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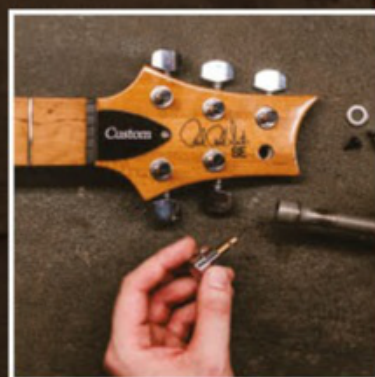
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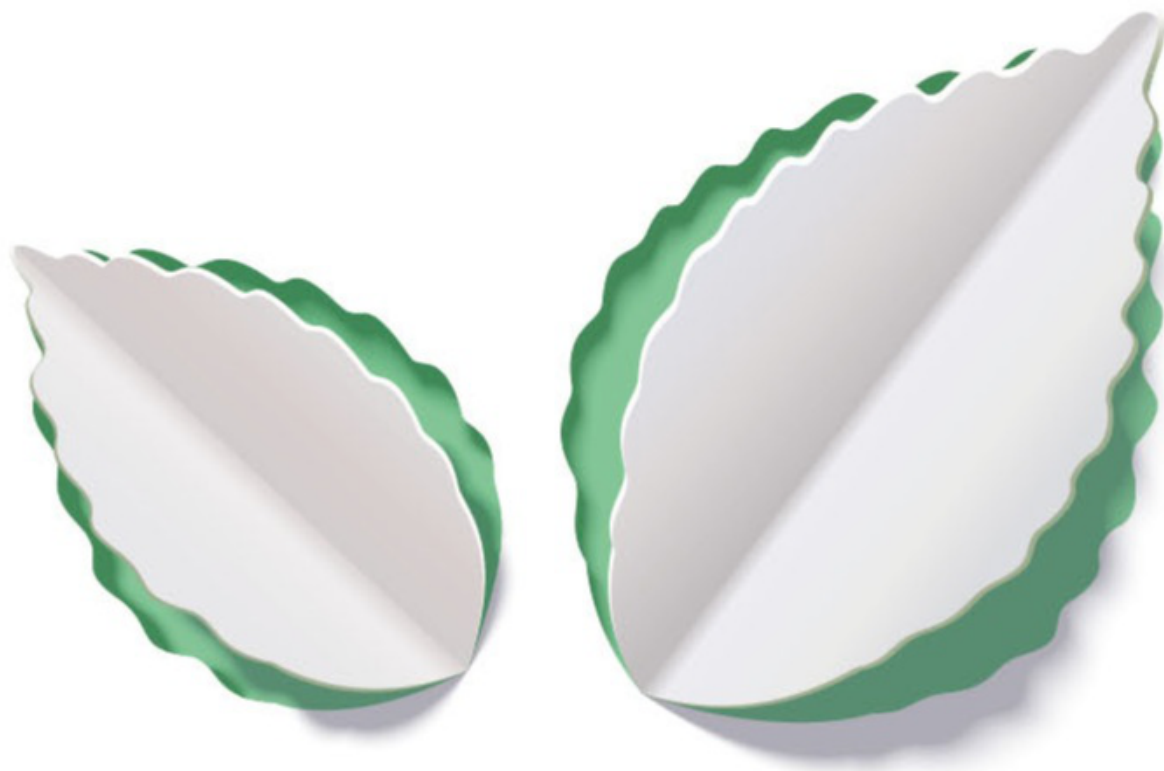
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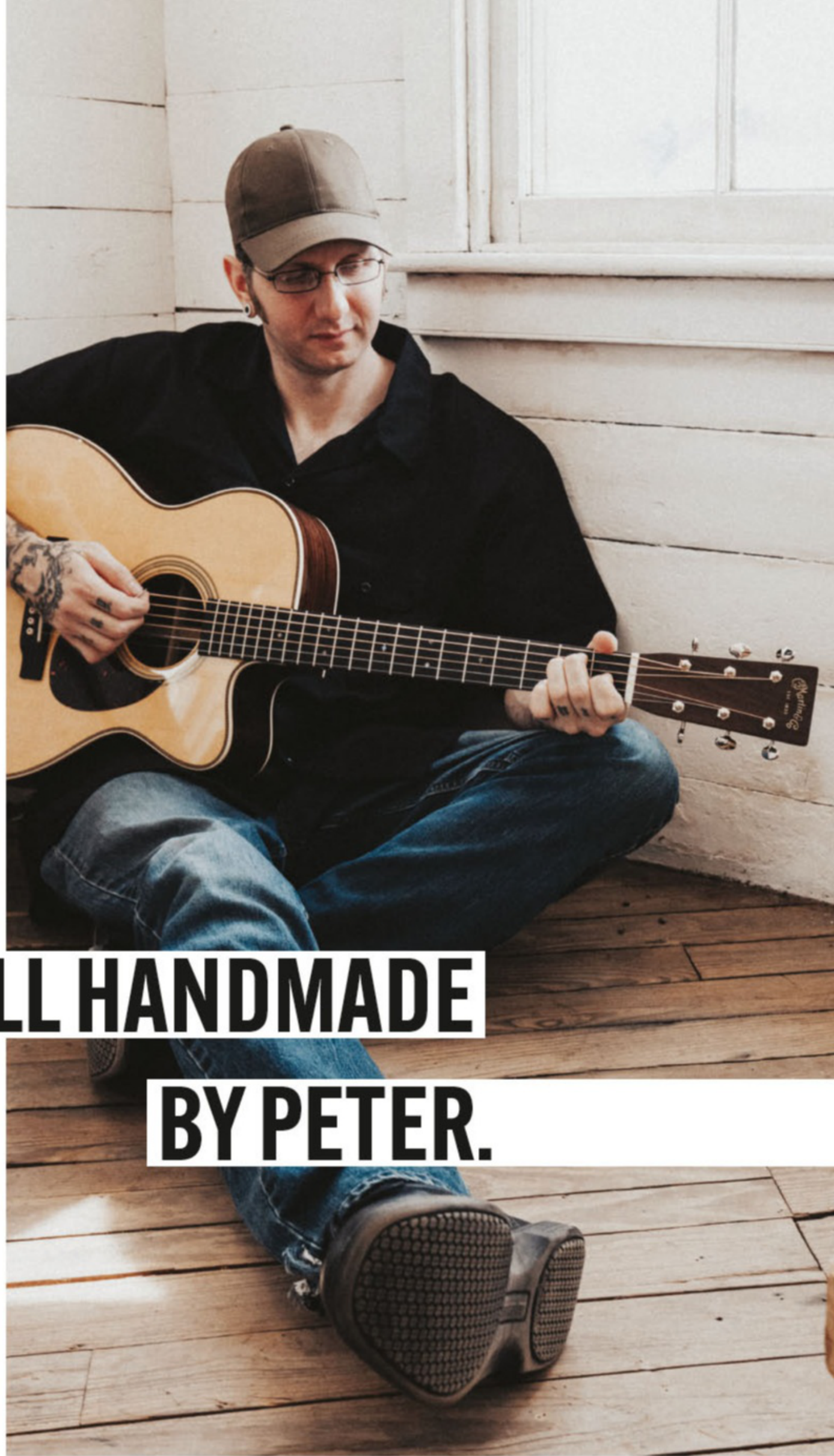


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THE POWER TO BELIEVE

THE OPTIMIST IN me dreams up possibilities. The realist in me is awake to low expectations. Some six months ago, I had the fanciful idea that we should get Robert Fripp to sit down for an interview. Why not? He's all over social media with his wife, Toyah Willcox, performing theatrical covers of rock and roll classics in their kitchen for their *Sunday Lunch* YouTube series. Surely he'd sit down with a guitar magazine for a serious conversation about his years with King Crimson and his career as one of the most innovative guitarists of our time.

But of course Robert Fripp is notoriously interview shy. And I can't think of the last time I read any guitar magazine's deep Q&A with him.

So it was with dim prospects that an invitation was sent down rock royalty's backchannels, with assistance from Jamie Dickson, editor-in-chief of our U.K. sister publication *Guitarist*. And surprise of all surprises, Robert said yes, and not only to an interview — he also agreed to have his guitars photographed: from his circa-1962 Gibson ES-345 (his "first real guitar," as he says in this month's story) to his 1959 Les Paul Custom, which has graced countless classic tracks by King Crimson, Fripp and Eno, David Bowie and others. *Guitarist* deputy editor David Mead did the honors, and the result is one of the most revealing and thought-provoking guitar interviews you will read here or anywhere.

But Robert Fripp is only part of what makes this issue such a treat. I'm very excited to introduce Stephen Dale Petit to these pages. The U.S. expat has made a name for himself in the U.K. but remains little known in the country of his birth. It's a shame. Not only is his latest album, *2020 Visions*, one of the most exciting guitar records I've heard this year, but his career is a fascinating story that has seen him cross paths with everyone from Randy Rhoads to Albert King to Eric Clapton and Mick Taylor. Along the way Stephen's circle has widened to include Ringo Starr, Beatles friend and associate Klaus Voormann, who designed the cover of *2020 Visions*, and Pattie Boyd, the muse behind songs like "Something," "Layla" and "Wonderful Tonight," who shot many of the spectacular photos in Stephen's feature.

I'm likewise thrilled to bring you an interview with Peter Rowan, an Americana treasure whose past work includes stints with Bill Monroe, Old & in the Way (where he performed with Jerry Garcia and David Grisman) and Tony Rice. Peter's new album finds him teaming up with guitar stars Billy Strings and Molly Tuttle as he continues to thread his way through the Americana landscape.

So dig in. There's all this, and plenty more, to inspire you in the pages ahead.

Christopher Scapelliti

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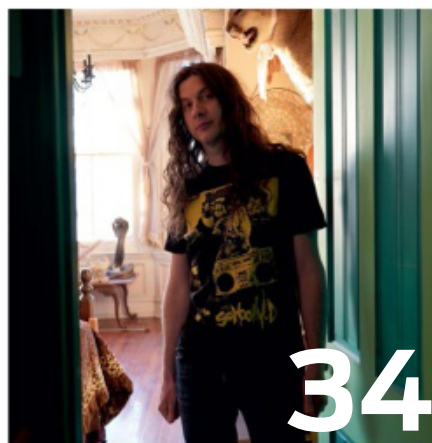
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Robert Fripp, photographed
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AMANDA ROWAN (ROWAN); ADAM GASSON (FRIPP)

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A promotional photograph of musician Lizzy Hale. She is standing, holding a bright red Gibson Explorer guitar. She wears a black leather motorcycle jacket over a white t-shirt and a white guitar strap with gold lettering that reads "LIZZY HALE". The background is a dramatic, dark red with swirling smoke or fire effects. In the background, a drum kit is visible. The Gibson logo is in the top right corner.

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JERRY CANTRELL

"WINO" LES PAUL CUSTOM
DARK WINE RED

MAGIC ACT

With electronics inspired by a famed 1970s studio console, Terry C. McInturff's Spellcaster sounds like a Telecaster from your favorite classic rock album.

BY DAVE HUNTER

CONSIDERING THAT HE has been working with guitars since 1978, it's no surprise Terry C. McInturff knows how to build a good one. Most newcomers to his work, however, are surprised by just how good his creations are, and by the fact that this eminently skilled luthier isn't a household name. McInturff's Spellcaster wraps the builder's broad-reaching craftsmanship and innovation into a mightily versatile instrument that pays homage to the seminal solidbody electric, while it launches the platform into the next dimension.

McInturff grew up in the Chicago suburbs and got hooked on guitar from the AM rock and roll radio of his youth. Though he's a talented player (and remains a gigging guitarist to this day), he was drawn to guitar making, and McInturff solidified his abilities by attending the famed Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery in Phoenix, an institution he discovered in the back pages of *Guitar Player* magazine. From independent building and restoration, he went on to work at a shop that subcontracted Ken Smith basses, then took a stint building in the Hamer Custom Shop before moving to North Carolina and setting out on his own as Terry C. McInturff Guitars in 1996. For many years now, McInturff has maintained a one-man shop in which the master himself completes every aspect of the design and build process, which is how this Spellcaster came into the world.

In a very real sense, McInturff has taken the Spellcaster so far from the blueprint of its inspiration that it's an entirely new thing. Still,

PHOTOS BY WAY OF THE LENS



elements of the single-cut shape, the lovely swamp ash used in the body's construction, and the giveaway tilt of the bridge pickup hint at its roots. Regarding Leo Fender's original design for the guitar that became the Telecaster, McInturff tells us, "They got it right almost immediately. The original design is, for the most part, as good as that design is going to get. As a builder, I did not address that sound for 25 years. It was a tad frustrating not having anything new to bring to it."

"But one day I realized I could explore the effect that the classic analog recording chain had upon the sound of the Tele on my favorite recordings, and build some of that character right into the chassis. That idea took years to bring to fruition in the form of my TCM Spellcaster model."

Beyond the touch points that define the Spellcaster as an homage of sorts, the guitar shows innovation and originality that are well off the charts. The body profile is adapted from one found on other TMC models. It shows an elegant modernizing of the lines and a racy forward lean that creates a subtly offset waist, along with the addition of ribcage and lap contours and a gentle arch to the top's carve. The swamp ash displays a stunningly bold grain beneath a vintage sunburst that's shot in TCM's proprietary blend of three nitrocellulose lacquer formulations to create a thin, Golden Era–like finish, with no catalyzers.

The neck is another proprietary TCM design. Carved from solid Honduran mahogany, it's glued in with a mild dovetail joint. The profile is sweetly rounded to help the guitar sit well in the hand, yielding an extremely ergonomic and playable feel from nut to joint. The fingerboard is bound torrefied Purple Heart (a.k.a. Royal Blackwood), inset with 22 medium-jumbo frets across a 25.125-inch scale length and adorned with sterling-silver "ghost ring" inlays. "I've been building with this fingerboard wood as an option lately, and I really like the clear tap tone, stability and density," McInturff tells me. "The density falls between Brazilian rosewood and ebony. The stability, due in part to the roasting, is really quite good. Sustainable yield, too!"

Other relevant specs include the 12-inch fingerboard radius and a 1 11/16-inch width across the nut. The latter, which TCM calls the Zebra Nut (patent applied for), is original and



The master volume control is set in the tortoise pickguard. BELOW: Terry C. McInturff

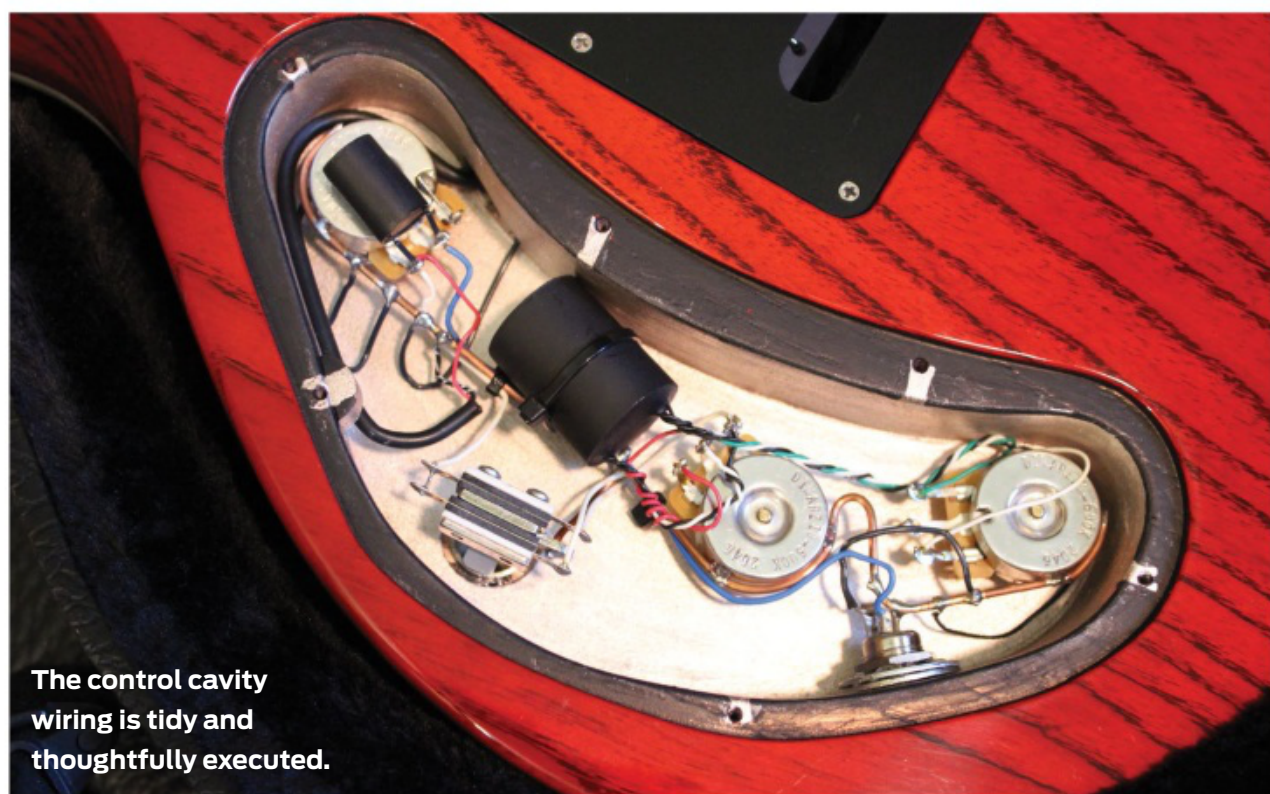


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EFFECT OF THE
CLASSIC ANALOG
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THE TELE, AND BUILT
THAT CHARACTER
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innovative. It's made from a piece of extremely dense water buffalo bone that is inset with slippery black polymer inlays to form individual “saddles,” allowing two-thirds of the string's bearing surface to be self-lubricating as it passes over both the bone and the polymer in each slot. Tuners are Gotoh Magnum Lock Minis, and the bridge is a Gotoh 510 Series two-point vibrato.

In addition to the specs and hardware list, the Spellcaster's dress and presentation really take it up several notches in the looks department. The faux-tortoise knobs, switch tips and trem-arm tip are custom made to TCM's specs, then hand sanded and buffed by McInturff and, in the case of the knobs, inlaid with a sterling-silver/blackwood indicator dot to echo those on the fingerboard. The tortoise pickguard — cleverly inset with the master-volume control — and the “poker chips” around the two switches are made in-house by McInturff, as is the bound ebony truss-rod cover. Together with the multi-ply binding on the body's top, the bound flame-maple headstock overlay (finished in translucent black, and hand signed), and the translucent vintage-cherry finish on the back and neck, it makes for plenty of custom-grade bling that's never ostentatious or over the top.

However, some of the most adventurous thinking went into the electronics. It's the rare builder who gives as much thought to the entire signal path and the components that carry and enhance it as he does to the carving and crafting of the instrument they're intended to transmit. TCM's holistic approach to guitar making is further revealed in this element of the Spellcaster, embodied in what he calls his Maxi-Q electronics.



The control cavity wiring is tidy and thoughtfully executed.



It begins with a pair of Lindy Fralin Split-Blade T-style pickups, which add hum canceling to the vintage-wound tonal template. From there, a three-way selector switch on the upper bout feeds the single volume control and a pair of filter-style EQ controls. The first (nearest the volume) is a low-pass filter (LPF), much like a traditional guitar tone control, but with a different voicing. The second is a midrange-control filter (MCF) inspired by the input modules on a Raindirk Series 3 mixing desk previously in use at London's Olympic Studios in the mid to late '70s. “I love the midrange EQ on those,” McInturff says. “At 10, you have full midrange boost, while at zero you have full midrange cut.” A three-way switch near these lower controls routes the signal through either the LPF or the MCF, or bypasses both. To top it off, the beauty of the execution is reflected in one of the most neatly and thoughtfully wired control cavities I've seen on any guitar.

With the Spellcaster plugged into a 1968 Fender Super Reverb combo and a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini head and 2x12 cab, its deceptively simple control setup enables a near-infinite variety of tones. For example, with the three-way selector set to the bridge pickup alone, it's easy to dial in a thick, yet clear humbucker-like sound on the LPF,



a funky, Strat-ish in-between tone on the MCF, and maintain a beefy Tele-inspired twang in the bypassed position. Extrapolate that to the other pickup selections and the full sweep of each EQ knob, and the world's your sonic shape-shifting oyster.

The guitar itself is extremely resonant, with a clarity and precision amid the shimmering, overtone-rich character, all of which speaks to the quality of the three-pronged effort — design, build and woods — that has gone into the thing. It really shines via straight-in playing with the amp set clean-ish, or with just a little bite and breakup when you dig in hard, which is my go-to anyway. It also takes to overdrive pedals like they're second nature, the overall sonic solidity and hum-canceling single-coils all working in the Spellcaster's favor when I stepped on a Wampler Tumnus Plus or a Tsakalis Six for some added dirt.

All in all, the Spellcaster is a masterfully rendered original design from one of today's true artists of the electric guitar, and an impressively chameleon-like performer. Well done, Terry C. McInturff, for weaving this tonally magic spell. 🎸

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STRANGE BREW

Barteas Strange cooks up a heady, dynamic indie-rock concoction on *Farm to Table*.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE PIOTROWSKI

WITH REHEARSALS FOR his tour just a week away, rising indie-rock star Barteas Strange is surrounded by his favorite guitars and amplifiers. From all indications, this is the hard part of the job.

"If you could see me right now, I have all of my amps in a circle around me and, like, five guitars," Strange says over the phone from his home in Virginia. "And I'm just like, 'What's going to be the perfect combination?' I can't figure it out."

Whether he's strapped with his Gibson '59 ES-335 Reissue, '67 Epiphone Casino or '59 Fender Jazzmaster, Strange will show up ready to blaze. Over the past year, he's toured with indie vanguards like Phoebe Bridgers, Lucy Dacus and Car Seat Headrest. But as one can tell from his latest album, *Farm to Table* (4AD), his own music is a fusion of

styles and influences stretching back to his youth, when hardcore and emo bands ruled his playlists and fueled his creativity.

"I got into guitars and playing music from having hardcore bands and punk bands expand my understanding of what you can do with a guitar," he says, "the ethos of guitar playing and sounding like yourself being more important than sounding like anybody else."

Strange's music is rooted in the emotional heft of emo, but he pulls R&B and hip-hop into the layered madness of "Cosigns" and explores acoustic pop on "Tours" and "Black Gold." There is also a hint of Fleetwood Mac balladry on "Escape This Circus" and some fine dueling guitars on the surging and lyrical "Heavy Heart." On the eve of touring for *Farm to Table*, Strange spoke with *Guitar Player* about his journey to indie-rock stardom.

How and when did music come into your life?

I remember the first real moment that I was like, Oh, what is this? It was a Norma Jean concert. To see everyone react to it reminded me of church, like the spirit moving through a room and people going crazy, moshing. The music was so loud, and it was such a different context for me. I went to some all-Black churches and heard some pretty wild, awesome church bands, but I'd never seen anyone making — let alone playing for an hour and half — music that was that intense. It really changed what I thought you could do with music and made it more accessible for me, because I was always so intimidated.

That was my on-ramp to getting into guitar-based music and finding the blues, falling in love with Albert Collins and Freddie

King and Rosetta Tharpe, and copying all those licks. Then I heard those same licks in country music and fell in love with Chet Atkins and Waylon Jennings and Brad Paisley. Seeing TV on the Radio perform “Wolf Like Me” on [Late Show With David] Letterman and hearing those Telecasters on Bloc Party’s “Helicopter” completed the circle. I knew what I wanted to do with guitars.

What about Telecasters spoke to you?

Teles resonate with me and my guitar philosophy. I’m not a super-fast, technical player. I don’t really know how to read music. I like to write songs — I think about chords and the song construction and what the section means and why it’s there. I need a guitar that’s not in the way, that I can treat just like a tool. Like, this is a hammer and I build houses with this hammer, and who cares what brand of hammer it is? That’s how I like to think of guitars, and that’s how I think of a Telecaster. You can play jazz or country on a Tele. Some of my favorite emo bands, like American Football, Joan of Arc, Cap’n Jazz — these guys are all Tele players. And whenever I make records, there’s always two or three Teles in the room. They record really well, and I know what it’s going to sound like.

It certainly lends itself to the intricate picking you do.

I don’t really play with a pick; I play with my fingers. So every time I play a chord, I’m kind of picking it out and finding the loop within the chord, finding the lead. Sometimes I’ll write a riff and build the song around it, but most of the time I write the chords and come back and solo on it. It is literally just me with a looping pedal playing the chords and following along with it. I don’t put too much thought into it. I’m just playing what feels good.

What are your favorite guitar moments on *Farm to Table*?

My favorite is the end of “Heavy Heart,” where the solo kicks in. I just love that freaking guitar part and all the tones involved with that song. It’s a guitar

symphony. It’s such a fun song to write and play. Every guitar line is a solo. And then on “Hold the Line,” there is a guitar line at the end, which is a solo slide part played by my friend Dan Kleederman. But my favorite part about the song is how the two guitars interact with each other. I’m playing the rhythm part on the left side, and the part is sneaky confusing. It’s a slow song, so there’s all this space, and you just have to sit in it. You can’t play through it. It took many years of overplaying to get a song like that.

“THE ETHOS OF GUITAR PLAYING AND SOUNDING LIKE YOURSELF IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SOUNDING LIKE ANYBODY ELSE”

On the song “Escape the Circus,” there is a guitar moment on the bridge where a cacophony of guitars swirl around each other and result in these weird bloopy tape loops, and oversaturated sounds that fade in and out. That’s probably the most Bartees guitar move of all time. There’s just a combination of a lot of things I love smashed into that section, and then we leave it and move into this big Blink-182, nine-million-guitars, big-drums moment, which is the only moment like that on the whole album, but it’s a throwback to some of my favorite music.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Farm to Table

“Heavy Heart,”
“Mulholland Dr.,”
“Tours,” “Hold the Line,”
“Black Gold”

What was your main rig on the record?

My ’67 Epiphone Casino, my favorite guitar, is on everything. There’s also a 1963 Gibson ES-125T, the slim one, with some funny quirks added to it. For that song it had flatwounds on it, and the string slots on the bridge were rubber, so it created a sound that was different from the other 125 I had played. It has the stock Gibson P-90, and so when you hit it, it crunches in a really unique, nice way on the hollow body. I played that guitar quite a bit.



I also used a 1964 [Fender] Jaguar all over the record. For the outro of “Escape the Circus,” I played a Danny Gatton Telecaster and that Jaguar through a Tone King amp and a Benson Vincent amp in stereo, with different ribbon mics on each. I’m not really big on dynamic mics for guitar amps, ’cause I like how an amp breathes and sounds in a room. Sometimes when a mic is right on the cone, it can be a little too much for me. So I always use a ribbon mic about a foot away, just to catch the darkness and the air. The amp I used the most on the whole album is an early ’70s [Fender] Vibro Champ. I think it’s my best-sounding amp. Almost every song starts on that amp. I actually broke it on this album, and I still haven’t gotten it fixed, which is killing me. But it’s also forcing me to use some of my other amps.

You were a football player before you took up music. Are there parallels between your days as an athlete and your career as a musician?

I don’t know if there are parallels, but there are definitely things I took from athletics that I apply to music. I’m a competitive person; I have goals of what I want to do with music. I’m extremely grateful that I get to make music, but it doesn’t stop there for me. Ultimately, I think there are a lot more Black kids from Oklahoma and Arkansas and Missouri and Texas who are great artists and deserve opportunities like I have. Seeing Tunde Adebimpe [*of TV on the Radio*] on *Letterman* blew my mind, like, “You can do that?” It’s like, you can’t tell a Black kid to be a doctor if they’ve never met a doctor before. They’ve got to see it, and I hope people see me and they’re like, “Oh, he did it! I’m going to do it better than he did it. I’m going to do it bigger than he did it.” That’s really my dream with all of this. 🖤



**“BUILD A HISTORY OF
PLAYING IN TUNE, AND
IT WILL BECOME PART OF
YOUR SIGNATURE SOUND”**

TIP SHEET

Joe Satriani shares 10 pointers to improve your practice, playing and performance.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEN ROSENSTEIN

YEARS BEFORE HE became one of the most celebrated guitarists on the planet, Joe Satriani was a club-gigging musician who paid his bills — sometimes barely — by teaching other aspiring players. His famous alumni includes the likes of Steve Vai, Kirk Hammett, Alex Skolnick and Primus’s Larry LaLonde, among others.

“It was a great experience,” Satriani says of his teaching days. “No matter what abilities my students came to me with, I always tried to give them their money’s worth and build

their musical knowledge in ways they could grasp and use. And I tried to make the lessons fun, because I knew that if things got boring, they’d tune out and stop coming.”

In his own life, Satch considers himself ever the student. “I’m still teaching myself,” he says. “I started out strumming the guitar and trying to grab bits of information from wherever I could, and in many ways that continues today. Some things you let slide along the way, and other things you obsess about. There are many rabbit holes you can

go down, but to me there are certain aspects to guitar playing that you should always pay attention to.” Here, Joe runs down his top 10.

1. TUNE UP FIRST

“It’s funny how this is such a neglected aspect of guitar playing. So much of the time, people grab their guitars because they’re inspired to play. There have even been records recorded that way. The guitarist doesn’t want his flow interrupted, and he winds up playing this amazing part with an out-of-tune guitar.

Check your guitar's intonation regularly so you know that, wherever you play on the fretboard, the intonation is accurate. Build a history of playing in tune, and it will become part of your signature sound."

2. STRIKE YOUR STRINGS AT DIFFERENT PLACES IN THE PICKING AREA

"Years ago when watching footage of Hendrix, I noticed his picking hand didn't stay in one place. Sometimes he'd pick at the bridge, while other times he'd move his hand toward the neck. It was a key element of his playing. Same with Keith Richards. I started trying it myself, and it unlocked this rich world of tone.

"Learn to move your picking hand around. This will allow you to shape the tone of each phrase and individual notes. Also, change your pick angle and the part of the pick you use. You'll be surprised how much variation in tone you can get."

3. PRACTICE ACHIEVING GOOD INTONATION WHILE BENDING NOTES

"Bending notes is cause and effect. You can determine what kind of effect you want, but you have to learn how to be in control to achieve a particular sound. It can be a scary guitar sound, or it can sound beautiful, but to achieve that result, you have to know how to get there. Fret a note on your B string and then drop down two frets and bend up to that note. Do this over and over again at a variety of fret positions using the first three strings. Bend half steps, whole steps and so on. Again, build a history of being in tune."

4. PRACTICE SCALES OVER ACTUAL MUSIC

"It's important to learn scale patterns, but if you spend all your time doing exercises, pretty soon everything you play will sound like scale patterns. Who wants to hear that? Playing over music is a good way to take what you've learned and apply scale tones to chords and chordal progressions. As an example, set up a two-chord pattern in one mode and jam over the top. Make sure to listen as you play. That's what the audience does."

5. VARY YOUR ROUTINE

"When I was learning how to play, I would get stuck on some exercise, and I would repeat it

over and over. What I didn't realize was how the repetition was working against me. It was making my playing stiff and nonmusical. Break out of that habit. Stay relaxed and change your guitar warm-up exercises each day. Crank up the variety factor. One day you can do the non-musical, finger-twisting stuff; the next, focus on arpeggios, and the next day it's scales, and so on."

6. DON'T DRAG YOUR PRACTICE SESSIONS OUT

"You can work on exercises and scale patterns forever, but after a while there's a point where you need to stop and move on. You're not going to sell out theaters or get a billion streams online with finger exercises. Limit



Satch
performs
tip #10

these routines. Keep them short and productive, but keep in mind they're merely exercises, not actual music your audience wants to hear. Spend more of your precious practice time learning and playing music. It'll be more enjoyable for you, and you'll progress much faster."

7. LEARN NEW MATERIAL BY MEASURED REPETITION

"Get in the habit of making the unknown, or something that feels awkward, second nature. You do this by measured repetition — by learning how to play something the right way, not by playing it the wrong way over and over. This is something I learned from Lennie Tristano [*the jazz pianist, who was Satch's*

guitar teacher]. I played a wrong note and he said, 'Why did you play that? If you're not sure about the next note, don't play it.' I had let a bad habit become part of my style. Be careful not to reinforce wrong parts and get stuck in bad habits. The more time you log playing something right, slowly and carefully, the better your chance of always playing it right."

8. DON'T STRETCH RIGHT BEFORE A PERFORMANCE

"I always thought it was natural to stretch before a performance. Then I noticed bassist Matt Bissonette was always backstage relaxing right before he played — and he killed it every night. Around that same time, I read an article about athletes that said stretching right before an event could actually hinder performance. So I changed my routine, and it really worked. I did my warm-ups hours before the performance, not right before, and I noticed that I seemed to play better onstage. I felt more relaxed, and I had extra reserves of energy. Try it!"

9. KEEP YOUR VOLUME LOW WHILE PRACTICING

"This is a crazy one. It relates to your ears' ability to hear certain sounds at different volumes. A high pitch will be perceived as getting higher if its loudness is increased, whereas a low pitch will be perceived as going lower with increased loudness. This psycho-acoustic effect has been extensively investigated. With an increase of sound intensity from 60 to 90 decibels, the pitch of a 6 kHz pure tone was perceived to rise over 30 cents. Why am I telling you this? So that you can hear your music properly. Keep your volume level low while practicing. It will help you more accurately perceive the tone and intonation of what you're playing. Your ears will thank you. So will your neighbors."

10. KEEP YOUR STRINGS CLEAN

"If your strings are nice and clean, you'll intonate notes better, everything will sound clear and beautiful, and your strings will last longer. I used to use isopropyl alcohol, which worked fine, but it also made the strings brittle. Now I use Big Bends Guitar String Wipes, and they work great. If you don't want to change your strings all the time, these wipes will clean them really well." 🎸



ZERO THE HERO

On Shinedown's latest, Zach Myers does more with less and finds an elusive amp tone in a Kemper.

BY JOE BOSSO

LET'S FACE IT: The chances for a rock band to have any kind of success, much less maintain it, are statistically very low. And then there's Shinedown. Together since 2001, and with record sales exceeding 10 million copies, the Jacksonville, Florida-based outfit has the kind of staying power that seems to defy all odds. How does guitarist Zach Myers explain the group's longevity?

"It's something I think about a lot, and I certainly don't take anything for granted," he says. "Most of the bands we came up with aren't here anymore. I think one of the things that's kept us going is the fact that we write songs that mean something and speak to people. We don't write about partying or doing drugs. Plus, we have a pretty unique sound. I don't hear anybody that does what we do."

He laughs. "And then there's luck. You just can't explain it, no matter how hard you try."

Throughout Shinedown's seven studio albums, which includes their just-released

Planet Zero (Atlantic), Myers has distinguished himself as an inventive and reliable guitarist. His riffs are sparky and hooky, and his solos are marvels of punchy economy. With surprising candor, he makes it clear that he's not trying to challenge anybody for shred supremacy.

"This will be very unpopular to say, but I'm not looking to blow people away with my guitar playing," he says. "I'm friends with people like Joe Bonamassa and [*Periphery's*] Mark Holcomb, but I'm not

like them. I can't do the crazy speed stuff, and I'd look foolish trying to impress people by playing flashy chops. If anything, I'm developing more as a songwriter than as

a guitar player. I just want to write good songs, so I view the guitar as a tool for composing and creating the right parts for each track."

Shinedown's previous album, 2018's *Attention*, was a sonically adventurous cinematic concept record based around an overarching

theme of personal alienation. Tougher and leaner, *Planet Zero* travels down a similar lane (this time the narrative concerns a worldwide dystopian future), but as Myers points out,

"WE FOUND OUT LONG AGO THAT MINIMAL EQUALS MAXIMAL ON THE SONIC SPECTRUM"

the sustained storyline that connects the songs was purely unintentional.

"We were just writing and recording.

There was no grand design to it," he explains. "When we were finished, [vocalist] Brent [Smith] said, 'This is less of a concept record than the last one.' Which was funny to me. I said, 'Are you kidding? It's way more of a concept album than before. It's got a beginning, middle and end.' Somehow, we created a story without even trying. I think the whole band has Pink Floyd as its navigational system."

On songs like "Dead Don't Die," "Clueless and Dramatic" and the pummeling title track, Myers' guitar sound is a scorching, paint-peeling thing of beauty. But what appears to

be a multitude of overdubbed guitars is actually the opposite. "There's really very few guitars on each song," he says. "It's basically

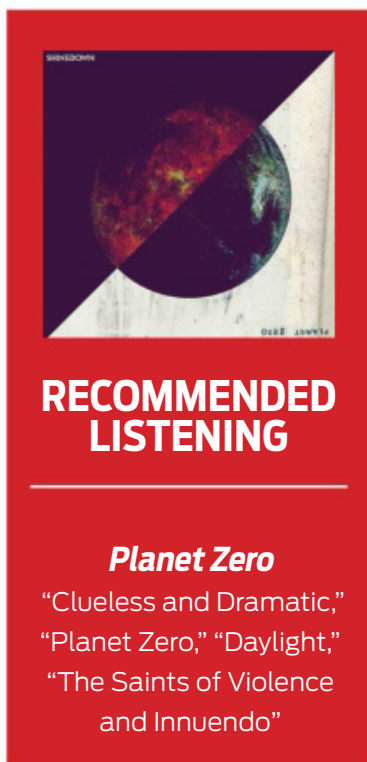
a hard-left and hard-right guitar, and that's it. There's no reason to dick around with endless overdubs. We found out long ago that minimal equals maximal on the sonic spectrum."

On each Shinedown album, Myers has relied on his treasured 1965 Gibson ES-335, and on *Planet Zero* he also played a couple of PRS 305 models in addition to a 1976 Fender Telecaster that he refers to as "the magic Tele. It sounds like nothing else around." However, on most tracks, he found himself grabbing one of two Les Pauls owned by Shinedown bassist (and album

producer) Eric Bass. "They're 'pancake' body Deluxes from the 1970s, and they're just incredible," Myers says. "They sound great on their own, but when you pair one with that Tele, it's the ticket, man."

While recording at Bass's home studio, Myers utilized an array of amps, including Marshall JCM 800s and a 1977 JMP, as well as a Roland JC-90 Jazz Chorus combo. But no matter what combination of amplifiers he tried on the album's title track, nothing seemed to click.

"Some songs just don't want what they don't want, and I was going crazy working on that one," he says. "No matter what amp I played through, I couldn't get it to sound right. It was driving me insane. Finally, we went back to the guitars I played on the demo, which went through a Kemper Profiler digital amp. And there it was! That's what I was looking for!" He sighs. "I wish I would have tried doing that the first time. It would have saved me a lot of headaches." ■



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Davey Johnstone and Elton John perform at BankAtlantic Center, Sunrise, Florida, March 9, 2012

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

Davey Johnstone picks a handful of hits from his decades-long run with Elton John.

BY JOE BOSSO

IN 1971, 20-YEAR-OLD Davey Johnstone was just starting to get his career as a professional guitarist off the ground when he got a call from his producer friend Gus Dudgeon that literally changed his life. “Gus asked me to meet Elton John, whom he was producing, and the next thing I knew I was playing on Elton’s new album, *Madman Across the Water*,” Johnstone recalls. “I played on four cuts — ‘Tiny Dancer,’ ‘Levon,’ ‘Holiday Inn’ and the title track. A week after the sessions, I was asked to join the band.”

Johnstone didn’t have to be asked twice. Although John wasn’t yet a huge star, his music appealed to the Scottish-born guitarist. “Elton was writing such beautiful songs with Bernie Taupin,” Johnstone says. “Plus, you had Gus Dudgeon and [arranger and conductor] Paul Buckmaster working with them, and they were both so damned cool and talented.

The whole situation felt right to me. There was a terrific atmosphere surrounding Elton — he was a wonderful piano player and singer, and now he was getting his shot at being a frontman and not just a studio musician. You could tell things were going somewhere.”

Along with John and Johnstone, the new band included drummer Nigel Olsson and the late bassist Dee Murray — a rhythm section that the singer had begun working with a year earlier. The quartet jelled quickly, and no matter which style of music they were presented — country-rock, soul, blazing rock and roll, lush ballads or symphonic pop — they tackled it like seasoned pros, instinctively playing the right lick at the right time, adding nuance and depth to each recording. For his part, Johnstone didn’t overplay his hand but made each riff, phrase and solo stand out. “Musically, it was a blank

canvas, and I got to do whatever I wanted,” he says. “I was the only guitar player in a four-piece group, and I loved the kind of freedom I had.”

Shortly after Johnstone joined the band, the hits started coming...and coming. Between 1971 and 1976, the group recorded eight studio albums (nearly all of them stone-classic multimillion sellers), and when they weren’t laying down tracks, they were jetting across the globe on tours that got longer and more elaborate. Not surprisingly, the band’s exhaustive schedule didn’t allow for a lot of time to labor over recordings. For example, the double album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* took all of 16 days to make. “We worked very quickly,” Johnstone says. “That’s how things were done in those days, and we didn’t think anything of it. We did ‘Rocket Man’ in three takes, and ‘Saturday Night’s Alright for

LARRY MARANO/GETTY IMAGES

Fighting’ only took two passes to get it right. I know that probably sounds astonishing to a lot of people, but the truth is, we knew what we were doing. The creativity just flowed. We were recording and touring all the time, but we were having the time of our lives. It really was such a brilliant era for making music.”

A key aspect of Johnstone’s job — one he relished — was coming up with guitar riffs. He points to songs such as “Love Lies Bleeding,” “Saturday Night’s Alright for Fighting” and “The Bitch Is Back” as key examples. “Those are definitely mine,” he says. “We’d be running down a song, and somebody would say, ‘We need a great guitar thing for the beginning, and after the chorus we’ll come back to it.’”

He singles out “Candle in the Wind,” however, as a rare — and memorable — instance in which John himself had a firm idea for what he wanted to hear. “Elton came up with a great guitar riff, but to be honest, I didn’t think it was going to work,” he says. “His idea was that every time he would sing

“I WAS THE ONLY GUITAR PLAYER IN A FOUR-PIECE GROUP, AND I LOVED THE KIND OF FREEDOM I HAD”

the words ‘candle in the wind,’ I would play the guitar lick underneath. I didn’t think that would sound right; in fact, it went against my grain of playing a guitar lick over such an important line. But Elton was very keen on it: ‘David, I really want you to try that.’ I said I would give it a shot. The part came up, I did the overdub, and sure enough, I thought, Oh, actually, that sounds pretty good. We kept it in and I doubled it.” He laughs. “I have to admit, to this day, it sounds pretty good.”

In stark contrast to his discography with John (21 studio albums), Johnstone’s solo work includes just two albums — 1973’s *Smiling Face* and his just-released set, *Deeper Than My Roots* (Cherry Red Records). The guitarist had long planned on recording a new album of his own material, but touring commitments with John relegated the idea to back-burner status. However, in March 2020, when he was halfway into the singer’s three-year Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour, the COVID pandemic not only curtailed the band’s shows but also shut down the entire

concert industry. Facing an extended period at home, he decided to get cracking.

Johnstone recruited Nigel Olsson to play drums on one track, the soaring melancholic ballad “Melting Snow,” and he tapped onetime Wings drummer Denny Seiwell for several other tracks. For the bulk of the album, it’s a family affair, with the guitarist’s children performing a number of duties: Youngest child Elliot supplied lead vocals on all but one cut; Charlie Johnstone engineered, played keyboards and sang background vocals; Jesse Johnstone played drums and joined his father and eldest sibling, Tam, on writing, recording and producing the album’s two instrumentals, “Black Scotland” and “Walt Disney”; and daughter Juliet Johnstone conceived and designed the packaging.

It’s a rich set that covers a lot of musical ground. The shimmering album opener, “Go Easy on My Heart,” has echoes of Roy Orbison, while the laid-back acoustic gem “Meu Amor” has a distinct Latin feel. “Boxer in the Corner” is an edgy, almost lo-fi alt-rock number with moments of absorbing psychedelia, and toward the end Johnstone swoops in with a sparky, rousing lead. A pair of tracks reveal more than a passing mid-to-late-period Beatles influence: “One Look in Your Eyes” is bathed in dreamy keyboards that bear a striking resemblance to “Blue Jay Way” and the lush harmonies sound reminiscent of the three-part vocals on *Abbey Road*’s “Because.” (And just in case the Fab Four nods go over anyone’s head, there’s even a bonus cover of “Here, There and Everywhere,” which features Johnstone’s exquisite mandolin playing.)

Throughout the record, the guitarist doesn’t showboat — indeed, even on the two instrumentals, he always plays in service to song and melody — and without reservation, he points to George Harrison as his North Star. “George is one of my biggest idols, no doubt about it,” Johnstone says. “I learned so much about what to play and what not to play from



listening to him. He was a master of great guitar parts that always meant something. You would never hear him just soloing blindly; his parts came in and out, and they wove throughout a song and made the whole thing better. That’s always been the way I approached playing, and it’s something Elton has talked about in terms of how I play, which, of course, is a great compliment.”

Earlier this year, Johnstone rejoined John to resume the second half of the farewell tour, with the final show booked for July 2023 in Sweden. Asked if he considers the end of his performing days with the singer a bittersweet experience, the guitarist says, “No, no, not at all. I would call it a sweet experience. I’m happy to be almost done with touring. I’ve had an amazing, unbelievable career. I can’t think of many bands who have been able to tour at this level over all these decades. It’s especially nice to have Nigel back in the band — there were years when he wasn’t playing with us. The same goes for [percussionist] Ray Cooper. So we’ve got Elton, Nigel, Ray and me finishing this wonderful thing together. I think that’s pretty cool.”

Bearing in mind that it would have been easy to come up with 100 or so tracks, we asked Johnstone to share his memories of recording five cuts with John.

“MONA LISAS AND MAD HATTERS” HONKY CHATEAU (1972)

“Elton didn’t really make demos back in the early days. Frequently he would simply play us a new song he’d just written, and a lot of times Dee, Nigel and I would be right there while he wrote. As he’d play, we’d start to

work out our parts so that we knew what to do when it came time to lay down the track. Elton never said, 'I want you to do this,' or 'Please, don't do that.' We all did what we wanted. Gus Dudgeon would spur us on: 'Oh, that sounds amazing. Let's double-track that. Let's quadruple-track that.' It was all very fun.

"With 'Mona Lisas,' I remember Elton playing it, and I thought, Oh, wow, mandolin would be beautiful here — not only because of the Italian idea of Mona Lisa but also for the shimmering sound of the mandolin. I thought it would work well mixed with a bit of acoustic fingerpicking. Straight away, I knew what I was going to do. I was a skilled mandolin player, as I'd played it since I was 15.

"WE WERE VERY FORTUNATE TO BE ABLE TO DO WHATEVER WE WANTED ON THOSE RECORDINGS"

Plus, I had a background in traditional folk music. Mandolin, tenor banjo, dulcimer — I picked all that up in my teens. Elton appreciated that I would come to him with this tapestry of sounds.

"It was an easy track to lay down. I used an Ovation Spanish-style nylon-string acoustic. It was a beautiful guitar. Actually, I used it again on Elton's [1988] album *Reg Strikes Back*. It wasn't a highbrow guitar, but it played beautifully and sounded great."

"CROCODILE ROCK" DON'T SHOOT ME I'M ONLY THE PIANO PLAYER (1973)

"As Elton played it for us, it was obvious that it was a tongue-in-cheek send-up of rock and roll. He sang that high-pitched part [sings] — laaaa la-la-la-la-laaa — like it was from [Pat Boone's 1962 hit song] 'Speedy Gonzales.' We were stealing little things. So I started thinking, Oh, how about some twangy Duane Eddy guitar parts? The song gave me a lot to work with.

"I have parts where it's very cool and clean, like the Shadows or the Ventures, and then in the chorus it's very crunchy and distorted. I think I did about eight or 10 tracks of guitar; I'd just pick my spots when I wanted



Onstage playing
a Gibson Flying V
circa 1975

to do them. I can't stress how much fun it was in those days, because it was just Elton, Dee, Nigel and me. We would do a track and somebody would go, 'Oh, you know what? Let's do some hand claps here.' Then we'd all run to the mic and do them. And we didn't spend more than a day on a song.

"For the clean parts, I used a black Strat that I picked up in London in 1967. It was one of my favorite Strats, and it's now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Actually, I have a bone to pick with the people running the place because they never inducted the band into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, only Elton. So I want my guitar back! Anyway, I used that guitar, and on the crunchy sections I played a Les Paul goldtop, from '58 or '59 I think.

"It's a good-time song. As soon as people heard it, they knew it was just fun, straight-up rock and roll. There were many years when we didn't play it live. It had become this thing where some people said, 'Well, it's a huge hit,

but it's not very cool, is it?' I would tell Elton, 'Screw it. It's a great nod to rock and roll.' I'm glad we're doing it again in the set. All these songs are valid in their own way."

"FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND/ LOVE LIES BLEEDING" GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD (1973)

"It's been a staple in our set for a long time. Of course, the song starts with that symphonic synthesizer section that David Hentschel did such a brilliant job on. [Hentschel, the album's engineer, wrote the intro using elements of various songs on the album and performed it on an ARP synthesizer.] Then we come in with the slow part, and it's just Elton on acoustic piano and me doing volume pedal slides that sound kind of like Indian flutes or something. From there, we continued straight on because we wanted 'Love Lies Bleeding' to come in after 'Funeral for a Friend' seamlessly.

ANWAR HUSSEIN/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

"I did a bass guitar part during the whole of 'Love Lies Bleeding' on my Les Paul. It was a three-pickup Custom that Elton had bought at Manny's Music in 1972. I picked it out for him because he wanted a guitar. However, I unfortunately had some guitars stolen, so he said, 'Use this one for a while.' I ended up playing that guitar a lot, and it's on this song.

"I worked out a very specific guitar riff because Elton wanted a recurring part that was kind of ringing and chimey. It became sort of a theme of the song. There's also those big power chords that I play. A lot of people have said to me, 'That's so iconic,' which is always nice to hear. People have grown up hearing these parts. There's a lot of rhythm guitar throughout — that's the Les Paul going through a couple of 50-watt Marshalls.

"For the solo section, I went back to the goldtop. I can't tell you how much fun it was to play a part like that. Elton was a huge guitar fan, but he'd never been in a band like ours, so he was loving it. He would always say, 'Do another guitar. Double-track that!' He didn't even put a piano on 'Saturday Night's Alright

"WE WERE HAVING THE TIME OF OUR LIVES. IT REALLY WAS SUCH A BRILLIANT ERA FOR MAKING MUSIC"

for Fighting' until after I did all the guitars. He was very enthusiastic, so we would layer four tracks of guitar, and the sound would get bigger and bigger."

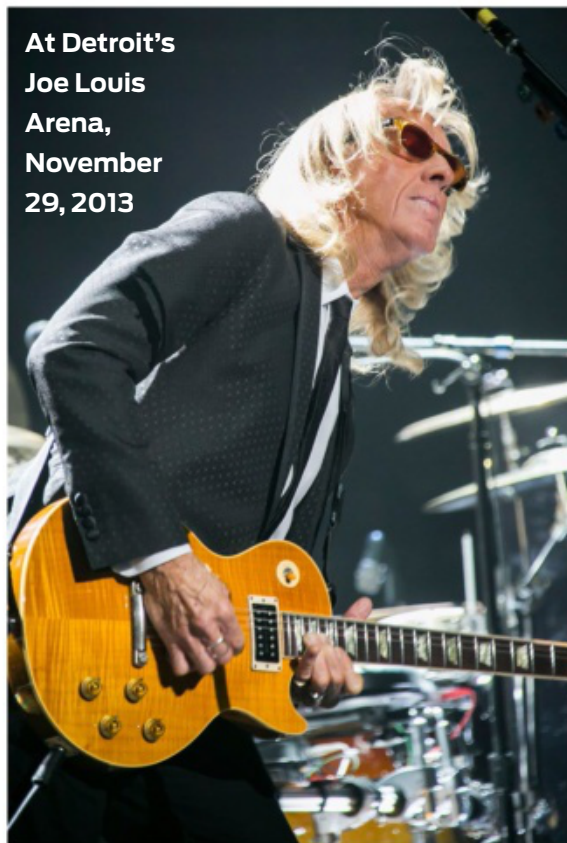
"ALL THE YOUNG GIRLS LOVE ALICE" GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD (1973)

"It opens with that really cool guitar volume swell. That's through a Uni-Vibe, which I've used for various sounds since way back. In those days there was very little hardware available for guitarists. You maybe had a volume pedal, a Cry Baby wah pedal, a fuzz pedal and a Uni-Vibe. That was kind of it. But I loved the Uni-Vibe. When you put it to the upright position, you would get this beautifully slow phasing sound. Conversely,

when you flattened it out, it would create this fast wobbly sound, almost like a guitar through a Leslie cabinet. I found out that if I used the Uni-Vibe in conjunction with my volume pedal, I got this wonderful singing sound as it got louder.

"Then I went into the guitar riff. It needed something kind of harsh and aggressive. Elton loved that one. It's another part that I came up with and he went, 'Oh, shit, that's great.' It's a very pumping song, so I pretty much jumped on what Elton was playing on the piano. I clicked off the Uni-Vibe and we just went to a straight crunch sound for the basic structure of the song. Then at the end, I did all kinds of overdubs, using, believe it or not, a bottle on my guitar strings. That's how I got all those phasing sounds. They sound like cars going by, which we did overdub as well, but a lot of them are guitar effects that I did."

At Detroit's
Joe Louis
Arena,
November
29, 2013



In concert at the
Frank Erwin Center,
April 10, 2010



"I'VE SEEN THAT MOVIE TOO" GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD (1973)

"It's such an atmospheric song. For the bulk of the track, it was mostly acoustic rhythm guitar because I thought that gave it that nice darkness. Paul Buckmaster began writing this great string arrangement, and I didn't want to get in the way with too many electrics. However, Gus said, 'Look, I really feel that this should have a guitar solo.' So I said, 'Okay, why don't you flip the tape over?' I wanted to try a backward guitar solo.

"It wasn't so easy. You literally had to turn the tape over on the spools, rewind it and rewrite the track sheet so that we'd know which track the guitar was going to come up on. And you never knew what you were going to come up with when you played it back. Getting a backward guitar part is really hit or miss, but I've always loved the effect of it after I first heard the Beatles create it on songs like 'I'm Only Sleeping.'

"Gus got the tape all ready and marked it up where the beginning and end would be. My plan was to make half of the solo backward so it would be all cool and different, and at the end I'd bring in some straight-ahead electric stuff. I thought that would really tear people's hearts out. That's the way we did it, and it came out great. Obviously, there was some luck involved.

"When we all heard it back in the control room, everybody was screaming, 'Holy shit! That's it!' It was exactly what I wanted, and it sounded beautiful. There were a lot of good, happy accidents like that. Sometimes we tried things that didn't work out so well, but we had the luxury of experimenting. We were very fortunate to be able to do whatever we wanted on those recordings." 🎸

The Leading Wedge

The attention-getting Watkins Dominator pointed the way forward to Marshall's famed 18-watters.

IN A WORLD where the standard shape of the guitar amp had yet to be set in stone, one British innovator thrust a wedge into the future of guitar tone. The result was the Dominator, and while its style didn't prove to be a lasting way forward, it established a cult classic nonetheless.

Charlie Watkins is rarely given sufficient credit among the pioneers of British guitar gear, although he certainly deserves it for his work on several fronts. His Copicat tape-echo machine, which we probed in our March 2022 issue, was the biggest-selling product of his career. In the physical sense, his biggest creations were the festival-grade sound systems he created for the Windsor and Isle of Wight festivals and others in the mid to late '60s, which hauled PA systems into the modern age.

But his most iconic creation might be the V-front Dominator combo of the late '50s and early '60s, which looked and sounded like nothing else on the market at the time. Watkins first used the striking V-front cabinet briefly as an upgrade of the existing Westminster model in 1956. It became the permanent home of the new Dominator in 1957. In addition to being an attention-getter — and all the more so in its two-tone blue-and-cream covering with gold-thread grille cloth — the shape was thought to aid sound dispersion, with the amp's two 10-inch Elac speakers firing away from each other at something close to a 45-degree angle. The design does enable a fairly broad soundstage from a relatively small package, although it

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- > V-front 2x10 combo cabinet
- > 7 watts from two EL84 output tubes
- > Normal and Microphone channels
- > Tremolo on the normal channel
- > Three ECC83 (12AX7) preamp tubes, EZ81 rectifier tube
- > Two-tone blue-and-cream covering with gold-thread grille cloth

also means there can be something of a hole in the center if you stand too close to the front of the amp. Unlike the Gibson GA-79RVT of 1960, which had a similarly wedge-like shape and two 10-inch speakers, but with a flat panel at the front where the V's point would be, the Dominator was not a stereo amp but rather a simple two-channel mono amp with tremolo.

Otherwise, the Dominator's circuit was relatively straightforward and included three ECC83 (a.k.a. 12AX7) preamp tubes, two EL84 output tubes and one EZ81 rectifier tube, enabling 17 watts RMS. These are fronted by individual tone and volume

controls for the Microphone and Normal channels, with tremolo speed and depth on the latter. While the effect was largely intended for guitar, Watkins was an accordion player and possibly had it in mind for that instrument as well.

The early Dominators were built with point-to-point wiring, the circuit connected by a jumble of components with just a turret strip or two here and there to help support the capacitors and resistors between tube sockets and controls. By the turn of the decade, however — as seen in this combo from 1963 — production was more standardized, using a printed circuit board



Though it wasn't stereo, the Dominator produced a wide soundstage, thanks to its angled speakers.



BY DAVE HUNTER



The Dominator's back and interior (above) and control panel (below)

(PCB), albeit one that was loaded with the same types of discrete components used in the previous amps, and wired up by hand.

Watkins-brand amps were commonplace among players in the rock and roll and skiffle scenes, particularly in London, given that the company's headquarters were in Balham, a borough in the capital's south. But the combos themselves rarely seemed to advance to the professional stage, unlike the PA systems and the big Starfinder speaker cabinets that Pink Floyd's David Gilmour and others would later use. Overall, they were regarded as having decent quality, as the build of our featured combo exhibits, although perhaps not on par with what Vox and Selmer were producing, or what Marshall would soon be known for.

Shortly after this amp's production, Watkins moved the Dominator model into a more conventional rectangular combo cabinet and deleted the tremolo from its feature set. It remained a good-sounding, lower-wattage tube combo, and proved a bargain for coming generations of players, although it still failed to attain notable pro users. Around the same time, Watkins changed his brand name to WEM (for Watkins Electronic Music), largely because he had noted the success of rival JMI's brand and admired their bold Vox logo.

An arguably bigger early classic is said to have been inspired by Charlie's flagship combo. When the Marshall company needed

a "student"-sized amp to join its big JTM45 and the like, Jim Marshall, Ken Bran and Dudley Craven purportedly based the so-called 18-watter's circuit on that of the Dominator. Certainly, there were plenty of smaller 15- to 20-watt amps on the market that also carried just a volume and tone control per channel, plus tremolo. But an examination of the Watkins and Marshall circuits reveals that Marshall's 18-watt amps are nearly identical to the Watkins Dominator, including the unusual arrangement of having the tone control before the volume control in the preamp stage, something you don't see in Fender's similarly powered tweed and brown Deluxe and Princeton, Gibson's GA-30 or Vox's AC15.

Charlie Watkins reissued one of several later versions of V-front Dominators in the early 2000s, although these amps were manufactured out of house according to his specifications. The company British Amplifiers put out another limited release around 2010, and the latest is being produced by Amp-Fix of Cullompton, Devon, England, and is available by direct order. Other makers have followed with the inspiration too: Aircraft has produced an accurate-looking combo, while Goodsell's Dominatrix is based on the Dominator's circuit, if not the distinctive wedge-like cabinet shape of its early incarnation. Watkins passed away at his home in Balham, London, in 2014, at the age of 91. ■



BY JIM CAMPILONGO



The Blues Had a Baby

Elvis Presley's *Sun Sessions* is the sound of rockabilly's accidental birth.

EVERY MORNING I get a croissant at the bakery a few doors down from where I live. It's a nice way to start the day. With a 7 a.m. opening, some mornings I wait for the croissants to come out of the oven, and on these morning the wait is filled with small talk. One of the bakers is a huge guy, kind of a John Candy type. One morning, I asked what his name was. He told me, "My name is Elvis." I was strangely uncomfortable with his answer and started talking. I told him I dated a woman who's ex was named Elvis. There is also Elvis Costello (whose real name is Declan McManus), and there was an NFL quarterback named Elvis Grbac. He looked at me curiously. I wondered if I was making too big a deal out of his name? Or maybe I just knew more Elvises then he did?

Well, kind readers, there are a bunch of Elvis Presleys. There's rockabilly Elvis, Memphis Elvis, bad movie Elvis, leather-clad comeback Elvis, narco agent Elvis (partnered with Richard Nixon) and rhinestone-jumpsuit bloated Vegas Elvis, to name a few.

Personally, my favorite Elvis is found on *Elvis Presley: The Sun Sessions*, where a pre-Army, pre-Colonel Tom Parker Elvis is young, uncorrupted and adopting long hair and sideburns to get a "truck driver" look. Cool. On these recordings he curates his favorite songs, colorblind to the racial source during an era where racism was a blatant part of everyday life. Elvis sang the songs he loved, with bassist Bill Black and guitarist Scotty



**THIS LP IS AN
ENCYCLOPEDIA
SOURCE OF HOW TO
PLAY ROCKABILLY
GUITAR, AND
ELVIS'S DRIVING
RHYTHM GUITAR
PLAYING CAN'T BE
UNDERESTIMATED**

Moore as the supporting cast. Both sidemen were playing a style that placed them in uncharted musical territory. Reportedly, Bill Black didn't care for the music of Elvis Presley, and Scotty Moore said he was navigating the unfamiliar musical terrain by combining the styles of Les Paul and

Chet Atkins. By doing so, Scotty, on his Gibson ES-295, inadvertently created an iconic rockabilly guitar style.

All of this is evident on *Elvis Presley: The Sun Sessions*, a compilation of tracks recorded at Sun Studios from 1954 to 1956 and released on RCA in 1976. This LP is filled with classic recordings such as "That's All Right (Mama)," "Good Rockin' Tonight,"

"Baby Let's Play House," "Mystery Train" and other fantastic performances that formed the DNA of rock and rockabilly. The impromptu nature of these recordings gives them a time capsule feel, where one hears the excitement of discovery among the players. On some cuts, the songs don't end — they just suddenly stop. "Blue Moon" is redefined from Bill Monroe's melodic appreciation of life to Elvis's urgent declaration of experiencing now. My personal favorite track, "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone," was the first song I learned to play in this style, and the triadic solo is something I still incorporate to this day.

This LP is an encyclopedic source for how to play rockabilly guitar, and Elvis's

driving rhythm guitar playing can't be underestimated. I can't imagine "That's All Right (Mama)" without his driving, somewhat off-beat rhythm playing. Do I further need to describe tracks we hear almost everyday, at the supermarket and in-between innings at baseball games? Probably not, but if you're looking for a great rock and roll record with monumental performances, one can't go wrong with *The Sun Sessions*.

Sure, there have been a lot of Elvis Presleys. They run the gamut from terrific to off-putting, but regardless of where I've stood, I always return to *The Sun Sessions*. This is a great LP that I've embraced as a source of inspiration, style and brilliance. But I wouldn't want my name to be Elvis. 🎸

Jim Campilongo has 14 critically acclaimed instrumental records available on vinyl, CD and digital download at jimcampilongo.com.



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FAST TRACK

From inside his home studio,
Kurt Vile reveals his working methods.
Writing songs, playing guitar — it's all
about capturing a “perfect moment.”

BY JONATHAN HORSLEY

ONE OF THE cruelest misfortunes to befall musicians of any stripe is when memory fails just as their inspiration and abilities converge at the summit of their creative Kilimanjaro. Our best ideas are often the most perishable, the first to evaporate if we fail to document them, get them down on tape.

Kurt Vile is alive to the danger. He takes every precaution, booby-trapping his home studio with recording devices to ensure those song ideas get committed to something more reliable than his grey matter. The ideas might not seem like much in the moment, but that's okay, because sometimes there's gold right there, just waiting to be extracted.

“You just lay stuff down really fast with some keys, guitar, or whatever you have, and you'd be surprised,” he explains, speaking from his home studio, OKV Central. “Because what you are trying to do when you are writing a song with vocals, lyrics and guitar is to not think at all. Just lay it down fast. Like Sun Ra — he recorded everything, rehearsals and whatnot. That's what a looper is there for, just for laying something down fast. And you will be surprised that, just because you were walking by, playing music, it captures it, and you have this whole song you didn't otherwise have.”

Vile's recording career was built on such moments. While a member of the War on Drugs — the band he co-founded with Adam Granduciel — Vile was already establishing an alternative canon with a DIY production style, squirreling songs away on CD-Rs. His setup was rudimentary but has since evolved. There's been personal growth — parenthood, hitting his 40s, becoming a pretty big deal, and producing the latest Dinosaur Jr album, *Sweep It Into Space* — but his

ethos and multi-instrumentalist approach hasn't changed much. One thing he's learned over the years is that you can't possibly have too many recording devices: tape recorders, Zoom multi-track field recorders...whatever comes to hand, and especially the looper pedal because that can be the most valuable of them all, allowing you to record without giving a second thought to the red light. And without, as he says, thinking at all, which is how much of his new album, (*Watch My Moves*), was written.

“I have several generations of those Boss loopers, and there is lots of stuff on this record alone where I just treat it like a tape machine — like a recorder without a loop. But then it ends up looping anyway,” he says. “I learned that on this album, recording constantly and then going back to them. I used to not do that. I would show up in the studio and then start from scratch. But these are different times.”

Vile has an unconsciously disguised professionalism. Speaking over Zoom, he doesn't seem the ruthlessly efficient type, dressed in a flannel shirt and a Willie Nelson & Family trucker hat, and his easygoing demeanor suggests he is rarely unmoored from a sense of equilibrium. But (*Watch My Moves*) is a considerable body of work that can only be the product of a certain brand of efficiency and discipline, and perhaps even faith, too. Faith in the sense of letting the imagination out to forage and trust what it'll bring back, a form of quasi-automatic writing that holds song ideas in suspension, as though in a dream.

“Yeah, I like to just get lost in strumming the guitar,” he says. “Like the line on ‘Flyin’ (In a Fast Train)’: ‘Playing in the music room in my underwear...’ At that moment, I literally was!” The memory makes him chuckle. Then it gets serious.





**“I JUST GET
LOST IN
STRUMMING
THE GUITAR”**

**“IN A FULL-ON
SESSION, THERE’S
A PEAK MOMENT
WHERE YOU
FINALLY GET
DOWN AND
REALLY
LET LOOSE”**

How do you finish a track like that — a gentle song, a loose-leaf Americana hip-hop vibe? The risk is that it gets overworked and tightens up. “When I was trying to get the song recorded, my family went away. It was the first summer of the pandemic,” he says. “I stayed, like, ‘I gotta get to know this Marantz four-track!’ I

had this Uni-Vox drum machine, and I sped it up, because I had it down a little too slow, and the next thing you know, I’m just sitting and strumming.

“It’s kinda funny, because you said it was like Americana hip-hop. And strangely enough, the pop star Ke\$ha asked me to help her write some songs. I was flattered, like, ‘Really?’ At the time, I was listening to some of her music, and it is kind of hip-hop. I was trying to make ‘Flyin’ (In a Fast Train)’ poppy, but it came out through me with a Martin acoustic 12-string I got recently, and

with floaty vocals, captured at that time when the song was fully written. I just walked around the block — it was literally all you could do at the time — and next thing you know, the sun went down and I was home alone, feeling pretty good about myself, like in outer space. I think all that’s captured in that song.”

“Mount Airy Hill (Way Gone)” is another song that arrived unannounced. Within minutes, Vile had the lyrics and was singing it over the arpeggiator on a Yamaha organ. The task, again, was to record it and put flesh on the arrangements. That’s when his band, the Violators, came in and the opportunity arose to put slide guitar over it, using his old Rodeo electric with gold-foil pickups — the one from the cover of his 2008 debut, *Constant Hitmaker*. “I can’t remember if I tried slide on something else first, but it just really sung on that thing,” he says. “It’s really beat-up, but those gold-foil pickups just have this special sound. That’s the secret to my early sound. At first I was trying to play that slide part on a Jazzmaster or something. And sure enough, I was like, ‘Hand me that Rodeo!’”

“Mount Airy Hill (Way Gone)” has special significance as a hometown song. Vile took off the headphones to track his vocals and organ, “trying to just ignore the technology” and keep it natural and low-key, as if he were just talking to a friend. His songwriting is deceptive like that. It’s disarming, a stream of consciousness-gathering observational data as it goes, wry asides, lyrics in a meter that help draw the instrumentation forward, everyday stuff, before it establishes a momentum, taking the scenic route to someplace profound.

The blend of the everyday and the profound establishes a dramatic tension. Songs such as “Goin’ on a Plane Today” are like children’s music for existentialists. Even the album’s title speaks to a sense that Vile has the ability to look at the world as a child might, calling it as he sees it, without any filter. But if children lack the wisdom and emotional maturity to always make sense of their experiences, a 40-something adult at least stands a better chance.

“I really like my 40s. I like them a lot,” he says. “I sort of dreaded them, just the number, when I was in my late 30s. Even in the very earliest sessions on this record, I wasn’t even fully ready to record, but I forced myself to go into the studio before I hit 40. I feel like, growing up, you’ve got a lot to prove, a lot to figure out. Now I can tap into it, but I don’t have so much to prove. It’s not such a contest any more.”

Vile recorded (*Watch My Moves*) over various sessions at OKV Central, and in Rob Schnapf’s

Mant Sounds, Los Angeles. Songs such as the Bruce Springsteen cover “Wages of Sin” were performed and recorded live with the Violators in the studio. “I have heard this song a hundred times, and I know I can nail it vocally, and then I can just improvise my guitar over it,” he says. Others offered him the opportunity to bring a host of guests onboard, with Chastity Belt performing on the nostalgic acoustic folk of “Chazzy Don’t Mind,” and James Stewart of the Sun Ra Arkestra playing saxophone on “Goin’ on a Plane Today” and the epic and trippy “Like Exploding Stones.” Extra drums and percussion come from Warpaint’s Stella





Mozgawa and Hot Chip's Sarah Jones, while Cate Le Bon joins him for a duet on "Jesus on a Wire."

Vile plays around with a lot of different styles and textures. At times his guitar playing recalls Ry Cooder, or even Mark Knopfler, but presented in context with synths and keys, these motifs serve a higher purpose. How he presents his instrumentation has a similar effect on the audience as his lyrics. He can be direct and accessible, honest and humane, but there's a soft focus to his sound, a gauzy texture to the production. (*Watch My Moves*) is like an audiophile's interpretation of lo-fi, designed to encourage the audience to lean into the arrangement and take from it what they want.

"That used to be what I was doing all the time with cheaper equipment and recording myself," he says. "I also came to the realization that, one, you do it as live as possible; two, you clutter it up as little as possible; and three, you put as little reverb and delay on there that you used to think helped it — a lot of times, the vocal cuts through better if you keep it dry. You've still got to find the tone, and that's the beauty of playing in the moment. Like, you pick up a guitar and you get lost in one chord."

He pans his camera round and talks through some of his most important pieces of gear, such as the Moog Matriarch that gets a shout-out on "Like Exploding Stones" and an upright piano against the wall behind him. "It is sometimes more spiritual than the guitar," he says of the instrument. "Any time you go over to it, you'll be sort of writing. It's all there in front of you." There were plenty of guitars in the mix, too. An old orange Gretsch — "I can't remember the

number now. 6120?" — that reminded Vile of Neil Young's *On the Beach* tone. "Once I picked that one up, it was hard to put down, and it's just cool how you get to know instruments as you are getting to make the record," he says.

Schnapf's '65 Fender Jazzmaster, a big favorite of his, was most notably used for "Wages of Sin," its signal fed through an ADA Flanger and possibly a Memory Man and a "dirtied-up" vintage Fender Deluxe. Vile is hazy on the details. "If you want to get the straight, gnarlyish but warm, analog sound, go through those ADA Flangers," he offers.

That's how it goes in the studio, he explains, when the writing is near done and the deadline pulls him forward, when the ill-formed blur of an album becomes clearer, when day turns to night and the band plays on, staying up late, and Vile understands once more what it is all about, why he does this in the first place, creating something, making life momentarily transcendent.

"In a full-on session you are maybe up a little bit later than you would be normally, and things get fun and it gets otherworldly and psychedelic, and there's a peak moment in the songs, where you finally get down and really let loose," he says. "I feel like you wouldn't play like that otherwise. It's like a culmination of some moments, almost like being in outer space with your friends or something. A perfect moment, y'know?" ■

**Vile performing
at the All
Points East
Festival,
Victoria Park,
London, May
26, 2019**

**“WHAT YOU’RE
TRYING TO DO
WHEN YOU ARE
WRITING A SONG
WITH VOCALS
AND GUITAR
IS TO NOT
THINK AT ALL”**



IN THE COURT OF THE CRIMSON KING



With King Crimson on perhaps permanent hiatus, the notoriously interview-shy **Robert Fripp** does the unthinkable and sits down for a lengthy talk about his musical beginnings, Crimson's history and the guitars with which he's created some of prog-rock's finest moments.

BY DAVID MEAD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM GASSON





A ROBERT FRIPP interview has become a rare thing. “That Awful Man,” as he calls himself, has been quite happy to keep journalists at arm’s length. He hasn’t even allowed his guitar collection to be photographed. That includes the 1959 Gibson Les Paul Custom, serial number 9 1986, used on many classic albums by his group King Crimson.

Which is why it strikes us as implausible that we are here at Fripp HQ in the Middle England countryside for a lengthy discussion with Fripp on all things King Crimson, as well as a photoshoot of the instruments behind some of that group’s — and prog rock’s — finest moments.

“I don’t collect guitars,” Fripp cautions as we settle down to talk. “They are merely tools that I use in my work.” However, we note that the ’59 Les Paul Custom appears to be in almost pristine condition. In fact, it’s still shiny even after years on the road. “One careful owner,” he quips with a wry grin.

When it comes to Fripp, where does one begin? Certainly, there is the long, rich history of King Crimson, a group whose evolution over the years has been the result of what seem to be rigorously considered changes on Fripp’s part. There are his own skills as a guitarist, including his use of crosspicking to play some challenging classical pieces with a plectrum, instead of the more conventional fingerstyle crosspicking. For evidence of his crosspicking finesse, one need only listen to the Moto Perpetuo from “Fracture,” on 1974’s *Starless and Bible Black*. This influence reached into the Crimson repertoire and is apparent in “Peace — A Theme” from 1970’s *In the Wake of Poseidon*.

“Yes, Carcassi Etude No. 7, the middle section,” Fripp confirms. “You probably wouldn’t be able to see the connection, but ‘Peace – A Theme’ wouldn’t have quite ended up that way unless I practiced the Carcassi Etudes for fingerstyle — but with a pick, because crosspicking was my speciality.”

Fripp first arrived on the English rock and roll music scene in the mid 1960s with the League of Gentleman, an act that bears the same name as his 1980 touring group. In 1967, he joined brothers Peter and Michael Giles in Giles, Giles and Fripp, a trio that, in 1968, transformed into King Crimson, Fripp’s long-running, oft-transforming prog-rock group.

As of 2022, Crimson have entered another hiatus. The performance of “Starless” in Japan from last

December is regarded by all as the last we’ll hear from the band. But Fripp is anything but idle. He’s just released *Robert Fripp/Exposures*, a truly massive 32-disc boxset of his late-1970s solo work. This fall will bring the release of *The Guitar Circle*, his long-awaited book that collects much of his writing about Guitar Craft, his unique approach to guitar playing, collaborating and personal development. Amid this activity, Fripp has generously carved out some time to speak with us. And where does one start with King Crimson’s only permanent member but at the very beginning.

When you started playing guitar, you were listening to a lot of jazz, weren’t you?

My trajectory was, on my 11th birthday — so that would be 1957 — my sister and I went out and bought two records: “Rock With the Caveman,” by Tommy Steele, and “Don’t Be Cruel,” by Elvis Presley. The guitarist on Tommy Steele, I learned later, was Bert Weedon. Hearing him on Tommy Steele and the 21-year-old Scotty Moore on the Elvis record, it was just real. I just knew that’s what it was.

There weren’t any English rock musicians; they were all jazzers. Old men, basically — old men who would come in and do the young character sessions. [*King Crimson sax player*] Mel Collins’ father would be doing the ripping tenor solos on [*the BBC music program*] *Six-Five Special*, with Tubby Hayes and Ronnie Scott sitting next to him. They would be making derogatory comments about these young rock artists, who really weren’t in the same musical ballpark as they

were. In America, it was entirely different. There was nothing demeaning about playing rock music and moving out of blues. Scotty Moore, Chuck Berry, the sheer power of Jerry Lee Lewis... That was me around 11 to 12.

At 13, trad jazz came along. I would go down to the Winter Gardens in Bournemouth and see all the characters: Chris Barber, Acker Bilk, Monty Sunshine and just about everyone else that was working at the time. I remember Monty Sunshine because he hogged the microphone when the players came in. Even at age 13, I thought that was something disrespectful. Anyway, there we are. Memphis Slim I saw there too. I think he was supporting Chris Barber. Wow, wow.

At 15, I was turned on to what we call “modern jazz,” hearing Mingus, extrapolation, Max Roach at the Town Hall in New York, which I played in 1981 and afterward with Crimson. Then at 17, there was



“I DIDN’T HEAR SEPARATE CATEGORIES; I HEARD MUSIC BUT AS IF IT WAS ONE MUSICIAN SPEAKING IN A VARIETY OF DIALECTS”



the more challenging aspects of what we call “classic music.” At that time, 17 and 18, it segued into the Beatles and 1960s English rock instrumentals.

When I was 17, I saw the Outlaws with Ritchie Blackmore at a show in Poole. He was phenomenal. He had all the moves. He had the music; he had the playing. It was astonishing. Zoot Money’s Big Roll Band: Andy Summers. Stunning young jazz guitarist was Andy. The Bournemouth scene was very hot. Working in the first League of Gentlemen, we would do lots of speciality vocals: Four Seasons, Beatles. We would also do the instrumental specialities, like “Entry of the Gladiators,” which I didn’t realize until I met him years later was Mick Jones of Foreigner. [“Entry of the Gladiators” was a hit for Nero & the Gladiators, a British instrumental rock and roll group in which Jones performed in 1963.]

Then I went off to college to take A-levels to go onto university and take a degree in estate management. My musical interest went slightly to the side, and I went to the Majestic Dance Orchestra to pay my way through college. When that came to an end, there was Hendrix, *Sgt. Pepper’s*, and things shot off in a way different direction. Going on to London, where I’d been accepted to take a degree in estate management at the College of Estate Management in South Kensington, I had my digs booked in Acton. How awful that was. I said to my father, “I can’t continue,” and I turned professional on my 21st birthday.

Can we talk about guitars? You started on steel-string acoustic.

TOP: Fripp onstage with his 1959 Gibson Les Paul Custom, July 1974
BELOW: The first King Crimson lineup, in 1969: (from left) Fripp, Michael Giles, Greg Lake, Ian McDonald and Peter Sinfield



Yes. It was an Egmond Freres. It was an appalling instrument. The action at the seventh fret and above, you needed pliers to depress it. It required me to develop such strong muscles that I remember, in 1971, practicing to put less pressure into my left hand. I moved on to a cheap Rosetti guitar.

My first halfway decent guitar was a Höfner. I believe it was a President, the cutaway version. It wasn’t great, but at least it was an instrument. At the time you couldn’t get American guitars in England.

As you know, Hank Marvin probably had the first Fender Strat in England, bought for him by Cliff [Richard].

My first good guitar, my first real guitar, is in the cellar here, my Gibson [ES-]345 stereo, which I bought from Eddie Moors Music shop in Boscombe, where on a Saturday afternoon I would give guitar lessons. Young characters would come in and say, “I’m interested in buying a guitar.” They’d say, “We have an in-store guitar teacher who can give you lessons on Saturday afternoon.” I’d go around the corner to something like a village hall in Boscombe and

give guitar lessons. Then in the evening I’d go on to Chewton Glen Hotel — this was when I was 17 — and play in the Douglas Ward Trio.

This was my first good guitar, and it was expensive — something like £350. My father refused to sign the hire purchase — this was 1963 — until I had a deposit of £100. The singer in the League of Gentlemen, Reg Matthews, who’s still a pal today, he had a job digging an allotment in Poole. Reg said, “Come on, Bob, and we’ll earn some money for you to put your deposit down.” So I did that for three evenings with Reg, at the end of which my hands were immovable. To turn a door handle, I had to press both palms together. Although it hampered my guitar playing for a few days, it gave me sufficient money to make a deposit. So my father signed the hire purchase, and I got my first good guitar.

That was the guitar with the League of Gentlemen. That took me to London with Giles, Giles and Fripp that guitar, which I used until 1968, when I got my first Les Paul, also in the cellar down below. I only

“AS I SAW IT, MY
PRIMARY ROLE
ON IN THE COURT
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PARTS THAT
SUPPORTED THE
PIECES OF THE
WRITING”



1. Fripp's 1959 Les Paul Custom, serial number 9 1986. "Acquired from Orange Music, London in November 1968 for £380, I believe," Fripp tells us. "Used on all KC albums from 1969 to 1974, two Fripp & Eno albums, Bowie's *Heroes* and *Scary Monsters*, Eno's *Here Come the Warm Jets* [on 'Baby's on Fire' and 'Blank Frank'], Frippertronics in Europe 1979 and the League of Gentlemen in 1981." Fripp's triangular picks, seen lodged in the bass strings, are custom made in Japan by Mr Hiroshi Iketani.

2. At the photoshoot we remarked on the amazing condition of Fripp's '59 Custom: "One careful owner," he quipped.

3. Fripp lowers the middle pickup as far as it can go, otherwise it gets in the way of his picking.



used the 345 with Crimson on *In the Wake of Poseidon*, the second studio album, on “Cat Food” and “Bolero.”

Under the circumstances, I’m not surprised there isn’t an awful lot of blues influence in your playing.

There was John Mayall’s Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton: “All My Love.” Wow. Early Cream. I still love “Crossroads” and “Sunshine of Your Love.”

But I had six months between being accepted and going off to London and university in September. That’s when music began to speak to me: the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s*, Hendrix. I also began listening to the Bartok String Quartet and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. I didn’t hear separate categories; I heard music but as if it was one musician speaking in a variety of dialects. The crashing chords of *Thunderbird Suite* or *Rite of Spring* or Bartok — where is that coming from? The opening bars of “Purple Haze” or “A Day in the Life,” “I Am the Walrus”.... It all had this incredible power, as if it reached over and pulled me toward it. I could no longer be the dutiful son going off to take a degree in estate management to rejoin my father’s firm as a partner and give the firm an academic qualification. I set off to London with the world open and beginning again.

So why didn’t I become a blues guitarist? Probably because I wasn’t a very good blues guitarist. The thing is, a lot of young players and some established players have said to me, “I only wanted to be like Clapton.” They didn’t say it, but you knew it. That wasn’t my aim. Stunning player, but the question eventually became formulated for me as, “What would Hendrix sound like playing the Bartok String Quartets?”

In 1967, you joined Michael and Peter Giles in Giles, Giles and Fripp, which transformed into King Crimson with the elimination of Peter and the

addition of Ian McDonald, Peter Sinfield and Greg Lake. How did that experience shape you?

In 1969, the major musical influences in Crimson were Ian McDonald and Michael Giles. I recognized they had a connection with music, which at the time I didn’t have but could recognize in others. I’d known this probably since 17 or 18, working alongside and going to see the other young players in Bournemouth. They had something which I hadn’t quite connected with, but which I knew, if I worked hard for long enough, I would get to. And I did, with Michael Giles and Ian McDonald, for example, in the studio recording *In the Court of the Crimson King*.

How did their influence connect with you on that album?

They would make a comment, and I would adjust my response to sit in accord with theirs. Then, when they left, it was heartbreaking for me, because although Giles wasn’t a writer, his contribution to the arrangements and direction were stunning. As I saw it, my primary role on *In the Court* was to come up with guitar parts that supported the pieces of the writing. Although you could say McDonald and Peter Sinfield were the main writers, you can’t exclude Giles from that. You can’t really exclude anyone from that. It was five people. On “Moonchild,” the music was 99 percent Robert [Fripp often

refers to himself by his first name], with one suggestion from Ian McDonald to move a G to a G sharp, which we incorporated. Ian had a gift for the simple melodic phrase. That’s what we went with.

For the writing credit, which properly should have been Fripp/Sinfield, I opted to have all the names of the members, because I felt that actually everyone was involved equally. For me, Crimson has always been a cooperative, which it certainly was in 1969.

That led to some turbulence within the band.

My personal difficulties with any Crimson musician since has been if they favor themselves or see themselves as somehow coming ahead of the other players or the music. To put that positively within Crimson, the music comes first. That’s principle one. Principle two, the band comes first; the interests of the band come ahead of the interests of the other players. Three, we share the money. If there seem to be personal difficulties, look at those three principles and, really, that’s the clue to anything that follows. If the music does come first, then all the names are

“I DON’T LIKE THE WORD BANDLEADER BECAUSE I’VE NEVER VIEWED MYSELF AS A BANDLEADER. THAT’S ANOTHER ENDLESS WITTERING ON”

OPPOSITE: Fripp with his Gibson J-45, serial number 122301. “Acquired around 1972 from Denmark Street,” he says. “May have been used on Larks’ Tongues in Aspic but not otherwise on records.”
BELOW: The mid-’70s Crimson lineup, on French TV, 1974. (from left) David Cross, John Wetton, Bill Bruford and Fripp





The original paperwork for “Bob” Fripp’s purchase of his Gibson ES-345

there at the top. We shared the record royalties; we shared the publishing royalties.

There is a legitimate concern that, if you have one person who writes all the music, shouldn’t they get a disproportionate part of the publishing? The answer is yes, they should. This was a legitimate concern for Adrian Belew [*who joined in late 1980 as a member of Discipline, the quartet — with Tony Levin and Bill Bruford — that became a new version of King Crimson*]. From 1994 onward, we would look at, essentially, who had made the greatest contribution to writing this piece. Then the distribution of publishing incomes would reflect that. I understand legitimately that for Adrian Belew, having written “Heartbeat,” it was unfair for Bill to get as much money. But up until 1974 — where between 1970 and 1974, Robert was the primary writer — even if Bill Bruford didn’t play a note, he would receive an equal share of the publishing.

As on “Trio” [from 1974’s *Starless and Bible Black*].

As on “Trio,” yes. Why? Firstly, because it exemplified the view that where there is an equal commitment, there is an equitable distribution. Secondly, if Robert made a value judgment, a call or recommendation that we go this way, there was never any question that my recommendation for either a musical or business direction favored me. If I said, “Look, lads, I think we should do this,” it was because I thought we should do this, primarily for the music, then primarily in the interest of the band and so on.

Around this time, King Crimson released *Islands* [the only studio album to feature the 1971–1972 King Crimson touring line-up of Fripp, Mel Collins, Boz Burrell and Ian Wallace]. I always thought the closest your playing probably got to legitimate blues was on the track “Ladies of the Road.” It was blues as if Picasso had painted it.

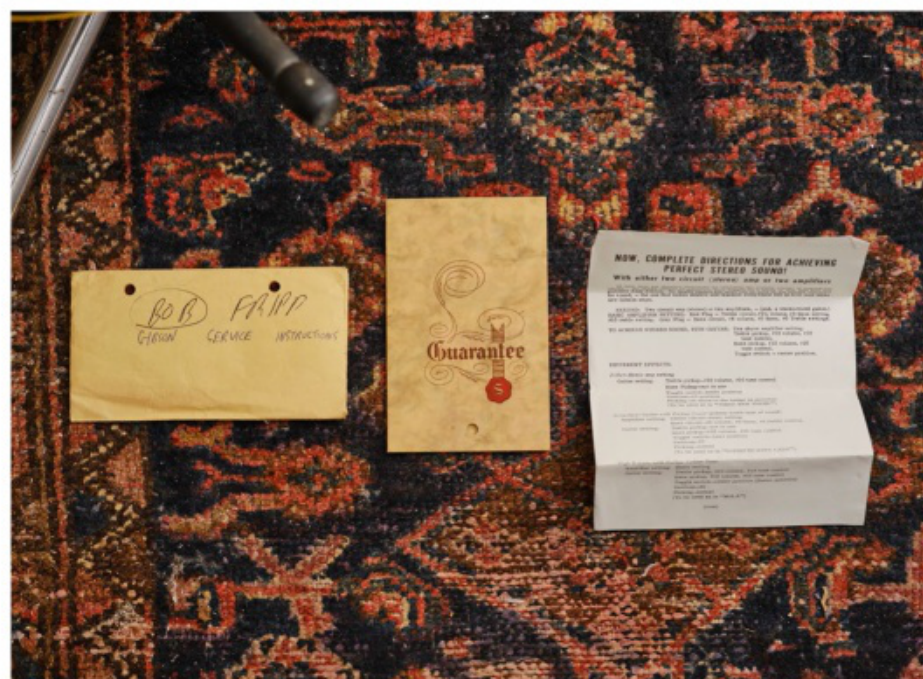
It’s Crimson blues. “Ladies of the Road” I think is stunning. We recorded it after one of the very, very rare times that Robert went out on tour with Mel, Boz and Ian. They were ravers. We came in the day after and we recorded this at Command Studios. The music reflects that.

You stopped playing acoustic guitar with Crimson in the mid 1970s.

It would have been on *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic*. The recording sessions were the beginning of 1973.

Was there any reason for that? Was it difficult to reproduce live?

Specifically in terms of that question, yes. I have never with Crimson played acoustic live. Why? Because it interrupts the flow of the process of the performance



unfolding. You take a guitar off, you pick up the acoustic. Is it direct inject? Is it with a microphone? Certainly, for Crimson up until 1974, it would have been a microphone, so you’re not going to hear it. You’re going to get feedback.

The other thing is, musically I was moving toward...is *grungier* the word? A grungier more metallic approach to guitar, which was certainly beginning from 1971, where “Larks’ Tongue in Aspic” was beginning to fly by, and “Larks’, Part Two.” I remember writing “Fracture” [from *Starless and Bible Black*] at the kitchen table at my Thornhill Cottage in Holt, in the middle of 1972, with a Les Paul. The band had a three-and-a-half-week holiday; I had three days. My holiday was writing music for Crimson. So it was “Fracture,” it was “Lament.” What else was on that album? That was my summer holiday.

Something else that people might not be aware of is you actually write your parts out.

Yes, I do. I don’t give the other players charts. Neither did Mingus, I understand. Why? Because it goes in through your eyes. You present the music you have and you say, “If I’m playing this, what are you playing?” One of Bill’s good quotes from the time was, “It was as if Robert expected us to know what to play.” Of course. If I have to tell you what to play, why are we working together?

I don’t like the word *bandleader*, because I’ve never viewed myself as a bandleader. That’s another endless wittering on. What I would aim to do is construct situations or conditions within which the talents of these players are given an opportunity to develop. To the extent that Robert composed for Crimson, it was writing specifically for these people in this band to play. Not a generic piece that anyone could play — it was specifically for these people.

For example, “Larks’ Tongue in Aspic”: It was written for John Wetton and Bill Bruford in the rhythm section to come forward. There were two occasions when I presented “Larks’, Part Two” to that formation of Crimson, at short rehearsals in Covent Garden and Richmond Athletic Club. I presented the defining “Larks’” rhythm and chords at Covent Garden, and it wasn’t heard; it went nowhere. Then



4. Gibson ES-345, serial number 100510. “Acquired 1963, and so probably 1962 manufacture. Used in the original League of Gentlemen (1964/’65) at the Majestic Hotel, [and with] Giles, Giles & Fripp. Not used much in KC other than on ‘Cat Food’ and ‘Prince Rupert’s Lament’ [1970].”

5. Fripp tells us he receives a lot of communications from guitarists telling him that his string ends look untidy, but he insists that his method of restringing is both functional and thoroughly effective.

6. It’s unclear as to whether Fripp used Gibson’s infamous Varitone switch much, and that extra piece of wire looks like it was employed to cure a ground issue on the Bigsby.



I played it at Richmond Athletic Club, and Bill and John leapt straight in. They had it, it clicked, it worked. But most really good rock drummers in London at the time wouldn't have heard it, because it wasn't written for them.

With Crimson, it was an open form of engagement which has always been complex, always problematic and always very demanding. If you would like a band to break up, have writing rehearsals. What you do when you hit that problem is you get on the road; then you introduce an audience into the situation, music comes to life and you'll keep going. Not that Robert is a bandleader, but in terms of practical strategies for keeping the band together and working, you move from writing rehearsals as quickly as possible into live performance.

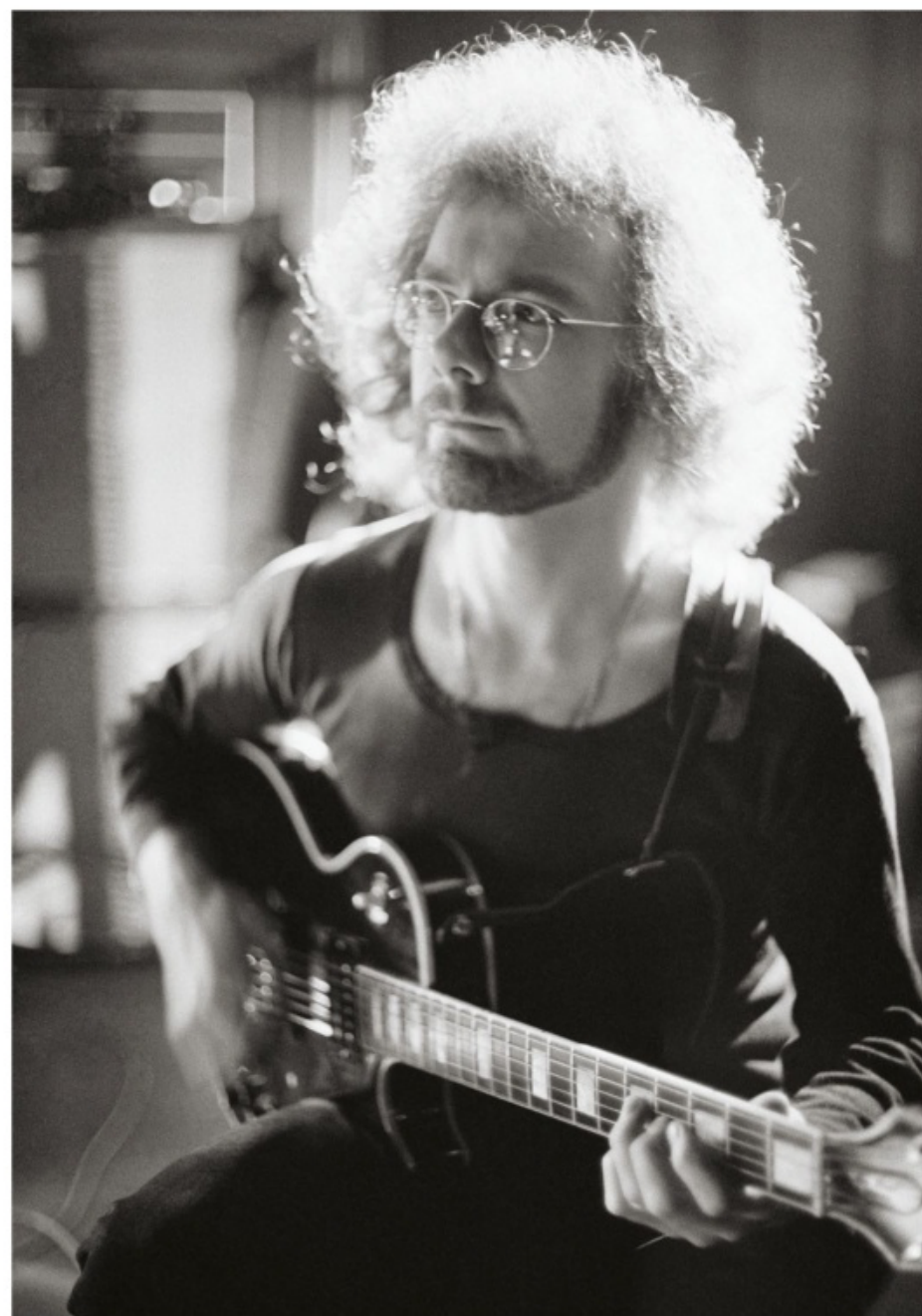
Some ideas actually came from sound checks and things like that.

Yes. The other thing is the importance of informality. When you have any formal undertaking, it becomes problematic. Even worse than rehearsals are band meetings. That's when the band will break up.

So what you do there instead is you have an informal band meeting as someone is getting on the bus. Like, "Will the name of Discipline change to King Crimson?" Do not call a band meeting to discuss this; ask Tony Levin as he's getting in the Volkswagen bus in Paris, "Tony, what do you think of changing the name to King Crimson?" "Yes, I never did like Discipline." On you go, drive off to the next gig.

That's how it works in practice.

Writing rehearsals — it is what it is. Sometimes you have to do it. You go in with sufficient structure to get things going and orientation of direction, which is compatible with the particular talents of the people in the band so they can move from them. "Erudite Eyes," for example, [*a Fripp composition from 1968's The Cheerful Insanity of Giles, Giles and Fripp*] was



a vehicle for improvisation. "21st Century Schizoid Man" — my contribution to it was exactly the same: You get things to a particular point where the momentum is there and then you jump, and that's where you go into the solos from that point.

When *Red* came out in October 1974, it struck me that was the end of Crimson in that form. Then the 1980s manifestation of Crimson happened, with Adrian Belew joining. But between, there seemed to be quite a huge gap.

The interregnum.

With the recent reissue of *Exposure* [Fripp's 1979 solo album], I can see now the link between *Red* and *Discipline*, the first album with the 1980s lineup. The two-guitar thing that came to be with the 1980s Crimson, with the offset rhythms and everything, was already nascent with *Exposure*. Who had the idea of having those timings that parted and then met again?

Was it Steve Reich? Was it Philip Glass? Was it Robert Fripp? Was it in the air? Was it world music? I began listening to world music. In 1976, the BBC had three program on world music. I had cassettes, and Elektra Records had some stunning releases.

So my thinking — my academic interests and approach to music — were in place in 1980, 1981, with the coming together of that form of King

Crimson. I met Adrian personally at the Bottom Line in New York when I went down to see Steve Reich. Bowie was there with Adrian. I didn't know they were going to be there. We went over and said hello, and Adrian said, "Let's get together for tea tomorrow," so we did. That's how our personal connection began.

That brings us to the 1990s albums, with *THRAK*, *The Power to Believe*, *Construkction of Light* and so on, which again was another shift of gear. What were the influences that poured into that manifestation of Crimson? [The group at that point included Fripp and Belew, bassists Tony Levin and Trey Gunn, and drummers Bruford and Pat Mastelotto.]

The influence was "double trio." The repertoire of the *Discipline* era of Crimson excited me. I was very happy to play that repertoire again. On the other hand, it needed to extend outward. One day in 1995, while driving away from DGM [*Discipline Global Mobile*, Fripp's independent record label, founded in 1992], in a flash I saw that it should be two trios. One trio could handle all of the 1981 to 1984 material, and the other trio would enable you to move somewhere else entirely. There were so many possibilities available in that. If we got as far as two percent of what was possible, even that might be an exaggeration.

Then what do you do? You put people in a room together. You go in with some suggestions and you see what happens. This took place within the very considerable period of distress known as Endless Grief, which was the breakdown of EG Records and the using of artist income to fund their losses. They began running into considerable problems around August, September 1988, then went into collapse in 1991.

With the collapse of EG, there needed to be a business construct so that King Crimson could work. What I did was put two or three years into setting up a new record company and new management structure with DGM. The initial rehearsals of that band were financed on an advance for the *Vroom* EP [in 1994]. We went to rehearse in Woodstock to make the EP to get the advance to fund the band.

On the first day of rehearsals, on April 18, 1994, Adrian Belew said, "I think you need to get someone else." That will lead us on another discussion, which we're unlikely to have today. Anyway, we addressed Adrian's concerns, as we have on other occasions, and the double trio kicked into action. We did our EP,



which funded activities, and went on down to work in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

**The 1980s
Crimson
lineup,
at Hotel
New Otani
Garden,
Tokyo,
December
1981. (from
left) Fripp,
Bruford,
Adrian Belew
and Tony
Levin**

**“WITH CRIMSON,
IT WAS AN
OPEN FORM OF
ENGAGEMENT
WHICH HAS
ALWAYS BEEN
COMPLEX, ALWAYS
PROBLEMATIC
AND ALWAYS VERY
DEMANDING”**

Can we talk about gear?

You know I have no interest in that. I have no interest in gear at all. [*Tool* guitarist] Adam Jones asked me about gear, and I said, "It's attitude." For example, whatever fuzz box, whatever guitar, whatever amp I'm using, you'll get my sound.

What interests me is that, even on the most recent tour, you're still using the same stuff that you were using 10 years previously, is that fair to say?

I'm trying to think when it changed from the Solar Voyager [Fripp's earlier rig] to the Sirius Probe [his present setup]. It changed when I stopped

using the TC Electronic TC2290 [*Dynamic Digital Delay*] and moved to the Eventide 8000s. I think it was likely in 2014. The TC2290s I used to use for sampling. It developed high-level digital frizz. The Eventide 8000s are astonishing things, and you have 90-second samples that will repeat. You can leave

them 24 hours, come back, no decay, no degeneration whatsoever. For sampling, that's astonishing.

In terms of shaping the sound, it's the Eventide 3000 that has not been replaced. There is something irreplaceable in those early versions of the Eventides. I've no idea what the algorithms are, but wow! They shape the sound. In terms of the 8000s, where I have bona fide quadraphonic, what I do is work to ratios. You have four outputs. If a short loop is needed, one stereo pair will have a 12-second delay on one side and an 18-second on the other. You have a 3:2 ratio. On the next one, I tend to have an offset of maybe 20.5 to 21 seconds. It's just essentially the same delay, which over a period of maybe half an hour will change.

If I'm going for long-form soundscapes, it might be something like 42:49 or 42:63. The other stereo pair might be 21:35 or 63:72. In other words, there are ratios within the time delays generally in terms of six or seven seconds, which lots of experience, including being booed constantly, has suggested to me has resonance.

I then have my defining program within the Eventide 3000s, which sends it shooting off in different directions. In terms of soundscape performances, I bypass all of that and through an Eventide Eclipse I have a solo sound. It gives me my solo voice. In the quiet moments, the solo voice will come up with all of this, all in real time.

Fripp performs with masterclass students at the Paradiso, in Amsterdam, April 3, 1991.

I have had various suggestions: "Bob, why don't you use Ableton Live?" The answer is, when I'm doing a live performance soundscape with the rig I have, the Sirius Probe, I can change all of the parameters in real time by hand as I am playing. I don't have to go to a computer and fiddle about.



✿

**“I HAVE NO
INTEREST IN GEAR
AT ALL. ADAM
JONES ASKED ME
ABOUT GEAR,
AND I SAID, ‘IT’S
ATTITUDE’”**

I don't have to look up here and see what's going on; I can do it all with one hand.

You're not still using the Roland GR guitar synth? Is it the GR-100 you were using?

It's set up in full Crimson rig. I haven't been using it recently, but I have used it, certainly in 2015, probably using it for the first half of the seven-, eight-piece Crimson. Why? Because it does two or three things which nothing else does. The GR-100 has a fretless bass sound which is breathtaking, which I would use to have fun with Tony Levin. Tony would be doing either some upright slides; I might slip in some fretless. Tony would look up wondering where the bass sound was coming from. It's also stunning in terms of low end for soundscapes. It also has bell sounds which, in combination with an Eventide 3000 program called "In Six," does astonishing sounds. It also has a piano sound, which I haven't really used since 2003, but which was astonishing. I used it a lot in all the projects.

It's funny. It's one of those things where the technology was perfectly capable then, and still works.

Yes, that's right. It's like early fuzz boxes: Plug them in, they work. It's astonishing. I've had these posts: "Bring back the ReVox. Where is Frippertronics?" A recent post from yesterday: "I love the tone of that era." I agree. But it's just not feasible.

If you go back to when I used that technology — the Frippertronics tools [*including two ReVox tape recorders*] — you'd have to fly it. Here's another one: You have it set up on the table. What happened if someone walked by in the record shop in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1979 and bumped the table? The answer is, There would be a fluttering of the tape. You'd then have to shape the entire Frippertronics piece around the flutter. If, as in Madrid, in May 1979, the ReVox the record company has brought in begins to catch fire, what do you do? These are practical examples. It's not feasible.

Digital technology: Does it sound good? In 1988 it didn't sound good. It sounds good today. With Crimson, I use Axe FX, which is very good. For basic work that I can carry myself without a team of engineers, I use a Helix. Why? Because [*current Crimson guitarist*] Jakko [*Jakszyk*] uses a Helix, and if you're working in a band with the other character, you aim for compatibility. The other thing is, he can tell me how to work it.



7

7. Tokai LP-type, serial number 8 0001. "Given to me around 1984 by the U.K. importer of Tokai. Modified for me by Ted Lee and used on David Sylvian's *Gone to Earth* in 1986, Sylvian-Fripp from 1991 to '93, and in the Robert Fripp String Quartet, 1993."

8. The guitar's electrics were heavily modified to Fripp's requirements. "Lots of switches that I probably never used," he says.

9. A Roland hexaphonic guitar synthesiser pickup is nestled between the bridge humbucker and Kahler vibrato system, and the guitar is also fitted with a Fernandes Sustainer unit, which Fripp describes as a lifesaver in that it kept him from having to rely solely on fuzz for his distinctive solo sound.



8



9

It's funny: Jakko told me he changed from a Kemper to a Helix because he could see the presets without putting his glasses on. It's such a simple thing.

Yes, it's practicality. It depends: If you're orientated toward studio work, it's one world. If you're orientated to live work, it's utterly different. I use a little Yamaha desktop. You know the little Yamaha desktop amplifiers —the 30-watt things? Love them, they're stunning. With the Helix, you can do direct input from the Helix or you can plug your guitar in. It is a stunning piece of kit.

Your new book, *Guitar Circle*, comes out in September. But this is not a guitar tutor in the



conventional sense. It's more like the philosophy behind playing the instrument.

To quote Adam Jones, it's the attitude. It's less what you do, it's more how you do and why you do.

People will have to read it and draw what they can from it.

We've now had guitar courses since March 1985, and the book is essentially a report on the history of Guitar Craft and the Guitar Circle to date. [*Starting in 1985, Fripp taught the course Guitar Craft at the American Society for Continuous Education (ASCE) in Claymont Court, West Virginia. After 25 years, Guitar Craft transformed its activities into Guitar Circles, which offer introductory courses and performances in Europe and the Americas.*] If you're looking for a book of guitar exercises, this is not the way to go. People who have a background in martial arts feel an immediate affinity with Guitar Craft in the Guitar Circle. One character said to a pal of mine, "It's like martial arts with a guitar." In martial arts, your response is governed by the intentionality of the person with whom you're sparring. If you wait for them to make a move, you're on the floor. What you respond to is their intention. How we respond to someone's intention before there's any movement at all is a subtle thing. How to explain that? That falls under the heading of "cosmic horseshit," or cosmology. The point is, it can very easily be experienced.

Within a Guitar Circle course, you are given a very direct experience of what is involved in this. For example, if we're moving notes around this Guitar Circle, what are we moving? If I explained it to you, it would be yet another piece of cosmic horseshit. If you're sitting in the circle and the note is coming along, you enter into that process with anything of maybe up to 110 people. Your experience is of a flow. What is flowing?

Guitar Craft was basically developing a personal discipline with a guitar; the Guitar Circle is developing a personal discipline within others. We're learning to work with others and with ourselves. In a sense, it's a maturing and a development within a social context. One of the difficulties I've had doing interviews over a period of 53 years with guitar magazines and music magazines is that just about everything that is real with me in terms of how I experience and engage with music and other musicians is subtle. If I'm explaining it in bold terms, it falls under the heading of cosmic horseshit.

One of the important principles in this is "Accept nothing that someone is telling you. Judge by your own experience." When someone comes into a Guitar Circle, don't take Robert's view of what might be happening for yourself. What is your experience? ■

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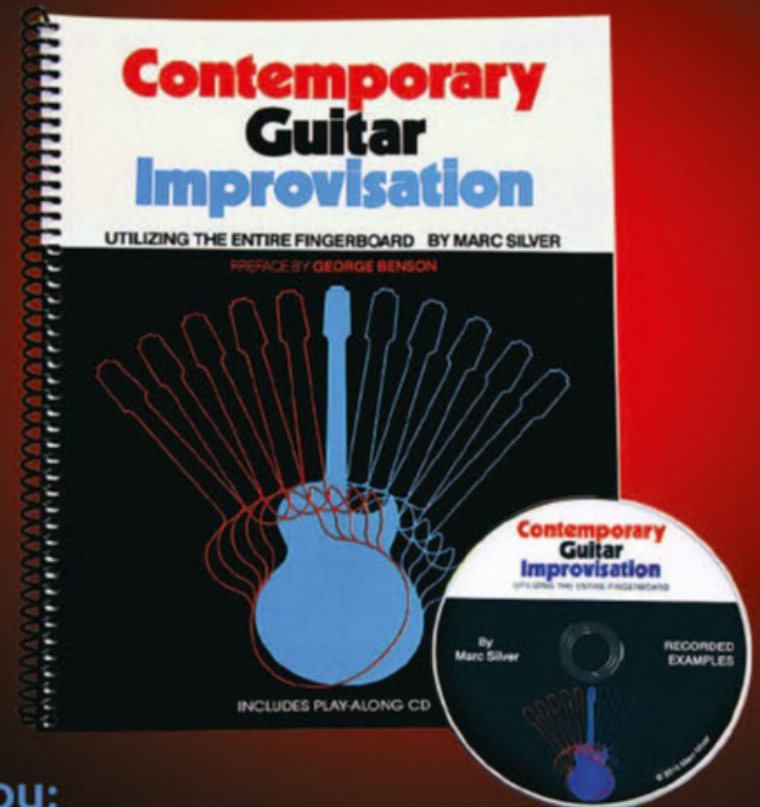
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2020 IS HINDSIGHT

A health scare and the pandemic delayed his sixth studio album. With the release of *2020 Visions*, **Stephen Dale Petit** reveals why this American-born blues guitarist is Britain's hottest export.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATTIE BOYD

ON HIS SIXTH studio album, *2020 Visions*, maverick guitarist Stephen Dale Petit has created a blues record unlike any other. For one thing, it's a concept record. For another, it presents a dystopian view of society, America in particular, with themes of factionalism, tribalism and alienation, all through the lens of someone gazing into the not-too-distant future. In this case, that someone is an ex-pat (Petit moved to England from California in the mid '80s) who penned much of the material back in 2017 but is only now seeing his album — and a good many of his prescient predictions — become a reality.

"I guess it's pre-dystopian, to make up my own term," Petit says in a distinct British accent. "Having not lived in America for so long, I'm kind of imagining what it must be like for a parent who arrives home after a trip. You walk into the house and the kids are going crazy, the rooms are all torn apart, and you go, 'What have you done to the place?' The son says, 'She did it,' and the daughter says, 'He did it.' That's my feeling about the polarization in America and how savage and how indoctrinated ideologically everything seems to be."

Petit traveled to Nashville and cut *2020 Visions* with producer Vance Powell back in 2017, and if various, unforeseen circumstances had not upended his



“BLUES IS THE ESSENCE OF WHAT I DO, BUT I DON’T LET IT DICTATE WHERE I CAN GO. I JUST LET MY INSTINCT GUIDE ME”

plans, he would have released the album the following year. A cancer diagnosis — Stage 4, as it turned out — threw his world into a tailspin, and for much of 2018 he had to curtail most professional activities while dealing with treatment. “It was a chemo and radiation regime every day for two months,” he says. “Brutal stuff. I’m all clear now, thank goodness, but it takes a while for you to get back up to speed. I did a couple of shows during that time, and it was strange, because I experienced this sort of artificial energy while performing, almost like a weird caffeine kick or something. But that drops off and your body’s completely reeling. Basically, it put me out of action for a good year.”

Once his doctors gave him the go-ahead to proceed with his normal life and career, Petit was set to release

the album in late March of 2020 when the COVID pandemic threw a wrench into that idea. A tour to support the album was nixed, and while he waited for lockdown to be lifted, he decided to release the record digitally. “We finally got physical copies out in the fall of 2020, once brick-and-mortar stores began to open up again,” he explains. “The whole thing was this crazy double-whammy. First I had my own health issues to sort out, and then this global pandemic knocked out the rest of the world. In a way, the second thing wasn’t so hard on

me because of what I’d just gone through, but it was a really insane time.” He laughs. “Is this where I say, ‘All’s well that ends well?’”

Another thing that distinguishes *2020 Visions* from most other blues albums is its sound, a unique and revolutionary sonic approach that owes as much to art rock, emo, punk, metal and even jam bands as it does to traditional blues. On the nine-minute space-age epic “The Fall of America,” Petit exorcises demons as he explores every possible shattering cry and wail his guitar can emit. In an equally virtuoso performance on another extended track, “Zombie Train,” he goes for broke, firing off supersonic, freak-out solos and shards of psychedelic lines while leading his ace band — bassist Sophie Lord and drummer Jack Greenwood — on a slinky, cosmic and soul-drenched jam journey. “Sputnik Days,” co-written with his legendary friend (and quasi-mentor) Mick Taylor, is a sublime yet exhilarating dream that offers Petit a showcase for celebrating the lyrical power of bent notes and harmonics. And those are just some of the highlights. There’s also incendiary re-workings of classics like “Steppin’ Out” and “Long Tall Shorty,” on which the guitarist goes full throttle, summoning the spirits of

blues greats while fearlessly claiming the songs as his own.

“Blues is the essence of what I do, but I don’t let it dictate where I can go,” Petit notes. “I just let my instinct guide me. Otherwise, I’m just re-creating what’s been done before, and what’s the point of that? It’s like people doing ‘Caldonia,’ which is a great song that’s been a blues standard for 50 years. On any given day, there’s a hundred bands playing it, and I think, Why would they do that, especially if they’re not going to do something new with it? I try to take various essences, flavors, colors and styles, but I want to bring them into the present. I want to sound like today. There’s enough people stuck in yesterday, and that’s just not for me.”

As a teenager in California, you hung out with some early metal stars of the day, including Randy Rhoads and George Lynch. Were you much of a shredder?

Not really, no. I more or less decided that I would never develop those kinds of chops. For a good while, I sat on my parents’ sofa, playing my guitar and pondering. I’d just seen B.B. King — I even got a chance to meet him. There was something about the blues that had touched me deeply, because it’s a cry of the soul. It felt so authentic, especially when compared to the phoniness that was around at the time. I considered all that stuff out of L.A. contaminated by the ethos of Hollywood, and I didn’t want to be a part of it. On top of that, George Lynch tried to steal my girlfriend.

Oh, well, that would sure turn you off metal.

[laughs] It didn’t help. But yeah, prior to that, I was playing lots of rock covers like everybody else — “Rocky Mountain Way” and stuff like that.

After the revelation of seeing B.B. King, how did you do your homework and absorb the blues?

It actually started with Chuck Berry. My parents listened to the Beatles and the Stones, who both name-checked Chuck. They covered him and talked about the debt they owed him. They celebrated him. I went out and bought *Chuck Berry Is on Top*, which was on Chess Records, and from there I started checking out other people on the label: Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Walter. It happened really quickly.

I imagine you felt like an outlier in L.A. Everybody was getting into the Sunset Strip shred-metal scene while you’re digging into older stuff.

I was very much out of anybody else’s orbit. I just didn’t participate in their scene. But it was a conscious decision. At first I felt a bit awkward, but the magnetic pull of the blues was too strong.



Now, you did a bit of reverse engineering. You went to the U.K. because you were inspired by their blues players, but those were the same people who revered American blues artists.

You're absolutely right. I was getting the echo of the echo, so to speak. But the way that it was marketed, whether it was Cream or Hendrix or even the Beatles, it was all about appealing to youth. I was young — a generation out, perhaps, but I was still a youth.

How do I put this? I just thought of England and Europe as angular, whereas America was square. There was something coming out of England that felt like a way in. To me, a player like Mick Taylor was a revelation in the beginning, more than even somebody like Peter Green. Hendrix was immediate. I was hearing all this stuff long after it was released by listening to friends' older brothers' records. It all just started to percolate and simmer. But yeah, I decided to go to England because I just wasn't thrilled with what I was getting in America.

You became friends with Mick Taylor. How did you two meet?

I went to a show of his, and then it turned out that I knew his manager. Also, I had spoken to somebody in a restaurant adjoining the club who turned out to be his best friend. She had a dog named Roxie, and my dog was named Roxie. The stars aligned, basically. It was fate. Mick and I met up and hit it off.

He was such an important player to me in terms of understanding overbends. We all started doing two- and two-and-a-half-step overbends from hearing *Crusade* [by John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers, 1967], specifically the song "Oh, Pretty Woman." Mick was 17 at the time, and I started listening to it when I was 17. I was like, Oh this guy did this at my age. Incredible!

Performing with (from left) Mick Taylor and Ron Wood



Did Mick take you under his wing?

He did. I think he was expecting a Stones freak initially, so he was pleasantly surprised that my interest was more in the blues stuff and the John Mayall records. He toured with me as a special guest, and I think he's on three of my albums. The way "The Fall of America" came about is interesting: Mick was living with me. I'd just come back from a trip to L.A., where I'd seen the Kills. The band's guitar player, Jamie Hince, is fond of hooking the thumb over the neck to make chords — an old bluesman's trick. I thought, Wow, yeah, I should try some more of that.

I started to noodle around, and Mick came into the room; actually, he was sort of lingering in the doorway while going to make some tea or whatever. He would listen to me sometimes, but he wouldn't say anything. So this one time he was listening, and I knew he was there. I was playing around with this riff, and finally he said, "That's so powerful. It's really intense and hypnotic." Then he left to go into another room but not before saying, "It needs to go to E." And that's why it goes to an E at the end. I was inspired by seeing the Kills, but Mick, to his credit, knew not to interrupt me till the right time. He could sense something was being born.

You also became friends with Eric Clapton. That must be pretty remarkable.

Oh yeah. We met through mutual friends. In the beginning, it was like a dream coming true, and you can't quite believe it — you're hanging with one of your heroes. Then it changes and you're dealing with a human being, and through that process, when you're actually becoming friends, it goes through phases and you get closer and closer. All of that stuff happened. Any preconceived notions I had of what he was like went out the window pretty early. He was nothing like what I expected.

Do you two sit down and play together?

Oh, no. No, no, that's not happened, at least not yet.

He's commented on your playing and has been quite complimentary.

Yeah, that's brilliant, isn't it? It's mind-blowing, really. You hope for it, but you tell yourself not to expect it.

What kind of impact did Eric have on your playing?

Oh, a lot. [laughs] In my journey, I got my head around overbends, so I went back to the people who started it. Albert King did overbends left, right and center. I would listen to him, but I couldn't figure him out. This was all before YouTube. I had to do it by ear. Now, if you overbend by two steps, the note has a

PAUL STEWART



PRIDE AND JOY

GIBSON'S MODERN FLYING V LANDS IN BRITAIN WITH A SPECIAL DELIVERY TO STEPHEN DALE PETIT.

THINK ABOUT THE Gibson Flying V and chances are good Albert King will come to mind. The left-handed blues guitarist adopted the model for its symmetrical body, as well as its versatility. It has also become a favorite of Stephen Dale Petit, a Gibson obsessive who received tour bus lessons from King.

So it seems a bit of musical karmic justice that Petit was the recipient of a custom Modern Flying V bearing his initials in the serial number. The new sci-fi special edition has been heralded as a “blast from the future,” with its space-age design, custom-plated metal appointments and a shimmering prism-sparkle finish. With it, Petit follows in the footsteps of not only King but also Flying V adoptees Dave Davies and Jimi Hendrix.

“I always seek fresh ways of presenting blues music, which, in its golden era, was a living, breathing music,” Petit says. “This search extends to production, sonic values, artwork and album covers. The visuals of this guitar struck me immediately as an

embodiment of a fresh take on something that’s become a guitar world staple, and I immediately got in touch with Gibson [U.K.] head honcho, David Bower. It sounds amazing, plays like a dream and is

extremely fun onstage, as the shape of the guitar fits into the player’s body perfectly.”

Petit’s guitar is the only Modern Flying V in the U.K., making it as singular an instrument as he is a player.



Petit and
Gibson's
David Bower

different tone than if you just fret honestly on the neck. It's not dishonest — it's just got a whole different thing. The tone is different; the timbre of the way the string vibrates is different.

With Eric, I heard the solo he did on Cream's "I'm So Glad," and he's doing different things. I was knocked out. That and the "Steppin' Out" solo — I was literally speechless. I know that's an overused figure of speech, but that's how I felt. My whole foundation was rocked. Just when I thought I might be getting somewhere with the guitar, I heard this and thought, Holy shit!

You've put out some terrific albums, but 2020 *Visions* feels like a breakthrough. The guitar sound is wild, trippy and dramatic, and it's not typical of how most blues guitarists sound. And you have more than one sound.

I've spent years thinking and working on this. To me, tone and textures are every bit as important as what you're playing. I don't want to sound like anybody else, and I don't understand why other people would want to. What I'm seeking is some sort of a sonic texture that's unique. It's not quirky or weird, like it's a novelty or gimmick; rather, it's related to what the music is addressing. It's a style. It's a sonic style as opposed to a musical style.

It's easy to say, "I want to sound unique." It's quite another thing to pull it off.

It is. One big thing that's helped me was getting an original Marshall JTM45. It's part of the toolbox that enables me to do this. I hate to say that, because the amp was stupidly expensive. I didn't want it to be true, but the way those amps were designed with the negative-feedback loop, it stacks harmony when you're sustaining a note. It's more of a musical instrument than just an amp.

Let's talk about some of the songs on the album. The title track is blues, but it's got a very pronounced punk rock side to it.

Sure, sure. I mean, I'm playing blues licks, no doubt, but it's got another thing. You know, I never really used to like Iggy Pop until I read that he went to Chicago and tried to be a blues guy for, like, six months. Then I kind of understood.

The guitars on the song are trashy and reckless. It's like they collide off each other.

As well they should. The guitars on the chorus are just driving and out of control, but there's the call-and-answer guitar to the vocal. It's got a bluesier, warmer sound. But I'm purposely trying to smear notes, bitter to sweet.

**"SO MUCH
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You're very rough with your guitar on "The Fall of America." Every riff, power chord and solo is brutal. It's not festival-tent blues.

It's designed not to be that at all. There are people who can do that beautifully and brilliantly, and my hat is off to them. It's just something that doesn't interest me. I guess I take my sensibilities from the British musicians of the '60s and '70s. They were making new art. That sounds pretentious, but they weren't just making an archive of what was happening in the room. They were using all the tools of technology to create something unique in that moment, and it was as far from field recordings as you could get.

At nine minutes long, the song is epic. For much of it, it seems like you're having fun exploring tones.

Oh, I am, I am! Yeah, we went on for a bit, but hey, America's a big country. [laughs] The subject of what's going on is a big subject. I'd never written a nine-minute song before, but it went where it wanted.



LEFT: Onstage at the Upton Blues Festival, England, July 2022. BELOW: Performing with Walter Trout

“Roxie’s Song” is altogether different. It’s a tight, beautifully constructed instrumental.

Yes, Roxie was my miniature schnauzer, and she died. With this record, there was a musical concept. I wanted it to be an honorific homage to the bent note on the guitar. “Roxie’s Song” has a really long bend, which is the sad part. Obviously, I was gutted that my dog was dead, and I was missing her like nothing else. But what about the happy times? So there are middle bits where it’s sort of like in summer grass and how she had to hop around to be seen. There are fun bits and moments of exhilaration, like how you play chase with your dog, or how they go crazy when you walk in the door.

How did you and Mick Taylor collaborate on writing “Sputnik Days”?

That was another one of those times when he heard me working on something, but rather than lingering in the doorway, he felt compelled to pick up a guitar.



PETER SURCOMBE (TROUT); RICHARD PURVIS (TOP)

He co-wrote it with me. It sums up what I aspire to: It's rooted properly in deep blues while living in the present and being aware that we have tomorrow to look forward to.

One song that is very reverential to the blues is the very short instrumental "On Top."

Yeah. That's Sophie Lord playing bass and doing some serious chording — lovely tone clusters as the bedrock. I don't mind going there — you know, the reverential thing — but it's why it's short as well.

**Pattie Boyd
photographs
Stephen
Dale Petit**

"Zombie Train" has a bit of funky soul to it. It's got a bit of a '70s feel, but again, it sounds very current. And it's a great showcase for everybody in the band.



Oh, yes, for sure. That's another one on which Sophie is front and center. It was sort of showcased for the bass. Both Sophie and Jack Greenwood play brilliantly throughout the record. "Zombie Train" is this spoken-song verse, and I really loved being able to stretch out on the guitar solos. It's another long one, and it's closer to us being a jam band or something.

You have all these Beatles connections. Ringo Starr does a spoken intro on the song "The Ending of the End," the album's artwork was done by Klaus Voormann, and you're photographed by Pattie Boyd.

Yeah, it's something. Actually, Pattie photographed me for two album covers. You know, my parents played the Beatles; they were part of my musical journey. When I met Jimmy Page the first time, we talked through it and he agreed. He said, "Well, yeah, they're rooted in the blues." The Beatles are like blues songs with pop choruses. "Can't Buy Me Love" is a blues progression, and so is "She's a Woman," "Lady Madonna," "I Feel Fine" and on and on.

"Yer Blues," obviously.

Sure. That was a great one.

You recently started playing the Gibson Custom Modern Flying V.

I did. That's a whole different experience because it's so lightweight, and it kind of folds into you. You're almost wearing it. It's an insane guitar, and I love it. On *2020 Visions*, I mostly played a cherry-red [ES-]355 reissue. It's the star of the record. It's like the Cadillac of guitars. It's semi-hollow, and it just feels like a proper guitar. I grew up hating 355s. I thought solid-body guitars were the only real guitars. Lately, I've done a complete turnaround.

Is there anybody in the current crop of blues guitarists who stands out to you?

There's some great players. Connor Selby, Toby Lee — those are two off the top of my head. It's hard for me to criticize anybody, because I think anybody doing it should be applauded. If they're out there and playing, they've already accomplished so much.

At the same time, so much current blues has become formulaic — the sounds and just the concept of what a blues record in the modern age should be. A lot of that has to do with people being concerned about airplay. I'm unsure how it all happens. Is it the artist? The producer? These people can be great players, but it's hard for me to listen to another blues song that's produced the same way or with the same approach. Sometimes I can't get past it, but that's a personal problem. It's got nothing to do with anybody else. ■



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THE BUD POWELL OF JAZZ GUITAR



One of the most gifted and musical jazz guitarists of today, **Pasquale Grasso** takes inspiration not from his six-string brethren but from the genre's legendary ivory ticklers.

BY BILL MILKOWSKI

IN 2015, I had the honor of being on a panel of judges for the First Annual Wes Montgomery International Guitar Competition, sponsored by George Klabin of Resonance Records and held in Merkin Concert Hall on Manhattan's Upper West Side. This evening showcased half a dozen rising-star guitarists from around the world, including Dan Wilson from Ohio, Michael Valeanu from France, Lucian Gray from Toronto and Roland Balogh from Budapest. But of all the finalists that October day, one preternaturally gifted guitarist stood above the rest. In fact, after Pasquale Grasso from Italy finished his set, I elbowed fellow judge Pat Martino sitting next to me and said, "It's all over. That's the guy." And Pat agreed.

Grasso won the competition, taking home the \$5,000 prize and a Pat Martino Signature Model Benedetto guitar. It wasn't long after that Wes competition that he was signed by Sony Music Masterworks, which led to a series of digital EPs commencing in 2019 with *Solo Standards, Vol. 1*, followed by *Solo Ballads, Vol. 1*,

Solo Monk and *Solo Holiday* and continuing in 2020 and 2021 with tributes to jazz giants Bud Powell, Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington. The latter is a trio outing with his longtime simpatico rhythm tandem of bassist Ari Roland and drummer Keith Balla, and featuring guest appearances by vocalists Sheila Jordan (on “Mood Indigo”) and Samara Joy (“Solitude”).

The trio returns with *Be-Bop!*, Grasso’s tribute to bop pioneers Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. This latest outing, which also marks the guitarist’s first physical album release by Sony Masterworks, kicks off in exhilarating fashion with a faithful reading of Dizzy’s “A Night in Tunisia.” It’s a brilliant showcase for Grasso’s balance of technical wizardry and inherent swing, and his blazing solo break at the 1:03 mark is in the breathtaking tradition of Charlie Parker’s famous alto sax break from his 1946 Dial recording of the tune. Pasquale’s

stream of single notes that follows for the next two minutes in his solo is even more astounding, brimming with rare facility and abandon to match his fertile imagination. He punctuates his solo with brief but dazzling quotes from one of Paganini’s Caprices (the extremely difficult No. 24 in A minor) in the coda to the tune.

Elsewhere on *Be-Bop!*, the trio is in sync through super up-tempo, challenging bop staples like “Shaw ‘Nuff,” “Groovin’ High,” “Cheryl,” “Ornithology” and “Be-bop.” They

settle into a more serene vibe on Thelonious Monk’s gorgeous ballad “Ruby, My Dear” and take Parker’s “Quasimodo” at a relaxed mid-tempo, with

Grasso’s superb octave playing leading the way. *Be-Bop!* stands as the next step in the brilliant career of one of the most technically gifted and supremely musical jazz guitarists on the scene.

As his producer, Matt Pierson, put it, “When I first head Pasquale, it was clear that he was doing something on the instrument that I’d never heard before. First, he was approaching the guitar in a revolutionary way, combining jazz and classical technique to pull off a very pianistic vision. Second, as is the case with the greatest artists, his mastery of both his instrument and his musical vocabulary was a means to an end, a storytelling vehicle that is a direct extension of his own personality. As time goes on, each time I hear him play, I’m amazed how this emotional quality continues to deepen. And while he has gotten more advanced technically, the listener can feel more connected to him now. His phrases are more lyrical; I can feel him breathe, pausing to reflect as he’s telling his own story, leaving me hanging on that last note, dying to hear what he’ll say next.”

Born and raised in Ariano Irpino, in Southern Italy’s Campania region, Grasso relocated to New York in 2012 and has since been wowing audiences with regular appearances at Mezzrow, Smalls and the Django, where he has showcased his Joe Pass-ian command of the fretboard by freely moving between single notes, chords and independent bass lines while flashing Art Tatum-esque filigrees with uncanny speed and precision.

Grasso’s main guitar is a custom Trenier archtop called the Modello Pasquale Grasso model, made by French luthier Bryant Trenier. “I like big guitars,” Grasso says. “I like to feel the vibration go to my chest. That’s one of the most beautiful feelings when I play.” His amp is a 1953 Gibson GA50, and he uses LaBella strings.


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Where does your very pianistic approach to the guitar come from?

Since I was a little kid I always had this sound in my head. Slowly, it’s coming out, but it’s still not what I want. I was never too influenced by guitar players, for some reason. I grew up listening to Art Tatum, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. Those were my guys. For guitar, I always liked Charlie Christian and Oscar Moore, but I never really listened too much to guitar players. Of course, when I hear Barney Kessel and Chuck Wayne and Jimmy Raney, I love them. They’re all great artists, but they never really got me when I was a kid. I was more into Bird and Bud, Dizzy Gillespie, Roy

Eldridge and Louis Armstrong. So I was always more influenced by horn players and piano players than guitar players.

When I first heard you perform live, the Joe Pass comparison immediately sprung to mind because of the independence of chords, bass lines and melody. Was Joe at all an influence on you?

Of course, I love Joe Pass. I was very amazed by the touch that he had on the guitar. This is something very special. But I wouldn’t say I was influenced by that. Of course, when I got Joe Pass’s *Virtuoso*, I was very shocked. I had never heard a guitar player play in this way. It’s the same with Wes Montgomery. I love Wes so much: his tone, his phrasing. I love



Pasquale Grasso with
his Trenier Modello
Pasquale Grasso archtop

everything that he plays. But I would never play in that kind of guitar style. It's just not who I am. It's not what I want to do.

And, for some reason, I always preferred to listen to Art Tatum. It's just a different feeling that it gives me when I hear him, or when I hear Bud Powell playing solo. It's just their sound. Of course, nobody can be Art Tatum. He's a true genius — a creation of god. But I always try to catch some of his runs and some of his chords and harmonies and this swinging feeling that he gets on the piano. There's just something about the sound of that I always liked, and I tried to transfer that onto the guitar.



“WHEN I SAW THE GUITAR, I TOLD HIM, ‘I WANT TO PLAY THIS.’ THERE WAS JUST SOMETHING ABOUT THE SHAPE THAT ATTRACTED ME”

In terms of guitar players, I'd rather hear a classical guitar playing a [Matteo] Carcassi song or a [Mauro] Giuliani song, and that makes me very inspired, because of the way that they play counterpoint and stuff like that.

When you cite Bud Powell as a major influence, are you referring to the very speedy single-note lines or the chord voicings and advanced harmonies in his playing?

Bud has been my inspiration ever since I was six years old. Everything that he plays — single lines, chords, his compositions — has influenced me. And the same thing with Monk and Art Tatum and Teddy Wilson. There's just something about the piano. I studied with a great piano player, Barry Harris, when I was nine years old. That was always the sound that I liked, and I tried to transfer that onto the guitar.

But I'm curious: How does a six-year-old kid even know about Bud Powell, especially growing up in Southern Italy?

That's funny, I know. My dad and my mom love music. When my dad was young, he went to Canada and he brought all this jazz vinyl back home, because he always liked jazz. So we grew up with all these great jazz records that he would play for us, and he saw that my brother, Luigi, and I really liked that kind of music, so he wanted to support us. My brother, who is two years older than me, started with saxophone when he was six years old. I was four and a half when I told my dad I wanted to play music. So he brought me to this instrument store and said, “Choose whatever you like.” He actually wanted me to play trumpet, but when I saw the guitar, I told him, “I want to play this.” There was just something about the shape of the guitar that attracted me, and that's what I chose.

What was your early music training like?

Luigi and I grew up playing and practicing together. It was a game for us. My mom learned how to read music. There was no music school in the village where we grew up, so she got a book and she taught us how to read music. She would sit for a couple of hours a day every day and say, “Okay, you're going to learn the scales... You're going to learn to read.” And my mom realized early on that both of us had perfect pitch, so it was really easy for us to learn music. Both my parents grew up in a little town where nobody even knows jazz, but somehow they have a great love for this music. And I keep asking myself, Where does this come from? How is it possible that two people from the middle of nowhere in Italy got into jazz? And then they transmitted their love of jazz to me and my brother. That's really amazing.

What were the circumstances that led to you studying with Barry Harris at the age of nine?

Luigi had a sax competition when he was eight, and in the competition was a great guitar player from New York named Agostino Di Giorgio, who had moved to Italy to take care of his grandparents. My dad asked him if I could take some lessons. Agostino was a student of Chuck Wayne, the great guitarist from the '40s. And so me and Luigi ended up taking lessons from Agostino, who lived in Rome, which was about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from where we lived in Arpino. He would teach me guitar and teach harmony to both of us.

One day, Agostino said, “Barry Harris is coming to do a workshop in Switzerland. You guys should go there.” And my dad, being a jazz fan, knew the name of Barry Harris, so he said, “I'm going to bring you guys there.” So we drove all the way to Switzerland to do this workshop. I remember walking into the room on the first day, and Barry was playing “I Want to Be Happy.” And me and Luigi looked at each other and said, “We're in the right place!”

What kind of records did your father have in his collection?

He had some Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong, and he's a big fan of trumpet, so he had records by Chet Baker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro. He also had some George Benson records. Actually, my first love was George Benson, because my dad had this vinyl copy of one of his first recordings, with Jimmy Lovelace on drums and Ronnie Cuber on baritone sax and Lonnie Smith on organ.

That was *The George Benson Cookbook*, with that burning opening track, “The Cooker.”



Exactly! That was my first love. And then I heard Jazz at Massey Hall with Bird and Bud, Charles Mingus, Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie, and it just got me so bad, you know? After that, all I wanted to do was play like Charlie Parker and Bud Powell.

You are mostly known for your virtuosic solo series of digital EPs that have come out on Sony Music Masterworks. But on last year's Ellington tribute, *Pasquale Plays Duke*, you introduced your trio for the first time on record. What can you tell us about them?

I met Ari and Keith when I first got to NYC in 2012. My good friend Stefano Doglioni, who is a terrific bass clarinet player, introduced me to them, and we had an instant musical connection. I started hiring Ari and Keith for my local NYC gigs. We have met nearly every day to jam together for the past 10 years. I love them as people, and they bring out the best in me when I play with them. It's an inspiration to be around them. I love playing solo, but it's easier to play with the rhythm section because I have more freedom. When you play solo, you have to play chords and play the melody; you have to do everything by yourself. But when you play with a rhythm section, you can play more like a horn player.

That horn-like quality is apparent on the opening track to the Duke tribute album, "It Don't Mean a Thing." You're playing more single notes and, of course, you don't have to play so pianistically and cover baselines and chords and melody at the same time.

I play the same way that I play solo with the trio. It's a little different because I can focus on improvisation and just be more free when I take my solo.

Thinking back to your development as a guitarist, was there a moment when you had a breakthrough in terms of the independence that you've attained on the instrument?

What helped me a lot was studying classical guitar. Agostino is a great jazz player and a great teacher, but what really turned me around was when my dad took me to a concert of the great classical guitarist David Russell. I was sitting, like, five feet from him, and what I realized is that he had so much command of the instrument. He could play the melody, he could play chords, he could play counterpoint. I was about to go and study chemistry for college, but then I thought, I'm going to go and study classical guitar instead, and that's going to help me figure out what I want to do with jazz.

And it did! That was the point where I met my classical guitar teacher, Walter Zanetti, at the Conservatory in Bologna, and he helped me a lot, just in terms of developing a sound and independence with the fingers on the right and the left hand. It's still hard, because classical players learn something and they play it; in jazz, we improvise. So it can never look as perfect as a classical guitar. And sometimes my teacher writes me and says, "Oh, I saw a video of your performance. You sound beautiful. The left hand still needs some work, though." So he always sends me books to study, and things. And it's true that the more you get better, the more you discover that you just have to do it every day. You really have to live with music. You know, if you practice one hour a day, it's not going to do anything for you.

Speaking of incorporating the classical technique into jazz, your recordings of "Over the Rainbow" and Monk's "Epistrophy" [both from Solo Masterpieces, Vol. 1] are both masterful examples of counterpoint.

Yeah, it's just the way that I hear music. When you hear Monk playing "Epistrophy" solo, he's using two hands, and it's very difficult to get that kind of movement going on the guitar. But I would never change the instrument. I love guitar so much, and I think there are so many possibilities, especially if you learn classical guitar.

I mean, if you hear a piece of classical guitar music by [Matteo] Carassi, what I do is nothing compared to that. He has a way of playing every string of the guitar as a melody. That's what I want to achieve, but, of course, with the jazz language. I don't want to mix idioms. I'm never going to play Bach in jazz, for example. But I would sit home and practice Bach, especially a transcription from piano, to see how to transpose that on guitar.

I recently listened to Art Tatum playing "I Cover the Waterfront" solo and was hearing all these beautiful filigrees at the end of each phrase. I'm hearing you do that as well on some of your tunes, whether it's arpeggiations or these incredible lines that come off the melody. Very Tatum-esque.

Well, Tatum. I remember when my dad brought me his *Solo Masterpieces* when I was eight years old. Luigi and I listened to all 10 CDs in one day, and we didn't say a word. We were just looking at each other like, Is this possible? How is this possible? And then, I said, "Maybe, I'll try that."

What I love about the swing player and the bebop player is the feel that they have, the emotion that they put in music. For example, if you hear Bud Powell play "Spring Is Here," every chord is an emotion. Those guys were so connected with their



"THE MORE YOU GET BETTER, THE MORE YOU DISCOVER THAT YOU JUST HAVE TO DO IT EVERY DAY"

feelings and their emotion when they played because they lived lives in such a different way from what we do now. And you can hear it in just the touch of playing a chord that makes you feel in a certain way.

I think you successfully captured that on "Warm Valley" and "In a Sentimental Mood," both solo pieces from your new album, *Pasquale Plays Duke*.

Thank you. Actually, "Warm Valley" I recorded in March 2021. The other solo pieces on the album — "Prelude to a Kiss," "In a Sentimental Mood," "Day Dream" and "Reflections in D" — were all recorded three years ago [June 2018]. And I think you can hear more maturity in my playing on "Warm Valley." Plus, the sound of "Prelude to a Kiss" is very different because three years ago I recorded it with a Fender Twin amp. It's not really my sound. I remember having a tough time in the studio with that amp. Now I find those Gibson amps from the '50s — the same kind that Jim Hall and Barney Kessel used to play — have a more balanced sound. They just have a volume control — no EQ or anything.



I like your very relaxed approach with the trio on “All Too Soon.” It’s a very patient, very mature attitude. Young musicians with a lot of chops can’t do that. They don’t know how to relax that way.

I think the more you grow up, the more you understand. It’s different when you’re in your 30s and when you’re in your 20s. When you’re in your 20s, you just want to break everything. You want to do everything that you possibly can think about. And then when you grow up more, you realize that music is not about showing off and playing as much as you can, but it’s about telling a story and making somebody feel a certain emotion when they hear your music. I love Lester Young for that. Every day I make sure that I hear Lester Young, because I like the melodies that he plays. That’s why I’m not a very big fan of too much modern jazz, because there are no melodies. There is no emotion and no melodies for me. I didn’t grow up with modern jazz; I never listened to that. And now, the more I grow up, the more I go back to listening to Oscar Moore, Charlie Christian, Teddy Wilson and Louis Armstrong.

Are things pretty much getting back to normal at the clubs in New York? Are you playing out again?

Yeah, I’m actually playing again solo at Mezzrow every Sunday. And I have a few restaurant gigs now. I try to take every gig. Every chance I get to play out, I’ll take it. So things are looking up. My mood is getting a little better.

The one good thing that happened during the pandemic is that I really practiced a lot, working on things that I wanted to fix about my playing. When you’re gigging all the time, you don’t have time to do that. And I got back a little bit into the classical guitar during the pandemic, reading some books, listening to a lot of music, discovering new records and transcribing — all the things that musicians do. There is still so much to develop on the instrument. Music never ends. And it’s a beautiful thing, because it keeps you alive. It keeps your head and your heart and your personality engaged, because you always want to be a better musician, a better person. So the more you live, the more you do, and it’s all going to go into the music. That’s the beauty of music. 🎸



UNCOMMON THREAD

Peter Rowan's remarkable career connects bluegrass legends from Bill Monroe, Jerry Garcia and Tony Rice to Billy Strings and Molly Tuttle, both of whom join him on his new album, *Calling You From My Mountain*.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMANDA ROWAN

PETER ROWAN'S 60-YEAR career weaves like a thread through the vast bluegrass tapestry, from its traditional roots through the progressive movement and onto the modern landscape. Rowan has never been a flashy player. He's a subtle guitar hero, renowned for his artistic rhythm accompaniment full of meaningful bass runs and purposeful passing chords, setting the stage for his signature vocals and a lengthy list of virtuosic soloists. Equally adept as a flatpicker or fingerpicker, Rowan has probably played alongside as many all-time acoustic greats on every conceivable instrument as anyone who's ever donned a guitar. The iconic list includes Bill Monroe's mandolin in the Bluegrass Boys, Jerry Douglas's Dobro, Tony Rice's dreadnought, and Jerry Garcia's banjo in the extraordinarily popular Old & In the Way, which in the mid '70s also included mandolin master David Grisman, fiddler Vassar Clements and string bassist John Kahn. Old & In the Way made Rowan a star on the jam-band scene, and recently he's been celebrating it on tour, backed

by Railroad Earth. That stint saw him present a Grandstand Stage performance at the High Sierra Music Festival over Independence Day weekend. Rowan is such a bona fide Americana treasure, he was actually born on the Fourth of July.

The 80-year-old is still sharp as a tack and cutting tracks with his tight bluegrass quintet. Rowan's new album, *Calling You From My Mountain* (Rebel), is a deep mix of covers and originals, and it features the current prince and princess of bluegrass, Billy Strings and Molly Tuttle, on a total of four lovely and diverse songs. Rowan also continues to tour with his electrified bluegrass ensemble, Big Twang Theory, and its country-fried Texas cousin, the Free Mexican Airforce, as well as perform solo acoustic.

What keeps you coming back to the guitar after so many years and miles?

The guitar is an endless exploration of its own language, everything from flamenco to Hawaiian slack key to the blues. I first got interested in Hawaiian music because my uncle taught me a few songs on the ukulele when I was





**“BILL MONROE
IMPRESSED UPON ME
THE IMPORTANCE OF
RHYTHM GUITAR
AND LEADING WITH
BASS-NOTE RUNS”**

about five years old. The tune that has jogged my imagination for years is “Bye Bye Blackbird.” I’ve never really settled on a definitive version, but that song influenced the way I hear passing chords. Libba [Elizabeth] Cotten, who wrote “Freight Train,” was a huge influence as well. I started out by strumming in a Buddy Holly kind of style on a Telecaster with my rockabilly band, the Cupids, but when I was about 15 and heard Libba Cotton, I was touched by her lyrical fingerpicking and wonderful songs. I begged my father for a Martin, and he bought me a 0-17. That enabled me to get going as an acoustic fingerpicker.

Lightnin’ Hopkins was a tremendous fingerpicker, and everything changed for me when I heard him. I also studied the music of Lead Belly, and I cover his “Penitentiary Blues” on my new album. But back then I realized that I didn’t have the life experience to be a blues man. I used to go to a record store in Harvard Square [in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near where Rowan grew up], where you could listen in a booth. When I put on Bill Monroe’s “In the Pines,” I heard the connection to Lead Belly and the blues, but I felt closer to it culturally, so it seemed my best entry was to adopt a bluegrass approach. I put aside fingerpicking for a while, found myself a big ol’ Martin and started flatpicking.

By 1963 you were in Bill Monroe’s band. What did he impress upon you?

Bill Monroe impressed upon me the importance of rhythm guitar and leading with bass-note runs. He said that the Black man who taught him to play guitar, Arnold Shultz, could play the prettiest runs of all. Apart from the hot picking leads that have become so popular, the unique thing about bluegrass guitar is the bass runs. That goes all the way back to people like Eddie Lang [known as the father of jazz guitar], and the way he would lead a bass run into a chord. That’s what bluegrass does in the traditional sense, from the style I play right up to Billy Strings. The beauty is in the way it lifts from the bass run into a chord or an arpeggiated type of solo passage. I spent



Peter Rowan (right) with Bill Monroe at the Great American Music Hall, San Francisco in the 1960s

so many years playing rhythm guitar that bass runs became a big thing for me, and it’s still a wonderful exploration.

Where are you at as a rhythm guitar player now?

I’ve gone back to playing with my fingers, even when doing bluegrass. I practice flatpicking all the time, but in order to keep the continuity between the blues and Hawaiian music and fingerpicking, I’ve gone back to the way that Carter Stanley and Lester Flatt played bluegrass rhythm guitar, which is with a thumbpick and one or two fingerpicks. That way I can play “Freight Train” as I do in the middle of “Panama Red” [Rowan’s signature song] and have all the worlds of guitar at my fingertips.

What guitars are under your fingertips the most?

The guitar I played on the new album that’s featured on the cover was made for me by Casey Cochran. It’s a dreadnought in Style 28 made out of koa for that sweet, Hawaiian sound. I write a lot of songs on my old ’37 sunburst [Martin] triple 0-28 that I got years ago in a series of trades. That’s the most intimate guitar with the most beautiful sound. I also inherited Charles Sawtelle’s 1937 D-18 [the Hot Rize Martin dreadnought]. Preston Thompson Guitars is currently building a commemorative model for me as sort of a lifetime achievement award for my longstanding relationship with them. It’s a troubadour model 0000-28 with all sorts of inlays of mantric syllables and Buddhist designs. I was actually the first person to buy a triple 0 from Preston, and Charles

Sawtelle set that up. When Preston got into making guitars, he based his first two models on Charles Sawtelle’s vintage Martins. Preston made a triple 0 in style 42, and the other was a dreadnought. I still have the triple 0 that I bought and the dreadnought in Style 28 that Preston gave to me. The main acoustic I use on the road is a Martin D-18GE Golden Era, which is a single luthier guitar made about a dozen years ago. Man, its sound has come in beautifully! Martin has perfected the D-18 as a kind of all-accomplishing instrument. You can really fingerpick it, and it’s great for [flatpicking] bluegrass.

How has your approach evolved?

My way of thinking about bluegrass guitar now is “light touch.” Let the instrument speak, rather than bearing down on it hard, like when I was with Bill Monroe. He simply wanted such solid rhythm that there was only one way to go in my mind at the time. And every time I’d lighten up, he’d look askance, you know? But now I find that it’s easier to sing using the thumbpick and the fingerpick. There’s no pressure on my arm to move, so I can sort of caress the strings with my fingers.

Fingerpicking is basically just a downward stroke on the thumb and a backwards strum on the forefinger, which is interesting because that backwards stroke is a flamenco technique called a *rasgueado*. It’s the second half of a motion that starts with a downward strum and then goes backward from the high strings to the low strings. I still study flamenco music with my buddy Carlos Lomas, in



Rowan onstage at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Music Festival at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, on October 7, 2017

Santa Fe. I appreciate playing the guitar with a more delicate touch to allow the singing to come forth a little more.

Can you speak to Tony Rice's touch?

A normal person would make every string buzz on his guitar, but Tony's touch was so incredibly light that it was really beautiful. And if you listen to Tony's music, you'll realize that he didn't try to take a lot of extensive solos when he was singing. It was when he experienced some throat problems that his guitar playing came to the fore, and he explored some unusual tonalities.

How did it feel to have him accompany you?

It's a subtlety, but his accompaniment guitar is inspiring, because his use of suspensions and passing chords is so beautiful. We only scratched the surface, because the pressures of touring kind of limit what you can do. If I had those days to live over, I'd

probably use more open tunings, because of the tonal possibilities.

We managed a few. There's one called "Shirt Off My Back," which is in open G and played in the key of D.

So much is possible on the guitar, and my love right now is trying to tie those runs in with the passing chords in emotional ways, not just playing them in a slick way. "Uncle Pen" is a classic example. I play that song on almost

every bluegrass set because it settles us into a traditional thing, and that's my love. On the original record, Jimmy Martin used a dead-stringed Gibson to play that run, and yet it's the definitive statement of the G run pattern. But it's still tricky. It's not just a straight-ahead thing at all, and you get so nervous that it's easy to make a mistake. Everybody knows the mistake "Uncle Pen" guitar run, when you land on the B string instead of the G. [laughs] It's a classic joke among guitar players, because it's happened to everybody.

What's so magical about the music of Old & In the Way that it still resonates to such a broad audience to this day?

Jerry Garcia is immortal, and it carries the weight of his spiritual intent. In spite of mortality, the spiritual intent is immortal, and that's pretty much all there is to latch onto.

How did you come to play his herringbone 1943 Martin D-28?

He had that guitar at his house when we were getting together. I only had a triple 0 at the time, the same '37 that I have now. He brought out his dreadnought and said, "Hey, do you want to play this one, man?" I did because it's an unmistakable guitar with a great sound, and that's the one on all of the Old & In the Way stuff. When I got to play that guitar [through the Grateful Guitars Foundation] at Terrapin Crossroads a few

months ago, I was reunited with that lively, resonant sound. A week later I was in Nashville, and Billy Strings was in the studio with me. He had just bought a vintage D-28 from the same time period, and the two-toned Brazilian rosewood is exactly the same as the back and sides on Jerry's guitar. They're only a few serial numbers apart, so the wood that you hear on my record from Billy Strings is from the same woodpile as Jerry Garcia's D-28.

Billy Strings is seemingly everywhere these days. What do you appreciate most about his playing?

I like how he plays for emotion, not for flash. I didn't want him for just his extraordinary solo capabilities. We played the tunes a couple of times and he played fabulous rhythm/lead guitar. He put a couple of Tony Rice's patterns in his runs and fills to honor him. I love the feeling he put into his playing on "A Winning Hand," which is like an Irish ballad. Billy took a natural approach and simply played the music, which is what I wanted.

How about Molly Tuttle's contribution?

Emotion is what strikes me about Molly Tuttle as well. When she came into the studio and sang the title cut, she didn't try to sing it with a bluegrass style; she sang with something that is the essence of Molly Tuttle, which is tremendously moving to me. I'm always struck by her voice. It's tender and vulnerable, not clichéd at all. She also sang a wonderful part on "The Red, the White, and the Blue" and she played lovely clawhammer banjo on that too.

I feel so grateful to still be playing bluegrass for such a broad audience with my band. We're playing the music as straightforward as we can, and that's all we were doing with Old & In the Way. We'd practice every night, just for the joy of doing it. The idea of going out and playing came afterward. This band has that same joy. We're not some fabrication of somebody's imagination, with a bunch of tour posters and merchandise. We're just a bluegrass band, and that's all it's ever been. ■

**"SO MUCH IS POSSIBLE
ON THE GUITAR, AND
MY LOVE RIGHT NOW
IS TRYING TO TIE
THOSE RUNS IN WITH
THE PASSING CHORDS
IN EMOTIONAL WAYS"**



Joel Hoekstra onstage
with Whitesnake in Hamar,
Norway, June 2, 2022

WHAT SHOULD I PRACTICE, Pt. 2?

We conclude our two-part lesson on how to make the most of your time in the woodshed with tips from Joel Hoekstra, Molly Miller and others.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

LAST MONTH, WE explored the practice approaches and routines of great players like Pete Thorn. We learned about the importance of going beyond the notes when learning a favorite piece of music, as well as the value of challenging oneself to play a new style. Let's get right back into it!

I first heard Patrick Hay (fons.app/@patrickhay) play on singer/songwriter Matt Singer's stellar 2008 EP, *The Drought*, and I was moved and inspired

Ex. 6 E5

(0:55) (1:03) (1:28) (1:37)

Original phrase Multiple positions...

TAB

2 0 3 (3) 14 12 15 (15) 12-14 14-12 (12) 10 12 12-10 (10)

PER OLE HAGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Oscar Bautista (oscarbautistaguitar.com) is one of the most versatile players I know. He's a session and Broadway guitarist currently on tour with *Pretty Woman: The Musical*. Oscar told me that he consistently works on his tone, timing and technique by recording himself and critiquing the playback, and he highly recommends this for everyone. For **Ex. 7a**, put yourself in Oscar's place, sitting in the pit band for a Broadway show. The phrase isn't exceedingly difficult technically, but would you be able to confidently play it accurately and in time, knowing your guitar might be front and center for this part of the show? On Broadway, it is also the guitarist's responsibility to sculpt guitar tones for each part he or she plays. To facilitate this, Oscar uses the same method to critique his tone and choice of effects. For the music in **Ex. 7b**, he went with a Leslie effect. What would your choice be? Oscar demonstrates that listening with the intent of objectively critiquing your own playing can help you improve more quickly.

SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES



and in his own bands for years. He also now spends much of his time working on composition and recording projects, which run a remarkable gamut of styles and draw upon all manner of instruments and sounds.

Mark recommends honing your ability to play what you hear, via a concept he learned and refers to as “HSP” — “Hear, Sing, Play.” First, choose a simple chord progression, like the one in **Ex. 8a**. Then record yourself singing short melodic phrases as you strum the chords. Finally, listen back to figure out those melodies on guitar and experiment with adding bends, slides, vibrato, etc., to make them come alive. (Hmm, along with Pete Thorn’s, here’s another mention of this same type of attention to “touch” detail!) See **Ex. 8b** for one of Mark’s sample melodies, along with one way to approach playing it on guitar. Now try coming up with one of your own! Sure, this doesn’t feel the same as using your practice time to play scales or learn your favorite guitar solo. But HSP gives you a concrete way to actually practice making your playing more musical. Trust that this is time well spent, as it will put you on the road to finding your own voice. Give it a shot!

Molly Miller (mollymillermusic.com) has recorded and toured with major-label artists such as Jason Mraz and the Black Eyed Peas. She is currently the chair of the Guitar Department at Los Angeles College of Music and also leads her

HSP — HEAR, SING, PLAY — GIVES YOU A CONCRETE WAY TO ACTUALLY PRACTICE MAKING YOUR PLAYING MORE MUSICAL

Molly Miller Trio. For Molly, a great way to improve your improvisational skills is to focus on *chordal voice leading* — how each single-note voice within a chord moves from chord to chord. “You’re creating a melody, whether you’re

Ex. 8a

(0:45)

C D G

TAB

Ex. 8b

(0:45)

C D G C D G

Melody as sung

Melody as guitar line

TAB

Ex. 9a

(0:40)

Cmaj7 Am7 Dm7 G7

TAB

Ex. 9b

(1:27)

C⁶ Am7 Dm11 G7

hybrid picking

let ring

TAB

comping [playing chords] or soloing,” she explains. Molly stresses that melody is key in improvisation, and so she focuses on the top voice for our purposes. The guitarist takes a simple chord progression, like the one in **Ex. 9a**,

“EVERY MOMENT SPENT WITH MUSIC IMPROVES YOUR HANDS AND YOUR EARS, AND CONSEQUENTLY WILL MAKE LEARNING OTHER THINGS EASIER”

and first keeps the same melody note on top of each chord (**Ex. 9b**). Then she recommends exploring other variations, for example, moving the melody up, as in **Ex. 9c**. Lastly, Molly demonstrates how this can directly improve your improvisational skills, by taking the same approach, only now treating it more like a solo (**Ex. 9d**). This is a fun and unique way to approach improvising. But remember what Molly says: “Melody, melody, melody!”

Jeff Berner (jeffbernerrecording.com) spent over a decade as guitarist in the English experimental band Psychic TV and has done everything from hosting recording clinics to designing presets for Eventide effects. These days, he is a producer/engineer/mixer in Brooklyn, NY. Jeff sent this along: “I would try to learn vocal lines from records, paying close attention to phrasing, rhythm, spacing and note choices. There’s a surprising amount to learn if you hone in on all of those attributes.” As we saw with Pete Thorn and Mark Marshall, here is yet another great player telling us that when you focus on the “little” things, you’re actually working on the big things that matter. As an example, Jeff recorded the opening bars of the melody to the traditional Celtic folk song “Molly Malone” (**Ex. 10**). The most notable thing evident in both the tab and audio is everything Jeff didn’t do here, as he mainly employs just a few subtle uses of

Ex. 9c

(1:38) C⁶₉ Am7 Dm7 G7

hybrid picking
let ring

Ex. 9d

(2:30) C⁶₉ Am7 Dm7 G7

hybrid picking let ring----- let ring-----

Ex. 10

(♩ = 3♩)

E C[♯]m F[♯]m B

vibrato and slides. I asked him about this choice, to which he thoughtfully replied, “I think there’s merit in trying to make it simple and reflect the vocal phrasing. I imagined Bill Frisell playing it!”

Finally, I turned to Joel Hoekstra (joelhoekstra.com), currently of Whitesnake and Trans-Siberian Orchestra. I was fortunate to meet Joel before he became a rock titan, when he played on my self-titled first album back in 2006. His playing can be lyrical and subtle, but I also knew that when I wanted to conclude this lesson with some fun, outside-the-box rock guitar madness, Joel would surely not disappoint. Nobody shreds quite like Joel, and he demonstrates how we can use our imagination to take something common and make it new and exciting. In **Ex. 11a**, the guitarist shows us one of his blistering legato licks. Here he combines two adjacent, overlapping positions of the traditionally two-notes-per-string Am pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G) into one that is expanded out to three notes per string. Then, in **Ex. 11b**, he goes completely off the rails and extends it to four notes per string with a tapping lick that employs two fingers of his picking hand. Now, some of you might be thinking, “Yeah, this just isn’t my thing.” But I’d encourage you to take a leap of faith and simply spend a few minutes to have some fun with it. Remember, Bess Rogers and Gilber Gilmore both challenged themselves to play something new, each with surprising results.

In addition to the fun licks, Joel also very much wanted to impart these words: “I’m really glad I’ve learned everything that I have learned. Stay open-minded and work on music. Every moment spent with it improves your hands and your ears, and consequently will make learning other things easier. Be productive every day! It’s a daily process.”

So it’s the same for Joel as it is for the rest of us. Amen. 🎸

Have a question or comment about this lesson?
Feel free to reach out to Jeff on Twitter
@jjmusicmentor or at jeffjacobson.net.

Ex. 11a A minor pentatonic

(0:49)

Ex. 11b A minor pentatonic

(1:33)

*i = index finger, r = ring finger

‘Panama Red’

Peter Rowan reveals the origin of his signature song — and explains how to play it.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

“PANAMA RED” IS well known in the jam-grass scene, but it’s perhaps not as widely known that Peter Rowan wrote the song. It was originally a 1973 hit for the New Riders of the Purple Sage, and the first popular version with Rowan singing and playing it came when the supergroup Old & In the Way, released their eponymous album in 1975, two years after their seminal time, in 1973, and a year after they disbanded. Jerry Garcia was the connective tissue between the two projects, playing pedal steel in the early New Riders and banjo in Old & In the Way. During Rowan’s Frets feature interview [see page 72], he spoke fondly of Old & In the Way, saying, “Jerry gave us a tremendous gift, he gave us his blessing.” Rowan went on to offer his insights into “Panama Red,” which was perfect for a complementary Learn column.

ORIGIN

“I wrote ‘Panama Red’ after leaving my first project with David Grisman, Earth Opera, around the summer of the Woodstock music festival [1969],” Rowan explains. “It’s a fun song because it captures the vibe of the time. I was from the East Coast, but I found there to be more creativity on the West Coast during that time period. Nobody wanted to do ‘Panama Red’ on the East Coast. I took it to Seatrain [the roots fusion band in which Rowan played from 1969 to 1972], and when it eventually became a hit, the manager of Seatrain claimed it. I never

saw any money, even though it became the title of an album for the New Riders of the Purple Sage [1973’s *The Adventures of Panama Red*]. When David Grisman and I got back together for Old & In the Way in 1973 with Jerry Garcia, Vassar Clements and John Khan, we started playing it.”

KEY AND CHORDS

“It’s in the key of D, but I play it with a capo at the second fret, so I’m looking at the fretboard as if it’s in the key of C and working from an open C chord progression,” Rowan continues, “so we’ll go with that for this discussion. The chorus is the genesis of the song. ‘Panama Red’ starts out going from A minor to G, and then the chords go from F to D7/F# and back to G, as I sing, ‘He’ll steal your woman, then he’ll rob your head.’ It goes back to A minor when I sing ‘Panama Red,’ and then again to G for the repeat of the title. Now, there’s a chromatic bass run from the G down to the E; that’s when I sing, ‘On his white horse, Mescalito, he comes breezing through town.’ Hit an F chord on ‘breezin’ and then go to G7 for ‘I’ll bet your woman’s off in bed with old...’

before resolving on the C for ‘Panama Red’ and the start of the verse.”

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE ICONIC INTRO

“The chromatic run that became the intro is actually part of the chorus, and the tune just had to kick off there,” Rowan says. “It’s my favorite part of the song because it’s similar to Elizabeth Cotton’s ‘Freight Train,’ which was hugely influential on me when I was learning to play acoustic. So it was like coming full circle to honor Libba Cotton. ‘Panama Red’ is in the key of C and goes to E, which is the same thing that happens in ‘Freight Train.’ The progression when she sings ‘Please don’t tell them what train I’m on’ is the same as when I sing ‘On his white horse, Mescalito, he comes breezin’ through town.’ I thought that chord change was the coolest thing, and I’ve loved it forever.”

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player– and Frets-related videos on his YouTube channel, and learn about his acoustic/electric rock group at spirithustler.com.



Rowan circa 2000



FENDER

JV Modified '50s Stratocaster HSS

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

IT'S NO SECRET that Japan has produced some outstanding guitars since the late 1970s. The country's electrics of that era in particular nudged several U.S. manufacturers to up their game and helped bail Fender out of a tight spot following the company's near demise some 40 years ago. It's with this backstory in mind that the JV Modified '50s Stratocaster HSS pays homage to the great Japanese Fenders of the early '80s, all while embodying so much of just how extremely versatile, though relatively affordable, a Strat can be.

SPECIFICATIONS

JV Modified '50s Stratocaster HSS

CONTACT fender.com

PRICE \$1,329 street

NUT Bone, 1.650" wide

NECK Maple, full soft "V" profile

FRETBOARD Maple, 25.5" scale, 9.5" radius

FRETS 21 medium-jumbo

TUNERS Fender vintage-style locking

BODY Solid basswood

BRIDGE Six-point vintage tremolo with bent-steel saddles

PICKUPS Hot Vintage Alnico Humbucking bridge, Vintage-Style Single-Coil Strat neck and middle

CONTROLS Master volume, tone shared by neck and middle, tone for bridge pickup with push/pull switch for coil splitting

FACTORY STRINGS Fender nickel-plated steel .009-.042

WEIGHT 7.1 lbs (tested)

BUILT Japan

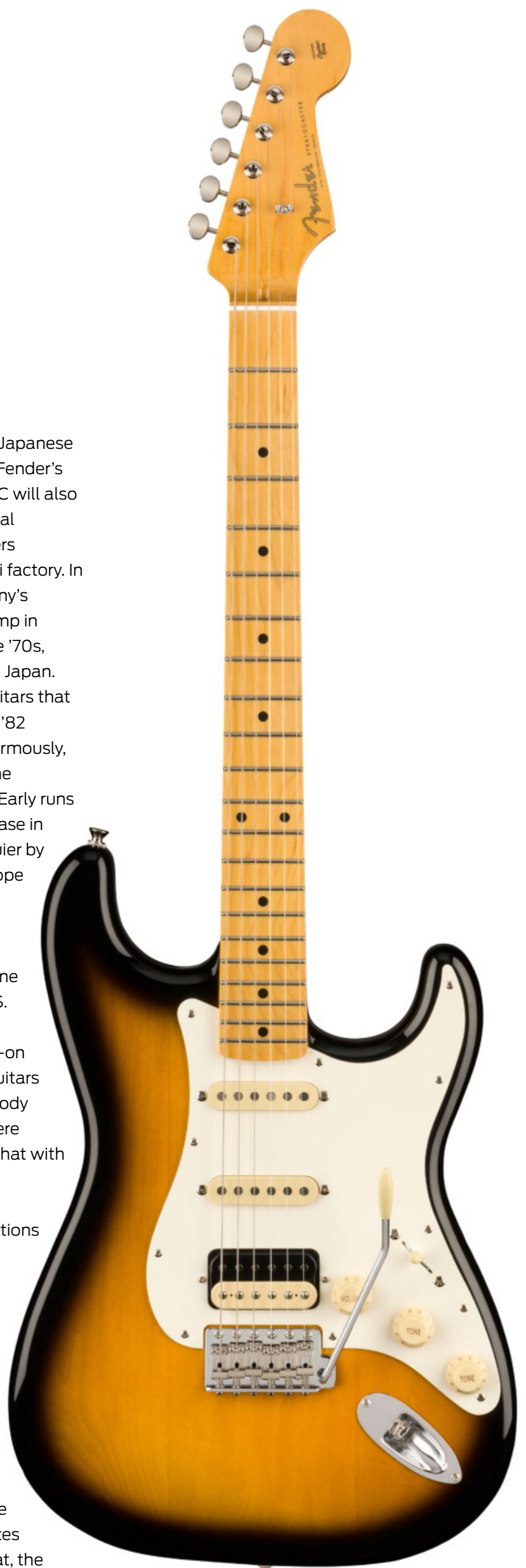
KUDOS A well-built, great-playing rendition of a popular modified Stratocaster, with impressive alternative and traditional tones

CONCERNS Bridge humbucker can be a tad dark for clean tones (although, that's what the coil split is for)

The "JV" tag is an acronym for "Japanese Vintage," but players familiar with Fender's transitional years from CBS to FMIC will also recognize it as the prefix to the serial numbers on a range of Stratocasters manufactured at the FujiGen Gakki factory. In a bid to regain some of the company's pre-CBS credibility following a slump in quality in Fullerton through the late '70s, Fender farmed out the JV Series to Japan. The quality and accuracy of the guitars that arrived at Fender's U.S. HQ in April '82 impressed the American team enormously, and pointed the way forward for the American Vintage Series to come. Early runs carried the full Fender logo for release in Japan only, then were labeled "Squier by Fender" for release in the U.K., Europe and finally the United States.

Appropriately, the new JV Modified '50s Stratocaster HSS is manufactured in Japan, the first time a standard-issue model for the U.S. market has had such origins since about the late '90s. It's not a dead-on reissue of the circa-'82 JV Series guitars — if anything, the headstock and body shapes are more vintage correct here — but it incorporates elements of that with the company's successful Vintage Modified ethos, adding several contemporary updates in specifications to a design that still pays obvious tribute to the pre-CBS originals.

Notable modern features include locking tuners that otherwise mirror vintage Klusons (in all but the name), a 9 1/2-inch radius fingerboard with medium-jumbo frets, a 1.65-inch width across the bone nut and truss-rod adjustment access at the headstock end. There's also the pickup configuration that contributes to the model's name. Yet for all that, the



“vintage” side of the equation remains plain to see and dominates the overall first impression of the guitar, fat bridge pickup aside.

The body is the traditional '50s Stratocaster shape, with deep ribcage and forearm contours and a polyurethane two-tone sunburst finish. It's made of basswood, however, rather than the swamp ash of most early Strats or the alder that Fender transitioned to around the 1957 touchstone era that best defines this guitar, a diversion taken, I suspect, largely to enable the appealing seven-pound weight of this example at a time when supplies of light ash and alder are difficult to find. The neck is solid maple with a soft-V back shape and a fairly chunky depth, finished in clear polyurethane satin with a gloss headstock face and a spaghetti Fender logo. It's more rounded than some of the sharper, boat-like profiles of many '57 reissues, and it feels great in the hand as a result. I personally would have enjoyed a little more rolling of the edges of the fingerboard, which is not to say there's a sharp feel to the neck-to-fingerboard transition in the hand at all.

With modernized tuners at the other end, the vibrato bridge is Fender's fully vintage-style six-point tremolo, with a steel base and six individually adjustable bent-steel saddles. Benefiting from a good factory setup right out of the gigbag, it offers good return-to-pitch stability through reasonable use.

Players have understood the power of a humbucker in the bridge position ever since rockers starting chiseling hunks out of their Strats in the '60s to install stray PAFs, and the HSS — humbucker, single, single — has been a standard alternative ever since. Fender has used its Hot Vintage Alnico Humbucker in this instance, wound to exhibit a powerful 18.14k ohms DC resistance reading, which in turn enables a full single-coil sound with its tone control's push-pull switch popped up for splitting. The middle and neck pickups are standard Vintage Single-Coil Strat units, and they're wired through a five-way switch with master volume, a tone control for the neck and middle pickups, and a dedicated tone for the bridge pickup.

Many players have long considered a good Stratocaster modified with a full-size humbucker in the bridge position to be among the most versatile electric guitars available, and once plugged into a Friedman Mini Dirty

Shirley head and 2x12 cab and a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo, the JV Modified '50s Stratocaster HSS takes that premise and runs with it. One aspect of the design that really impresses me in this guitar's case is that its bridge position enables bountiful girth without really sacrificing its Fender quality. The humbucker splits extremely well, yielding a bright traditional bridge-position tone that rivals that of most standard Strats, and the sounds from the bridge and middle together are extremely good both split and full-'bucker. I found the latter particularly useful, providing a thicker, punchier version of the classically funky sound without sacrificing the honk and nasality of the trad single-single combination.

The guitar's full-humbucker clean tones might have benefited from the dual-gang 250k/500k volume pot used on Fender's 2015 Shawbucker Stratocaster and some others, since the full humbucker is a little dark on its own, but that's a tricky wiring task when a split-coil option is also employed, as in this case. Otherwise, the humbucker sizzles and roars through a high-gain amp or overdrive pedal, where more than enough treble bites through for cutting power. Unsurprisingly, given the pickup complement, the other positions dial in classic Stratiness with ease, with enough low-end thump for piano-like single-note riffs on the wound strings. Any excess of treble here — as can be found in almost any Strat — is easily dialed out with a twist of the tone controls.

As for the tonewood foundation, it's worth noting that although basswood might be frowned upon by some vintage purists (despite its use in plenty of high-quality modern guitars), it provides a relatively neutral palette, while enabling an appealingly light weight in this instance. And honestly, I tried hard to “hear the wood” throughout the review process, and continually came away with the impression that this is simply a good maple-neck Strat making its mark on the frequency spectrum, with no surprises and nothing notably lacking from that more traditional template. All in all, the guitar plays great, sounds great through a range of traditional and alternative Strat tones, and earns an Editors' Pick Award for its achievements. 🎸



BOSS



RE-2 and RE-202 Space Echo pedals

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

BACK WHEN MAGNETIC tape was the main way to create delay, the Roland RE-201 Space Echo ruled the tape-delay domain. Introduced in 1974, the 201 was an advance over the RE-100 delay and RE-200 reverb/delay units released the previous year. It boasted three tape heads that could be combined as you wished, a three-spring reverb, and single-, double- and triple-head modes. A selector let you choose from seven delay/reverb modes, four delay-only modes and a 12th mode for reverb alone. With independent controls for delay and reverb volume, repeat rate, intensity, bass and treble, the RE-201 was a dream machine. Tape delay remains desirable for its natural compression and richly saturated sound, and the Roland units have likewise retained their popularity on the vintage market, and for good reason. They were quiet, high-quality units that were built for the road. Furthermore, the 201

SPECIFICATIONS

RE-2 Space Echo

CONTACT bossus.com

PRICE \$289

CONTROLS Repeat rate, wow & flutter, intensity, tone, echo volume, reverb volume, all on concentric knobs

FOOT SWITCHES Carryover, pedal

I/O Input A (mono), input B, output A (mono), output B, all 1/4". Control/expression 1/4" TRS

POWER 9-volt or AC adaptor (sold separately)

DIMENSIONS 2 7/8" x 5 1/8" x 2 3/8" (WxDxH)

BUILT Malaysia

KUDOS Realistic modern emulation of the RE-201 Space Echo in a pedalboard-friendly form factor. Convincing RE-201 preamp emulation.

CONCERNS None



The RE-202 Space Echo (above) has a full complement of controls, including buttons for new and aged tape and guitar or line input, and MIDI in/out for switching among its 127 presets. The RE-2 (below) has a smaller feature set but sounds just as good.



preamp added its own harmonic richness and distortion to the input signal, resulting in a fatter sound that made the unit useful even without producing effects.

Boss had previously captured the delay and reverb magic of the 201 in its RE-20 Space Echo Twin Pedal. Now the company has introduced the latest incarnation of its Space Echo pedals with the RE-2 and RE-202, a pair that provide an uncanny emulation of the original tape units while they model the sound of the RE-201's preamp. Let's dig in.

The RE-2 is the smaller of the two. It delivers the original's three-head configuration with 11 modes and a spring reverb emulation. Three concentric knobs provide control over echo and reverb volume, intensity and tone, and repeat rate and wow and flutter. This last control goes a long way toward re-creating the fluctuations of a motor-driven tape assembly, adding to the effect's realism. The unit offers true stereo inputs and outputs, as well as tap tempo and effect carryover functions, plus control can be expanded with external foot switches or an expression pedal.

NEIL GODWIN



As for the modeled RE-201 preamp tone, it delivers all the fatness and harmonic richness of the original tape units. You can choose to have the preamp on the dry and wet signal path, or only on the wet signal path, leaving the dry signal unaffected.

A novel addition here is what Boss calls the Twist effect, which ramps up the pitch of the delay signal into a swirling maelstrom when you press down on the pedal, then ramps it down again when you release it. While it's not exactly musical, it's a cool effect that will get a reaction at your gig.

The RE-202 delivers all of the RE-2's features and more, including a fourth tape head not found on the original RE-201. In addition to individual controls for echo and reverb volume, repeat rate, intensity, and wow and flutter, the RE-202 has a two-band EQ, with knobs for bass and treble, as well as a saturation control to add varying amounts of tape-like compression and preamp coloration. There's also a switch to choose between new and aged tape conditions, with the latter sounding slightly darker and more lo-fi. Yet another switch lets you select between guitar- and line-level signals, allowing you to connect everything from keyboards to mixers.

Like the original RE-201, the RE-202 provides 12 modes, but in yet another update, its reverb effect can be used on all 12 modes. Furthermore, the preamp effect is also available on the dry signal path, so you can use it as a distortion/boost pedal even while the delay/reverb is turned off.

Down at the pedal's front are three foot switches. The left switch turns the delay and reverb effects on and off, while holding it down produces a Warp effect that adds endless feedback for as long as the switch is depressed. The center switch lets you choose among the four user presets, and giving it a longer press turns the reverb on or off independent of the delay. The right switch is for setting the tap-tempo rate, while holding it down engages the same Twist effect included on the RE-2.

Like the RE-2, the RE-202 has true stereo inputs and outputs and expandable control via external foot switches and an expression pedal. In addition, it has MIDI in and out via Boss's TRS/MIDI cables (sold separately), giving you access to a broader palette of 127 presets that can be saved in the pedal.

Suffice to say, both pedals sound fantastic. I thought Boss had already nailed the RE-201's sound with the RE-20 Twin

SPECIFICATIONS

RE-202 Space Echo

CONTACT bossus.com

PRICE \$419

CONTROLS Saturation, wow & flutter, mode, bass, treble, reverb volume, repeat rate, intensity, echo volume

FOOT SWITCHES On-off/Warp, memory/reverb on-off, tap tempo/Twist

BUTTONS Memory, input, tape

I/O Input A (mono), input B, output A (mono), output B, all 1/4". Control 1, 2/expression 1/4" TRS. MIDI in and out on stereo miniature phone type. USB micro B-type (program update only)

POWER AC adaptor (included)

DIMENSIONS 7 9/16" x 5 15/64" x 2 3/32" (WxDxH)

BUILT Malaysia

KUDOS Realistic modern emulation of the RE-201 Space Echo. Extra reverb types, tape age and guitar/line input options. Convincing RE-201 preamp emulation.

CONCERNS None

Pedal, but the company has added even greater depth and realism to the effect. The wow and flutter control has a lot to do with that, adding the sort of random fluctuations that lend natural-sounding oscillations to the effect, ranging from subtle to strong. The modeled preamp also sounds excellent, and I could see using the pedal without the effect engaged just for the tonal thickening and mild distortion that it adds.

As to which pedal you should get, it depends entirely on your needs. Gigging guitarists will find the RE-2 fits all their needs without taking up a lot of pedalboard real estate; you're also unlikely to miss the additional reverbs and tape-condition options offered on the larger RE-202.

For studio work, the RE-202 can't be beat. In addition to giving guitarists more bells and whistles, it works great with keyboards, drum machines and the like, and its line-level input option made it suitable for effects processing with my mixer.

As a satisfied RE-20 owner, I didn't think Boss could significantly improve upon its earlier update of the RE-201, but these new pedals — from their wow and flutter effects to their modeled preamps — are game changers that both earn Editors' Picks Awards. 🎸



FANE

Ascension F25, F30 and A30 guitar speakers

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

ANOTHER COMPANY LIKELY comes to mind first when “British speakers” are mentioned, one that has continued to proliferate on the market with several successful new and vintage-styled models. However, plenty of discerning tonehounds will tell you that Fane, a lesser-known U.K. manufacturer, deserves far more acclaim than it’s often given, while attesting that the company’s speakers are among the best you can find, anywhere, and for any guitar-intended purpose.

Fane speakers were often the choice of powerful Hiwatt amps and cabs in the late ’60s and ’70s, and the company’s acclaimed Axiom series carried that reputation into the late ’90s and 2000s with models like the



100-watt AXA-12 Alnico. In fact, more often than not, Fane designs have presented more robust and higher-power-handling speakers than the general run of guitar drivers inspired by the golden age of British amplification. That was certainly the case with the Ascension F70 and A60 speakers that the company unveiled in the mid 2010s.

Now Fane has partnered once again with U.S. maker Avatar Speakers to expand the Ascension lineup with the F25, F30 and A30. As their model numbers indicate, the two ceramic-magnet speakers and one Alnico follow the lower-power-handling template of other vintage-inspired models, aiming to deliver more pushed and detailed

SPECIFICATIONS

Ascension F25

CONTACT avatarspeakers.com (for sales in the U.K. and Europe visit fane-acoustics.com)

PRICE \$125 street

MAGNET Ceramic, 35.27 oz

POWER HANDLING 25 watts RMS

IMPEDANCE 8Ω as tested (16Ω available)

SENSITIVITY 98dB

FREQUENCY RANGE 75Hz–5kHz

VOICE COIL DIAMETER 1.75"

VOICE COIL FORMER Paper

WEIGHT 7.83 lbs

BUILT England

KUDOS A great take on the Greenback formula, enhancing classic-rock crunch and lead tones with added balance and articulation

CONCERNS Be aware of its lower power handling when used singly, when it will also be just a little soft in the low end.

Ascension F30

CONTACT avatarspeakers.com

PRICE \$165 street

MAGNET Ceramic, 60 oz

POWER HANDLING 30 watts RMS

IMPEDANCE 8Ω as tested (16Ω available)

SENSITIVITY 100dB

FREQUENCY RANGE 75Hz–5kHz

VOICE COIL DIAMETER 1.75"

VOICE COIL FORMER Paper

WEIGHT 10.69 lbs

BUILT England

KUDOS A loud, punchy speaker with firm lows and a lively, detailed response overall

CONCERNS Potentially a little shrill in bright-leaning amps

Ascension A30

CONTACT avatarspeakers.com

PRICE \$265 street

MAGNET Alnico, 35.27 oz

POWER HANDLING 30 watts RMS

IMPEDANCE 8Ω as tested (16Ω available)

SENSITIVITY 100dB

FREQUENCY RANGE: 75Hz–5kHz

VOICE COIL DIAMETER 1.75"

VOICE COIL FORMER Paper

WEIGHT 9.04 lbs

BUILT England

KUDOS An extremely sweet, musical Alnico speaker that presents great clarity and harmonic sparkle, with plenty of volume

CONCERNS Obviously it’s pricey... and you’ll want to watch your power handling

performances coupled to lower-powered amps, along with a dynamic and complex response when used in multiples to suit 50- and 100-watt rigs. Made in the U.K., all three are classy-looking, well-built speakers, with pressed-steel chassis, tidy cone mounting and doping, and high-quality multi-tab solder connections. Note that the rims have only four mounting holes, preventing use in amps that use eight bolts without some modification.

I tested each in an open-back 1x12 pine cabinet powered by an AC15 for classic Vox chime, a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini set for lower-powered Plexi-inspired tones, and a tweed-Deluxe style amp, using a Gibson Les Paul and a Fender Stratocaster.

ASCENSION F25

If you're thinking the F25's 35-ounce ceramic magnet, ribbed British cone, 25-watt power handling and 98dB sensitivity hint strongly at the Celestion Greenback, you're correct, although this is no straight-up clone by any means. However, the F25 does indeed seek to present that classic lighter-magnet delivery in a speaker that's easily driven into juicy breakup, with a guitar-flattering midforward response and a softer low end that won't threaten your bassist's place in the mix.

In use, the F25 follows through on the premise, while proving that it's far more than just a copy of the ubiquitous Greenback. It gave a detailed and balanced performance, with a very classic-British character overall, particularly in that instantly identifiable warmer midrange and crackling high-end sizzle when hit with overdrive, although also with less of the overtly midforward haze that you get from many Greenback-inspired speakers.

Overall, I found it far less of a one-trick pony than that ubiquitous design often turns out to be, working surprisingly well with a broad variety of tones and playing styles. It's impressively good as a single unit — which isn't always the case — with a very clear, musical presentation from clean amp



settings, and dynamic pushed tones for crunchy power chords or leads. In addition to hitting the design touchstone sonically, the F25 is just a great-sounding all-round speaker, and it is certainly one to consider if your amp isn't putting out more than 15 or 20 watts.

ASCENSION F30

If you think you're seeing a pattern emerging in the step up from F25 to F30, you're likely on to something. This speaker's bigger 60-ounce magnet, higher 100dB sensitivity and 30-watt power handling chases the traditional late '60s and '70s "heavy magnet" (a.k.a. "H") speaker that was the punchier, more bass-heavy partner to the Greenback's "M" magnet.

In use, the F30 delivers, too, with a tighter, crisper overall performance and a noticeably bigger low end. This speaker is very articulate throughout its range, with a lot of immediacy and detail in a fast response that benefits swift picking, both clean and overdriven. There's a little barkiness to the efficient F30, too, which really helps lead work cut through, but it can also give a slightly brittle impression with brighter amp settings, a characteristic that might lean it away from excelling in some Vox-styled amps. Given the slightly scooped impression made by its bigger lows and more immediate highs, the F30 proved a surprisingly gutsy speaker for the Stratocaster, especially when bouncy SRV or fat Hendrix-like riffs were the aim.

And while +2dB might not sound like much in the efficiency department, it makes the F30 noticeably louder than the F25, an impression that's further enhanced by the increased overall articulation and bigger bass response. All told, it's another great speaker for the right application, and a high-quality rendition of its classic theme.

ASCENSION A30

This is the one Alnico-magnet entrant amid the three newbies, and as such, both price and intentions set it somewhat apart from the F25 and F30. The 35-ounce Alnico



magnet delivers 100dB of efficiency with 30 watts of power handling, which should take us into famed Alnico Blue territory, specs-wise, in a speaker able to tolerate something like twice the power. The result, it has to be said, is an extremely tasty-sounding speaker. The A30 is sweet, articulate and loaded with the legendary chime that great Alnico speakers can deliver as a result of the slight softening of the compression, mixed with bountiful harmonic overtones and detailed sparkle in the highs. I also found it a great speaker for taking the bite and harshness out of an overly bright amp (approximated with some higher treble-control settings), yet without dulling or muting the high-frequency detail and extension in the least.

The A30's clean and edge-of-breakup tones are particularly musical, with a lush juiciness that really benefited all three test amps, showing how well an ostensibly British-voiced speaker can work with, for example, a tweed Deluxe-style amp. It also responded well to overdriven tones, enhancing a softer, more vintage-voiced edge amid the grind, and delivered plenty of lead-enhancing wail when pushed hard. Really, though, it's a speaker that thrives in the middle, where its lush dimensionality, superb dynamics and lively shimmer help those "sweet spot" tones to truly shine.



CONCLUSIONS

Each of these new Ascension models provides a great option for guitarists shopping in their respective markets, and should be given serious consideration alongside the usual suspects. The F30 is a very able speaker, and one that will help you cut through a muddy mix or give some guts to an underpowered amp. But I found the F25 and A30 impressive for their classic Brit-voiced grind and sweet musicality, respectively, and each of these speakers is deserving of an Editors' Pick Award. If anything, I think I enjoyed these lower-powered Fanes even more than the higher-powered Ascensions released some seven years ago, and that's really saying something. 🎸

FENDER

Paramount Bluegrass Collection PR-180E Resonator and PM-180E Mandolin

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

FENDER INTRODUCED ITS Paramount Series for discriminating acoustic players at Winter NAMM 2016, and the company has been busy updating and augmenting it in 2022. Fender started off the year with three new steel-strings, and then — just in time for warm-weather back-porch pickin' — offered up the three instruments that make up the Paramount Bluegrass Collection: the PB-180E banjo, along with the PR-180E Resonator and PM-180E Mandolin on review here. The whole Paramount concept is about modern takes on vintage designs, and the Bluegrass Series takes it a step further, applying elements such as onboard electronics and modern neck profiles to old-time Americana instruments.

SPECIFICATIONS

PR-180E Resonator

CONTACT fender.com

PRICE \$549 street

NUT WIDTH 1.75", bone

NECK Mahogany, 15.75" radius

FRETBOARD Walnut, 25" scale

FRETS 19

TUNERS Nickel, open-back

BODY Laminated mahogany back, sides and top

BRIDGE Spider

ELECTRONICS Fishman Nashville

CONTROLS None

FACTORY STRINGS Fender 60L Phosphor Bronze (gauges .012–.052)

WEIGHT 5.4 lbs as tested

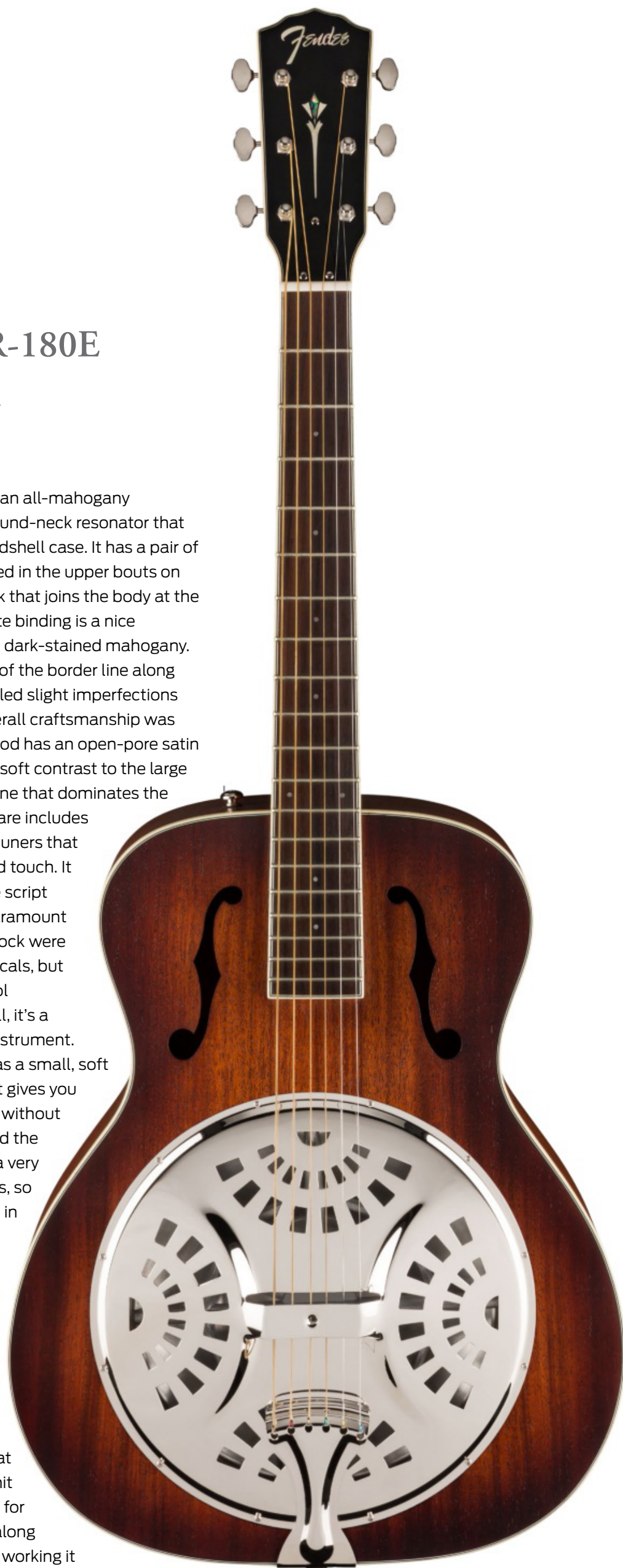
BUILT China

KUDOS Super sharp aesthetics, solid construction, good playability, broad tonal palate, great amplified sound

CONCERNS Occasional resonator rattle with aggressive attack, some blemishes along fretboard binding

The PR-180E is an all-mahogany acoustic-electric round-neck resonator that comes in a nice hardshell case. It has a pair of small f-holes located in the upper bouts on either side of a neck that joins the body at the 12th fret. Aged-white binding is a nice complement to the dark-stained mahogany. Close examination of the border line along the fretboard revealed slight imperfections on this unit, but overall craftsmanship was super solid. The wood has an open-pore satin finish that sets it in soft contrast to the large spider resonator cone that dominates the front. Nickel hardware includes Grover open-back tuners that add a time-honored touch. It would be nice if the script Fender logo and Paramount staff on the headstock were inlays instead of decals, but they still have a cool appearance. Overall, it's a fantastic-looking instrument.

The PR-180E has a small, soft V-shaped neck that gives you plenty to hold onto without being too much, and the width at the nut is a very common 1.75 inches, so it feels pretty much in line with a typical steel-string neck, especially given that the string gauges are also common to a typical light steel-string set. Playability out of the box is somewhat easy. This review unit arrived on a gig day for me, so I brought it along and had no trouble working it





right into the set alongside the grand auditorium and concert steel-strings that were in the mix that night. It's clear that Fender designed this instrument with an eye to accommodating acoustic players of all stripes, not just resonator heads. The factory action is slightly on the high side compared to a standard steel-string, and that's certainly advantageous for an instrument that so easily lends itself to bottleneck Delta blues and lap-style slide playing. It's easily adjustable via the dual-action truss rod as well.

The PR-180E's tone is an interesting blend of wood and metal, warmth and clarity, attack and sustain, all with plenty of punchy

SPECIFICATIONS

PM-180E Mandolin

CONTACT fender.com

PRICE \$399 street

NUT WIDTH 1.12", bone

NECK Maple

FRETBOARD Walnut, 13.9" scale

FRETS 21

TUNERS Chrome, open-back with pearloid buttons

BODY Laminated mahogany back & sides; laminated spruce top

BRIDGE Walnut

ELECTRONICS Fishman Implant

CONTROLS None

FACTORY STRINGS Fender Phosphor Bronze Mandolin (gauges .011–.040)

WEIGHT 2.2 lbs as tested

BUILT China

KUDOS Classic style, good playability, clear tone, affordable

CONCERNS A few minor blemishes in the neck attachment region

volume. How it sounds depends a whole lot on your plucking approach. Since there are only 12 frets to the body, the feel is more compact than on a 14-fret instrument, and your plucking hand naturally comes further across. I often found myself plucking over the neck right in-between the two F-holes, leading to a wooly, wooden sound. On the other hand, plucking with the heel placed right on the steel bridge cover brightens the tone considerably, and you can't help but want to play a few banjo-inspired rolls.

The articulation and sustain one achieves with this instrument is inspiring. Plucking aggressively in particular tunings occasionally yielded some extraneous rattle from the resonator cone, but that's not altogether unwelcome or surprising for an instrument of this affordability. The real surprise is how good it sounds amplified. The PR-180E comes equipped with a Fishman Nashville Series Pickup, which delivered a balmy, robust tone through a Fender Acoustic Junior GO. I actually preferred it to the pure acoustic tone. It's a passive pickup with no controls that simply sounds full and organic.

The Fender Paramount PM-180E Mandolin is an acoustic-electric instrument with a classic A-style teardrop shape. Typical of the Paramount line, it's not made of solid woods but rather of laminated mahogany back and sides, with a laminated spruce top. It also comes with a gig bag rather than a hard case. A pair of f-holes grace either side of the walnut bridge in the center. It sports a handsome aged Cognac Burst, finished in satin, and like its resonator cousin has complementary aged-white binding that offers a nice contrast. I noticed a few blemishes where the binding, the body and the neck all come together. Chrome hardware includes open-back tuners with pearloid

buttons that add an old-time element, and the Paramount staff on the headstock caps it off nicely. It appears that the brand name and Paramount logo, consisting of a staff with a sort of diamond-shaped kite head on top, are silkscreened on the headstock. The overall aesthetic is down-home handsome, with a modern classic sensibility.

Snowflake inlays grace its walnut fingerboard on a soft V-shaped neck that feels instantly accommodating to hands used to holding an acoustic guitar. Playability on this review unit was easy enough right out of the box. My friend and I are both guitar players who dabble in mandolin, and we found it easy to transfer our guitar skills to this instrument. It facilitates everything from running scales to playing primary chords or stabbing out singular notes with good intonation and minimal fret splat, until you get into about the 10th position, where some dead spots start to occur. Some of the fret edges felt a bit sharp, but the craftsmanship is better than par for its price class.

The PM-180E features parallel tone-bar bracing, which Fender says is designed to deliver a bright, clear tone, and that's exactly how I'd describe the sound. This mandolin is loud and lively, and it does a bang-up job filling a small room with sound. It's equipped with a passive Fishman pickup that delivered a signal faithful to the acoustic tone to my Fender Acoustic Junior GO. Importantly, the level was well balanced from string to string.

Fender's Paramount Series offers options for players seeking authentic acoustic sounds on modest budgets. Both of these additions to the Paramount Bluegrass Collection will appeal to acoustic and electric guitar players who have come to love the Fender feel, trust the brand name and want to expand their styles in an Americana direction. 🎸

VALCO

KGB DIST

distortion pedal

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

ALTHOUGH ITS RUGGED looks might imply a more sinister meaning, the “KGB” in Valco’s new KGB DIST stands for *keyboard, guitar and bass*, hinting at the unit’s broad functionality. Valco is a subsidiary of Eastwood Guitars, whose pedal line is designed and built in Canada, and has thus far released several pedals and a handful of pickups. The Valco name was associated with amps branded as Supro, Oahu and Gretsch in the 1950s and ’60s, but today the company is aiming for the characterful, slightly aggressive personality its name implies, and the KGB DIST’s looks inspire a street cred to match.

Housed in a wedge-shaped, folded-steel box, the KGB DIST demands some real estate on your pedalboard, but it does a lot to warrant its squatter’s rights. The input and output are right and left of the top-rear edge, respectively, with a dry out and nine-volt adaptor input between them. The bottom control row has knobs for distortion, filter (a one-pole low-pass filter that acts as a dark-to-bright tone control) and output. Above these, a red chicken-head knob adorns

SPECIFICATIONS

Valco KGB DIST

CONTACT valcofx.com

PRICE \$299 list

CONTROLS Distortion, filter, output, blend, voice, input impedance. Mini-toggles for polarity and line/Inst.; On/off stomp-switch
I/O Input, dry out, output. 9V DC adaptor input (adapter not included)

SIZE 7.25" x 5.5" x 1.25"–3.5" (LxWxH)

BUILT Canada

KUDOS A well made and good sounding distortion pedal, packing more versatile tone-shaping options than most

CONCERNS The size requires sacrificing some pedalboard real estate



a six-position input-impedance switch that lets you dial from line levels to high-impedance guitar input (1M ohm) with four stops in between. The line/instrument toggle beside it flips instantly between the 10k ohm line level and your preset on the red knob.

Another red chicken-head accesses the voice switch, which offers four flavors of distortion generation: op-amp (Op), LED diode clipping (LED), silicon diode clipping (Si) or germanium diode clipping (Ge). Running vertically along the left edge of the pedal, the blend slider proportionally blends distorted and dry signals at the output as desired (the dry out is always sans distortion, pre input-impedance switching). A powerful option, it lets you blend in the dry signal to add articulation and low-end body to the distorted signal, however fuzzy you push it. Finally, a 0/180 polarity toggle allows you to flip the relative polarity of the dry signal at the output to enable phase cancellation for creating alternative blended tones.

I tested the KGB DIST with a Fender Telecaster and a Gibson 1959 Les Paul Reissue into a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini head and 2x12 cab and a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo, and was immediately impressed not only with its versatility but also with the availability of real-world-usable sounds at a wide range of settings. The distortion knob

really wants to be a third of the way up or more to start feeling the juice, especially with a little dry signal blended in at the fader. But from that point on up, there’s an enjoyable range of mostly vintage-voiced distortion tones to be had, from a light thickening to an all-out, fuzz-like sizzle.

Guitarists might start with the standard 1M impedance switch setting, which elicited the most clarity and broadest frequency range from the pickups in the test guitars, but dropping that a couple notches proved a nifty way to soften up the overall feel and tone somewhat, and was useful in its own way. Consider the voice switch your modern-to-vintage tone melder. Op and LED lean to the former, while Si and Ge are browner and more ’60s/’70s leaning, respectively. All are functional and usable, although it’s worth noting that volume changes come with each twist. LED is loud and punchy, for example, while Ge is the softest and chewiest — but it may be my favorite mode in the whole box for its honey-thick goodness.

All in all, if your distortion tastes lean more retro than metal (though there’s classic metal here in spades, for sure), and enhanced versatility floats your boat, the Valco KGB DIST has a lot to offer. And undoubtedly it’s a handy box for adding hair to synths, claws, Wurlis, bass and more. 🎸

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JACQUES

Prisoner BBD

Analog Delay

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

ANALOG DELAY SOMETIMES gets pigeonholed as a compromise between the pristine, mirror-like reproduction of digital delay and the warm characterful sound of tape. However, analog delay has secured its place in tone history, if only for the classic sound of the Electro-Harmonix Memory Man bucket-brigade delay pedal. The Deluxe version of that effect offered the perfect combination of fidelity — just enough to not mush out when placed in front of a distorted amp — and frequency fall off to keep multiple repeats from muddying your mix. Combined with its distinctive modulation section, the Deluxe Memory Man became a go-to effect for legendary guitarists like The Edge, Andy Summers, Eric Johnson and numerous others.

The Prisoner BBD Analog Delay from Jacques offers some of that same ambient magic thanks to its use of high-quality N.O.S. BBD chips, which provide 0.3 seconds of hi-fi analog delay. Cranking the delay to the full 300-odd milliseconds, turning on a few repeats, and dialing the effect level knob way up to about three o'clock hit the exact sweet spot for U2-style rhythms. Bringing the repeats down to just one served up Albert Lee-style double-time tricks, and by dialing the delay time and level back a bit I was

SPECIFICATIONS

Prisoner BBD Analog Delay

CONTACT jacquespedals.com

PRICE \$233 street

CONTROLS Rate, mod, repeat, time, level

EXTRAS True bypass

SIZE 2 1/2" x 4 1/2" x 1 1/4"

BUILT European Union

KUDOS Warm, clear delay sound. Lush modulation. Makes your guitar sound bigger

CONCERNS Electronic pop when engaged and disengaged



treated to a classic rockabilly, slap-echo. The Prisoner's fidelity is perfectly poised: dark enough to stay out of the way of solos when the level is low, but crisp enough to nail those rhythmic effects.

The modulation is also redolent of a coveted vintage Memory Man pedal. With the delay set very short, I enjoyed a chorus sound that was lush without sounding too '80s. I could raise the modulation level up as far as one o'clock for a series of different modulation characters, while a faster rate and more repeats gave me some Uni-Vibe-like throb. I had to be careful when lengthening the delay with the modulation past nine o'clock, or the Prisoner would stray into seasick territory, but careful manipulation of the parameters gave me some of that early Bill Frisell "just the right side of nausea" tone.

Turning the Prisoner's repeat knob all the way up will not result in runaway or even infinite repeats. However, they did last long enough to let me play with the pitch by changing the delay speed. There was an audible click when turning the pedal on and

off, loud enough to be a deal breaker if you are playing quiet gigs in small rooms or doing live studio takes, but it's likely to be inaudible in a noisy bar situation.

While I've repeatedly referenced the Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man here, in fairness the Jacques Prisoner BBD Analog Delay has a sound of its own, and that sound is gorgeous. It should definitely be on your list of analog delays to take for a spin. **B**



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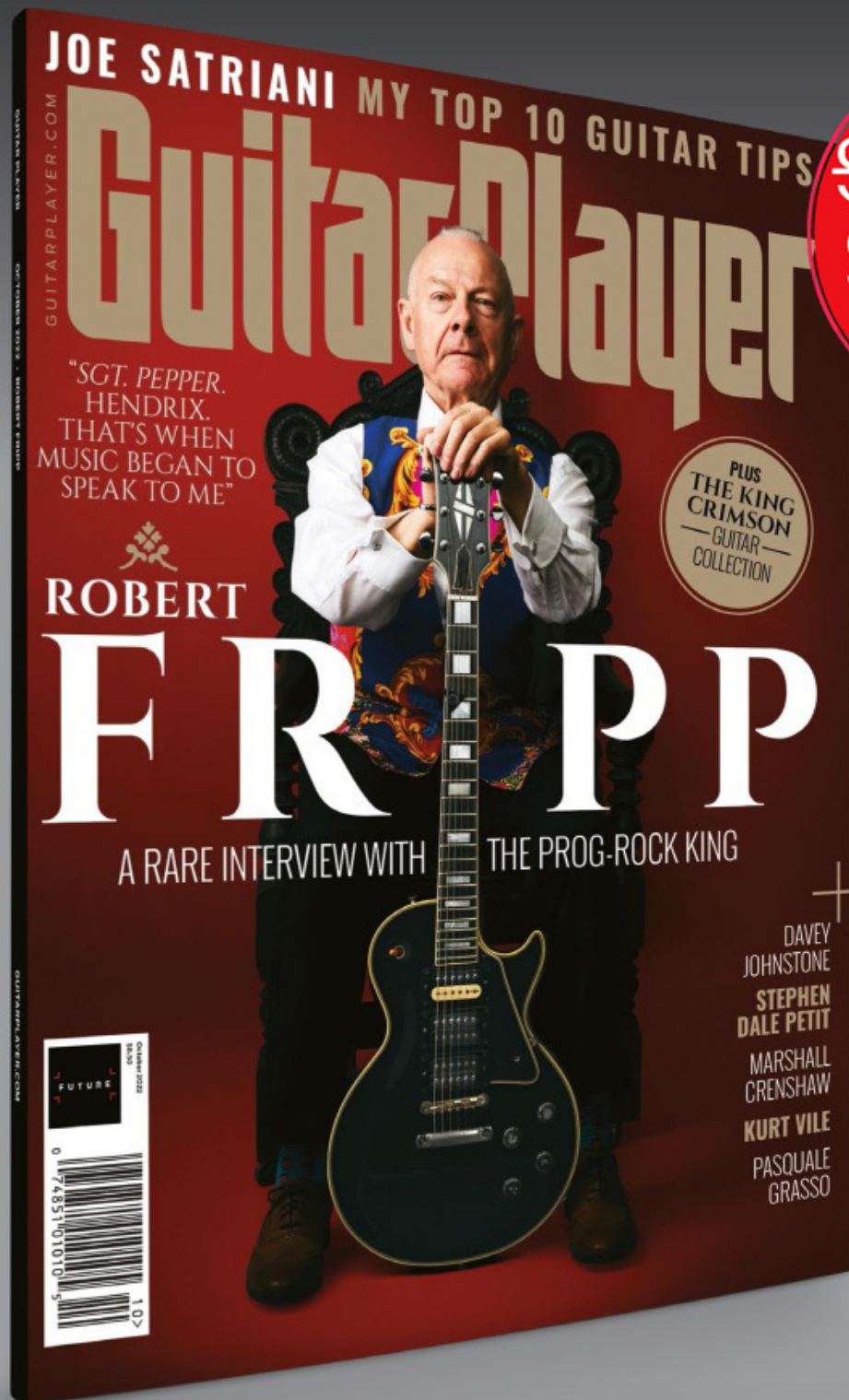


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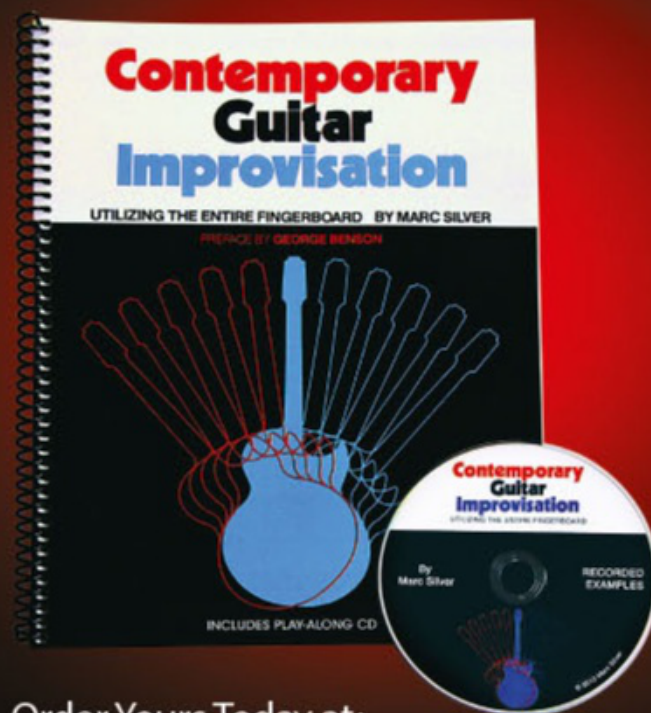
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How I Wrote...

“Someday, Someway”

Marshall Crenshaw reveals Gene Vincent’s role in his 1982 signature hit.

BY JOE BOSSO

“**I CAN KNOCK** certain songs of mine for one reason or another, but not this one,” Marshall Crenshaw says of “Someday, Someway,” the irresistibly catchy 1982 pop-rock gem that launched the Detroit-born musician’s career and is now considered his signature song by fans and critics alike. “It sounded good when I released it, and it still sounds good today. People want me to play it at every show, which is fine, because I happen to love it and I’m really proud of it.”

PHONY BEATLEMANIA

In February 1980, Crenshaw was in Boston for a four-week run of *Beatlemania*, the musical revue in which he’d portrayed John Lennon for three long years. “One night, the stage manager gave me a warning: ‘You’ve got to try harder. Look like you’re enjoying it,’” he recalls. “I quit the show the next day.”

While in Boston, Crenshaw began writing songs in earnest, a creative binge that was sparked by listening to the city’s FM rock station, WBCN. “They played a lot of punk and new wave tunes, and I found them very exciting and inspiring,” he says. “I was in my hotel room and I heard the Clash’s ‘London Calling’ for the first time. Those words ‘phony Beatlemania has bitten the dust’ spoke to me. It was, ‘Okay, that’s a message I’m getting.’”

At the same time, Crenshaw was channeling the spirit of ’50s rock and early ’60s girl groups in his writing. He was particularly taken with “Lotta Lovin’,” a 1957 rockabilly hit by Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps. “I started with that same drum beat, and before I knew it a song came to me — the

riff, the verse and chorus, the words,” he says. “Even the title, ‘Someday, Someway’ — it was ‘first thought, best thought.’ Right away, I knew I had something.”

Crenshaw dashed off a boom-box cassette demo of the song (which he soon recorded over), then headed to his home base of New York City and made a proper recording of the cut and other compositions at a rehearsal studio where his brother Robert worked. He shopped his tape around, even leaving a copy with the doorman of producer Richard Gottehrer. “From Richard, the tape got to Robert Gordon, who started recording some of my songs,” Crenshaw says. “He did a version of ‘Someway, Someway,’ and it became a nice hit for him. Then I made a single of it for this little label, Shake Records, and WNEW started playing it. That opened the floodgates, and all the labels wanted me.”

TAKE 28

Signed to Warner Bros., Crenshaw, with bassist Chris Donato and brother Robert on drums, set about recording his debut album, with Gottehrer producing, at Manhattan’s Record Plant Studios. “I was intimidated being in this fancy studio,” Crenshaw remembers. “I struggled to get sounds I was happy with.” Gottehrer offered suggestions for arrangements on certain songs, but when it came to “Someday, Someway,” the track pretty much stayed as it was.

“BEFORE I KNEW IT, A SONG CAME TO ME. EVEN THE TITLE. IT WAS ‘FIRST THOUGHT, BEST THOUGHT’ ”

“I did some cool guitar things on the song,” Crenshaw notes, “like I’m playing an E-string harmonic that drones throughout. But Richard had me record six rhythm acoustics, which I didn’t understand. They’re way down in the mix.” The guitarist doubled all of his electric parts, relying on his main sunburst 1966 Stratocaster that he played through a Fender Pro combo.

The basic tracks went smoothly, but even so, the group performed it 35 times to get the right feel. Crenshaw credits second engineer Jim Ball, with zeroing in on take 28 as the keeper. “Jim played it for us and said, ‘Listen to this one,’ and sure enough, it was there,” he says. “My brother really nailed it on the drums, and that’s something I keyed into.”

DON’T CHANGE THAT DIAL

Because “Someday, Someway” had enjoyed success from its earlier versions, Crenshaw balked at it being the lead single from his eponymous album. But Warner Bros. insisted, and he relented. “Thank goodness they talked me out of my stupidity,” he says. Released in May 1982, the song hit number 32 on *Billboard* and was hailed by critics as being one of the

year’s best.

“It’s a really cool record,” Crenshaw says. “When it comes on the radio, I don’t change the station.” When asked to name a song of his that causes a different reaction, he laughs and says, “That’s a detail I’ll save.”



A full-body photograph of Dave Mustaine standing in a dark studio setting. He is holding a Gibson Flying V electric guitar with both hands. He has long, wavy, light brown hair and is wearing a black leather jacket over a maroon t-shirt and black pants. Behind him are several Marshall amplifiers and a stage light fixture with five glowing yellow lights. The Gibson logo is in the top right corner.

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