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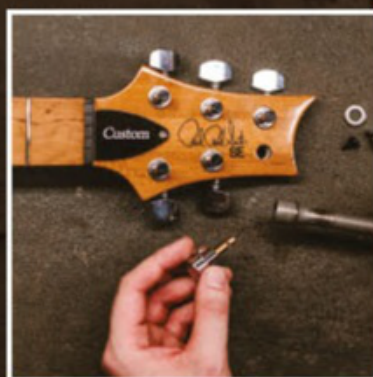


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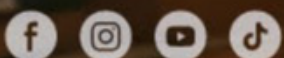
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AMERICANA PIE

AS GENRES GO, Americana has always been a difficult one to pin down. In taxonomical terms, it's more a family of genres that includes blues, folk, bluegrass, gospel, jam band, rhythm and blues, and even some styles of rock and roll. The common threads that bind these disparate forms to Americana are a distinctly rural southern character, and an embrace of traditional instruments and themes that speak to the American experience. But like America's own melting pot, these various musical strains have been transformed through exposure and intermingling, changing one another and making Americana a style that is ever evolving.

Many of the artists featured in this issue are prime exponents of this very tradition. Take our cover stars, Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks, the driving forces behind the Tedeschi Trucks Band. Since touring together in 2007 as Derek Trucks & Susan Tedeschi's Soul Stew Revival, they've gone on to form one of music's premier jam bands with their unique blend of blues, rock and soul. As the group's guitar slingers, Susan and Derek have a lot of ground to cover, and they do it authentically, steeped as they are in the traditions of southern music. But as with all things Americana, their music reaches beyond its indigenous roots. Consider, for example, the influence of Indian music on Derek's gorgeously liquid slide playing.

Or, for that matter, take a listen to the Tedeschi Trucks Band's new opus, *I Am the Moon*, a four-album set that orbits 12th-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's *Layla and Majnun*, a poem that was itself the inspiration for Eric Clapton's song "Layla." It's an epic project that spans blues, rock, soul, folk and more. And considering that its heroine, Layla, spends her time locked away in a tower, the album has parallels to our experience as of late in the wake of COVID. Put it all together, and you have a quintessential Americana album — four, to be exact — that speaks to the past and present in a wholly traditional and transformative way, and is among the most breathtaking and ambitious musical creations we've heard in a long time.

That same spirit abounds in the work of other Americana artists in this issue, including Megan and Rebecca Lovell, the sisters of Larkin Poe, and Charlie Musselwhite, the famed harmonica player who shows his six-string prowess on his latest album, *Mississippi Son*. And it is most certainly evident in hill country blues, the genre celebrated this month in Jim Beaugez's feature about the practitioners of this distinctly regional music, as popularized in the late 20th century by R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, two guitarists whose music is foundational to Americana. I hope you enjoy this issue's decidedly southern exposure.

Christopher Scapelliti

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Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks,
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SCAN ME



The top-of-the-line Juliet/v Bigsby (center) is reviewed this issue.

SIGNIFICANT OTHER

Part Firebird, part SG and a full partner to Romeo, Juliet is Eastman's first original solidbody design.

BY DAVE HUNTER

WITH A NAME like Romeo, it was only appropriate that Eastman's first original guitar design was a head turner. Introduced in 2020, the semihollow model was a milestone for a company that has had its share of noteworthy achievements in its short history. Established by Chinese flutist and Boston University music graduate Quian Ni in 1992, Eastman Guitars has continually defied preconceptions, while it has consistently garnered respect from players. The company forged its reputation with clever, well-made semi-reproductions of classic models. While they weren't straight-out copies, guitars like the SB59, SB55 and T64 clearly echo Gibson's '59 Les Paul Standard, Les Paul Junior and ES-330, respectively. But with Romeo, Eastman began branching into

entirely original designs from the imagination of the company's Pomona, California-based master luthier, Otto D'Ambrosio.

Now Romeo and its followup, Romeo LA, are joined by Eastman's first original solidbody design, a partner aptly named Juliet. A collaboration between D'Ambrosio and Eastman's Netherlands-based product development manager, Pepijn 't Hart, Juliet comes in three different appointments, all featuring the same basic design, construction and Romeo-inspired body styling. There's the standard Juliet with humbuckers, and the Juliet P-90, both offered in Truetone Gloss finishes. Striding above them is the top-of-the-line Juliet/v Bigsby, on the table this issue. The */v* in the name stands for *antique varnish*, the top coat which is applied to this model,

and Eastman's most exclusive finishing option. In addition to that upgrade, the guitar includes a slew of high-end, name-maker parts (albeit many of which are included on the other Juliet models), along with a certain air of style and quality that slots it in comfortably with much of the American- and European-made "boutique" crowd. All that, and an enticing origin story.

"I was always the commercial guy, and I looked at the classic models we could improve," 't Hart says. "But there is a point after you've done a Junior like our SB55 that the road stops. And the SG — you can't improve that. Plus, it's got the two horns, so there's no way you can alter it. You're only gonna make it look ugly! So Otto and I love SGs, and we love Firebirds..."

“But I think the issue is that we love everything!” D’Ambrosio interjects. “So we wanted to put everything into a new design that is our own. We worked for two years on this project. Juliet has an elevated centerpiece, like a Firebird has, but it has the specs of an SG: double humbuckers, a mahogany body — in this case it’s an Okoume body. And then we wanted to have a six-on-a-side headstock, because we have to think ahead — there will be bolt-on instruments eventually.”

So, part Firebird, part SG and part offset, given the asymmetrical waist and horns. Yet Juliet is also something very different, both in looks and specs. In addition to the iconic raised center section, the bass-side body wing is perhaps slightly Tele-derived, but with contours for ribcage comfort at the back and forearm at the front, while the treble side leans a little single-cut Les Paul. Differentiating it from its stated roots, the Juliet is tailored to a 25 1/2-inch scale length, adding a little extra chime and low-end tightness to the otherwise classic-inspired formula.

“THE ISSUE IS THAT WE LOVE EVERYTHING. SO WE WANTED TO PUT EVERYTHING INTO A NEW DESIGN THAT IS OUR OWN”

The neck is also made from solid Okoume, glued-in with a long tenon rather than part of a through-neck construction like the original reverse-body Firebird. It has 22 medium-jumbo frets on an ebony fingerboard that has a 12-inch radius. Together with the curvaceous rounded-C neck profile, it’s full in the hand without being clubby, and feels comfortable and easily to play, right up to the joint. The bone nut spans a 1 11/16-inch width, with a gently back-angled, six-a-side headstock that’s carved in two tiers, hinting at the Firebird headstock, though not reversed like the most iconic of those guitars.

The entire neck-and-body construction has an appealingly tactile hand-rubbed look and feel to it, thanks in part to the varnish top

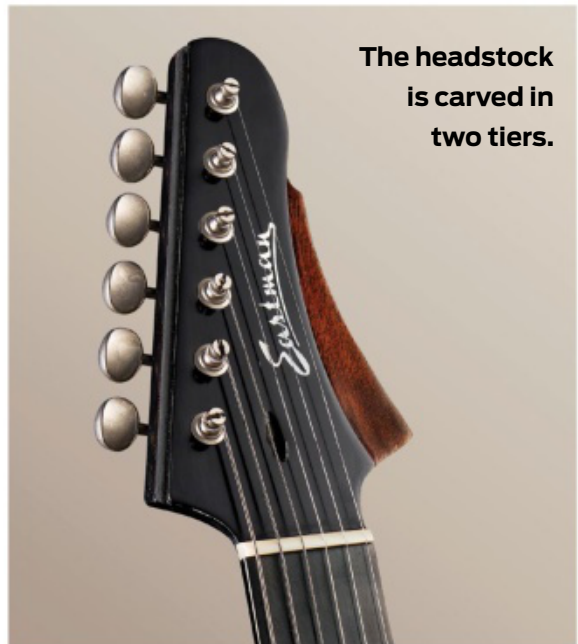


(from left) The Juliet P-90, the standard Juliet with humbuckers, and the Juliet/v Bigsby.

coat. Tastefully minimal aging has been applied so that, for example, a few “rubbed” spots of brownish-red wood show through the black finish, complementing both the bare wood revealed on the headstock’s lower tier and the inlaid tortoise pickguard and switch plate.

Regarding Eastman’s appealing finishing technique, ‘t Hart tells us it was a natural extension of the company’s 30-year history as a maker of fine violins. As he explained in *Guitar Player*’s April 2022 Meet Your Maker feature, the company’s Antique Varnish series got its start when he and D’Ambrosio spied an unfinished archtop in the factory. “I asked the ladies in the workshop, ‘Hey, can you finish these like you do the violins?’” he told us. “Because the violins look like they’re from the 1800s or something. Suddenly, we attracted a whole different audience.”

But the quest for quality goes beyond the designs, woods and finishes. Makers inevitably need some off-the-shelf parts, and Eastman strives to go for the good stuff, eschewing the generics and base-level



The headstock is carved in two tiers.

in-house hardware used by many offshore guitar companies. The Tune-o-matic-style bridge and control knobs are from German maker Goeldo, while the tuners are Gotoh’s version of the old Kluson “Safety Post” units used primarily by Fender in the 1950s and ’60s, with slots for securing the otherwise finger-puncturing string ends. It’s a nifty

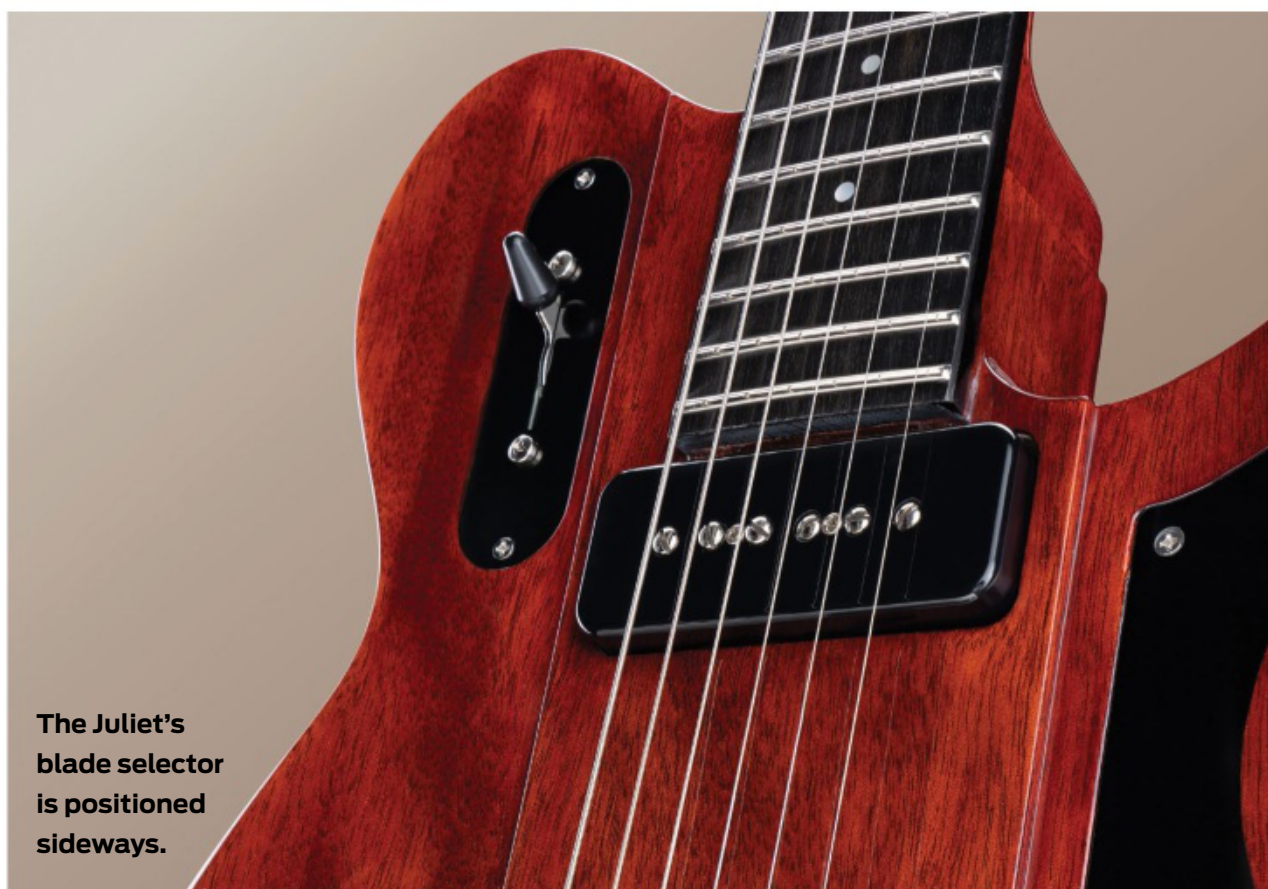


design that originated in the '40s, and which also provides a form of simple “locking” as you wind on the strings.

Appointments remain high-end with a pair of U.K.-made Bare Knuckle Old Guard humbuckers. Constructed along the lines of the classic PAFs, they offer a little more output from both positions, wound to around 9k ohms in the bridge and 7.9k ohms in the neck, with Alnico II magnets in both. These are wired to a three-way blade switch on the upper horn, with individual volume controls and a shared tone. The Bigsby that helps to give this model its full name isn't the cheaper licensed version but a proper U.S.-made B-5 “horseshoe” vibrato, with a smooth action and good tuning stability in partnership with the sturdy bridge and well-cut nut. The only notes I might have are that the Bigsby somewhat gets in the way of on-the-fly access to the control knobs, but such is often the way with that vibrato unit. That, and the “sideways” blade selector switch takes a little getting used to. Otherwise, it's all smooth sailing and an easy ride.



The standard Juliet, like the P-90 version, is offered in Truetone Gloss finishes.



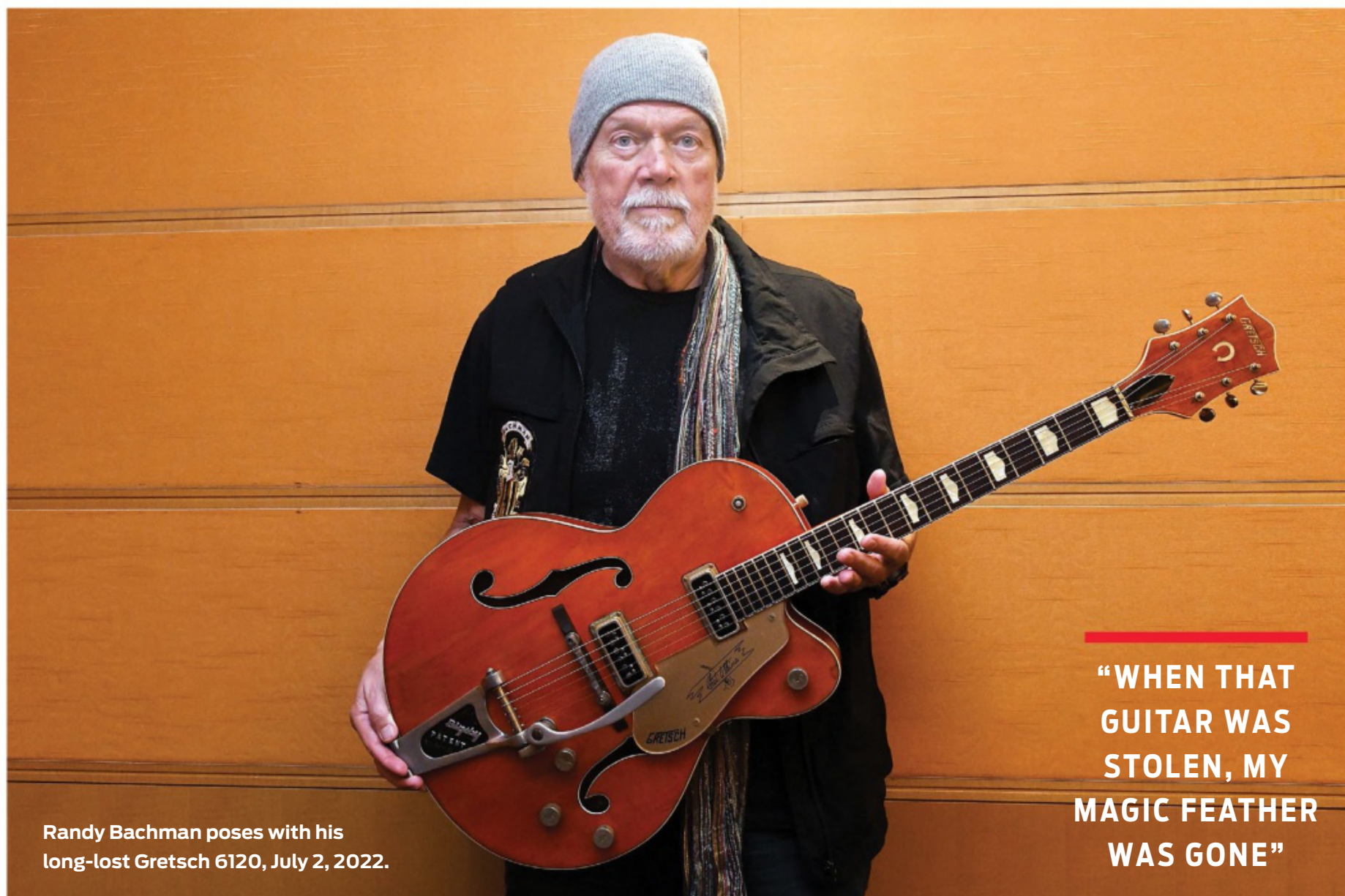
The Juliet's blade selector is positioned sideways.

Tested through a Carr Skylark 1x12 combo, a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini head with 2x12 cab, and a Neural DSP Quad Cortex into headphones, the Juliet/v Bigsby revealed a chameleonic versatility that confidently tackles a wide range of playing styles, all slathered in a delectably PAF-based sonic richness, with loads of harmonic sparkle and great, edgy bite when I hit it hard. Given the combination of features, it's a natural roots-rocker, with a big, warm voice that's laced with good clarity and just a little grit. These characteristics enable it to clean up well when you need something a bit twangier — a “Tele on steroids” voicing further enabled by the 25 ½-inch scale length. But, going the

other way, it's a trenchant heavy rocker, with a lot of snarl in the bridge position and a throaty, singing tone from the neck.

The Juliet/v Bigsby plays great, too, and considering the quality of the design and construction, it strikes me as good value in today's market, considering the escalating prices of upper-tier instruments. Tone-wise, it's bold and characterful with a personality all its own — neither SG nor Firebird as such, but something truly quite different, which I expect will appeal to a lot of players seeking fun and inspiring alternatives. 🎸

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Randy Bachman poses with his long-lost Gretsch 6120, July 2, 2022.

“WHEN THAT GUITAR WAS STOLEN, MY MAGIC FEATHER WAS GONE”

A LEGEND COMES HOME

After a 46-year search, Randy Bachman is reunited with his long-lost 1957 Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins.

BY TIM HORNYAK

RANDY BACHMAN SHUFFLED across a Tokyo concert stage and quietly embraced his long-lost girlfriend for the first time in 46 years. It was a quiet, somewhat awkward moment, and the aging Canadian rocker, perhaps overcome by emotion, said little. He was finally holding his hit-making Gretsch guitar, an instrument he'd once compared to a lover. After decades of fruitless searching, the guitar had been located and would at last be going home.

Bachman's July 1 reunion with his Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins model brought one of the guitar world's greatest mysteries to an end. In 1976, the guitarist was on top of the world. His band Bachman-Turner Overdrive (BTO) had topped the U.S. and Canadian charts the year before with *Not Fragile* and followed it up with the successful jazz-influenced single "Lookin' Out for #1." He built a mansion with

its own recording studio and bowling alley. Then came the gut punch: In a hotel outside Toronto, a thief stole his treasured Gretsch guitar. Bachman was devastated. The Gretsch had made him a star. He looked everywhere for it, enlisting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and searching through guitar and pawnshops across North America for years. But the guitar was gone without a trace.

Bachman grew up in Winnipeg. He played classical violin until one day in 1956, when he saw Elvis Presley gyrating and strumming his Martin D-28 on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. His parents told him it was rock and roll. Bachman borrowed a cousin's guitar and was hooked. "I found out the guitar is the most intimate instrument there is," Bachman says from his home in British Columbia. "It's the only one you hold next to you, with both arms around it, like a person. Your whole body

resonates with what you're playing, and it's very special."

Bachman learned guitar from jazz player Lenny Breau and developed a crush on guitars made by Gretsch. He and fellow rock icon Neil Young would ogle the models in the window of a Winnipeg music store. Bachman saved up his earnings from babysitting and other odd jobs until he was able to buy the perfect Gretsch, a 1957 6120 Chet Atkins hollowbody, in Western Orange. Endorsed by the country music legend, the 6120 has a rosewood fingerboard with hump-style inlays, single-coil DeArmond pickups and a Bigsby tailpiece. It also has a big, punchy tone as heard on Eddie Cochran's 1958 hit "Summertime Blues." Vintage examples regularly sell for more than \$10,000.

"The 6120 represented everything that Gretsch had learned about making guitars

since the introduction of the Electromatic in 1939,” says Aaron Philips, curator of the Fred & Dinah Gretsch Artifacts Collection at Georgia Southern University. “In the 1950s, Gretsch usually produced instruments in batches of 50 or 100, but only 35 of the 1957 6120s were produced, increasing its popularity among collectors.”

In the early '60s, Bachman co-founded the band that became the Guess Who, where he and singer Burton Cummings proved a powerful songwriting team. Their tune “These Eyes” broke into international markets in 1969, and “American Woman” became the first single by a Canadian band to top the U.S. *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. Along with another Guess Who hit, “No Sugar Tonight,” it was recorded with the Gretsch 6120.

By 1970, however, tensions with Cummings led Bachman to quit the group. In 1973, he and his brothers formed BTO and crafted classic-rock staples, including “Let It Ride” and “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet.” Once again, the Chet Atkins powered the band’s most iconic single, “Takin’ Care of Business.”

When the guitar was stolen in 1976, it preceded another period of change for Bachman. Cranking out five albums in three years had taken its toll on BTO, and after they released *Freeways* in 1977, Bachman left. Over the next few years, he released another solo album and formed the short-lived bands Ironhorse and Union. He reportedly lost millions in a bitter divorce and custody battle. It seemed as if he’d lost his mojo along with the guitar. “It was like Dumbo’s magic feather,” Bachman says. “When that guitar was stolen, my magic feather was gone. I had a No. 1 album and single with the Guess Who and BTO, and that has never repeated since 1976.”

In the years that followed, Bachman picked up vintage Gretsch guitars for a few hundred dollars or less. He ended up accumulating 350. Having lost its original templates, Gretsch turned to Bachman when it wanted to relaunch manufacturing. The company studied his collection and eventually purchased it.

But Bachman could never forget the Chet Atkins. Fast-forward to 2021, when he took to YouTube to jam with his son Tal, known for his 1999 hit “She’s So High.” The two were playing live when a viewer sent them a message saying he had found the lost Gretsch. Intrigued, Bachman reached out.

Takeshi and Bachman exchange guitars in Tokyo, July 1, 2022.



The sender, William Long, is an amateur sleuth from White Rock, British Columbia, who had seen online videos of the 6120. A fan of mysteries like the 1971 D.B. Cooper hijacking, Long was intrigued. He enhanced a frame in an old video that showed three distinctive marks on the guitar’s finish. He then scrutinized more than 300 images of similar Gretsches around the world. It took about a week to find a match in a 6120 that a Tokyo guitar shop had sold before 2016. After another week of using search terms translated into Japanese, he spotted the

“THE THING THAT MAKES VINTAGE GUITARS SO ATTRACTIVE IS YOU CAN DREAM THAT THEY WERE ONCE OWNED BY A SUPERSTAR”

instrument being strummed to Johnny Marks’ “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” in a video recorded in a bar in Japan. “I knew instantly that was Randy’s guitar,” Long says. “The woodgrain fingerprint was a perfect match that no other guitar could have.”

The performer of Marks’ song was songwriter and lyricist Takeshi, who has penned songs for J-pop acts like Arashi. He’d found Bachman’s Gretsch in a Tokyo guitar shop eight years earlier. “When I played it and compared it to some 1959 Gretches in the shop, the 1957 just had the perfect fit,” Takeshi says. “The thing that makes vintage guitars so attractive is you can dream that

they were once owned by a superstar. That dream came true.” Takeshi agreed to give Bachman his Gretsch if he could find its “sister” — the same model, unmodified. Bachman rose to the challenge.

The pair finally met onstage at the Canadian Embassy in Japan. The event was held on July 1, Canada Day, but it turned into a virtual Gretsch fest, with anecdotes about the 6120, and a video message from Gretsch president Fred W. Gretsch. Host Marty Friedman, the former Megadeth guitarist, who is now a TV personality in Japan, enthused that Gretsch is “the holy grail of guitars. When I first was able to buy one, I felt like I finally made it in the music business.”

After exchanging the 6120s, as well as a few hugs, Bachman and Takeshi performed “Takin’ Care of Business” and other hits. The older guitarist kept scrutinizing the six-string from his youth, as if he couldn’t believe it was real. Takeshi was all smiles despite giving up a piece of history. “I appreciate this honorable man giving me the opportunity to get it back,” Bachman said. “I’ve had such a worldwide response to this feelgood story. It’s a random act of kindness that a lot of people contributed to.”

Bachman seems to have recovered his mojo. In addition to launching a reunion tour with Cummings, as well as a new album, he and Tal have written a song about the 6120 called “Lost and Found” that will feature in a forthcoming documentary about the guitar. Needless to say, he’s not letting it out of his sight. “I imagine we’re going to have a hit documentary or movie, and a number one record with Bachman and Bachman,” he says. “That’s what I expect, and nothing less!” 🎸



“I WANTED TO
MAKE A RECORD
THAT SOUNDED
BIGGER THAN
ANY BANDS MY
DUDE FRIENDS
WERE IN”
— ALLEGRA
WEINGARTEN

VOLCANO GIRLS

Brooklyn, N.Y. indie rockers Momma bring back molten-hot Big Muff fuzz on *Household Name*.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOPHIE HUR

ETTA FRIEDMAN AND Allegra Weingarten, co-guitarists and vocalists for guitar-heavy indie-rock band Momma, are sitting on a Brooklyn stoop, still buzzing after spending their morning chatting up one of their '90s alt-rock guitar heroes. “When I was a freshman in college, I taught myself how to play the solo from ‘Number One Blind’ by Veruca Salt,” Weingarten says. “I did those hammer-ons, and I was like, ‘Yo, what?’ And it’s crazy, ‘cause we just finished having coffee with Louise Post literally an hour ago.”

The duo surely picked up a thing or two about songcraft from listening to the guitarist’s work with the recently reunited Veruca Salt. But their lingering buzz pales compared to the one that anticipated the July release of *Household Name* (Polyvinyl), Momma’s third long-player.

Sequestered in L.A. during the pandemic, Friedman and Weingarten used the time to sharpen their guitar riffs and interplay, perfect their keen sense of melody, and construct a wall of guitars that rivals '90s touchstones like Smashing Pumpkins’ *Siamese Dream*. Forget dropping *Household Name* songs like “Speeding 72” or “Medicine” on your playlists — the album is its own summertime playlist, a 12-song arc of shimmering and saturated guitars that shares its charms with seminal works by O.G. indie rockers the Breeders and Pavement.

It’s a delicate balance to get the layers just right, but Momma have an ace collaborator in bassist Aron Kobayashi Ritch, a multi-instrumentalist, producer and engineer who has worked on projects by Andrew Bird and Randy Newman. Ritch helped shape

Household Name’s tones and textures, and with his help, that cheeky album title is becoming prophetic.

While the world hums, clangs and beeps around them on this sunny Brooklyn day, Friedman and Weingarten are the calm of their own storm as they talk guitars and their breakout new album.

Everything sounds bigger on *Household Name* — the melodies, the songcraft and especially the guitars. How intentional was that shift?

ETTA FRIEDMAN Super-intentional. This is how we have wanted to sound, and I think we finally got the opportunity and the means to sound big.

ALLEGRA WEINGARTEN With the last record, *Two of Me*, even though we had

distorted guitar riffs and tones, it wasn't like that wall of Big Muff that you get on a record like [*Smashing Pumpkins*] "Cherub Rock." And we really wanted to accomplish that. I feel like we got a lot of it out of our system.

Can you elaborate on that?

WEINGARTEN I think for me, I was honestly jealous of a lot of bands I was listening to that had really massive tones. All the bands I love have huge guitar sounds, and then people come and see Momma and it's just not abrasive enough. So I personally wanted to make a record that sounded bigger than any bands my dude friends were in. I wanted to be like, "I can rock harder."

Nineties indie- and alt-rock figures pretty heavily in your sound.

WEINGARTEN It's just the stuff we liked and listened to growing up. At a pretty young age, I was discovering Nirvana, Pavement, the Breeders...stuff like that. And then into our high school years, everyone liked Pavement. But that was the music that we were into and the music that we bonded over.

You even name-check the Pavement song "Gold Soundz" in "Speeding 72." Was Stephen Malkmus a guitar inspiration for you?

FRIEDMAN Yeah, Malkmus was huge for us.

WEINGARTEN I was really into Rob Crow from Pinback when I started playing electric guitar in high school. I was recreating those clean, angular guitar riffs he was writing. We always cite the '90s as an influence, but a lot of '90s bands were just playing power chords. So guitar-wise we were obsessed with Speedy Ortiz when we started the band. [*Speedy Ortiz guitarist*] Sadie Dupuis was just wildly influential to us.

The guitar hooks on "Lucky" and "Speeding 72" use the Kurt Cobain/Rivers Cuomo trick of having the guitar mirror the vocal melody.

WEINGARTEN What's funny is, on "Speeding," the guitar melody came before the vocal melody, but we liked it so much that we made it the chorus.

FRIEDMAN I feel like we intentionally try hard to avoid copying exactly what the guitars are doing. It has to be the right song and the right melody, and "Speeding" felt like that. I think it can get really boring if people are just consistently singing what the guitar is doing.

Under all the thick guitar tones are these crystalline clean tones. What gear are you using?

WEINGARTEN There were a couple guitars being tossed around. I played my Gibson SG Standard a lot, which has a really beautiful clean tone. Aron has a really cool Gibson Melody Maker he got for 300 bucks that sounds amazing. For the songs "Tall Home" and "Medicine," he stuck a block of foam behind the pickup on a Jazzmaster, which created this really cool plucky sound. For amps, we were in Studio G in Brooklyn, so we were using their Marshalls. There was also a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Princeton Reverb.

FRIEDMAN We also used this cool Kay archtop that Aron has in his studio in L.A. It's electric but has a very nice acoustic tone. We used that under a lot of things, like "Motorbike" and "Lucky."

WEINGARTEN There's a lot of acoustic layering. I feel like that's what gives the heavy parts a really discernible side. It's heavy and it's loud, but you can hear what we're playing 'cause there's a lot of clean and acoustic stuff layered underneath.

What are some of the pedals you used for the recording?

FRIEDMAN Definitely Big Muffs and Tube Screamers. I used EarthQuaker Devices' Grand Orbiter phaser and Plumes distortion pedals.

WEINGARTEN There were a lot of boost pedals for the clean tones. There was this really old Boss chorus pedal [*CE-1*]. The pedalboard for my solo for "Rockstar" was insane. I literally had nothing to do with it. Aron is just like a mad scientist. It was, like, eight pedals, all engaged. I did 27 takes of the solo for no reason. It's such an easy solo, but we were adjusting the pedals for every single take to get just the sound we were looking for.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Household Name

"Speeding 72," "Lucky,"
"Medicine," "Rockstar,"
"Ripoff"



Etta Friedman (left)
and Allegra Weingarten

What guitars and amps go on the road with you?

WEINGARTEN I just play my Gibson SG, which is my favorite guitar of all time, and a Fender Deluxe Reverb. Super simple.

FRIEDMAN I also use a Deluxe Reverb. I have a Fender Duo-Sonic [*HS*] that my brother got me. They're cool because they have a humbucker and a single-coil, so there's a lot of tonal possibilities there.

Considering your accomplishment in creating your wall of guitars, have you sketched tone ideas for the next album?

WEINGARTEN We've been listening to a lot of Blur and Chapterhouse, baggy stuff associated with Manchester bands. We're interested in doing some more ethereal, breakbeat stuff.

FRIEDMAN I don't think we're ever going to abandon rock. It's at our core. But at the same time, there's so much we can play around with. I think *Household Name* shows the beginnings of that. I think we want to lean into it and see what comes of it when we put our own spin on all of those influences.

WEINGARTEN Yeah. And maybe some country songs too.

FRIEDMAN For sure. [*laughs*]. 🎸

A photograph of Eric Johnson sitting on a wooden staircase, smiling and playing a black electric guitar. He is wearing a grey button-down shirt and a colorful patterned guitar strap. The background features a warm, yellow light from a circular porthole and a metal handrail.

“I’VE LEARNED SO MUCH FROM LISTENING TO JONI MITCHELL. I REALIZED THERE WAS A LOT MORE TO LEARN THAN JUST SHREDDING LEADS”

TIP SHEET

Eric Johnson reveals his five guidelines to improve practice, technique and music knowledge.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

ALTHOUGH HE’S RECOGNIZED as one of the most gifted guitarists of his generation, Eric Johnson considers himself a student of his instrument. “Playing guitar is being part of a journey that never ends,” says the artist, whose latest albums, *The Book of Making* and *Yesterday Meets Today* were released in July. “That’s what’s so great about it. You can’t just focus on a destination because there’s so much to discover along the way.”

One might assume Johnson was born with a guitar in his hands, but in fact he began his musical life as a child studying piano. By the time he picked up the guitar at age 11, he had already developed a musical ear. “I took a few months of guitar lessons, which I really enjoyed,” he says, “but then I kind of started teaching myself. I would sit at the piano with the guitar, and as I played notes on the piano, I would find them on the guitar.”

Growing up in a pre-instructional video and pre-internet age, Johnson learned many guitar basics from playing along to records. He credits a childhood friend, Jimmy Shade, with helping him along the way. “Jimmy had a great ear, and he could pick out anything off records,” he says. “He’d teach me stuff and give me lots of tips, and before long I was able to pick stuff up on my own.” Here, Johnson offers five tips learned the hard way.

START SLOW AND GRADUALLY BUILD SPEED

"We all want instant gratification, and this is certainly true when it comes to guitar playing. You hear a piece of music with a lot of fast notes, and of course you want to play it at real-time speed right away. But if you jump in and try to play something fast, you're setting yourself up for trouble. You won't mute strings properly, you're not going to pick correctly, and you're basically going to sound sloppy. You'll just graze over everything without looking at all the incidentals that actually make it a well-groomed piece of music.

"You can always learn to play something faster, and that'll come once you start slow and look at all the elements of the music. Get a total sense of what you're playing before you go full throttle. Get all your fundamentals together. Gradually, you can pick up speed and assimilate all the aspects that will make the piece sound better.

"This is something I've put into my own playing routine. Way back in the day, whenever I would listen to a record, I'd slow it down and listen to what the guitar player was doing. It really helped me kind of see it on the fretboard. That might not be possible these days if you don't have vinyl records, but however you go about it, try to pace yourself and really take your time."

MUTE YOUR STRINGS

"If you're playing with a distorted or a gain-driven sound, it's very easy to activate strings you're not playing. This can result in a messy, sloppy and weird sound, and not in a cool way. To fix this, if you're right-handed, use the side of your right hand to mute strings at the bridge wherever you're not playing. Then you can use your other fingers you're not fretting with to mute the strings on the fretboard so they don't get activated. It sounds complicated, but it's not. It's a kind of hand choreography you can easily learn by being attentive to the fact that you need to silence the strings around where you're playing. It makes everything sound better.

"It took me a while to learn how to navigate my hands to correct this problem. I would hear strings sustaining or getting activated that weren't supposed to, and I thought it sounded bad. I put a little thought and time into it, and before long everything started to sound a lot better. Sometimes you

want a little extra noise and craziness in your sound, but often you want people to hear what you intend for them to hear."

OPEN YOUR EARS TO OTHER MUSIC

"I don't know why people would want to limit themselves to one kind of music in the first place. There's so much out there to enjoy, and a lot of it might surprise you. I grew up exposed to many different styles of music. My dad liked country, show tunes, swing, rock and jazz, so I heard it all. When I started playing guitar, I got into blues.



"If you listen to different types of music, you'll hear many kinds of instruments, and you'll appreciate their beauty. From that, you might take some of that sonic capacity and figure out a way to put it into your guitar playing. It could be intentional, or it can just sort of happen without thinking.

"I've learned so much from listening to Joni Mitchell. She's a great guitarist. Her chord voicings amazed me, and I always loved how she could get in the pocket with her rhythm playing. That stuff influenced me. I realized there was a lot more to learn than just shredding leads. After learning a lot of her

chords, I began to learn how to solo out of their structures. Suddenly, I was playing different kinds of things that were more outside the box of generic rock patterns."

PRACTICE WITH A METRONOME

"This is a really good habit to develop. Using a metronome has been an ongoing part of my practice routine. I have a tendency to want to rush through parts, so it's something I have to watch out for. Playing with metronome helps me keep that impulse in check, and it helps me relax.

"This is especially important for when you play with other people. If you sit in your room and play guitar alone without a metronome, you won't develop an internal clock or a natural rhythm. This can lead to disastrous attempts at playing with other people. You won't be in sync with everybody else.

"So I continue to practice with a metronome. I just did an acoustic show, and I used one for the first month that I was practicing my set. I'd figure out the beats per minute of the songs, and then I would keep practicing with the metronome, over and over. Once I felt like I was playing everything comfortably and in time, I shut the metronome off. I can't stress what an invaluable part of the process it is for me."

STAY A STUDENT OF THE GUITAR

"There's so much to learn with guitar. Stay open to new sounds and ideas, or old sounds and ideas. They're all valid. If you ever think you've learned it all, forget it. You didn't.

"It's great to learn mind-blowing, crazy playing, but it's just as important to learn good rhythm playing. There are guys in Nashville who get hired to play on sessions just because they're dependable rhythm players. They have a way of strumming that just makes a track sing. Some of the people who we think are the greatest players in the world can't strum a guitar like those Nashville guys.

"I try to take it all in. I listen to people like Tommy Emmanuel, Doyle Dykes and Sonny Landreth, just to name a few, and I get so inspired. Some of the sounds they create and the places they go on the guitar, it makes me think, I've got some work to do! But that's why you wake up and pick up the guitar. There's always something new you can do." 🎸



A Blue Lava Touch sits in a Wireless Airflow Charger, which doubles as a stand.

IN THE FLOW

As the visionary behind Lava Music, Lu Zitian is bringing innovative smart guitars to the masses.

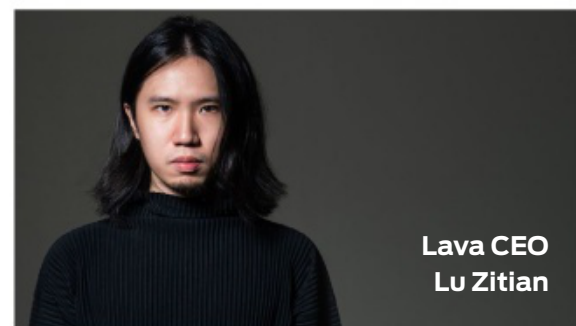
BY JIMMY LESLIE

ONCE IN A blue moon, a design so radically progressive appears that it commands attention, spurs discussion and often leads to imitation. Lava Music's singular acoustic/electric guitar is just such a phenomenon. To offer one mind-expanding element would be a breakthrough; two would be revelatory, and three revolutionary. In Lava's case, the company nails the trifecta by delivering on the guitar itself, the HILava operating system and the Lava+ social media sharing app.

Carbon-fiber guitars have been here for a while, but Lava Music uses a unique unibody design that's just big enough to deliver booming bass, yet small enough to be very travel friendly. The offset oval soundhole and overall high-tech aesthetic nods more toward Apple and Tesla than Martin or Gibson. We've seen onboard resonance-based effects that turn an acoustic into its own amplifier, but this Chinese manufacturer

has integrated a wild and wonderful collection into a top-side digital graphic interface that's packed with awesome apps, including onboard looping and recording, plus a practice program. All that pairs to the Lava+ app for iPhone or Android, allowing the user to store and share songs and riffs with other Lava players from around the globe instantly.

CEO Lu Zitian is the Elon Musk/Steve Jobs/Mark Zuckerberg kind of visionary behind Lava Music's quickly advancing awareness in the market, but he doesn't have their need to attach his face or name to every press release. Zitian prefers that his products get the attention. He founded Lava Music in 2013 and introduced its unibody carbon-fiber design on the first ME (pronounced "me") model in 2017, followed by the ME 2 and Pro. The ME 3, introduced in late 2021, delivered improved 4-Mass carbon fiber designed for deeper bass and longer sustain, and added



Lava CEO
Lu Zitian

**"I HATE TO SEE PEOPLE
LOOKING AT GUITARS
LIKE THEY ARE ALL
BUILT FOR YESTERDAY,
AND INDUSTRY LEADERS
GIVING THEM GUITARS
THAT WERE DESIGNED
50 TO 70 YEARS AGO"**

the smart HiLava system. The new, more affordable Blue Lava Touch delivers most of the same system on the smaller of Lava's two body platforms. It measures 36 inches long (the other is 38 inches), is made of high-pressure laminate (HPL) and has a heel-less bolt-on neck. The aesthetic is more pop art-inspired and less future/cosmic than Lava's carbon-fiber guitars, but it's clearly a cousin that's not from an entirely different planet. Both the ME 3 and the Blue Lava Touch won Editors' Pick awards in our July and August issues, respectively. We were very curious to know about the man behind the plan, in order to better understand the source of such boundless ingenuity, and Zitian was happy to oblige us with an interview.

You studied at the Musicians Institute. What styles did you focus on?

My background is a combination of guitar and film scoring. I was in the G.I.T program at the Musicians Institute, which is really about electric guitar improvising. I'm in love with rock, blues and hip-hop, but it's interesting that everyone who finished M.I. does so with some kind of jazz or fusion skills, and I'm a bit like that too. I have too many favorite players to name them all, but I love the three Kings, Jeff Beck, Joe Satriani, Tommy Emmanuel and Scott Henderson.

What's your personal guitar story?

I've played electric guitars for most of my life. I loved Satriani when I was a kid, so later when I went to college I bought an Ibanez JS1000. That was my first dream guitar. Then I got a bunch of Les Pauls. I also like collecting unique handmade acoustic guitars from individual luthiers. I have some not for the sound but because of the concept, craftsmanship or soul behind it.

What was your vision for Lava Music?

I love guitars and the music industry, but I see a lack of innovation. I hate to see people looking at guitars like they are all built for yesterday, and industry leaders responding to their expectation by giving them guitars that were designed 50 to 70 years ago. I love vintage, but we need to innovate. I believe that music is about creating the future, and instruments are about inspiring people to create. So our mission is about building a world where anyone can be inspired to create.



Did you have mentor or hero in the world of instrument manufacturing?

Our friends at Plek gave us advice along the way. And building the Lava ME 3 guitar required lots of robotics, so we learned a lot from Apple as well.

What led you to the unibody carbon-fiber design?

My original idea was to create an acoustic guitar machined from a whole block of wood or any wood-like material. The concept was a combination of minimizing vibrational energy loss and creating a perfect art form, if you will. We did actually make something out of a giant composited wood block, but neither the strength nor the sound really worked at all. Almost at the same time, I received an email from a material-science student who said that he wanted to join us. I found out that he had been working on exactly the right technology we needed. We spent the next two years working with a huge team to create the first-ever injection-molded carbon-fiber guitar, the Lava ME.

How did you decide on the size, shape and unique soundhole ?

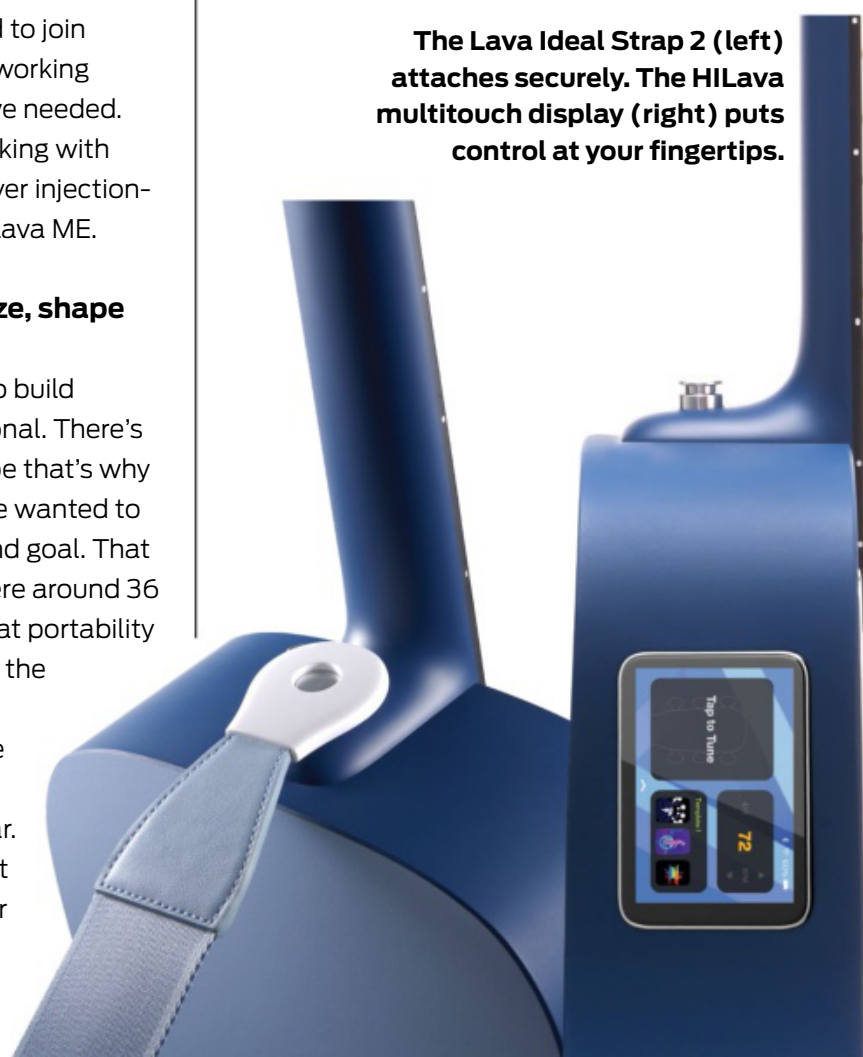
It came from our founding idea to build something easy, light and functional. There's also a sense of personality. Maybe that's why we called it Lava ME. [laughs] We wanted to achieve a weight goal and a sound goal. That focused our designs to somewhere around 36 to 38 inches, which gives you great portability and a deep enough bass. Putting the soundhole on one side frees up about 30 percent vibration space on the top, which maximizes the output of this smaller-body guitar. And the soundhole really couldn't be anywhere else. Put it the other

way around and your right hand might stick in it while strumming. Its shape follows the straighter curve of the upper body, so to us it shouldn't be any other shape either.

How did you develop such a precise way to machine and manufacture?

We didn't do it alone. When we showed the project to the machine makers, they were all very interested but ended up rejecting it. What we wanted to do seemed simply too difficult, and no one had ever done it before. Luckily, we convinced one of the largest material suppliers in Asia to help us, and they were willing to send their top engineers and scientists. At the very beginning of this project there were nearly a hundred people, internal and external, working on it.

The Lava Ideal Strap 2 (left) attaches securely. The HiLava multitouch display (right) puts control at your fingertips.



How did you wind up with the HILava [Human Interface] system?

Most of our designs evolve from what we learn from our customers. The Lava ME 2 was successful, and people love its FreeBoost [onboard actuator-generated effects] feature. People love to use effects without plugging in the guitar, and it does create unique sounds. When we tried to enhance the feature, giving more options of effects or loops, it immediately became a machine-like device. It felt complicated. It just didn't work. We wanted an easy but powerful and fun customer experience. We believed the combination of a multitouch display and a custom-designed operating system to be the ultimate solution. So we then spent the next three years of our lives working on that.

Had you ever seen a smartphone style design onboard any other guitars?

No. I don't see it as a smartphone-style design onboard though. Look at the control panel of most old acoustic-electric guitars. All you really need to replace it is a graphic interface and a physical volume wheel. You can record tracks of ideas anywhere, anytime. You can play with hundreds of effects. You can jam with your friends and the whole community. The system on the Lava ME 3 is always getting updated and more fun to play. Give it some time. I don't see why anyone wouldn't want one.

How did you decide on the core features and apps?

There are lots of features that we would like to create for our customers, as you can imagine, and we definitely learn a lot from interacting with our users.

What were the greatest challenges in getting it to work well?

It's the sense of making the interaction that feels right on the guitar, and creating the features that work better on the guitar than any existing solutions in any other way. I'll give you an example: let's say that you want to create a short loop piece and maybe share it with your Facebook friends. There are no smoother ways than doing it on the Lava ME 3. You could plug into a laptop and use Logic to record a file. Then you'd have to export and upload it. But by the time you've opened your Logic file, I've already finished and gone.



A Blue Lava Touch (left) and Lava ME 3 (right)

“PUTTING THE SOUNDHOLE ON ONE SIDE FREES UP ABOUT 30 PERCENT VIBRATION SPACE ON THE TOP, WHICH MAXIMIZES THE OUTPUT OF THIS SMALLER-BODY GUITAR”

What made you decide to add the social element as well?

Music to me is eventually about sharing and connecting with others. Wouldn't it be great if I could play with others or immediately share a work I just created on my guitar?

Who is your target audience?

It seems that the Lava ME 3 users love to create and share. We also believe that if we release more affordable as well as more advanced versions, we will be able to reach a wider range of customers.

What made you decide to quickly follow up the ME 3 with an HPL model, the Blue Lava Touch?

Our mission is to inspire everyone to create. That means we need to make our products more affordable and reach out to a wider audience. The HPL is a wonderful material to get people started. You don't have to worry about storing it like you do wooden guitars. You get tools like a tuner, metronome, practice features and all these colorful effects, and you can also get inspiration from the whole community. I truly believe getting all that for \$699 makes it perhaps the best guitar for all entry-level players.

How will you address the challenge of keeping elements such as software and batteries up to date so that the technology remains cutting edge?

I believe that if we keep our heads down and work, and keep listening and caring about our users, we will be able to keep making something wonderful and inspirational for people. Let's look forward to that future. 🎸



LEAVE YOUR AMP AT HOME

For the first time ever, the authentic sound and feel of a real tube amp driving a perfectly-matched speaker cabinet in a great-sounding room is available in a pedal-sized enclosure. With no menus to dive through, IR-based speaker cabinets and mono or true stereo operation, your path to getting killer tones when going direct just took a major shortcut.

strymon



Vince Gill performs at PlayStation Theater in New York City, October 6, 2015.

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

With 22 Grammys, 20 studio albums and more than 40 charting singles, Vince Gill has had one hell of a career. Here are five songs he credits for its success.

BY MARK MC STEA

VINCE GILL IS a country music legend, racking up 22 Grammys and selling more than 26 million albums. Although part of Nashville's ultimate power couple, with his wife Amy Grant, Gill is one of the friendliest and most unassuming stars one could meet. Gifted with a distinctive voice, possessing the power to move even the hardest of hearts to tears, he is also an incredible guitarist who can play in any style. Beyond his own extensive catalog, he's contributed to more than a thousand recordings by other artists.

"I always aspired to be the guy who gets to play on other people's records," he tells *Guitar Player*. "I never had a hairbrush in my

hand in front of the mirror pretending to be Elvis; I always had my head down studying the harmonies and the guitar parts on records. I'm very lucky to have a solo career and to play on so many records. Even when my record company used to ask me to cut back on the sessions for other artists, I refused. To me, it's a harder job to bring something meaningful to someone else's record than it is to create your own music."

On top of his amazing recording career, Gill has been a member of the Eagles since 2017. It's a dream gig for the guitarist, who was a fan of both the Eagles and Joe Walsh long before he ever found success himself.

When Gill joined the Eagles, they initially planned to play a handful of live dates, but the response to the shows reinvigorated the band's enthusiasm, and they've continued to tour ever since, interrupted only by the pandemic. As for whether he's now a permanent member of the band, Gill replies, "So they tell me!"

For him, it's all about the legacy of the Eagles' songbook, "Those songs have been so powerful for nearly 50 years," he says. "I just feel that my role is to help keep this great collection of songs going. That's been the great lesson for me, that what creates longevity is great songs. There are a couple of

MICHAEL LOCCISANO/GETTY IMAGES

real highlights for me every night. I love to play ‘Desperado’, which I’ve loved all my life, and to get to play power chords for Joe on ‘Rocky Mountain Way.’ I played that song when I was about 14 years old in a garage band. [laughs] Actually, I look forward to every song.”

Given Gill’s years of solo success, it is interesting to ponder the different challenges the role of band member presents to him. “I’m perfectly happy where I’m not the main focus, but I’m also very comfortable to be the frontman in my own shows,” he reveals. “I’ve done both roles for so long now that they both feel real natural to me. The coolest thing Don Henley said about me is when he was asked why they picked a country guy. He said, ‘Because he knows how to be in a band.’”

As for the prospect of a new Eagles studio album? “I would be the most wrong guy to ask,” he says with a laugh. “That’s what I love about getting to do this: I don’t have to decide anything. I would suspect not, from the way that things have unfolded, but I don’t know if it would be appropriate in some ways.”

Gill’s love of the guitar is reflected in his home studio, which resembles a top-shelf music store. There are racks of vintage Martins, and cabinets with drawers containing old Strats, Teles and Les Pauls. “I’m sure I’ve

“EVERYONE FORGETS THAT THE FIRST GREAT LEAD GUITAR PLAYER IN COUNTRY WAS A WOMAN”

got a couple of hundred guitars, but I don’t have a boat or multiple houses or cars. I wouldn’t say it’s out of control, but it’s borderline. Having said that, I see myself as a painter with musical instruments, and each guitar gives me a different color for my painting. I don’t buy them and sell them to make money; I keep pretty much everything. I guess it’s a hobby that makes a lot of sense.”

Many of those guitars were previously housed in the Soundcheck storage complex in Nashville, but after the 2010 flood that saw many artists lose priceless instruments, Gill decided to keep everything at home. “I live high up a hill; I think I’m pretty flood-proof now — unless Noah comes back. If the ark goes by, it won’t matter anyway.”



Performing at Summerfest, Milwaukee, July 10, 1995

As far as Gill’s solo work is concerned, there are a number of projects in hand to follow on from 2019’s *Okie*. “I’ve almost finished an album that I did with Paul Franklin, the great steel-guitar player, called *Bakersfield*, where we play half Buck Owens songs and half Merle Haggard songs,” he reveals. “I’ve been working on some Ray Price songs, and I’ve also written a bunch of new songs. I think I’ll probably make two or three records in the not-too-distant future.”

Given his ample guitar chops, Gill is often asked whether he’d ever make an all-instrumental album. “I’m really a songwriter, and I really love to create songs,” he offers. “Having said that, if I were to do an instrumental album, I’d want it to reflect my chameleon-like approach to the guitar — maybe have some smooth jazz, bluegrass, blues, some rock or whatever. Actually, I’ve got a studio in my house and a lot of time on my hands these days, so maybe I might.”

After more than 40 years in the business, Gill takes nothing for granted. “Every time I play, I feel like it might be the last time,” he says. “I never phone it in. I play the best that I possibly can, every single time. It’s so deep that it’s as simple as taking a breath. I was playing the guitar this morning, and when I put it down, I thought, When people ask who’s your best friend, I’d say the guitar is. It’s always been there when I needed it, and it’s never let me down.”

When it came to picking five songs to represent such a vast body of work, Gill was candid about his rationale. “I think in a couple of days’ time they might be completely different,” he says. “But I tried to go with songs that had a real significance for me, rather than songs that were all about the guitar solos, because I think there is more to me than just being a guitar player.”

“LIZA JANE” *POCKETFUL OF GOLD* (1991)

“I guess there’s a little of the J.J. Cale feel about this song — maybe a touch of Eric Clapton’s ‘Lay Down Sally’ about it. As with most solos, the one on here was the result of editing myself and trying to hone down what I was playing to get something that really fit the song. I chose this track because I think it epitomizes the biggest perception about the way that I play, with chicken picking and the bends. I think it is possibly the most identifiable solo that I’ve ever played. Lyrically, it’s certainly not *War and Peace* [laughs], but there are certain songs where their purpose is a vehicle to play on, and the whole idea was to create something for me to play guitar on.

“It’s interesting in country music that there aren’t a ton of guitar gods, like in rock and blues. I knew that going in, that my chances of having a successful career as a country artist would be more for having my songs and singing than as a guitar player. The guitar player in me got a little fired up for this one. Country has always been loyal to the guitar, even in its very earliest days, way back to Mother Maybelle Carter and Jimmie Rodgers. Everyone forgets that the first great lead guitar player in country was a woman.

“I’ve gotten to play this song live with some great players, like Albert Lee and Danny Gatton, and those are some special moments. I played my white Telecaster on this one, which has been my main Tele for my whole career. I found it in 1978 for \$450. It was the first Fender that I ever bought, and the best. It was obviously meant to be.”

“LOOK AT US” *POCKETFUL OF GOLD* (1991)

“I chose this because of the steel-guitar solo by John Hughey. He was a really iconic

steel-guitar player. He played in my band for about 15 years. He played on all the Conway Twitty country records — a legendary steel-guitar player. I always wanted to have a musician who was part of the identity of the music I make, like Don Rich with Buck Owens, and John was that for me in a really big way. That solo is one that steel guitarists look to as one of the greatest ever played.

“The interesting thing about this song is that when I first came up with the idea and the lyrics, it was about a couple who separate, so it wasn’t a celebration of an enduring relationship. Me being me, it was going to be a breakup song. [laughs] The guy I wrote it with, Max Barnes, said to me, ‘You’re going the wrong way with it.’ [laughs] The change in the direction of the song was really the key to its popularity. I’ve received so many thousands of videos and pictures of couples who’ve been together for years, saying how much this song means to them. I’m glad I was wise enough to take Max’s advice.”

“GO REST HIGH ON THAT MOUNTAIN” WHEN LOVE FINDS YOU (1994)

“I think hands down, if somebody is going to remember a song of mine from my career — the one that had the biggest impact — it would be this one. I think that is largely in part because of the sentiment behind it. I wrote it after the death of my brother, but nobody knew at the time that it was going to become a mainstay funeral song like ‘Amazing Grace.’ The beauty is that it wasn’t even a big hit record; it was a song that provided an awful lot of comfort to people in their hardest times, and to me that matters way more than a hit record. It cuts deeper.

“I love the playing on this song. The music is so haunting. Stuart Duncan’s fiddle solo is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard. Patti Loveless and Ricky Skaggs sing harmonies, and there are so many elements of the entirety of my life wrapped up in this song. It sounds like a sad song; I guess it is sad, but for me the real beauty of it is that, although it is about despair, the essence of hope is in there. I took a little inspiration from some of my heroes for the intro and the

fills — people like Mark Knopfler, who taught me about playing with the meat of my fingers instead of a pick.”

“WHENEVER YOU COME AROUND” WHEN LOVE FINDS YOU (1994)

“When I look through my catalog of songs, I think this might be my favorite one to play and sing. This song takes me back to a time that was impactful and changed my life. I love the melody and also the angst in the lyrics. I wrote it after I met my wife, Amy, for the first time, and I thought, I’ve met this beautiful human being; I’m really taken by her, but nothing’s going to happen. The sense of melancholy was really powerful for me when I wrote it. I’m an emotional and romantic guy; I love the blue side of music and melancholy. It’s all going to come out in my music and lyrics. I’m not crazy about happy songs, I never have been, and I never will be. I want to hear the angst and the emotion.

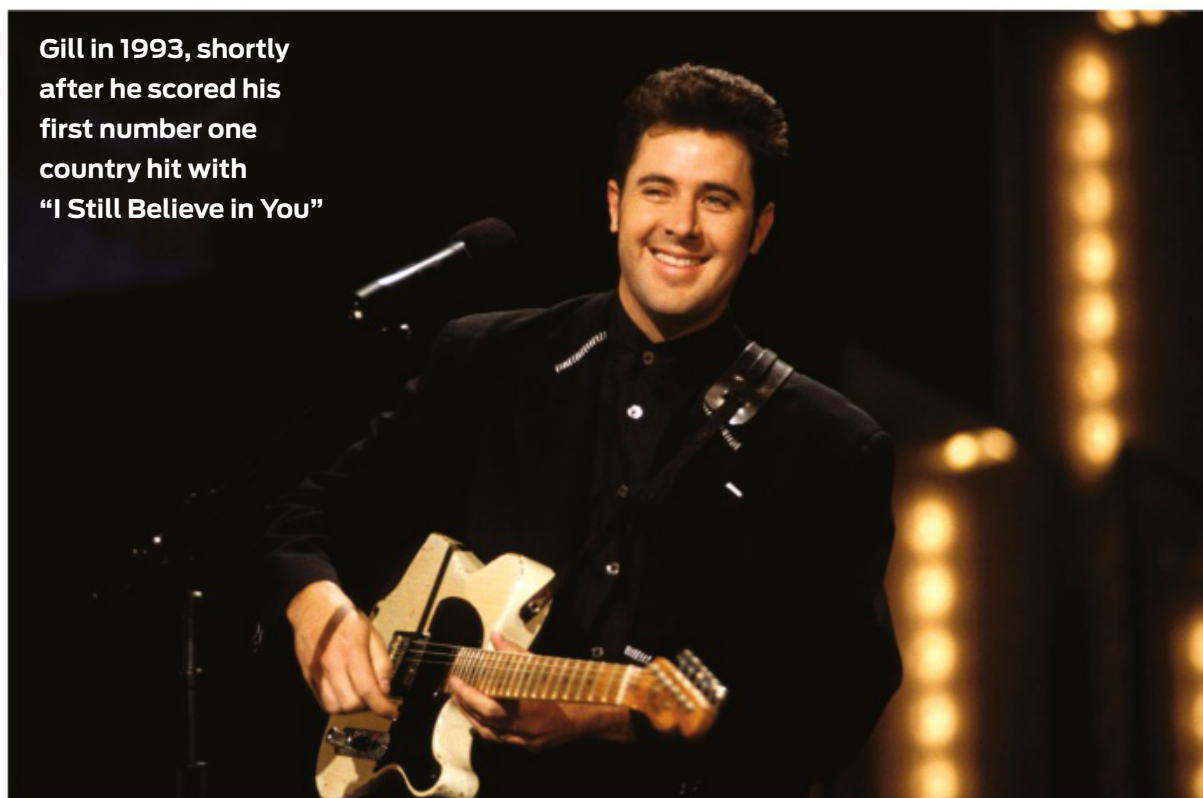
“I used a Strat on this one, again just using the meat of my fingers to get the tone. A lot of

people have preconceptions of what I am, but I’m a little bit of a chameleon. I can take a Les Paul and fire it up and do what those things do, or play a Strat or a Tele, and I think it’s all down to the ability to hear the differences and the subtleties of those instruments. I always reach for a guitar that serves the song best when I’m deciding what to play.”

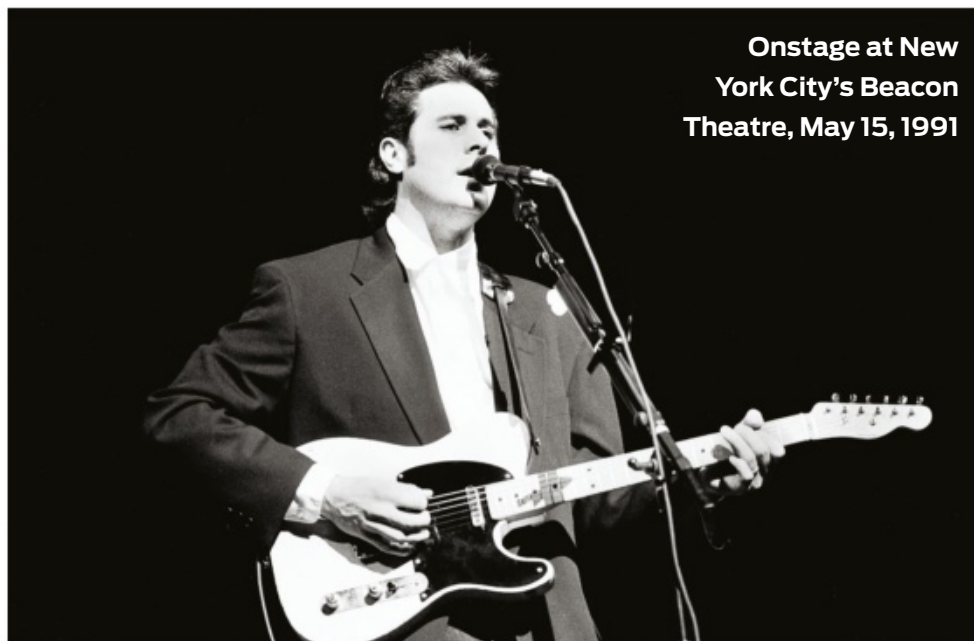
“YOUNG MAN’S TOWN” NEXT BIG THING (2003)

“I chose this song because I think it might be one of the best songs lyrically that I’ve ever written. The sentiment of that song, the passage of time — I think it was the first time that I ever really channeled Merle Haggard in a song that I was really proud of, because he’s always been my favorite. I’ve written other songs that sound a little Haggardy, that were close but not quite there, but this one hit the nail for me. I remember when I started playing with the Eagles, this is the song that Don Henley told me was his favorite song that I’d ever done, which really meant a lot to me.

“For the solo, I tried to keep the melody at the forefront. I’ve always believed that solo playing should not stray away completely from the melody of the song. On slower songs in particular, I always try to dance around the melody. My mindset has always been to think, If you had to sing this solo, what would you sing?, and then I try to play that. The reverse is also true actually, that I will sometimes try to sing what I might play. Melody doesn’t seem to be as common in today’s music. I’ve always wanted to be moved by music rather than impressed by it.”

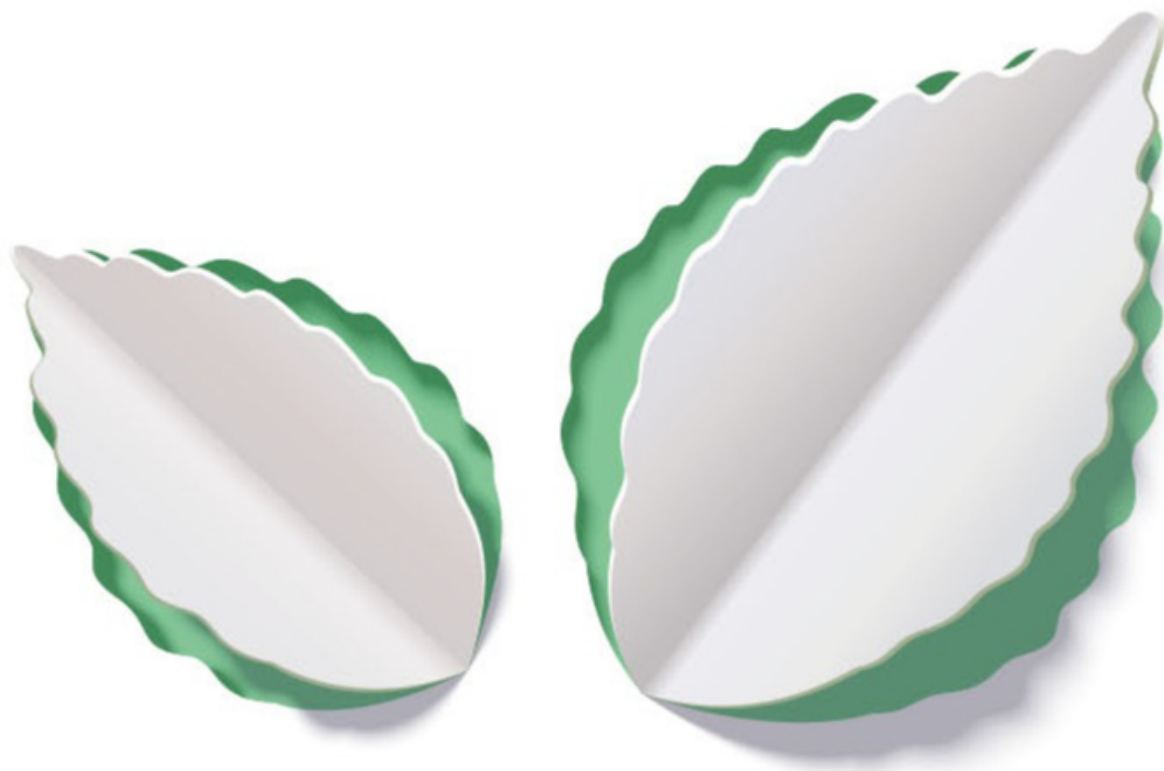


Gill in 1993, shortly after he scored his first number one country hit with “I Still Believe in You”



Onstage at New York City's Beacon Theatre, May 15, 1991

BETH GWINN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (1993); GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES (1991)



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Royal Relic

Once the crown jewel of Teisco Del Ray's budget lineup, this circa 1966 ET-460 commands a comparative king's ransom on the vintage market.

IF YOU CAME of guitar-playing age in the 1960s and couldn't afford a Gibson or Fender, chances are one of the offerings from the Japanese company Teisco captured your attention — and your budget. In fact, if you came of guitar-playing age in the '70s, there's a strong possibility that you started on a used Teisco, a guitar that would have been cheap enough for your parents to write off if your interest in guitar failed to take hold. Despite their budget prices, many of Teisco's offerings were entirely playable and sounded cool, too. Take the circa-1966 Teisco Del Ray ET-460 featured here. It had enough body points, pickups and switches to excite any starry-eyed adolescent. It's also among Teisco's guitars that have attracted something of a cult following in recent years, and for good reason, as we shall see.

Teisco's origins date back to 1946, when renowned Spanish and Hawaiian guitarist Atsuo Kaneko and engineer Doryu Matsuda formed Aoi Onpa Kenkyujo in Tokyo in 1946. The company name transitioned to Nippon Onpa Kogyo Co. Ltd. before changing to Teisco String Instrument Corporation in 1961. The Teisco name itself had appeared on instruments since 1948, and on the rudimentary solid-body guitars the company was manufacturing as early as 1954. Teisco made in-roads in the North American market starting in 1961. Although some of these guitars appear to have been issued with the brand's name, it seems that most initial offerings were rebranded as Kent, Kingston, Norma, Encore, Duke and occasionally Kay and Silvertone.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- > Bolt-on neck with rosewood (or similar) fingerboard
- > Unique double-horned "shark's-fin" styling
- > Four single-coil pickups
- > Individual on/off switches and three-way tone switch
- > Striped aluminum pickguard



With its angular body and striped aluminum pickguard, the ET-460 has distinctive looks to match its characterful sound.



Teisco's big breakthrough came when it secured major distribution in North America via Weiss Musical Instruments in Chicago. WMI renamed the brand Teisco Del Rey — “of the king” — giving the guitars a name that was both regal and surfy sounding, although many of these guitars (including the one shown here) were still branded simply Teisco. By any name, they sold in significant numbers to young aspiring players, thanks to their flashy looks and very affordable prices. While Fender's price list of the time shows the Stratocaster selling for \$289 and the top-of-the-heap Jaguar going for a whopping \$379 (both in standard finish, with tremolo), Teisco had a raft of models — including a deluxe three-pickup solidbody, a slimline semi and a bass — priced at \$39.97 each, roughly one-tenth the cost of a Jaguar.

The ET-460 (also seen with the model names Super Deluxe and K4-L) would soon be top of the heap, selling for \$59 to \$79, depending on the seller and the era. The model represented Teisco's effort to go all out and do Fender one better — well, two if you're counting pickups. As seen on the featured guitar, the ET-460 carried four of Teisco's unique single-coil pickups, with metal shields around the coils and distinctive square pole pieces. It has individual on-off switches for each pickup, a three-way tone selector that goes from bassy to bright, and master rotary volume and tone controls. At least some of the guitars were wired so that the two different pairs of pickups nearer the

neck and the bridge worked in unison as humbuckers when selected together.

The guitar's simple vibrato is some amalgam of a Bigsby and Fender's Jaguar/Jazzmaster tremolo, with a bridge that looks much like those on the latter models. Also distinctive is the ET-460's aluminum pickguard, with alternating stripes of gloss and buffed-satin finish, an appointment that featured on many guitars of the 1965-'69 era, when this model was made.

Although the luscious antique-white finish of the featured ET-460 hides any hint to its timber, the bodies of sunburst ET-460s reveal a wood that can occasionally appear to be alder or mahogany but is most likely one of the more generic species used in many budget Japanese guitars of the era. The bolt-on necks of some were carved from planks made with several thin laminates of wood, although some examples had a three-piece maple neck. Unlike some Teisco

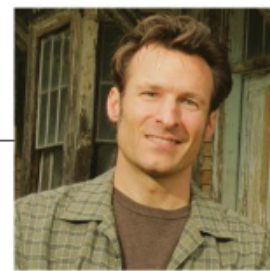
DAVID LINDLEY OWNS AND PLAYS AN ET-460, AS DOES HIS BROTHER IN SLIDE, RY CODDER

models, the ET-460 had a truss rod, with adjustment accessed at the body end, and many had a zero fret. The fingerboards were rosewood, by appearance, but could be something else.

Alongside the guitars' gizmo-fied electronics, the overall styling makes them strangely lustworthy in the eyes of many retro-minded players. Often dubbed the “shark's-fin models” for obvious reasons, the pointy body horns trace lines that seem to be uniquely shared by Italian and Japanese designs of the era. They also sport a distinctive four-plus-two headstock that enables a nearly straight string pull from nut to tuner posts.

Sound-wise, the ET-460 is perhaps best described as “funky yet characterful.” It can lean toward thin and bright when played clean, depending on pickup and tone settings, but the pickups on earlier examples can be

BY DAVE HUNTER



fairly hot for single-coils and will sound effectively gnarly and edgy with a good overdrive pedal applied, or into a cranked amp going at it old-school.

Given their budget origins, you'd expect pro sightings to be rather few and far between, but a surprising number of notable guitarists have taken an ET-460 or one of its siblings in hand. David Lindley owns and plays several Teisco models, including an ET-460, as does his brother in slide, Ry Cooder. Mark Knopfler owns at least a pair of fancy Spectrum 5s, which were used in the studio on “True Love Will Never Fade” and “Postcards From Paraguay.” A young Edward Van Halen found his first electric guitar in an earlier Spectrum 5 model, and during his session days studio ace Glen Campbell often played a Teisco T-60. Fans of the brand sometimes point to James Iha of Smashing Pumpkins using an ET-460 in the video for “Rocket,” but the similarly styled guitar is actually the two-pickup ET-230.

Japanese instrument maker Kawai bought Teisco in 1967 and made changes to the model names, but the ET-460/Super Deluxe remained in the U.S. catalog until around 1970, about the time the brand name was discontinued on guitars shipped to this country. Long the \$50 pawnshop specials, fancier Teiscos like this ET-460 and the Spectrum 5 are fetching prices into the four figures these days, and it's hard to deny the major dose of cool they bring with them for the player who digs the styling of the era. ■

BY JIM CAMPILONGO



Soul Salvation

In a world of noise, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* is balm for the ears.

THIS IS A strange way to start a column about noteworthy records, but, kind readers, it's harder and harder for me to listen to music. Aside from my senses being assaulted when I leave my New York City apartment (is the national bird the jackhammer?), music is everywhere. Inescapable. It's in the Uber, it's at the supermarket, it's at the hardware store, it's at the bank... A few months back, I was running errands and realized I had heard "Jessie's Girl" three times and "Hotel California" twice at four different locations. Huh? Are there only 10 songs in the world? One might think when I return home I'd put on something personal to cleanse the palate, but instead I receive four or five YouTube music links from my inspired, loving friends and see dozens of silenced music performances on my Instagram and Facebook feed. Instead of wanting to explore new ideas and new music, I withdraw. I want to evacuate from any stimuli whatsoever. Many days I actually force myself to play a record, and 100 percent of the time I'm so glad I did! On one of those days, I put on Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, and it brought me back to a time when music was not taken for granted. It

has real instruments, it's cutting edge, and completely and utterly unique, inspired, humble, soft and beautiful. It makes me want to move...and it's trying to change the world.

Marvin Gaye's 11th solo record, *What's Going On* was released on the Motown label in 1971. This LP was conceived as a concept record, and it remains timeless, yet undeniably ahead of its time. *What's Going On* balances that



problematic line of addressing issues like the environment, inequality, needless war and hopelessness, while urging compassion for each other to remedy the overwhelming chaos of the early '70s. All the while, it's cemented in a "pop" presentation that's grooving and infectiously accessible.

Influenced by the melodic ideas of Miles Davis, Marvin wanted to incorporate the

musicality of a jazz mentality and jazz harmony. This amazing LP plays like a "soul opera," where the tracks segue from one to another masterfully. Marvin preaches to us the Gospel of Marvin Gaye while singing beautifully over cascades of harmony, with his heart on his sleeve.

The record opens with the title track and the haunting alto sax line played by Eli Fontaine, who conceived the part while warming up to the song.

IF YOU ARE TRYING TO FIND SOME BEAUTIFUL, UNCORRUPTED MUSIC THAT CAN UNTHAW YOUR SENSES, WHAT'S GOING ON IS SHELTER FROM THE STORM

To my ears, this is one of the top 10 perfect moments in pop music history, and I assume you've heard it just the same way I do. It's magic. Next up is "What's Happening Brother," about a soldier returning from war and trying to assimilate into a culture that remains difficult and unchanged. This song creates a harmonic journey that descends and ascends with the narrative. "Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)" has shades of Mr. Gaye's tour de force, "Trouble Man," where Marvin's voice is reminiscent of a Miles Davis trumpet performance. "Save the Children" states, "When I look at the world, it fills me with sorrow," and on "God is Love," he professes his Christian ideals — "all He asks of us is we give each other love" — that, in my opinion, any spiritual adherent

or atheist could successfully live by. Every track is significant, including "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," "Right On" and "Wholy Holy." But my personal fave, "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)," combines the infectious style of Curtis Mayfield with a jazz mentality that knocks me out every time I hear it. It's the perfect marriage of message and groove.

What's Going On is filled with hope and never feels naïve or arrogantly preachy. It's a cry for help. To this day I can't fathom how Marvin Gaye and company pulled this feat off over 50 years ago. His solution to the world's problems? We need to care about each other.

I was hesitant to start this column like an old guy yelling "Get off my lawn, you young whippersnappers!" But if you're struggling and assaulted by an onslaught of sound, you're not alone. If you are trying to find some beautiful, uncorrupted music that can unthaw your senses, *What's Going On* is shelter from the storm. 🎧

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



BY TERRY CARLETON



All That Glitters

It's not gold, but the finish on this 1967 Tele-Star guitar sparkles from its headstock all the way to its electronics cavity.

SPARKLE FINISHES ARE rather commonplace on guitars today, but they were less so in the 1960s, seen mostly on some models from Danelectro, Gretsch and EKO. To that group we can add Tele-Star, which offered guitars in a range of sparkly finishes, from gold to teal. Whatever the overall color scheme, their sparkles were always multicolored, and as such glimmered like one of Liza Minelli's dresses in *Cabaret*! While Tele-Star was an independent Japanese manufacturer in the mid '60s, later models were made by the highly respected Japanese guitar maker Kawai and played better as a result. The 1967-to-1970 sparkle-finished 5000 series guitars, like the two-pickup model shown here, are the ones the collectors chase.

WEIRDO FACTOR

The weirdness pretty much starts and ends with the outspoken finish, which really stands out on my example due to the clear pickguard. The original tortoiseshell plate was cracked, and when I opened it up to make a repair I noticed that the sparkle finish extended to the electronics cavity, which gave me the idea to replace the plate with clear Plexiglas. The guitar was also missing knobs and a trem bar, so I replaced them with Gibson knobs and a Fender trem bar.

PLAYABILITY AND SOUND

This Tele-Star actually plays quite well as a

rhythm instrument. The action is super low, the frets have a nice rounded smooth profile, and the 21-fret neck is quite slender. With that said, it's rather limited for lead work. Due to the absence of a headstock angle, the strings aren't under a lot of tension. If it weren't for the towel-rack string retainer, there would be nothing holding the strings down onto the fretboard. As such, there's not much sustain, and bending notes is a huge challenge, although stringing it with .009s helped.

But as a rhythm guitar, the Tele-Star rules. Clean-tone funk-style playing is very *chick-y* and awesome, and when strummed with open chords, the guitar spits out snarky, nasally, midrange garage-rock tone. Add a dirt box and the Tele-Star has a unique sound, although it's not particularly outspoken or screechy in the cool way some of these Japanese builds tend to be. The neck on this example is a "propeller wood" multilaminate, with about 25 plys. It's still straight as an arrow, but if it were to stray, a truss-rod adjustment at the butt end of the neck would make fixing it easy.

As for the electronics, the three-way toggle lets you choose either pickup or both, and there are global tone and volume knobs. The two rocker switches are an EQ bypass and a global kill switch. The tremolo on my example is frozen. I opened it up to see if it was missing springs or something, but it's not. Contrary to expectations, pushing down on the bar causes the pitch to rise about a semitone.

VALUE

These guitars sold new for about \$50 in 1967. I paid \$150 for mine about 20 years ago, and examples are still going for well under a grand.

WHY IT RULES

It's dead sexy, super lightweight and sounds cool for most rhythm applications. Best of all, you can bag one relatively cheap. 🎸

Got a whack job? Feel free to get in touch with me at rtcarleton@gmail.com. Who knows? Maybe I'll write about it.







Southern Charm

With fuzz guitars and lap steel,
Rebecca and Megan Lovell cast a spell
on *Blood Harmony*, Larkin Poe's new album
of blues-infused rock and roll.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON STOLTZFUS

THERE ARE EARLY wake-up calls, and then there are mornings you're too jet lagged to sleep a wink, anyway. Add an airline losing your guitars and you have the first day of Larkin Poe's European tour in advance of their new, sixth album, *Blood Harmony* (Tricki-Woo).

After landing in Hamburg, Germany, from a transatlantic flight, following a run of gigs in Canada, sisters Rebecca and Megan Lovell discovered their guitars didn't arrive with them. They made an attempt to sleep but returned to the airport early in the morning and spent the next three hours "shaking the airport down from tip to tail," Rebecca says, so they could play on German TV before the gig on the evening of our interview.

Fortunately — and perhaps ingeniously — the Lovells knew their gear was somewhere in the airport because the electronic trackers they stuck inside their guitar cases led them there. Finally, past an empty terminal, they found a warehouse full of luggage, and around another wall, their lost guitars.

"We actually did a social media post yesterday to have some backups," Rebecca says. "And — god bless all of the incredible supportive people in our network — we had a lap steel and some guitars lined up if we didn't get our things back."

As anyone who has followed Larkin Poe knows, the Lovells bring that same determination to creating their blues-heavy southern rock, producing their albums and releasing them on their own label. But after the meticulously crafted songs on 2020's *Self Made Man*, they were determined to make *Blood Harmony* sound like their live performances.

The band enlisted Rebecca's husband, Tyler Bryant, on loan from his band the Shakedown, to co-produce. Out went the gratuitous overdubs, and in came a back-to-basics approach as they recorded live with their touring band in a room. As the Lovells rested for their TV moment, they let us in on their call-and-response guitar arrangements and the story behind *Blood Harmony*.

You both sound recharged on *Blood Harmony*. What lit that fire?

REBECCA I feel like the "fire" is a culmination of so many years making records that we felt were "almost there," and the intrinsic desire of being a songwriter and recording artist and wanting everything to line up. Megan and I self-produced our last four albums, and I feel like with each project we've gotten closer and closer to what we want. I really feel that of all the albums we've made, this one has come closest to having all of the *t*'s crossed and *i*'s dotted. It's a really spontaneous and vibrant record, especially compared to some of the more methodically produced albums we've made.

MEGAN We've been learning a lot as producers. On past albums, we've pretty much played all of the instruments on the record, and Rebecca's programmed the drums. While I love that sound, it has its limitations, and this time we knew we wanted to bring in live drums. We knew we wanted to make it sound a little bit more like how we are live. We wanted to try and replicate some of that energy, and I think we did accomplish that. It was all very much live. We didn't piece things together. It was kind of raw.

“My ability has exceeded my own confidence, and my confidence is a total head game”
—REBECCA

Rebecca
(left) and
Megan Lovell

REBECCA I think, additionally, not double-stacking guitar was part of it. It’s such a temptation when you’re making a rock record to have the left and right wide pan, and when the chorus hits, *boom!* — there’s all that energy. But I think we were very restrictive of ourselves in maintaining how we sound live, and so we didn’t double-stack guitars. We let it be the raw components of who we are as a rock band — very stripped back.

When you resist the temptation to overdub, how does that affect the way you play? Are you trying to cover

what you would do over multiple parts in one take?

MEGAN I think it was really interesting how much pre-production had an impact on how we recorded, because we did really want to put a lot of time in on the front half of the recording process, which is the writing and the pre-production — thinking things through. Rebecca and I sat together in my basement



day after day and went through the songs with a fine-tooth comb. We also performed them just as a duo because we wanted the songs to be good enough to stand on their own two legs, without production. Rebecca and I think when you build it from the ground up — if the songs inherently have their own dynamics, if your verses sit at a certain register and then you have a blooming of a chorus — you don’t necessarily even need new elements to enter to spice it up if, in fact, the song itself is spicy and delicious.

I think that in the amount of time we spend playing, just the two of us, we organically develop guitar parts that are complementary to one another. It’s funny: We have not only been in bands together for 15 years but we’ve also traveled as side musicians. So we’re sort of a dynamic duo to each other in knowing how to work around each other musically.

Were there moments in pre-production where the magic happened and you worked out something that surprised you?

REBECCA I think the track “Kick the Blues” features some really interesting call-and-response between the two of us. Typically, when people listen to the album, I am panned to the left and Megan is always panned to the right, and so people can focus on the two guitar parts. You’ll hear how they correspond and intermingle.

MEGAN I think a fun example of us really just hammering away at it during pre-production would have been “Deep Stays Down,” where we sat with that song for a while. How many versions of that song did we come up with? Five?

REBECCA Five or six.

MEGAN We knew we loved “Deep Stays Down,” but we couldn’t find the right feel for it. We started with it being upbeat, kind of a hoedown; then we tried it really stripped back and cinematic. We wobbled back and forth, and then I started playing that riff. I was like, What if we had something just really monotonous going the whole time, and then it didn’t bloom until the very end with chords — the chords kind of stayed out until further into the song? And that was when we settled into what it would be.

REBECCA It definitely takes discipline to allow yourself the time to be bored and beat your head against the wall on some of these creative ideas. I think we all have this somewhat unrealistic expectation of a highlights reel cut together, where ideas arise quickly and inspiration strikes, and suddenly it’s miraculously amazing. No, actually nine times out of 10, you really just have to have the patience to sit with the idea and to see it through and honor the idea to its highest and best purpose. And I feel we did do that with “Deep Stays Down.”

The phrase *blood harmony* has a specific meaning, especially for you two. Was there some reaffirmation of the two of you as a creative partnership?

REBECCA Absolutely. Being in a sibling band is not easy, and I feel like that's not a big surprise based on how many sibling bands you read about having über-traumatic relationships and a lot of extra stuff that comes attached to the sibling bond. It's a knife that can cut both ways very sharply.

We've never really just been individuals. It's always been us as a package deal, and you can either feel really resentful of that fact or you can celebrate it. I think we've done a healthy amount of waffling between the two extremes. We still hit potholes occasionally, but for the most part we couldn't do what we do without one another.

You're a decade into this career, and you've got to stay on top of your game. As guitar players, how do you keep it interesting for yourselves?

REBECCA I didn't start playing electric guitar with a focus until probably five years into being a band, so I've been on a little bit of a different timeline as a guitar player. We were already playing big gigs by the time I was trying to work myself in as an electric guitar player. And so for many years I didn't take solos because it turned into such a train wreck so fast. But the last two or three years, I've been stuck in this hinterland where my ability has exceeded my own confidence, and my confidence is a total head game. It's only been I think in the last six, eight months that I've really stepped into confidence. So it's like, Get out of your own way. Just go for it and believe.

MEGAN I live by the phrase, "If you're thinking, you're stinking," because I live for the moments onstage when I don't feel that barrier of thought between my hands and my mind. It's not even my mind; it's something else. It's just coming naturally out into the fingers or something. If I'm thinking about my solos as I'm soloing, I find that they're a little bit more stilted. So now I work toward those moments when I'm not in my way as far as trying to think forward, because, really, if I'm playing in the moment, I'm having the most fun. I'm surprising myself because I didn't know what I was about to play until I played it.

What guitars and amps inspired you this time?

REBECCA A friend gave me this really beautiful, early '60s SG, and I played that on probably about half of the record, and it really pushed me in a nice way. That guitar was particularly inspiring. The other half would've been predominantly my Strat with a humbucker. The majority of *Blood Harmony* we recorded in our home studio, but also we recorded with Roger Alan Nichols at his studio, Bell Tone, and



he is the wizard of guitar tone. If you're feeling a little bit caught in a rut, he can really fire up some inspiring sounds. He's got this unbelievable, really vibey mid-'50s Fender tweed, and we used that on a couple of tracks as well.

MEGAN I used an old '50s Rickenbacker, which has been on every record and probably will be on every record. Then we picked up a couple of cool pedals. Beetronics Royal Jelly — we used that drive on quite a lot of the songs. That was a quintessential sound on "Bad Spell," and we do a lot of Fender Deluxe using some of the amp as the drive. We were playing around with some really out-there sounds for the lap steel on "Deep Stays Down."

REBECCA That was the Gamechanger Audio Light Pedal. It's an optical spring reverb system, so you can see the spring inside and you can affect it. If you breathe on it or move it at all or change the tension of the spring, it's affecting the reverb in spooky, artifact-ridden ways.

MEGAN Whenever the lap steel kind of blooms, it's that pedal.

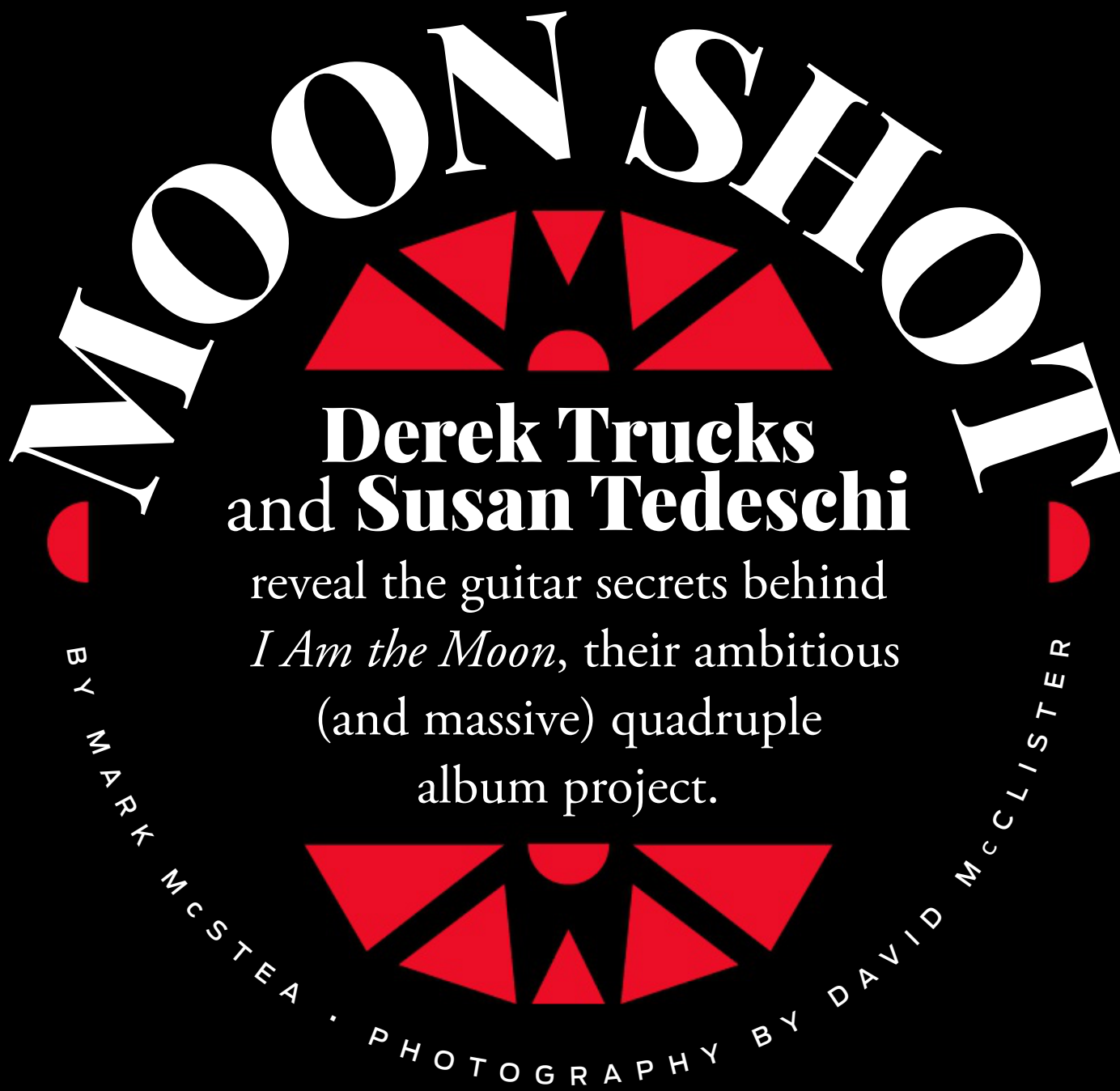
Having recorded these songs mostly live in the studio, how do you anticipate interpreting them in a concert setting?

REBECCA It's a bit surreal, actually, because I can have an intimate memory of when I wrote specific lines of a song, or the process surrounding each song. I feel so deeply attached, but then I simultaneously forget that I wrote them, because, suddenly, distance is introduced. I cannot express enough how much a fan's attachment to a piece of music — or people who actually have the courage and/or the heart connection to show up and sing — how much that means, because it really shapes everyone's relationship with the song. It's a really cool exchange of energy between people, I think. ■

Larkin Poe perform at the Ogden Theatre, in Denver, September 18, 2021.


"I live for the moments onstage when I don't feel that barrier of thought between my hands and my mind"
—MEGAN





MOONSHOT

**Derek Trucks
and Susan Tedeschi**
reveal the guitar secrets behind
I Am the Moon, their ambitious
(and massive) quadruple
album project.

BY MARK MCSTEA • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MCCLISTER



As musical acts go, the **Tedeschi Trucks Band** is a large, family-style affair consisting of a dozen of the finest, top-caliber musicians.

At the front of it all is the husband-and-wife team of slide virtuoso Derek Trucks and singer/guitarist Susan Tedeschi. Now some 12 years into their history, the Tedeschi Trucks Band has just issued a quartet of albums as sprawling and packed with musical virtuosity as the group itself. Released under the umbrella title *I Am the Moon*, it consists of 24 new songs, with a total running time of more than two hours, presented in easily digestible servings as *I. Crescent*, *II. Ascension*, *III. The Fall* and *IV. Farewell*.

This avalanche of new music is the result of a period of feverish creativity, when the band was forced off the road due to the global shutdown in the wake of COVID-19. The inspiration for the project came after TTB member Mike Mattison suggested the band should read the epic 12th century Persian poem *Layla and Majnun*, written by Nizami Ganjavi, which inspired “Layla,” the classic-rock tune penned by Eric Clapton. Connections and coincidences between the song’s history and Trucks’ and Tedeschi’s own backgrounds are many: Trucks was named after Derek and the Dominoes, the banner under which Clapton released *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs* on November 9, 1970, the very day Tedeschi was born. Trucks has worked extensively with Clapton in the past, so his interest in the poem was already piqued.

“I had been meaning to read it for about 15 years,” he tells *Guitar Player*. “So when Mike proposed the idea, it wasn’t with the idea of making a record; it was more of a nice thought exercise for the whole band to be on the same page, because we were all stuck at home.”

Given the tragic nature of *Layla and Majnun* and its tale of unrequited love, one might naturally expect *I Am the Moon* to be a collection of maudlin, downbeat songs. In fact,

it is far from it. Covering a broad spectrum of blues, soul and gospel, the record explodes with joyful, powerful and positive music. “The poem details a sense of longing,” Tedeschi explains. “And I think the alternative ways of viewing that desire just seemed to fire up everybody’s imaginations. The songs sound positive even when, sometimes, lyrically, they are perhaps a little dark.”

Naturally, the four records are overflowing with killer guitar playing. Trucks’ slide playing has never

sounded so expressive, and on the tracks where he and Tedeschi trade solos, the enthusiasm leaps from the grooves. “The whole band is really thrilled with what we’ve created,” Tedeschi says, “and I think we all appreciated that this was a special project that we were really able to focus on.”

Trucks concurs. “It came together better than we could ever have hoped for,” he says. “We certainly didn’t think that we were going to write this much music, but we could tell that something special was going on as we were recording.”

Could this project have happened without lockdown and the enforced layoff from touring that it dictated?

DEREK TRUCKS The amount of time that we had available was definitely what allowed us to do this. Another aspect of that is, between us, we’ve been on the road for maybe 20 years without a break, and the fact that we were forced to stop gave us the chance to regenerate our creative spark. Even though the pandemic and lockdown were really terrible for so many people, it was, ironically, kind of a perfect storm for us as a band.

Given that there is so much new music, did you always envisage that you would release it in stages, over four separate albums?

SUSAN TEDESCHI When we started recording and putting the songs up on the board, we realized that there was way more material than one record’s worth. I think we were all of one mind that the way records used to be made, where a great album would last between 30 and 40 minutes, was a much better approach from an artistic point of view. It’s such a sweet spot for running time, and you can really focus your attention on the music. I think the CD format is largely to blame for the increasing length of albums, where there was so much more available space. Whereas when records only came out on vinyl, the optimum sound quality was around 20 minutes or so per side. The way we’ve divided it up means each set of songs works perfectly on vinyl.

You already had a big live repertoire. With the new songs added in, what would you be looking at?

TRUCKS It’s about 150 or so. When we did the Beacon Theatre [*in New York City*] a year ago, we performed about 118 songs over the course of seven shows, and that wasn’t everything we could have played.

“RHYTHM IS SO IMPORTANT. THAT’S WHERE LISTENING TO GREAT DRUMMERS CAN BE INSPIRING”

—Derek Trucks





TEDESCHI When we're writing set lists, we run out of space because there's so many songs we want to play. [laughs] We've already done some shows where we played the first record in its entirety, and I think we'll do that for all four of the albums.

How do you keep so many songs stage-ready?

TRUCKS We use our soundchecks every day as a rehearsal, and we also set up a small rehearsal room at the venues where we can work on ideas and tighten up problematic parts or whatever, just with little amps. When we haven't done a song for a long time, we need to really kick it around.

Given how many songs you recorded, the sequencing of the albums must have been quite a challenging process, I imagine.



TRUCKS We really spent a lot of time on that. We realized very early on that there was way too much music for a single album. A few more weeks down the line, I asked a good friend of mine, Jud Strickland, if he could sequence the four albums. He really got into the details. He had a card for each song with tempos, time signatures, what key it was in and what kind of feel each song had. I'd gotten way too close to the process, so he really managed to pull everything together on that front.

What were your go-to guitars for the albums?

TEDESCHI I used my '93 Tele a lot. I was planning on using a whole bunch of guitars, but we were literally writing and recording ideas off the floor, live, thinking we might go back and add or redo some parts, but that never happened, and we kept the first versions pretty much as we came up with them on the spot. That meant that we ended up mostly using the gear that we take out live. I actually played a Gretsch White Falcon a little bit, plus I used a guitar that I stole from Derek that I really love, which is a Custom Shop replica of Eric Clapton's Beano guitar [as used on the *John Mayall's Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton* album]. He had a couple of those made, and he gave one to Derek, but I've been playing it a lot. I also used a '30s Martin 00-17 for a lot of the acoustic work.

TRUCKS I think the vast majority is the B2B [Brother to Brother] Dickey Betts reissue SG. I also used a '65 Gibson ES-335 and a '30s L-00. And I played an old National resonator guitar and an old Gibson Roy Smeck as well. With the exception of the acoustic guitars, we generally take the guitars on the road that we record with.

What were your amp choices? There are some seriously great tones all over the record.

TEDESCHI I mostly used my Fender '64 Deluxe Reverb that I've had for years. I don't use much in the way of effects. I have a Vox wah-wah pedal and a Moollon Zeppelin overdrive, but that's pretty much it.

TRUCKS The main tracking amp for me was a '64 Fender Deluxe Reverb, which has an incredible sound. I also used a Vibrolux occasionally and a little tweed Deluxe that I used here and there, plus a real old lightning-bolt Supro.

When you're both working out your respective guitar parts, how much planning goes into who plays what? It must be difficult enough anyway to carve out your own sonic space with such a big band.

TEDESCHI I guess that's pretty much become an instinctive, organic thing for us now. Of course, we already play so differently from each other, as Derek plays in open E tuning and I'm in standard. Derek

tends to use an SG a lot, so I would instinctively opt for my Tele, for the mix of humbucker and single-coil sounds. We try to avoid both using humbuckers, although the tone of the Beano Les Paul is very different from Derek's SG, so that is an exception. Sometime Derek will play all the parts on a particular song for the record if I'm concentrating on the vocals, but then I'll figure out for the live show how to cover some of those guitar parts.

TRUCKS A lot of it is definitely instinctive at this point. Plus, since I'm in open E, if a song calls for open cowboy chords, that's already a non-starter for me. A lot of times it depends on who writes the song. Whoever writes it, the other tends to fold in around that. With so many years behind us now, we have a real instinct for what works. When we do find that something just isn't working, we'll really drill down on our parts.

You both have strong individual styles. What do you think is the secret to getting started and finding your own voice on the guitar?

TEDESCHI I think the best start is to find out who you like to listen to and try to play along to their records. For me that was Magic Sam, the three Kings, Otis Rush, Johnny Guitar Watson and T-Bone Walker. I did five world tours with B.B. King, and I also used to tour with John Lee Hooker, so those experiences were unbeatable in really steeping myself in the traditions and roots of the blues. I learned so much. When you start to study your favorite records, you begin to hear licks and phrases, which you unconsciously adapt to your own playing. But in doing that, they morph into an essential part of your own vocabulary as a musician. The next thing you need to do is get up and play live, because that's where you really forge your own identity. Then you see what does and doesn't work with an audience, and you learn how to build a solo and the importance of rhythm.

TRUCKS Rhythm is so important. I think when people have blind spots in their music, it's often due to rhythmic limitations. That's where listening to great drummers can be inspiring. Playing the guitar isn't just ripping and playing solos, although that can be incredible fun. *[laughs]*

TEDESCHI Finding your tone is crucial. That often comes down to experimentation. Make sure everything you play is musical, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

TRUCKS I started out when I was so young, so I was kind of lucky in that regard. By playing and meeting a lot of people and listening to what they were doing

**“MAKE SURE
EVERYTHING
YOU PLAY IS
MUSICAL, WITH
A BEGINNING,
A MIDDLE
AND AN END”**

—Susan Tedeschi



and recommending to me, I found things that really moved me. And that was where I drew inspiration from. The more you listen, the more you find what moves you, and at some point you stumble across combinations that no one's really come up with

before. And that's the entry point for discovering your own unique thing.

I think the starting point is always to absorb what you love about other people's playing, because in the end, every player is a combination of their influences. No matter who your guitar heroes are, you always know what they were listening to. But then the secret to their success is similar to how a great chef tastes food: Those legendary guitarists took their influences and found something in there that spoke to them and allowed

their own identity to shine through. Obviously, Duane Allman and being born into those waters were the starting points for me, followed by Delta blues and the three Kings. But then I really got interested in Indian classical music.





ABOVE: The 12-strong Tedeschi Trucks Band. **RIGHT:** Performing at PNC Music Pavilion in Charlotte, North Carolina, July 23, 2022

Do you think it's important to listen to musicians who don't play the guitar?

TRUCKS Totally. I really love tenor sax players, like Wayne Shorter, John Gilmore and John Coltrane. Things like that became the bedrock for me. People should be open to all areas of music, because you don't know where inspiration might come from.

What sparked your interest in Indian music?

TRUCKS I got into it through our good friend Colonel Bruce Hampton. A drummer that was playing in his band, Jeff Sipe, turned me on to Pakistani qawwali music and Indian classical music artists like Ali Akbar Khan, who was really the guy for me. I really dove right into it for quite a period. Later on with Kofi [Burbridge, *Tedeschi Trucks'* former keyboard player and flautist, who died in 2019], we'd really dig into those scales. I would go sit in on some of Ali Akbar Khan's classes at San Rafael in California. Whenever we were out west, Ali would let us drop in and check things out. To say I studied would maybe be taking it too far, as I didn't spend enough time, but I definitely did investigate it in depth.

When you started to explore Indian music and discovered the different microtonal subtleties, did you immediately connect that with slide guitar, where the fine microtonal nuances are something that is very particular to slide playing?



TRUCKS Yeah. The fact that I'm essentially playing a fretless instrument and the sarod is a fretless instrument was one of those little epiphanies that you get when you're exploring music. I realized that, with slide, you're really singing through your instrument. There are no frets on the human voice. The melodies are so incredibly strong in a lot of Indian classical music, and that was something that really hit me. What Ali Akbar Khan did was very modal when he was exploring those ragas, and it was almost like the rules changed in mid-melody. It could be based on whether it was an ascending or descending melody. Things like that just totally captured my imagination and opened up new pathways to expressing myself on the guitar.

JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES



DEREK TRUCKS'

TOP 10 SLIDE TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

The slide master shares the secrets to heavenly tone and technique.

AFTER A FEW minutes listening to some of Derek Trucks' astounding slide work, two thoughts usually occur: "How the hell does he do that?" and "Hey, I'm gonna dig that old slide out and give this a go." While Derek can't particularly help with the first question, he's more than happy to supply the info that he believes you need to come to grips with the uniquely expressive art of slide guitar.

1. Let Elmore James be your guide.

"For electric slide, Elmore is definitely the entrance point. You could spend years just trying to delve into the nuances of his playing."

2. Try it fingerstyle.

"Definitely experiment with a fingerstyle approach. It gives you so much more control over the sound that you're creating. You can mute unwanted strings much more easily, and something that players new to slide often struggle with is controlling unwanted noise and notes."

3. Choose open tunings over standard.

"You should really explore open tunings. I started in standard, and I could get some of the stuff that I was hearing, but when somebody turned me on to open E, wow, man! That was like the keys to the kingdom! It was all the stuff that I'd been hearing right there. I went for open E over open G because I took a few lessons from a slide player who advised me to try open E. But open G sounds great as well."

4. Take your string gauge up a notch.

"I think going a little heavier makes sense. I use 11, 14, 17, 26, 36 and 46. It works well for me, and since I'm tuned to E, there is quite a bit of tension on some of the strings."

5. Start with your action a little higher than usual. Once you've got the technique down, bring it down as low as it can go.

"I think my action is actually pretty low for a slide player, but that's just from years of doing it. It's probably as low as you could get it and still play slide. For newer players who want to go for a lower action, I'd say that there's nothing wrong with developing great touch from the outset. Having said that, at the start a little bit of a higher action helps to get a cleaner sound."

6. For pitch accuracy, trust your ears and get in the groove by listening to music that isn't played on fretted instruments.

"For me, getting accurate pitch has always just been about listening to what I was doing and identifying what was right and what was wrong. I think the secret, if there is one, is to always listen to what you do. Make sure that you're making a sound that you want to hear."

Listening is always as important as practicing. Listening to music that isn't played on a fretted instrument helps get you in the mindset."

7. Put in your 10,000 hours.

"I feel like I was really lucky that I came along at a time when there weren't any cell phones, so nobody was recording my mistakes and I got the chance to develop out of the spotlight. I just played all the time and maybe it's like that thing about putting in your 10,000 hours, where the more you do it, the better you get. The other thing you should do is record yourself and play it back. Listen for what doesn't sound quite right."

8. Find the slide that works for you.

"You'll have to experiment to find the slide that's right for you. I started off on a metal slide playing an acoustic, but the first time I tried glass — a Coricidin medicine bottle — that was the sound I'd been looking for. I have my own signature model now. Everything about it is just right. It's medicinal." *[laughs]*

9. As on electric, so on acoustic.

"Once you find the slide you like, use it regardless of whether you're playing electric or acoustic guitar. I use the same slide for everything. If I did use something different, it would be more of an experimental thing, but I virtually always use the same slide no matter what guitar I'm playing."

10. Experiment, and never stop.

"I still experiment with slide and standard guitar playing all the time, particularly when I hear a melody somewhere. I'll try to figure out where it is on the neck. Of course, as soon as you think you've mastered one thing, something else starts to slip, so you have to go back and sort that out, so you never really master anything. All guitar playing is a work in progress."





Performing
at Red Rocks
Amphitheatre
in Morrison,
Colorado, July
31, 2021



Do you feel restricted when you're not playing slide and you're working with frets and a more definite sense of where notes sit?

TRUCKS I feel like it just gives me different ways to explore. There's an Indian electric mandolin player that I listen to a lot, Srinivas, and when you hear him play you can't even tell that it's a fretted instrument. I sometimes think about his approach when I'm playing without a slide. It's a way to blur the lines between fretted and slide playing.

Did you ever learn solos note-for-note from old records?

TRUCKS Yeah, I definitely borrowed/stole a lot of lines from horn players. [laughs] Any time that I'd hear a phrase or a melody that really pulled my ear, I'd try to work out what they were doing and adapt it for guitar. I think with horn players and the fact that they're not playing the guitar, they can come up with ideas and approaches that you hadn't imagined before. What's funny is when you find something like that on the guitar, it's almost like you're saying, "Oh yeah? That's been sitting there on the neck the whole time and I never knew?" [laughs]

TEDESCHI T-Bone Walker's "Here in the Dark" and "Right Place, Wrong Time" by Otis Rush were two real favorites. But as I said, even though you play what they played, you find that your own personality starts to change the way lines are phrased, and that's when you start to put your own stamp on ideas that you hear other people play. I would say playing with Derek has really improved my playing. I realized how dynamic a player he is, and that's opened my eyes to the idea of being more patient and letting a solo build up. He can play super loud or pin-drop quiet. It's all about using dynamics to tell a story. It's been such fun to play with Derek.

Do you think you brought influences to each other that you hadn't previously been aware of?

TEDESCHI Definitely. When we first started dating, Derek would kid about how we had brought these new artists to each other. He didn't know who Magic Sam was, and Derek liked a lot of people that I wasn't familiar with, like Sun Ra and some really weird and wacky stuff. The funny thing is that I went to jazz school, and he knows way more than I do about jazz, that's for sure. [laughs] He can hear something and identify the artist in two seconds, whatever their instrument. We both liked Wes Montgomery and Grant Green before we met each other.

TRUCKS That was one of the real fun things when we first got together, to explore our mutual likes and trade favorites.

Let's discuss some of the tracks in detail. "Playing With My Emotions" sounds like you're trading lines on the solo.

TEDESCHI Yeah, that's right. That was a really fun one to play. Derek wanted us to both take lines on the solo, and I think it worked out really well. It has a joyful spirit to it.

TRUCKS That's one of the tunes where we basically wrote it and played it in the studio. The trades were very spontaneous, we just went for the take right there on the floor. We don't do that a whole lot on our records, so it was nice to get that on the album.

"Yes We Will" sounds like you are both taking a solo as well. There is a flavor of B.B. King's work with the Crusaders on this one.

TEDESCHI Yes, I take the first one and Derek takes the second one. That is another real bluesy track, like "Playing With My Emotions." Those two songs really reflected a lot of the live dynamic that Derek and I have, where we will often trade solos or call-and-response guitar lines. I was definitely always pushing for us to get into more blues as that is such a big part of my roots and also Derek's, so it's very much a tribute to B.B. King.

You cover a wide range of styles on the album. A track like "So Long Savior" is a rollicking gospel number. Like many great gospel songs, the bleakness of the lyrics is in opposition to the spirit in which the message is delivered.

TEDESCHI It's definitely a tribute to gospel music, but the acoustic feel is a little like Bukka White, where Derek plays a line and I sing it back. It is definitely rooted in the call-and-response of gospel music.

"La Di Da" has an interesting rhythmic pulse, and the solo on there is sublime. It is short, yet packs so



“THE FUNNY THING IS THAT I WENT TO JAZZ SCHOOL, AND HE KNOWS WAY MORE THAN I DO ABOUT JAZZ!”
—Susan Tedeschi

much emotion and melody. Did you work out what you’d play beforehand?

TRUCKS That was just done live on the floor. Sometimes when you’re tracking, you think the track sounds really good, so I’m not going to leave a space for the solo, I’m just going to go for it, which does put quite a lot of pressure on me, because then I’m thinking that I really hope I don’t blow this, and we all have to start again. [laughs] It’s mildly intimidating. You really don’t want to fuck up.

One of the simplest, yet most effective songs is “I Can Feel You Smiling.” The slide solo on there is particularly sublime.

TRUCKS That’s one of my favorite tunes on the record. Again, it kind of played itself. It was another time where I thought I should just go for the solo as we were recording. The other thing that can be intimidating is when you record a perfect track and leave a space for the solo; then there’s a whole world of pressure to make that solo count. It gives you a lot to live up to. [laughs]

TEDESCHI That is a really beautiful song. It definitely has a mixture of [Malagasy slide guitarist] D’Gary crossed with Dolly Parton. [laughs]

For the band, is the live experience more important than making records?

TRUCKS I think that is where our heads were for a long time. This band is incredible live. I do think that there is something very enjoyable about recording though, and I think that is almost a lost art. There are



times when people don’t spend the time to craft a really great record because they’re rushing to get back on the road. I think the only way you can make a lasting statement is by making great records. I also think it limits a band if they aren’t creating the best record that they can. Your recorded music is your legacy. That’s what we have for all the great artists who are no longer with us. As an artist, writing music and finding new things to say is really important. At a certain point, what you see with many acts is that they’re still playing the same songbook forever, and there’s only so much you can say. The key point, though, is that whenever you bring new material in, it refreshes everything, gets everyone excited and inspired, and takes what we do to another level. ■

Onstage at the PNC Music Pavilion, Charlotte, North Carolina, July 23, 2022

GLIDE PATHS

Learn five useful slide-playing techniques to help you become a bottleneck virtuoso with these Derek Trucks-inspired licks.

DEREK TRUCKS IS celebrated for his soulful, innovative slide guitar playing, which is characterized by his unique touch, highly refined tone and adventurous note choices. The guitarist plugs straight into a cranked Fender-style tube amp for natural, organic-sounding gain, but an overdrive pedal can provide similar tones at more reasonable volume levels. Most often, he uses the bridge pickup on his Gibson SG, softening the sound slightly by rolling back its tone control a little. Derek is also a fingerstyle player, which lightens the attack of his tone further. In this lesson, we'll look at some of the elements of his signature slide playing approaches.

Like many slide players, Derek prefers open tunings (usually open E: low to high, E, B, E, G#, B, E), but the examples in this lesson are presented in standard tuning, for your convenience. When playing slide, the most important thing is to achieve good *intonation* (pitch centering). This is done by positioning the slide directly over the fret, not behind it. Another critical aspect of slide technique is suppressing unwanted notes. This is best done by wearing the slide on either your 2nd, 3rd (best choice) or 4th finger and lightly resting your 1st finger and any others that are behind the slide on the strings, to dampen unwanted sympathetic vibrations. Also, the fingers and palm of the pick hand may be used to mute



Ex. 1 Keep Truckin' On w/slide (all examples)

♩ = 71 (E5)

8^{va}

1

TAB

12 12 12 10 12 10 12 12

3

(12) 12 10 12 (12) 10 12 7-9 (9) 7 9 9 (9) (9)

Ex. 2 Linear Slides

(A7)

1

TAB

7/9 8-10-12 8-10 9 8-10 8 (8) 10 3-2-0

3

3-5 (5) 3 0 4-2 0 2

unplayed strings. Use a light touch with both hands and be careful not to “clang” the slide against the frets.

Ex. 1 KEEP TRUCKIN' ON

The first half of this phrase toggles

between targeted chord tones at the 12th fret (E and B) and other E minor pentatonic scale tones at the 10th fret. In bar 3, we do something similar one octave lower, on the D and G strings at the 9th and 7th frets. Work on

cultivating the vibratos in this example and in the remaining ones, striving for a wide, even shake. Wiggle the slide the distance of one fret both below and above the target note, in a smooth, even oscillation.

Ex. 2 LINEAR SLIDES

The opening phrase of this example gets to the core of what makes Derek such a great slide player: His ability to seamlessly and accurately shift between notes up and down a single string using linear slides. Playing this way makes you rely more on your ear and less on familiar visual scale shapes. Here we're exploring the A Mixolydian mode (A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G).

Ex. 3 TURN IT AROUND

This example is a stock V - IV - I blues turnaround lick in the key of E (B - A - E). Remember to use a light touch, and keep the tip of your thumb anchored to the back of the neck roughly opposite your slide as you play, for added stability and control as you repeatedly shift the slide. The open-string notes in bar 2 follow slide phrases, so you'll need to slightly "flick" your slide off the string, slightly downward, much like a pull-off.

Ex. 4 SLIPPERY SLIDEY

We change to a slow $\frac{12}{8}$ (triplet) blues feel here, in the key of G. The first phrase is deceptively challenging. You'll need to accurately nail the 13th-fret C note then quickly move the slide down to the 12th and 10th frets, pausing very briefly to sound the B and A notes. The old adage of practicing slowly at first is particularly relevant here.

Ex. 5 GRACE-NOTE SLIDES

Our final example, also played with a triplet feel and in the key of G, shows how to tastefully emulate Derek's signature use of quick grace-note melodic embellishments. Sometimes he will briefly and intentionally press the slide down onto the fretboard, instead of letting it "float" along the strings. We highly recommend that you experiment with this technique to cop Derek's unique touch. 🎸

Ex. 3 Turn it Around

1 (B5) (A5)

TAB

5 7 (7) 5 7 5 7 5 7 (7)

3 5 3 0 3 5 3 3 2 0

3 (E5) (B5)

TAB

3 5 3 12 12 10 5 7 (7)

Ex. 4 Slippery Slidey

1 (G7)

TAB

10 12 13 12 10 12 (12)

4 3 3 5 3 4 2 0

3 (C) (Eb)

TAB

5 5 5 8 8 8 6 6 5 6 5 8 (8)

Ex. 5 Grace-note Slides

1 (G) (E7) (Am7) (D7#9)

TAB

10 12 12 10 12 10 12 (12)

6 8 (8) 6 5 3 5 7 3 5 3 5 3

3 (G) (C) (Cm) (G) (D7)

TAB

5 7 6 5 (5) 6 5 3 5 5 7 (7)

CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE *COMES HOME*

One of the most revered blues harp players, **Musselwhite** finds his way back to the guitar on *Mississippi Son*.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RORY DOYLE



THE SIGHT OF blues-harp legend Charlie Musselwhite holding a Harmony acoustic guitar on the cover of his 2022 album, *Mississippi Son* (Alligator), isn't as incongruous as you might think. Chances are, if you've listened to any of his two-dozen-plus solo albums, you've already heard Musselwhite play guitar. But he wouldn't be offended if you didn't notice. After all, harmonica has been his calling card since the 1960s, when he was sitting in with Muddy Waters and other foundational blues artists on Chicago's South Side.

But throughout his five-decade career in blues music, Musselwhite has snuck a bit of his own fretwork into the mix across most of his albums. On *Mississippi Son*, which pays tribute to the music and region that inspired him, he finally brings his guitar playing to the forefront on 14 country blues songs recorded in his adopted Mississippi Delta hometown of Clarksdale, where Son House, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and other blues greats played.

"The guitar players in my band that I hired, to me they were way better, more modern guitar players than I was," Musselwhite admits, speaking from his home, which backs up to the languid Sunflower River as it flows through one of the most fertile musical landscapes in America. "I liked having a guy that could play a strong rhythm underneath me so I can play the harp over the top of that. And a good player makes you play better."

That maxim carries a lot of weight from someone who learned his craft from blues artists who were no more than one degree removed from the originators. Musselwhite grew up on a dead-end street in Memphis, Tennessee, the only son of a single mother. Young Charlie had ample time to himself, and he used it to explore places like the patch of woods behind his neighborhood along Cypress Creek, where he would lay in the shade and listen to the blues hollers and songs emanating from nearby fields.

"I remember it sounded like how I felt," he says. "I liked all kinds of music, but blues seemed like there was more to it than just music, and I was really attracted to it because it was comforting. I was a lonely kinda kid and I was left alone a lot. So that was my comfort."

Musselwhite had already been toying with a harmonica when, at 13, his father gave him a black Harmony Supertone guitar. He learned basic chord shapes from a book, starting with an E chord — "I remember putting my little finger down and making it an E7 and going, 'Yeah!,'" he says — and then began moving the patterns up and down the neck. Before long, he kicked off his training wheels and went for it with gusto. "I just kept experimenting with patterns, and finally I had these patterns where I could go all the way up and down the neck," he recalls. "I'd play one note and think, Okay, I hear the next note I want. Where is it? I'd find that note, and then I'd find the next note that made sense. So I would create these scales — I guess you call them modes — and that was the beginning of figuring out how it works."

Musselwhite's guitar education accelerated once he began hanging around Beale Street, the main artery of the city's African-American community, and meeting like-minded musicians and blues elders around town. A mutual friend introduced him to influential bluesman Walter "Furry" Lewis, and he met Earl Bell and Will Shade of the Memphis Jug Band, as well as Memphis Willie Borum.

"Furry was a friend," he says. "I would go over to his home, and sometimes we just listened to the ball game on the radio or something. But often I'd ask him to show me things, and he was eager. All those guys were flattered that I would come to them and spend time with them, and they thought it was great that I wanted to learn their music and that I respected them and their music. And so it was good for them. And it was good for me."

The first thing Lewis showed Musselwhite were alternate tunings: open G, or Spanish, and open D, which he called Sebastopol. They unlocked a mystery he'd carried since watching a man play blues under a Summer Avenue overpass years earlier. He'd been vexed,



ABOVE: Charlie Musselwhite sits with John Lee Hooker (left) and Albert Collins during the South Bay Blues Awards in Santa Clara, California, November 15, 1992. **BELOW:** Charlie blows harp in the studio in the 1970s.



“BLUES SEEMED LIKE THERE WAS MORE TO IT THAN JUST MUSIC. IT WAS COMFORTING”

unable to figure out how the chord shapes and licks he'd committed to memory didn't sound the same as they did under the bridge. Now he had the key.

Like his Memphis mentors, Musselwhite doesn't use a pick when he plays. He tried to use a flatpick once, but it didn't gel with his playing style. He also tried a thumbpick, but it was so inconsequential to his playing that when it disappeared, he never bothered to get another. Naturally, he goes about it in his own way.

"When I first started teaching myself guitar, I noticed other people would turn their hands so they strummed up with their index finger," he explains. "But to me, it made sense to use my index finger on the little E, my middle finger on the B string and my ring finger on the G string, and I would pick up, backward from the way they picked. I've had guitar players that are light years ahead of me on technique say, 'Man, I could never play like that!'"

He laughs. "And I didn't really know what I was doing. I was just making it up as I went, and that's what I came up with."

Soon, Musselwhite set aside what he learned and headed north to Chicago like thousands of others, looking for better jobs than laying concrete in the sun for a buck an hour. He started driving for an exterminator and learned the city quickly on his routes. He also saw flyers and posters advertising performances by blues artists whose names he already knew well. "I remember going out 43rd Street, past Pepper's Lounge, and it said 'Muddy Waters' on the window," he says. "I thought, Damn! I couldn't believe it. I saw signs for Elmore James and Howlin' Wolf, and I was like a kid in the candy store."

Musselwhite began to write down the addresses, and he would show up after his shift and spend the night watching his heroes paint the walls blue with music. He didn't tell anyone he played harp or guitar — he wasn't even legally old enough to be there — but after he'd requested songs from obscure 78s and become a regular, a Pepper's waitress bragged to Waters that he should hear Memphis Charlie blow harp. So he did.

"That changed everything, 'cause Muddy insisted that I sit in, which wasn't unusual," he says. "Guys



sat in all the time with other musicians. Playing 'til four in the morning, that's a lot of time to keep playing music, so Muddy's always inviting musicians to sit in." After hearing him play with Waters, other musicians began offering him gigs. "I couldn't believe it. 'You're going to pay me to play harmonica?' Boy, that got me focused. That was my ticket out of the factory."

Eventually, it became his ticket out of Chicago. Although he wasn't looking to leave, a radio station in San Francisco had started to play a record he recorded for Vanguard, his 1967 debut, *Stand Back! Here Comes Charley Musselwhite's Southside Band*.

Offers for gigs followed at ballrooms and auditoriums that paid many times what he could make in the blues clubs on the South Side. He put together a band, lit out for the Bay Area and never looked back.

So many steps in Musselwhite's career seem like happenstance. Once he moved to Clarksdale in 2021, where he could be near extended family and just a two-hour drive from his birthplace in Kosciusko, he began to hang out at a studio owned by musician Gary Vincent a few blocks away. The sessions, he says, were a complete accident.

"I was just showing what I do on guitar, and he said, 'You know, we should tape these,'" Musselwhite recalls. "It wasn't like it was a plan; it was just another one of those things. It just happens. I wasn't

trying to be flashy. I wasn't thinking about radio play or nothing like that."

At first, Musselwhite wasn't even planning to add harmonica parts, but after cajoling from Vincent, he overdubbed his signature harp. "It was easy for me because I knew the songs and I knew how to play with the guitar I was playing and accompany myself."

Mississippi Son turned into a semi-autobiographical song cycle of 10 original songs and four covers, including Delta blues re-imaginings of the Stanley Brothers tune "Rank Strangers" and Guy Clark's "The Dark." Played as solo excursions or in a trio format

with upright bass and a small drum kit, the songs unfold under Musselwhite's frank, storyteller vocals, with harp and fingerstyle guitar flourishes.

Musselwhite also pays tribute to his Chicago roommate and rambling partner Big Joe Williams with the solo acoustic "Remembering Big Joe." It's an improvised blues inspired by and played on one of Williams' guitars, a nine-string instrument — his preferred configuration — which Williams fashioned by nailing a piece

of metal with three tuning pegs across the top of the headstock. A mutual friend had inherited the instrument and brought it to the studio where Musselwhite was recording *Mississippi Son*. Perhaps not knowing what he had, he reverted the guitar back to a six-string.



"THOSE GUYS WERE
FLATTERED THAT
I RESPECTED THEM
AND THEIR MUSIC.
IT WAS GOOD FOR
THEM. AND IT WAS
GOOD FOR ME"



**Musselwhite
strums his
Harmony
Bobkat in front
of Clarksdale's
Shack Up Inn**

"Joe would double the little E and the B and the D," Musselwhite says. "The G string was not doubled, but he always played an unwound G. In Memphis, I remember the brand of strings we all used was Black Diamond, and you'd take out that G string and it'd be wound, and you put the end of it under your foot and take a knife and just scrape all that stuff off so you had an unwound G. 'Cause it's cool to bend it in the middle of a chord, you know?"



For *Mississippi Son*, Musselwhite relied mostly on a 1954 Gibson J-45 and a 1967 Silvertone, although his tastes run even more eclectic. One of his favorites is a Harmony Stratotone, which he picked up while working with Tom Waits in the '90s.

"I was on tour with Tom Waits, and I was backstage," he begins. "He had two guitar players with him — Marc Ribot and Smokey Hormel — and they both had Stratotones, and they were talking about how much they liked them. And I'm just listening, and at one point Marc Ribot said, 'You know, it's really the only guitar worth having.'" He laughs. "And I thought, I'm getting me one!"

"That's just a hell of a guitar," he adds. "I love the tone on it, and I love that fat neck, 'cause you can really dig in. I've played these guitars that are really finely made, with the shaved-down neck and everything, and they're too delicate. I can't play those things."

Ultimately, it's just as well, because Musselwhite has never had an interest in being a speed demon. His raw, gutbucket style of playing requires a sturdy instrument he can wrangle. "I never really tried to or had any interest in being like a shredder." He laughs again. "Or a rocker, or anything like that. I didn't ever have any desire to get a big amp and conquer the world shredding guitar. I just liked the feeling and the subtleties and the substance of the original down-home blues, and that's what I've always wanted to play. And if I never ever had a career at all, that's what I would be playing anyhow, for myself." ■

Eastman

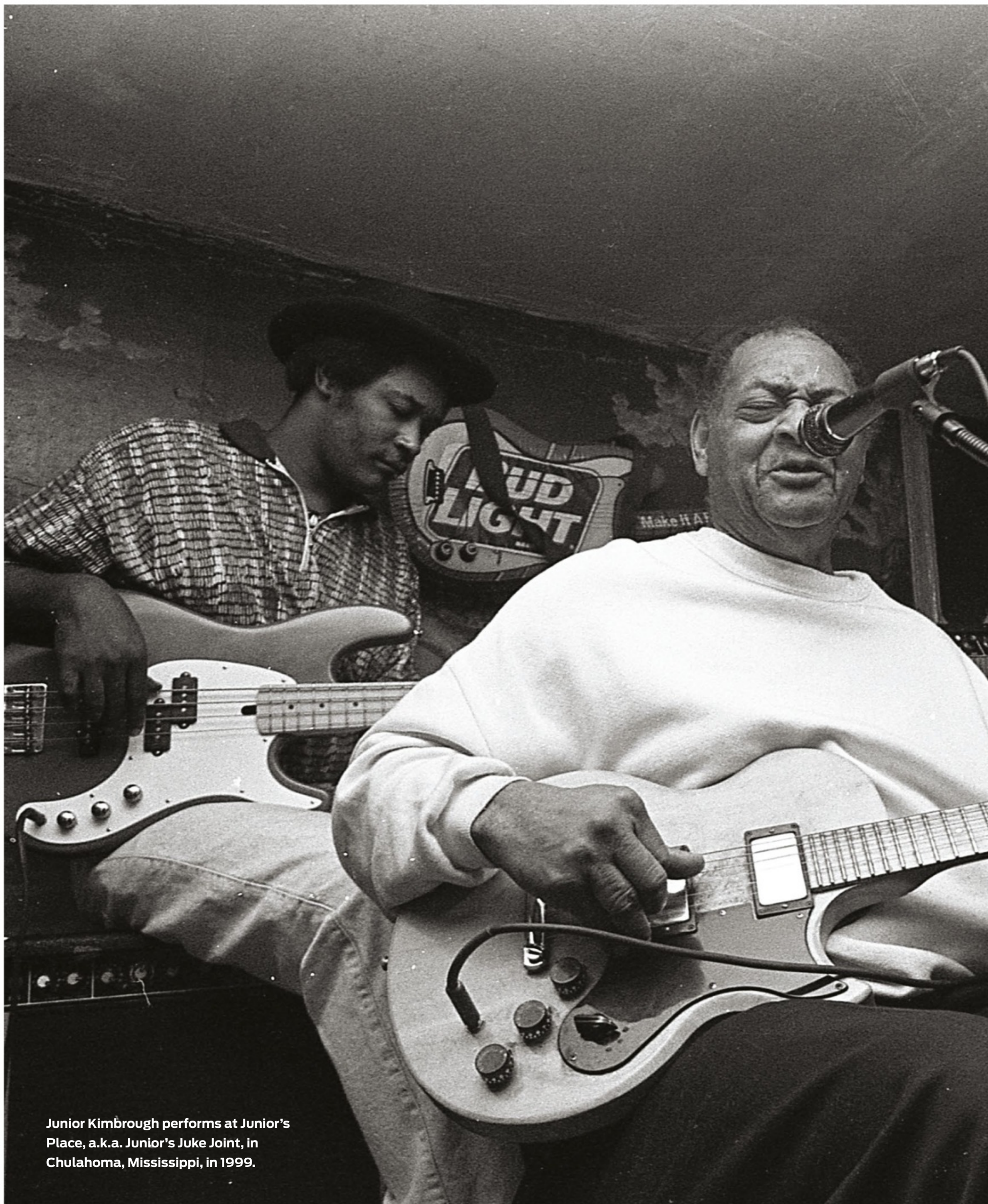
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Junior Kimbrough performs at Junior's Place, a.k.a. Junior's Juke Joint, in Chulahoma, Mississippi, in 1999.



All Night Long

Hill country blues was created for the juke joints. Here's how the new generation is evolving the sound.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ADAM SMITH

YOU CAN'T VISIT the place where hill country blues, the hypnotic strain of blues that developed in the kudzu-wrapped hills of northern Mississippi, had its 1990s heyday. The elders — Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside, chief among them — are no longer alive. And the club where they performed outside Chulahoma, Mississippi, is long gone.

There has been no greater embodiment of the rural blues that germinated in the hill country than Junior's Place, the famed juke joint owned by the often-bawdy bluesman Kimbrough. Like the music played within its walls, it was an unpretentious

place, a simple, wood-frame building shielded from the elements by sheets of rusted tin roofing, with a dirt parking lot and frontage along a lonesome state highway. Kimbrough's juke had few rules, and most were scrawled onto white paper signs posted outside the door: No drugs or outside booze were allowed into the club, but patrons could buy cold beer from an upright refrigerator, and homemade corn whisky, once they went inside. The building had been a church and a general store before it became the juke unofficially known as Junior's Place, ostensibly because it had no formal name. Sunday was the day to be there, usually, and the music went all night.

Of course, it wasn't the first juke in the area, and it wasn't the last. But during the '90s, Junior's Place hosted countless performances by Kimbrough and Burnside, who often recruited their kids and grandkids to back them on drums, bass and sometimes a second guitar. Cedric Burnside, a grandson of R.L., whose 2021 album, *I Be Trying*, won a Grammy, started playing drums in juques before he was a teenager.

"By age 10, I was good enough to play in the juke joints," he says. "Mr. Kimbrough used to give me about five dollars every weekend when I got done playing. I think he gave that to everybody, even the grown folks."

What Cedric brought to the music was crucial, though. Percussion and rhythm are key to the hill country blues sound. Unencumbered by the strictures of 12-bar Delta blues and I-IV-V chord progressions, Hill country songs can repeat licks and motifs almost until they become trance inducing, propelled by

the rhythmic, slide-accented guitar figures. Where Chicago blues polished and electrified the Delta blues, the music in the hill country remained a primal country blues.

The full expression usually isn't a concisely crafted song, except on recordings. In a juke setting, the songs became background for dancing. And in the long tradition of American roots music, and especially blues, lyrics and licks from one song are often mixed into other songs. While McDowell, Junior and R.L. wrote a lot of their own songs, some, like "John Henry," were part of the oral tradition.

Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars attests to one unspoken but important rule of hill country blues, though. "The main lesson I learned

from playing at Junior's is to never clear the dance floor," he says. "R.L. could keep a room dancing by himself with his syncopated fingerpicking."

Because performances could go from early evening until dawn, Cedric says, "there was a lot of repetition of songs. But also, they played some songs a lot because people had favorites. One was 'All Night Long' by Junior Kimbrough. Even though

he had several songs, he sometimes played that song four or five times in the same night, 'cause people were requesting it that much."

"A lot of the hill country stuff was strongly influenced by the fife-and-drum bands"

— Kenny Brown



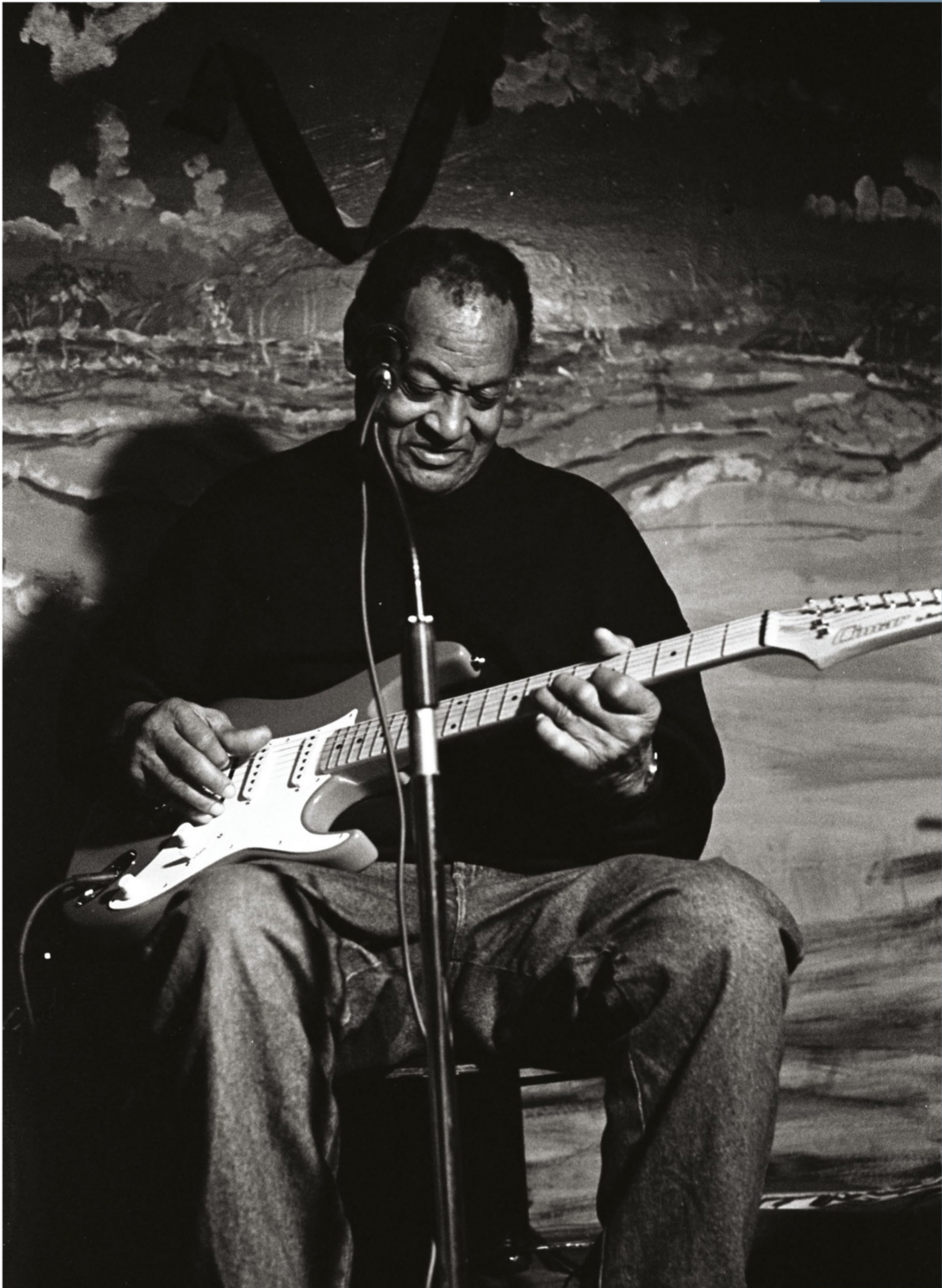
The roots of hill country blues are West African, particularly in the focus on rhythm and drums, but also the fife, an instrument played in hill country blues by the late Otha Turner. Enslaved people in America were forbidden to have drums after their overseers discovered they could be used to communicate with each other. Following the Civil War and Emancipation, though, drums resumed their place in African-American culture and expression. The fife-and-drum tradition is an outgrowth of that.

"The differences in Delta, Chicago and hill country are kind of tough, but it's real," says Kenny Brown, who played sideman to both R.L. and Junior for decades, and now leads his own group while also collaborating with artists like the Black Keys. "And it's fun music and it's happy music, most of it, and it's more concentrated on the groove and the rhythm. A lot of the hill country stuff, I believe, was strongly influenced by the fife-and-drum bands."

In the early '90s, two events brought a critical spotlight to this corner of the South. First, the Robert Mugge documentary *Deep Blues*, narrated by

OPPOSITE:
Kimbrough
onstage at
Junior's Place,
1998. **BELOW:**
Patrons mingle
at Junior's
in 1999.







Luther Dickinson performs with the North Mississippi Allstars in 2015.

hill country blues champion Robert Palmer, a music writer who penned an authoritative book of the same name in 1982, featured R.L. and other blues artists from the region. Then, a fledgling new label in nearby Oxford called Fat Possum Records began a campaign to record the region's country blues artists. R.L. and Junior were first, with the raw, uncompromising *Too Bad Jim* and *All Night Long*, respectively, in 1992. R.L. found a new, young audience in punk, garage and indie-rock circles after opening for Jon Spencer and the Blues Explosion on tour.

"When we did this stuff with Jon Spencer, we got to play for younger kids, and they loved it," Brown says. "We played a little louder, and I don't know if it was any faster or not, but that kind of evolved into more of an electric, rocking band than the duo stuff did."

The style of blues that became recognized as hill country in its modern form traces back to Mississippi Fred McDowell, who worked as a farm laborer and played country blues at parties on weekends. Musicologist Alan Lomax recorded his first sessions in 1959 on one of his trips through the South, but as the folk-blues scene heated up in the mid '60s, McDowell began to record more. His repertoire combined traditional and gospel songs with

his own compositions that became foundational to the hill country canon. "Wished I Was in Heaven Sitting Down," from the Lomax recordings, was later recorded by R.L., and "61 Highway," from McDowell's 1969 album *I Do Not Play No Rock 'n' Roll*, is recognized as a key composition in the genre. Other signature hill country tunes, like "Drop Down Mama," "Going Down South" and Bukka White's "Shake 'Em on Down," were key songs in McDowell's sets.

Brown met McDowell at the Memphis Country Blues Festival in 1969 but didn't get to play with him.

"The hill country guitarists inspired me to play open-tuned, finger-picked slide guitar, electric and loud as hell"

— Luther Dickinson

He did, however, come to know Johnny Woods, a harmonicist who recorded and performed with McDowell. "I learned a lot from Johnny about Fred's playing," he says. "It took me years to figure out what he was talking about. He'd say, 'Frail it man, frail it!' I figured out what he meant: It's like your thumb and your index finger are going back and forth, and as your thumb's going down and your finger's going up, it creates a lot of rhythm. R.L. Burnside and I, we both got to doing pretty much that same kind of thing when

we were playing together on two guitars, and that created that sound."

Brown wasn't the only blues fanatic listening to how McDowell played guitar. Keith Richards,

Mick Taylor and the Rolling Stones were inspired enough to record a faithful cover of his song “You Got to Move” on *Sticky Fingers* in 1971, with Taylor playing the slide licks on a 1954 Fender Telecaster. Aerosmith delivered their own take on their 2004 blues covers album, *Honkin’ on Bobo*, setting the tune to a rock and roll arrangement over a Bo Diddley beat.

McDowell’s note placement was very intentional. He used a slide to drive the tunes, but his flourishes often were a series of well-placed notes without flashy tricks like slide-ins, hammer-ons or pull-offs. One of the most important things McDowell did, other than write and play music, was to teach his neighbor R.L. Burnside how to play blues.

Although 22 years his junior, a teenage R.L. latched onto his mentor’s rhythmic style of playing. A few years on, he would accompany McDowell on gigs at house parties and juke joints in the area. “Him and my Big Daddy were really, really great friends,” Cedric says, using his preferred name for his grandfather. “They shot craps and drank a bunch of moonshine and stuff together.”

Burnside lived in Chicago for a period in the ’50s but soon returned to northern Mississippi. In 1967, George Mitchell recorded him in Coldwater for the Arhoolie label, which helped him get gigs. Like other hill country bluesmen, his music career ebbed and flowed, and he worked on a farm to supplement his income when the gigs weren’t there. He formed the Sound Machine with his sons and in 1981 put out *Sound Machine Groove*, a record that reflected the times. Playing electric guitars, the band somehow aligned country blues with danceable funk and soul.

The next time R.L. recorded, though, would be with Brown by his side and Calvin Jackson, his son-in-law, on drums. Titled *Too Bad Jim*, and released in 1994, it was the first of a six-album studio run before his death in 2005. The record found a wider audience for the genre, thanks in large part to the intervention of Jon Spencer, who brought R.L. on tour. That led to a creative partnership in the studio, as well. The band backed R.L. on a pair of albums, 1996’s *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey* and 1997’s *Mr. Wizard*, which modernized the hill country sound.

Brown has vivid memories of moving to north Mississippi in the early ’60s. Across the street from his family’s home, Otha Turner and Fred McDowell would host picnics and play music all weekend. That experience primed his interest for when Mississippi Joe Callicott moved in next door, when Brown was 10 years old. Callicott had recorded with George

Mitchell the same year as R.L., and cut songs for the U.K. label Blue Horizon on a Memphis session that included Furry Lewis. Soon after his arrival, Brown began woodshedding guitar licks with him during a period in American music when most kids his age were listening to the Beatles.

Callicott taught Brown the tunings and techniques of hill country blues. Tuning his guitar to open G,

which he called Spanish tuning, Callicott laid the instrument in his lap and used a pocket knife as a slide. When Callicott passed away in 1969, Brown picked up open E tuning from Bobby Ray Watson, who also showed him how to play slide licks in the standard position. He says he and Johnny Woods would get together and “ramble the whole weekend from different parties to

juke joints” playing music.

In 1971, Brown met R.L., and they became fast friends over their love of hill country blues. For a slide, Brown used a glass Coricidin bottle, a deep-well $\frac{11}{16}$ socket or a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch piece of copper he cut at his construction job. They played house parties and juke joints throughout the ’70s and ’80s, and when Fat Possum came looking for R.L., Brown went with him, backing him on albums beginning with *Too Bad Jim*.



R.L. Burnside plays guitar at his home in Chulahoma, in 1998.

“Hill country blues is in my blood, you know, so I just gotta let it do its thing”

— Cedric Burnside



ABOVE: Cedric Burnside with his youngest daughter, Portrika, at his home near Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 2020. **BELOW:** Patrons shoot pool at Junior's in 1999.



While the hills heated up with new fans, better tours and bigger album sales, the next generation of hill country artists were taking notes. Junior's sons, Kenny, Robert and David, were learning alongside their father, as were Cedric and his uncles Duwayne and Garry Burnside. Lightnin' Malcolm, Eric Deaton and others from the scene were coming up. The ones who have arguably made the widest impact, though, are the Dickinson brothers, Luther and Cody, and their friend Cedric. The Dickinsons are the sons of Memphis musician Jim Dickinson, who had played piano on the Rolling Stones' "Wild Horses" and produced Big Star, the Replacements and Ry Cooder. Luther recalls that he first heard and saw hill country

blues on a 1982 episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* that featured Otha Turner and Jesse Mae Hemphill performing fife-and-drum music. Although Luther didn't get to meet McDowell, his mother carried him to his funeral in utero, and he studied his music from audio and video recordings. He did meet Turner, though, a decade later at the Memphis Heritage Festival. Turner took him to Junior's Place for the first time just as Fat Possum was getting off the ground and preparing to record R.L. and Junior.

"Once we befriended the musical families of Otha Turner, the Burnsides and the Kimbroughs, it was on, wide open," Dickinson says. "They had a juke joint and we had a recording studio. We learned from our peers as well as studying the elders. On tour with Burnside in '97, I would sing along and learn his later style, and then compare that to the earlier, more virtuosic style of his solo guitar work in the '70s."

Dickinson's hill country education was immersive. He became a regular at Junior's Place, getting to know R.L. and Junior as well as their extended families, and picking up their playing techniques. He began to think about "using folk music forms as frameworks for improvisation," a concept he put into practice a few years later with the North Mississippi Allstars.

"I had grown up with open tunings, finger picking and slide guitar from my father and his partners, Ry Cooder mainly," he says. "The hill country guitarists inspired me to play open-tuned, finger-picked slide





guitar, electric and loud as hell, but have it respond like an acoustic guitar while using amp response and feedback to create sustain with the slide.”

Luther produced *Everybody Hollerin’ Goat*, the 1998 album Turner recorded with his Rising Star Fife & Drum Band, and would drive him to performances. By then, Dickinson had formed the Allstars with his brother, Cody, and bassist Chris Chew. The Allstars put together everything he had learned about hill country blues, from the songbook to the licks and even the fife-and-drum percussion, at times. The band’s 2000 debut, *Shake Hands With Shorty*, drew together the hill country traditions with Allman Brothers–style improvisation and Chew’s gospel harmonic sense.

“I wanted to orchestrate the riffs of Fred McDowell and the solo acoustic work of R.L. Burnside with a rock and roll band,” Dickinson says. “At first, we strove to be as traditional as possible. But we eventually opened up and began using the blues songs as vehicles for ensemble improvisation, finding portals for extended jams.”

Dickinson toured with R.L. around the time Cedric took over the drum chair from his father, as the hill country scene started to attract hipster attention in the mid ’90s. All the while, though, Cedric was paying close attention to what his Big Daddy was playing on guitar. “I would sit there and watch him and look at his coordination, how his



fingers moved while he was playing, what time his lyrics would be in, because the music was so unorthodox,” Cedric says. “It was a really crazy rhythm, but he made it sound really great, and so I always wanted to do that. I always wanted to play the guitar and sing, just like my Big Daddy did.”

Dickinson gave him his first guitar, a yellow Harmony acoustic, after the tour, and his uncle Garry showed him open G tuning and some picking and fretting patterns. “I was playing in open G a lot, and I wrote most of my songs in that tuning and loved it,” Cedric says. “But Garry showed me a little bit in standard, and I was not playing in standard at the time. He showed me a pattern in E and then he showed me a pattern in A, and he said this pattern that you did in A, you can go to G and do the same

ABOVE:
R.L. Burnside
at his home,
1998. **LEFT:**
Off Highway
61, South
Clarksdale,
Mississippi,
2000



ABOVE: Kenny Brown (left) performing with the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach in Oxford, Mississippi, in 2022. **BELOW:** Clarksdale, Mississippi, 2004

thing. You know, you can go to C and do the same thing, all the way down the fretboard. I was like, 'Okay, let me just try it in all of them then.'"

Cedric stayed up nights, into the early morning hours some days, practicing chords, change-ups and licks in open G and standard tuning. "When I got on the guitar, I just played with sounds, and I remember some of the top players looking at me, and they're like, 'Man, that is so crazy like that. It's backwards.' And it may well be backwards, but if it sounds good, I'll go with it. That's where I'm at, even right now today."



"It's fun music and it's happy music, and it's more concentrated on the groove and the rhythm."

— Kenny Brown

By the time Junior's Place burned to the ground in 2000, two years after Junior passed away, the scene had matured. The Allstars had landed hill country blues on the jam-band circuit and national television, and they brought everyone with them. Duwayne played in the band for a few years, and for their performance at Bonnaroo in 2004, they brought R.L. and the extended family onstage for a one-off set released later that year as *Hill Country Revue*.

Unlike other regional blues styles, hill country blues isn't a dying art, thanks to Brown, the Burnsides, the Kimbroughs and the Dickinsons, as well as Otha Turner's granddaughter Sharde Thomas, the Black Keys and scores of artists who have taken its influence in new directions.

"I can't help but be hill country in whatever I write," Cedric says. "I just let it flow. I don't try to force anything. If it comes out what somebody might call weird, I just let it come out weird. My heart is just old-school music. That's all I've been around my whole life, and that sound was embedded in me. It's in my blood, you know, so I just gotta let it do its thing." 🎸

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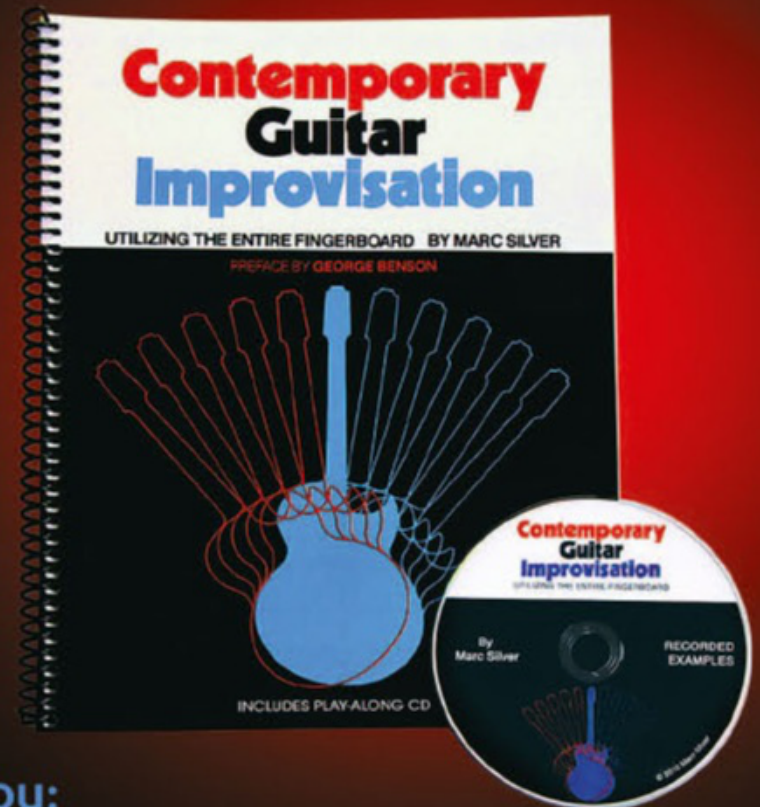
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Lead Guitarist and Musical Director for Jeff Bridges and The Abiders



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A man with short brown hair and a light beard is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. He is holding a dark-colored acoustic guitar. The background is a bright, slightly overexposed sky with the silhouettes of palm fronds visible. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

**“I WOULD HEAR
BASS AND DRUMS
IN MY HEAD, AND
I’D DO MY BEST
TO CREATE IT
ALL WITH THE
GUITAR ALONE”**



MOONLIGHT SERENADE

Jack Johnson dives deep into his percussive strumming style and enchanting new album, *Meet the Moonlight*.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIZZY O'NEAL

JACK JOHNSON MAY not have the most advanced guitar technique, but the hugely popular acoustic influencer has a treasure that precious few other strummers possess: a signature rhythm style. The Hawaiian with the hallmark rhythm hand planted his flag with *Brushfire Fairytales*, his 2001 debut that featured such breakout hits as “Flake” and “Bubble Toes,” which incorporated a snare-like muted “whap” on the two and four into a few go-to strumming patterns. The former professional surfer and accomplished surf moviemaker delivers his grooves with an infectious laid-back, hang-loose feel. Often imitated, Johnson’s original approach remains so instantly recognizable that he purposely mixes things up in the studio.

Meet the Moonlight (Brushfire), his first album in five years, marks a bit of a departure from past efforts. The record is textural and takes a slinky, nuanced approach to contemplative, spiritual material. Several cuts feature his longtime bandmates, who include

keyboardist Zach Gill, bassist Merlo Podlewski and drummer Adam Topal. But the primary difference is producer and multi-instrumentalist Blake Mills, who is known for his work with Alabama Shakes and My Morning Jacket’s Jim James. Mills is an accomplished guitar player who brings a slew of interesting things to Johnson’s table, including a fretless guitar that he reportedly picked up from Ry Cooder. Mills and Johnson developed the material player to player, and his influence pervades the 10-song affair. Check out the ethereal title track to hear the significance of Mills’ presence. Their languid slide interaction on “Calm Down” is simply lovely. On “3AM Radio,” Mills holds down the groove while Johnson steps out for a few melodic acoustic lead flourishes.

Johnson is clearly in a guitar-centric mode. He invited ALO’s acoustic-electric whiz Dan Lebowitz to step in and lend a leading hand on a few recent tour appearances. Fellow Hawaiian Ron Artis II is also supporting on select upcoming dates, and he’s an electric ripper that players will appreciate. But no matter

what hot guitarist is in Johnson's camp at any given event, his own acoustic groove is always the heart of the show, and he's quite capable of holding an audience's attention all on his own.

How did you develop your signature rhythm style?

The most solid aspect of my guitar playing is the rhythm, and I think that percussive style came from playing alone for so long, not necessarily wanting to be a folk musician, but not having a band. When I was writing songs, I would hear bass and drums in my head, and I'd do my best to create it all with the guitar alone. I'd try to make a snare drum sound by muting the strings with the fingers of my left hand — my chord hand — so that I could still keep the rhythm going with my strumming hand. I would mess around trying to hit where the kick drum would be with my right hand too. I didn't wind up writing or recording that way, but I still play around with it sometimes on my own. When I wound up having a bass player and a drummer, I actually had to unlearn a little of what I was doing, because I was trying to cover too much. Once somebody is helping you, it gets sort of redundant.

Do you ever avoid applying your own signature style to some material to steer clear of redundancy from song to song, album to album?

Yeah, I probably do a little bit, because there are times when I hear that in my own stuff. But it's what I love to do, and when I'm sitting on the front porch, I have a version of all the songs in just that style. It's like when a blues player does just guitar and vocal — it's got a certain thing. I don't mind going to it as my default when I'm alone or playing with friends in the living room, but there are times when I'm recording that I avoid it.

“GREG BROWN WAS THE ONE PERSON I LOVED LISTENING TO ACOUSTICALLY. HIS MUSIC HELPED ME MAKE SENSE OF WHAT I WANTED TO WRITE ABOUT”

Where does it come from?

I think that a lot of it comes from listening to reggae, and there are actually two different versions. The first one is that muted thing we first talked about, where there's no note. The second one is a reggae skank, where you hear a little bit of the chord before muting it; you strum on the backbeat with the fretting hand holding the chord, and then release quickly to mute it. So you hear a little bit of the chord, but it also acts as a

percussive moment. They are both different styles of percussive acoustic strumming. The reggae skank is done more on electric guitar, but I tend to play a lot of acoustic because it's always around and doesn't require electricity. Especially when we were making surf movies, we were always traveling and

there was always a guitar around, but there wasn't an amp very often.

What exactly is going on with the pick and fingers as you execute that skank rhythm?

It's funny, because I would almost always play with a medium-gauge pick, and I think that's partly because my fingernail gets worn down from all that percussive strumming on the heavier-gauge acoustic strings when I'm on tour. But for the new album, I worked closely with producer Blake Mills, and every time I would give him the option of playing a track with or without the pick, he'd always choose the one without the pick because he preferred the tone. I wore my fingernail down quite a bit. Then when I went back out on tour, I'd play kind of using a bit of both the pick and the finger. It all depends on how much definition you want in the top end. Adding in some skin from the finger provides a bit of a fuller sound. So I adjust the blend according to the song. I haven't gone to fake nails yet, but it seems like a good idea. I probably will.

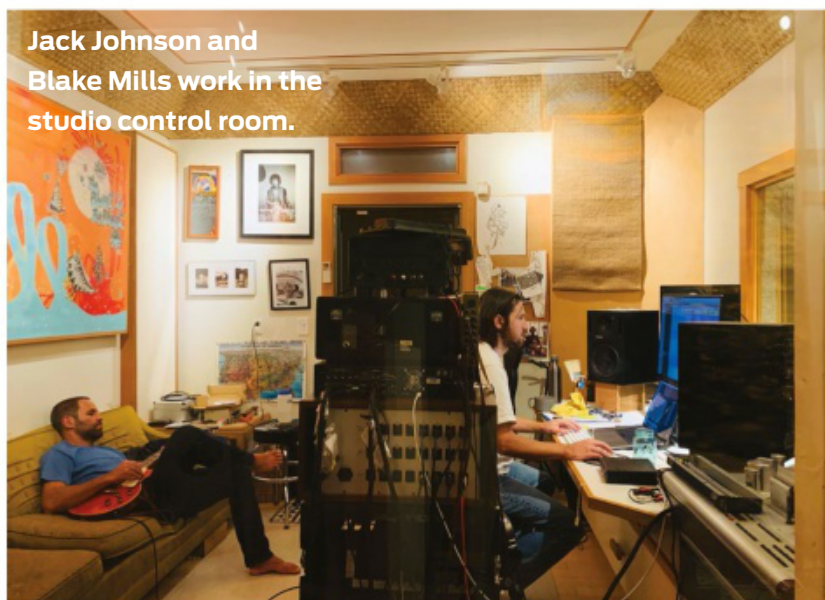
Was it a conscious choice to have less driving rhythm and more slinky lines and textures for *Meet the Moonlight*?

It was conscious in the sense that the main reason I wanted to work with Blake Mills is because he's an amazing guitar player. I wanted to play with him and learn. I grew up before the internet, learning to play by sharing books and guitar magazines with my friends.





I loved that feeling of trying to improve as a player, and it felt great to get it back during this album by playing with somebody who is so accomplished. Blake played an electric fretless guitar quite a bit, and he told me that he picked it up from Ry Cooder. It's the one on the soundtrack for the movie, *Paris, Texas*. Blake got so into the fretless that he made a whole album with it called *Mutable Set*. I wasn't so sure when he pulled it out — you know, a fretless guitar? But it had this cool characteristic, and Blake wound up playing it on about half the songs on *Meet the Moonlight*, including the title track, “Don't Look Now” and the first song, “Open Mind.”



Jack Johnson and Blake Mills work in the studio control room.

Is the fretless involved in the swelling sound that kicks off the album at the top of “Open Mind?”

Yeah, it's that fretless mixed in with a few other things, including a melodica that Zach played and a Brazilian percussion sample that Merlo found. I'm playing a Gibson ES-335 tuned to dropped D through a little Kalamazoo amp on that track, and Blake played a Gibson Les Paul as well.

What was your main instrument on the album?

I have an old Gibson J-45 that I used for most of these songs and a lot on my other albums. Ben Harper helped me pick it out on our first tour. We went to Matt Umanov Guitars in New York and I played a bunch of them while Ben stood in different spots in front of me. I knew I could trust him. That was the first guitar I ever bought myself. I play Cole Clark acoustics live, and I've used them on albums as well, but mostly it's that dark-colored 1975 J-45 and 1978 Martin dreadnought.

What tuning are you in on the cosmic title track?

I'm playing in a cool version of a Hawaiian slack-key tuning we call Taro Patch, which is like open G but with the lowest string tuned down an additional step, so instead of D, it's C [*low to high, C G D G B D*]. If you hold the shape of an A minor 7 chord and strum all the way through with the C in the bass, it makes a big, open-sounding C chord. Kawika

Kahiapo is one of the greatest living slack key players and a good friend. He's taught me lots of tunings and licks and tricks over the years.

What are the sources of some other unique guitar tones on this album?

I played one of Blake's Martin acoustic-electric's on “3AM Radio,” and we used a synthesizer and some reverse recording tricks to get those weird,

ethereal sounds. We both tracked slide parts together on “Calm Down,” and I played my part on a resonator. I overdubbed some nylon-string for the end of “Meet the Moonlight” and also every time I sing “It's funny how blind dreams can be.” Pepe Romero [*of the famous classical Spanish luthier family*] is a good surfer friend, and he made that nylon-string. He made an amazing ukulele for me as well, and you can hear that at the beginning of “One Step Ahead.”

What makes you favor the Cole Clark Fat Lady 2 for live performance.

I like that Cole Clark makes guitars from sustainable, fast-growing woods and how consistent they are in the way they play nice and sound pretty. They also have great electronics. It's a two-way system with a bridge pickup and mic that works well for our soundman because the tones and levels remain consistent as I switch guitars in different tunings. If we're playing a loud song, I'll favor the pickup. When I'm playing alone doing a little acoustic set at the end of the night, I'll favor the mic. We split the signal to a direct box and a Fender Twin. I use a feedback buster in the soundhole with the band. I don't need that when it's just me playing solo acoustic.

Can you close by considering an artist who helped set your path and reveal what it's like to see your own influence in the world?

Greg Brown was the one person I loved listening to acoustically. His music helped me make sense of what I wanted to write about. To go the other direction, one band I've come across that wasn't bullshitting when they said I was an influence is Milky Chance. They're very sweet, younger guys. When we met backstage, they showed me how they knew every riff of mine from different songs over the years. I always appreciate hanging out with them, and it's fun when we get to do a song together now. Over the years I've met some people that I could tell were a bit influenced by my style, and it's always flattering to know you had an influence on anybody. 🍻

HOT COUNTRY 101

Learn the nuts and bolts of high-tech country lead guitar.

BY TOM KOLB

LET'S FACE IT — quite a few of us die-hard rock guitarists are a little bit country too, whether we're aware of it or not. Think about it: Our rock and roll forefathers, players like Chuck Berry, Scotty Moore, Cliff Gallup, Eddie Cochran and James Burton, sprang up from the rockabilly era, which was a fusion of blues and country. In the 1960s, George Harrison introduced millions of Beatles fans to his Chet Atkins-inspired fingerpicking on his Gretsch guitar. Don't forget the country-influenced southern rockers of the 1970s, such as Lynyrd Skynyrd, as well as prog-rock legend Steve Howe's sizzling twangy onslaughts in many Yes songs. Hell, even Eddie Van Halen tipped his hat to the genre in Van Halen's "Finish What Ya Started." And speaking of heavy hitters, Zakk Wylde and John 5 are known for dipping into the country vernacular in their solos.

Whether you plan to plow full-bore into the world of country guitar or are just a little bit curious about what all the hubbub is about, this lesson will give you the tools you need to start rubbing shoulders with masters of the style — players like Danny Gatton, Albert Lee, Chet Atkins, Jimmy Bryant, Roy Buchanan, Joe Maphis, Brent Mason, Brad Paisley, Tony Rice, Roy Clark, Jerry Reed, James Burton, Jerry Donahue and Johnny Hiland — to name just a few. So come on little doggies, put on your boots and spurs, hop into the saddle and let's



take a trail ride through fundamental country lead guitar techniques, advanced licks and string-bending tricks.

GEAR

Fender's Telecaster and combo amps like the Deluxe and Twin Reverb are the Holy Grail of modern "hot country" guitar. If you don't own a Tele, any Strat-style guitar will do. For that matter, any solidbody guitar equipped with a single-coil (soapbar) or humbucker pickup in the bridge position will get the job done. For your amp, any bright sounding combo will suffice. And be sure to include effects. Overdrive/boost, compressor, tremolo and reverb pedals are in the running, as well as a delay pedal, to dial in a quick slap-back echo.

STARTER LICKS

Let's get the ball rolling with a series of "starter" licks set against an E7 tonality (E, G#, B, D). **Ex. 1** is a stock country lick. It's so common that it has a name: the

Lester Flatt run. Flatt was a singer and guitarist in the famous bluegrass duo Flatt & Scruggs, in which Earl Scruggs was the banjo player. Lester would often insert his run at the end of his vocal phrases, fashioning it for whatever chord he was playing at the time.

The melodic foundation of this lick is the E major pentatonic scale (E, F#, G#, B, C#), with an added minor, or "flat" 3rd (b3), G. The major pentatonic scale (1, 2, 3, 5, 6) is an essential scale in country music. Adding the b3rd provides a bluesy quality as well as a chromatic link between the 2nd and major 3rd degrees of the scale. Many refer to this hybrid scale as the major blues scale. For the purpose of this lesson, we'll refer to it as the bluegrass scale.

It's interesting to observe that the notes of the bluegrass scale align exactly with the relative minor blues scale. In other words, the E bluegrass scale (E, F#, G, G#, B, C#) is *enharmonic to* (contains the same notes as) the C# blues scale

(C $\sharp$, E, F $\sharp$, G, G $\sharp$, B). Just as you can use C $\sharp$ minor pentatonic patterns to cast E major pentatonic lines, so too can you employ C $\sharp$ blues scale patterns to create a variety of countrified licks over the same chord. Check it out. You may discover that you have an inner “twang master” waiting to bust out of your rocker heart.

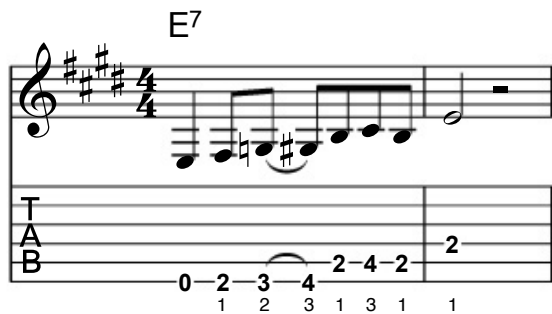
Like many straight-ahead jazz guitarists, traditional country pickers are heavily influenced by the blues. Case in point: **Ex. 2** is a stock phrase that incorporates the E blues scale (E, G, A, B $\flat$, B, D), with a passing major 3rd degree (G $\sharp$). Although the lick is played in 7th-5th positions, there is an open-string inclusion, namely the open D string). Many hot pickers seem to honor an unofficial country guitar commandment: “Thou shalt play open strings whenever possible.” This important open-string nuance will pop up throughout this lesson.

And speaking of jazz, **Ex. 3** is a phrase right out of the bebop vocabulary. But when performed with a bright, twangy tone and chicken pickin’ textures (more to follow on this topic), the lick feels right at home in a country music setting. Incidentally, although it’s based more on arpeggio target tones than a scalar approach, this lick also uses the bluegrass scale. **Ex. 4** is pure E major pentatonic (E, F $\sharp$, G $\sharp$, B C $\sharp$), fortified with whole-step bends and pre-bends on the G string. Note the use of *reinforced bend fingering* here, with the middle finger (2) assisting the ring finger (3) in pushing the string, from one fret below.

Ex. 5 puts a wrap on this starter section with a Danny Gatton/Albert Lee-inspired melody. Basically an E major pentatonic-based passage, it utilizes a series of strategically placed G-string bends to outline a I7 - V7 - V7 chord progression in the key of E: E7 - A7 - B7. The half-step bends and releases at the 13th fret supply a major 3rd-suspended 4th interplay (G $\sharp$ - A) over the E7 chord (E, G $\sharp$, B, D), while the 12th-fret whole-step bend maneuvers hit the $\flat$ 7th (G) and root (A) of A7 (A, C $\sharp$, E, G). The whole-step bend/release at the 11th fret targets the

Ex. 1 bridge single-coil pickup on all examples

♩ = 180



Ex. 2

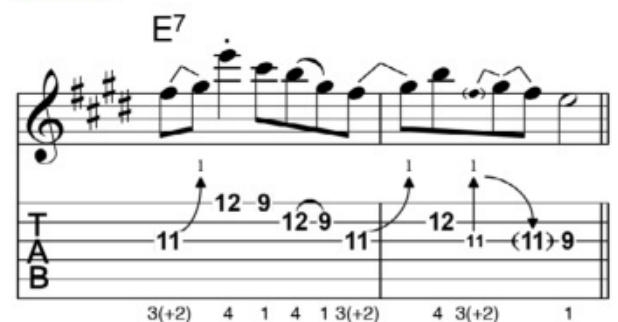


Ex. 3

♩ = 180

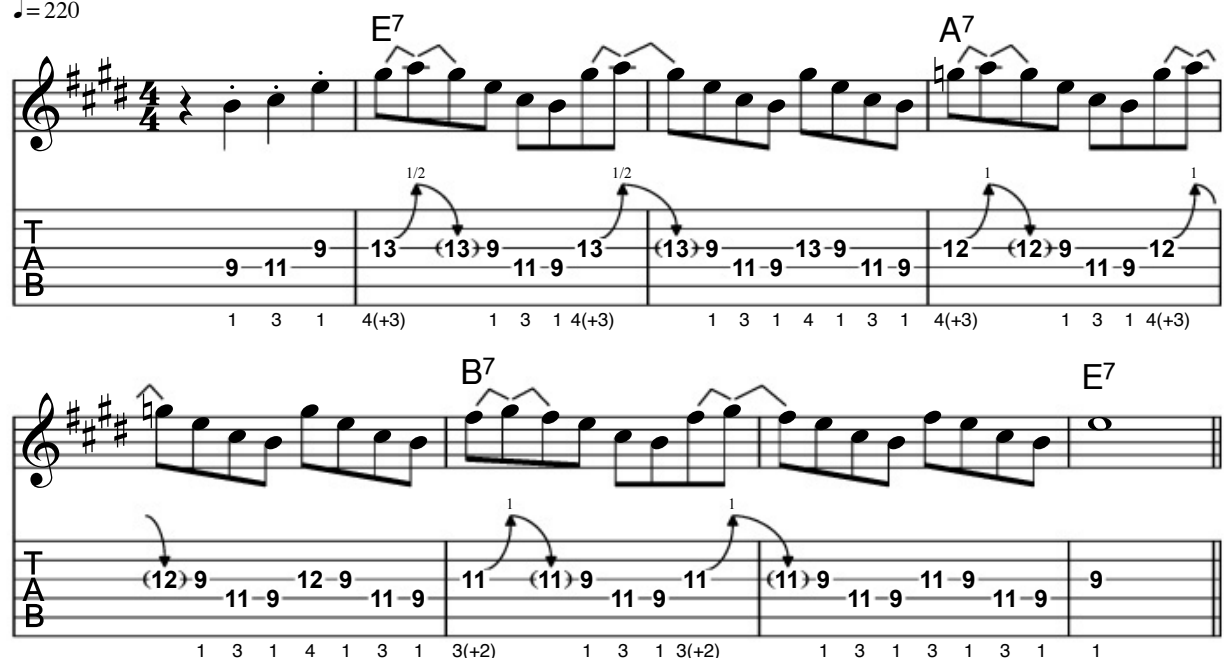


Ex. 4



Ex. 5

♩ = 220



B7 chord's (B, D $\sharp$, F $\sharp$, A) 5th (F $\sharp$) and 13th (G $\sharp$).

CHICKEN PICKIN'

One of the most recognizable techniques in hot country guitar is what players call *chicken pickin'*. Simply put, chicken pickin' involves the inclusion of “dead” or fret-hand-muted notes interspersed between melody notes. They are

sometimes strategically placed, as in every other note in an eighth-note phrase, or just included willy nilly for the percussive effect the sound produces. James Burton, Roy Buchanan and Albert Lee are generally considered among the pioneers of this electrifying technique, while more modern players such as Brent Mason and Brad Paisley have kept the clucking sound alive and kicking.

Examples 6a–d use the same phrase to illustrate four different pick-hand approaches to achieving the chicken pickin’ effect. Ex. 6a uses alternate picking on the G string while the fretting finger is lifted off the fret but remains



on the string to deaden every other note. Ex. 6b utilizes a similar technique, except the dead notes are produced on the D string. Ex. 6c is similar in nature to Ex. 6a, except it employs *hybrid picking* (a combination of pick and fingers). Use your middle finger (*m*) to pluck the G string in an aggressive fashion.

Ex. 6d also uses hybrid picking but, as in Ex. 6b, muted attacks are on the D string.

Ex. 7 is a fancy “6ths lick” phrase that is fortified with chromatic chicken pickin’ ornamentations on the D string. This high-octane technique has been used in one form or another over the years by every hot country player, from Joe Maphis to Brent Mason.

Ex. 8 proves that you don’t have to be playing in a country band to put chicken pickin’ to good use. In the style of Zakk Wylde’s hard-rocking countrified licks, the passage zips down the A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G) in sequenced fashion, fortified with super-aggressive, middle-finger picking attacks along the way.

OPEN STRINGS

As mentioned earlier, open strings are a prominent, permanent fixture in country lead guitar. The following seven examples depict a wide variety of open-string plays.

Ex. 9 is a low-string twanger, the

Ex. 6a

♩ = 200

A7

Ex. 6b

A7

Ex. 6c

A7

(m = middle finger)

Ex. 6d

A7

Ex. 7

♩ = 180

A7 D

Ex. 8

♩ = 200

A5

Ex. 9

♩ = 160

A7

likes of which has been used, in various permutations, in countless country and rockabilly solos and riffs, not to mention mainstream pop-rock (for example, the Kenny Loggins track “Footloose”).

Ex. 10 is an open-position, double pull-off fest. Cast for a G7 (G, B, D, F) tonality, it combines the scales G minor pentatonic (G, B $\flat$, C, D, F) and G major pentatonic (G, A, B, D, E) in a shape-oriented pattern along the G and D strings (3rd fret, 2nd fret, open string).

Ex. 11 is another open-position double pull-off example. Designed for an A7 (A, C $\sharp$, E, G) tonality, this lick follows the A Mixolydian mode (A, B, C $\sharp$, D, E, F $\sharp$, G) symmetrically down the G, D and A strings, capping off with a quarter-step bend on the low E string’s 3rd fret and culminating with an open A5 chord.

Ex. 12 introduces a country guitar technique known as the *banjo roll*. Getting its name from the arpeggiated picking techniques of bluegrass banjo stylists such as Lester Flatt (à la “Foggy Mountain Breakdown”), banjo rolls are most often played on a set of three adjacent strings, typically with one or more open strings. Here we find the D-G-B string set being used in the first two bars, segueing to the A-D-G set in bar 3. The first measure alone is worth the price of admission, as it could be cycled relentlessly at will to produce a mesmerizing soundscape over a static G7 chord. Bar 2 provides a G Mixolydian (G, A, B, C, D, E, F) effect, with a



melodic descent down the D string, reinforced with the root (G) and 3rd (B) of the G7 tonality. Measure 3 sets the G bluegrass scale (G, A, B $\flat$, B, D, E) at play on the next to lowest three-string set (A-D-G), closing on a low G root note.

Ex. 10

♩ = 160 (♩ = 3/4)

G7

let ring -- |

Ex. 11

♩ = 160 (♩ = 3/4)

A7

1/4

Ex. 12

♩ = 180

G7

w/pick & fingers
let ring throughout

□ m □ a m □ □ m a □ m a □ □ m a □ □ □

Ex. 13

♩ = 180

Am Am(maj7) Am7 Am6

w/pick & fingers: (m = middle; a = ring; □ = pick)
let ring throughout

□ m □ a □ m □ m □ a □ m □ m □ a □ m □

The trick to playing this lick is to follow the hybrid-picking notations faithfully: Pick down on the lowest string of each set, followed by middle (*m*) and ring (*a*) finger plucks. (Be sure to pluck the strings with an upward motion.)

Next in line in our open-string studies is the hybrid-picking passage shown in **Ex. 13**, which displays the “cascade” maneuvers made famous by Chet Atkins. This advanced technique, which is somewhat distant cousin to the banjo roll, produces scale-oriented melodies by staying consistent to set arpeggio patterns that are often played along adjacent four-string groupings. This example is played on the top-four string set, D-G-B-E. Start off by familiarizing your plucking fingers with

the hybrid-picking pattern in the first measure, as well as the fret-hand fingerings. Listen closely to the notes that are produced, and you should hear the first five notes of the A minor scale in ascending and descending fashion. Consider this the melodic motif, if you will. The following bars remain consistent, both in terms of the picking (roughly) and fretting, and virtually “roll” with the chord changes: Am (A, C, E) - Am(maj7) (A, C, E, G $\sharp$) - Am7 (A, C, E, G) - Am6 (A, C, E, F $\sharp$).

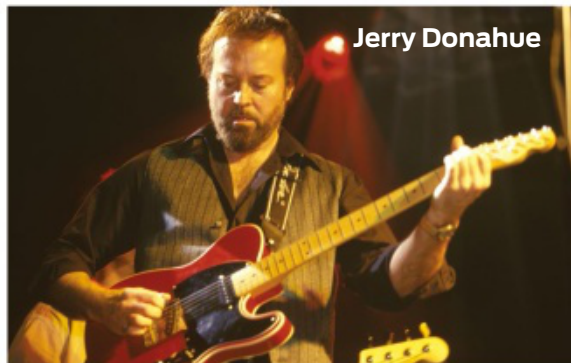
The final two examples in this open-string portion of the lesson are also based on the Chet Atkins “cascade” style but are more lick oriented (as opposed to chordal) in nature. **Ex. 14** is a pretty passage based on the E major scale (E,

F $\sharp$, G $\sharp$, A, B, C $\sharp$, D $\sharp$). **Ex. 15** is a moody phrase formed exclusively from the E minor pentatonic scale (E, G, A, B, D).

PEDAL-STEEL BENDS

Another common fixture in country lead guitar is the pedal steel-style string-bending technique. These special bending techniques are emulations of licks commonly performed on a pedal steel, which is essentially a lap-steel guitar that stands on four legs and additionally sports a system of foot pedals and knee levers that tighten and/or loosen designated strings to create precisely calibrated pitch bends. Quite difficult to master on guitar, pedal steel-style bends require strong bending fingers and a well-trained ear to zero in on the precisely intonated target pitch of the bent notes(s). (Consider using light-gauge strings to be a prerequisite for performing the following examples.)

Ex. 16a is a “starter” pedal steel-style bend that illustrates the basic approach. The concept is to hold the note on the high E string to its fixed pitch (G) while bending the B-string note up a whole-step, from D to E. This is what’s known as an *oblique bend*, for which one pitch moves up or down while another one is held stationary. At first, the natural tendency is to allow the pinkie to follow suit and bend the high E string slightly. Don’t allow this to happen! Concentrate on holding that finger firm in its fixed



position while simultaneously bending the B string with your 3rd finger. And, again, as indicated by the fingering “3(+2),” use your middle finger to assist with the bending. End-game result: a double-stop dyad that matches the chord tonality of the C chord, with the major 3rd (E) and 5th (G).

Ex. 14 A minor pentatonic

$\text{♩} = 150$

E

let ring throughout

Ex. 15

$\text{♩} = 132$ Em

let ring throughout

Ex. 16a

C

Ex. 16b

C

Ex. 16c

C

Ex. 17

$\text{♩} = 128$ C C⁶

let ring—

hold bend

Ex. 18

C⁷

let ring throughout

hold bend

Ex. 16b is a triple-stop oblique bend that results in a 1st-inversion C major triad (E, G, C). Here, the notes G and C on the top two strings are barred with the pinkie and held in place while the ring finger, supported one fret below by the middle, pushes the D note on the G string up a whole step to E.

Ex. 16c demonstrates a tricky and very cool-sounding variation on the triple-stop oblique-bending technique, for which the top note is bent instead of the bottom note. In this example, an inverted C5 power chord (C, G) is held in place on the D and A strings with the 3rd and 4th fingers while the 1st finger bends the G string, by pulling it *downward* (toward the floor, or in toward the palm), bending the D note, which is the major 2nd of C, up a whole step to E, the major 3rd. This is

a signature move of the great Jerry Donahue.

Our next three examples (17–19) employ pedal steel-style bends to supply chordal backdrop to single-note passages, emulating the kinds of slick, high-tech licks commonly featured by such highly accomplished country pickers as Brent Mason and Brad Paisley in their solos and lead fills. **Ex. 17** is a C major pentatonic (C, D, E, G, A) lick cast in 5th position. Seemingly nothing out of the ordinary here, except that the initial bend (D to E on the G string) is sustained throughout most of the phrase. In addition, the fretted notes on the B and high E strings are also held in place when the G-string bend is released to pitch.

Ex. 18 ups the challenge with a C Mixolydian-based lick (C, D, E, F, G, A,



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B $\flat$) that includes several bends that surround ringing fretted notes. Take this one slowly at first, being extra mindful to follow the fret-hand fingerings. Try to let all the notes ring as long as possible.

Ex. 19 is a standard “outro” phrase that employs the “downward G-string bend” tactic introduced earlier, in Ex. 16c. As with all of the previous pedal steel-style bend examples, be sure to follow the prescribed fingerings for maximum sustain and accuracy.

DOTTED-EIGHTH DELAY FLASH

Ex. 20 presents an awesome delay-pedal trick that will make even slowpoke country pickers sound like they’re galloping full speed toward the last roundup! Set the delay time to approximately 350ms (if you have a tap tempo feature, use the dotted-eighth setting and tap in quarter notes at 260bpm). Set the repeat to one generation (single repetition), and adjust the mix level 50 percent “wet,” so that the repeat is as loud as the attacked note. When you’re set up, play the TAB notation in steady quarter-note rhythms using a strong, staccato attack. The end result creates the aural illusion that you are playing twice as fast as you actually are — eighth notes instead of quarter notes. You can hear Albert Lee employing this effect in songs like “Fun Ranch Boogie,” “T-Bird to Las Vegas,” and “Arkansas Traveler.” John Jorgenson plays some dazzling dotted-eighth flash in “Price I Pay,” by the Desert Rose Band with Emmylou Harris, and the Hellecasters’ “Orange Blossom Special.”

TEXAS SWING

Last, but not least, **Ex. 21** is a “chord/melody” example in the style of “Texas swing” by Bob Willis and the Texas Playboys, as well as Asleep at the Wheel. Basically, the country counterpart to the big-band sound of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman, Texas swing (also known as Western swing) is a jazz-flavored country style that opens the door for colorful chord voicings played in catchy, danceable chord/melody-fashioned rhythms. As with the oblique

Ex. 19

$\text{♩} = 100$ D

let ring throughout

Acoustic Tips for Electric Players

How to maximize that big hollow box.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

THE GUITAR IS rather schizophrenic, being essentially one instrument with two polar opposite personalities. Acoustic was the only option for eons, but by the rock and roll era the script had flipped and electric instruments attracted different kinds of players. Manufacturers such as Taylor built their brand names creating acoustics that appealed to the electric base. Even the most die-hard electric aficionados often own an acoustic, even if it just hangs around the house, and most acoustics are more playable than the old war horses of yore. By its nature, the acoustic beast is a bit more to manage under the fingers, and the world of acoustic electronics is still alien to many. Here are a few suggestions to make the most of any acoustic experience.

TAKE CARE

Modern acoustics are generally easier than electrics to tweak without a tech's help, but also more susceptible to environmental changes. Neglect is the primary reason that house box gets hard to handle. Start by changing the strings. If it gets left out a lot, go with a coated set that will feel fresher longer. D'Addario's XS Phosphor Bronze strings are ultra durable, and I'm looking forward to checking out the brand-new XS 80/20s. Heavier strings deliver more tone but are harder to play, so unless the body size is a dreadnought or larger, go with a light-gauge set. Electric cats may still want to use lights on a dreadnought for easier playability.

Many vintage acoustics didn't have adjustable truss rods, but modern ones do, and a simple turn can make a ton of difference. Tighten it until the frets start to buzz a bit, and then loosen until the buzz is gone or acceptable. That's the

easiest action readily available. Keep the instrument in a space that has the most consistent temperature and humidity, and away from windows. If you hang it, choose an inside wall rather than one that faces outside. It's also a great idea to place your acoustic back in its case or bag with a two-way humidification system such as D'Addario's Humidipak every once in a while.



Eric Clapton in 1993. He led the movement toward smaller acoustics.

TRY A SMALLER/THINNER GUITAR

The voluptuous dreadnought was omnipresent during the '60s folk-rock revival and remains ubiquitous. When I was growing up in the 1980s, it seemed like the only option at most music stores, so that's what we bought. Hey, Stephen Stills and David Gilmour played them. But when Eric Clapton played a Martin triple 0 on *MTV Unplugged* in 1992 and "Tears in Heaven" became a giant hit, more modern players got hip to smaller acoustics. Some of those guitars, like Clapton's, actually pre-dated larger guitars. Myriad new models have come along since, including every sort of

hybrid acoustic-electric imaginable. Even traditional-minded Martin is in on the game with its shredder-friendly SC deep cutaway models. Takamine and Ibanez are well known for their thinline acoustics that look and feel a heck of lot like electrics. For traditional acoustics the main specification to understand is scale length. Shorter scale length means closer frets and looser feel, which makes it easier to play stretch chords and bend strings like an electric guitar.

TAKE IT TO THE STAGE

The final issue that keeps electric stalwarts from bringing their acoustic goodness to the masses is amplification. A player brings a new acoustic-electric guitar to the band's show, plugs it into the house direct box, and often ends up with an uninspiring sound through a worn-out monitor. Acoustic electronics is a huge discussion, but there are two simple moves to make forward progress.

First, get a dedicated acoustic amplifier to control your own sound onstage. Fender is doing great stuff with affordable acoustic amps. Even easier, simply get a magnetic sound-hole pickup for your acoustic guitar and run it through your electric rig. The acoustic guitar will now be essentially a hollowbody electric. It may not sound as truly "acoustic," but if you're not a purist, what's the big deal? Your pedals are at your disposal to manipulate the sound into something you dig, so have fun using your gadgets and gizmos. In fact, there's no law against trying the piezo signal through a tube amp. A lot of them sound shoddy, but some can actually sound pretty good. In his Frets interview on page 70, Jack Johnson reveals that his main sound onstage is the piezo signal from his Cole Clark acoustic into a Fender Twin.

The rule is, There are no rules. Do whatever makes the acoustic experience electrifying to you. 🎸

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.

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ERNIE BALL MUSIC MAN

Cutlass HT

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

BORN OUT OF the California bolt-neck electric guitar tradition, Ernie Ball Music Man has nevertheless continued to strive for originality and innovation. It's an attitude that has won over plenty of pro players, especially since the Ernie Ball company took the reins at Music Man back in 1984. The new HT Series shows a company that's still far from ready to rest on its laurels. As such, the Cutlass HT on review here might appear to be a familiar model, but it represents a significant shake-up for a modern classic from the Ernie Ball Music Man stable.

SPECIFICATIONS

Ernie Ball Music Man Cutlass HT

CONTACT music-man.com

PRICE \$2,899 street

NUT GraphTech, 1 5/8" wide

NECK Roasted maple

FRETBOARD Ebony, 25.5" scale, 10" radius

FRETS 22 high profile/medium width

TUNERS Schaller M6-IND locking

BODY Solid alder

BRIDGE Music Man modern tremolo with cover, bent-steel saddles

PICKUPS Three Music Man HT single-coils

CONTROLS Volume with push-push gain boost, tone, five-way switch

FACTORY STRINGS Ernie Ball M-Steel Hybrid Slinky .009-.046

WEIGHT 8.2 lbs

BUILT USA

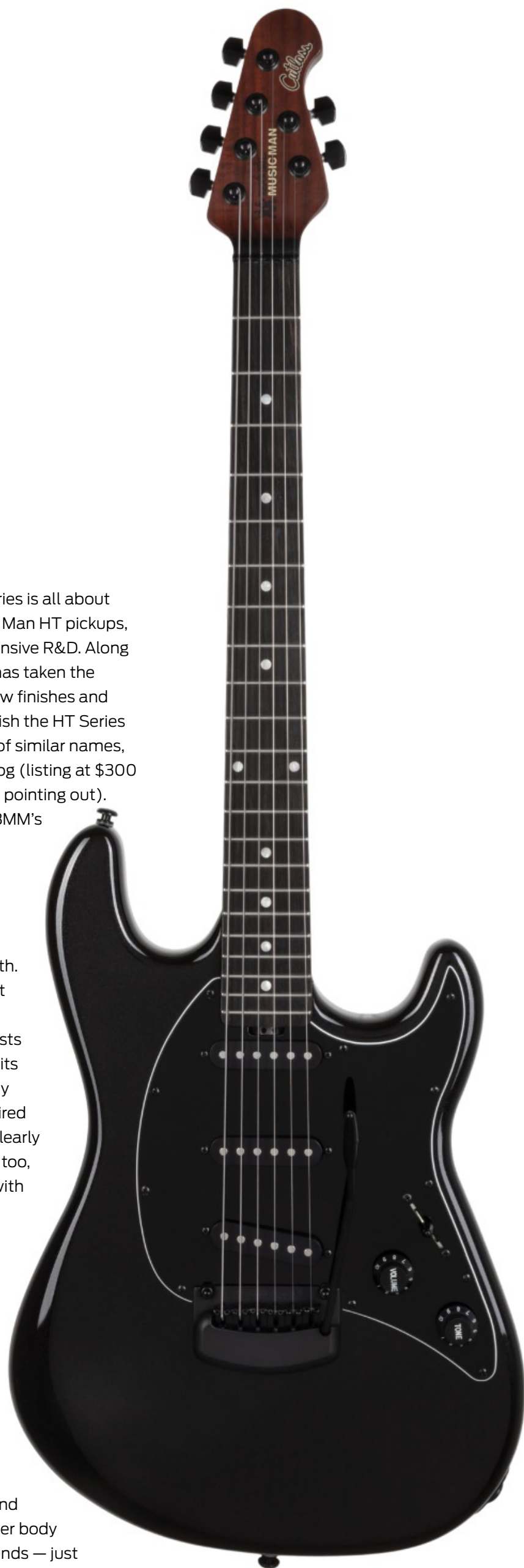
KUDOS Well-built and well-conceived, with great full-range pickups, a handy gain boost, and broad sonic capabilities overall

CONCERNS This example tips in a little heavy

In one sense, the HT Series is all about the newly developed Music Man HT pickups, the result of 10 years of intensive R&D. Along with them, though, EBMM has taken the opportunity to introduce new finishes and features to entirely distinguish the HT Series from the standard models of similar names, which still exist in the catalog (listing at \$300 less than the HTs, it's worth pointing out).

The Cutlass model is EBMM's take on the classic asymmetrical-double-cutaway, bolt-neck model from Fullerton, with three single-coil pickups, vibrato and a 25 1/2-inch scale length. But even before these latest upgrades, the model displayed several clever twists that give it a personality all its own. Among these, the body shape, while obviously inspired by the classic template, is clearly something a little different, too, streamlined and redrawn, with two knobs instead of three and a sleeker look to the EBMM tremolo bridge, in particular.

Our test sample looks particularly slick in its new Midnight Rider finish, a none-more-black regalia that displays a fine sparkly metallic layer amid the body finish, complemented by matte-black hardware and black plastics. The solid alder body weighs in at around 8.2 pounds — just



a little hefty for my tastes, for a guitar of this breed at least, although it's no boat anchor.

The neck on the Cutlass HT represents a component long regarded as one of EBMM's most innovative. The five-bolt attachment with sculpted heel, body-end truss-rod adjustment point, and four-plus-two headstock are joined by an extremely comfortable asymmetrical profile. EBMM has been hip to roasted maple for several years, and this piece displays some subtle flame that helps it sit well with the body's black finish and the ebony fingerboard, which carries another contemporary upgrade in its 22 stainless-steel frets.

Of course, a big part of what launches the Cutlass HT into the 21st century is found internally. In addition to features new to this series, the model sports EBMM's existing Silent Circuit, a hum-canceling network that nixes noise post-pickup while enabling the units themselves to remain proper single-coils. And what single-coils they are. Resulting from 10 years of guitar-string research at Ernie Ball, the new HT pickups are traditional electro-magnetic pickups in the broad sense, but they're made with heat-treated (hence the HT in the name) pole pieces and large neodymium magnets for a bigger, tighter low end, extended highs and more output overall, without sacrificing a clean and balanced sound. The bridge pickup is overwound with plain enamel wire (as used on the classic PAF humbucker, for example), for a thicker sound, while the neck and middle pickups are underwound using Formvar-coated wire as used on original S-style pickups, for a more traditional tone and response.

On top of all this, the Cutlass HT includes a transparent buffered output to retain signal integrity regardless of your volume control setting and long cable runs. And, finally there's the nifty internal boost circuit, engaged via a push-push switch on the volume control and powered by a nine-volt battery in a hatch around the back that requires no screwdriver for entry. The boost circuit is preset at the factory for +12dB, but an internal trim-pot lets you lower that or raise it to as much as 20dB.

I tested the Cutlass HT through a Princeton Reverb combo and a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini head with a 2x12 cab. At its core, this guitar simply plays and sounds like a great, classic S-style guitar. It might look a little different and carry several twists in the

build and components departments, but close your eyes and dig into your favorite riffs from SRV, Mark Knopfler, David Gilmour, Hendrix and other Stratophiles and there's nothing here to dissuade you from the authenticity of the experience. In fact, engage that push-push boost on the volume pot — more of which to come — and you might even find yourself attaining some of these tones more easily than you do on many passive S-style guitars.

The HT pickups do indeed produce a clear, balanced, full-fidelity signal, but I feel it's a mistake to come in with any preconceptions that they'll be inherently modern or sterile. I found them extremely dynamic and expressive, and easily capable of doing anything I'd hope to achieve with this style of guitar, and more. They're also well balanced, with just enough added grunt from the bridge position to beef up the twang and sidestep the ice-pick treble, while attaining traditional tones. Aligned with what I already said about the versatility in general, these HT pickups actually broaden the range of what can be achieved with this guitar, rather than hinder any efforts to attain classic or vintage tones.

The boost works very well and constitutes a significant bonus feature, adding a transparent, high-fidelity preamp into the chain at the press of a knob. At the preset +12dB, it's a little much for a quick solo boost, knocking volume levels up significantly, but as an always-on feature, with the guitar's volume control as the preamp gain, it adds a ton of range and flexibility. Dialing the volume control down to about five or six achieves unity with the Cutlass HT's unboosted levels, so if you start there, you've got a higher ceiling to work with as you wind it up for more bite, sting and drive.

Overall, if not an entirely new experience from the existing Cutlass SSS, the HT represents a significant upgrade and an advanced level of performance that plenty of players should really dig. 🍷



BLACKSTAR

St. James 6L6 Combo

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON



IT'S A SAFE bet that tube-powered guitar amps won't go out of style with guitar players anytime soon, but if there's one thing that drives players to find acceptable alternatives to tube technology, it's the weight. By nature tube amps are heavy, and for the most part people have just accepted it as fact that nothing can be done about it. But what if someone came up with an all-tube amp that

SPECIFICATIONS

Blackstar St. James 6L6 Combo

CONTACT blackstaramps.com

PRICE \$1,299

CHANNELS

Two

CONTROLS Volume I, gain II, volume II, bass, middle, treble, reverb. Gain II select switch, gain II voice switch, power switch (50 watts, Sag, 2 watts)

POWER 50 watts, switchable to 2 watts

TUBES Two 12AX7s, two 6L6s (also available with EL34s)

SPEAKER 12" Celestion G12Z-70 Zephyr (16Ω)

EXTRAS Effects loop with -10 dBv/+4 dBv switch. Built-in reactive load, Cab Rig speaker simulator with 3-position cabinet selector, 1/4" stereo line-out/headphone jack and XLR balanced out. Three speaker jacks (1x8Ω, 2x16Ω, 1x16Ω) USB audio. Two-button foot switch included for channel select and reverb on/off

WEIGHT 28.48 lbs (tested)

BUILT China

KUDOS Easy to carry. Great range of clean and overdriven tones. Well equipped for recording thanks to built-in reactive load with three preset cab sims. Free Cab Rig software lets you change cabs, mics, rooms and more

CONCERNS Clean channel tones are a little strident when pushed into distortion. Cabinet vibrates excessively at higher volume, causing items set on it to tumble off

weighed about as much as a typical solid-state rig?

Well Blackstar has done just that with the St. James series 50-watt heads and 1x12 combos, which tip the scales at 13 and 28 pounds respectively. (A matching 2x12 speaker cabinet weighs 29 pounds and runs \$749.) The James gang claim to be the lightest 50-watt amps available. So how did Blackstar accomplish it? For starters, the patented design features a new output transformer that uses "specific interleaving of the windings, careful choice of lamination materials, and a couple of other geometric considerations" that allow it to deliver the tone Blackstar required while reducing the OT's size and weight. Other contributing factors include a new lightweight Celestion Zephyr speaker that's based on a Vintage 30 and does not use a neodymium magnet. The cabinets are also made of real wood — candlewood ply, to be exact.

Removing the folded-steel chassis to have a look inside reveals circuitry that's laid out on five interconnected PC boards that grip most of the components, including the tube sockets. The pots, jacks and switches are also attached to the chassis for extra strength. The output transformer is indeed quite small and sits atop, next to the tubes, and the 400-volt power supply is fan cooled and housed in a separate, perforated-steel cage bolted to the chassis.

The main difference between these amps is one uses EL34 output tubes and has a British-voiced medium-gain lead channel

while the other uses 6L6 tubes and has a lead channel that Blackstar says is their highest-gain channel ever. Both versions have identical "blackface-style" clean channels that offer crisp highs and tight low end, and all other details are identical except for the fawn covering and dark gray grille cloth of the EL34 version versus the black covering and salt-and-pepper grille cloth of the 6L6 model.

To test the 6L6 combo, I initially used it on a gig that involved a hike to reach the stage. This is where the St. James' weight was most appreciated, especially compared to my 39-pound Deluxe Reverb. With a Tele or an ES-335, the St. James sounded great with its clean channel turned up to around two o'clock to get a slightly gritty tone when the guitars were cranked. The response was similar to a Deluxe with its volume around five, although for some reason the Blackstar sounded harder when its volume was pushed past the point where the sound begins to break up.

A Fulltone OCD pedal hitting the front end yielded a nice range of overdriven tones. Channel I cleans up well when the guitar volume is turned down, and when you need to crank, it gets intensely loud. I mostly kept the master volume around one or two o'clock and used the Sag setting, which produces a slightly softer, tube-rectifier feel. The two-watt setting is handy for rehearsing and recording, and it's loud enough for a small gig. Blackstar achieves the reduced wattage by lowering the voltage in the circuit, not by using a power soak, which would affect the tube tone.

Channel II is a completely different animal that has tons of gain and is voiced to deliver classic British overdrive with tight, thumping lows and ballsy midrange. I set the gain II knob about a quarter way up and had plenty of sustain for lead and slide playing. Activating Channel II's voice switch bumps up the gain and low end, and you get that looser, modern vibe, with lots of chug. There's no clean range to speak of in Channel II, but that's cool because it's optimized for rock and metal. If you prefer to have two channels that can be set to deliver American- and British-style tones without such a drastic change in gain — and therefore perhaps be a better platform for pedals — the EL34 version is probably more your cup of tea.

The St. James (which is named for an ancient abbey in Blackstar's hometown of Northampton) features a digital reverb that sounds reasonably blackface-like, along with an effects loop with a level switch. As you'd expect from a modern tube amp, it's also well



equipped for recording and DI applications, thanks to its built-in reactive load, which comes after the tube stages so that it sees the full whack of the amplifier. On the bottom rear panel there's a stereo line/headphone out and a balanced XLR out that came in handy for going direct or for silent recording. A mini-toggle selects three different cabinets that are factory loaded — and they all sounded good though a PA — however, you can change them by connecting the USB to a computer and using Blackstar's free Cab Rig software to select different cabs (an

assortment of 2x12s, 4x12s, 1x12s and 1x10s are available, along with a DI option), as well as microphones, rooms, damping and EQ settings (preset or user-adjustable). Saving customized cabs is simple, and you can save them to the amp if you want to replace any or all of the three stock cabs.

Well-equipped for just about any situation, and remarkably easy to carry considering the wallop it packs, the St. James is a shoe-in for an Editor's Pick Award. Kudos to Blackstar for cracking the code on making a tube amp that won't break your back or your wallet. **B**

LARS TAYLOR

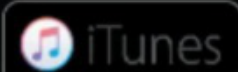
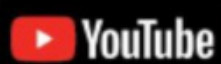
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TAYLOR

724ce Koa Grand Auditorium

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

SOME PEOPLE ARE obsessed with power; some are obsessed with fame. Taylor chief guitar designer, president and CEO Andy Powers is obsessed with koa, and that's the name of the game for the new additions to the 700 series: the 722ce Grand Concert and 724ce Grand Auditorium, the latter of which is on review here. It's a totally different take on the lovely Hawaiian hardwood from a manufacturer who is passionate about koa.

"I love building guitars out of koa," Powers says. "I love the look, the smell and the sound. This guitar started from materials as we furthered our relationship with our colleagues at Pacific Rim Tonewoods."

Whereas Taylor's luxurious Koa Series guitars are made from the highest instrument-grade wood, full of curls and swirls, and laced with copious organic appointments, these koa additions to the 700

SPECIFICATIONS

724ce Koa Grand Auditorium

CONTACT taylorguitars.com

PRICE \$3,499 street

NUT WIDTH 1.75" black Tusq

NECK Tropical mahogany

FRETBOARD West African ebony, 25.5" scale

FRETS 20

TUNERS Taylor polished bronze

BODY Solid Hawaiian koa back, sides and top (V-Class bracing)

BRIDGE West African ebony with Tusq saddle
ELECTRONICS Taylor ES2 with volume, bass, and treble controls

FACTORY STRINGS Phosphor Bronze Light

WEIGHT 4.7 lbs (as tested)

BUILT USA

KUDOS Organic look and feel. Sensitive dynamic response. Clear, sweet tone. Good value. Eco-conscious

CONCERNS Sharp nut edges. Not for the heavy handed

series take a more workmanlike approach.

This essentially straight-grain koa is more uniquely streaked and less extravagantly figured than the Koa Series. And rather than a beautifully polished, multilayered high-gloss finish with a dark stain, the treatment here is super thin and practically unfinished, for a lighter appearance.

To be clear, Taylor's koa comes from the same sustainably managed Hawaiian forest. Some wood simply appears different inside the tree. It's analogous to some people having curly hair while others have straight hair. Powers saw it as an opportunity to make a more straightforward guitar with a different voicing for a different style player. He says, "I want the guitar to look the way it sounds, and sound the way it feels."

There is a direct correlation to Taylor's Ebony Project. Prior to it, everyone from loggers to manufacturers to players assumed that the only desirable ebony was solid dark wood. But that turned out to be a purely cosmetic concern resulting from collective expectations. When Taylor bought a West African ebony mill and started marketing "striped ebony" in a positive light, both in terms of forest management and aesthetics, lots of players agreed. Perfectly fine ebony trees no longer waste away in the forest after being cut open, and many players prefer the unique nature of striped ebony.

Taking the 724ce out of its case, the only thought that crosses the mind is, "Gorgeous!" I especially love how the seafoam-green paua-shell rosette appears, set inside the



flowing wood grains. Who doesn't love genuine seashell inlays on a stunning tonewood? Mother-of-pearl Fountain inlays grace an ebony fretboard as well. A dark-stained maple pickguard blends seamlessly, and the polished bronze tuners practically match the wound phosphor-bronze strings. A white Tusq saddle is the only thing that sticks out, especially since the nut is black Tusq. The open-pore matte satin finish facilitates a direct, organic feel of wood against skin.

Indeed, the clear, natural sound matches the feel. It's lighter and far less dampened than the Koa Series. It takes very little pick energy to set the 724's top in motion, and its sensitivity facilitates extreme nuance. It's very player reflective, capable of a wide variety of tones, from mellow to bright, depending on the attack. Caress the strings with a light touch and be rewarded with lovely dynamics at low volume. This is a V-Class instrument made of solid woods, but the thickness and back bracing are different from a K Series. The

bass is less booming but still strong. The focus is a warm, sweet middle range, with a detailed sparkle on top. The 724ce invites fingerpicking and playing with a flexible plectrum. Play too hard and the top end becomes more brittle and less beautiful. For that reason, heavy strummers and bass mongers may prefer the heartier Koa Series models. If you like your instrument lively and sensitive to subtlety, the 724ce delivers. Plugged into a Fender Acoustic Junior GO, its tone was balanced from string to string, and it was easy to add a bit of tropic thunder to complement the vivacious acoustic koa tone with a quarter turn of the bass control.

The 724ce plays easily and precisely up and down the neck, and that's no surprise, as Taylor guitars are remarkably consistent. The neck has a modern profile, and the action is so supple that it's easy to forget you're playing an acoustic. I was surprised to find somewhat sharp edges on either side of the nut, but the fret edges were nice and smooth.

For those who have longed for a koa Taylor but couldn't manage the luxury price tag of the K Series, here's an attractive and far more affordable option. The 724ce is clearly aimed less at collectors and more at everyday players. One could draw a correlation to Taylor's workmanlike American Dream Series. If you like a chunky sound and a bit of fight back under your fingers, this is not the instrument for you. The 724ce is for players that appreciate a lighter, freer, more touch-sensitive tone. The Grand Auditorium body, with its Venetian cutaway and onboard electronics, accommodates myriad styles and applications, from the studio to the stage. I had a chance to compare the 724 to the 722 at the NAMM show. It's essentially similar, but the smaller size yields a slightly softer tone with less gumption and a more crystalline quality, so it's more suitable for parlor-style fingerpickers and troubadours. Kudos to Taylor for finding another creative way to bring "aloha" to the musical masses. 

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FENDER

Hammertone effects pedals

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

FENDER'S NEW LINE of Hammertone effects pedals features nine models, all in the same grey-finished 4.375 x 2.375 x 1.375-inch aluminum enclosure, with differently colored "F" logo "witch-hat" knobs derived from Fender's semi-hollow Starcaster guitar of the mid to late '70s. Priced at what's arguably the entry level for roadworthy pedals, the full range includes the utilitarian-monikered Overdrive, Distortion, Fuzz, Metal, Reverb, Delay, Space Delay, Flanger and Chorus. There are no compressor, phaser or tremolo models yet, although rumors of future additions abound. The drive-based pedals are



fully analog, while the others use digital processing with analog dry-through.

Other commonalities of the range include true-bypass switching and top-mounted mono input and output jacks either side of the center-negative nine-volt jack (a nine-volt

battery can also be used internally). All were tested using a Fender Telecaster with standard single-coil pickups and a Gibson Les Paul with full-size humbuckers into a Friedman Dirty Shirley Mini and 2x12 cab, and a Fender Princeton Reverb Reissue combo.

OVERDRIVE

The Overdrive has four red-capped knobs for gain, level, tone and pre-mid boost. The latter is more fully described as a pre-gain mid boost, an EQ control that lets you boost or attenuate the midrange to help dial in your cutting power. In addition, the Overdrive contains an internal trim pot to dial down the ultra-high frequencies, helping you tame single-coil pickups or harsh amps.

A thick, gutsy, medium-gain overdrive that pushes toward heavy saturation with the gain control up high, the Overdrive doesn't try to cop the classics as such, but its flavor and feel lean more toward the earlier days of this breed of pedal — a little Distortion+, if you will — in its body and attitude, without copying



that precise tone. It's a great tone thickener for single-coils with the gain down lower, and it's adept at rock and roll with leads wound up higher, with the very effective pre-mid boost dialing between scooped lead tones and in-your-face midrange punch.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$79 street

CONTROLS Gain, level, tone, pre-mid boost, internal high EQ

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS Easy to dial in, and vintage-leaning tonally, without cloning any specific classic

CONCERNS None

DISTORTION

Orange knobs and a bouncy, cartoonish font seem to hint at a late-'60s/early-'70s British vibe for Distortion's aesthetics. It offers up to 15dB of boost and cut for each frequency band in its two-knob EQ, and there are two internal trim pots — midrange and high-end cut — for further EQ tweaking.

The thick, meaty, warm distortion available here takes me quickly to those glory days of super-cranked guitars, when flannel shirts and ripped jeans ruled the streets and grunge segued into heavy rock on stages



across the U.S. Unlike some early "brick wall" distortion pedals, this one was very dynamic and playable, and it interacted nicely with both my amps, slathering on a ton of rock tones for a wide array of playing styles.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$79 street

CONTROLS Gain, level, bass, treble, internal midrange and high-cut

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS Ballsy and characterful, with a lot of external and internal EQ tweakability

CONCERNS None

METAL

Fender's new Metal pedal gets the black knob caps, naturally, with essentially the same control functions as the Distortion, above, while the internal midrange and high-cut trim pots provide further frequency sculpting.

While obviously a sibling of the Distortion, the Metal pedal does a great job of nailing contemporary high-gain tones with a lot of saturation, sustain and razor-sharp sizzle. Most impressively, it's all available through a wide range of voices, thanks to the powerful and versatile EQ, which takes you from scooped to gut-punch to machine-grind midrange glory. Powerful stuff.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$79 street

CONTROLS Gain, level, low, high, internal high EQ, internal midrange and high-cut

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS Usable and versatile high-gain tones well suited to both contemporary metal and more classic varieties

CONCERNS None

FUZZ

Fender bills the Fuzz as a '60s-inspired fuzz using silicon diodes, which delivers the lower noise floor and higher output levels demanded by many players circa 2022, while



it achieves tones reaching back through several decades. Pink knobs and a pink LED lead the stylistic cues, and there's one mini-toggle switch on top to enable the octave-up tone. Like the Overdrive, the Fuzz also carries an internal trim pot to further tame super-high frequencies.

While many simple fuzz designs can be one-trick ponies, the Fuzz manages a plethora of moods across the range of its eponymous control. Less a smooth-and-treacley lead machine and more a semi-jagged, ripped-Velcro grinder, it nevertheless rolls from relatively subtle to gutsy sludge, with plenty of gain make-up to push the amp hard and useful high-end taper from the dual tone and internal EQ controls.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$79 street

CONTROLS Fuzz, tone, level, internal high EQ

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS Great character and surprising versatility from an edgy and snarly leaning fuzz

CONCERNS None

DELAY

With two different echo pedals among the offerings, the Delay is the more modern all-purpose variety of the pair. It offers an impressive 950ms of delay time, available in three modes via the external

mini-toggle: Digital (a.k.a. modern), Analog and Tape, the latter two obviously emulations thereof. Time, feedback and level controls take the brunt of the duties, and there's another two-way toggle to add a chorus-like modulation as desired, with rate and depth adjusted at the internal trim pots.

In use, this proves a great all-purpose contemporary delay pedal, with three useful voices running from crisp to characterful, and



surprisingly sweet modulation to boot. I was impressed by both the lack of noise and the quality of the repeats. The feedback knob's taper is very sensitive, and it's difficult to go from a single repeat to just two or three without tipping into a dozen or so, but it all functions well otherwise.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Time, feedback, level

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, toggles for type and mod(ulation)

KUDOS A good-sounding and surprisingly versatile digital delay all round, especially at this price

CONCERNS Early taper on the feedback knob makes it tricky to dial in limited repeats

SPACE DELAY

The Space Delay is more purely dedicated to tape-echo emulations, again via DSP, with a maximum delay time of 950ms. Its controls are the same as on the Delay pedal — time, feedback and level — but this unit includes a three-way toggle that offers three delay patterns that replicate the repeats from different combinations of tape heads. It also has an on-off toggle for modulation, with trim pots available inside for rate and depth.

Although it otherwise seems similar to the Delay, the Space Delay's dedication to tape-emulated character throughout all of its settings means there's more analog-emulated personality throughout the range, which is something I might prefer if I were using this for retro-voiced stylings or even more trenchant shoe-gazing atmospherics. As such, it's relatively warm and thick throughout, and the three repeat pattern selections provide easy access to creative feedback variations. Its modulation is similar to that of the Delay, too, giving it an impressive amount of personality overall.



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Level, feedback, time

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, toggles for pattern and mod(ulation)

KUDOS A lot of tape-emulated character and handy features in an easy and affordable package

CONCERNS Can take some fine tuning to balance your ideal pattern switch and feedback knob settings

REVERB

I can see the Reverb pedal at this size and price point appealing to a lot of players who need a little splash or ambience in their rig but don't want to mess with the prices or complex interfaces of some of the

bigger digital engines out there. Controls include level, tone and damp, the latter gradually attenuating highs and eventually squelching the reverb tails when used in extreme. Although Fender's literature declares "Fender & Reverb – name a more iconic duo," the three-way mode switch accesses Hall, Room and Plate reverbs, with no emulation of the spring reverb that the company proliferated in the '60s. The tone switch instantly shelves highs in the reverb signal to warm it up.

As a useful pedal for dialing in a little room sound or more dramatic effects, the Reverb doesn't really suffer much from the lack of a spring setting, since many players today are looking for atmospherics more than that surfy splash. At lower time and level settings, the differences between types are subtle, but turning them up about halfway reveals lush, dark reverberations in the Hall setting in particular, as well as some very useful Plate sounds, although higher level settings start to sound a little gimmicky.



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Time, level, damp

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, toggles for type and tone

KUDOS Handy, good sounding and priced right for those who need a little or a lot of room sound in a compact package

CONCERNS No spring emulation, but arguably it doesn't need it

CHORUS

The surf-green knobs for rate, depth and level control are the most significant parameters on the Chorus, while the type toggle taps three classic chorus styles, and the tone toggle tames the highs in the wet signal to help it sit less obtrusively in the mix.

Although it leans toward more contemporary sounds, the Chorus pedal's type switch provides a decent variety of voicings, allowing it to dial up an impressively usable palette of shimmer and swirl for a broad range of genres. Subtler settings proved to be my favorites, adding luscious depth and motion without getting too seasick. It's a very good-sounding pedal overall, with maybe a little background noise when the level is turned up. For those who don't require more complex or vintage-precise choruses, this is a handy sub-\$100 box.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Rate, depth, level

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, toggles for type and tone

KUDOS A good sounding chorus with impressive flexibility for its size and price range

CONCERNS Arguably sounds a little metallic at deeper depth and level settings



FLANGER

A digital modulation circuit with analog dry-through signal powers the Flanger, which offers impressive versatility despite its outward simplicity. Seafoam-green-capped knobs offer control over

rate, depth and manual (the latter sweeps through the resonance range). The three-way res toggle offers different intensities of resonance, while the type switch toggles between more intense and mellower flanging sounds. There's no internal trim pot.

Flanging is another '70s child that really saw its heyday in the 1980s, and the Flanger impressed me by being more usable and musical than many, which is saying something at this price range. Just a touch adds lovely dimension and spin to the tone without the nausea-inducing space-time-melding sounds that some issue forth, though it will do those too if you push it hard. Overall, this is a sweet little flanger with a surprisingly tasty core voicing.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Depth, rate, manual

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, toggles for res(onance) and type

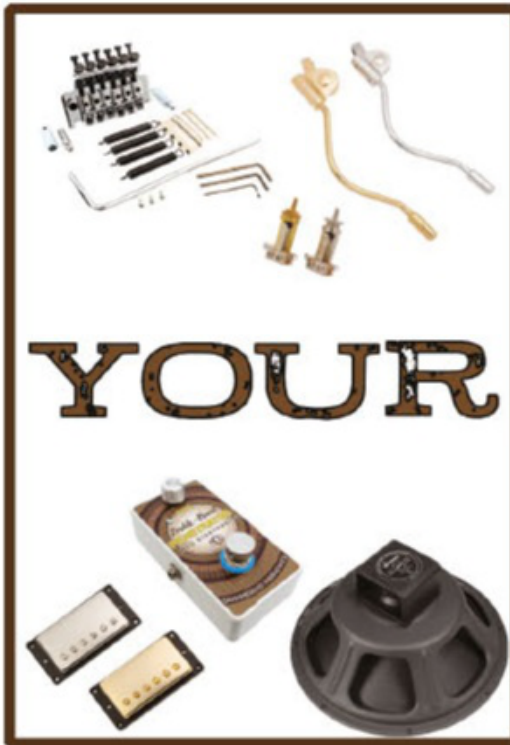
KUDOS Impressively natural and organic sounding for a lower-priced flanger

CONCERNS None



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KEELEY ELECTRONICS

Halo Andy Timmons Dual Echo

TESTED BY JUDE GOLD

LONGTIME ANDY TIMMONS fans surely remember an era when the Texas guitar hero gigged with two vintage Electro-Harmonix Memory Man analog delay pedals at his feet. He would run the huge stompboxes in series, with large foot-operable levers attached to the mix knobs, allowing him to adjust effects levels on the fly. It was a primitive setup that hogged an immense amount of pedalboard real estate, but it was all part of Timmons' eternal quest to achieve the ultimate echo sound. Generating pristine, subtly modulated reflections that ricocheted dreamily behind the notes, the setup made simple guitar phrases sound spectacular.

Now you can get Timmons' treasured echo sound without having to spend hours or

SPECIFICATIONS

Halo Andy Timmons Dual Echo

CONTACT robertkeeley.com

PRICE \$299

CONTROLS Feedback (push and hold to engage the other knobs' alternate functions), time/high pass filter, level/saturation, rate/tone, depth/rhythm. Foot switches activate either of current bank's two presets. Toggle switch advances bank.

EXTRAS Mono/stereo inputs and outputs. Eight presets. Tap tempo with multiple rhythmic subdivisions. Infinite hold. Trails/true-bypass switchable. Controllable via expression pedal and/or remote switch

BUILT USA

KUDOS Packing more features than its small size would suggest, this versatile stompbox delivers everything from digital delay, chorus and slap-back sounds to heavenly modulated echo treatments, including Andy Timmons' coveted Halo setting

CONCERNS Ping-pong echo fiends take note: Although the Halo serves up beautifully stereophonic echo sounds, true left/right stereo repeats are not on the menu

days toying with a mountain of old analog delays and tape echoes, as he has been doing his whole life. Just hit preset 1A on Keeley Electronics' new Halo pedal, and his go-to echo setting is yours.

For the Timmons fan, having instant access to this sound is a huge score. It's like an RC Cola engineer suddenly getting the recipe for Coke. Playing in mono, à la Timmons' Memory Man setup, the effect is quite inspiring, seducing your ears with hypnotic repeats tastefully chorused via the modulation and depth knobs, and warmed and compressed by the high-pass filter and saturation controls. The most hypnotic aspect of this patch may be how the ethereal, dovetailing echoes gradually diffuse into a pleasant, reverb-like wash — a "halo," as Timmons describes it.

Running this patch in stereo through two amplifiers geometrically expands the magic, and the sound is so scrumptious it may make even a die-hard mono player crave a stereo rig. Interestingly, while the Halo's delays are truly stereophonic, the signature diffusion sound Timmons loves arises from how the modulated delays, rather than ping-ponging aggressively left and right, subtly drift in time on each side of the mix, all the while leaving the initial guitar signal unaffected.

While Timmons' halo tone may be this box's flagship feature, it's important to note that this compact pedal is — like the Keeley Eccos and Hydra pedals, which share the same layout of knobs, switches and LEDs — a most versatile stompbox. (Robert Keeley says that, thanks to a new circuit board, the Halo noise floor is even lower than that of its sister pedals.) From slapback echo and rich stereo chorus to ultra-saturated overdriven tape echo-style repeats and standard digital delay sounds (attained by opening the high-pass filter and minimizing saturation), the Halo is primed for many a pro application.

Halo's handy utilities include infinite repeat, which is engaged by holding down whichever foot switch is inactive along with



tap tempo (hold down the active foot switch to enter tap-tempo mode). The pedal offers five tap-controllable subdivisions, including dotted-eighth, quarter-note and "golden ratio" (quarter-note plus dotted-eighth-note) stacked echoes. The latter subdivision is a key part of the Timmons' halo sound, and is represented by the circular halo graphic located at the noon position of the rhythm control. And forget those clumsy foot levers from Timmons' past — mix levels and any other parameter can be controlled using your favorite expression pedal.

To advance to the Halo's next preset bank, just flick the toggle switch, or, better yet, step on both foot switches at once. And while I dig all the factory patches that Timmons, Keeley and Keeley DSP engineer Aaron Tackett came up with for the Halo, it's great that you can write over them to store your own patches. This means you have eight places to store new sounds — well, realistically, seven, because you'll never write over that first Andy Timmons patch.

My favorite Halo trait, though, is that it is, in the best possible way, a real productivity interrupter. When I unboxed it, set it up in stereo and started playing, I lost two hours soaring in those echoes, playing for the pure joy of it, reveling in the illusion each of us hope every new pedal will bring — the feeling that, somehow, the new guitar gizmo at our feet has made us a better player. 🎸

WALRUS AUDIO

Mira optical compressor

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

WALRUS AUDIO BROUGHT studio-grade compression to guitar effects with Deep Six, a pedal inspired by Universal Audio's industry-standard rackmount 1176 FET compressor. Now the Oklahoma City-based company has introduced Mira, an analog optical compressor that offers smooth, transparent compression in a pedal that boasts studio-quality features, specs and headroom.

If you're among the guitarists who have incorporated a compressor into your rig, you undoubtedly appreciate how the device can tame dynamics and transients, add detail and improve sustain. Mira does all of the above but has a few additional tricks up its sleeve, as we'll see. It also has, like all Walrus pedals, eye-catching graphics, in this case a smoke-grey enclosure with art by Adam Forster that depicts bodies rising heavenward from a barren desert plain, a cunning hint to the pedal's impact on your tone.

Like most compressors, Mira has controls for input level, threshold (where compression begins to take effect), ratio (the amount of gain reduction applied to your signal) and

makeup, which adds back volume lost through compression. Two smaller controls govern attack and release. It's all fairly standard stuff for a compressor pedal, but Mira also has a handy button on the pedal's right side to engage a high-pass filter that cuts frequencies below 120Hz, preventing strong bass frequencies from assertively triggering the compressor.

Most significantly, Mira has a blend knob, a versatile feature found on an increasing number of compressor pedals these days. The blend control changes the signal from full dry to full wet as you turn it clockwise, permitting parallel compression, a studio technique in which a dry signal is blended with its compressed counterpart. Whereas standard compression levels off transients, parallel compression decreases the overall dynamic range of the combined signals, which allows more subtle details to become audible. In this way, you can use it to add varying degrees of fullness and clarity to your guitar's sound, sculpting its tone in ways ordinary compressors can't.

Adding to all this, Mira runs internally at ± 15 volts DC, allowing for higher headroom, even while it operates at nine volts. The result is a cleaner signal path, which is especially important if you already have a boost or distortion pedal in your chain.

Tested with a variety of electrics and acoustics, including a Gibson ES-345 and J-160E, Mira made everything I threw at it sound more present and full, while it evened out dynamics and imparted a more polished, studio-quality tone. Like most optical compressors, Mira is transparent, smooth and musical. The attack and release knobs have plenty of useful range, although if you're like me, you'll find your favorite spots — in my case, a slightly slow attack to preserve the transients, and a long release for sustain — and leave them set.



As expected, I spent most of my time twiddling the blend control, and the results were rewarding. Turning it up toward the 12 o'clock position brought in a bloom of low-mid warmth and detail which increased ever so nicely as I continued toward the upper reaches of the dial, at which point you're hearing the compressor on its own. Overall, I found the zone between noon and three o'clock to be my favorite, where I could work Mira like a low-mid boost to dial in just the right amount of body, clarity and sustain. It was especially nice on my ES-345 and the J-160E, allowing me to control how much resonance I wanted to hear. The high-pass filter was also useful here to keep Mira from triggering in response to each guitar's low frequencies.

As some will know, Mira is a Spanish command for *look*, and the name is appropriate for a pedal that will lift your tone to make it more commanding and present. Like the souls rising skyward on its painted chassis, Mira will take your guitar's sound to a more perfect place. It's one of those pedals that, once you find the sweet spot, you'll never turn off. 🎸

SPECIFICATIONS

Mira optical compressor

CONTACT walrusaudio.com

PRICE \$249

CONTROLS Threshold, ratio, make-up, level, attack, release, blend

EXTRAS High-pass filter, gain-reduction LED, bypass status LED

FEATURES True-bypass. Runs internally at ± 15 VDC for increased headroom

POWER 9 volts (adapter not included)

DIMENSIONS 4.77" x 2.6" x 2.28" (HxWxD)

BUILT USA

KUDOS Transparent compression, with versatile blend control to dial in the perfect amount of compression, sustain and detail

CONCERNS None



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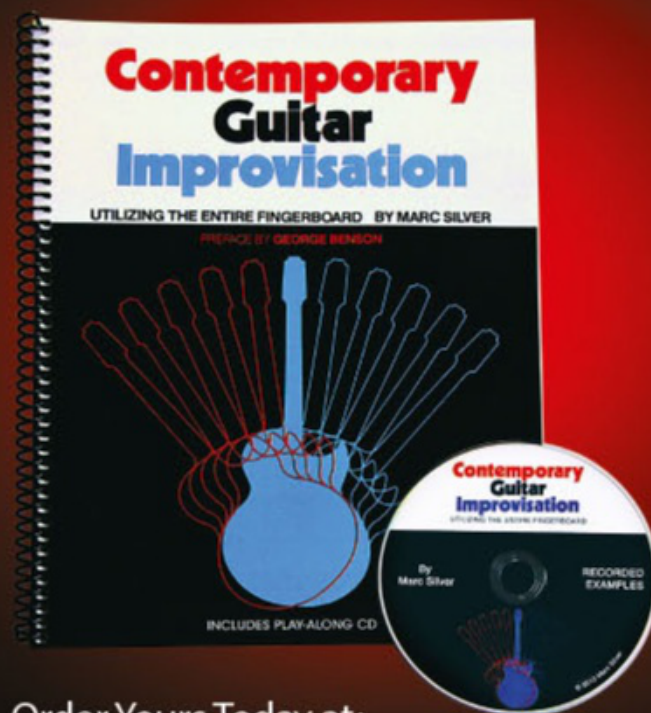
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How I Wrote...

“Vincent”

Recorded in 30 takes with his Martin 00-21, Don McLean’s 1972 hit has delivered mixed blessings.

BY MARK MC STEA

AS THE SECOND single from *American Pie*, Don McLean’s 1972 album, “Vincent” rode to the U.S. charts on a wave of popularity, thanks to that long-player’s megahit title track. Often recalled by its opening line, “Starry, starry night,” itself a reference to Vincent Van Gogh’s celebrated June 1889 painting *The Starry Night*, “Vincent” is an evocative reverie on the artist’s life and work. Remarkably, neither it nor its companion hit existed when McLean began recording the album. “I had everything except ‘Vincent’ and ‘American Pie,’” he tells *Guitar Player*.

TALKING PICTURES

The starting point for “Vincent” was a book about Van Gogh written by his brother, Theo. “He wanted to set the record straight that Vincent hadn’t killed himself over a woman but because of mental health reasons,” McLean says. “That started my wheels turning, and I knew I wanted to write a song about him. I spent a whole lot of time wondering how to do it, but every single idea that I came up with sounded silly and lightweight. So I decided to look at the *Starry Night* painting and let that tell me how to write the song.

“As I was looking at it, the words and music just came into my head. It was as if the painting was writing the song. That’s the way that I write songs. I come up with the melody and lyrics together, usually. Once I get a little piece of action going, I can decide where I want to go with it.”

Even so, the song’s fingerpicked guitar performance stands up as a piece of music

in its own right. “I’ve always studied many different acoustic styles, from Doc Watson right through to the great flamenco artists,” McLean explains. “It all comes through in my playing. The tone that you get from your guitar is always the most important thing.”

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT

Contrary to reports that McLean will only do one take of a song, “Vincent” was the product of many hours in the studio with his Martin 00-21. The track also features accordion, marimba and strings.

“‘Vincent’ is basically me and the guitar, recorded as a live version,” McLean says. “But I think we did about 30 takes before we really felt we’d got the definitive one. That means that what you get is exactly how the guitar wraps itself around my voice as I’m playing through the song. It creates a single entity, and that’s what I do.

“There are subtleties in the performance, in terms of tempo, while it remains constant.

The feel sometimes pushes or pulls against the pulse.

I like to sing around the beat, ahead, behind or even right on it, which I think all adds to the emotional intensity of the performance.”

HIT SHOW

Released in February 1972, some four months after “American Pie,” “Vincent” rode to number 12 on the

Billboard Hot 100 and was a chart-topping hit on the U.K. Singles chart. Fifty years on, its success has been a mixed blessing for the guitarist, who had never expected the tune to have such staying power. On the one hand, he says, “nothing had ever lasted that long at that stage, you know? The Beatles, they weren’t that far back in my past in 1971.”

On the other hand, McLean gripes, “my entire career has been focused on two songs, specifically. Nobody has ever taken the time to examine my singing, the scope of the works I’ve created overall, my recording or my guitar playing. It’s always those two songs. Nobody ever discusses my art. I’m an artist and I do many, many different things, but people have never taken the time or had the respect for me to find out anything about the broader body of my work.

“If you just look at ‘Vincent,’ you can study my singing, playing and how they interweave, and that is a whole aspect that never really gets discussed. The reason that it was

successful was because of the way that I did those things. People forget. They think it’s a beautiful song with beautiful words, but they would never have heard it if I hadn’t recorded it with my guitar and my voice. That’s what did it. It’s the same for ‘American Pie’ as well. I felt like I had to fight with everybody to get those songs released as I envisioned them.”



Don McLean performs circa 1972.

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