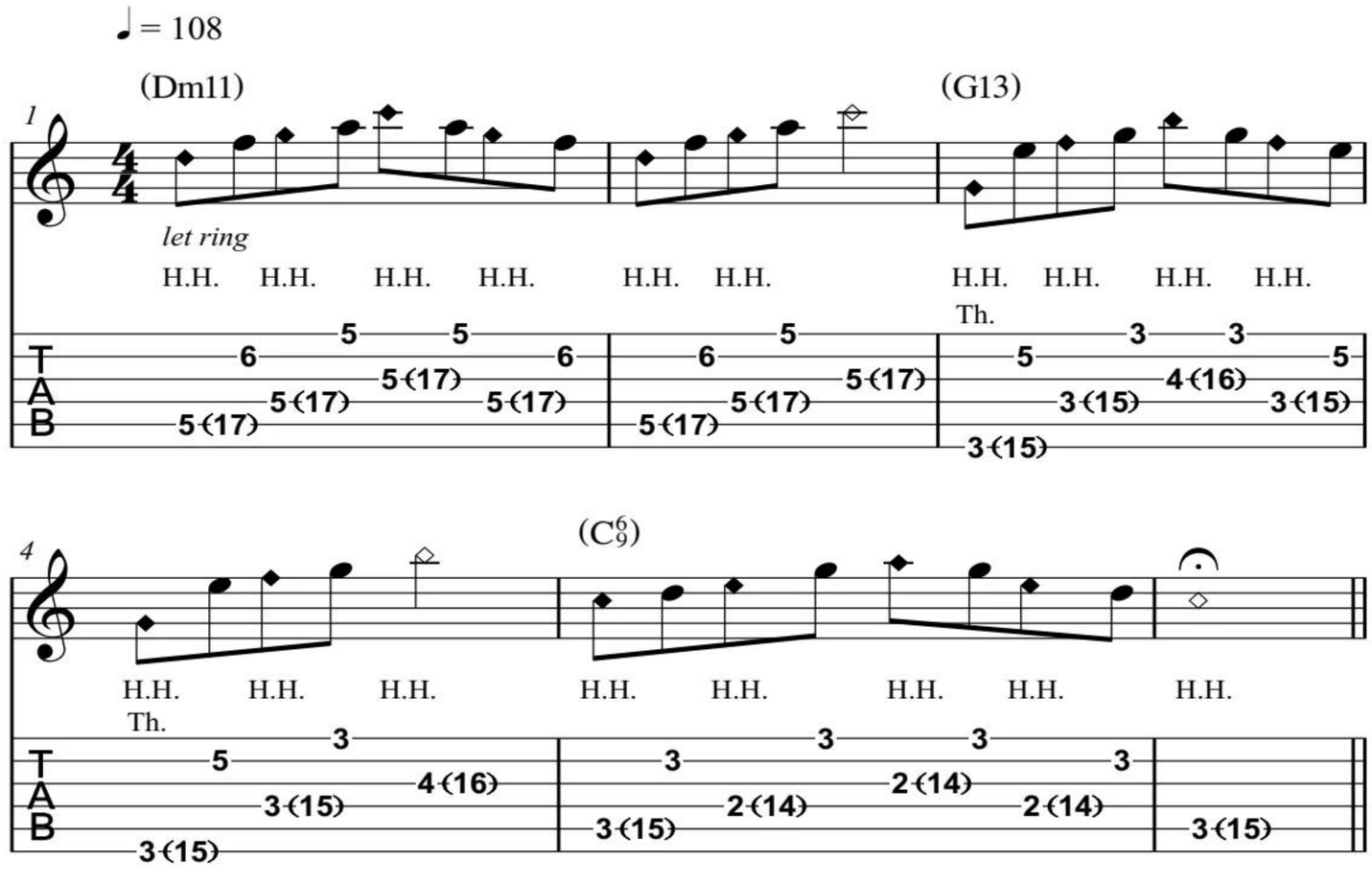
*Jeff Jacobson is a guitarist, songwriter and veteran guitar transcriber, with hundreds of published credits. For information on virtual guitar lessons and custom transcriptions, feel free to reach out to Jeff on Instagram (@jeffjacobsonmusic) or visit jeffjacobson.net.*

**Ex. 8**

**Ex. 9**




**Ex. 10**



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# 5 WAYS TO GET MORE FROM YOUR ACOUSTIC GUITAR

Acoustic guitars are arguably simpler than electrics, but there's still a wealth of details involved in playing like a pro...

**Words** Jenna Scaramanga

## 1. KNOW YOUR BODY TYPES

If you're shopping for an acoustic, realise that the different shapes and sizes of body are not only about what's most comfortable, but also what style of music they most suit. Dreadnoughts are the go-to for big strumming and bluegrass picking, while smaller bodies are often better for bringing out delicate fingerstyle parts. That said, if you love a particular guitar, don't be put off if it isn't the standard choice for your genre. Just be aware of the different sounds each shape can produce.

## 2. CHANGE YOUR PICK GAUGE

Changing your pick is the most direct way to change your tone. The thickness and the shape of the tip both impact the sound. Generally, thinner picks have more attack and less of the fundamental note, although very thick picks produce more upper harmonic 'chirp' as they contact the string. If you want a new tone, buy a variety pack of picks and try them out side by side.

## 3. EXPERIMENT WITH PICK MATERIAL

Delrin (as used in Dunlop 500) is smooth and warm. Celluloid (used by Fender and many other brands) is bright with a lot of click in the attack. Nylon has a gentle tone with probably the least pick click. Ultex, meanwhile, has both brightness and warmth for a very balanced sound. Which is right for you will depend on the song, the way you pick and your guitar's natural tone.

## 4. TRY DIFFERENT STRINGS

The most common strings are 80/20 bronze (brighter) and phosphor bronze (warmer). Many acoustic guitarists believe it's worth using heavy strings to get the wood to vibrate, but lighter strings allow a higher proportion of harmonic overtones relative to the fundamental with less low end. Another theory is that larger body styles benefit more from bigger strings. It's always worth experimenting to find what you like.

## 5. USE VARIOUS PICKING GRIPS

Changing the way you hold your pick will not only change the feel, but also the angle your pick approaches the strings at, and therefore the tone. If you want more attack and harmonics, angling the pick at 45 degrees to the string could help, while having the pick parallel to the strings gives a bolder, rounder tone. Holding the pick on the side or the pad of your index finger, with thumb and middle (a la noted acoustic player Eddie Van Halen!) or with all three will give different feels and sounds.

## 6. VARY YOUR PICKING MOTION

Guitar teachers sometimes insist that picking motions must come from the wrist, but if you watch the pros carefully, you'll see it's more complex than that. Strumming can come from the wrist or rotating forearm. Even the elbow, which some teachers say should never be used, can work effectively as long as you're not holding unnecessary tension. It's rare to see an acoustic strummer with a completely still elbow. Try different things until you get comfortable.

## 7. DON'T DIG TOO DEEP!

Your strumming should sound effortless, even when it's loud and intense. If it feels like you're having to fight to get over each string, the tone and timing will suffer. The most likely cause is burying the pick too far below the strings. Think of the pick as brushing over the top of the strings rather than colliding with each one.

### 8. BUY A BRIDGE PIN PULLER

If you've ever yanked at a bridge pin for minutes, only to have it explode out of the guitar and vanish under a sofa, you probably won't need much persuasion here. Pulling bridge pins without losing or damaging them is an annoying job, and a dedicated pin puller can save you frustration every time. Most string winders have a small indent to make the job a little easier, but dedicated tools like those by Martin, Music Nomad, or Allparts can make it a breeze.

## 9. GET YOUR STRING HEIGHT RIGHT

String height is always a compromise. Lower is almost always easier to play, but will buzz if it gets too low, while higher often sounds better. Because most acoustics don't have adjustable saddles, lowering the action yourself is not a great idea for the inexperienced. Raising it is less problematic though. Remove the white saddle from the bridge (it should lift out without a fight), drop in a thin strip of card or hardwood maple, then place the saddle back in. It's easily reversible if you don't like it.

## 10. BUY A GOOD CAPO

If you think capos are just for people who can't play barre chords, you're missing out. A capo will allow you to play things that are physically impossible even for Tommy Emmanuel. A good quality one will also give a tone similarto that of open strings, so you can get the great tone of open chords regardless of what key you're playing in.

### 11. CHANGE WHERE YOU STRUM

Changing where you strum on the strings makes a big difference to acoustic tone. It's easy just to let your picking hand land wherever feels natural and never examine it. Try instead to be intentional about where you're picking. Moving from the bridge to the fingerboard is as dramatic as switching pickup positions on an electric. Try accenting a change with a purposeful raked downstroke beside the bridge.

### 12. TRY FINGERSTYLE

Fingerstyle playing on acoustic guitar is older than flatpicking, so, if you're only ever using a plectrum, you're missing out on your guitar's potential. You can use flesh or fingernails, although steel strings can be tough on nails, so many advanced fingerpickers use false nails. Use your thumb to pluck the low E, A, and D strings. You may want to use just one finger at first, and you can achieve a lot of beautiful parts without getting more complicated than that.

### 13. TRY A THUMBPICK

If you like fingerstyle parts but miss the attack of a plectrum, a thumbpick is a great tool. Because you no longer need to grip the pick, your index finger gets freed up for plucking. Travis picking works especially well with a thumbpick. Check out Chet Atkins to see its potential.

### 14. CHECK OUT HYBRID PICKING – THE BEST OF BOTH

Hybrid picking is the art of combining regular flatpicking with fingerstyle, by using your middle, ring, and occasionally pinky fingers to pluck notes the plectrum can't reach. You'll probably have to slightly change your pick angle to get the other fingers comfortably in position, but switching between this and regular picking technique will be a breeze. Tommy Emmanuel, Mike Dawes and Richard Thompson have all used this approach.

### 15. GET A QUALITY DI

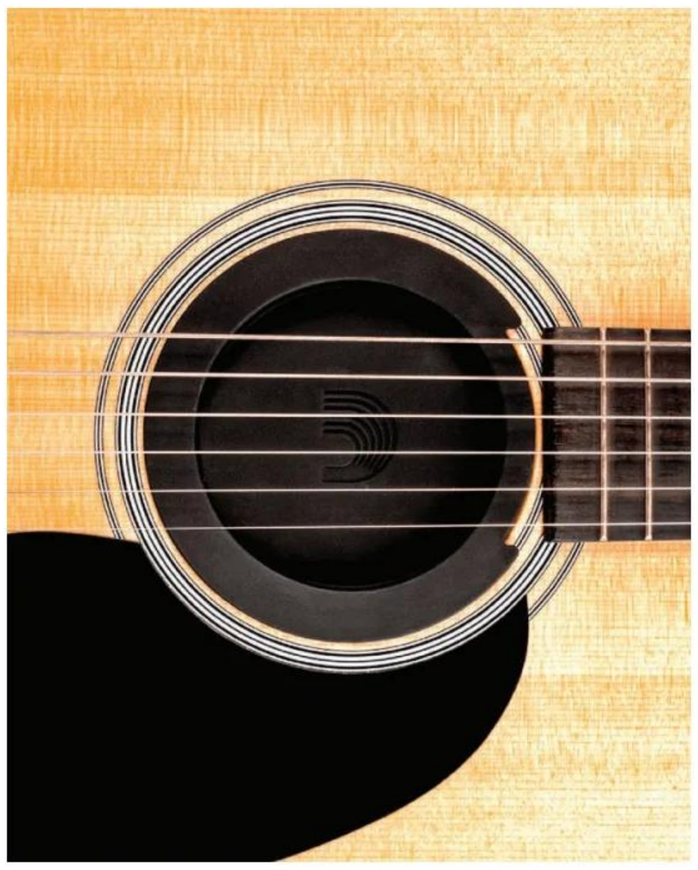
When plugging in your piezo-equipped acoustic, the difference a good DI (direct injection, meaning plugging straight into a PA or mixer) box can make is enormous. The LR Baggs Para Acoustic DI also includes a preamp and EQ, and is a classic. The Fishman Platinum Para DI has bags of flexibility, although it's not cheap. Caline, Behringer, and Harley Benton, meanwhile, have budget-friendly options that will make you sound better without causing unpleasant alerts from your mobile banking app.

### 16. FIT A SECOND STRAP BUTTON

Many acoustics only come with one strap button at the base of the body, leaving you tie the strap to the headstock if you want to stand up. Many players find that quite ungainly, and if you're one of them, adding a strap button where the neck joins the body will improve things no end. If you're confident drilling a small pilot hole it's a quick DIY job, but look at some other guitars first for the best position.

### 17. SLIDE

Setting up an electric guitar with the high action and heavy strings needed for slide is an off-putting barrier of entry. Happily, most acoustic guitars already have a setup that will work for slide. Glass and brass slides have a mellow tone that sounds great on acoustic, the ideal place for your first slide excursions. And if your acoustic's action is on the low side, simply opt for a lightweight slide such as Taylor's Ebony Slide or the MagSlide MS-2, which are sure to put less downward pressure on those strings.



### 18. DESTROY FEEDBACK

If you're playing live, you'll find that acoustic guitars just love to break into uncontrollable feedback. Covering the soundhole is a cheap and easy solution. For the cheapest fix, you can just use duct tape, but if you'd rather preserve your instrument's finish and have a reusable option, feedback busters can be bought from under $30.

### 19. RELAX YOUR FINGERS

Chances are, when you first tried playing chords on a steel string acoustic, you had to push with all your might just to get a clear note without buzz. Many players never get out of this habit, and you could be wearing yourself (and your frets!) out unnecessarily by over-squeezing. Try fingering a chord and applying as little pressure as possible with each finger while still getting a clear tone. If you notice this feels more relaxed, practise this regularly until you form a new habit. This goes double for barre chords!

### 20. TRY GETTING YOUR THUMB OVER THE NECK

The wide fingerboard on classical guitars makes thumb-over hand positions impractical, but you can happily fret notes on the low E string with your thumb on most other guitars. Try adding your thumb to the 2nd fret while playing an open D major chord for a big D/F#, or fretting the lowest note in E shape barre chords with your thumb like Hendrix. It's a great alternative if you get fatigued playing barre chords.

### 21. EXPERIMENT WITH IMPULSE RESPONSES

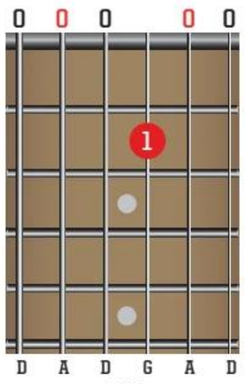
If you use a piezo pickup, you've doubtless struggled to get a natural plugged-in tone. Impulse responses (IRs) have changed the game for speaker cabinet simulation and they're doing a similar thing for amplified acoustic guitar. You can add them to your recorded tone with a plugin, or the Fishman Aura Spectrum, NUX Optima Air, and LR Baggs Voiceprint DI are all dedicated pedals for the purpose.

# ESSENTIAL ALTERED TUNINGS

## Learn how retuning your guitar can fuel your creativity with our pick of the most useful altered tunings

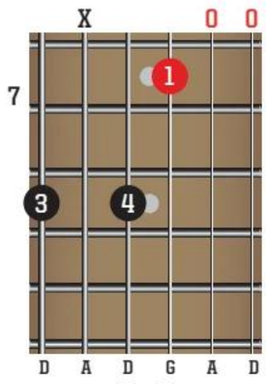
### DADGAD

First up is the ever popular DADGAD tuning. It's harmonically somewhat 'ambiguous' because it contains stable-sounding perfect 4ths (G), perfect 5ths (A) and the root note (D) – but no 3rds to make it major or minor. Strummed all at once, the open strings are a big, bold Dsus4 chord. It's a de facto standard alternative to traditional E standard (EADGBE) tuning amongst fingerpickers and percussive players alike.



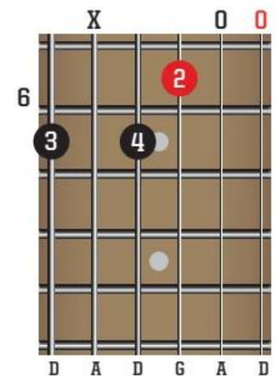

D5

This chord only requires one finger, but creates a huge-sounding D5 powerchord.



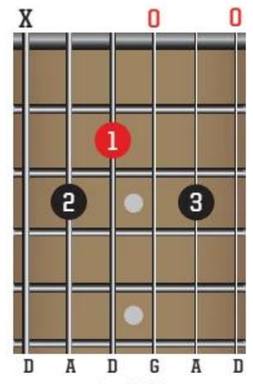

Bm7

This fingering sounds great as it uses the first and second strings as a drone.



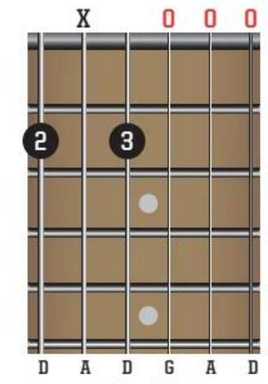

Aaddl1

This shape also uses a drone. Try swapping between the previous shape and this one.




Cadd9

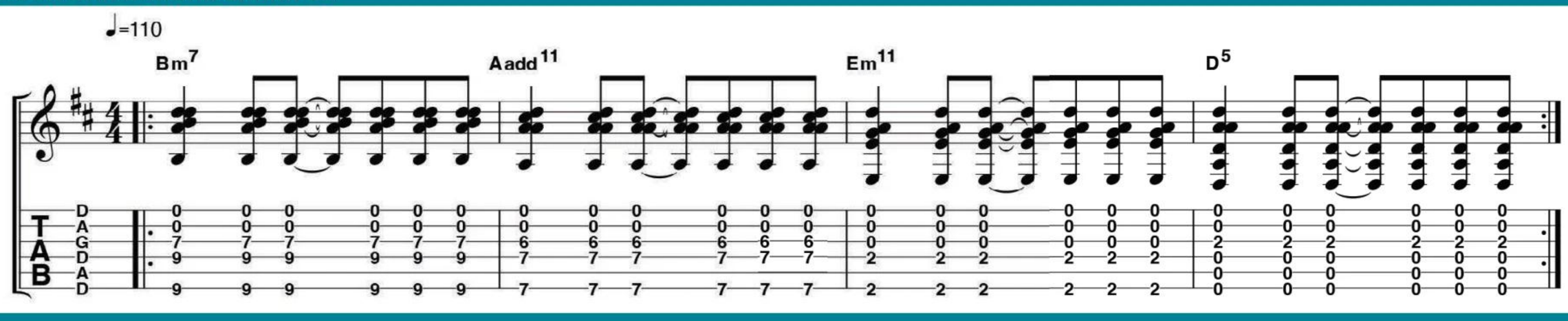
This one can be heard in action by Jimmy Page in his fingerstyle classic, *Black Mountain Side*.




Eml1

This final chord provides a huge, resonant Em11 sound thanks to those ringing open strings.

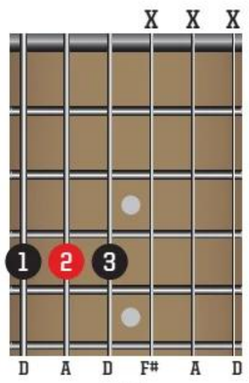
**FOUR-BAR DADGAD EXAMPLE**




Our DADGAD example creates a part out of some of the chords we looked at. The fifth string is dampened when necessary by laying the second finger of the fretting hand lightly on top.

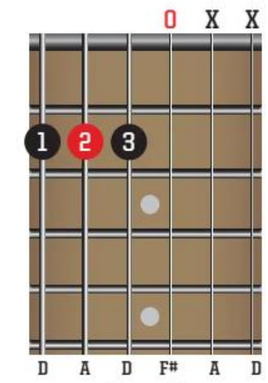
### Open D (D A D F# A D)

Our next tuning is open D (aka D A D F# A D). As with DADGAD, drop the sixth string down a tone to D, then drop the first and second strings down a tone to D and A, respectively. The final step is to drop the G string down a semitone to F#. The open D tuning is great for blues and fingerstyle acoustic pieces.



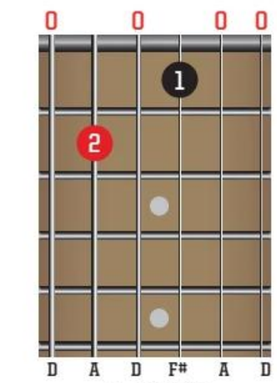

F#5

This powerchord shape features in Mumford And Sons' *The Cave*, transposed to various fret positions.



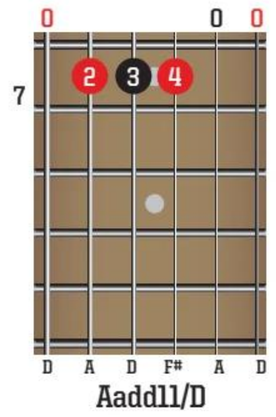

Esus2

If we move the F#5 fingering down two frets and leave the third string ringing, this Esus2 is created.



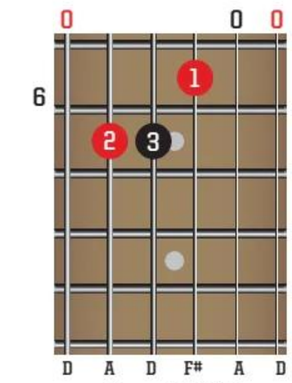

Gadd9/D

This one is nice and easy, and sounds great when followed by a D chord played on the open strings.




Aaddl1/D

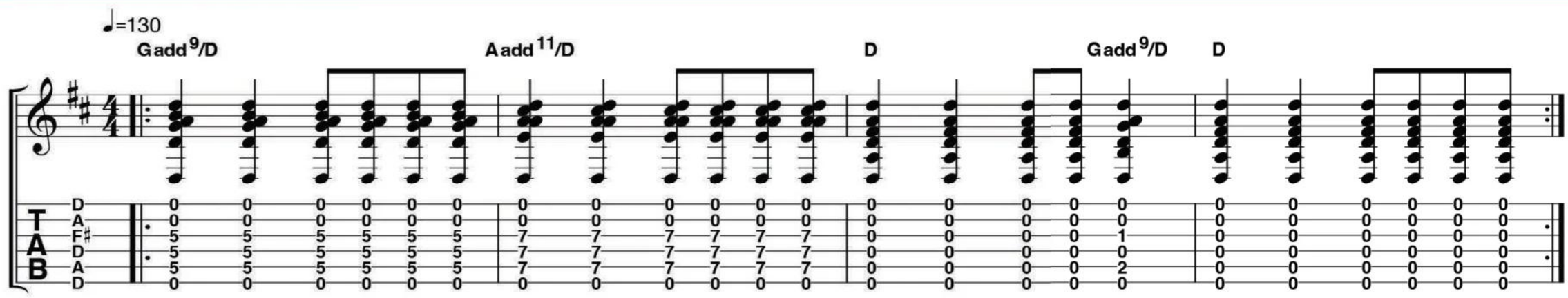
This fingering uses the open strings as drones. Simply move the shape around the fretboard to find different sounds.




Amaddl1/D

This final chord fingering is the minor version of the previous chord – it only differs by one note.

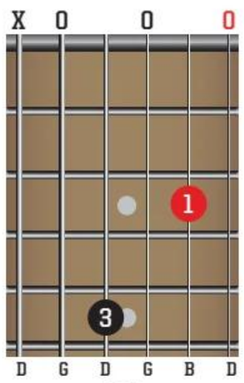
**FOUR-BAR DADGAD EXAMPLE**




The simple shapes and easy strumming pattern should allow you to get to grips with open D tuning quickly. As you gain confidence with the part, try out some arpeggios, either picked or played fingerstyle.

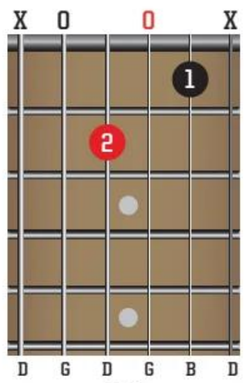
## Open G (DGDGBD)

To retune into open G from standard tuning, drop the sixth, fifth and first strings down a tone. The open strings form a G chord, but, where open D tuning has its root note in the bass, here in open G, the low string is a D. It's still a note in the G chord (G–B–D), but it means you'll often find chords and riffs phrased around an open fifth-string root. The tuning is common in many styles including Hawaiian 'slack key' and bottleneck blues.



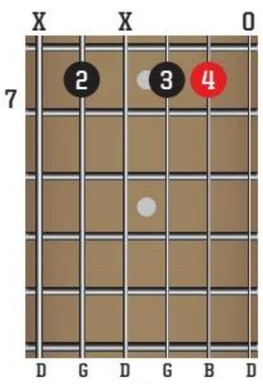

G5

With its G-G-G-D-D arrangement of notes, this first chord is near impossible to play in standard tuning.



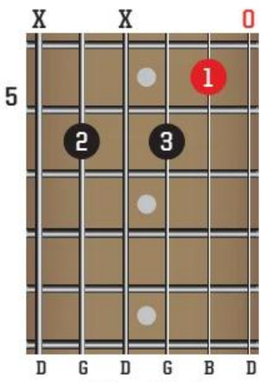

C/G

This chord offers a way to create boogie riffs by moving between an open-string G chord and this C/G fingering.



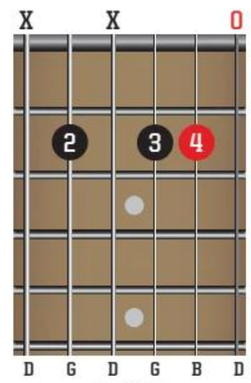

D

It's well worth having a fingering for the V chord (D) of the key of G up your sleeve.




C♯m add♭9

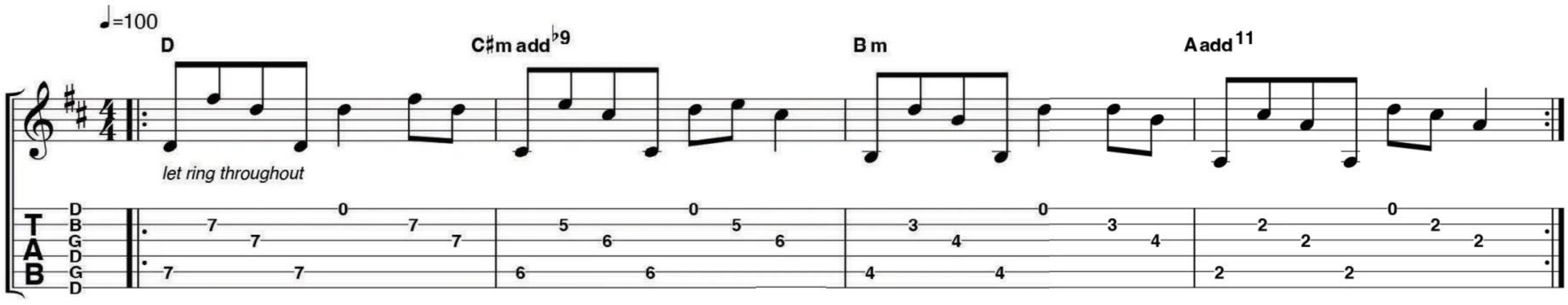
This minor version the major shape includes a lush sounding ♭9th interval.




Aadd11

This chord sounds great and the dissonance between the major 3rd (C♯) and 11th (D) adds colour.

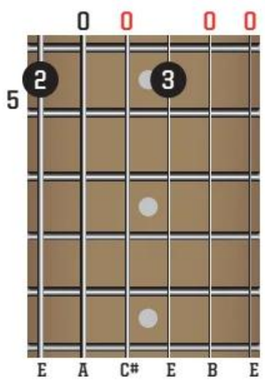
### OPEN G EXAMPLE




For this example, we're linking a few of the chords together using a simple fingerstyle pattern. If you're new to fingerstyle then concentrate on practising the first bar until you have the pattern locked in before moving on to the rest.

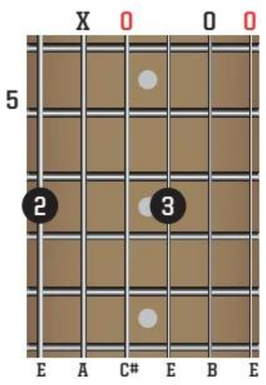
## Open Aadd9 (E A C♯ E B E)

This next tuning is a bit more of a rarity, and is the main tuning used by Australian virtuoso Alan Gogoll. The tuning has a wide open sound all of its own, with the brightness of a major 3rd interval (C♯) and the richness of a 9th (B) giving the signature sound. It won't disrupt your neck/string tension much, either – simply drop the fourth string by a semitone and the third string by three semitones.



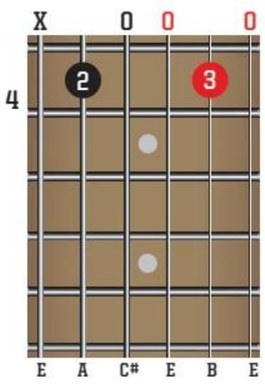

Aadd9

Use your second and third fingers to fret the notes on the sixth and third strings. Strum all six strings and let it ring!



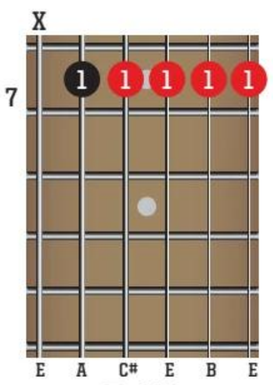

Bsus2/4

This chord is created by moving the previous shape up by two frets. Try other fret positions, too.



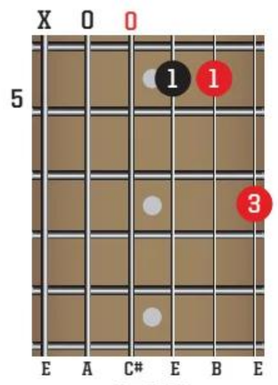

C♯madd9

This time, instead of changing fret position, we're moving the shape on the fifth and second strings.




Eadd9

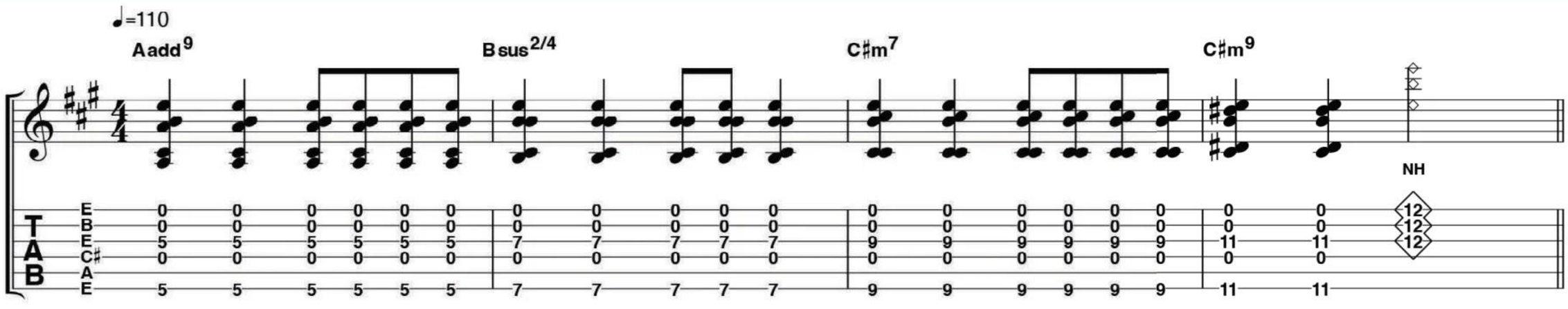
If we barre across the top five strings at the 7th fret, a large Eadd9 chord is created.




Aadd9

This shape has a jazzier character to the opening Aadd9 thanks to a wider pitch range and fewer ringing open strings.

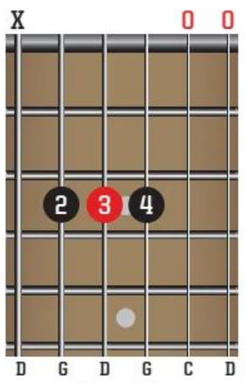
### FOUR-BAR DADGAD EXAMPLE




Here, we're taking the same shape and moving it up the fretboard in two-fret intervals. The drone strings remain the same and provide some cool dissonances and resolutions as the chords change. The harmonic is played by lightly touching the strings above the 12th fret.

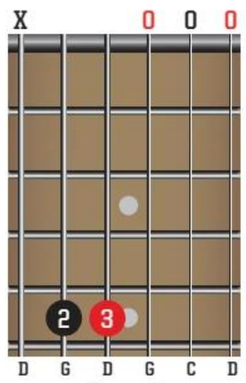
## Open Gsus4 (DGDGCD)

Our next tuning is a popular tuning for clawhammer guitar. It is essentially the same as open G tuning, but with the second string raised by a semitone. So to tune from standard tuning drop the first, second and sixth strings down a tone and then raise the second string by a semitone. Molly Tuttle uses this tuning for her track *Take The Journey*.



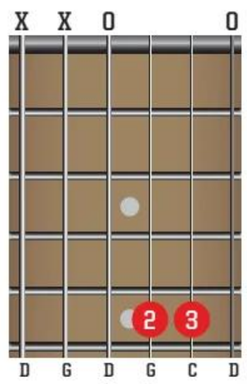

B♭add9

It's a little awkward to fit all three fingers in place here, but the results are worth it.



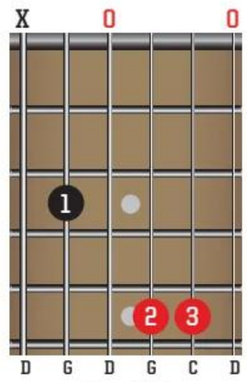

Csus2

This chord sounds great following on from the previous shape, and this forms the basis of our recorded example below.



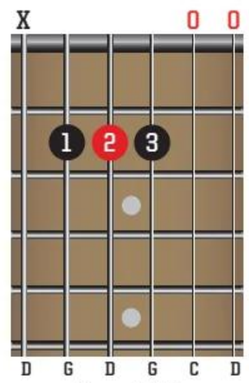

Dm7

This fingering here is easy. Simply place your second and third fingers on the second and third strings at the 5th fret.




B♭add9

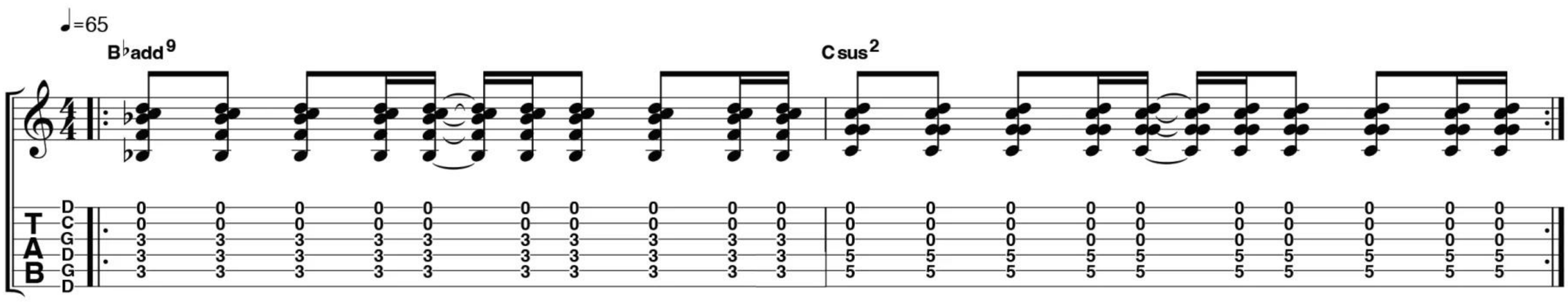
This chord use the same fingering as the previous Dm7 chord, but places a B♭ note in the bass.




Amadd11

The final fingering is easy to play and gives a moody minor tonality to experiment with.

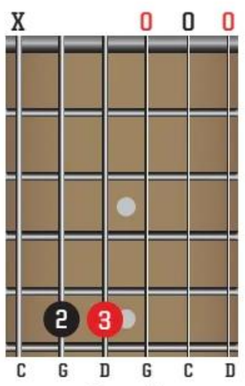
**BBADD9**




Our example here is inspired by Molly Tuttle's *Sit Back And Watch It Roll*. Simply linking two-chord fingerings sounds great – that's the beauty of using open tunings. Use our example as a springboard for your own ideas – for example, by moving the shapes to other fret positions.

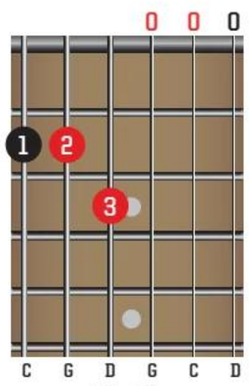
## Open Csus2 (CGDGCD)

This next tuning is a cracker and is actually very similar to the previous Gsus4 example. The only difference is that for this tuning we'll drop the sixth string another tone down to C. It's quite remarkable how two tunings that share the same notes can be applied in different ways. Just think how different drop D feels compared to standard tuning on electric guitar and you'll see what we mean!



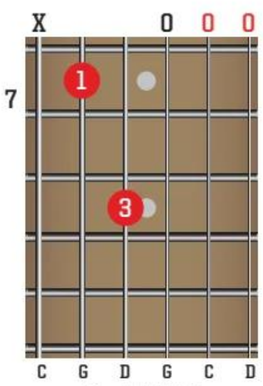

Csus2

The low C is deep and full here, and it sounds especially good in when played on a dreadnought or jumbo.



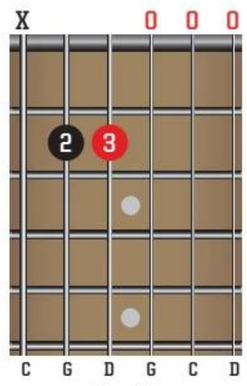

Dm11

This chord is created by simply moving the last shape up two frets. Try other fret positions, too.



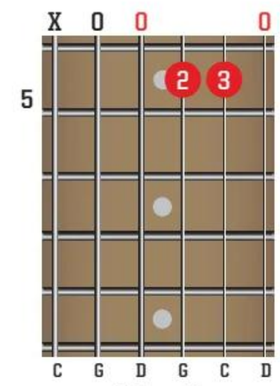

Gadd11/D

This shape resembles a standard-tuned powerchord but it's a much richer sounding Gadd11/D chord.




Am11

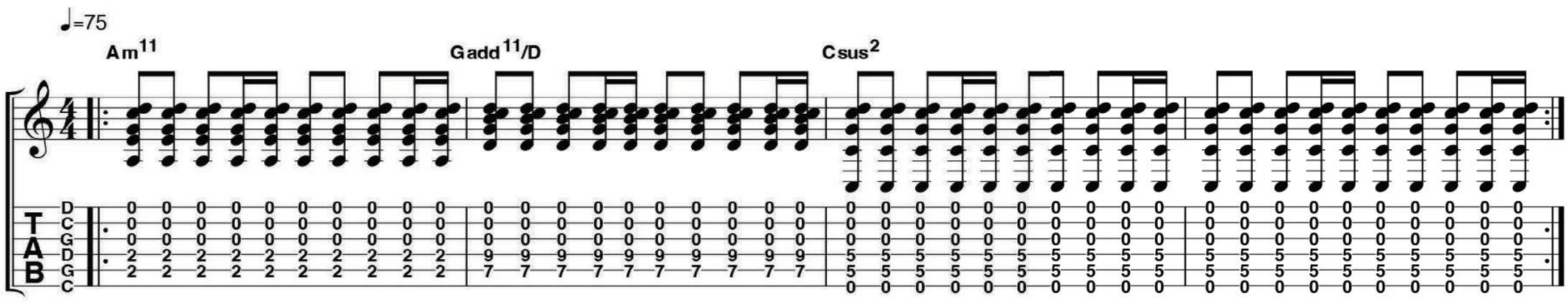
This chord is easy and sounds great. Keeping the sixth string muted gives a more focused bottom end.




G7sus4

Sus chords sound great on acoustic – just look at how many tunings are based on them! This 7sus4 shape is no different!

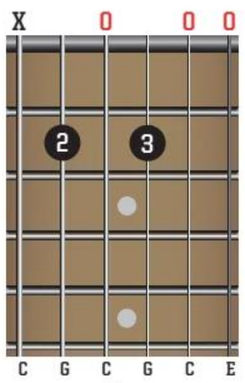
**FOUR-BAR DADGAD EXAMPLE**




This example links together three of our open Csus2 tuning chords to create a flowing progression. We're introducing a 16th-note strumming rhythm into the mix which is really simple, so feel free to add your own rhythmic ideas and try our other shapes, too.

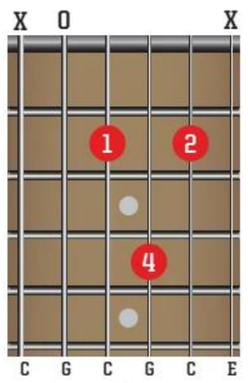
## Open C (CGCGCE)

Another 'C' tuning here, but this is different to our previous example because the strings are tuned to a major chord, not a suspended sound – and that changes the character. To get into open C from standard tuning, adjust the fifth and fourth strings down a tone, tune the sixth string down two tones, and raise the second string up a semitone. Check out *Come To Me* by Goo Goo Dolls and *As It Was* by Hozier for songs in this tuning.



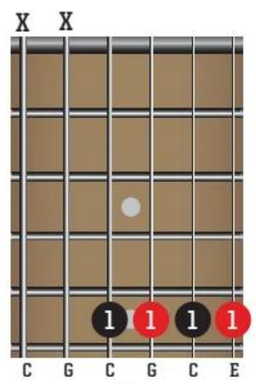

Am

This first chord is an easy fingering for Am, with the open strings giving it a nice, rich sound.



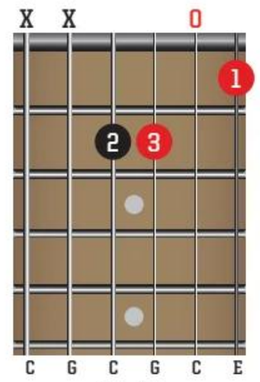

G

This G chord has a sweet sound thanks to the wide intervals between the three lowest notes. G fingering. Try it also with a barre.



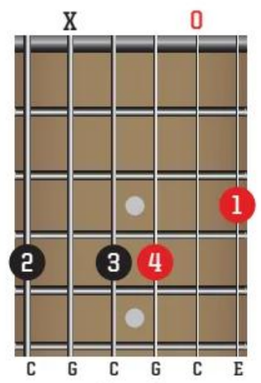

F

You've gone to the trouble of tuning to a major chord. Well, that means any barre across the strings like this is a major chord, too!




Dm7

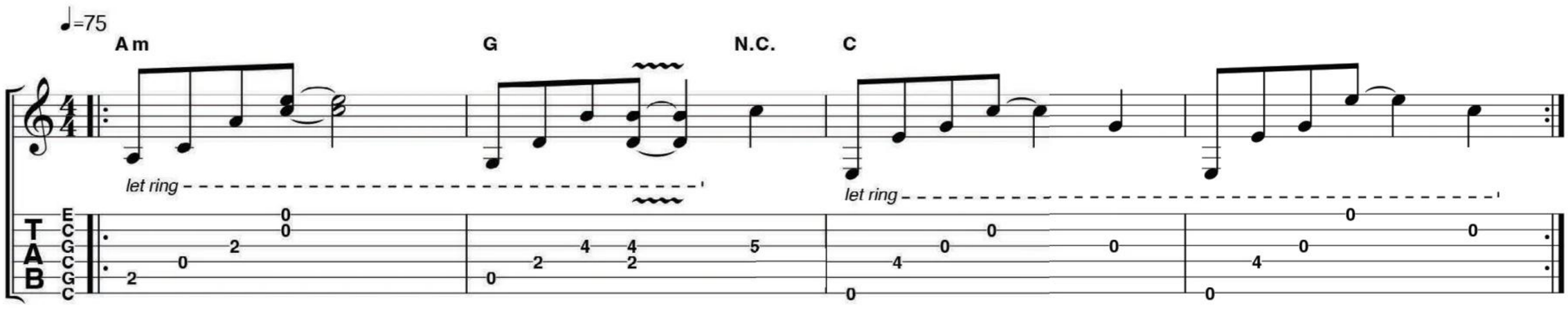
This Dm7 chord fingering has an open, ringing sound to it.




Em♭6

The Em♭6 chord in standard tuning it doesn't always sound the best. Open C tuning gives us this more musical fingering.

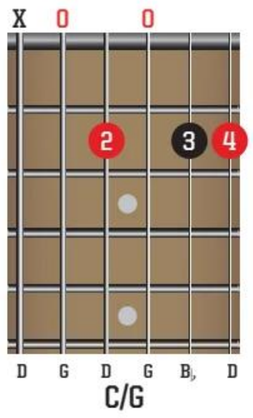
**OPEN C EXAMPLE**




This example creates a fingerstyle version of the chord progression we used in our Csus2 tuned example, albeit with some slightly different chord extensions. Get creative and see how the fingering patterns for both examples sound when played in each tuning.

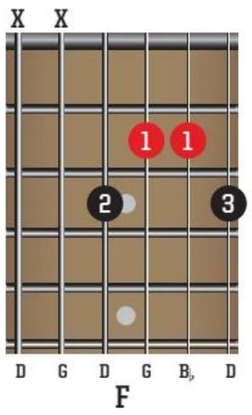
## Open G minor (D G D G B♭ D)

For our final, tuning we are going to take open G and turn it into a G minor version. To do this tune into open G as we did before but drop the second string down a semitone to a B♭ – that's the all-important minor 3rd in the key of G. Though not as commonplace as its major counterpart, G minor tuning is used in many songs including John Renbourn's *The Mist Covered Mountains Of Home*.



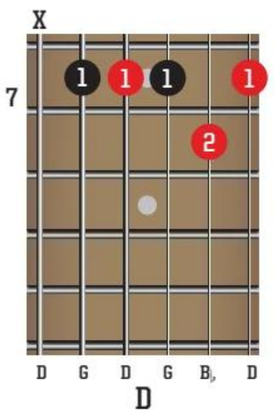

C/G

This first chord is a nice, easy fingering for C/G. Do your best not to accidentally mute the open third string.



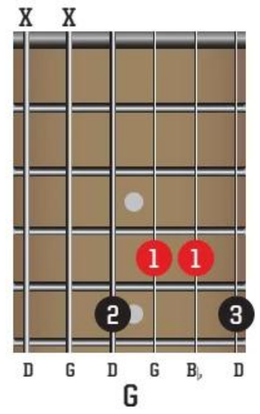

F

The F chord is the fourth chord in the key of C, so this will go well in a progression with our C/G chord.



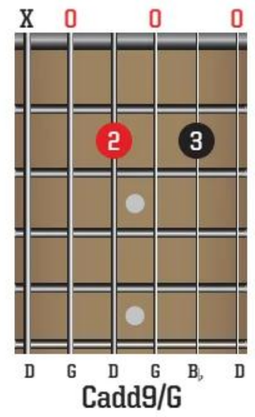

D

Play a first-finger barre, then use a spare finger to raise the minor 3rd to make a major chord in this minor tuning.




G

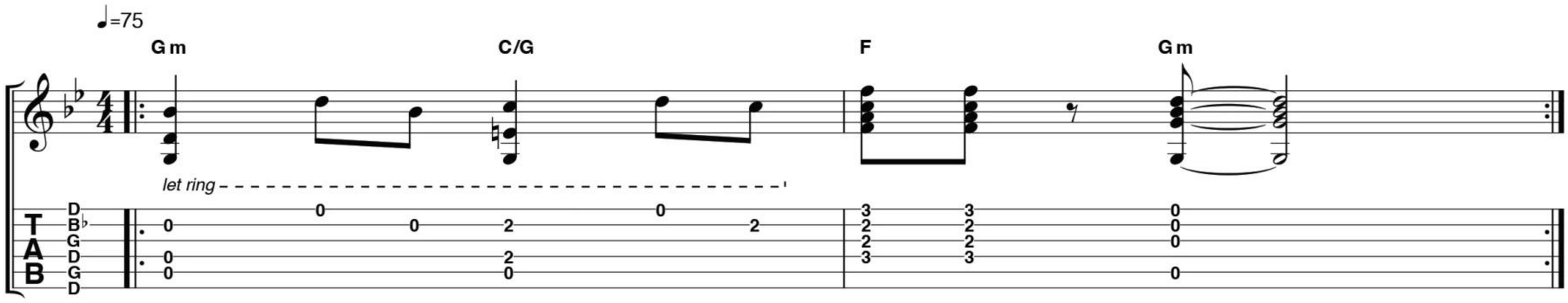
The G chord is the fifth chord of G major and completes our three-chord trick of C/G-F-G.




Cadd9/G

To finish off, it's another great fingering. The Cadd9/G chord only requires two fingers and sounds ace.

**FOUR BAR OPEN G MINOR EXAMPLE**




This final example provides another opportunity to practise a bit of simple fingerstyle picking. There's a lot of space here in our simple part – and that can expose inaccuracies. Try to be deliberate with every note and aim for clarity and good timing.

# GO GLOBAL!
# 6 STUNNING SCALES

Expand your musical horizons and discover new sounds to elevate and inspire your playing, with six scales from around the world. **Jamie Humphries** is your guide.

**ABILITY RATING** Moderate ★★★★☆

**Info** https://bit.ly/4bghT62
**Key** C **Tempo** 135bpm

**Will improve your...**
✔ Compositional potention
✔ Scale knowledge
✔ New fretboard shapes and phrasing

As guitarists we're always looking for new sounds and inspiration, and love to explore new techniques. But if you still find yourself trapped in the confines of Pentatonic and Major scales, a good way to break this harmonic stalemate is to explore new sounding scales. Although most popular music, rock included to some extent, has a fairly familiar 'westernised' sound, music from other countries often carries distinct characteristics that reflect culture, tradition, and history. Just compare music from Japan to the sound of popular western music and you'll hear many different aspects, from instrumentation to scales and harmony. Japanese music emphasises different intervals, too, and understanding the formulas of these more unusual sounding scales is a rewarding area for us musicians. Well-known players that have exploited the harmonic wonders of these scales include John McLaughlin, Al Di Meola, Marty Friedman, Jason Becker, Joe Satriani, Yngwie Malmsteen, and Ritchie Blackmore.

In this feature we will focus on six scales, three Minor and three Major, all of which have their own intervallic DNA, with unique sounds and unusual chordal possibilities.

Although such scales are often used over specific chords, especially in jazz to outline the colourful construction of Altered chords, the scales presented in this feature work great for composing chord progressions, riff writing, and soloing. Each scale has been illustrated from an A root note for ease of learning, as well as being able to compare the differences between their harmonic structures. I have presented one shape for each scale, but strongly advise you to explore all the positions of each one, starting from every note. We'll move into different keys when we apply the scales in this article's mini pieces, a little later on.

For maximum appeal, I've approached the subject from more of a rock angle as opposed to jazz, focusing on how we can harmonise the scale to produce different chord families, write exciting new sounding riffs, plus explore soloing concepts.

The Hirajoshi is our first of three Minor scales, and is a Japanese Pentatonic scale with a formula of R-2-♭3-5-♭6. Great examples of this scale can be heard in the playing of both Jason Becker and Marty Friedman. Try experimenting with intervals, especially the semitone distance between the 2nd and ♭3rd, as well as the 5th and ♭6. This is a great scale to add flavour and mystique to your Aeolian (Minor scale) soloing.

***"There's a lot to get your teeth into here. But a little work put in now will be rewarded later on."***

The Hungarian Gypsy is our next Minor scale and is very dark sounding, with its formula of R-2-♭3-#4-5-♭6-7. This scale is great for composing sinister sounding riffs and licks, and has been used by Joe Satriani. Its unique sound comes courtesy of the chromatic groupings, which result in some interesting chordal and melodic possibilities. The Hungarian Gypsy scale is the fourth mode of the Double Harmonic scale, and is a great choice over Minor/Major 7th chords.

The Arabian scale is our final Minor offering, although it is actually a Diminished scale. The Arabian scale consists of eight notes (R-2-♭3-4-#4-#5-6-7), and is the same as the Diminished Whole-Half scale.

The Chinese Scale is our first Major scale and is in fact an inversion of the Japanese Hirajoshi scale we opened this lesson with, but starting from the 4th interval. Its formula is R-3-#4-5-7, and the scale is a great alternative for soloing over Lydian progressions. The harmonic structure of this scale also introduces semitone distances which are great for creating haunting yet beautiful dissonance when soloing over a Major chord, or a Major chord that includes a #4 or #11. This one is another favourite of the great Marty Friedman.

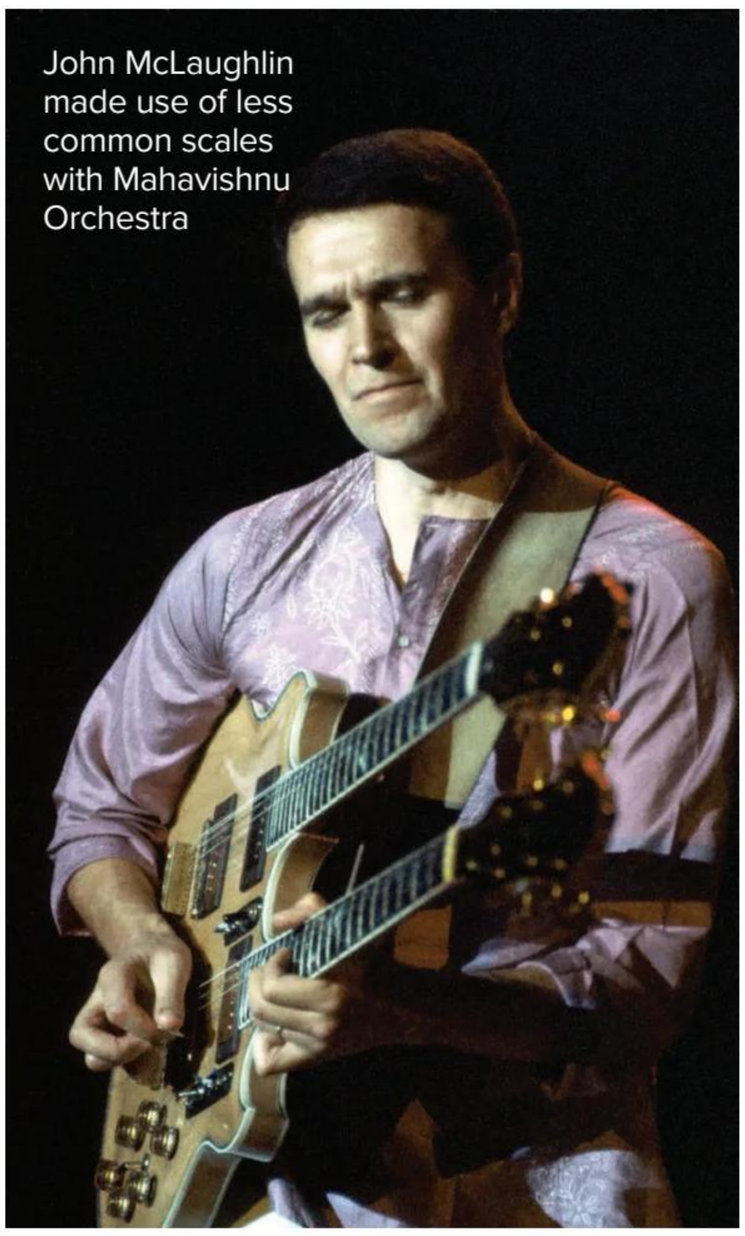
The Byzantine, also referred to as the Double Harmonic scale, has a formula of R-♭2-3-4-5-♭6-7 and makes for an interesting alternative to the Major scale when soloing over Major 7th chords. You could view it as a Major scale with a ♭2 and ♭6. It also makes for a refreshing alternative to the Phrygian Dominant when composing Eastern-style metal riffs. Once again the chromatic notes make for some interesting harmonic lines and intervals. This scale was famously used by Dick Dale for the melody of his classic instrumental, Miserlou.

Our final scale, the Oriental, is the fifth mode of the Byzantine/Double Harmonic scale. Featuring the formula R-♭2-3-4-♭5-6-♭7 it works as an alternative for soloing over Dominant chords, particularly the 7♭5, but again can be used in its own right for composing riffs, progressions and solos.

There's a lot to get your teeth into here, but a little work put in now will be rewarded later on. Be sure to check out the audio at bit.ly/4bghT62 (see page 2), courtesy of our friends at Guitar Techniques! ag

### Get the Tone

For this lesson I used a mixture of clean and driven tones. For the clean tone aim for a pristine clean like that used by Marty Friedman. Try using a single-coil pickup and compression if you have it, plus a large reverb. For the driven tone aim for a thick, middly distortion with clarity and separation. Push the gain a little more for the solos as well as adding delay.

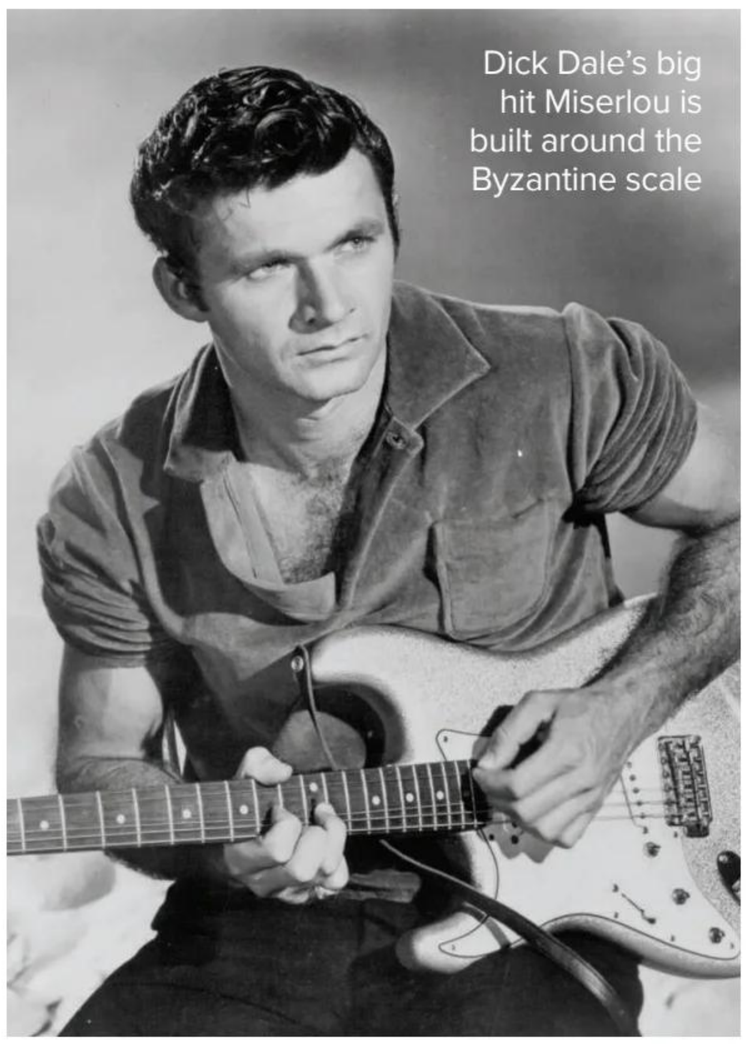


John McLaughlin made use of less common scales with Mahavishnu Orchestra

Joe Satriani is well known for composing with specific scales

Yngwie Malmsteen likes to use less conventional scales in his compositions

***"If you find yourself trapped in the confines of Pentatonic and Major scales, a good way to break the harmonic stalemate is to explore new sounding scales."***



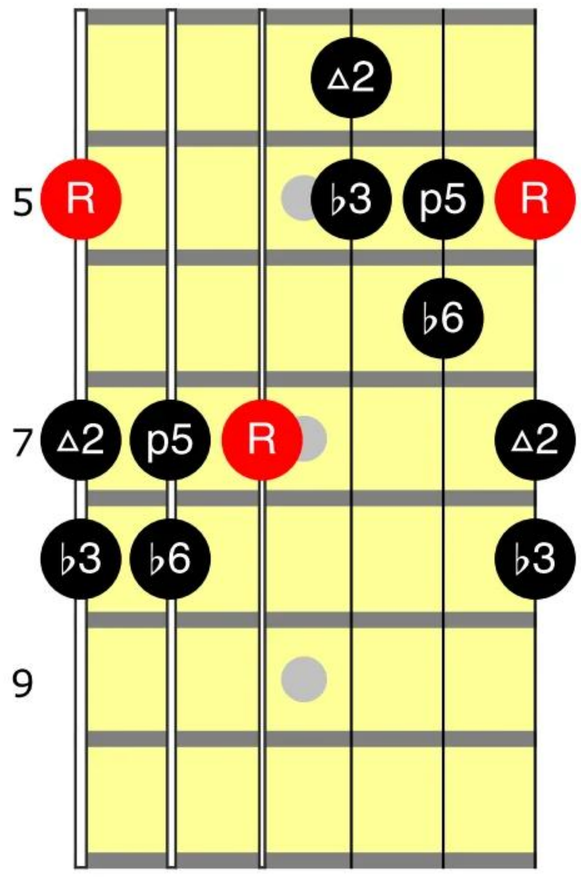
Dick Dale's big hit Miserlou is built around the Byzantine scale

**TRACK RECORD** There are many examples of artists using less common scales across many genres. Here's a few standout examples in rock: Cocophony, Speed Metal Symphonywith Jason Becker; Dragon Mistress, Namida (Tears) by Marty Friedman; Long Live Rock And Roll, Gates Of Babylon by Rainbow; Not Of This Earth, Professor Satchafunkilus by Joe Satriani; Miserlou by Dick Dale.

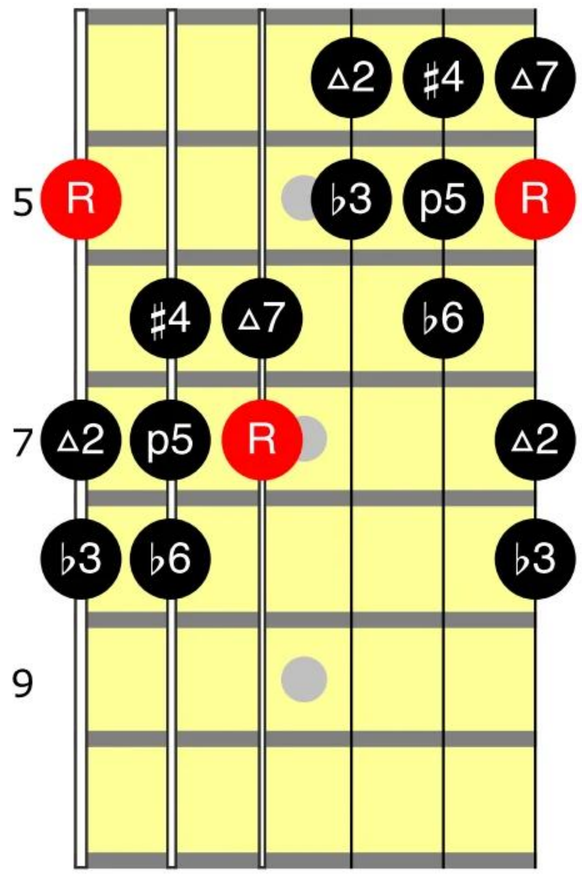
MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/ CHIAKI NOZU/FILMMAGIC/ TIM MOSENFELDER GETTY IMAGES

**VIDEO & AUDIO** https://bit.ly/4bghT62

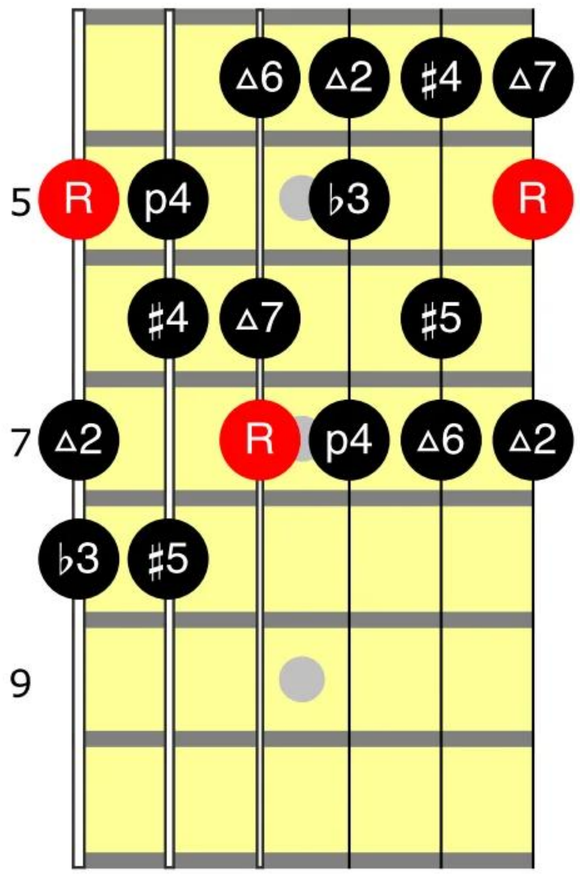
## HIRAJOSHI SCALE



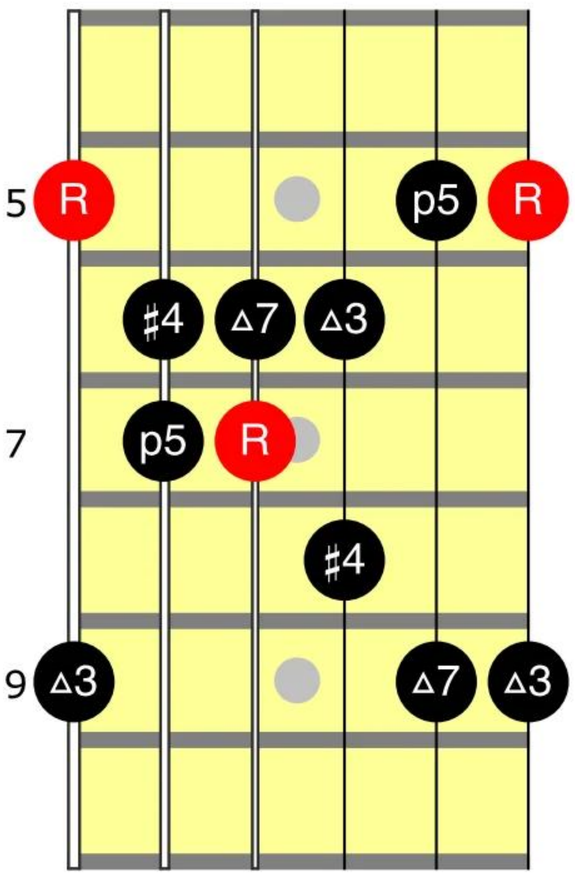

## HUNGARIAN GYPSY SCALE



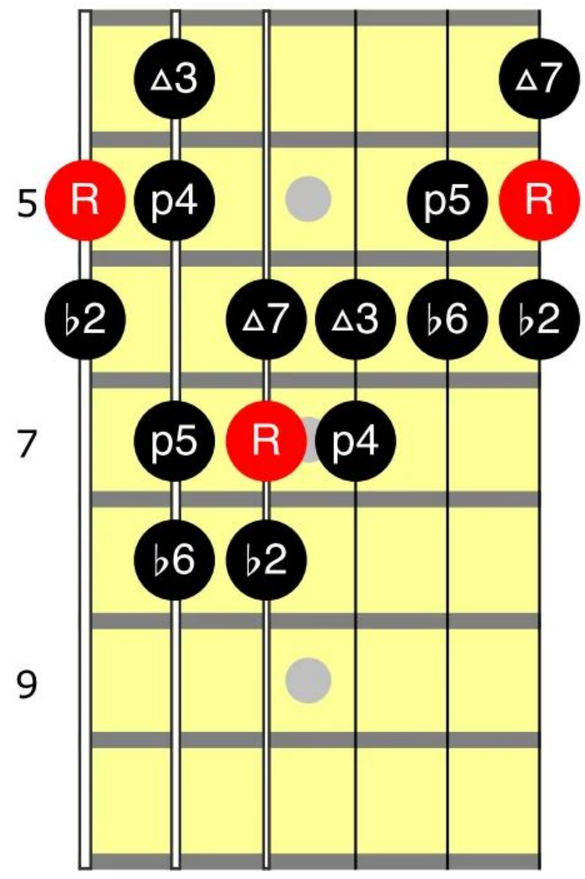

## ARABIAN SCALE



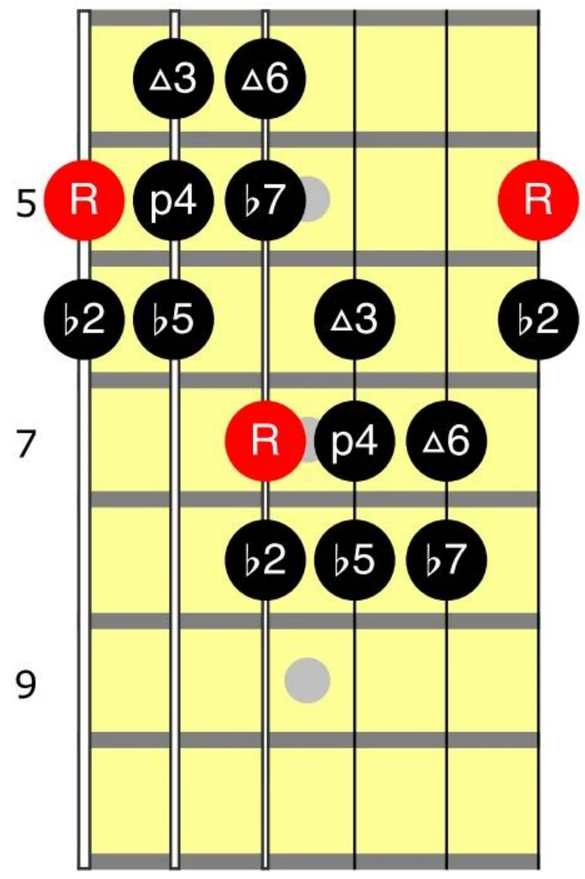

## CHINESE SCALE

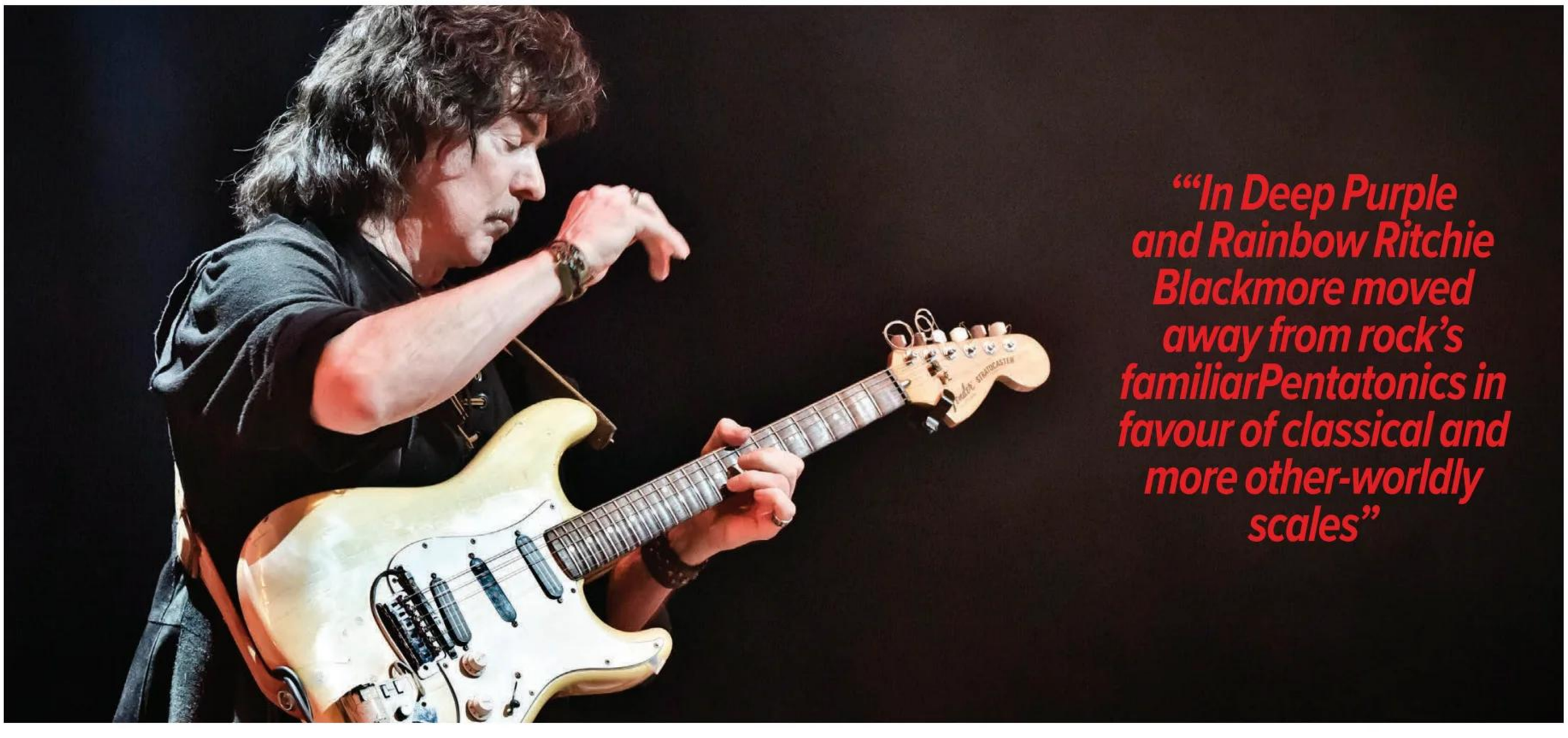



## BYZANTINE SCALE




## ORIENTAL SCALE




FRANK HOENSCH/REDFERNS

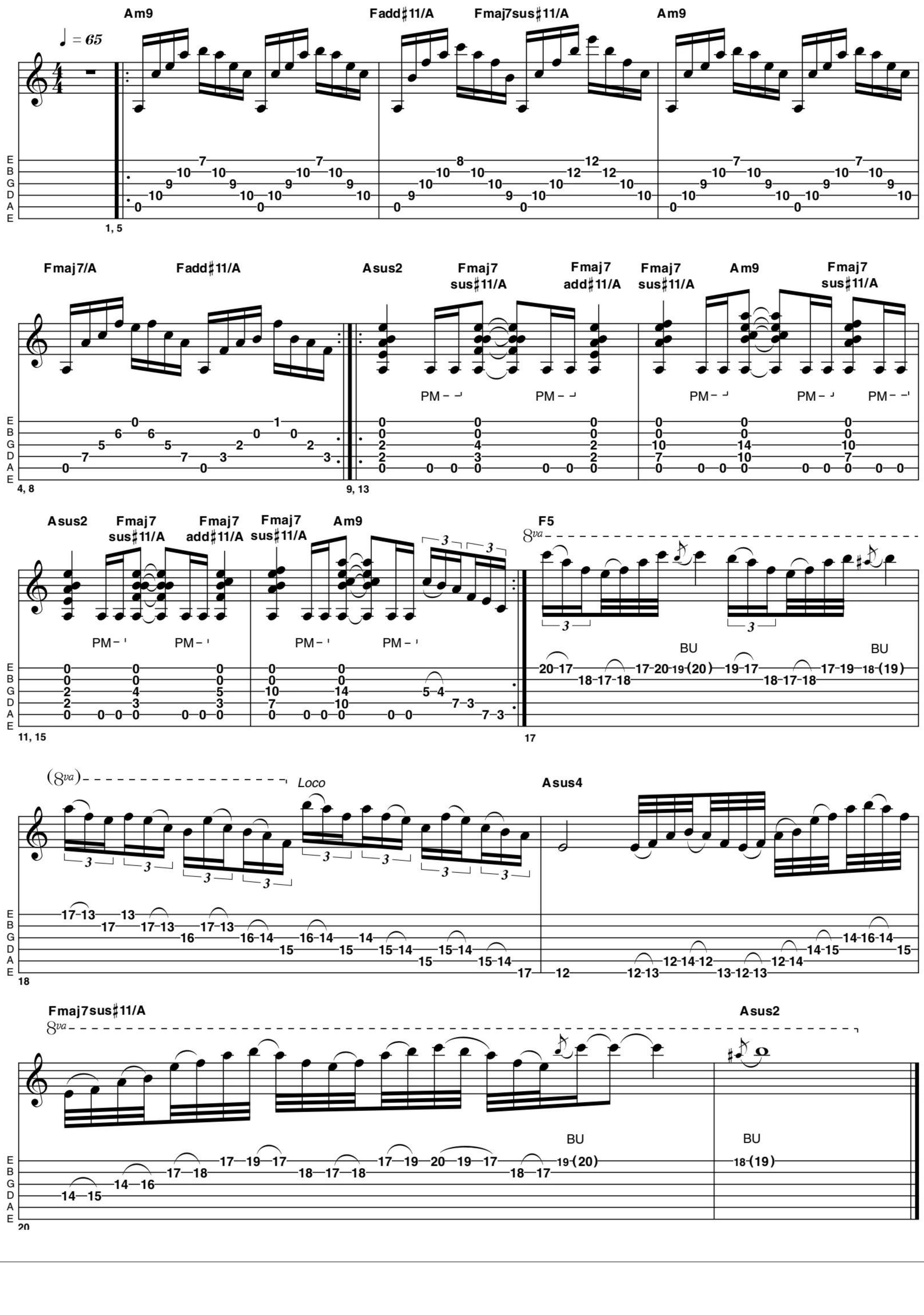
## EXAMPLE 1 THE HIRAJOSHI SCALE - KEY OF A (A-B-C-E-F)

**Bars 1-4** We kick things off with an arpeggio figure based around the chords of A Minor and F Major, extended to highlight the scale's stronger intervals, giving the progression a rich mood and evoking a sound of this Japanese scale.

**Bars 9-12** Our second riff makes use of a powerful, overdriven tone. Once again we highlight the characterises of the Hirajoshi, the total centre based around A Minor, but pedalling off the open fifth string with tight palm muting. Again we highlight the strong and unusual intervals of the scale, highlighting the 2nd and ♭6 intervals again within the A Minor totally, plus the #4 against the F Major. This section and the previous chord clusters and their intervals produce a beautiful yet haunting dissonance.

**Bars 17-18** Here's our solo, with some Marty Friedman and Jason Becker inspired phrasing, including outside notes moving into scale tones, plus a powerful descending figure that highlights the close intervals.

**Bars 19-21** We conclude this piece with an ascending lick that shifts in octaves and has a strong Japanese sound. Take care with the speed of this figure, especially when crossing positions.

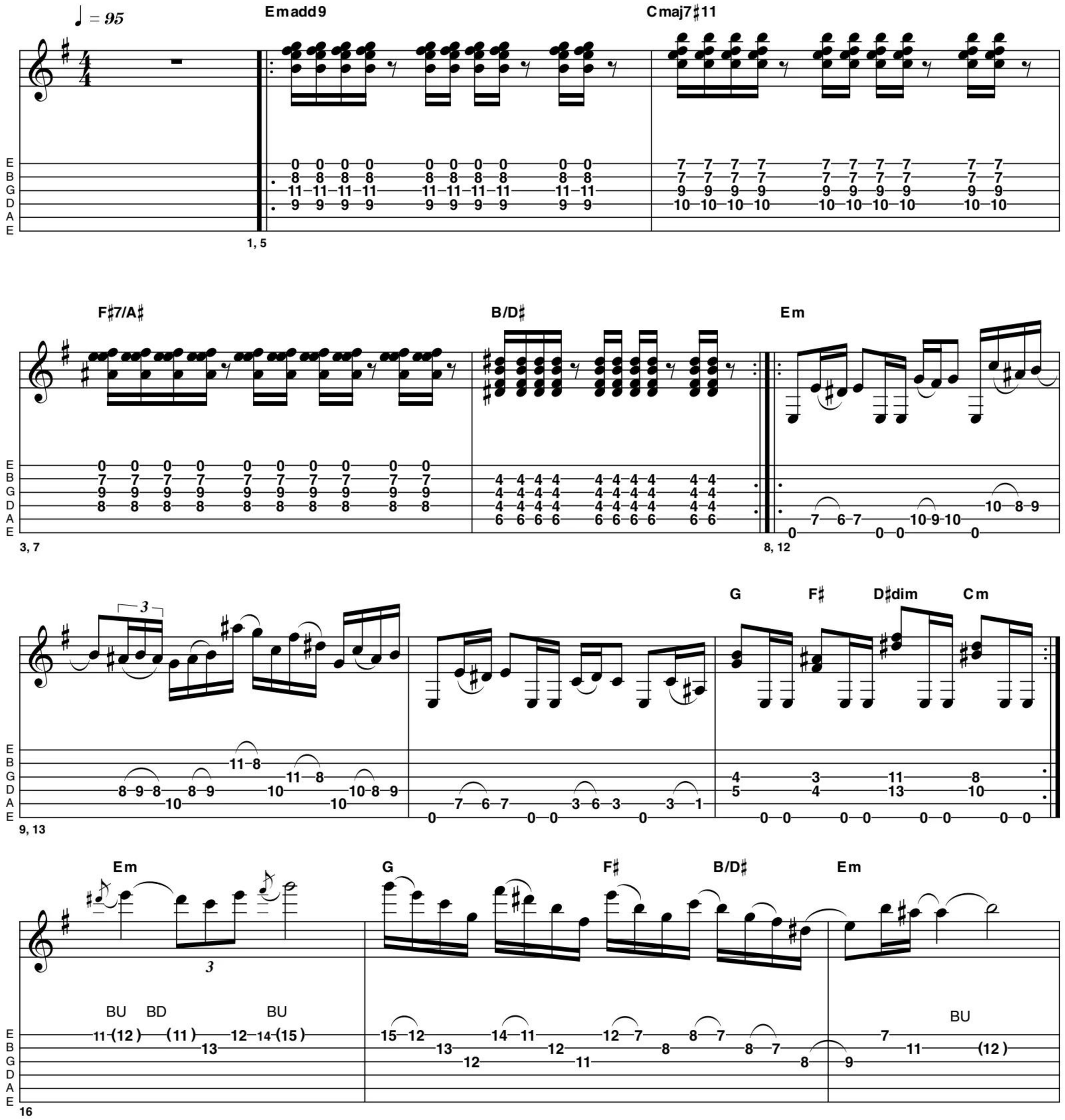


**VIDEO & AUDIO** https://bit.ly/4bghT62

## EXAMPLE 2 THE HUNGARIAN GYPSY SCALE - KEY OF E (E-F-G-A#-B-C-D#)

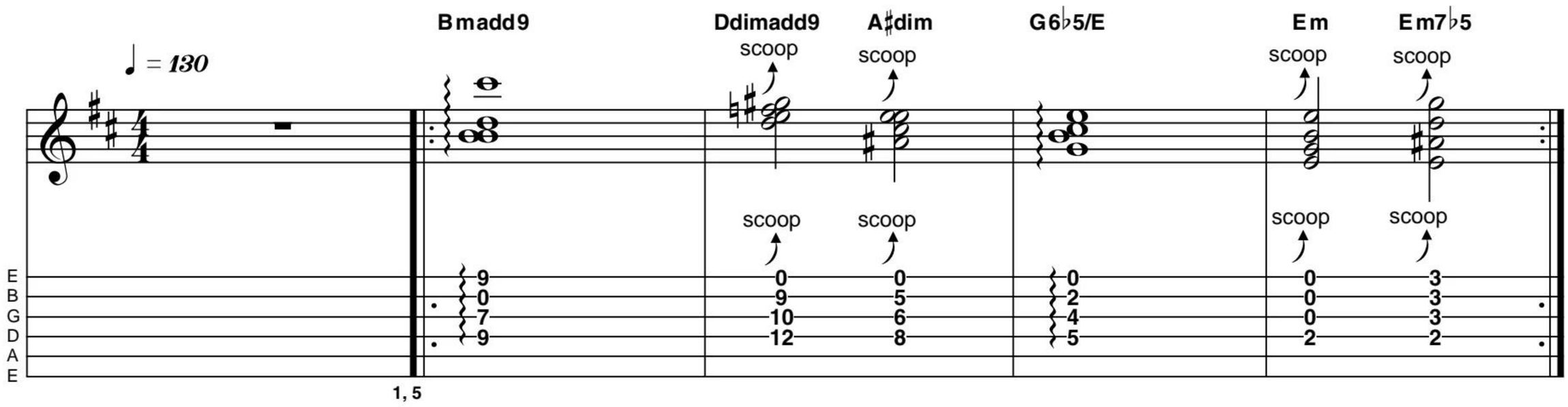
**Bars 1-4** Our first section includes a selection of chords that are constructed from the E Hungarian Gypsy scale. Take care with the 16th-note rhythmic syncopations; repeat the audio if you find it difficult.

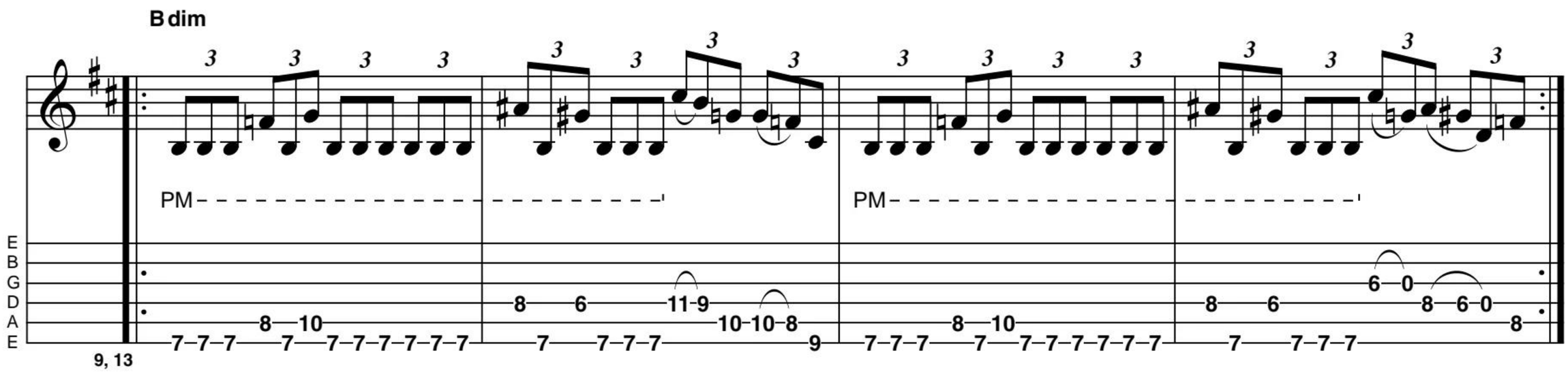
**Bars 9-12** Here's our main riff, and in contrast to the clean intro section it should be performed with a driven tone. This pedals off the sixth string and highlights the semitone intervals, as well the scale's chromatic elements. I have outlined the angular quality of the scale with a slightly awkward string skipping section, so take care. This riff also includes a section of diatonic 3rds that outline the chords of G Major, F# Augmented, D# Diminished and C Minor.

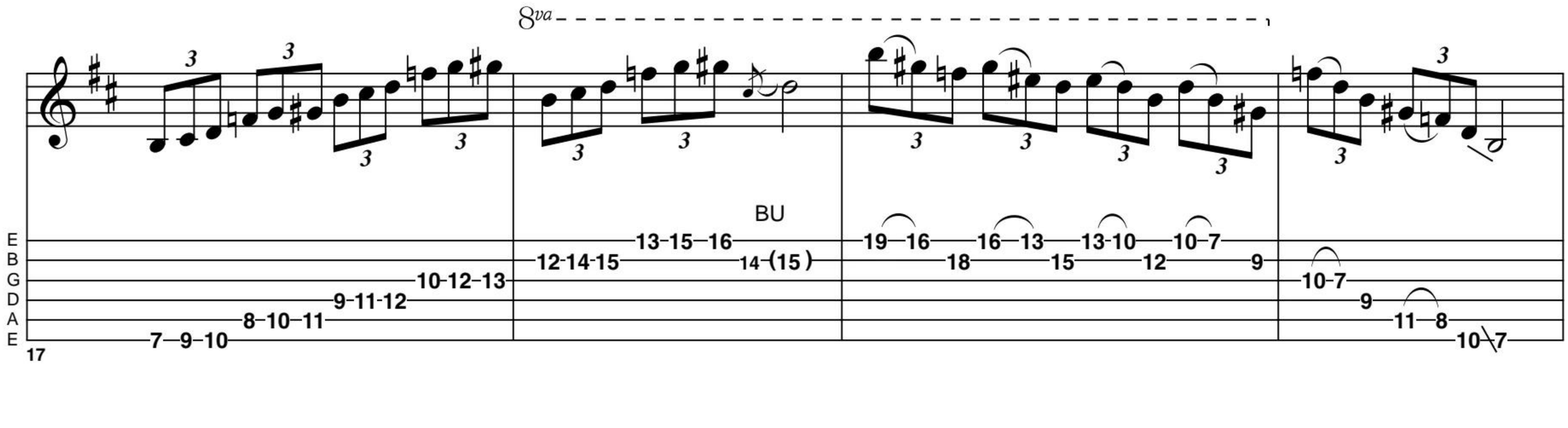
**Bars 17-19** The solo kicks off with some Marty Friedman-style string bends, before a descending diatonic arpeggio based around C Major and B Major, and concludes with an E Minor figure that outlines the Minor/Major 7th tonality of the I chord. This is followed by more stylistic bends. **Bars 20-21** We conclude things with an ascending 16th-note triplet legato run played on the top two strings. Pay attention to the wide stretch fingerings required to accommodate the unusual DNA of this scale.

## EXAMPLE 3 THE ARABIAN SCALE - KEY OF B (B-C#-D-E-F-G-G#-A#)

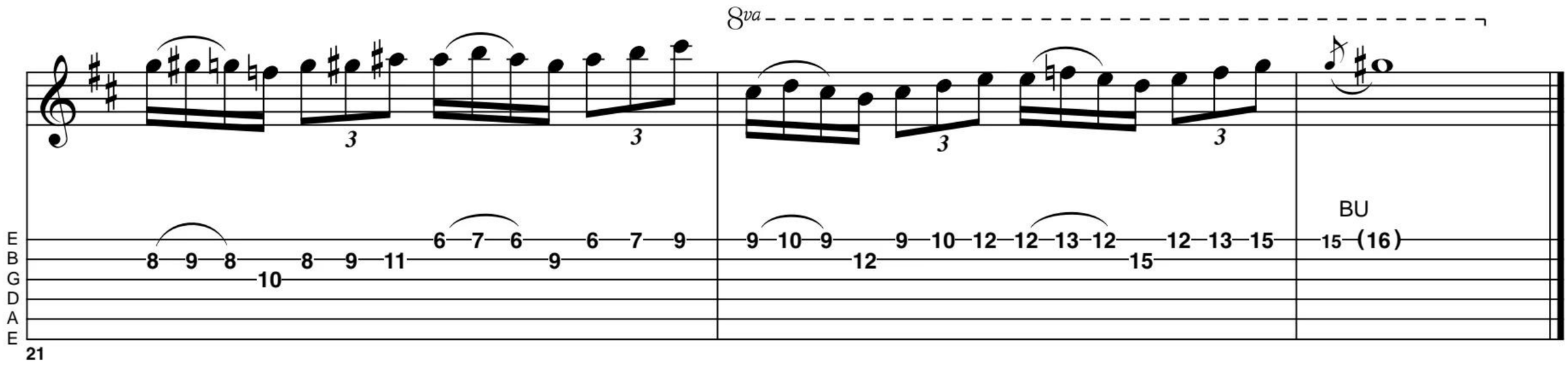
**Bars 1-4** This B Arabian Scale example starts with some clean chords performed with rakes and whammy bar scoops. The chords have a dark and unsettling sound, and we can include both an E Minor and an Em7♭5 chord from its chord family. It presents some interesting chord options when analysed. **Bars 9-12** This section features an angular sounding riff that pedals off of the B root note. Pay attention to your picking hand as you'll have to cross strings as you maintain the pedal tone.

**Bars 17-18** This run illustrates the symmetrical nature of the scale, and maintains the same finger permutation while crossing all six strings as it ascends.
**Bars 19-20** Here a descending Diminished 7th arpeggio ends with a full six-string shape. Pay attention to the position shifts, while maintaining the pattern.
**Bars 21-23** Our solo concludes with ascending run that once again demonstrates the symmetrical layout of this scale.



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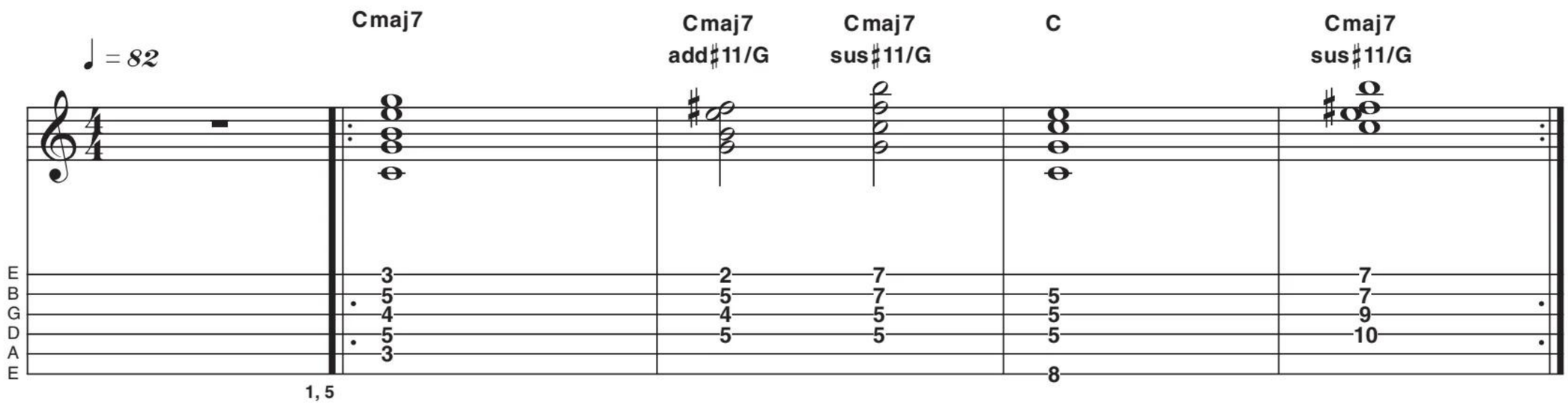
## EXAMPLE 4 THE CHINESE SCALE - KEY OF C (C-E-F#-G-B)

**Bars 1-4** Here's our first Major idea, with chords constructed from the C Chinese scale. As this scale is closely related to the Lydian mode the chord progression outlines the #4 interval as well as the Major 7th.

**Bars 9-16** This picked arpeggio figure again underpins the #4 interval, as well as demonstrating how we can construct clusters of notes to imply harmony.

**Bars 17-18** Our solo features some stylistic oriental inspired phrasing, achieved by bending the first note of each phrase by pulling the string down.

**Bars 19-21** We conclude this excample with a double-picked descending line, reminiscent of something Marty Friedman would play, before we conclude with the final cascading chord.



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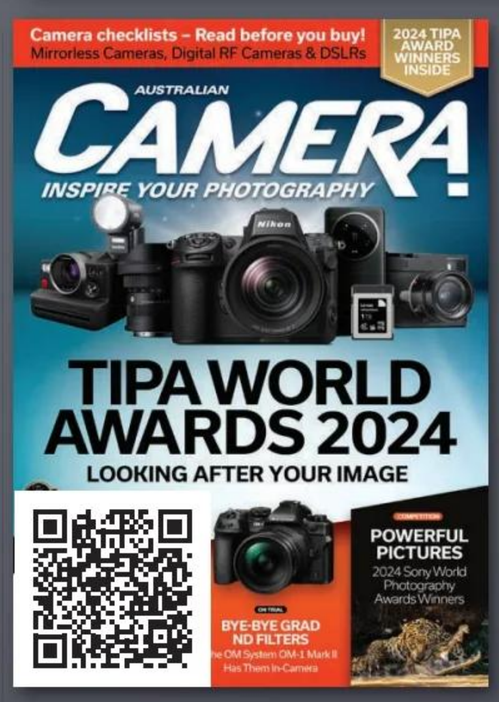

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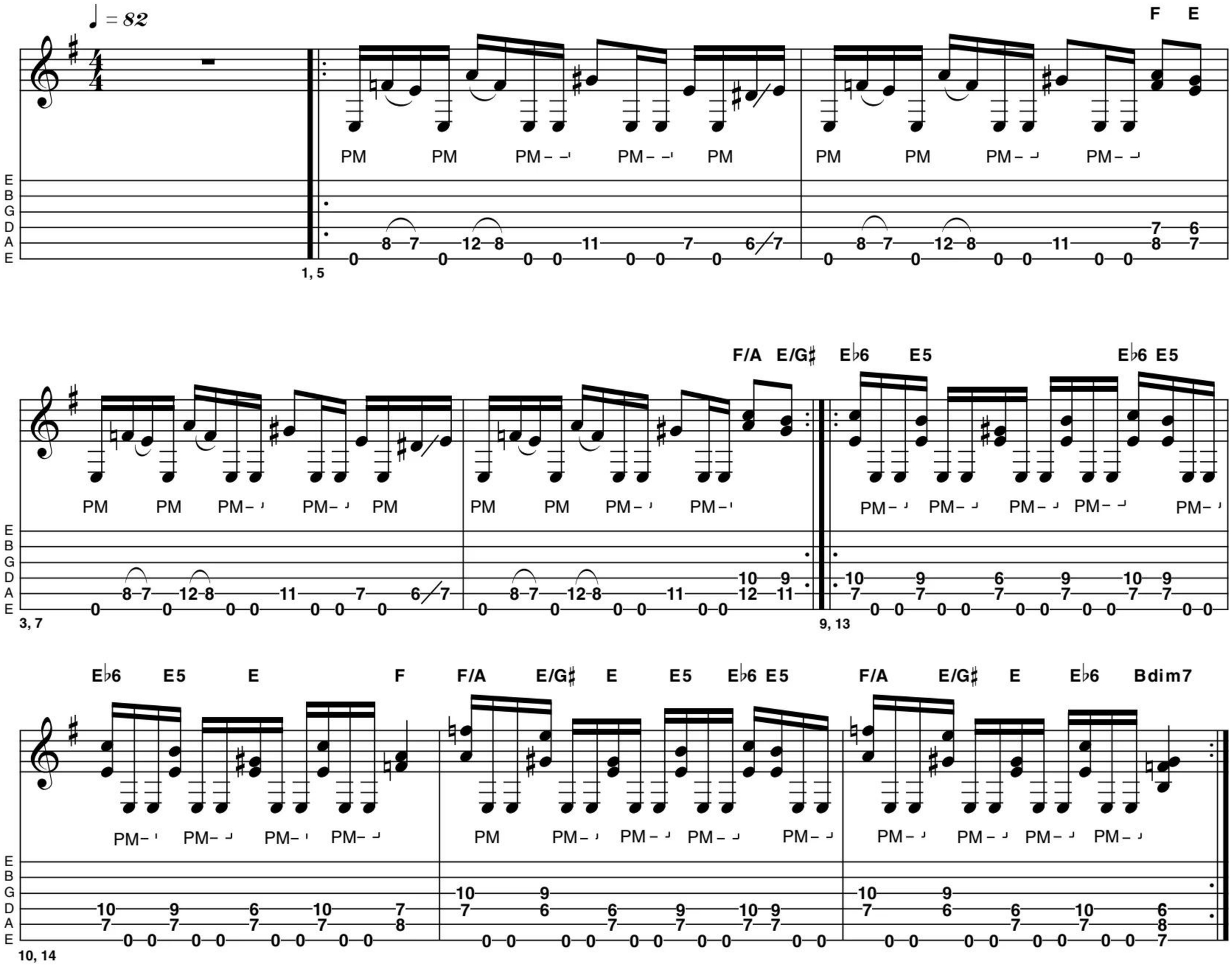
## **EXAMPLE 5** THE BYZANTINE SCALE - KEY OF E (E-F-G#-A-B-C-D#)

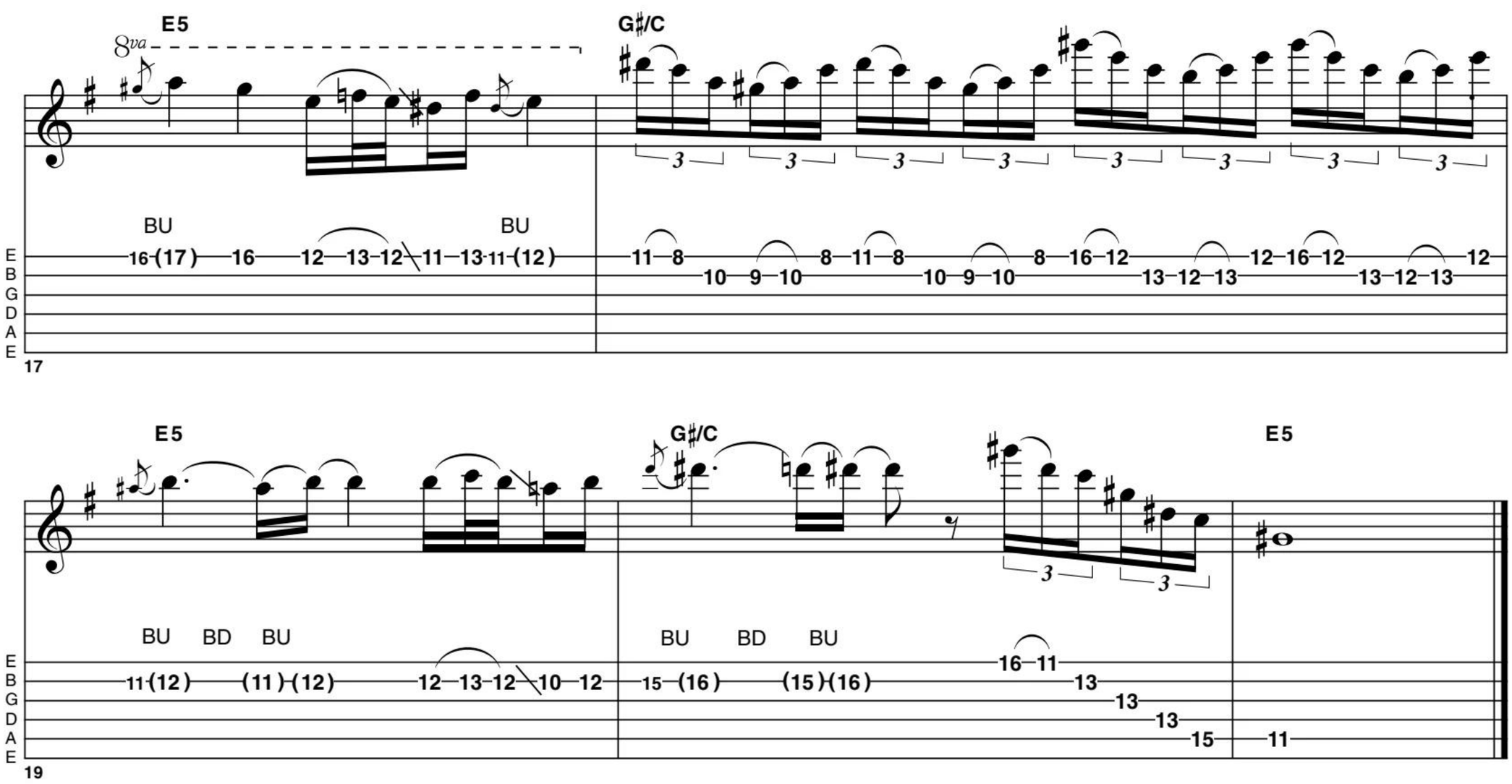
**Bars 1-4** As our opening riff kicks off it features a pedal tone figure that includes diatonic 3rds which outline the chords of F Major and E Major, creating a strong Eastern sound that typifies the Byzantine scale.

**Bars 9-12** Here we encounter a second pedal tone riff that includes more diad or double-stop ideas against the E pedal tone, once again capturing the mystical flavour of this very musical sounding set of notes.

**Bars 17-18** The solo starts here, with some string bends, speedy slurs and slides, all designed to highlight the chromatic nature of the scale. This is followed by an ascending 16th-note triplet idea performed on the top two strings. Pay attention to the speed of this lick as it's made more tricky due to the position shifts.

**Bars 19-21** We come to the end of the solo with more stylistic string bending phrases, which concluding with a descending G# Minor arpeggio.



## EXAMPLE 6 THE ORIENTAL SCALE - KEY OF D (D-E FLAT-F#-G-A FLAT-B-C)

**Bars 1-4** We start with clean chords highlighting the Altered chord tonality of the D7♭5 as well as the A♭/D. This intro also includes an E♭ Augmented chord, giving you some indication of the harmonised chords available in this scale. Pay attention too, to the piece's progressive rock 5/4 time signature.

**Bars 9-12** The riff has a strong Joe Satriani feel, harmonically and rhythmically. We pedal off the open fourth string to underpin the key centre while shifting the harmony, playing double-stops on the third and second strings.

**Bars 17-18** The solo gets underway with an extended figure that begins with an A♭7 arpeggio and concludes with a powerful line that outlines the Dominant ♭7 elements of the Oriental scale.

**Bars 19-21** Our solo, and indeed this feature, finishes off with an interesting descending lick that borrows ideas from familiar blues-rock phrasing but with a harmonic twist due to the scale's chromatic layout. The solo ends in style with some tasty blues phrasing that again outlines the sound of the D7♭5 chord.

**Words, guitars and backing** Martin Cooper

# POWER UP!

## Master the rhythm and lead sounds of Aussie classic rock legends, AC/DC's Malcolm and Angus Young

**Formed in 1973 in Sydney, Australia by Scottish born brothers Malcolm and Angus Young, AC/DC need little in the way of introduction. There have been various lineup changes in the band, most notably Brian Johnson taking over as lead vocalist in 1980 following Bon Scott's death, and Stevie Young taking over rhythm guitar duties from Malcolm in 2014. For our purposes, Angus and Malcolm represent the bedrock of the AC/DC sound.**

Angus Young's influences range from Muddy Waters, Freddie King and Chuck Berry – and you can probably hear a kind of turbo-charged version of Chuck's rock 'n' roll style in Angus' soloing approach. Malcolm was influenced by many of the same players, but it's his rock solid rhythm guitar sound that was the foundation of AC/DC.

Keeping this in mind, we've created a track in the style of the band's classic lineup for you to play along to and we've tabbed the parts out below. The track is in the B Mixolydian mode, with a shift to G major in our chorus. The solo at the end is, again, in B Mixolydian, but leans into blues phrasing with B minor pentatonic licks. Be sure to follow the accompanying links for each section, courtesy of our friends at Total Guitar.

Photo Getty

## 1 RIFF AND LICK

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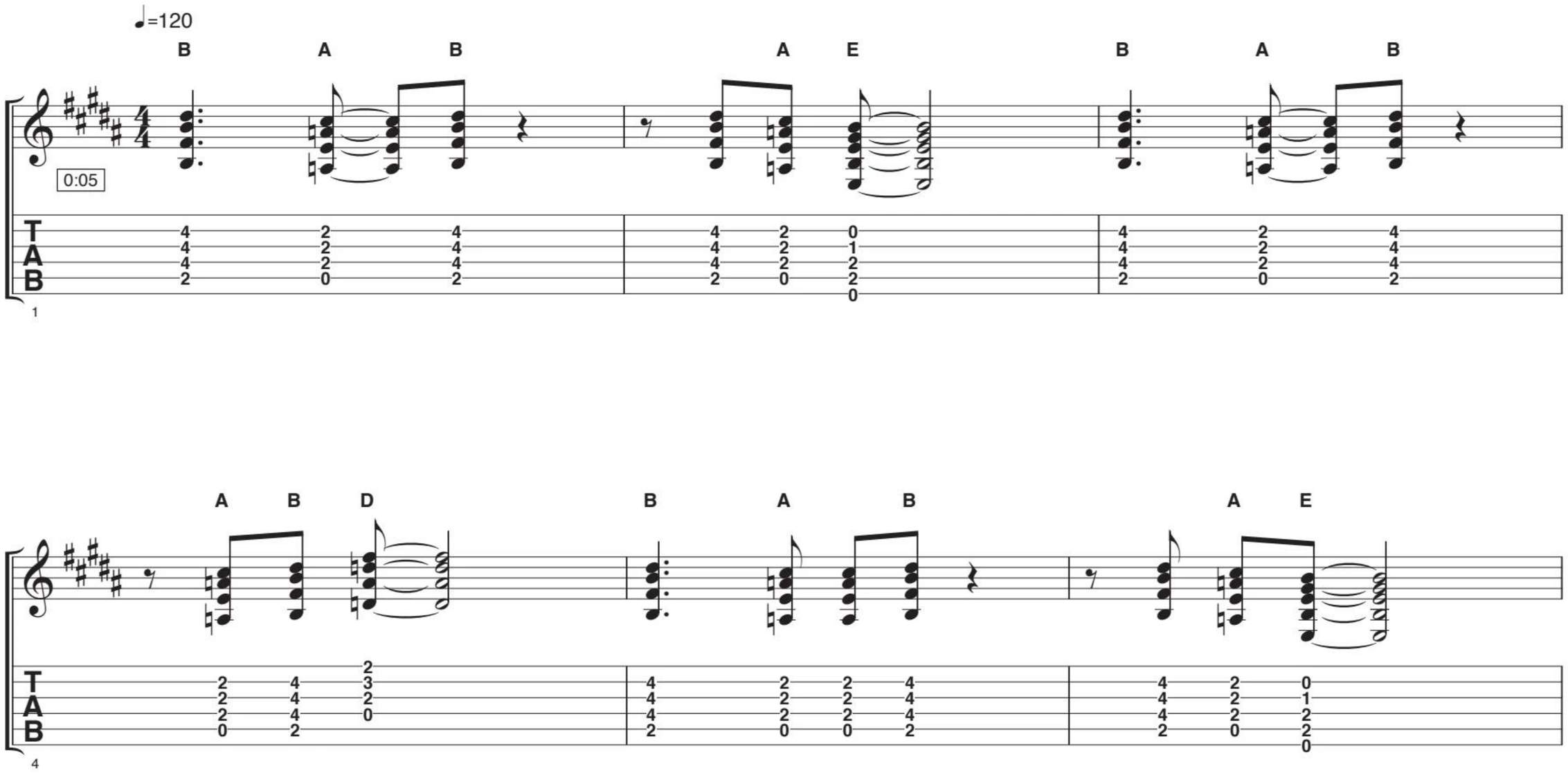


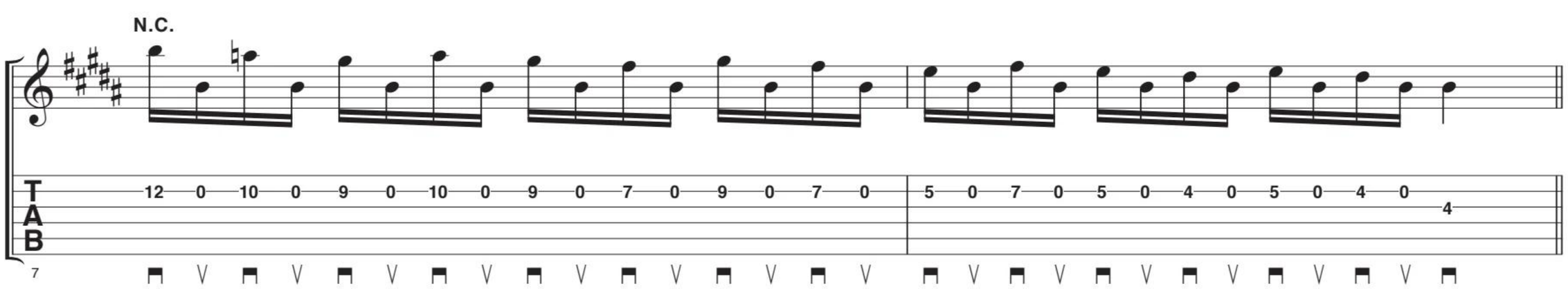


Here's our intro, inspired by Malcolm's parts in songs like *It's A Long Way To The Top...* and *Thunderstruck*, with our closing lick calling up the latter track's blazing opening line delivered by Angus. We'd recommend practising these last two bars separately, then piecing it all together as you gain confidence.

## 2 RIFF VARIATIONS

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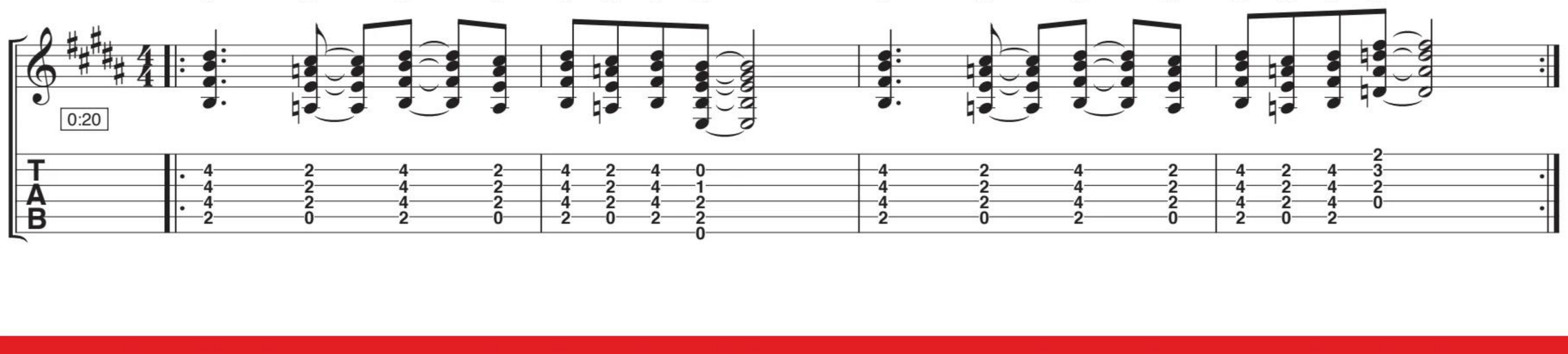


This riff is, in part, a rehash of our intro, albeit with a couple of variations. This is classic AC/DC rhythm playing – so that means rock solid timing and downstrokes throughout. Down-up-style alternate strumming would have a much looser, more fluid sound that's just not in keeping with the band.

## 3 KEY CHANGE

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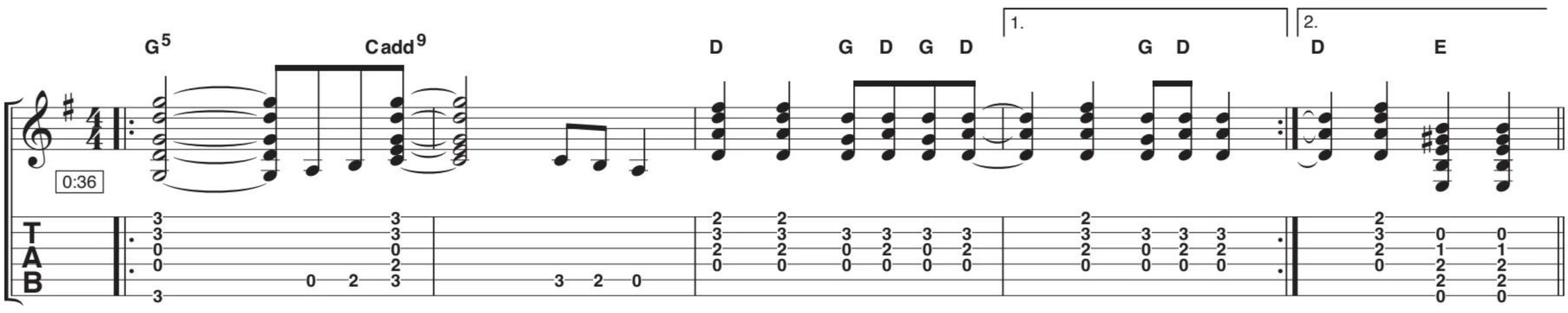


Here, we're hitting a key change from B Mixolydian in the previous sections to G major here, and we're taking our inspiration from *You Shook Me All Night Long*. The phrases at the end of bars 1 and 2 are a classic way to link between a G and C chord – an idea that's by no means limited to AC/DC!

## 4 SOLOING STYLE

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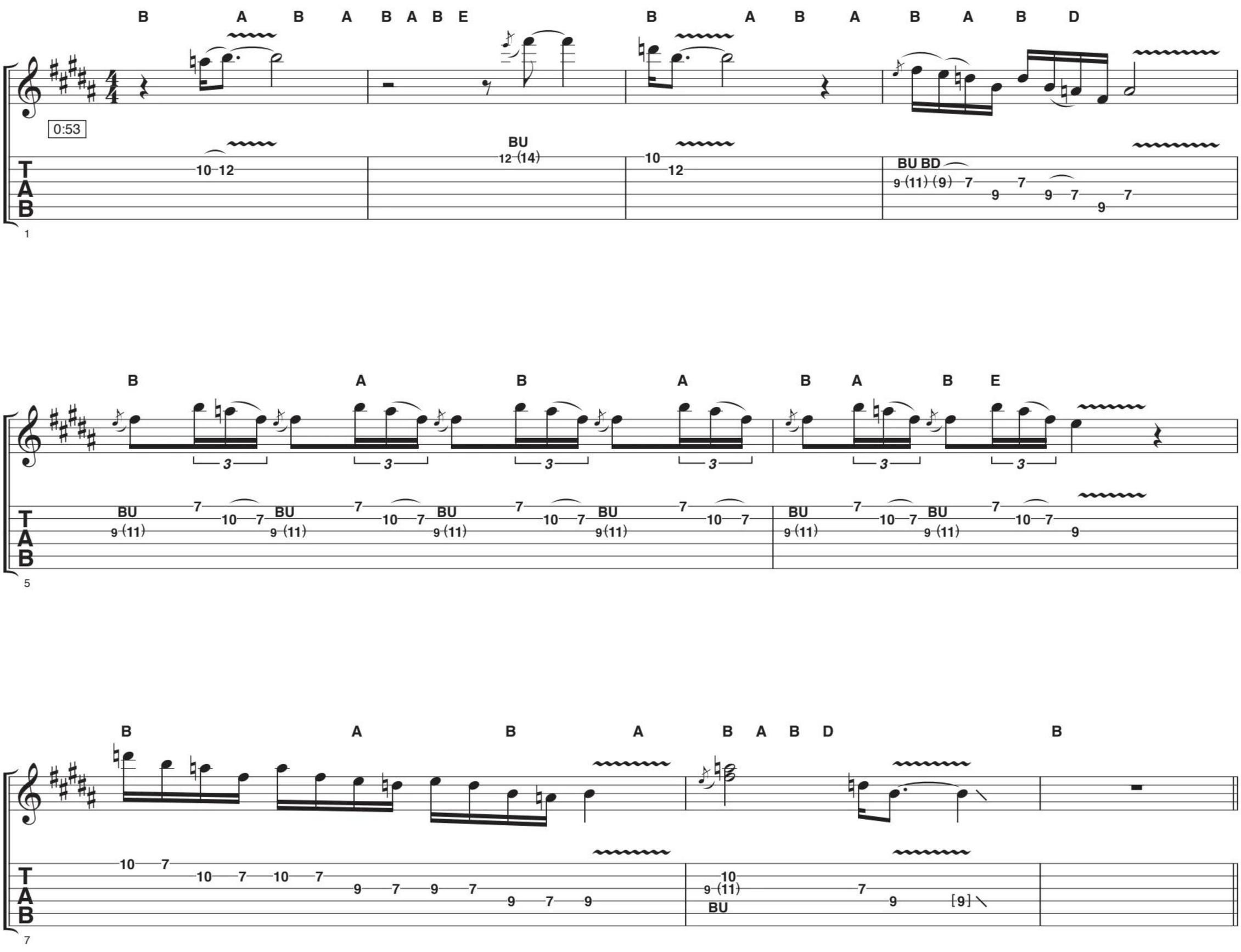
Here, we take a look at Angus' soloing approaches. Take note of the pentatonic runs in bars 4 and 7, and also the Chuck Berry-esque repeating idea in bars 5 and 6 – all classic Angus stuff. We're also using another staple Angus approach of employing the minor pentatonic scale over a predominantly major scale (the Mixolydian, in fact). Targeting the minor 3rds of the minor pentatonic scale over the major 3rds of the largely Mixolydian chord progression gives an edgy, bluesy sound.

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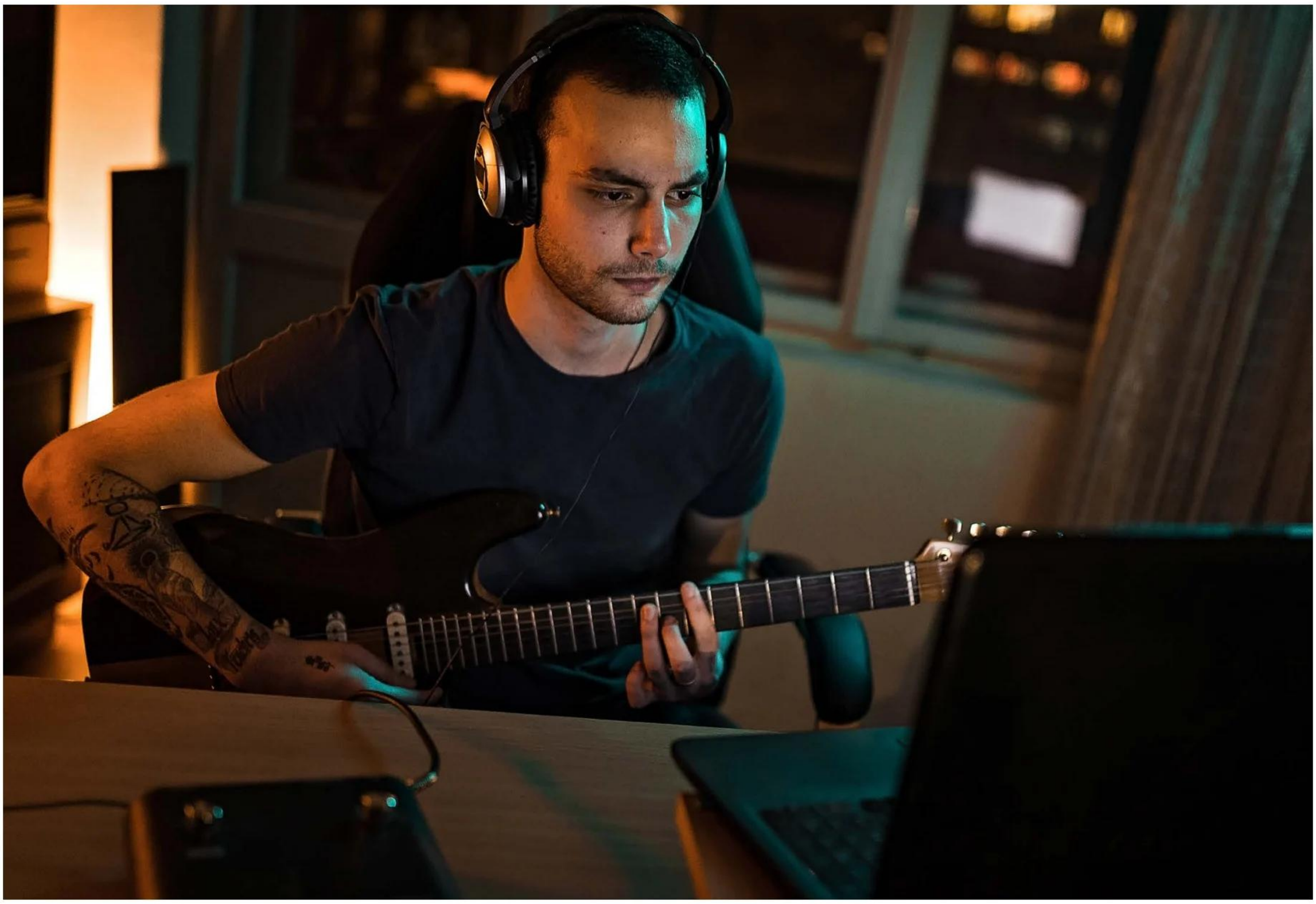


# GEORGE LEVER & FORRESTER SAVELL ON RECORDING GUITAR

Lever and Savell have worked with some of metal's biggest names, and now they're offering you advice on getting the most out of your bedroom productions before, during and after you've pressed record. Words by **Phil Weller**.

Gone are the days of the inferior bedroom producer. As production gear and software becomes ever-more affordable, spare rooms become more viable alternatives to Abbey Road. Whether your homemade productions are for sharing with bandmates, seducing industry professionals or official releases, the tech is more accessible than ever – but making your music stand out in a saturated market isn't.

With so many variables to self-recording and mixing guitars, as well as a raft of conflicting information online, we sat down with esteemed producers George Lever (Sleep Token, Loathe, Monuments) and Forrester Savell (Karnivool, Tesseract, Caligula's Horse) to learn about what to do, and what not do, to make your productions pop.

## BEFORE RECORDING

Like everything, preparation is key. Savell stresses the importance of players learning their parts before entering a recording environment; but Lever goes one step further by emphasizing the value of players "understanding their instrument to the best of the ability".

He says: "There's an assumption that recorded guitar should sound like MIDI, but that ignores the builds of different guitars – the way it's set up, the string tension relationship with the tuning that you're playing in, and how the left-hand influences microtonal changes to the tuning.

"Or whether the pickups can perform in the way you want them to. The best thing someone can do before hitting record is become the most intuitive musician that they can, based on what they want to achieve with their instrument."

He also recommends tuning to a piano at full volume, rather than relying on a tuner, as they "don't tell you about the variation that might be occurring above and below the pick attack, or during the sustain." He adds: "When tuning to a piano note, you can hear how in tune you are versus the piano – that's why you'll see orchestras tuning to each other."

## SAFETY FIRST

Savell says bedroom producers can be

**"AS A SAFETY MECHANISM YOU SHOULD BE RECORDING YOUR GUITARS WITH A DI SO THAT YOUR TONE CAN BE RESCUED IF NEEDED."**

GETTY

guilty of "poor tonal choices," so it's important to set up a get-out-of-jail-free card. "As a safety mechanism you should be recording your guitars with a DI so that your tone can be rescued if needed."

You also want a suitable gain level. If it's too loud there's the risk of clipping, which is a difficult thing to fix. But if you overcompensate, a recording may include too much of the electrical noise inherent in guitars, cables and pedals. Says Lever: "I'll make the loudest sound I can make on the guitar until it doesn't clip on a preamp, then go back one notch."

## SETTING THE TONE

In order to avoid the tone-chasing rabbit hole while recording, familiarity outranks experimentation. "Always record with a guitar sound you like," Savell says. "It's good for comfort and it also gives mixing engineers – if you're going to work with one – a reference point if they want to build new tones."

If you're demoing your new track with your favorite tone, how should you dial in the double track's tone? Savell says it comes down to trial and error, but adds: "There are characteristics of different amps and tones that I find work well together.

"A high-gain, smooth-sounding amp like a Peavey 5150 or Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier pairs well with a slightly backed-off breakup amp like a Marshall. It gives you a combination of saturation and a more percussive sound."

Lever's approach is a little more streamlined: "You can't use one rule for everything: add what you think is missing from that first tone. You don't want to compromise either tone."

## LESS IS MORE

Both engineers agree that recording more guitars isn't necessarily conducive to a bigger, punchier sound. "Quad tracking is something that I only really do when I know that the guitarist is exceptionally tight," Savell says. "The more guitar performances you start stacking on top of each other, the smearier they can become – you lose the articulation of what's being played.

Lever adds: "Instead of tracking more of the same, I'd be thinking about playing something different with other layers, like higher or lower octaves, ambient or lead parts to fill out the sound. Then it becomes more melodious and interesting."

## TRACKING

Recognizing that many of us record their demo parts in isolation, Savell stresses that it's "important to listen to what the other instruments are playing. If each member records to an earlier demo version, they're not bouncing off each other's performances – it gets a little stale and things can fall out of sync."

Asked if it's better to aim for fluid takes or a more fragmented approach, Lever says: "It comes down to how shit the guitarist is. If it sounds good, then I don't care. There's a lot of ego involved in recording, but that's often for the musician on their own. The person who ends up enjoying the music doesn't give a fuck about how you recorded it."

## EDITING

As technology improves, it becomes easier to salvage a poor take or rescue an ear-bleeding tone. But therein lies

YOUTUBE, PERRY DEGENNARO

another pitfall: precision editing can starve takes of their character.

"I like to keep the drums and bass nice and tight, but I'll leave the guitars quite unedited unless they're out of time or out of tune," says Savell. "The guitars are where you can re-inject an organic feel to the song.

"Distorted guitar tones can get pretty gnarly up in the higher frequencies, to the point that you can hear if too many notches have been made with the EQs. It can be detrimental."

## HOW DO I USE EQ?

Savell offers a jargon-free explanation of what guitarists should be looking for when they pull up their guitar's EQ.

"It's going to depend on the voicing of the guitar part," he explains. "If it's a low, heavy rhythm part, you might be concerned about how much body and bottom end is in there.

"You might want to take some of the low-end out so it doesn't flood the mix. With high parts, you might want to remove some of the harshness by taking some high-end out.

"The first thing I'd always be trying is volume – finding that point where the guitar is audible. Then I'd approach it as more of a subtractive EQ approach to remove the parts of the frequency spectrum that aren't necessary."

## MIXING AND PANNING

Once guitars are tracked, finding a spot in the mix where they shine can be a real headache. "Guitars are always slightly above cymbals but below vocals," Lever says. "That's the pocket they're given because they sit on the extremes of the stereo image.

"The thing they're going to come into contact with the most when mixing is cymbals. But the cymbal information that takes up the area the guitars are in is not very musical; it can be quite brash. You don't need to hear it."

Both engineers hard-pan rhythm guitars, meaning they're put as far out on either side of the mix as possible. Lever only changes that "if you intentionally want to make the song smaller" – a quiet verse section, for instance. This can also help make other sections sound even bigger.

"Where you pan ambient layers and lead layers is going to depend on other elements in the mix," Savell says. "I'll pan them to where I'll hear them best; you don't want two different tracks to compete for the same sonic spaces. You especially want to put ambient guitars in the holes of the mix to fill in the sonic spectrum."

## WHAT TO DO WHEN A GUITAR DOESN'T CUT THROUGH THE MIX

You nailed the take, but you can't hear it in the mix. How do you troubleshoot? "Panning can be a great way to make things stick out," says Savell. "If you've got one guitar in the middle, as soon as you start to move it off to the side, it instantly gets more attention because it becomes asymmetrical.

"The other thing I'd ask if it's not standing out is, 'Is it the right part? Is there something that would carry that moment better?"

Lever predicts the drum track will usually be the main issue. "If you still can't hear the rhythm guitars in the side signal [the isolated side of the mix where the guitar sits] then you've likely got something that's masking or clouding them. A lot of the time it'll be cymbals covering up the guitar attack and aggression.

"People often misunderstand the usefulness of the midrange. You can have a scooped guitar tone but still have midrange in place. That carries across all sound systems and anchors the position of the guitars in the mix."

## IS IT BETTER TO MIX WITH HEADPHONES OR SPEAKERS?

"Headphones are essentially just microscopes," Lever argues. "Speakers offer a larger picture view. It's about understanding how each one complements the other."

For Savell, "the most important thing is to do whatever you're comfortable with. If you're making and listening to other music in the same space, you're probably going to have a pretty good idea of how things are meant to sound. It's only when you're not confident that you need to throw on the headphones for more detail."

As Lever points out, guitarists need not get bogged down in thinking they need the priciest monitors available to mix on. It's unlikely your listener will be afforded such luxuries at the other end.

"The most commonly used headphones are the wireless AirPods now, so they're the reference stage for music at this moment in time," he says. "It would be silly to not check your mix with them. But don't mix specifically for them; the likelihood is the people that are listening on these headphones don't care."

## SHOULD I GET MY RELEASES PROFESSIONALLY MIXED?

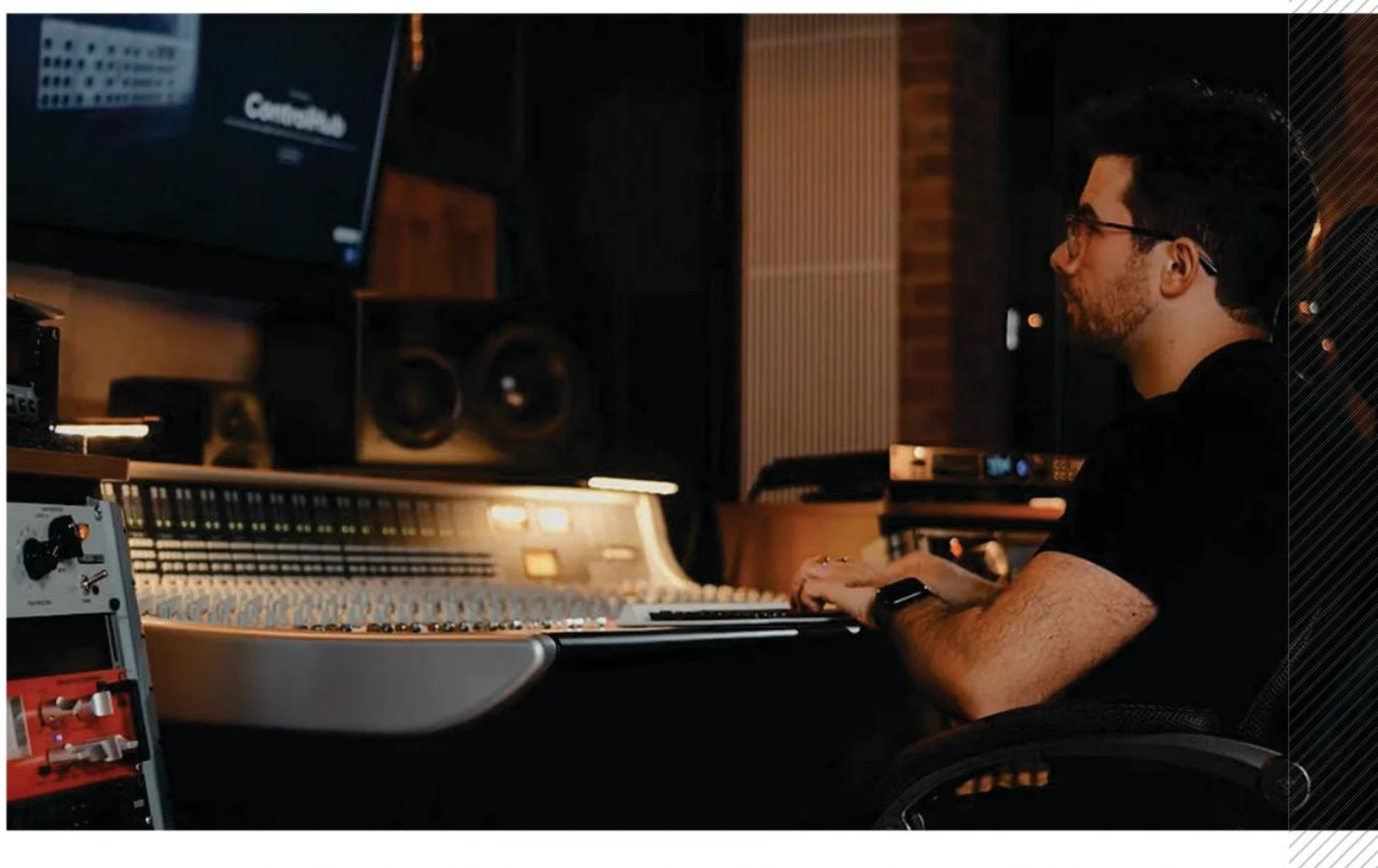
On the subject of working with a mixing engineer, Lever says it's all about your own intent and mindset. "If you don't value what a person is going to bring to the table, then there's no point working with them," he states – but underlines that collaborating with the right people can help your music cut through a saturated market.

"When it comes showcasing your music, remove your ego and understand that most people are only ever going to listen to your song once before moving on. So how can you stand out and stay there?

"There are a lot of people that believe that they have to be the songwriter, producer, mixer and mastering engineer. But if you took on all the roles in another creative industry, you'd be seen as a madman.

"You do not know what happens as a result of collaboration," he concludes. "You definitely know what happens if you stay stuck in your bedroom."

**"GUITARISTS NEED NOT GET BOGGED DOWN IN THINKING THEY NEED THE PRICIEST MONITORS AVAILABLE TO MIX ON. IT'S UNLIKELY YOUR LISTENER WILL BE AFFORDED SUCH LUXURIES AT THE OTHER END."**



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# Shure SM7dB

Iconic speech and vocal mic gets a welcome boost. The same, but better? Review by **Chris Corfield**

If you've listened to a podcast over the last 10 years, then you'll likely have heard the work of the Shure SM7B, which has become the go-to speech microphone of its era. Building on the legacy of the SM7B, the SM7dB, which we're looking at today, aims to increase its capabilities by introducing a built-in preamp, offering up to +28dB of gain, making it, in theory, more usable across a variety of different applications.

The SM7dB aims to simplify the recording process by essentially eliminating the need for external preamps. This feature is particularly beneficial for users with audio interfaces that lack sufficient gain, as it ensures optimal sound levels without additional (or more expensive) equipment. Less background hiss at higher levels, and a much cleaner sound available for recording or streaming as a result. Simple.

Very little else has changed; the SM7dB's cardioid polar pattern still effectively isolates the sound source, minimising background noise and making it ideal for home studios and professional recording environments alike. The SM7dB also retains the iconic design - other than a slightly stealthier-looking appearance - and sound signature of its predecessor, ensuring the same warm, smooth audio quality that has made the SM7B a staple in studios worldwide. For musicians seeking a reliable microphone for studio recordings, the Shure SM7dB offers a user-friendly and high-quality solution.

The Shure SM7dB maintains the iconic design of its predecessors with a sleek, matte black finish and rugged construction that - after years of using an SM7B - I'd have no problems recommending. As a dynamic mic, it's already inherently more robust than a typical condenser, and its rugged exterior gives us extra cause for confidence. Weighing approximately 837g, it still feels substantial in the hand and well-built, ensuring longevity even under rigorous use. The SM7dB also includes a detachable windscreen, which helps reduce plosive sounds and unwanted noise, and did a great job in my testing studio of keeping those nasty pops to a minimum.

**"For speech applications, like podcasts or streaming, there aren't many that compare when it comes to unlocking that rich, velvety broadcast sound you hear from the professionals."**

The SM7dB genuinely excels in delivering clear, natural sound across a wide frequency range (50 to 20,000 Hz). For speech applications, like podcasts or streaming, there aren't many that compare when it comes to unlocking that rich, velvety broadcast sound you hear from the professionals. Its cardioid polar pattern performs well at isolating the sound source, minimizing background noise and making it great for less-than-ideal recording spaces.

The microphone's performance is further enhanced by features like bass roll-off and presence boost, which allow users to tailor the frequency response to suit different recording needs - sometimes nice to head things off at source if you can, rather than fixing everything in post, and these extra controls were welcomed.

The elephant in the room comes with the comparison to the original SM7B. Clearly, the primary advantage of the SM7dB over the SM7B is the integrated preamp, which addresses one of the main limitations of the SM7B - its need for a high-gain external preamp to achieve optimal sound levels. This makes the SM7dB more user-friendly and accessible, particularly for podcasters and streamers who may not have access to high-end audio interfaces. The sound signature of the SM7dB remains faithful to the SM7B, ensuring the warm, smooth audio quality that users have come to expect from Shure, so while it is a new model, it's an evolution rather than a revolution.

The Shure SM7dB is a worthy successor to the SM7B, offering all the benefits of its predecessor with the added convenience of an integrated preamp. Its robust design, excellent sound isolation, and versatile features make it a top choice for professionals in various audio fields. While slightly more expensive, the built-in gain control and ease of setup justify the investment for those seeking high-quality, hassle-free recording solutions.

## VERDICT

**Whether you're upgrading from the SM7B or exploring professional microphones for the first time, the SM7dB is a compelling option that stands out in its category.**

- Plenty of headroom.
- Same sturdy build and iconic design.
- Pricey, but think of it as an investment.

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# Fender Player II Stratocaster and Fender Player II Telecaster

The second iteration of this affordable, ever-faithful Mexican-made line-up has landed, with improved hardware, custom colours, and maple or proper rosewood fingerboards. Review by **Neville Marten**

The fact that several of our own magazine and website staff have owned and gigged the original Player Series guitars is testament to how much Fender got right in 2018, when they replaced the previous Standard range. So, following in the footsteps of the US-built American Vintage II Strat and Tele, these models from Ensenada, Baja California were eagerly awaited.

Most obvious of version two changes is a choice of new colours. Among the various models are four original Fender custom finishes that had lain undiscovered in the vaults, so it's great to see something other than the same old suspects (we love them, too, of course). Our Tele's finish is called Birch Green, while the Strat is Hialeah Yellow and with its tinted maple neck, white/black/white pickguard, yellowed pickup covers, knobs, switch and vibrato arm tip, it really does look fabulous. The green Tele's chrome-ware, similar-style 'guard and dark fingerboard offer a different and attractive picture.

Further changes or upgrades come with the Strat's two-point floating vibrato bridge with its bent steel saddles and what Fender calls ClassicGear tuners, both said to improve tuning stability.

Not so obvious but equally welcome is that proper rosewood has replaced the pau ferro of the first Player Series fingerboards. Now, we've always sung the praises of these alternative timbers and for all the obvious reasons. But there is something satisfying about having good old rosewood back. Of course,

NEIL GODWIN

maple is the other option, and both models feature drag-free satin urethane finishes on their necks, with high gloss for the bodies.

Hardware-wise, it's what we've come to expect from modernised versions of these two veterans, the Tele receiving a few more tweaks than its younger sibling. So on both guitars we see hex-key truss rod adjustment through a recess at the headstock, and tuners that marry the vintage Kluson look with Grover-style nut and washer fitting. The Tele's bridge and rear pickup housing features no raised edges but gains the improved intonation of six block steel saddles. Through-body stringing has been retained for that rock-solid feel and tone. On the Tele's pickguard you'll notice two cross-head screws for neck-pickup height adjustment. Fender has been doing this for years on non-vintage style instruments and it's certainly better than having to remove the 'plate to access them.

Both instruments also receive 22 medium jumbo frets on 241mm radius fingerboards – Player Plus models have 305mm radius 'boards. Fender has gone for its popular modern C neck profile here, a more slender affair than you'd find on 50s and 60s guitars but not insubstantial, either. Both feature rear skunk stripes as well as boasting rolled fingerboard edges for smooth playability.

Regarding pickups and wiring, it's standard Strat and Tele fare, with three single coils, master volume and two tones for the Strat (the second to tame bridge pickup shrillness) plus five-way blade switch. It's single master tone and volume with three-way selector on the Tele, as usual. Pickups have not changed from the Player Series' original Alnico V single coils, although Fender reminds us that they are marginally hotter and with more bite. If you step up to Player Plus level, Noiseless pickups come as standard.

You can choose between alder, chambered ash or chambered mahogany body woods for your Player IIs. In reality, certain colours come with specific timbers so you can't say, "I want this wood in this finish," if that combination is not available. In general, it seems opaque colours are alder, as are both of ours, while translucent and see-through finishes get to show off the ash or mahogany wood grain.

As previously mentioned, our guitars come with Fender's 'modern C' profile necks. While not skinny, you certainly couldn't call them chunky. There's a distinct feel that the Player Series is aimed at the younger player making their first serious step up the ladder, hence the friendly neck size and nine-gauge strings that come as standard.

And thereby hangs a slight problem, since both of these guitars suffer from quite serious fret rattle. Around the nut area in particular it's noticeable, so a slight slackening of the truss rod to add a little relief might help. Or fit a set of 10s which could be enough to pull the necks forward, add a bit of string tension and alleviate the problem. Nut slots are all over the place, too; some too high and the low E on both too low. These issues are easy to resolve, but if you are that young player graduating from the Squier Affinity that's seen you through to the next level, it's not a great introduction to the proper Fender brand.

**"Each guitar provides a set of clear and articulate voices, in its own instantly recognisable language, making them a very compelling choice"**

Get past the initial let-down, though, and we soon warmed to these guitars. Rolled fingerboard edges, the 241mm fingerboard radius and 22 medium jumbo frets make for a superb playability combo. The speedy licks, big bends and heavy vibrato that typify modern blues-rock playing are well catered for here, and luckily there's no choking off when bending strings further up the neck.

We tested with the excellent Boss Katana Artist Gen 3 combo. As you'd expect, on clean settings we're treated to all the Fender-y snap, warmth and edge for which these instruments are renowned. The Tele is the more strident of the two, its neck pickup a milky liquid tone that suits anything from pop and funk strumming to jazzy runs (with the tone turned down). At the bridge, it's spanky, clanky and delightfully in-yer-face, thinning up beautifully when you combine the two in the middle position. The Strat, too, offers all you expect, with a set of recognisable voices that the Katana reproduces superbly. Flip across to the Boss's Lead mode and things liven up considerably. The Tele gets darker and dirtier but retains its inherent musicality. Bridge pickup on its own is incisive, articulate and exactly what's required when a Les Paul is a bit too meaty (just ask Jimmy!). The middle setting is brighter but also a little flabby in the middle – exactly how we like it!

Back to the yellow Strat and most of those famous names are still there when cranked. Indeed, to this reviewer's ears it's a very Gilmour-ish set of Strat tones, with searing top-end (great with some Katana chorus), fat and flutey neck pickup, plus all those vowelly, vocal tones from positions 2 and 4 on the switch. And, as we've said before, don't write off centre position: when neither neck nor bridge is really cutting it, that good old middle pickup can often be your salvation.

While it's a shame about the fretbuzz that blighted these guitars' initial playing test, go beyond that and we are greeted with a couple of excellent instruments that do everything a great Strat or Tele can do – and for a whole lot less. While the less than adequate setups are irritating, an hour on the bench will get them playing as well as their excellent necks deserve. And with each guitar providing a set of voices so clear and articulate, each in its own instantly recognisable language, it makes them a very compelling choice.

While the changes seem pretty minimal save for the introduction of rosewood, and, to be honest, barely noticeable to the average user, the Player II Series remains a benchmark for how to make a great guitar for not a great deal of money. ag

NEIL GODWIN

## Australian guitar MAGAZINE VERDICT

**The Fender Player II Stratocaster and Telecaster offer plenty of pros. We'd have loved to see a gig bag, but they're gorgeous and playable specimens - just look at the darned things!**

- Fine set of classic/modern Strat tones
- Superb modern-feeling neck
- Nice to have rosewood back
- Punchy Telecaster tones
- Great neck with rolled fingerboard edges
- Annoying fretbuzz (that could be easily cured)
- The fact that Fender doesn't include a gigbag

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# Charvel Pro-Mod San Dimas Style 1 Relic HH FR PF

With a super-charged Strat vibe and a contrasting relic finish, Charvel's San Dimas Style 1 is swapping Spandex for slippers as the 80s blueprint reaches middle age. Review by **Stuart Williams**

It's a crowded table in the Fender household. Outside of the obvious Fender and Squier-branded instruments sit its 'specialist' brands, including Gretsch, Jackson, EVH and Charvel. Excluding the former, which wears its unmistakable niche indelibly, you might think that the latter three brands present quite the overlap: three very well-respected names that all have their roots in hard rock and metal. However, each one also has to fight for its place, and we think it's pretty clearly delineated. The EVH brand is very pointedly an execution of Eddie Van Halen's ethos, which appears to be continuing faithfully under the watchful eye of Wolfgang Van Halen. Jackson has things covered at the more contemporary, heavier end. Which just leaves Charvel.

For those who are not aware, Wayne Charvel himself started his career as a luthier at Fender, before leaving to set up his own modding and repair shop, which offered refinishes and upgrades to out-of-warranty Fender instruments. Grover Jackson bought the brand in the late 70s and, thanks to its OEM parts business and later its own instruments, Charvel became a leading light in the hot-rodding trend of the 80s, offering souped-up, svelte guitars aimed at players with licks so hot they'd melt your platforms as well as your face.

Coming full circle, Fender acquired Jackson and thus Charvel around 20 years ago. And just as well. Because while Charvel has dabbled in various alternative designs over the years – such as the PRS-looking Questar, slightly pointier LS shape and Jazzmaster-inspired Skatecaster – it's the SuperS shapes and configurations that we really associate with classic Charvels. With the threat of lawsuits out of the way, this meant we could now benefit from proper Fender-approved shred machines that didn't look out of place (Fender Heavy Metal Strat, anyone?). More recently, it's culminated in the Pro Mod import line, featuring Charvel's San Dimas and So-Cal designs in Dinky, Style 1 and Style 2 configurations. Which brings us to our review guitar.

This San Dimas is identifiable by the sans-scratchplate body and direct-mounted pickups, and its Style 1 tag refers to the fact that this guitar features a Strat-style double-cut body (Style 2 is Tele-shaped). While Charvel's pedigree might conjure images of metallic, primary-coloured finishes covered in glossy lacquer, this version of the San Dimas shows us what becomes of Sunset Strip-dwelling rock tools after the smoke machine has long depleted.

Being made in Mexico, the relic finish has undergone treatment in the same facility as Fender's Road Worn series, and as well as our review model's Orange tint, this guitar also comes in Black and White with the same ageing.

But don't let the 40-year throwback look fool you because while there's a lot of tradition going on here – including a Strat-style square heel, 22 frets, clay-dot inlays, a Floyd Rose and a classic Seymour Duncan JB/'59 pairing – it's met by some modern features, too. These come in the form of a 305mm to 406mm (12- to 16-inch) compound radius fingerboard with rolled edges, 'speed neck' profile and a body-end truss rod adjustment wheel.

In the flesh, the Orange finish is more of a paled red, and the satin neck (rubbed urethane gel finish) matches the wear with a lot of darkened/faux-grubby spots. It's apparently built for comfort as well as speed, though, with the thin profile feeling forgiving to our fretting hand as we anchor our thumb for barre chords, while also allowing us to put our foot down for single-note runs up the neck. It's thin but doesn't feel cramp-inducing like some shredder necks can, and big bends are aided by the increasingly wider radius, as well as the highly polished frets. It's here that we start to feel the crossover between family traits, with the playability and finish coming very close to the EVH Frankenstein Relic.

But our Charvel has the benefit of having an additional humbucker wired in from the factory. It's a pickup pairing we've seen countless times over the years – and for very good reason. The bridge-position JB and neck-position '59 work seamlessly together, with the '59 delivering a punchy example of a neck humbucker: slightly hollowed without being too scooped and, at least in this format, light enough on the bass end to maintain some clarity.

Flicking to the bridge, the JB gives us a shift in gain and a bump to the midrange. There's enough of a contrast that our clean setting turns crunchy by simply changing the pickup selection, and the sometimes-overlooked middle position combines both voices nicely in a way that we think will see it get a lot of use. This is important, given the sparse single volume control.

It would have been nice to see some extra options, electronically, with a coil-split being the most obvious. However, the pickup is four-conductor, so in keeping with tradition, this is something that could be an aftermarket addition. ag

## VERDICT

**A hard-rocking double-cut that harks back to the golden age of the genre, and it does so very well, though some players might also miss the additional two frets to make a two-octave fingerboard.**

- Great playability combined with classic looks
- familiar tones and some modern appointments to boot
- This model is slightly limited in places when it comes to features

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**02 8198 1300, www.charvel.com**

OLLY CURTIS

# Epiphone Inspired by Gibson Custom 1963 Firebird V and 1959 ES-355

Big-league tone for minor-league bucks. Review by **Dave Hunter**

Epiphone has expanded its Inspired by Gibson Custom range, and in doing so has arguably narrowed the gap in quality between these guitars and those of the parent company. At the same time, Epiphone has expanded its offering of period-correct models, which so far has included renditions of the J-45, J-180 and SJ-200 acoustics. The new lineup features the 1959 Les Paul Standard, Les Paul Custom, 1963 Les Paul SG Custom, and the two more exotic offerings, reviewed here, the 1963 Firebird V and 1959 ES-355.

While the majority of Epiphone's guitars have been "inspired by Gibson" models since it was absorbed by its parent company in 1957, the series represents a much closer collaboration between the Chinese-made guitars and the luthiers of Gibson's Nashville-based Custom department. The twofold goal includes greater attention to vintage-correct details and the use of many of the same parts featured on American-made Gibson guitars.

For example, each of these guitars has the same USA-made pickups found on Gibson's Custom counterparts, as well as CTS potentiometers, Switchcraft jacks and switches, Mallory tone caps and other components you'll find on many of the finest guitars available today. At these prices there will inevitably be some departures from both vintage-correctness and Gibson Custom quality. The most obvious include a polyurethane finishes, some slightly sharp fret ends and the use of bridge mounting anchors rather than posts directly into wood. With that said, the look and feel are both impressive at first glance, so let's dig more deeply into them.

The Inspired by Gibson Custom 1963 Firebird V accurately follows the reverse-body Firebird shape of 1963–'64. In addition to the distinctive body lines — which rather closely resemble the outline of a flipped-over Jazzmaster or Jaguar — the Firebird's most noteworthy feature is its neck-through-body construction, in which a multi-ply core forms both the neck and the center of the body. Glued-on mahogany "wings" give the guitar its shape, and it's topped with a reverse six-a-side phoenix headstock to maintain the theme, with six Kluson banjo-style tuners to avoid spoiling the lines.

Other hardware items include an Epiphone ABR-1 (a.k.a. Tune-o-matic) bridge and a vibrato tailpiece that Epiphone calls the Maestro Vibrola, with engraved cover. The model is available finished in Frost Blue, Ember Red, Cherry Red and a gloss Vintage Sunburst that I find classy and arguably most representative of the originals. It's beautifully complemented by a white pickguard with phoenix graphic and parallelogram inlays on the bound Indian laurel fingerboard.

The pickups are another component that sets the Firebird apart, a narrow humbucker that delivers a brighter, tighter sound than the full-size Gibson humbuckers, and in this case, they're a pretty big deal. After using a hotter Firebird mini-humbucker with ceramic magnets for several years — with arguably strident results — Gibson reworked the formula in 2019 to use Alnico V magnets and vintage-spec windings. They're the same pickups used on the Custom 1964 Johnny Winter Firebird and Murphy Lab 1963 Firebird V I've played in recent years, and most 'Bird fans find them a big improvement.

The '63 Firebird neck profile is a medium-depth "C" that's a touch flatter than, say, a typical '59 Les Paul carve, but not as flat as the enduring SlimTaper profile. Played unplugged, this through-neck design reveals a lot of resonance and sustain, and you really feel the body vibrating into your sternum. Tested through a Friedman Small Box head and 2x12 cab, a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo and a Fractal FM9 modeler, this Epiphone 1963 Firebird V delivers an authentic and enjoyable take on the classic reverse-body 'Bird and proves an inspiring and versatile performer by any measure.

The bridge pickup is bright, snarky and aggressive without ever being harsh, the neck is rich and vocal, yet very clear, and the in-between setting offers myriad blends of thoroughly usable voices. Having owned both vintage and newer Gibson Custom Firebirds in the past, I was pleasantly surprised by how well this Epiphone sat alongside them, and what a characterful and fully giggable guitar it presents for the price, offering that legendary Firebird cut-through-the-mix bite and sting without tipping into shrill tones.

Often considered an ES-335 with fancier looks, the ES-355 stands further apart thanks to its ebony fingerboard and Grover Rotomatic tuners, both present here. Most originals had a stereo output, rejected by many players as cumbersome, so the mono version with stop-tail — upon which this Epiphone Inspired by Gibson Custom 1959 ES-355 is modeled — has always been considered the design's zenith.

The looks are all there, for sure. The top is trimmed with seven-ply top binding, with three on the back, five ply around the headstock and one along the fingerboard. Gold-plated hardware, a bound tortoise pickguard, and mother-of-pearl block inlays and split-diamond headstock inlay complete the luxury appointments.

The Epiphone rendition is built to the classic formula of a semihollow body made from maple ply, a solid-maple center block and a glued-in one-piece mahogany neck. The body is 3/32 inch thicker at the rims than the original '62 ES-355 sitting beside my desk, but the actual depth measurements of vintage ES models from '58–'65 varied quite a bit too. The neck on this guitar is carved to a full, well-rounded '59 "C" shape, with rolled fingerboard edges for extra comfort. It leans a little bulky in the shoulders perhaps, so players less at-home with bigger necks might want to feel it out in person before jumping into a purchase. The guitar is offered in Classic White, Cherry Red and Ebony, all in what Epiphone calls "VOS," for Vintage Original Sheen, kind of a satin polyurethane that yields a textured feel to the fingers.

The pair of Custombucker pickups are the same PAF-style humbuckers used on the majority of Gibson Custom models. Tested through the same rigs as the Firebird V, the 1959 ES-355 admirably pulled itself in line with classic Gibson ES tonalities, which I generally hear as a blend of rich and bright, crisp and articulate, yet with a textured, almost granular body to the notes, along with that extra ounce of clarity from the ebony fingerboard. While a good dual-humbucker ES can do most anything a Les Paul can, there's a little extra bite and edge to the former that can help it cut through, and this Epi has it in abundance into an overdriven amp. Add the harmonic depth and a certain chewy swirl from the Custombuckers, and it's a tone that stands out beautifully through myriad rhythm and lead applications. ag

## Australian Guitar Magazine VERDICT

**The 1959 ES-355 delivers classic ES performance and top-tier looks, while the 1963 Firebird V captures that classic's character so well, it might just be the best reverse-body Firebird I've played at this price.**

**Inspired by Gibson Custom 1963 Firebird V**

- An impressive rendering of the original reverse-body Firebird V at this price, with great playability and authentic tones
- Some fret ends above the 12th fret are a tad sharp

**Inspired by Gibson Custom 1959 ES-355**

- Great looks, easy playability and versatile ES-derived tones from a well-built ES-355 for the money
- This guitar's arguably just a little heavier than some might prefer a semi to be

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**RRP: $TBC, GIG BAG INCLUDED**

# Cort Sol Encanto classical cutaway acoustic-electric

## A true nylon stunner with a distinct appeal. Review by **Jimmy Leslie**

The Sol Encanto is the newest member of Cort's top-of-the-line Masterpiece range featuring all solid woods and elegant aesthetics, and it's the only nylon-string model of the four Masterpiece models currently available. When the press release came out, I quickly asked about a review unit because the Sol Encanto checks a lot of boxes. Here's a nylon-string guitar with solid mahogany back and sides, a solid Engelmann spruce top, a soft Venetian cutaway, a side sound port and Fishman electronics. Once I saw the gorgeous promo photo, I simply had to meet this lovely in person and feel it in hand.

The Sol Encanto is a true stunner with a distinct appeal. The White Blond gloss finish makes its Engelmann spruce top truly pop. Take it outside in the sun and it practically radiates. The multifaceted rosette consists of several wooden elements and a custom abalone soundhole inlay that come together in abstract style. Wooden check-pattern binding puts a fine frame on the top, and the dark Macassar ebony headstock cap, fretboard and bridge provide striking contrast. The golden open tuners with black buttons appear simultaneously classic and modern, and the script mother-of-pearl logo inlay at the 12th fret is a nice finishing touch.

The Sol Encanto's playability is likewise very nice. The neck profile feels like that of a real classical, without being so wide and flat as to be foreign to those who primarily play steel-string and electric. The neck is 48mm wide at the nut, which is greater than a standard steel-string's 44mm, but not nearly as wide as a traditional classical's more than 50mm width. The scale length is a full 650mm, but as nylon strings bend readily, the Sol Encanto excels as an expressive lead instrument. It's also a great fingerpicker, with string spacing of 60mm.

The tone can sound quite different depending on where and how you play. The Engelmann spruce top is touch sensitive and quite responsive to the nuanced dynamics of a fingerstyle attack. The overall tone is clearly colored by the solid mahogany back and sides, delivering a rather balmy and smooth sound for its relatively small body size, which is significantly smaller and thinner than a triple 0. That makes it easy to wrap your body around.

It brightens up nicely if you play way back by the bridge and/or use a plectrum. You have to be a bit careful where you rest the corner of your plucking hand because the bridge comes to a rather sharp corner, rather than being rounded off, which would be preferred. The sound port's unique placement on the back end of the top side encouraged me to position the guitar a bit further back to keep my bicep from covering it up. Folks can argue all day about whether a sound port makes much difference, but I say it does. Just cover it up and compare the difference. To my ears it adds a welcome sense of dimensionality on the Sol Encanto.

Although I took to this guitar like a fish to water, my only complaint was that it had trouble staying in tune. I always find this problem with nylon-string guitars, so I was patient and did a lot of string stretching. Perhaps the tuners are a bit wonky, but I felt confident enough to take it out on a gig, where I performed for a couple celebrating their wedding anniversary. They wanted a Spanish-style soundtrack for their celebration, and since Sol Encanto is Spanish for sun and charm, I was very happy to have the guitar on hand for the job.

With the signal running through a Universal Audio Max Preamp & Dual Compressor and into an L.R. Baggs Synapse Personal PA, the guitar's dual-element Fishman Flex Blend electronics delivered a robust amplified tone that seemed surprisingly more powerful than the larger steel-string guitars I brought along. The Flex has a built-in tuner that was handy for on-the-fly adjustments, and once I got going playing songs at full force, the tuning seeded in well enough that I could forget about it and focus on playing.

As with a 12-string, there are certain songs that sound authentic only when played on a nylon-string, such as Blind Faith's "Can't Find My Way Home" and the beautiful étude on Pink Floyd's The Wall called "Is There Anybody Out There?" I also wound up performing instrumental versions of tunes, such as "Across the Universe," that went over especially well because the Sol Encanto's classical tone fit the vibe of the classy clientele at the event.

I think every guitar player should own a nylon-string acoustic. The techniques and skills you develop will raise your steel-string game and help you improve your posture, while its warm and mellow tone will give you a new take on playing the most familiar tunes. To that end, the Cort Sol Encanto is a worthy choice for gigging players who use the entire neck and desire a handsome presentation. It delivers solid tones from a light body made of solid woods and features fine playability along with gig-worthy electronics. ag

**Australian guitar magazine VERDICT**

**An utterly gorgeous nylon string acoustic with a celestial white blond gloss finish, tonally aided by the solid mahogany back and sides.**

- Elegant look
- Easy playability
- Solid acoustic and amplified tones
- Some issues staying well tuned
- Sharp bridge corner

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# Mesa/Boogie Mark VII 1x12 Combo

How can Mesa/Boogie possibly have improved on the Mark V so much that it skipped the Mark VI? Join us as we plug in and find out.

Review by **Richard Barrett**

Randall Smith's first foray into amp building began as something of a prank. When repairing amps at the back of his San Francisco music store in the late 1960s, Randall was commissioned to hot-rod an unassuming Fender Princeton combo, turning it into a 100-watt wolf in sheep's clothing, guaranteed to give its owner a fright to remember.

But before the amp reached its new owner, a passing Carlos Santana was persuaded to try it out, reluctantly at first, but on the assurance that this was no ordinary Princeton. His oft-quoted reaction was: "Man, that amp really boogies!" Many 'Princeton Boogies' would follow, leading to Randall creating his own Boogie Mark I in 1972. By now, Santana and The Stones were enthusiastic users and this, along with the undeniable quality of the amps, helped establish a reputation that still goes from strength to strength today.

Since 1980, all Mesa products have been made in Petaluma, California. This includes the famous Dual/Triple Rectifiers and the Mark Series, of which the Mark VII incorporates many notable features. In fact, you could say this is a 'greatest hits' of the Mark Series, all rolled into one amp.

To say an amp can achieve any sound may seem a rash claim, but we'd wager you won't get closer to that possibility than with the Mark VII. There are three channels, each with three modes, three-way switchable output power and Mesa's own discrete spring reverb control. Each also has its own four-band EQ (Bass, Mid, Treble, Presence) and can be routed through the onboard Graphic EQ – or not, as you prefer. There's even a choice of several excellent cab IRs (Mesa's own 'CabClone' interface is built-in) for recording, DI or silent headphone practice. We can attest that these sound as good as any we've heard, and you can assign a different IR to each channel if you wish.

As you might expect, there's the facility for crystal cleans up to ultra-high gain, with thousands of possibilities in between, all delivered with impeccable focus and clarity. The detailed instruction manual is very helpful, too, and gives some excellent advice on how to get the best from the Mark VII, which can also be applied to dialling in many other amps. Next, then, let's examine those three channels...

PHIL BARKER

Channel 1, with its Clean, Fat and Crunch Modes, is where the clean to medium-gain tones live. The most sparkly/tight tones are achieved with the gain set below 11 o'clock, warming up a little at two o'clock. Moving beyond this warms and loosens things up further, and adds low-end. On gainier tones, keeping the bass set low and adding in extra lows with the Graphic EQ at the end of the signal chain is a great way to keep the bottom-end tight.

Switching to Fat mode gives us fuller bass and mids, a bit like turning off a bright switch. There's more potential to gently drive for 'pushed' sounds that retain every note of a chord. Humbuckers prefer less bass in this mode, which is to be expected; Crunch takes us a step further. With the gain between 12 and two o'clock, there is what Mesa calls "classic British territory where chords break up more smoothly and evenly, yet with urgency". We'd concur!

Below the Mode switch we have another, offering the option to auto select/disable the Graphic EQ when using the (included) footswitch. Squeezed below this is the three-way Power Select switch, offering a choice between the full 90-watt Simul-Class, 45-watt Class A pentode or 25-watt Class A triode, which uses only two of the four 6L6 power amp valves. Each has its own sound, with the tightest/boldest being the 90-watt.

Moving to Channel 2, the controls here are identical to Channel 1, except for the three modes: Fat, Crunch and the brand-new Mark VII mode. The Fat and Crunch modes function identically to Channel 1, with this duplication meaning you don't have to choose either/or. However, the Mark VII mode is where we first hear Mesa's latest version of its signature focused high-gain loveliness. From a "Brit-style colour" with the Gain set between 10 o'clock and 11:30, to a hybrid between the previous Mark Series and more British-sounding circuits such as the Triple Crown, this mode has more pronounced mids and sounds great without the Graphic EQ, perhaps leaving it free for the other channels.

Once again, Channel 3 has a full complement of EQ, Reverb and power modes, but this channel brings the Mark IIB, Mark IIC and Mark IV modes. The Mark IIB mode is the least saturated, giving what Mesa calls 'Turbo-Traditional' sounds, preserving the character of your guitar, rather than all-out heavy drive. The Mark IIC mode is more saturated, as the Treble Shift function of the Mark II+ is duplicated, giving us that sound, which has characterised so much great rock music. The Mark IV mode notches this up a step further, with thicker gain and more low-end. Though this does excel at the heavier tones, there are quite a few tasty lower gain tones in there as well. It can genuinely hold its own in any genre, with an amazing amount of projection, spread and thump from such an unassuming looking 1x12 cab. ag

## VERDICT

**In this era of quiet stages and portable multi-effects, some might say the era of the valve amp is waning. But with tones of this calibre available without having to scroll through a single menu, that's a while off yet.**

- Typical high-class build
- Virtually any sound you can imagine
- Relatively portable
- Well thought out and flexible options
- It's certainly not for the single channel purist and is a very serious investment

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# Fishman Loudbox Micro

Portable acoustic amplification gets even more portable. Review by **Steve Henderson**.

The acoustic guitar has never been more popular. Even before Covid gave everyone a reason and the time to take up a hobby (and acoustic guitar sales took off), the resurgence of the acoustic guitar, following MTV's Unplugged presentations, has brought new ideas and technologies into play. The tragics talk about the guitar's Golden Era: the late 1920s to the early-1940s. But that period has nothing on what has been happening over the last couple of decades. Guitars have never been better, never been cheaper, and there's never been so many options: like interesting timber choices, great hardware, excellent pickups, and dedicated acoustic guitar amps.

For four decades, Larry Fishman has been serving the needs of guitar players with great sounding and innovative pickups and, lately, amplifiers. His pickups are original equipment on a huge range of brands and models, with the kind of practical on-board preamp controls that the performer requires. You just don't have to think too hard about it – it's all right there. His amplifiers, too, have user-friendly control layouts that are perfect for the live performer, with value-added features like DIs, well-chosen reverb and chorus effects, and vocal microphone channels.

Full disclosure: I have a number of Fishman products and I use my Loudbox Mini all the time so, when I had a chance to try the little brother, I was pretty keen. The Micro, at 40 watts, is a little quieter that the Mini's 60 watts, but since Fishman amps have always had a generous output, that was of little concern. The Fishman controls are completely straight forward – if you can't figure it out, you should go back to the drum kit. There's a microphone channel with volume, bass, treble, and reverb controls; there's a guitar (or whatever) channel with volume, bass, mid, treble, and reverb controls plus a variable, two-voice chorus. You can plug anything into this channel: for this review, I used 6- and 12-string guitar, mandolin, dobro, and banjo. But I have a friend who uses a Fishman amp for flute, and another who plays fiddle through hers. There's also a master volume and a phase switch. On the back panel you'll find a DI, a headphone out, an Aux in, and a power port for the external power supply. And it weighs just 4 kilos!

The Fishman Micro was built for guitar so, naturally, that's our first option. Plugging in a Maton MSH-210 with an AP5 system, the tone was rich and immediate. The 40 watt issue wasn't an issue at all – there was plenty of power, all of it with clean headroom. Even at full volume, which was annoyingly load, there was no break-up or fuzzy treble. I thought the main concern would be a lack of bottom end, given that I'm accustomed to a Loudbox Mini or a Loudbox Performer. Actually, there was not as much bass – after all, it's a smaller speaker in a smaller cab – but the bass was not underwhelming and, for fingerstyle, worked in my favour. However, playing with a band, the more focussed range of the Micro really came into its own. Where, with larger amps, the bass and low mids tended to be swamped by other instruments, the Micro's more contained focus let those notes push through the mix with a lovely definition. I could hear those low notes quite clearly. Thinking this was an aural illusion, I switched back to my Mini and those low notes were a little hard to hear once more. Back to the Micro...and there they were.

The mandolin and banjo sounded good – very clear and precise. But the dobro was so at home, it was like the amp was purpose-built for resophonic guitars. It really voiced the guitar's honky-ness nicely. If you play a 12-string, you'll love the treble and upper mid jangle. Add a touch of reverb and you'll be Eight Miles High in no time. Back to the 6-string, the internal chorus circut adds a nice softening effect. The effect can be dialled in for a bit more depth but it doesn't swamp the guitar tone like most chorus effects can do. I tend to add just a touch to sweeten the tone by accentuating all those lovely overtones. And here's an idea: plug in your jazz guitar (I used a Godin 5th Avenue) for a full-range tone that will refresh your ideas about what that guitar can sound like.

If you're regularly playing though a nice PA system, this Micro is all you need for a personal guitar monitor and to fill your stage area with some sound that doesn't spill into the audience. You can even run a line-out, from your main system, into the input of the guitar channel (or either channel really) and have the Micro be a powered monitor wedge, carrying guitar and voice – just a thought. For the singer-songwriter, the Micro will be a blessing with its big sound and diminutive size.

The Fishman Loudbox series is built for musicians, and the Micro is a welcome addition. It has enough power, it has oodles [technical term] of tone, and it's a super easy lug. I've had my Fishman amps for over 7 years and they keep right on working, so it's nice to see a compact amp with that kind of build quality. ag

**"If you're regularly playing though a nice PA system, this Micro is all you need for a personal guitar monitor and to fill your stage area with some sound that doesn't spill into the audience."**

## VERDICT

**Whether you're serious player or maybe you're just after an easy entry into acoustic amplification, the Loudbox Micro could be just what you're after.**

- Good tone
- Plenty of power
- Simple to use
- Super value

- None

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# Line 6 HX One

Line 6 puts all of the Helix effects into a box that will slot into any pedalboard. Review by **Trevor Curwen**

Besides its units with amp/speaker and effects simulation, Line 6 has a range of multi-effects pedals that put just the effects from those more complex units into a stompbox format. You could trace the lineage back some way – names such as the M13 and M9 come to mind. And while the HX One may have the same effects as the current HX Effects, it most readily resembles the diminutive M5; like that unit, you can only use one effect at a time.

Nevertheless, you get over 250 different algorithms to choose from, making the HX One a nicely compact source of any effect you may wish for. While your pedalboard may already have everything for your basic needs, it could be that at times you feel you're perhaps lacking a certain type of modulation pedal, a particular flavour of overdrive or an extra delay with a different delay time. The HX One is the pedal that can supply that.

The algorithms are neatly laid out in categories and can be scrolled through to find the one you want, but the key to using the pedal live would be to populate as many of the 128 presets with the effects you'll want to use, suitably tweaked to taste using the three soft knobs. The pedal has a preset mode you can enter by briefly pressing down on the two footswitches simultaneously, and you can then scroll to the next wanted preset with the Effect knob or by using the footswitches to scroll up or down. A quick press on the Effect knob, or the two footswitches together, will load said preset.

Now, there's a conundrum in that if you're using the pedal as a fuzz or wah, you may want it at the front of your chain – but if you're using it for delay or reverb you'd probably want it at the end of the chain or in an amp's effects loop. If you're using the pedal in a mono or stereo chain, you have that choice to make (or maybe buy two pedals!). However, the right input and output double as a return and send respectively, so for full flexibility you can connect to the amp via the four-cable method and assign the effect in each preset to be either in front of the amp or in its effects loop. Neat.

A brilliant feature of the HX One is the Flux function, which can do expression-pedal-style tasks without the need for connecting an actual expression pedal. A press-and-hold on the tap tempo footswitch on the right toggles it between tap tempo and Flux. This function basically adjusts multiple effect parameters simultaneously over a predetermined period of time with a footswitch press: this could mean an everyday task such as ramping the speed on a rotary speaker or ramping delay feedback up to the point of self-oscillation, or even something more complex involving several parameters moving together.

This is all easily set up in the menu on a per-preset basis. Minimum and maximum values can be set for each parameter – the first press on the footswitch ramping from minimum to maximum, the second press ramping down again. You can also set values for the ramp time and the shape of ramp (various curves or linear) separately for the ramp up and the ramp down. When you press the Flex footswitch, a directional line runs across the top of the display for the duration of the change while the Flux LED moves from dull to bright or visa versa.

Should you want to connect an expression pedal, there is provision: a socket provides the option of expression pedal, two assignable external footswitches, or one of each. There is also MIDI capability allowing the HX One to receive program change, continuous controller and other MIDI messages from external sources. A USB socket is provided for firmware updates but also to connect to a librarian application on your computer, which really makes easy work of any HX One setting up you need to do at home.

In sound terms, the HX One has just about every guitar effect known to mankind, with a good mixture of the bog-standard and the esoteric. Most players will have their favourite fuzz/drive/distortion boxes, and there's a massive amount of those nicely modelled here including three different Big Muff variations. The Flux effect can be very effective with these, not so much in ramping an effect over time but in providing an instant footswitchable jump between two levels of gain. In fact, with any effect you're using, Flux can give you two versions of it.

Modulations are well covered, as are all varieties of delays and reverbs, including some such as Ganymede and Particle Verb that cover the atmospheric/ambient field. Among the pitch effects there's a cool Whammy effect complete with octave jump via the Flux, a passable 12-string emulation, and a Poly Capo that's great for instant lowered tunings.

While the various wahs have the most flexibility if you use an expression pedal, the Flux function can give a controlled consistent sweep that's easily foot-operable. There's also a range of analogue synth sounds and two loopers with a mono loop length of 60 seconds (30 in stereo) – the Simple looper and the intriguing Shuffle looper, which chops your loop into slices, ready for various treatments. ag

PHIL BARKER

## VERDICT

**The HX One gives you HX sounds in a pedal that can run from a standard power distributor and easily slot onto any pedalboard. It's a fantastic augmentation pedal with the chameleon-like ability to be any colour you need.**

- Compact size
- Massive range of quality effects
- Extra layer of expression with Flux
- Flexible connectivity
- If you don't have 'board space for the provided power adaptor, you'd better make sure your own power supply unit can provide 500mA

**YAMAHA**

**Web: au.yamaha.com**

**RRP: $749**

# Zildjian Alchem-E headphones

A 17th-century cymbal maker turns its hand to wireless noise-cancelling headphones. We expected a branding exercise, but the Alchem-Es prove to be genuinely different. Review by **Jez Ford**

Almost inconceivably, after four centuries and a move to the USA, Zildjian is still run by family members. The secret cymbal "formula" had been passed from each head of the Turkish Zildjian foundry to the next male heir... until in 1927 the next male heir was Avedis Zildkina III, who had already emigrated to the USA to become very successful in the American candy-making business, thank you; what did he want with cymbals?

But Avedis III's wife encouraged him to make enquiries at local music stores, where he was amazed to find that even in Boston everyone knew that the best cymbals in the world were made by Zildjian in Turkey.

So he opened a foundry in the US in 1928, selling first to the US Army's marching bands, and then to dance bands, big bands, and jazz bands, during which expansion of business he established a virtuous feedback circle in order to "get drummers what they need", a philosophy which led to the diverse shimmering discs of gold gracing the kits of the world's greatest drummers ever since.

But one has to ask why, after four centuries of foundry work, Zildjian has decided to make a headphone?

This seems to be its first ever foray into overear headphones which are sold entirely as Zildjian's own. And it has aimed high, with a luxurious build that combines elements of sculptural metal yoke styling a bit like Bowers & Wilkins' earliest luxury headhuggers, but here with larger and rounder headshells more in the Beyerdynamic tradition, though very wide in their internal padding so that the space for your ears is relatively small.

The padded headband itself is a massive piece of metal, marked with divisions into which the headband ratchets in a series of bumps as you pull them out. Being gold, the band and yokes might be considered rather Chinese bling — such shining solidity graces many headphones aiming for that luxury market, such as Mont Blanc, as well as lesser designs hoping to appear more luxurious than they are. But of course here it may have been chosen to reference the gold of Zildjian cymbals.

The yokes arrive covered with protective rubber tubes, and when removing them there's one plastic bit which doesn't come off: remarkably this houses a minijack socket inside its end, a cleverly-disguised connection point if you're listening with the provided (and nicely branded) cable, rather than wirelessly. Cabled listening might be expected to be an advantage, as the Bluetooth spec here is limited in quality: version 5.2, but using only the SBC and AAC codecs. There is no proprietary aptX or LDAC or other codec available to raise the bit-rate above the 256k AAC to which iOS devices will default, while Android users are left with only the base-level SBC codec. (Including a proprietary codec might have raised this as far as CD quality.)

Some headphones play digitally via their USB-C charging connection; here the headphones never appeared as an output when we plugged them into our laptop, so we conclude the USB-C socket is for charging only. There's good capacity of 680mAh in the internal battery; 15 minutes is enough to charge it to 15%, two hours for a full charge. Zildijian doesn't give an approximate battery life in specs, but the app shows how much is left, and it began up at 50 hours, so that's a minimum, and that's impressive battery life!

Controls are nicely intuitive; when you press the power button they don't announce "On", or "Battery 80%", as is common; instead there are little open or closed hi-hat twiddles (ba-da-dum-tish!) to indicate turn-on and turn-off. Rising or declining LED segments confirm which choice you've made. Holding the power button puts the headphones into pairing mode.

The button above the power, on the other side of the four LED segments, selects the level of noise-cancelling, shuttling through three levels announced by one to three electronic bleeps: one for 'Off', two for 'Half', described unusually as providing "a protective, full-frequency acoustic drumming experience...", while three bleeps means Full, "designed for isolation, protection on airplanes".

Finally, there's a control knob on the outside of the right headphone shell. Knobs have become fashionable since the 'digital crown' on Apple's AirPod Maxes showed how very useful such a spinning wheel can be. Here it turns for volume, presses once, twice or thrice for pause/next/last track, and you can even press, hold and turn to scrub through tracks (if you're lucky).

The supplied case will look a bit odd to many, slightly testicular (compare with Apple's bizarre headphone case which looks like a bra on one side and a butt on the other). We thought perhaps the rubberised outer and fabric lining was mimicking Zidjian's protective cases for cymbals, but we couldn't find anything similar in their ranges. So just a bit weird, then.

We were soon powered up and connected. With power buttons you normally need to hold them just a little time to power them down again, to avoid doing so accidentally. Not so here, so it's nice and quick to turn off, but rather too easily done when you're feeling for the ANC button or adjusting the headband. Besides, when auto-standby is selected via the app, they'll turn off after any period without music anyway; you can set the duration to 15, 30 or 60 minutes — or never.

The ANC is solid, especially on lower (aircraft drone) frequencies; the ear padding is so substantial that even with the ANC turned off there is significant passive isolation against higher frequencies, so the combination of passive and ANC is effective. But there's something else going on here as well. We gather that Zildjian hasn't just used the ANC on a Bluetooth receiver chip as supplied, it has developed its own bespoke ANC, which is specifically tailored to the sound of drums.

"Traditional ANC software does not work with acoustic drums," it says. "When you try to drum with regular ANC headphones, they clip, some frequencies (i.e. cymbals) may be completely inaudible, while other frequencies (e.g. kick drum) will still come through. So they're impossible to use while playing drums."

Sadly we didn't have a drum kit handy to check all this out. But it's an interesting pointer to how and why these headphones were developed — their name, 'Alchem-E', comes from Zildjian's sideline in electronic drum kits; perhaps these headphones were developed to match, and in reaching us are breaking out into the wider world. The ANC seems not primarily intended to block everyday noise, but specifically a drum kit, either to remove them entirely (perhaps while using the headphones for foldback), or to deaden the sound.

"At 100% ANC, our headphones block out the acoustic drum kit almost entirely," says Zildjian. "There is no clipping, and the sound of the kit is evenly blocked out."

But at 50% ANC, "our headphones work like a damper pedal on a piano — the entire drum kit is

audible, but quieter. There is no clipping, and all parts of the drum kit are evenly dampened."

All this reveals these headphones to have been designed as a specialist tool. Drummers and percussionists most definitely need hearing protection; drums can exceed 115dB. No surprise, then, that many drummers later in their careers need hearing correction: they are more than four times more likely to have sustained hearing damage than the general population. These headphones provide both protection (see above) and correction (see below).

They may be more for drum practice than performance. If they were intended for foldback, we would wonder whether Bluetooth's latency on SBC and AAC would be low enough not to annoy drummers. Why no low-latency codec to help with that? Would Wi-Fi/UWB be a better option?

These questions are not for us, specifically. We just want to know how the ANC works when we're listening to Alex The Astronaut on the bus commute. And happily, as already noted, the noise-cancellation seems to work just fine in everyday life, in addition to the rare feature of fully protecting you against any passing drum kits.

The other key feature is 'Perfect Tune' personalisation. This involves sitting in a nice quiet place, then listening for test tones while pressing a giant 'Z' button on the screen of your phone or tablet. This enables the software to create a hearing profile which it can then reverse-engineer to create your ideal sound: "Find new parts in your favorite song," says Zildijian. "Hear notes you didn't know were missing."

Before we'd even started the process, we recognised the personalisation system; we have used it before. This is an Australian connection, originating from sunny Brisbane, where two doctors formed 'Audeara' back in 2018, aiming to make medical-grade 'audiograms' more accessible through just this kind of app; they used Kickstarter to develop headphones with their system of hearing personalisation built in. As Audeara put it when we tested their A-01 headphones back at the end of 2018, "Audeara measures each ear — and knows what it hears well and not so well..." then "modulates the playback to match each ear's audiogram", with the result that "you hear and feel so much more without having to add volume".

That last part is important, because if the Audeara system can prevent you turning your music up to hear the bits your ears are missing, it's potentially protecting your ears against further deterioration.

Audeara is far from alone in this market; the German 'Mimi Defined' system launched at a similar time, and there is a projected $10bn market for such high-street consumer 'hearables'; hence medical company Sonova licenses Sennheiser's consumer brand, also Denon turning Australia's 'nura' earbuds into PerLs.

Zildjian's 'Perfect Tune' system uses an evolved version of the Audeara test; it takes perhaps five minutes, listening to bleeps coming and going at various frequencies to one ear then the other; you get a training session beforehand but it might make sense to do the whole thing twice, to ensure you have the hang of it and create a solid profile. This profile is stored in the app and you can then turn it on or off, alongside various EQ profile options.

With the separate EQ options all off, we started A-B listening between the 'normal' sound and our new 'Perfect Tune' (aka Audeara) profile. As we've often found with these systems, there was not much difference between the two, though a notable lessening of impact on kick drums from a drop in upper bass. Of course we might hope this indicates that our hearing is not too horribly askew, hence the app has little effect. For those with more serious deficiencies, including those many drummers, the correction may be more valuable; we certainly have full respect for Audeara, its aims, and its Australian technology.

Which left us to get down to some straight-forward listening, though headphones being what they are (little speakers that may benefit from settling in), they were first left jacked into an amplifier and left playing for a night and a day. Then we paired them via Bluetooth to our iPad Pro, using Tidal to play tunes, and the Zildjian app to play initially with the sound options.

We did experiment with the ordinary EQ, the displayed curves for which looked rather more radical than the usual offerings in such apps. But on the whole we settled again for everything off, which seemed to achieve maximum clarity. The sound was also marginally clearer and better balanced when noise-cancelling was set to off; it had a small bloat when fully on, which could over-engorge very deep dub bass parts especially. Even the acoustic bass on GoGo Penguin's Raven came through too thick; with ANC off we sought an EQ fix, trying jazz and classical, but never finding an option that both tamed the bass and opened up the space in this recording. These are not headphones which particularly sparkle; they do not open a mix up wide like Apple's overears, or even the Sennheiser Momentum 4s. It's more about a big solid sound, able to drive along powerfully and without fatigue, and in this they are quite like the Bowers & Wilkins headphones in whose territory they are launching. They equal those in musicality, they're an excellent longterm listen, and their bass is firmer, sometimes very impressive with electronica that delves deep without being too strong, so it is kept clean. There's certainly no wondering here whether a bassline will disappear as it descends to its lowest notes — it won't.

**"There's certainly no wondering here whether a bassline will disappear as it descends to its lowest notes — it won't."**

After quite a long listening session, we did wonder if things were just a little thumpy on some recordings, so that a cleaner sound might be even less fatiguing. So we switched that personalisation back on. Darned if it didn't clean up just that effect, at the slight expense of power and drive. For longer-term listening, perhaps that should be our Perfect Tune after all. It helped clarify the GoGo Penguin track as well.

Usefully, you can keep the app connected even when you're listening to another source; we were able to Bluetooth from a laptop at the same time as adjusting EQ on a Bluetooth-connected iPad.

The knob on the right headshell worked well, though it is not as smooth in its effect as Apple's crown; there could be a slight delay to the notches of adjustment, and there was an infuriating and quite unnecessary 'boom' sound when you hit maximum volume.

And we did hit maximum volume quite a lot when playing un-normalised recordings; we do like to listen loud, for sure, but we note the inclusion of three options for 'Volume Limiter', labelled generic (recommended), EU standard, and Kids Safe. Laudable of course, but we couldn't turn them all off, so we were unsure if maximum levels were being suppressed or not here. It's good to have medical technology in headphones, but they're neither your doctor nor your mother, and we'd prefer full control to turn things like this off, to see what happens. Pleasingly the manual does call the 'generic' an 'Off' setting, but the app doesn't, so it's not clear.

The ANC modes proved powerful, but also unusual. The '100% on' really was full-on, and even 50% was strong; both these modes brought a small level of eyeball suck (or eardrum pressure, as some call this effect). Stranger still, though, both 50% and 'off' seemed to include some ambient sound fed from outside; if we clicked our fingers around the headshells we could hear them best at the tops of the earshells, where microphones were indeed found hiding behind the yokes. We can see no real purpose to this for hi-fi listeners, so it must play to that specialised ANC which is tailored to drummers.

What happens when wireless headphones run out of power? With most you can switch to cabled use (though not all can do this, notably the Apples). A cable is equally useful when plugging into inflight entertainment, though Zildjian provides no airline plug adaptor. You do get a neat branded cable management disc, and when connected via cable you have two choices: play with power on, or off. With power off your device, a laptop say, controls the volume, you obviously have none of the EQ and personalisation available, and the sound was fairly soft. Power the headphones up with the cable still connected, and you then have volume control via the headphone knob, also ANC available, and a whole lot more treble cut-through, brighter than the Bluetooth playback as well. But listening to the various balances, it seems clear that the Alchem-Es have been balanced primarily for Bluetooth listening, and sensibly so, since that will be their main usage. ag

## VERDICT

**We like almost everything about these headphones. We like that they're big, we like the long battery life, we like the clear emphasis on both protecting and potentially correcting your hearing, at a seemingly medical level. The sound is powerful if not sparkling, competitive at the price, and that's judging against the best-regarded competitors.**

- Solid sound, design
- Protective and corrective
- ANC for drummers!
- Pricey
- Could be more open sounding

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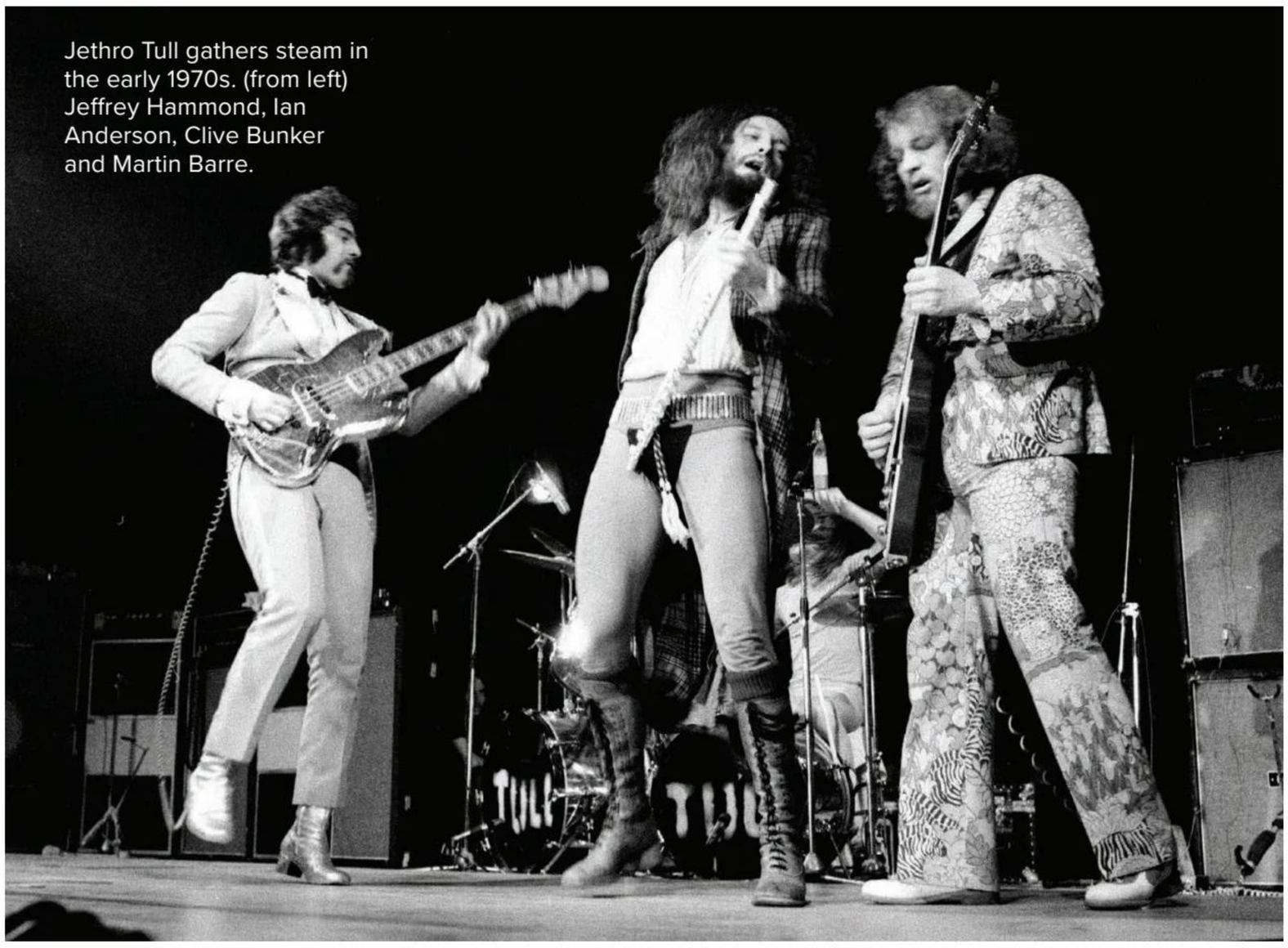

Jethro Tull gathers steam in the early 1970s. (from left) Jeffrey Hammond, Ian Anderson, Clive Bunker and Martin Barre.

HOW I WROTE...

# "LOCOMOTIVE BREATH"

## IAN ANDERSON REVEALS HIS TRAIN OF THOUGHT BEHIND JETHRO TULL'S 1971 CLASSIC.

BY JOE BOSSO

"I would say it's one of the important ones," Ian Anderson remarks of Jethro Tull's 1971 hard-rock classic. "It's an enduring live performance piece, but it's also important in terms of its prescient subject matter based on a runaway train of population growth and globalism. I'm pleased about that."

### IN THE SHUFFLING MADNESS

Throughout 1970, Jethro Tull fit recording sessions for their fourth studio album, Aqualung, around their hectic touring schedule, with the majority of their road-work taking place in America. "We were quite busy in those days, so I would grab what time I could, usually a few hours before soundcheck, to collect songs for the album," Anderson recalls. "The opening to 'Locomotive Breath' came to me while strumming an acoustic guitar as I sat in my room in a Holiday Inn."

He began hammering out a simple, hypnotic chord sequence, which he punctuated with a bar of aggressively strummed muted strings. "Even though I played it on an acoustic, it had an electric feel," he says. "It was train music, which appears in different music forms, particularly the blues. You have the imagery of the hobo, I suppose, and the idea of being on a train is mysterious and romantic."

Latching onto a runaway-train motif, Anderson sketched out lyrics about greed and capitalism run amok by overpopulation. While on tour, he would occasionally run through new ideas with guitarist Martin Barre, and if the numbers were fleshed out enough, the band would play them at soundchecks. "Locomotive Breath," however, remained in Anderson's head. It wasn't until Tull went back to England later in the year and reconvened at Island Studios in London that he first played it for his bandmates on an acoustic.

### STATIONS ONE BY ONE

The group tried to record the song's basic tracks live off the floor, but the groove wasn't happening. "It didn't have the metronomic feel I wanted," Anderson says. "It was just too loose and untidy." Rather than bag the song, he decided to build the track piecemeal on his own. After recording a click track by banging two drumsticks together, he played a kick drum and hi-hat over it. Next, to emulate the band's characteristic heavy sound, Anderson borrowed Barre's Les Paul and played a rugged rhythm track, adding lines and phrases that darted in and around vocals. Recalls Anderson, "This was the only time I ever played a Les Paul."

Anderson admits his process might have bruised his bandmates' feelings. "But sometimes, in order to get the job done, you have to do it yourself," he says, adding that Barre would add on his own biting electric licks, "things I simply couldn't play."

Gradually, the song took shape. Clive Bunker cut the remaining drum parts, John Evan played piano and bassist Jeffrey Hammond recorded "varooming" basslines. Anderson laid down vocals and a spirited flute solo, as well as a layer of acoustic guitar rhythms "for some texture." The idea for a jazz-blues piano intro came later. "I wanted something that would set a mood of quiet grandeur before it was shattered," Anderson says. "John did some improvisation that became more definitive, and Martin added the intro guitar solo and various bits."

### NO WAY TO SLOW DOWN

"Locomotive Breath" was released as the lead single from Aqualung in March 1971, but it failed to chart (the following single, "Hymn 43," would be the band's first song to crack Billboard's Hot 100). Nevertheless, the track enjoyed heavy play on FM stations, and together with memorable cuts like "Cross-Eyed Mary" and the popular title track, it vaulted the album into the top 10. Over the years, Aqualung would sell more than seven million copies and become regarded by critics and fans as the band's finest hour.

"Locomotive Breath" quickly became a crowd favorite and remains Jethro Tull's most-performed song. It's been featured in films such as Jumanji and in various TV series like Fargo and Supernatural. "They have to ask my permission for use, so I always read a script or synopsis before I say yes or no," Anderson says. "Maybe it's got some actors in it that I like, or there's an important director. Either way, it's good to know that the song has another life in some new context." ag

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