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THE TIME"

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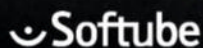
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REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

NITA STRAUSS HAS been one of the more extraordinary guitarists to explode on the scene in recent years. In 2016, just two years after Alice Cooper hired her to replace departing axe woman Orianthi, Nita became the first female guitarist to have her own Ibanez signature model, the JIVA10. Two years after that, she launched a wildly successful Kickstarter campaign for her debut album, *Controlled Chaos*, meeting her target within two hours and eventually raising eight times her goal.

Few guitarists have managed to generate so much excitement in so little time. Needless to say, when Nita announced the release of her new, sophomore album, *The Call of the Void*, we were eager to bring her back for her second *Guitar Player* cover to discuss her approach to career and craft.

The guitar world has been rightly captivated by Nita and her new album. That response is reassuring in light of a new threat to music discussed by Queen guitarist Brian May in another of this issue's features: namely, artificial intelligence. "I think by this time next year the landscape will be completely different," Brian tells us. "We won't know which way is up. We won't know what's been created by AI and what's been created by humans."

Strangely, for all the concern over how AI may change the world for good and ill, its impact on music gets the least attention. But it has already crept into our industry.

LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER GILES MARTIN DAZZLED US WITH REVOLVER, AI IS AVAILABLE FOR THE AVERAGE MUSIC FAN TO USE AND ABUSE

In one of the best-known examples, Giles Martin employed it in 2022 to "de-mix" and reconstruct the Beatles' 1966 milestone *Revolver*. Since then, Paul McCartney has used AI to extract John Lennon's vocal from a demo Lennon made shortly before his death.

But at least those are responsible uses of the technology. Less than a year after Martin dazzled us with *Revolver*, AI is available for the average music fan to use and abuse. Visit YouTube and treat your ears to the sounds of McCartney and

Lennon "singing" everything from their own unreleased Beatles-era songs to the 2011 Gotye hit "Somebody That I Used to Know." AI's potential to deceive became widely apparent this past April, when a homemade track called "Heart on My Sleeve" used digitally generated versions of pop singers Drake and the Weeknd that were convincing enough to fool fans. The tune racked up millions of streams before it was pulled.

These examples may make AI seem like a novelty, in so much as music is concerned, but it can and will have far-reaching implications for the industry, copyright and artists' careers. In terms of song creation and performance, AI will undoubtedly make inroads in pop, electronica, techno — basically any genre where virtuosity is beside the point — and be embraced by fans who have little interest in the "who" and "how" behind the music. Fortunately, it seems unlikely to impact the guitar world, where we put a premium on talent and the blood, sweat and gear it takes to develop it.

I think the real cost in the short term will be felt by the recording industry. Beyond its ability to make music, AI will be used to mix and master recordings to perfection. Who'll need audio engineers anymore? And while that may seem like a boon for home recordists, a musician's best odds for a thriving career are still in the live arena, not in streaming.

So who knows? Maybe it will all even out. Perhaps AI will free us up to spend less time in the studio and more time playing with others and performing onstage for the millions of people still hungry for music created by real musicians. And with any luck, we'll have more artists like Nita Strauss to celebrate. Fingers crossed. ■

Guitar Player

Vol. 57 No. 10

OCTOBER 2023

guitarplayer.com

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
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Nita Strauss, photographed by
Ana Massard, June 28, 2023



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Guitar Player (ISSN 0017-5463) is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future US LLC, 130 West 42nd Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10036. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Bleuchip International, P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Guitar Player, P.O. Box 2029, Langhorne, PA 19047-9957.

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The Tim Bram Tribute Archtop somehow manages to look, sound and feel traditional and alternative.

A TELE TRIBUTE WITH A TWIST

To build his hollowbody Tribute, **Tim Bram** turned to a vintage Fender from his youth. The result is a remarkably versatile jazz box.

BY DAVE HUNTER

PAYING HOMAGE TO the world's first production solidbody guitar by creating a hollowbody jazz box might seem an outré move — but it's not the only surprise Tim Bram's Tribute Archtop is packing. Certainly, the notion to make a more playable, portable and versatile jazz guitar by adopting a thinline design might seem like nothing new. But then again, nearly everything else about the Tribute Archtop is done a little differently than we've seen before.

"My Tribute model was first made as an homage to a vintage Tele that I restored when I was just 19 years old," Bram tells *Guitar Player*. "That guitar had a great feel that I wanted to try and re-create in an archtop guitar. The goal with this model was to make

an archtop that was smaller and easier to play than a traditional archtop, while still offering the familiar archtop voice. I also wanted to stay away from the traditional shape that is associated with archtop guitars."

Doing things differently would certainly behoove a luthier whose own career has followed an unusual path. Bram made his first guitar in 1976, at the age of 14, and followed it with several others through his high school and college years. During the latter, he took one of his instruments to an interview at a local cabinet shop, where the quality of its workmanship landed him the job. His professional focus shifted to furniture and cabinetry for many years, until he sought new challenges in 2013 and began building

guitars again part-time, tasking himself with designing the archtop model that would become the Tribute. Following the demand for this guitar, in 2018 he left the cabinetry trade and took up guitar making full-time.

"I always thought that my experience as a woodworker helped me develop the eyes and skills to make these guitars," Bram relates. "Fortunately, I have a pretty good ear too. I feel like this is where I was supposed to end up. I am excited to come down to the shop and make guitars every day."

On paper, the Tribute might appear much like any traditional high-end archtop from the golden age of the instrument, albeit rendered to thinline specifications. The graduated, lightly X-braced top plate is hand-carved



from solid European spruce, and joined to a hand-carved solid curly maple back with hand-formed solid maple sides. The neck is carved from lightly flamed maple and capped with an ebony fingerboard, while the trapeze tailpiece, floating bridge and finger rest — a.k.a. pickguard — are likewise crafted from ebony. A hand-wound Kent Armstrong humbucking pickup and its related trim-pot volume and tone controls are all mounted to the latter so they float above the guitar's soundboard without interfering in the slightest with its natural vibration.

Off paper and in hand, however, the Tribute makes quite a different impression than the standard jazz box, even if it delivers much of the same results, and impressively so. The six-a-side headstock and rounded, full-C neck profile are certainly reminiscent of the Telecaster that got Bram started down this path all those years ago, although the $1\frac{11}{16}$ -inch width at the nut and 25-inch scale length point elsewhere. The two-inch rim depth also lends a lot more playing comfort in the lap than the grappling dimensions of a full-depth archtop, yet initial unplugged playing reveals a full, rich tone with excellent balance and surprisingly good acoustic volume, indicating that Bram has ably cleared one of the design's more obvious hurdles.

"The main challenge was in the fact that the sound board is very small in comparison to a traditional archtop guitar," he tells us. "I dealt with this by carving the top to be very responsive and keeping it free to vibrate. There is only one point of contact besides the bridge, allowing the top to do as much work as possible. The shape of a Tele has a slightly squared-off lower bout, so I enlarged and rounded that bout so it would be able to work very efficiently, kind of like a speaker cone."

Even with the alterations required to make the concept work, the Tribute achieves many of the traditions of the archtop format, with enhanced comfort and playability. For all the recalculating needed to meld the Tele-inspired body to the design, the bridge still falls neatly between the center points of the f-holes, yet the cutaway placement allows for excellent upper-fret access. As someone who is not a traditional jazzbox player, I find the results extremely easy to come to grips with. And, according to Bram, although the Tribute is designed for the jazz artist who needs a more nimble and feedback-resistant



instrument in a solo or combo setting, the model is very much intended to appeal to other guitarists as well. That includes anyone who wants a versatile and very easy-to-play guitar with an excellent all-around voice.

I would add that the Tribute Archtop should appeal to anyone who simply wants an extremely elegant, and yet alternative, take on the format. In addition to the quality of the woods used and the skill with which they're put together, numerous other features help to make this a gorgeous instrument. These

**“THERE IS ONLY ONE
POINT OF CONTACT
BESIDES THE BRIDGE,
ALLOWING THE TOP
TO DO AS MUCH WORK
AS POSSIBLE”**

include the multi-ply binding on the body, fingerboard and headstock; the single-ply f-hole binding; the mother-of-pearl fingerboard inlay and headstock logo; and antique-sunburst finish in thin nitrocellulose lacquer.

Plugged into both a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a 65amps London head and 2x12 cab, the Tribute delivered the clear, rich, yet relatively tight acoustic tone married to electric snap and articulation that players often seek in an archtop acoustic-electric. The balance and depth of the acoustic tone played through

beautifully into its amplified voice, and did so with impressive resistance to feedback at pretty significant volume levels, provided I didn't get silly with my playing position...or inadvertently step on a fuzz box.

Speaking of pedals, the guitar did take to some light overdrive from a Victory Duchess and an Origin M-EQ extremely well, which pushed it around the bend from jazz to throaty blues and delivered a superbly playable update of some of the seminal amplified tones of the '40s and early '50s.

In use, I found Bram's claims that the Tribute suits “several types of music” entirely justified. Although I'm a rather pedestrian jazzier at best, I found this guitar stood in wonderfully as an alternative fingerstyle instrument and an elegant accompanist to singer-songwriter-style balladry, and even did itself proud amid some rockabilly excursions. However you approach it, the Tim Bram Tribute Archtop is a beautifully acquitted instrument that pulls off the tricky maneuver of somehow looking, sounding and feeling simultaneously traditional and alternative. Put simply, it's an heirloom-level guitar that I imagine a surprisingly broad range of players would be proud to call their own. **B**

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A RULE-BREAKER BREAKS THROUGH

On the heels of her 2021 number-two album, blues phenom **Ally Venable** steps up to the big leagues with *Real Gone*.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TINO SIELAND

ALLY VENABLE HAS been releasing records for nearly half her life — which is saying something considering the fact that the guitarist and singer is all of 23 years old. “Nobody told me that I couldn’t start putting out records when I did, so I just did it,” she says. “Thank goodness I didn’t know about any of these supposed rules, because they probably would have held me back.” She laughs, then adds, “Of course, I do like breaking rules.”

Over the past decade, the Les Paul–toting Texan has become a hot commodity in contemporary blues circles. Her 2021 release, *Heart of Fire*, hit number two on *Billboard*’s Blues Albums chart, and she’s proved to be a reliable draw in concert. But as she graduates to the big leagues, Venable makes it clear that she has more aspirational goals in mind.

“I want to be an inspiration to young girls,” she says. “I’m starting to see it. After my shows, I’ll sign stuff at the merch table and

there will be a line of young girls who want my autograph or to talk to me. It’s so cool. If I can be a role model to girls and get them to pick up the guitar, then I’ll feel like I made a real impact.”

Venable’s forceful playing — a vibrant mix of traditional influences and modern flash, delivered with a highly theatrical flair — has attracted admirers such as Buddy Guy and Joe Bonamassa, both of whom turn up on her new album, *Real Gone*. On the blues stomper “Texas Louisiana,” Venable and Guy intertwine high-energy vocals and guitar solos as if they were part of one body and mind. Bonamassa takes much of the six-string spotlight on the soulful ballad “Next Time I See You,” turning in a corker of a lead matched only by Venable’s emotive singing. Other highlights, such as the half-acoustic, half-electric grinder “Blues Is My Best Friend” and the hard-driving blues-rock title cut, belong to Venable herself. Her extraordinary instrumental command — she simply never seems to repeat a phrase or nuance — elevates the best set of material she’s ever had.

“I give a lot of credit to my producer, Tom Hambridge, and a songwriter named Rich

Fleming," Venable says. "We got together in Nashville and wrote the whole album in two days, which is crazy. On my other albums, I had complete control, but this time I handed the reins to Tom, and we made a pretty magical record together. I never felt so comfortable in the studio before. With Tom calling the shots, I could focus on singing and playing, and I could just let go."

As the story goes, you got into the blues at the age of 12. That's not exactly normal.

No, I guess it isn't. *[laughs]* I just really connected with it. My dad and I would listen to music every morning when he dropped me off at school. He liked '80s hair bands and stuff. One day I noticed he had a CD of Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Texas Flood* in his truck, and I was like, "What's this?" I popped it in and said, "Wow, this is different!" I didn't know anything about the blues, but I really liked the sound of Stevie's voice. Then I watched YouTube videos of him, and I was like, "Oh, he's playing guitar. Wow, he's amazing!"

This was around the time that I started learning songs and playing guitar. I had an acoustic, but seeing Stevie play made me really want to rip into the electric. I got one and started learning his songs and then some Buddy Guy songs. It just started snowballing into the rest of the blues.

Did you just go down the YouTube rabbit hole?

Exactly — the rabbit hole of the blues music. I had a Mexican Strat, and then I got an anniversary model Strat. I just played and played. I could play by ear, and I could sing and match pitch really well. I think that played a big part in how I learned to play. I could hear things and emulate what players were doing.

You're saying that learning to play wasn't a big struggle for you. It came to you pretty naturally?

Pretty much, but I still had to work at it and practice the delivery of everything. I studied how songs were structured. Once I got to that

point where I could play a full song, I'd hone in on my emotions to really deliver the song to an audience. That's something I worked at, because there's so much you're thinking about during a performance.

What kinds of gigs did you do at first?

I played anywhere I could. I played at a crawfish stand and in front of a grocery store. I played at coffee shops. I would play and I would practice with my band. Every week we would play four-hour shows for tips.

"THANK GOODNESS I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT ANY OF THESE SUPPOSED RULES, BECAUSE THEY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE HELD ME BACK"

players do it too. I always noticed their thumb was on the top of the lowest string, and it seemed like a good way to get the bass note and play the high strings at the same time. People always point out that I don't use my pinkie much. I tuck it back a little. I guess if I lost my pinkie, I could still play.

Guitarists often have quirks to how they play. I notice you bend your thumb over the neck.

Yeah, I do the thumb thing. That's how Stevie played. I learned that by watching his videos. I saw other

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Real Gone

"Real Gone," "Texas Louisiana," "Blues Is My Best Friend," "Next Time I See You," "Kick Your Ass"

You've always had a very musical feel for how you use a wah, especially on the new album.

Oh, thanks! The guitar players that I look at for a wah are probably Buddy Guy and Jimi Hendrix. Stevie, too, but mainly Buddy. I like using a wah because it lets me glide more. It's like this other frequency.

I just think I play differently with a wah.

You're also a great acoustic player. I love the way you dig into the acoustic on the opening of "Blues Is My Best Friend."

That was fun. Different guitars require different approaches. I play a Les Paul differently than when I play a Strat, so it figures that I'd play an acoustic differently, too. You do have to dig into it a bit more.

I was expecting you and Joe might sing together on "Next Time I See You."

No, he just plays.

How did you and Joe work out your guitar parts?

[laughs] We didn't. I thought the progression of the song was perfect for Joe. It just called out for the "Joe B. sound." We recorded the song, and I even did a solo on top, kind of anticipating what he might do. But then we took my solo out and sent the track for him to play on.

After Joe sent the track back, did you tweak your playing at all?

I think we just left it. It's Joe Bonamassa, you know? I didn't want to take away from anything he was doing. *[laughs]*

You and Buddy sing and play together on "Texas Louisiana," though. Were you together in the studio?

We were. It's a pretty magical thing working with Buddy. It feels like a kind of passing-the-torch thing. It's just a dream being around him. We have a dialog with our guitars — we're friends, and we've toured together. I'll play a lick, and I can kind of anticipate what he might do, because nobody else sounds like him. I don't know if he's anticipating what I might do, but I do think we're sharing a moment when we play. 🎸



(from left) Bassist E.J. Bedford, Ally Venable and drummer Isaac Pulido

THE DRAGON TAMER

Simon McBride's fire-breathing tube tones power a new era of Deep Purple.

BY JUDE GOLD

NO GAFF TAPE marks on the stage are necessary for Simon McBride — he always remembers where the sweet spot is. Alone under the lights for his big guitar cadenza each night with Deep Purple — and just after kicking on a Tube Screamer to make his white-hot guitar tone a few degrees hotter — he moves to that invisible X, hits a single note high up on the fretboard, and, with zero vibrato, gets it to sustain infinitely. When a shimmering overtone emerges from within the sound, the endless note becomes all the more prismatic. It grabs your ears the way a laser beam shooting up into the night sky attracts your eyes.

It's an old trick, but, after watching McBride do it flawlessly at 16 different arenas all over Europe last fall (I was playing with the support band, Jefferson Starship), I can report that I've never seen anyone do it more hypnotically. It's mesmerizing. Rather than seeming gimmicky, it comes off as heartfelt and part of a grander musical statement.

Next, McBride suddenly jumps up to a high-altitude F-major scale pattern, and, starting on the highest A on the highest string, blazes down an octave and a half of the shape as fast as possible, repeating the dazzling maneuver again up a half step, and

then again up another half step, and so on. The notes whiz by faster than tracer bullets. It's thrilling to experience, and it incites roars of delight from each new audience.

Standing at the monitor board after taking in McBride's many guitar solos each night, Donny Baldwin — the veteran, multi-Platinum drummer in my band — turned to me and said, "Damn, that dude plays with so much emotion!" I agree. Whether McBride is playing slowly or quickly, I still feel each note.

If you still think of Steve Morse as "the new guy" in Deep Purple — even though the brilliant Dregs guitarist's tenure in the iconic rock band was, at 28 years, far longer than that of founding guitarist Ritchie Blackmore — you're forgiven. There may still be a few guitar fans who haven't yet heard that Morse announced his retirement from

Deep Purple last summer to help his wife, Janine, through ongoing chemotherapy treatments as she confronts stage IV cancer.

The new new guy is Simon McBride. Hailing from Belfast, the Irish guitar hero

was already established before joining Deep Purple, with multiple solo albums and videos released under his own name. (Want to hear a spectacular fuzz guitar break? Listen to McBride engage his Vahlbruch Octavia pedal on "Kingdoms," from his latest solo album, *The Fighter*.) McBride had also proved his worth to the Purple camp by touring and recording with two legendary members of the band, keyboardist Don Airey and singer Ian Gillan, long before they ever knew they might need to enlist him for Purple.

"Two-thousand-twenty-two was weird but also wonderful," McBride says of the year he officially joined forces with the British rock titans. "At first I was sort of subbing in for Steve, but when they said he was stepping away and asked me to join, I said, 'I'll think about it.'" He laughs. "No, I actually immediately said, 'Yes.'"

Of all the guitarists you've seen perform in your lifetime, who most blew you away with the sheer level of emotion in their playing?

It's got to be Gary Moore. Gary was a massive influence on me, starting when I was a kid. Obviously, he was from Belfast too, but when I was about 10 years old and my dad took me to see him, it inspired me to go, "I want to do that." He played with such aggression and



MICHAEL GOLAB (@FOTOGOLAB) (THIS PAGE); PEDRO GOMES/RED FERNS/GETTY IMAGES (OPPOSITE)

RIGHT: Simon McBride's grey-finished custom PRS 408. No tone knob!
LEFT: McBride with his red-finished 408.



passion, and I think from learning all his stuff over the years it's a natural thing that comes out in me, too. I have to thank Gary for that.

There are so many Gary Moore songs that a lot of people don't really listen to, because he was so popular for his blues thing, as that's what really broke him and made him massive. But people forget the heavier stuff, like *Corridors of Power*. He has so many brilliant albums, all of them full of great riffs.

What's your philosophy on getting a kick-ass hard-rock guitar sound in an arena?

It's about having teeth. I do have a lot of modern gadgets like, for example, the [Neural DSP] QuadCortex, which I use in the studio and think is great. But live, I'm that old-school kind of a player who is used to having a fire-breathing dragon — a wall of Marshalls — shouting at me.

I started using Engl stuff when I joined Purple, and it's great. I used Steve [Morse]'s heads for a while, and they're great, but while that amp suits Steve, it is a bit more compressed and high-gain than what I prefer. Plus, there are too many buttons on it for me. I'm a very simple guy. I'm like, "Just give me my bass, mid, treble, gain and volume." Done.

So the guys at Engl tweaked a head for me to have more aggressiveness, especially around the high mids, because that's how a guitar frequency cuts through. Once you start sucking the mids out of your sound, you lose the guitar, whether you're playing a small club, an arena or a stadium — especially in a band like Purple, where you're competing

with [Airey's] Hammond running through two Leslies and a Marshall, which has a similar frequency range as your guitar.

One modern development, though, is that I now run my stage rig in stereo, and for that I blame COVID, because for two years I was sitting in my home studio playing in stereo through my studio monitors. When live gigs started happening again and I plugged in my mono setup, I was like, "This is not gonna work." [laughs] I now run a simple left/right setup with stereo effects courtesy of TC Electronic Plethora and Boss Space Echo pedals. I also tried the wet/dry/wet thing, but it wasn't for me.

You get an amazing spectrum of sounds from that Paul Reed Smith with the f-hole. [McBride has played a red-finished custom PRS 408 and now has one in gray.]

Yeah, I had it made for me about nine years ago. It's basically a PRS 408, which they stopped making — maybe because the pickups had slightly odd shapes, which meant people couldn't swap them out

easily if they wanted to. But I love the 408's design. It's very versatile. You have a three-way toggle selector, plus two little switches that split each humbucker. And it cleans up brilliantly through a proper valve amp. I think there's a capacitor in there that helps it get a little brighter when you roll the volume back. People always ask me why I don't have a tone knob on the guitar, and I'm like, "I haven't used a tone knob in 25 years, so what do I need one for?"

There's an exciting moment in "Hush" each night where you and Don trade licks back and forth and really seem to be pushing each other. It's a total head-cutting duel.

Oh, yeah, every night it's a full-on battle. It's great because at that point it's just me and Don, with only Ian [Paice]'s drums behind us, so we can drift in and out of stuff and go wherever we want, musically. Don has told me, "It's 14-1 to you, Simon," but I don't know. Every night I have to try harder, because he comes down to soundcheck each day and practices, coming up with ideas to try and screw me up. [laughs] Really, it's just fun. We're just having a jam and having a laugh. We just love doing it.

Is there a secret to kicking off "Smoke on the Water" each night? Any pressure when you're starting off what is possibly the world's most famous guitar riff?

At the moment, no. But the first time I did it I was very nervous, because that was with Ian Gillan in front of about 10,000 people. But it's such a simple riff. The main secret is just giving it the right tempo. Then Don kicks in with the Hammond playing the same thing. Roger kicks in with the bass, and it's just a wall of power. Some people overcomplicate the "Smoke" riff by playing it like a guitar player — you know, they throw vibrato and other things into it — but then the riff loses its essence. You just have to keep it simple. There are plenty of other places in the set for me to try new things.

People always ask me, "Do you have freedom to improvise in Deep Purple?" The answer is yes. But there are certain things you just have to play as they were recorded, like Blackmore's solo on "Highway Star." It would be very arrogant of me to think that I can do better than that. That's a brilliant solo. It's iconic. ■



McBride performs with (from left) Roger Glover and Ian Gillan, at Campo Pequeno, in Lisbon, November 6, 2022.

TIP SHEET

From breathing to talking — **Eddie 9V** reveals the advice that made him blues-rock's new guitar star.

BY JOE BOSSO

FAST-RISING BLUES POWERHOUSE

Brooke Mason (a.k.a. Eddie 9V) remembers a great piece of advice he got after a gig. "Somebody came up to me and said, 'Just breathe, man. You gotta look like you enjoy playing the guitar.'

"I thought about it, and I realized that I tend to hold my breath when I'm soloing," he continues. "It's like I'm caught up in this tense emotional state. Make no mistake: playing shows is hard work, and there's a lot of stress involved. I like a certain amount of fight and danger when I play, but on the other hand, I should enjoy it more, too. I need to be in the moment when I'm playing, particularly when I'm soloing. So yeah, I need to breathe."

Currently on tour to promote his sensational new album, *Capricorn* (Ruf), Mason took time out to dispense some of his own nuggets of guitar-centric advice.

LISTEN TO SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY

"I know it sounds like a cliché, but you can easily get stuck in a rut if all you're doing is listening to the same music over and over. Challenge yourself: Go listen to that random '80s album your favorite artist put out — you know, the record no one talks about. I love to listen to new stuff. In fact, I probably spend a couple of hours every day checking out new music on Spotify. Now, when I say 'new music,' I mean it's new to me. It can still be older tunes, but the point is that I haven't heard them before.

"I've written many songs by listening to old Junior Wells and Leon Russell tunes that I've never heard before. I was even listening to Jimmy Cliff and Lee 'Scratch' Perry, and from there I wrote a reggae song.

So much of the time I'm like, 'Damn, that guitar sounds crazy,' or 'How did they get that vocal sound with the reverb?' I get a lot of great tone ideas from listening to Spotify because I'm not stuck on the same records I've heard a thousand times already."

OVERDRIVE PEDALS WON'T SAVE YOU

"For years I struggled to get the tone I wanted by using overdrive pedals. Tube Screemers, Klon clones, Nobels, boutiques — you name 'em, I've tried 'em. Then one day, somebody told me, 'You don't need all that. You just need to crank your amp.' And it's true. Amp volume plays a key role in getting a good

overdriven sound, and if you're playing at a low volume, a pedal isn't going to help. In fact, it'll make you sound like crap.

"I hear people say that they want to sound like Freddie King, or maybe they want those classic Eric Clapton and Paul Kossoff tones. They think pedals will do it, but what they don't realize is those players dimmed their amps. They were up as loud as they could go. Try getting a smaller amp and cranking it. Right away, it will sound better than any overdrive pedal. There are plenty of cool old amps that'll do the job — like a Magnatone Varsity or a Gibson GA-5. You can pick those up for not a lot of money, and you'll sound incredible.



Eddie 9V with his Fender Custom Shop Esquire.

"My live rig consists of a guitar cable and a '65 reissue Fender Deluxe Reverb on 10. That's all I need. Now I admit, if I'm playing a small place and I don't want the sound guy griping at me, I will resort to using a pedal — an Origin Effects Magma57. It's a great pedal for small rooms. Given my preference, though, I'm going to max the volume out."

GET OFF INSTAGRAM AND GO TO JAMS

"If you think you're going to get better by watching 30-second Instagram clips of guitarists playing as fast as they can, think again. Stay away from that stuff. Back when I was learning guitar, people told me that the best way to get better — and the fastest way, I might add — was by playing with other musicians who are way ahead of me. All my favorite guitar players and guitar-playing friends started out that way.

"It's not as hard as you think. Look for blues, jazz or folk clubs in your area. Chances are they hold open-mic nights on Mondays and Tuesdays. Anything can happen in those situations, and they're great opportunities to jam. Yes, you'll have to start out bottom of the list, and you might go on with some random people at 11 p.m., but it'll be worth it.

"My first time jamming at an open-mic night, I learned really fast that I had nothing — but that's what it's all about. Then I came back and I had some stuff figured out. You learn so much at jams — rules of etiquette and how to conduct yourself musically. I would see these young guys show up with huge pedalboards, and other guys would be like, 'No, dude, you're using the gear that's here. Put all that stuff away.' But that's what makes you better."

DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR GEAR

"I know this will sound strange, but I don't like things to feel too easy when I'm playing live. I always tell my band that I want things to sound like a train that could derail at any



Eddie 9V performs at the Savannah Music Festival, in Georgia, March 28, 2023.

moment. I like to fight my guitar a bit. It's sort of like fishing: There's tension, release, cursing, and the 'Ahh!' moment when you've reeled the audience to the boat.

"I have this counterfeit Gibson guitar that I bring out with me. It plays like shit; I can't even solo past the 12th fret because it frets out. But I kind of like that because it changes my way of playing. It makes me fight harder, and that means I can't get lazy.

"I urge you to pick up that old guitar that's been gathering dust in the corner. Sure, it's got old strings and the action is all screwed up. Grab that thing and plug it in. Already you'll be out of your comfort zone. Those

licks you could play like nobody's business on your main guitar? You'll have to work at them now, and you might find yourself making new note choices. Or maybe plug into your buddy's rig. At first, you'll be like, 'I don't like this,' but learn to embrace it. Again, you'll start playing differently — and you might feel inspired."

TALK TO ANYONE AND EVERYONE

"If you're not just a blues lawyer and you're actually serious about getting ahead in the music industry, you need to learn how to talk to people. Talk to everyone. If you're watching a guitar player shredding in a dive bar, stay after the gig and strike up a conversation with him. If you find a cool player online, send him or her a message. There's a good chance they'll write back. Go up to a bass player and ask him what his favorite Motown [James] Jamerson bass song is. Connections are made by having genuine conversations.

"It's hard at first — a lot of musicians are kind of shy, and they like to speak through their instruments. But engaging with people makes this whole thing tick. Just recently, I sent a message to Oliver Wood from the Wood Brothers, and he messaged me back.

"And don't be afraid to ask questions. If you notice that a guitarist is using a Keeley compressor or a Fender Vibrolux, ask why. And remember to listen, too. Sometimes it helps to know when to shut up and take in knowledge. But that's a whole different tip." ■





James Burton
performing at Sala
Apolo, Barcelona,
September 22, 2012.

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

There's only one electric instrument worth discussing, says **James Burton**, the veteran guitarist behind Elvis, Ricky Nelson, Roy Orbison and Emmylou Harris.

BY JOEL McIVER

"THE FIRST GUITAR that Leo Fender tried to lay on me was a Stratocaster," James Burton says with a chuckle. At 83 years, he's fit and well, with memories like very few other musicians. "I said, 'No, man, I'm not gonna take it!' The Stratocaster's for younger kids. They like the whammy bar and all."

So no Strats in the Burton collection, then? "Well, it just depends on what you prefer," he reasons. "Some people like a fretboard that's flat, but I like a little bit of roundness to it, so for me, there's only one guitar to talk about: the Fender Telecaster. You know, Leo Fender was a wonderful guy. I met him many years ago, even before I went to work with Ricky Nelson. Leo assured me that whatever I wanted, it would be no

problem: he'd take care of it. And he did."

Indeed, as far back as 1961, Burton was tearing up that slightly rounded fretboard on Ricky Nelson's "Hello, Mary Lou" with a solo that left young listeners speechless. (One of those kids was the rocking knight of the realm, Sir Brian May, who regularly cites Burton as an influence.) Check out that solo if you don't know it already: it leaps from the speakers at 1:04 with a flurry of string bends and sassy popped notes, sounding nothing like its 62 years of age.

Born in 1939 in Dubberly, Louisiana, Buton was a self-taught guitar prodigy who played on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio show in Shreveport as a teenager. Soon after, he moved to Los Angeles, where he began his

career with Nelson and recorded numerous sessions. One of them was Dale Hawkins' 1957 hit "Susie Q," a tune Burton co-wrote and which was timed perfectly to assist with the birth of rock and roll. He swiftly became an in-demand guitarist, songwriter and bandleader. As a young, hotshot guitarist, Burton recorded with Glen Campbell, Judy Collins, the Beach Boys, Harry Nilsson, Nancy Sinatra, Buffalo Springfield, Townes Van Zandt and a litany of other 1960s greats before he joined Elvis Presley in 1968 as leader of the TCB (Taking Care of Business) Band. Hot as a pistol after that year's televised comeback special, *Elvis*, the King was dominating Las Vegas with an extravagant live residency.

JORDI VIDAL/REDFERNS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Burton's profile went stratospheric after Elvis began to include the command "Play it, James!" in each show, just before the guitarist ripped a spectacular solo — with no overdrive, and played with a pick-plus-fingers hybrid technique — from his custom Pink Paisley Telecaster. He remained at Elvis's side for the remainder of the singer's tragically curtailed career, although he took time out to play in Emmylou Harris's backing group and on sessions for Johnny Cash, John Phillips, Michael Nesmith, Joni Mitchell, Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons, Tina Turner, Kenny Rogers, Delaney & Bonnie, Phil Everly, Rodney Crowell and many others. After Elvis's death in 1977, Burton worked with John Denver, collaborating with the country singer until 1994, three years before Denver himself perished at a relatively young age.

In his middle career, Burton recorded and toured with Rosanne Cash, Elvis Costello ("a wonderful guy; very smart, with good ideas"), J.J. Cale, Gillian Welch, Marshall Crenshaw and others, and notably appeared in the 1988 special *Roy Orbison and Friends: A Black and White Night*. In the new century he has played with Matt Lucas, Jim Lauderdale, Drake Milligan and Brad Paisley, and he appeared alongside Eric Clapton on Jerry Lee Lewis's album *Mean Old Man*, in 2010.

In recognition of Burton's phenomenal career, Fender has long offered two signature Telecasters: a Candy Apple Red Tele based

"IT'S NEVER-ENDING. YOUR BEST SONG IS ALWAYS YET TO COME"

on the 1953 original and a Pink Paisley counterpart inspired by the 1969 Elvis model. The latter was redesigned in 2006 with three blade pickups, a no-load tone control and an updated switching system. A new model is on the way in 2023, with new pickups that are still being finalized as we speak.

"I'm real excited about the new Telecaster," Burton says. "We did a lot of research into the new pickups, and the ones we settled on are really good. I guess I've had thousands of guitars over the years, but the old ones are still my favorites. I don't know if you could get those tones nowadays. I guess if you had the right guitar and the right player, you might be able to do that."

In 2005 Burton launched the James Burton Foundation (jamesburtonfoundation.org), a charitable group whose aims are to support music education for those in need through guitar donations and music instruction to schools, hospitals and community service organizations. "The Foundation is doing really good," he says. "We've been able to present guitars to young kids and to veterans, and people are real excited about it. I like to be able to present

guitars to the young kids and keep our music program going. You can't do too much."

The annual James Burton International Guitar Festival, held in Shreveport, supports the Foundation, and at the 2009 event, he was inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame. Two years earlier he had been inducted into the Musicians' Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee, as a member of the pioneering Wrecking Crew group of session musicians.

Guitar Player spoke to Burton in May 2023 as he was about to jump on a plane to the U.K. for a show at the London Palladium, where he was supported onstage by two of his biggest fans: Brian May and Van Morrison. Considering all he's done over his career, we imagine it's a tricky task for Burton to pick out just five songs that define his legacy — although he somehow manages to do just that. "I can't count how many songs I'm on, but it's been over 500 albums, so the song titles must be in the thousands," he says. "Still, you know, it's never-ending. Your best song is always yet to come."

"SUSIE Q" DALE HAWKINS, OH! SUZY-Q (1958)



"I wrote this song when I was a young boy. I played this little guitar lick and there it was, just a little instrumental thing. I was working with

a blues singer, Dale Hawkins, and Dale wrote a few lyrics to it. I think he had a girlfriend he called Susie Q.

"We did the recording at a radio station, KWKH in Shreveport [in 1957. The single was released that year and the album in 1958]. I'm not even sure if we had drums in there. There was just one mic in the room. I played through a little Gretsch amp that I didn't keep very long. That was what I used before I got my Fender amp. I used the original guitar that my mother and father bought me: a red Telecaster. It's been on millions of records and it's a great guitar. I'd say it's my favorite guitar out of all the ones I've owned. It's still playing fine, too. It's all original: it's never needed a fret bar or anything.

"Someone asked me one time, if I wanted to sell my Telecaster, what would I sell it for.



Burton (left) and Glen Campbell at Columbia Records Studio in Los Angeles, September 15, 1967. The two played together on countless sessions.

I said, 'Well, it would be in the millions.' The guy reached in his pocket and said, 'How many?' I said, 'Not today!'" [laughs]

"HELLO MARY LOU"

RICKY NELSON, *RICK IS 21* (1961)



"My buddy Gene Pitney wrote this song. I used the same red Telecaster on the recording. I remember how good the solo was. [laughs] You

know, Ricky's dad, Ozzie, was a big-band leader, and sometimes he'd come to the recording sessions. I played this solo and he said to me, 'I had a saxophone player who played a lot like that,' just joking with me.

"It would have been done on the first or second take: Ricky might have done more takes for his vocals than that, but I never did more than two. You know, writing a good guitar solo is really about being smart. It's like traveling cross-country: be careful what you step on! [laughs] And remember: Being a great musician is sometimes about what you don't play. Leave space, and have an idea about what you're going to do next."

"FOOLS RUSH IN"

RICKY NELSON, SINGLE (1963)
ELVIS PRESLEY, *ELVIS NOW* (1972)



"Remember the old [1940 Mercer & Rube—penned] standard, 'Fools Rush In'? I did two versions in whole different styles: one with Ricky

and another with Elvis. Ricky's was a little laid-back; Elvis had more excitement in his version. I walked into the room playing the song, and Elvis started humming it, and he told the engineer to turn the machine on and to record it. Just like that.

"Elvis liked to do two takes, and that was it. He'd usually get it in one take, but sometimes the musicians would need another take to fall in together, because everything was recorded live from the floor back then. Elvis was a prankster and liked to joke around, so I had him practice a lot and work up the songs before he came in the studio, because I was the bandleader. The



Burton (center left) plays his Paisley Telecaster in the 1970 film *Elvis: That's The Way It Is*.

"LEAVE SPACE, AND HAVE AN IDEA ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO NEXT"

musicians had to do what I'd tell them to do. But I still believe that the best bandleader is the one who stands there and keeps his mouth shut and doesn't do anything. You gotta look at it this way: the singers key-off of the musicians. We have to be good musicians to do what we do.

"Elvis famously would call out for me to play this solo live. He just started saying, 'Play it, James!' during his shows for some reason. And then everybody else that I worked with started saying it!"

"POLK SALAD ANNIE"

ELVIS PRESLEY, *ON STAGE* (1970)



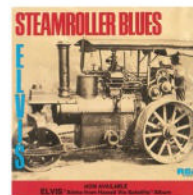
"I did a version of this song for a movie, *Ford Vs. Ferrari* [2019]. It really shows you the way I play, and my style of playing: bluesy, with a little rock and roll.

Give me a Fender Twin and let me plug it in. I don't need anything else. I don't really like effects. I never use them unless something happens to be required. I don't use overdrive, but sometimes I like an amp with a little breakup that'll give you that raspy, raw sound.

The main thing is just to be able to hear your guitar, whether that's from your amp or if you have monitors. It depends on the setup, but when you're standing in front of monitors, you have to be sure you're getting the sound you're looking for."

"STEAMROLLER BLUES"

ELVIS PRESLEY, *ALOHA FROM HAWAII VIA SATELLITE* (1973)



"This is a good one: Elvis always liked this song. James Taylor wrote it. I couldn't believe that when someone told me. I thought it was by

Elmore James or somebody.

"I played this with my Paisley Telecaster when we did the *Aloha From Hawaii by Satellite* show, and you can see Elvis really enjoyed it. When it comes to soloing, you gotta go for it and put your hot lick on it. You gotta ad-lib a little bit, too; you don't wanna read the paper too close. I'm self-taught. God told me that's the best way. He was my teacher. It's important to know the song, but it's more important to be able to play by ear, because you're able to do more in the music field. If you sit and look at a piece of paper to play, you have to depend on that. But when you play by ear, man, you can just walk out there and do it.

"And if you want to play hybrid picking, like I do, well — go home and practice. Make sure you got the right fingers." ■

SPIRIT STOMP MAN

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A fully-featured, top-drawer guitar amp shoehorned into stompbox format, the Hughes & Kettner SPIRIT StompMan was engineered to bring out the best in all effects – pedals plugged into its front end and units inserted into its FX Loop. SPIRIT StompMan can serve as the powerful backbone for any pedalboard or as your ingenious always-on amp. Either way, premium performance is just a toe-tap away.

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TECHNOLOGY OF TONE

Mail-Order Pride

Launched as a post-WWII startup, **Carvin Guitars** grew into a guitar gear giant, one catalog sale at a time.

GUITARISTS OLD ENOUGH to have had their early exposure to the instrument through mail-order catalogs are likely to remember the outsized presence of Carvin guitars, amplifiers and PA systems. As a kid in the early '80s, I was drawn to order my first Carvin catalog by an ad in the back of *Guitar Player*. I never did order anything significant, other than a replacement pickup for my Yamaha SG-2000 (Carvin declared its 22-pole M22 humbucker to be the hottest pickup available at the time). By then Carvin was no small operation, manufacturing 600 guitars a month on essentially a custom-order basis, and selling them direct to the consumer. The company had evolved out of much humbler origins that dated back as far as those of its California neighbor, Fender.

Founder Lowell C. Kiesel started making and selling pickups out of his own garage in Southern California in 1946, before scaling up to full lap-steel guitars the following year. In 1949, he dropped his surname from the company's moniker and replaced it with a contraction made from the names of his two sons, Carson and Gavin. Just a few years later,

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- Bolt-on maple necks, for a time made by Höfner (until 1978)
- Hard eastern maple bodies
- Carvin AP-6 single-coil pickups
- Some Bigsby and Gibson hardware
- Rudimentary esthetics

Lowell was making guitars and amplifiers that could have been considered rivals to those of his neighbor Leo Fender, were it not for the fact that they were rarely seen outside their Southern California environs. By 1954, Carvin was as much a seller of guitar parts as it was of entire instruments and amps, and often promoted its "build your own" opportunities. It even acted as an authorized dealer for Martin and Fender guitars.

Through the '50s, however, Carvin's own distinct styling began to take shape as the company made greater efforts to make its place in the electric guitar market. The 1960 Model 3-SGB shown in these pages represents a design Carvin launched in 1956 and offered unchanged until shortly after this one was made, when it evolved into the offset-double-cutaway 31-SGB. Notably, Carvin was no longer a Fender reseller by this time, although the 31-SGB boasted a distinctly Strat-like profile, albeit with squared-off body edges and a less elegant shape overall. As photos of the 3-SGB reveal,



1960 Carvin
3-SGB



1970 Carvin
SS-65



Circa-1974
Carvin CM95

GUITARS COURTESY OF T.R. CRANDALL. GUITARS, PHOTOS BY DREW GANZ



Carvin's AP-6 pickups were somewhat like Gibson's P90 single-coils but with a cleaner, tighter sound.

BY DAVE HUNTER



the guitar's aesthetic was rather DIY, with a crudely cut pickguard, a prominent truss-rod nut at the body end of the neck, a plastic tailpiece partnering a fixed version of Bigsby's rocking aluminum bridge and an understated brand decal on its six-a-side headstock.

Regardless of the basic appearance, the guitars were well put together, and this and other models benefited from Carvin's own AP-6 pickups, with adjustable poles. The units were designed somewhat like Gibson's P90 single-coils but with a cleaner, tighter sound. Considered something of a minor classic, these are the same pickups Semie Moseley used on early Mosrite guitars of the late '50s, including the famed Joe Maphis double-neck model, and they deliver an appealingly edgy twang, with a little bite and sting to it. Perhaps not coincidentally, Carvin came out with its own double-neck in 1959 — available with either mando or bass on the second neck — and Moseley began winding his own pickups shortly after.

Carvin catalogs from 1956 through '60 display a practice the company would continue to use through the following decades: offering the guitar at a "wholesale" price of \$119.90 when purchased direct (essentially the only option), which was made to look like more of a bargain thanks to the \$220 "list" price printed alongside it.

Through much of the '60s and into the mid '70s, Carvin acquired its necks from German guitar maker Höfner and bolted them to its own bodies. The company was already showing a propensity for using solid maple, but the house-made pickups remained a big part of the unique selling proposition.

The 1970 SS-65 seen here shows that Carvin's overall builds hadn't evolved much over the course of the decade, other than adopting some styling akin to the more affordable Japanese guitars of the day. Available with a three-tone sunburst finish as standard, the model sported a body clearly inspired by Fender's offsets models — the

Jazzmaster and Jaguar — and carried the AP-6 pickups, but it arguably displayed a little more refinement than seen on its predecessors.

In 1973, some Carvin designs began leaning toward the Gibson camp (albeit

still rendered with a preponderance of maple), as seen in the 1974 Model CM95 shown here. The company also introduced color to its catalog for the first time, and a glossier promotional aesthetic was in evidence. The guitar still carried a bolt-on Höfner neck, with a zero-fret in this instance, but now had two humbucking AP-6 pickups (even though earlier single-coil AP-6 units were seen in the color catalog photo of the model, possibly an earlier prototype). Rather

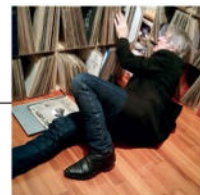


surprisingly, the CM95 included a genuine Gibson Tune-o-matic bridge, and was sold with an optional Bigsby vibrato, which has been removed from our featured example.

Just another couple years on, Carvin would enter its modern era, making guitars with the coil-taps and phase switches that were popular in the day, and beginning to make its own necks in-house — and set-necks at that — in 1978. A number of prominent artists eventually helped deliver greater exposure. Steve Vai endorsed the brand beginning in the '80s, followed by Allan Holdsworth in the '90s and Joe Walsh in the 2000s. The Vai Legacy series of amps and pedals arguably brought Carvin more acceptance among elite players than the guitars themselves ever did. Lowell C. Kiesel passed away in 2009, and in 2015 the company split into Kiesel Guitars and Carvin Corporation, the latter of which makes amplifiers and PA gear. ■

BY 1954, CARVIN WAS AS MUCH A SELLER OF GUITAR PARTS AS IT WAS OF ENTIRE INSTRUMENTS AND AMPS

BY JIM CAMPILONGO



A Love Supreme

Julian Priester Pepo Mtoto's *Love, Love* defines a moment with deeply spiritual power.

WHEN I WAS still in high school, my friends and I were driving around in my '62 Ford Fairlane "Woody" (that had no wood), all the while smoking weed like it was our last day on Earth. I'm surely not advocating marijuana, but my buddies and I were primed for the Julian Priester Pepo Mtoto *Love, Love* experience. While we were cruising around listening to the eclectic Bay Area jazz radio station KRE, the jazz trombonist and composer's *Love, Love* started coming through the car speakers at the perfect time. Transfixed, with mouths agape, we listened to the pulsating hypnotic bass and drums that supported the ethereal sounds — beautiful, ambitious, at times kinda evil and almost even bordering on pornographic. I had the feeling that *Love, Love* had found us. The DJ announced the cut before playing it, so five minutes into the lengthy title track, I made an illegal U-turn to our local Record Factory.

For those who don't recall, Record Factory was a corporate version of Tower Records, with a pretty impressive selection of music, nevertheless. Arriving at the store, I quickly parked and left my friends in the car, still listening to *Love, Love*. Five minutes later I returned with the album while they were still rocking out to all 19 minutes and 30 seconds of this great track.

Love, Love was released in 1973 on ECM Records, a label that represented excellence and personal artistry. Many of my favorite LPs are on ECM, and back in the pre-streaming days I might buy an ECM release without hearing a note of it. ECM stood for something: good music.



Love, Love has a wonderful supporting cast that includes Kamau Eric Gravatt on drums, Ron McClure on bass, Pat Gleeson on synthesizer, Bayete Umbra Zindiko on keyboards, the great Bill Connors on electric guitar, and Hadley Caliman on flute, soprano, tenor sax and bass clarinet (he plays a great sax solo on the title cut). I love Connors' unhinged electric guitar work, and his

contributions here are significant. His solo acoustic records on ECM are wonderful, and his playing on Return to Forever's *Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy* made it my favorite album of theirs.

On *Love, Love*, Connors plays a sort of contradictory shredding non-solo. It's very futuristic in approach, and cutting edge. He employs diminished runs along with personal-sounding rock phrases, while his biting and raw overdriven sound keeps me on the edge of my seat. I love the space between phrases, and at one point when I think the solo is done, there is a manic reprise. It's like taking a long

breath before a speedy closing monologue. The guitar could be mixed louder, but I've been listening to *Love, Love* for 40 years, so it can't be totally "wrong."

The title track is always a fascinating ride. The downbeat flip-flops every two bars, employing a 15/8 time signature. Despite the exotic time signature, the bass line sounds very Billy Cox/Band of Gypsies. Drummer Gravatt and bassist McClure play a deep hypnotic, repetitive groove in real time for more than 15 minutes. I respect their endurance and feel their humanity.

We listened to a lot of great music in that old Ford Fairlane: Muddy Waters, the Sex Pistols, Elvis, Julie London and more. Most of what I listened to is still in my DNA, but not much compares to having something powerful coming in uninvited that perfectly defines the moment, almost by spiritual force. Sometimes how and when I found music plays as powerfully as the music itself. A song can be like a smell, reminding me of a love that was extinguished by time but re-awakened by a sweet perfume. ■

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

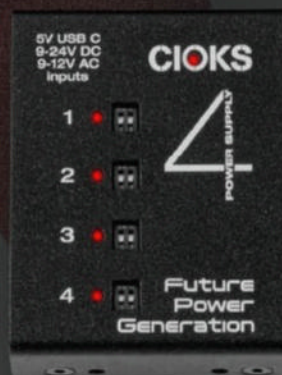
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PAST PLEASURES FUTURE SHOCKS

As he releases his expanded *Star Fleet Project* box set, **Brian May** expounds on Eddie Van Halen's role in it, the future of Queen and the dangers AI poses for music in the coming year.

BY GARY GRAFF

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PHIL CHEN



(from left) Brian May, Eddie Van Halen, Phil Chen and Alan Gratzer in the studio for *Star Fleet Project*. Note Ed and Phil's axe swap.

TALKING TO A rock star usually isn't rocket science. Unless you're talking to Brian May — er, that would be Dr. Brian May to you.

The Queen guitarist — who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II — is a bona fide PhD astrophysicist. He was studying at London's Imperial College as his group was forming and launching in the early 1970s, then returned to his education in the mid '00s, receiving the advanced degree in May 2008. Since then, he's been as active in the scientific realm as he is in music. "I do stereo-photography for various unmanned missions to the objects in the solar system," he tells *GP* via Zoom from his home in England. "So I'm hooked into various NASA and ESA [European Space Agency] missions, which is great."

He pauses and offers a slight smile. "I can't believe I'm saying this, 'cause it was a dream when I was a kid that I would work with people who are real astrophysicists and space explorers. But now I get to do it, which is wonderful. It takes up a lot of time, a lot of energy, but I wouldn't lose it. I wouldn't walk away from it for the world."

May, at 76, is actually a case study in being able to have it all — including, of course, the music. Since the death of singer Freddie Mercury in 1991, he and Queen drummer Roger Taylor have kept the group's legacy alive in other permutations — with Paul Rodgers, from 2004 to 2009, and, since 2011, with *American Idol* runner-up Adam Lambert, who has demonstrated an astounding ability to channel Mercury's flamboyance and vocal chops onstage. As a result, Queen remain a going concern, even 15 years since their last new music, 2008's *Rock the Cosmos*, with Rodgers.

Queen and Lambert are back on the road this year, but May is celebrating another part of his past as well. Forty years ago, during a band hiatus, he stepped outside of the Queen confines for *Star Fleet Project*, a three-song EP recorded over two days — April 21 and 22, 1983 — at the Record Plant in Los Angeles by a troupe dubbed Brian May + Friends.



Van Halen and May at Brian's home in L.A. at the time of *Star Fleet Project*.

"I KIND OF *STOLE* *ED FOR A DAY* *OR TWO*, AND THAT WASN'T SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED VERY OFTEN"

And what friends they were. First and foremost was Eddie Van Halen, riding high on the multi-Platinum success of his band's first five albums. REO Speedwagon drummer Alan Gratzer, latter-day Doors bassist Phil Chen and keyboardist Fred Mandel (Alice Cooper, Pink Floyd, Elton John and Queen) rounded out the core band, while Queen bandmate Roger Taylor contributed backing vocals.

The sessions yielded three songs: the sci-fi flavored title track, which was inspired by the Japanese TV series *X-Bomber* (released as *Star Fleet* in the U.K.), which May's then-young son Jimmy favored; the bluesy, Queen-styled rocker "Let Me Out"; and "Blues Breaker," a nearly 13-minute band-composed opus dedicated to Eric Clapton. *Star Fleet Project* came out on Halloween of that year and was May's first foray outside of Queen, which would be followed by two solo albums during the 1990s (*Back to the Light* and *Another World*) as well as the 2000 soundtrack to *Furia*.

For the album's 40th anniversary May has put together a box set, remixing the three tracks and adding alternate takes

and jams from the sessions. For aficionados, *The Complete Sessions* disc offers a lot of May and Van Halen playing, and a deep look at how the august ensemble worked together and brought the songs into shape.

Grimacing widely, May talked to *GP* about this trip down memory lane.

What does *Star Fleet Project* mean to you 40 years on?

It's a very important part of what I am, and it's something I really wanted to be buttoned-up and safe and out there for all time. It's a precious moment that I felt was getting lost on some shelf, and I wanted it to be out there so that people could experience it the way I experienced it. Luckily the analog tapes are still there. Hearing that stuff is not just nostalgic — it's inspiring, and very emotional. So it means a lot to get it out there, just so it will always be there.

How did the whole project come to be?

Back then, I was absolutely engrossed in Queen. For years we went into the studio for three months, and then we went on tour for nine months. It was completely all-encompassing, and this was a point where we took a break, 'cause we really needed to get away from each other for awhile. Suddenly, I had the opportunity to open a different door. And it was an adventure, 'cause I had no idea what would happen. I'd put all these people in the studio together with me, and maybe nothing would happen. And then I went in to do it, and it was the experience of a lifetime.

Did it take long before you realized that it would work?

The first day was so full of adrenalin and a good kind of nerves, and just the joy of discovery — the discovery of each other and creating in a different arena, a different universe almost. We all go in there and suddenly it's happening, and the tape is rolling. And it's kind of a bluff, 'cause we don't really know what we're doing, and gradually we do it a few times and it comes together. We eventually sound like a band, which is a miracle, really, because I don't think I ever expected it to gel quite that well.

It's the outtakes that are the most valuable for the listener. You really get a chance to hear the five of you evolve and learn to play together, in a very short time, too.

It's nice that you say that. We'd never played together before. There was no rehearsal period. What you hear in the *Sessions* part of this box set is exactly what happened the first time we ever got together and switched on the amps and tape machines. Every single take, every mistake, every laugh, a lot of funny stuff. You can hear that chemistry evolving.

We did have a little bit of preparation, because I had a couple of demos which we circulated to the guys. I didn't want to go in there completely unprepared, so I sent a little demo of the title track to

each of them — a little cassette with me singing and playing acoustic guitar, demonstrating the chord sequence and the development of this song. And there was also a very rough version of "Let Me Out." So they all knew kind of what was in my head, and Ed popped around to my house in L.A.

Just like that?

[laughs] I'd recently got a house there, 'cause we were effectively being Californians for a short period. My little boy went to nursery school there. So Ed came around, we plugged our guitars into a Rockman and played to each other and experimented a little bit. I wouldn't call it "rehearsing," but we had some fun, and I showed him what was in my mind. Phil Chen came around and we did the same thing with the bass. And Alan was my neighbor. We saw quite a



(from left) Gratzner, May, Chen, Van Halen and Fred Mandel.
(above) May and Chen at Brian's home.

bit of each other, so we had a chance to talk about it, but we never, until [Star Fleet Project] played with each other. So Alan was a good friend by that time. Fred Mandell is a virtuoso piano player that we'd just gotten to know in connection to Queen. I thought, How great would it be to get all these guys in the studio and see what happens?

How tight were you with Eddie at that point?

Ed I knew as a friend, but I'd very seldom had the chance to hang out with him. I got very drunk with him one night, ill-advisedly, 'cause he could drink and I couldn't. So I tried to match him and it was a terrible mistake. I ended up falling over in his bathroom in his hotel room... That's another story. [laughs]

One of the great services of the box set is to give us more Eddie Van Halen playing.

I set him up. I gave him that break in the middle of "Star Fleet," the bit where Ed steps forward and does his own thing, unfettered by anything. That to me was the climax of the whole song. He steps in, and it comes completely out of his head. That's not an overdub — he just does it. Every time he does it, it's different, 'cause his brain's constantly creating new stuff, which to me is one of the great joys of the [box set]. I love to hear the different version of what he came up with. What an extraordinary player he was. Just incredible.

Is the box set a tribute to Eddie in a way?

Yes, it is, but I did hesitate. At the time when I was starting to think about it, it was just about the time Ed passed away, and I couldn't do it. I just didn't feel right about it. So I embarked on the first two solo albums proper, *Back to the Light* and *Another World*. And then a few years passed and I got to talking to Alex Van Halen, who's a great inspiration and also a wonderful musician. He's become a trusted friend, and I have enormous admiration for him. He's been through such a terrible time because, of course, the two brothers were completely inseparable. For Alex it's like losing half of himself.





Queen + Adam Lambert perform in Bologna, Italy, November 10, 2017.

So I wanted Alex's blessing to do this, 'cause I didn't want to do anything that felt distasteful. Now I'm more conscious than ever that I kind of stole Ed for a day or two days, and that wasn't something that happened very often. Van Halen were a family and they operated as a family, always in the same space as a group. And, to be honest, Queen were pretty much the same way.

There's a lot of blues on *Star Fleet Project*, in that Queen sort of way, in "Let Me Out" and, of course, in "Blues Breaker." I guess whenever you get a group of musicians together, it can tend to go there, right?

Twelve-bar blues is a great place to learn to play with people. And Ed, like me, was inspired by Eric Clapton, and that's why when everything else had been attempted, we lapsed into this blues jam, which became "Blues Breaker" and was inspired by those days. And by that time we were very relaxed. We'd gotten over our nerves and we're not regarding each other like foreigners anymore. We're just enjoying playing, getting in the groove and really hearing and playing off each other. It was the most relaxed we got in the studio during those two days.

Eric is on record as not particularly complimentary about it, however.

I think he hated it! [laughs] But he's entitled. Eric could do anything and he'll still be our hero. There's probably lots of things I disagree with Eric about, but that doesn't change anything. He's been one of the greatest inspirations of my life, and that'll never change.

"BY THIS TIME NEXT YEAR WE WON'T KNOW WHAT'S **BEEN CREATED BY AI** AND WHAT'S BEEN CREATED BY HUMANS"

So will there be a *Bohemian Rhapsody* sequel?

No. I think if by a miracle the right script was created by somebody, that would be a different story. But for now we don't see a way to do it.

What about new Queen music?

Not at the moment, 'cause we're so busy doing the other stuff. We love playing live, and Adam's given us the ability to do that, and he kind of keeps us young, because he's so full of energy. So we're very engrossed in honing the live stuff, trying to introduce new elements to that. We did actually get into the studio a couple times to do various bits and pieces, but we never felt there was anything right.

There's a lot being made about AI right now, and its potential use in the music world. That's a technology you've probably been involved with and even used in your scientific pursuits, no?

It is, and my major concern with it now is in the artistic area. I think by this time next year the landscape will be completely different. We won't know which way is up. We won't know what's

been created by AI and what's been created by humans. Everything is going to get very blurred and very confusing, and I think we might look back on 2023 as the last year when humans really dominated the music scene. I really think it could be that serious, and that doesn't fill me with joy. It makes me feel apprehensive, and I'm preparing to feel sad about this.

I think a lot of great stuff will come from AI, because it is going to increase the powers of humans to solve problems. But the potential for AI to cause evil is, obviously, incredibly huge — not just in music, 'cause nobody dies in music, but people can die if AI gets involved in politics and world domination for various nations. I think the whole thing is massively scary. It's much more far-reaching than anybody realized — well, certainly than I realized.

Does it scare you off or fuel you to do more as a human creator?

I'm always doing bits and pieces. I do a lot of guesting on people's tracks; I quite enjoy that. But it's like the universe is a different place now, and there are echoes of us in that place. But where we actually stand as artists, I'm not sure. We still have something to say, but methods and media are so different now. It's kind of a struggle for us to stay on top of that, I think. We have young people around us, thank God. We ask them what to do. [laughs] The combination between different generations can produce a lot of powerful stuff. So we still have our methods, and our methods are acquired through years and years of experience, both in the studio and on the road.

The funny thing is they've forgotten the old methods, so sometimes when I go to someone else's studio I say, "What if you did this?" and I'll suggest doing something everyone would have done 40 years ago. And they'll go, "Oh, yeah. We never heard of that!" So there is that value in the combination of the old and the new that gives you great power, and I value that. But I have to swim quite fast to keep it up. Even being able to turn my TV on! [laughs] Put it that way. ■

RISING FORCE

As she drops *The Call of the Void*, her unapologetically shred sophomore album, **Nita Strauss** riffs on stress, solos and the importance of heeding Yngwie.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANA MASSARD

“**I** write very emotional music, and most of the time it’s pretty angry,” says the reigning queen of shred metal, Nita

Strauss. Right now, however, she’s the picture of morning contentment. Speaking with *Guitar Player* via Zoom, the guitarist is happily seated in the back of her tour bus, having wrapped the first date of her Summer Storm solo tour the night before in Nashville. On her lap are her two dogs: Bentley, a Pomeranian Chihuahua mix, and Motley, a Chihuahua mix. Strauss pats their heads and strokes their fur.

“The back lounge of the bus is their little kingdom,” she says. “They have everything they need, and they love it when people come by to visit them.

They’re true little road dogs. I take them out on all of my solo tours. When I’m playing with other people, I have to leave them home, but when I do my shows, I get to set the rules.”

It’s breakfast time, so Strauss pours some food in a couple of bowls and sets her canine pals down to eat. She smiles as she watches them, then turns her attention back to the subject of music. “Playing the guitar and writing music is therapy for me,” she says. “I’m typically a pretty happy person. I’m not angry, although I have stress like anybody else. I don’t get into fights at the drive-thru. It’s interesting, though: When I pick up the guitar, I let it all out and go wherever my creative journey takes me. It usually takes me to some aggressive places.”

That’s certainly true throughout much of her second solo album, *The Call of the Void* (Sumerian Records), a relentless — and relentlessly thrilling — collection of scorching metal that showcases Strauss’s lethal virtuosic abilities as both a guitarist and songwriter. Whereas her first record, 2018’s *Controlled Chaos*, was an all-instrumental affair that proved she could whip up an old-school neo-classical storm, the new album is a more future-forward set aimed at mainstream rock and metal audiences. More than half of the record features vocals from a variety of aggro guests — among them, Disturbed’s David Draiman, Halestorm’s Lzzy Hale, Dorothy Martin (from the band Dorothy) and In Flames’ Anders Fridén. Even Strauss’s longtime



employer, shock-rocker Alice Cooper, turns up and delivers the goods on the righteous arena-rock anthem “Winner Takes All.”

“I like to operate on 10 all the time, so for me, playing on the vocal songs was a real challenge,” Strauss explains. “Whenever people talk about ‘taking things to the next level,’ I always think about going to 11 — you know, pedal to the metal. On straightforward rock songs, like ‘Victorious’ with Dorothy or ‘Through the Noise’ with Lzzy Hale, I had to try to do what I wanted guitar-wise without stepping over their vocals. Even the song I did with Alice, I had to tell myself, ‘Hey, let him sing!’”

She laughs and recites Yngwie Malmsteen’s famous line, “How can less be more? It’s impossible. More is more!” “That’s always been my attitude,” she notes. “I would think, All right, I have this main part, and then I have this minor-third harmony. Now I can double the main line up an octave — but maybe it would be better to have three, four or five harmony parts? And hey, I can put a little arpeggio in there, too. It can get a little crazy.”

And indeed, on *The Call of the Void* she does go a little bonkers in the Yngwie sense. Many of the album’s cuts — instrumentals as well as vocal tunes — are packed to the gills with mesmerizing, high-flying guitar harmonies that at times reach operatic heights. “It was all about balance,” she says. “I had to keep reminding myself that not all of my big ideas had a place on any given song, which runs counter to my intuition. Being on 10 is my comfort zone, but occasionally I have to dial it back.”

She points to the exotic ballad “Kintsugi” as prime example of this kind of restraint. Only Strauss and her keyboardist, Katt Scarlett, appear on the track, which features blistering, fleet-fingered runs. At its core it’s an affecting study in legato melodicism, and it succeeds in casting a mystical spell. “I’m so proud of that song,” Strauss says. “It’s very pure, and the emotion comes from a different place than the other cuts on the album. I didn’t use any fancy tricks — I didn’t use a lot of gain or anything



“I’m a naturally quiet person,” Strauss says. “But I could get onstage and become somebody who was confident.”

like that. It’s very simple and evocative. To be honest, I didn’t know I could do something so sparse. It’s just the guitar and keyboard having a conversation. I didn’t need anything else.”

Nor did she need a lot of added musicians on the album. Aside from herself and Scarlett, the only other player is her drummer, and longtime boyfriend, Josh Villalta. They’re both part of Strauss’s touring band, which includes guitarist Johnny Young and bassist Dean, as well as singer Kasey Karlsen, a social media star and vocalist for the group Deadlands. “I’m so psyched about this band,” Strauss says. “To have Josh and Katt with me is awesome. Everything I do musically involves them. And Kasey is killing it. She did her first show with us last night, and she floored everybody. We’re having a blast.”

The brief Summer Storm tour saw Strauss return in August to her main gig with Alice Cooper (a spot she’s held down since 2014, one in which she shares guitar duties with another band veteran, Ryan Roxie). Last year, she caused a stir among fans when she split the Cooper camp and took up with Demi Lovato for a reinvention of the pop singer’s sound. Strauss added plenty of metallic crunch to Lovato’s bracing alt-rock album, *Holy Fvck*, and performed live dates as a member of the singer’s all-female band.

“There was some confusion about me going off to play with Demi, and I was surprised at the blowback,” Strauss says. “I was never ‘quitting’ Alice. There was a tour with Demi, and I talked to Alice about it — ‘Hey, are you okay with this?’ He said, ‘Absolutely. Go do it, and we’ll

“‘HOW CAN LESS BE
MORE? MORE IS MORE!’
THAT’S ALWAYS BEEN
MY ATTITUDE”



be here next year if the schedules work out.' He gave me his complete support. Kane Roberts stepped in for me with Alice, and he did a phenomenal job. There weren't that many dates with Demi this year, and there were a lot of dates with Alice, so it made sense for me to come back. There was zero drama." [Cooper, for his part, backs Strauss up. See the sidebar on page 44.]

She picks her pooches back up and considers the road ahead. "I'm in a really good place," she says. "This year marks my 20th year as a touring guitarist. If

there's one thing I've learned, it's 'Man makes plans and God laughs.' No matter what you've envisioned, something will happen and it all changes in front of you. I'm taking things one step at a time — getting this record out, a solo tour, touring with Alice, some one-offs with Demi and then game-planning the next solo record. If I looked back five years, I couldn't have imagined where I am right now."

It's interesting. The press never calls female singers "female singers." But if

a woman picks up a guitar, she's a "female guitarist." A woman who plays drums is a "female drummer," and so on. Aren't you sick of all that?

Honestly, it doesn't bother me at all anymore. Maybe when I was younger and had a chip on my shoulder, I'd be like, "I don't want to be a female guitar player; I just want to be known as a guitar player." But I've been touring for so long now, and the world of women in guitar is very different than when I started out. At the end of the day, to be in the conversation is a great thing. If we're talking about great female guitar players, or great guitar players from Los Angeles, or great guitar players with blonde hair, or whatever, I'm focused on the "great guitar player" part.

At the same time, though, you've talked about how happy you are to be the first female to have a signature guitar with Ibanez. Last year, you said that you hoped Demi Lovato's band could inspire women musicians. Is there a dichotomy there?

Maybe a little, when you put it like that. Look, let's just get down to the harsh reality. You can be the best heart surgeon in the world, and there will still be a guy out there saying, "I don't want a woman operating on my heart." There are still stereotypes to break down — it is what it is. We have a song on the new record called "Victorious," which is not meant to be a girl anthem, but it's taken on the role of a girl anthem. It's for anybody who struggles with self-doubt, and that's not limited to the female gender. I know a lot of insecure guys.

By and large, it's important to encourage people. When I was growing up, I didn't have a lot of women to look up to in the guitar field, so if I can somehow inspire the next generation of girls who want to pick up a guitar and learn to play, I'll gladly do what I can.

I would think that you already are an inspiration. Do you have girls come up to you at shows and say, "I picked up the guitar because of you"?

All the time. I can't put into words how much that means to me. It's not just little girls — it's 50-year-old men and



Strauss with the Ibanez JIVAX2 Ghost, her latest signature model guitar. "The pre-orders started at the last NAMM, and the first shipments are just starting to arrive now."

"If we're talking about great female guitar players, or whatever, I'm focused on the 'great guitar player' part," Strauss says



women who are retired. Their kids are grown, and they want to learn how to play guitar. I really get all kinds, and I love it.

Let's talk about shred guitar. Who lit that fuse for you?

I loved the Shrapnel guys — Paul Gilbert, Marty Friedman, Jason Becker. Of course, I loved Steve Vai and Joe Satriani. This was when I was 13 years old. Then I saw Steve Vai in *Crossroads* — he was so cool and charismatic. At the time, I had a guitar, but I hadn't fallen in love with it yet. I remember watching Steve Vai and thinking, Why didn't anybody tell me that you could do that with a guitar? That is so cool!

After that, I started devouring anything I could get my hands on. I got the instructional DVDs by John Petrucci, Marty Friedman and Yngwie Malmsteen. It was all too advanced for a beginning guitar player, but I was into it. My family didn't have a lot of money, so we couldn't afford private lessons. Those DVDs were my teachers. I would sit there watching the screen, just picking out the patterns as best I could. That's how I learned.

What was it about shred guitar music that spoke to you as opposed to other genres at the time? The fact is, you had to seek out the music; shred wasn't being played on the radio.

Oh, it was hard to find, for sure. I got into really heavy music, bands like In Flames, Children of Bodom, Soilwork...

I loved the European metal, but of course I loved our American heroes Metallica and Megadeth too. I think the music brought me out of my shell. I'm a naturally quiet person. I'm not super outgoing; I didn't have an easy time making friends in school. When I started playing in bands, it was like this whole new community accepted me. I could almost play a character version of myself. I could get onstage and become somebody who was confident. At the same time, I had a hard time starting a conversation with kids my own age. But I knew that if I played guitar, they would listen and they would pay attention. I fell in love with communicating through music and performance.

"I WRITE THE INSTRUMENTAL STUFF FOR ME. THESE SONGS ARE PURE, UNADULTERATED CREATIVITY IN A SOLO SENSE"

It's like how many shy kids excel in sports.

I did that, too. I grew up doing rhythmic gymnastics, and I would fly all over the country and compete. I had friends in my gym, but I still couldn't hold a conversation with anybody at school.

What would you say is the most important shred technique — maybe something you learned early on that still matters today?

Good question. Hmm... I would say legato playing. It's something I picked up on very early, and I still lean on it quite

a bit. I think a big part of that is because I'm self-taught. Any self-taught guitarist will tell you they have holes in their playing. I'm not as well-rounded as I could be. My right hand isn't as strong as my left; I'm a very left-hand dominant player. That just came from being a young guitar player who didn't know what was important. It was easier to move my left hand around, so I kept working harder on it. In a way, that ended up serving me very well, because later on my right hand caught up and I can do all the fast picking now. But I know that I've leaned heavily on my left hand since the very beginning.

It's interesting that you say legato playing. For a lot of shred players, that technique takes a back seat to high-speed flash.

I know, which is crazy! I love playing fast, believe me, but you have to know when to put on the brakes. Teaching myself how to play wasn't the smartest way to do it — I'm just being honest. If I could go back and take proper lessons with somebody who knew how to teach a young guitar player, I would probably be a very different guitarist than I am today. I'd certainly be a more complete player. But this is where I've landed, and all things for a reason. It's working.

You mentioned how Steve Vai in *Crossroads* got you interested in shred guitar, but the movie itself concerned a young blues musician.

Did blues come into the picture when you were starting out?

I wouldn't say it was a major influence. Of course, I had *Texas Flood* by the great Stevie Ray Vaughan.

That's funny. A lot of people who don't listen to blues have a Stevie Ray album.

That's true. Later in my career, I got into more modern blues players, like Joe Bonamassa. He was actually at my show in Nashville last night — so no pressure, right? I look out and there's Bonamassa.

Wow! [laughs] He texted me after the show — “Big tone.” Coming from him, it was the greatest compliment I could ever ask for. As far as modern blues goes, he is just the pinnacle of what’s going on.

I asked because it seems that a lot of metal or shred players just pass right over the blues.

Right. They do.

Given that, how then did you approach playing much of Alice Cooper’s material? Take a song like “I’m Eighteen,” which is very R&B-based rock and roll — you could play it on an acoustic.

Exactly.

How does a shredder come at something like that?

It was kind of an education process. When I got the confirmation that I was going to be on the Alice Cooper tour, I wound up taking my first actual guitar lesson.

Why exactly?

To learn, basically. I talked to [longtime Alice Cooper producer] Bob Ezrin, who was a big part of my audition process, and he said, “Alice Cooper doesn’t need a shred guitar player. He needs a rock guitar player. Can you become a rock guitar player in time?” I said, “Absolutely. I know I can do it.” This was two weeks before the start of the Alice Cooper-Mötley Crüe tour. When I hung up the phone, I was in a daze. I remember looking at my phone and thinking, “Wow... Bob Ezrin just told me I don’t know how to play rock guitar.”

That’ll wreck your confidence.

Yeah. I was like, “I need to figure out what he means — a ‘rock guitar player.’” I called around and found a great teacher. I came in and showed him my audition videos. I said, “What the fuck does he mean?”

My teacher was the first person to really teach me how to incorporate blues licks into my playing, like adding the blues note into the minor pentatonic scale — these little licks and things. AC/DC riffs, Kiss riffs and licks. Ace



“Whenever people talk about ‘taking things to the next level,’ I always think about going to 11.”

Frehley’s stuff worked seamlessly with my style of playing, but they added that extra nuance that made it feel a bit more like a classic-rock vibe.

What you’re describing is reverse engineering. A lot of the guitarists you first admired — Satriani and Vai, for example — came up listening to blues-based players. Their style of playing then morphed into what we call “shred.”

Completely. *Reverse engineering* — that’s the perfect term for it. We reverse-engineered my guitar playing to fit what it needed to be. You know, we talked about being a complete player and the gaps in my knowledge — the blues part was a big gap for me. I think that happened because I taught myself. When I was younger, I didn’t have the discipline to start from the beginning. I just skipped ahead to what I wanted to do.

Once I addressed that hole in my playing, it made me a stronger guitarist overall, and it allowed me to incorporate that style into what I do. If you listen to the new record, you’ll hear a lot of these little blues licks that I’ve learned over the course of playing with Alice. Also, Ryan Roxie, who is a fantastic, very rock and roll blues-based player — there’s a lot of little Ryan Roxie tips and tricks in there, as well.

With the exception of “Kintsugi,” you tend to favor a big, orchestrated guitar sound on the album — lots of harmonized parts. Where does that come from?

Probably all the bands I grew up loving

— Iron Maiden, In Flames, Children of Bodom, Arch Enemy. They gave me an appreciation for two guitar players doing minor-third harmonies.

Do you think you might explore the approach on “Kintsugi” in the future?

You never know. That one felt right at the time. I didn’t start out with the intention of doing it — it’s just what the song needed. If another song pops into my brain that needs it, absolutely.

Take me inside your process for writing instrumentals like “Summer Storm” and “Consume the Fire.” With the upfront knowledge that guitar players will like them, how do you try to make the songs appeal to non-guitarists?

Honestly, this may sound selfish, but I don’t do it for either of those reasons. I write the instrumental stuff for me. I don’t even think about the audience. These songs are pure, unadulterated creativity in a solo sense. I don’t work with other musicians or co-writers. It’s like a therapy session, and I get to explore whatever I’m thinking about. I’m always surprised at the reactions I get, and I’m so flattered that non-guitar players really get into these songs. The vocal songs get a lot of people in the door, but they stay for the instrumentals.

“Scorched” is a stately, elegant, mid-tempo instrumental. I hear bits of Satch, but mostly Vai, the way he orchestrated his guitars on *Passion and Warfare*. Am I in the right lane there?

Oh, my, what a compliment! I would say

AXE MASTER

When it comes to choosing guitarists, Alice Cooper has shockingly good instincts.

BY GARY GRAFF

AS ALICE COOPER explains, there was no great angst when Nita Strauss left his band last year to tour with Demi Lovato. And Nita received a warm welcome when she returned for this year's activities.

"I have a revolving-door kind of policy at the Alice Cooper show," the veteran shock rocker says. "When a musician has an opportunity to do something, I say, 'See ya! Come back any time you can.' If they see an opportunity or something that they really want to do, go for it. I look at it as a leave of absence. There's never any bad blood about stuff like that."

As for Strauss, "I told her, 'You should do this!'" Cooper recalls. "I said, 'The Alice Cooper show is gonna go



Nita Strauss performs with Alice Cooper at London's Wembley Arena, November 16, 2017.

on and on and on, God willing, but you're always welcome back.' And now she is."

In the meantime, Cooper adds, he had his own opportunity for a blast from the past, bringing back Kane Roberts, his lead guitarist and primary co-writer for his late '80s comeback with the *Constrictor* and *Raise Your Fist* albums and attendant tours. "The very first person everybody thought of was

Kane," he says. "That was the obvious choice for all of us. I called him up and he said, 'Yeah, sure. What do I have to do?' I said, 'Just be Kane,' and it worked out great.

"It was a little more masculine, definitely a little more macho," Cooper says about the muscular Roberts' return for the fall 2022 tour. "Kane brings this, y'know, 'The beast is back' kind of thing.

We already have a pretty powerful sound, but when he gets into it, all of a sudden you have this other sound of a guitar. Ryan

Cooper has certainly learned how to deploy guitar players over the years, too. Since the original Alice Cooper band (with Michael Bruce and the late Glenn Buxton) splintered during 1974, the core has included legends and upstarts, starting with the tandem of Dick Wagner and Steve Hunter, and continuing with Elton John's Davey Johnstone, Al Pitrelli, Reb Beach, Damon Johnson and Orianthi, who Strauss replaced during 2014. Current guitarists Roxie and Henriksen have been with Cooper since 1996 and 2011, respectively, and the latter is part of Hollywood Vampires, Cooper's band with Johnny Depp and Aerosmith's Joe Perry that released a live album and toured earlier this year.

"I love guitar players, and I've been lucky enough to work with so many great ones," Cooper says. "To me, rock and roll is guitar music. That's the crux of everything. Chuck Berry, Clapton, Jeff Beck, Keith... and on and on. That's what makes it rock, you know?"

"I LOVE GUITAR PLAYERS, AND I'VE BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO WORK WITH SO MANY GREAT ONES"

Orianthi, whom Strauss replaced in 2014, plays with Cooper at Wembley Arena in 2012.



[Roxie]'s guitar has a certain sound, and Nita has a certain style of playing, more of a shredding kind of style, and so does Tommy [Henriksen]. But Kane is kind of a brutal guitar player; he adds a certain toughness to it that wasn't there before. But with my stuff you can go either way with it. It's not gonna change the song; it's just gonna change the attitude of the song."

**“I LOOK OUT AND
THERE’S BONAMASSA.
HE TEXTED ME AFTER
THE SHOW — ‘BIG TONE’”**



you're in the right lane, although I didn't really start out trying to emulate Steve Vai's sound. I think it just happens naturally; having played for so many years in two- and three-guitar bands, harmonies are my wheelhouse. Everybody I work with knows that I'll add harmonies upon harmonies upon octaves — to the point where it can be a bit much. [laughs]

When you write instrumentals, do you always have a guitar in your hands? Do you sometimes start with a melody or a riff that pops into your head while you're walking around?

You don't get to choose when the muse comes. Sometimes I'll have a guitar with me, but other times I might be walking around thinking about a song. I usually try to have a story that I want to tell, and I try to come up with note choices and arrangements that serve the story. I think that's why my songs appeal to people who aren't guitar players; they might not have words, but they're about something.

Who in your opinion is pushing the boundaries of instrumental shred? Who's taking it somewhere new?

Oh, my gosh, I feel like we're in a golden age for it. Look at what Angel Vivaldi is doing. Look at what Yvette Young is doing. Tim Henson and Scott LePage from Polyphia, Tosin Abasi, Jason Richardson. These players are advancing the music to a place that people couldn't even conceive of 10 years ago. I watch Tim and Scott do what they do, and it makes my jaw drop. I would say that the world of instrumental guitar is in a very good place.

Anything new on the horizon for your signature guitar? Are you planning an update?

I have something cooking for a new JIVA model, but I'm holding off putting the wheels in motion until the new JIVAX2 Ghost is shipping more consistently. The pre-orders started at the last NAMM, and the first shipments are just starting to arrive now. A lot of people pre-ordered a very expensive guitar, and

"Legato playing is something I picked up on very early, and I still lean on it quite a bit. I think a big part of that is because I'm self-taught."



I think it would be a slap in the face if I said, "I know you haven't gotten that guitar, but hey, here's a new one."

Did you use any new gear on the record?

I experimented with a lot of different plug-ins — that was new for me. We used some of the Neural DSPs and some Steven Slate stuff. I liked using a Slate mic because of the modeling aspect. As far as live gear, I still used my signature guitars, and I can't beat a Marshall amp. I use the Satriani JVM series of amps.

You're big into fitness. Is that how you keep yourself together? Between the rigors of touring, plus everything else you're involved with, you've got a pretty full schedule.

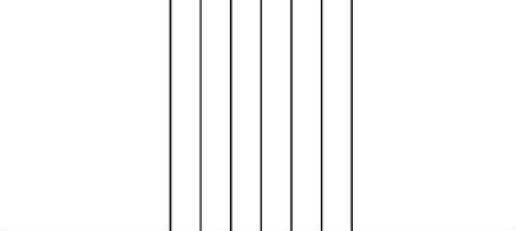
It gets pretty hectic. For me, it's all about getting into a routine and sticking

with it. The way my days are set up, I have to get to it right when I wake up. I take my vitamins, drink my green shake, and then I do my workout. If I don't get that workout in, I won't do it at all. It's so important to stick to a routine, mentally and physically. You have to fuel your machine.

It's admirable how seriously you take physical and mental health. I'm sure you've seen some musicians go down a bad road.

I have, but it's less and less common now. More musicians than ever are prioritizing their health. I go on tour buses and people are like, "We drink this green drink, and we use this protein powder." It's not drugs and partying and girls anymore. Everybody has calmed down. We keep the craziness for the stage. ■





SEVEN STRINGS TO SWING

As he drops *Stage & Screen*, **John Pizzarelli** celebrates his 40th year of recording and reflects on the lessons he learned from his father, Bucky.

BY BILL MILKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACI BERKOPEC

GROWING UP THE son of Bucky Pizzarelli, John Pizzarelli had quite an advantage over the other kids in his Paterson, New Jersey, neighborhood who wanted to pick up the instrument in the wake of the Beatles and the British Invasion. After all, Bucky was house guitarist in the *Tonight Show* band during the Johnny Carson years, and a ubiquitous session player through the '50s, '60s and '70s, recording with everyone from Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra and Rosemary Clooney to Benny Goodman, Zoot Sims, Lionel Hampton, Stephane Grappelli, Gerry Mulligan and Buddy Rich. He even appeared on classic pop recordings by Roberta Flack, Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker, Carly Simon, Judy Collins, the Drifters, and Dion and the Belmonts.

"John had a rock and roll band as a teenager," the late Bucky recalled in an interview I did with him for *New Jersey Monthly* in 2015. "I heard them play, and I said to John, 'Look, you're copying rock and roll solos. You can copy a jazz solo. Here's a record of Django Reinhardt. Copy this.' And he did it very well. And that's when he started to play jazz."

John Pizzarelli, now 63, remembers his father giving him records to learn songs from before they played together in public. "I would learn them and we would practice maybe once or twice," he recalls. "And then we'd go to a gig, and at the end of the set he'd say, 'My son's gonna play 'Honeysuckle Rose' with me now.' And I'd go up and do it. He always threw me in the fire that way, but I loved it. And I realized that the more things I learned, the longer I

could be on the stage with him. So I just started to learn songs."

The senior Pizzarelli, who died of complications from COVID-19 on April 1, 2020, at age 94, had switched from conventional six- to seven-string guitar (with a low B string) in 1969 after seeing George Van Eps demonstrate the then-new instrument. "I went down to Manny's Music on 48th Street the next day and bought one," Bucky recalled. "And at that point, it was a whole new ballgame."

By 1980, Bucky's teenage son John was ready to follow in his father's footsteps. That year they released their first duet album together, *2 x 7 = Pizzarelli*, recorded when John was 19. They followed with 1984's *Swinging Sevens*. Both albums, on Bernie Brightman's Stash label, featured father



Bucky and John Pizzarelli perform at the Duke Jazz Talks, New York City, February 11, 2009.

and son playing seven-string guitars. “I got a big education in those years,” said John, who also released his first album as a leader, *I’m Hip (Please Don’t Tell My Father)*, in 1983.

Pizzarelli went on to become a world-renowned guitarist and vocalist, hailed for reinvigorating the Great American Songbook with his contemporary interpretations. His 33 recordings under his own name include tributes to Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Mercer, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Duke Ellington, the Beatles (1998’s *Meets the Beatles*) and Paul McCartney (2015’s *Midnight McCartney*). His 2012 album, *Double Exposure*, featured clever mash-ups of Wes Montgomery’s “Four on Six” and the Allman Brothers’ instrumental “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed”; the Beatles’ “I Feel Fine” and Lee Morgan’s “Sidewinder”; and James Taylor’s “Traffic Jam” and Joe Henderson’s “The Kicker.” In 2021, during pandemic lockdown, he made the intimate at-home recording *Better Days Ahead: Solo Guitar Takes on Pat Metheny*.

Stage & Screen (Palmetto), Pizzarelli’s latest, marks 40 years since his debut recording. It’s a collection of familiar tunes from Broadway and Hollywood spanning 90 years, from the classic Tin Pan Alley tunes “Tea for Two” and “I Want to Be Happy” from the 1925 Broadway musical *No, No Nanette* to Jason Robert Brown’s “I Love Betsy” from the 2015 Broadway musical *Honeymoon in*

Vegas. Much of the album’s repertoire was inspired by Pizzarelli’s weekly Thursday night livestream concerts on Facebook, which are purely spontaneous affairs from home where he takes requests (with digital tip jar). He is sometimes joined by his wife, Broadway veteran Jessica Molasky, who is also Pizzarelli’s co-host for their weekly nationally syndicated *Radio Deluxe* broadcasts (heard on 70 listener-supported stations across America and online at radiodeluxe.com) as well as his singing partner for their annual fall engagement at the Cafe Carlyle in Manhattan.

“For *Stage & Screen*, I had the opportunity to find unusual songs as well as tried-and-true standards,” he explains. “These are all familiar songs from a play or a movie. I’m very close to a lot of people in the Broadway community because of my wife, and I like old movies. So to have Broadway and film represented here, there’s something sort of unique about it.”

Accompanied by the young piano phenom Isaiah J. Thompson and bassist Mike Karn, the seven-string guitarist swings his way through standards like “Just in Time,” “Too Close for Comfort” and the driving rhythm guitar feature “I Want to Be Happy.” The drum-less trio deftly puts together a suite of tunes from the musical *Oklahoma!* while delivering romantic takes on “As Time Goes By,” “Where or When” and “Tea for Two.”

Pizzarelli also performs a beautiful solo rendition of Leonard Bernstein’s “Some Other Time,” a tune from the 1944 musical *On the Town*, which later became associated with jazz piano legend Bill Evans. He was at his home in Manhattan for this recent phone chat.

For *Stage & Screen*, it sounds like you alternate between electric and acoustic seven-strings.

Yes, those are the two Bill Moll guitars that I generally use. The nylon-string classical Moll is what I played exclusively on the Metheny project, and the other one is a signature Moll electric with a Florentine cutaway that I’ve been using for about 15 years. Actually, on two other songs I played a handmade Bulgarian seven-string guitar called a Kremona. My friend Rick Haden, who’s the guitar teacher out at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, found it and actually shaved the neck down for me and sent it to me. It’s a great little box, so I ended up taking that in the studio and recording “Some Other Time” and “Where or When” on it. And on both of those cuts, I’m playing fingerstyle. For the rest of the tunes on the album I’m playing with a pick.

You interact so well throughout *Stage & Screen* with pianist Isaiah J. Thompson, who sounds like an old soul in a young man’s body. Your call-and-response together on “Surrey With the Fringe on Top” is particularly smoking.

Yeah. We met in 2013 when he was just 16. I was hosting a film and performance series at the Jacob Burns Film Center up in Pleasantville, New York, and I was accompanied by students from Jazz House Kids, the non-profit organization founded by Melissa Walker and her husband, Christian McBride. And so I interacted with these kids, and I remember thinking, Boy, that piano player’s got something! I always joked that I would have hired him right away but he had to go to the prom first. And it turned out that a couple of years later I wrote Christian McBride and said, “My piano player left and I need someone. There’s got to be a bunch of young kids



“THINK ABOUT THIS GUY
WHO WAS JUST THE SON
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SOLO THEN, BUT AGAIN,
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THAT’S HOW I LEARNED”

out there. You know who they are.” So he gave me four names, and the first one on the list was Isaiah J. Thompson. And I said, “That’s the guy!” My daughter found him for me on Facebook, and we’ve been together since 2019.

One thing that you highlight throughout *Stage & Screen* is that thing of scatting and soloing simultaneously, which is a George Benson signature. How long have you been doing that?

Ever since I learned Benson’s version of “This Masquerade.” It was a hit song and everybody wanted to hear it back then, so I sort of learned that Benson intro and some of his little licks from it. That whole *Breezin’* record [from 1976] was such a big smash, so I tried to learn a lot of things off of it, including the scatting and soloing thing. My father actually encouraged me to do that. Every once in a while he’d say, “Sing and play! Sing and play on that.” And you know, we had Slam Stewart in our house from the time I was a little kid. Slam’s trademark was his ability to bow the bass and simultaneously hum or sing an octave higher. He and Slim Gaillard had a popular duo called Slim & Slam that had a big hit back in the late ’30s called “Flat Foot Floogie (With a Floy Floy).” My father worked with Slam all the time [they had a 1978 album on the Stash label called *Dialogue*]. So I grew up with that sound in our house. It’s just one of those things that I’ve been doing for a long time, but it did come from George Benson and Slam Stewart.

Did you go through a period as a kid wanting to play rock and roll on a Stratocaster?

Oh sure, I owned a Strat. I totally dug that music. I was a big Beatles fan in my teens. The other thing that was key about my house was we had all the equipment. I had all the amps. My friend Steve would say, “Hey, I want to learn how to play the bass. Can you show me that?” I had a six-string bass at home, so he would play that and I would play guitar. We’d plug into one amp and try to learn Beatles tunes. So I did a lot of that stuff, even into my 20s, playing



John and Bucky perform in 1997.

weddings and things. And after the Stratocaster. I had a Fender Flame, which was the guitar Robben Ford played for a while. And I played it through a Mesa/Boogie amplifier, which I still have. I had a pedalboard and all those things. I had a lot of fun playing that stuff. But now I have two hearing aids too, so that’s the result of that.

At what point did you make the conversion over to seven-string?

When I came home from college in 1980. I went to University of Tampa for three semesters, and whenever I came home, my father would say, “Let’s go play a gig, just two guitars.” I had learned some of George Barnes’ choruses and their arrangement of “Honeysuckle Rose” and other tunes from that duo album they did together [1971’s *Guitars Pure and Honest*]. Then one day I remember we were going to the Morristown Library to play a concert, and Bucky said, “Just play the seven on this, because that way you can accompany me when I solo, and vice versa.” And I didn’t really even solo then, but again, it was like being thrown into the fire. That’s how I learned.

Around that same time, I worked at a day camp that was 10 minutes from our house, and each day they had a thing called Hobby Hour, where the kids would line up behind a sign — “Music,” “Softball,” “Art”...this and that — and they’d get an hour of whatever they really wanted to do. So I was one of the

music guys, along with another guy who had studied with the great jazz guitarist Barry Galbraith. We started playing duets together and Bucky showed me how to incorporate the seven-string. He said, “You can accompany that guy with bass lines and chords. Do it this way.” And he showed me how to figure it out.

So in a nutshell, that’s how it all started. And from there I just started playing the seven-string all the time. There was actually a time when I started my trio in 1990 when I was going to get a little Charlie Christian guitar [Gibson ES-150] or one like Oscar Moore played in the Nat King Cole trio [Gibson L-5]. So I was thinking about that but my father said, “No, Bob Benedetto has a little plywood seven-string guitar that would be perfect for you.” So I ended up staying on the seven from there on in. And on the new record you can hear me play a verse on “Tea for Two” and “As Time Goes By” where you hear that seven-string making a difference, I think. You can hear the all those low bass notes that you just don’t get on a regular guitar.

There are a couple of tunes on the new album where you do go into the Wes Montgomery–styled octaves and chord melodies. Was Wes a big influence on you? All of my stuff is from Bucky, but then as I go back, I realize, Oh, so that’s where he got that from! Hearing my father play, he would invariably start with single-note solos, then play octaves, and the

chord solo was always the third chorus before he turned it over to somebody else. And I realized later that he got a lot of that from those great Wes Montgomery records I was buying in my 20s, like Wes's *Smokin' at the Half Note*. It's just amazing what Wes does. He's so natural, it's such a nonchalant kind of thing with him. He's just so loose and everything's just so beautifully played. It's a brilliant thing. And he did it all with his thumb. Just amazing.

Have you acquired any other new guitars since recording *Stage & Screen*?

Yes, I have a non-cutaway guitar that was just made for me by [Utah-based luthier] Ryan Thorell. When I got COVID last year in February, I had nothing to do. My wife, Jessica, went up to our cabin and I was here alone, so I got on the phone a lot. I called Matt Munisteri and my friend Rick Haden and I was saying, "I want to get one of those Charlie Christian guitars. They're so cool." And they were both like, "You got to get a seven if you're going to get one. Then you'll play it. You know you're not going to play it if you get a six."

So I called Ryan Thorell, who I had met a number of times out in Salt Lake City, and I said, "Do you want to build me a non-cutaway Charlie Christian guitar, seven-string?" So that was how the process started. And I just got the guitar about three or four weeks ago. I've been playing it a little bit on gigs, and I'll probably play that on the road in the next couple of months of touring, just to break it in.

And do you still have a couple of D'Angelicos?

Yeah. I have my father's two: the one he played on Ray Charles' 1960 recording of "Georgia on my Mind" and I also have an early one. So I got two good ones.

I understand that your father's 1978 Benedetto archtop seven-string guitar is hanging in the Smithsonian now?

Yeah. It's a beautiful thing. It's more moving than I would have ever thought. I mean, think about this guy who was just the son of a grocer from Paterson,



New Jersey, who applied himself more than anybody ever could to the instrument and ended up playing in the White House. And he played with Benny Goodman and everyone. Just an amazing accomplishment. So it's a beautiful thing to see my dad's guitar hanging there.

And you obviously carry Bucky with you today every time you play.

Absolutely. That was especially true during the time I was recording the Metheny album at our cabin upstate. Watching Bucky learn classical guitar when I was a kid was something I kept relating back to while doing that project. I remember hearing my dad play all this Segovia stuff in this room where he practiced and seeing all the music spread out on this little table he had next to the music stand. He'd wake up every morning, go into that room and work on Segovia, trying to make new discoveries.

And that kind of work ethic rubbed off on me, I think. At the cabin I would

get up at six in the morning and I'd sit in this little porch up there and start to play those tunes. And it became a daily routine, learning new tunes and getting to spend six or seven hours a day playing on these things. I was practicing so much I actually got a little tendonitis in my pointer finger on my left hand from all the stretches in the barre chords I was playing. I kept thinking, I hope that goes away, which it finally did. But that was one of those things where I was like, "I actually think I'm playing the guitar too much," which I've never said before.

Then, when I began recording the Metheny tunes up at the cabin, with my seven-string Moll nylon guitar plugged into an iPad through an iRig, I felt like at certain times I could hear Bucky saying to me, "What are you rushing for? Take your time with this. It's a beautiful melody. Let me hear what this melody is." So all those pieces of his advice over the years were in my brain when I was recording that Metheny album. ■

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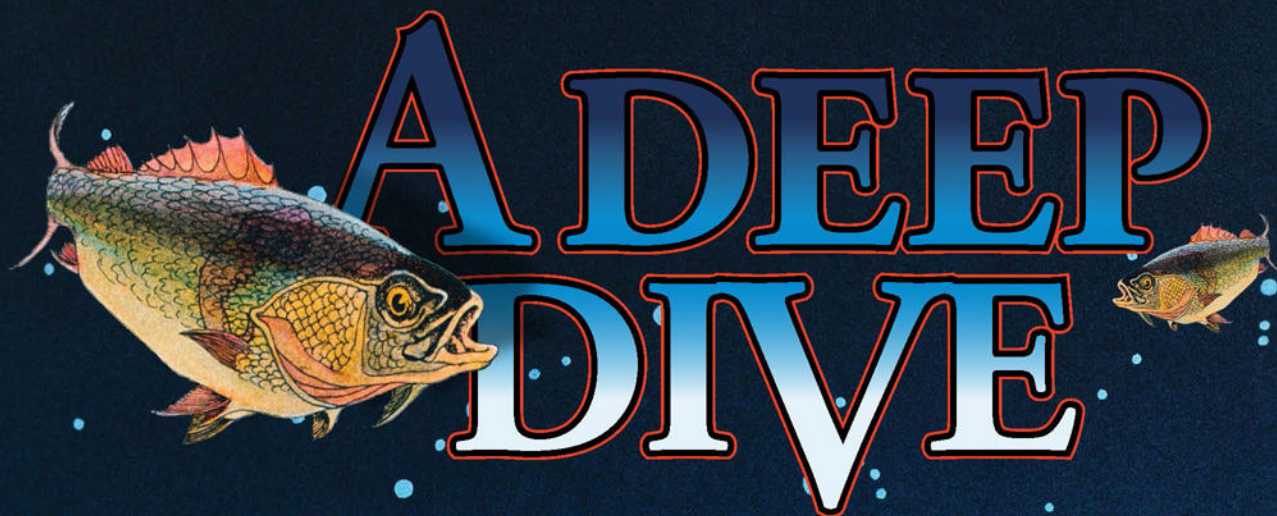
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A large, stylized title "A DEEP DIVE" in a blue and white serif font with a red outline. Two detailed illustrations of fish, one large on the left and one smaller on the right, are swimming towards the title. The background is a dark blue gradient with small white dots representing bubbles or stars.

A DEEP DIVE

As Yes release their second album in two years, **Steve Howe** reflects on the 50th anniversary of *Tales From Topographic Oceans* and his newly reconceptualized take on the debut album from his 1960s band Tomorrow.

BY GARY GRAFF

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ART BY ROGER DEAN



“IT WAS A time of spreading our wings, a wonderful project where we went to the ends of the Earth to do it,” Yes guitarist Steve Howe recalls of *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, the epic double-vinyl concept album the group released in 1973. Fifty years on, the record remains an important milestone in Yes history for the guitarist. “There was often a feeling that disaster was almost about to strike, but we got there in the end. You have to account for *Tales* in our history to properly talk about what Yes achieved, because it was quite exceptional. I don’t think we’d be the same group without it.”

Most certainly they wouldn’t. Following on the heels of the critically and commercially successful albums *Fragile*, *Close to the Edge* and *Yessongs*, *Tales From*

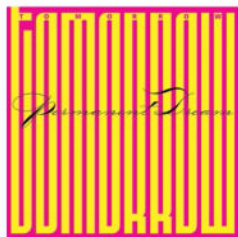
Topographic Oceans was a success on both sides of the Atlantic, albeit one that divided critics and fans with its ambitious musical aims. It took a mauling in the music press. Worse still, shortly after its release, keyboardist Rick Wakeman departed the group, bored by the new direction and eager to enjoy his recently launched solo career.

But at its inception, *Tales* was an exciting project, at least for its originators, Howe and Yes singer Jon Anderson. After composing the lengthy, ambitious tracks on *Close to the Edge*, Anderson was keen to explore more elaborate musical structures. In March 1973, he had been turned onto the memoir *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda, a guru known in esoteric circles, who had also made an unlikely appearance on the cover of the

Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, sandwiched between H.G. Wells and James Joyce. The book had a profound effect on Anderson. “It started me off on the path of becoming aware that there even was a path,” he says. Moreover, he discovered in the book a reference to the different levels and divisions within Hindu scriptures, providing him with a framework in which to place the large-scale musical ideas and concepts he’d been mulling over. He found a willing ally in Howe, with whom he’d co-written both “Roundabout” and “Close to the Edge.” “We were really up for the big, challenging things like, ‘Let’s do an album with four *Close to the Edges*,’” Howe says with a laugh.

Zooming in with *Guitar Player* from his “second home” in rural England, away from the hustle and bustle of London, Howe

PAINTING, PHOTOS AND LOGOS © ROGER DEAN 1973. YES LOGO © 1972



TOP: Tomorrow in 1967. (from left) John “Junior” Wood, John “Twink” Alder, Steve Howe and (front) Keith West.

ABOVE: The cover of Howe’s re-imagined version of the band’s *Permanent Dream*.

seems relaxed and at ease, not at all like the guy who’s seemingly been working his tail off in recent years. Keeping Yes alive and on the road, save for the pandemic pause, has certainly been part of that. Howe, 76, has shepherded the band through the deaths of founding bassist Chris Squire in 2015 and longtime drummer Alan White last year.

He has also stepped up and into the producer’s chair, helming 2021’s *The Quest*, Yes’s first new studio album in seven years, and its follow-up, *Mirror to the Sky*, which came out earlier this year. On top of that, he re-imagined *Permanent Dream*, the 1968 debut album by his pre-Yes band Tomorrow, by refining the mixes and adding lesser-known

studio tracks, and released a new solo album *Love Is*, as well as a seventh edition of his *Homebrew* series.

In that regard, the current year has been one of looking both backward and forward for Howe. It was in that mindset that he joined us to share his thoughts about *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, as well as Tomorrow’s *Permanent Dream* and Yes’s *Mirror to the Sky*.

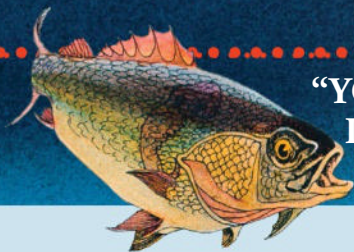
TOMORROW — PERMANENT DREAM

What led you to re-imagine the Tomorrow album?

One day I was digging around and found the record. I put it on and thought, This shouldn’t

sound like this; how can I listen to Tomorrow where it sounds any good? I’ve been friends with [Tomorrow singer] Keith [West] all this time. We eventually ordered the original mono tapes, because I believed it was much better in the mono world, but there were none really available — maybe an odd track or two. So we didn’t remix the whole album. All we could do is treat parts of it with the technology that’s available now. I just fixed all the things that were fixable. Fifty-five years was probably a long time to wait to work on this album, but I’m glad we did what we could.

What kind of perspective did it give you on Steve Howe back then and who he grew to become?



“YOU HAVE TO ACCOUNT FOR *TALES*... I DON'T THINK WE'D BE THE SAME GROUP WITHOUT IT”



It's my pathway. It's where I've been. I can go back there and still play Tomorrow music quite easily, doodle around with it. But, yeah, it's kinda like my early steps. I quite like some of the sounds. [*Abbey Road engineers*] Peter Bown and Geoff Emerick did a lot of that engineering on my [*Gibson ES-175*], and I really like that sound they got for me.

Tomorrow were recording at Abbey Road while the Beatles were working there, too, right?

Yeah. One day Paul and Ringo came in together and put their heads around the doors, like, “Hi guys!” People were very friendly there. It was very nice. There were a few times we'd maybe go downstairs and hear music coming out of the door and think, “Omigod! That's the Beatles! Omigod!,” and we'd sneak in to not disturb anybody.

It seems kind of ballsy that a young band like Tomorrow would cover “Strawberry Fields Forever” on *Permanent Dream*, not very long after the Beatles put it out.

[*laughs*] It was really quite a fresh song, yeah. I don't know how we got that idea. Someone must have said, “I like that. Why don't we try it?” It's very unusual we didn't choose another song, really, but we loved that one. It's such classic Beatles.

YES — *TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS*

Tales from Topographic Oceans turns 50 later this year. Before that came *Yessongs*, which was Yes's first live album. Did surveying the group's music up to that point for *Yessongs* have an impact on where you wanted to go on *Topographic Oceans*?

I guess doing *Yessongs* gave Jon and me more of a chance to

finish up songs we'd written and to be able to present something in a rehearsal room. 'Cause you had to be quite brave; you did it on your own — “Here's my song!” — or, in the case of *Topographic Oceans*, two people. Jon would sing, and I'd noodle my riffs and things, and the band would listen and get their ideas. That's how we did it. There was a rehearsal period, and then we went into the studio to start recording, and we were there for months and months. We kept plowing on until this thing was finished. It was a huge, huge undertaking.

Rick Wakeman expressed some reservations with *Tales* and subsequently quit the group.

Was it a hard sell to the other guys at the time?

Jon and I asked the guys to be as creative as they could: “Don't complain that you don't like it. Find something to play, and then you'll love it.” There was that adage to everything. So it was a bit of an open book, and we did give everybody credit for their

contributions, either structural, chordal structures, or a riff or some vocal line — not the whole song, obviously. So there was a Yes-style credit for music by everybody, but of course Jon and I wrote the majority of the music, and they wouldn't deny it. But all of them came up with a little bit to add to it, something they wanted to do. We just attempted to draw those things out of them so it was a worthwhile album.

It was a bit polarizing when it was released, wasn't it?

It was, yeah. But I find it so funny that anybody criticizes this album on the basis that it was a concept album. Out of the 22, 23 studio albums we made, one of them is a concept album called *Tales From Topographic Oceans*. Can you please allow us to make one concept record without getting on our case? We stuck our necks out with *Tales*, and some people wanted to chop our heads off for it.

How does it hold up for you 50 years later?



Roger Dean's cover for *Tales From Topographic Oceans*. Painted in watercolor and ink, it reflects his fascination with landscape and includes depictions of historic landmarks, including a Mayan temple at Chichén Itzá and famous British rocks, among them single stones from Stonehenge.

Jon Anderson and Howe photographed by Roger Dean on the *Tales* tour of the U.S. in 1974. The two artists were the key composers behind the album's creation.





“ONE DAY PAUL AND RINGO CAME IN TOGETHER AND PUT THEIR HEADS AROUND THE DOORS, LIKE, ‘HI GUYS!’”

I’ve listened to it quite recently and, y’know, I’m still very proud of it and very pleased with it. There are things in there you never would have thought Yes would do, particularly on side two [“*The Remembering (High the Memory)*”] — some beautiful, unusual, folk-like, almost Jethro Tull-ish things. Then we got really out there on side three [“*The Ancient (Giants Under the Sun)*”] with time signatures and crazy stuff. And we were playing it live, because you couldn’t do it any way else. The band was watching me, and I was watching them, and I didn’t know where they were! But at some point we met. The articulation on *Topographic Oceans*, the drama going into “Leaves of Green” [the last movement of “*The Ancient (Giants Under the Sun)*”] — and then side four is like...“What?!” It’s really big, and it’s got a lot of lovely moods. I think *Tales* is totally epic, and I love it to bits.

What are your favorite bits all these years later?

I did do a condensed version of

Tales on a solo tour in 1993, where I put it together very easily. And one of my favorite bits is [sings portion of “*The Remembering (High the Memory)*”]. Now that to me is Yes at its most exceptional. It’s not [sings riff from “*Roundabout*”]; it’s in the beautiful, folky world. Obviously, “*Leaves of Green*” is great — [Yes singer] Jon Davison and I have been doing that a lot over the last 10 years. And then side four, there’s some wonderful songs on that. Some of the fun Jon and I had there was very uplifting for us.

YES — *MIRROR TO THE SKY*

So you’ve got the new Yes album — two in 19 months, in fact.

[laughs] Well, what happened is what happened to everybody. The beginning of ’20 was a bit of a wake-up call. It was fortunate I’d had my studio upgraded the year before, and studio recording was where the energy could go. Suddenly it wasn’t about building the next set list for the

live show. It was, “What about an album, then?” We’d started thinking about it, but of course this was the golden opportunity to have a golden harvest of recording.

When we finished *The Quest*, a lot of music had come in, and when we realized all was still not good with the world as far as touring goes, there was time to do *Mirror to the Sky*. I’ve enjoyed it a lot, and the guys did too. We’ve made some miserable records in Yes’s career — some were like pulling teeth, and then we’d dash out on tour. So it is quite nice to be able to take time and work on the music. Both of these records were made by everybody having their own sort of process in writing, coming up with the material, then sending it to HQ, which is where [engineer] Curtis Schwartz is. Then I’d go in and sort of sift through it at his place. What you’re hearing is Yes in 2023, and it is a team. It isn’t Steve Howe and his bunch of cohorts trying to emulate Yes. You’ve got to be Yes to really do what Yes can do.

That’s an interesting statement.

What does it mean to be Yes?

I think it’s a shared belief together now, but also in line with everyone that’s been in it before. Because, in a way, nobody can replace Jon [Anderson] or Chris [Squire]. All the people who have been on that journey have contributed enormous things. It’s a bit like a *Star Wars* sequel: You have *Star Wars* and another *Star Wars* and another *Star Wars*.

So Yes are like an undefined story of how music can be developed, of how people can take adventurous ideas, and the thread that sort of runs through it all. I think that’s what the Yes idea is. You have to know that story. It’s like a taxi driver: You

Howe poses near a *Topographic Oceans* billboard advert in one of Roger Dean’s photos from the early part of 1974’s U.S. tour.





can't drive around New York unless you know New York, if you know what I mean. You have to know that story.

What's on *Mirror* that you feel was different or new for you as a player?

"Cut From the Stars." That came into the album late, and I'd already used every bit of gear I had in some way. So I just got out an analog pedalboard, plugged it in, and stuck it in an amp and put a mic there, and just recorded in more of an old-fashioned style. I enjoy doing that kind of live-guitar thing, more like the '60s and '70s stuff. I like to know about 80 percent of what's going on, and that last 20 percent that I don't know

what's going on, that's great. I don't want to know. Of course what I play has to work with it, but that's where improvisation came into play. Basically, I just had a nice time just developing a guitar part.

Do you accept the idea that this year, after all the lineup changes, Steve Howe's guitar is the defining voice of Yes?

Yeah, I guess I'd have to admit that maybe I've always believed that, but not any less than Jon Anderson's voice was an integral part of Yes — at a time, an essential part. But I have had this great opportunity to continue that path, if you like, of working out how to develop it. It's very flattering to consider that, but I

won't dwell on it too much. I just think it's what I do.

Is it hard to push that into different directions, then?

Not really. I mean, I love my 175, and I know that's got a kind of association with Yes. It was on so many things early on, a lot of lead guitar solos, because I was just so fluid on that one until I switched to the Les Paul Jr. for *Topographic Oceans*. Back in the '70s I was searching to find out what guitar was *the* guitar, leaving the 175 aside a bit and trying all the stereo guitars and all of that. Obviously, I'm just so lucky to never lose sight of the fact that it was still me coming through, even if I played an ES-5 Switchmaster. It was still me. ■



Yes today. (clockwise from top left) Billy Sherwood, Geoff Downes, Howe, Jay Schellen and Jon Davidson.



ON FIRE

Van Halen might not have been the same group without **Ted Templeman**, the producer who discovered and signed them, then produced their greatest albums. He tells *Guitar Player* how it all began with a friendly tip: “Ted, these guys are hot!”

BY KEN SHARP

FROM HIS DAYS as an artist with the '60s band Harpers Bizarre to his multi-Platinum hit-making forays producing Van Halen, the Doobie Brothers, Aerosmith, Cheap Trick and Montrose, Ted Templeman has always been content to let the music do the talking.

But through all his many adventures, no one artist has had quite the impact that Van Halen did. In addition to signing the band to a contract with Warner Bros. Records, Templeman nurtured them through the making of their 1978 self-titled debut album and continued with the group through its most successful era. In the following interview, Templeman reflects on how he first heard Van Halen and what went down during the preparation and creation of their ground-breaking debut record, an album that introduced Eddie Van Halen to the world and changed both guitar playing and hard rock.

Take us back to being invited to see Van Halen at the Starwood.

What was your initial impression of the band?

Marshall Berle told me about them. I knew Marshall for a long time. He's [comedian] Milton Berle's nephew, and he was kind of managing them. He said, “Ted, these guys are hot. Why don't you just get out there and see them?” So I went down there and went upstairs, so they wouldn't see me. I was watching Ed playing and I thought, Shit! I've never seen anything like this.

I left — they didn't even know I'd been there — and I called [Warner Bros. chairman and CEO] Mo Ostin, and I said, “You've got to go with me tomorrow night to see them. We've got to sign these guys. So I took him with me the next night. We went into the dressing room and said, “You've got a deal.” And there were other labels turning them down! They got turned down at A&M. Gene Simmons had taken them on, and they couldn't get arrested. I told them that we've got to do a demo. So we went in and cut all their songs in one day, me and [engineer] Donn Landee. And we just went on from then. *Bang!*

Was it tough to convince the brass at Warner Brothers that this was a worthy band to sign, or did they trust your instincts?

Well, I was vice president of the company. I don't mean to be arrogant but I could have just signed them on the spot without anybody. But I wanted some enthusiasm, and I thought, I'll bring the chairman of the board with me, and if he signed them he would go, “Hey, I signed those guys,” like he did with the Kinks or something like that. So it was a little bit of politics there too.

But the band! First of all, there was no guitar player who had ever played like that. God, I couldn't believe it. But also, Dave's lyrics were so creative. He had a sense of humor, and I'd never heard that unique situation where you have a heavy metal-sounding band with a sense of humor. Think of a song like “Ain't Talking 'Bout Love”: “Ain't talkin' bout love / My love is rotten to the core.” [laughs] You know, who else is going to say, “You know you're semi-good lookin' and on the streets again”?

You've said “Ain't Talking 'Bout Love” is your favorite track you worked on as a producer. Why?

First of all, Ed's guitar — that riff is incredible, and Donn got a great sound on it. Instantly, he tuned right in. And the lyrics are really brilliant, and Dave's delivery is brilliant. And it's got a really interesting solo on it. For some reason, out of anything I ever cut, I still love listening to that. And a lot of it is the intro. Ed's guitar is amazing.

“I was watching Ed playing,” Ted Templeman recalls of his introduction to Van Halen, “and I thought, Shit! I've never seen anything like this.”

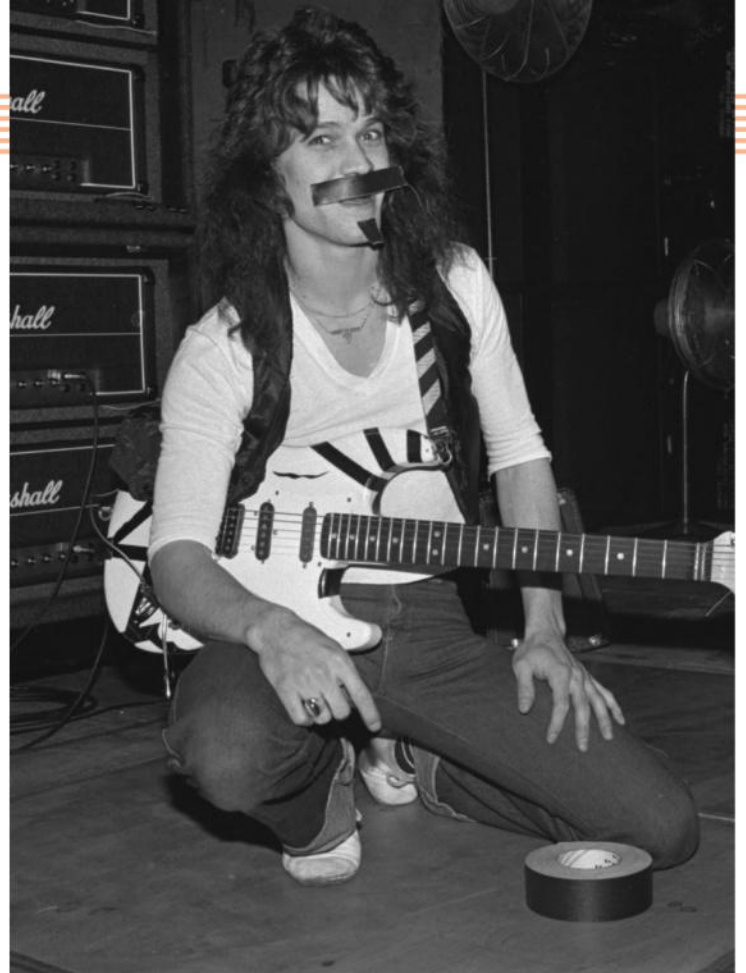
Didn't Eddie double his guitar solo with an electric sitar?

Yeah, he doubled the solo, but that's it. That was actually Donn's idea, I think. We worked so closely together.

Bring us into the sessions for Van Halen's debut album, recorded at Sunset Sound. What was the process, working in the studio with the band?

First of all, we rehearsed them in the basement of Dave's house in Pasadena. I got along with the guys really well, and the brothers [Ed and Alex] used to come over to my house to hang out. And we also benefitted from the fact that Donn and I had worked together for so long, and Donn had a fix on the guitar and had great communication with Ed, and that was amazing. He could look at Ed and know what Ed wanted. You can't find that very often.

I think the Beatles were very lucky because their engineer Geoff Emerick was someone who could communicate with them. He'd know what McCartney would want in terms of the sound of his bass. If I've got an engineer like Donn Landee, it



gives me freedom to think about the lyrics and all that. Donn could almost read Ed's mind.

Did you cut the band live in the studio for that album?

Dave would sing with the band, and then we would go back and patch up his vocal. So the band and him were all playing

together, whereas a lot of times people laid down tracks and then the singer would lay the vocal down. Dave was in the iso booth, where I could see him and he could see me, and the band was out in the studio. Everybody had eye contact. I made sure that Al and Ed could see Dave in the iso booth so they had eye contact, like they were used to.

So they were basically all playing live together. Then, I would go back and keep a lot of Dave's vocals, patch him up, because he was singing with the band. It was basically like a live performance, especially on the first album.

And they were nailing final takes pretty quickly?

Oh god! Are you kidding? I think we did that record in less than two weeks. We went in there and *bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!* They'd been playing those songs live, and you know, I had an epiphany. The album was done, and I went over to where they were playing live at the Pasadena

Ed clowns around onstage in 1978, wearing gaffa tape as a moustache and soul patch. "Honestly, those guys were a lot of fun," Templeman recalls. "All of them."

Templeman (standing center) works on a Harper's Bizarre session with (from left) Lee Hirshberg (face concealed), producer (and future Warner Bros. Records president) Lenny Waronker, arranger Van Dyke Parks and song plugger Larry Marks, at Western Studios in Los Angeles, January 27, 1969.





Van Halen perform at Lewisham Odeon in London, May 27, 1978. The band was opening for Black Sabbath, who were touring for their album *Never Say Die!*

Civic Auditorium and they were playing “Ain’t Talking ‘Bout Love.” The record wasn’t even out, and everybody in that place — there must have been about 2,000 people there — was singing along with the lyrics, goin’ “Hey, hey, hey, hey!” It was like the Beatles at the Cavern. These guys were like stars in Pasadena. I knew right then, Oh God, something is going on here.

“Eruption” is considered one of the greatest guitar solos of all time. Tell me about the origins of that.

I was in this little room making phone calls next to the recording studio, and I walked in and Ed was sitting there kind of playing it. And I went, “What’s that?” and he said, “It’s just something I warm up with before each show. And I said, “Donn, roll tape!” and he said, “I’m rolling.” He heard it too and he’d already pressed “record.” So it just went — *boom* — and we got it, just like that. I’d never heard anything like that. I’d never heard that kind of tapping. I’d never heard

“THESE GUYS WERE LIKE STARS IN PASADENA. I KNEW RIGHT THEN, OH GOD, SOMETHING IS GOING ON HERE”

anything that brilliant, and Ed said, “No, it’s nothing.” He didn’t even know. In addition to being a genius, Ed is one of the sweetest guys on the planet. Such a nice guy. He wasn’t even gonna show it to me.

You have such a high opinion of Eddie as a guitar player and have likened him to jazz greats like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. What is it about Eddie that warrants such comparisons?

I will tell you exactly what it is. I think I first used the comparison to Art Tatum, because if you listen to him, it’s genius playing; and Charlie Parker, probably the

hottest jazz player of all time. It’s about speed and accuracy and musical ability to go to the right notes, and I thought, for me, it’s Art Tatum, Charlie Parker and this kid, Ed. I don’t care what anybody says. I mean Allan Holdsworth could play really fast, but he couldn’t play those notes, ‘cause Ed plays melodically but plays brilliant stuff fast. So for me, those are the best musicians that I have heard and I’m a jazz player; I played trumpet, I played drums. Listen to an Art Tatum track or any Charlie Parker record, and you will hear that those two guys play crazy, fast and insane great stuff. And Ed was like the third guy, and that is why I made those comparisons.

Eddie doesn’t get as much credit as he should as a brilliant rhythm guitar player. Do you agree?

More so, because it is not just “rhythm guitar player.” Without those riffs there’s nothing to write melodies to. So he came up with [*sings riff for “Ain’t Talking*

Van Halen perform at the Rainbow in Finsbury Park, London, October 22, 1978. It was their first show at the venue, where they were supported by Bram Tchaikovsky's Battleaxe.

'Bout Love"]. If he hadn't written that riff, Dave couldn't have written "Ain't Talking 'Bout Love." You can go on and on. Ed's riffs were of a song, so Dave would hear the riff and he would come up with a melody to go with it.

So, I mean, he was more than just a solo guitar player; he's a songwriter with Dave. And you can't minimize Dave's lyrical ability, because without that, Van Halen wouldn't have had the sense of humor.

Early on in the band's career, you perceived David Lee Roth as kind of the weakest link in terms of his singing ability. What did you do to help him achieve his potential as a singer?

You know what? That's been over-emphasized. It was one day. We went in there to do the demo and there were certain notes that were a problem for him to hit. They were out of his range, but his melody was great, and I was a little nervous, that's all. But Dave had such great lyrical

ability and everything else. I just hung in there. I remember it was just one day that I said that, but after that I just started talking to him more.

Dave is a really, really good singer and a brilliant lyricist and a brilliant melody writer. So just because he couldn't hit certain notes, any producer would have been afraid. And the people that were looking at Van Halen before — like A&M Records, Gene Simmons — Dave's voice scared them off. It wouldn't be Van Halen if there was somebody to sing perfectly on pitch. It's all fucked up. And that's what makes them Van Halen.

You've said your favorite guitar solo by Eddie is on "You're No Good." Why is that?

Because he emphasizes the lyrics. It's ugly — it's almost like revenge. It's sad and angry and emphasizes the lyric and gets the point across. Obviously, it isn't technically the best solo, and only Ed knew what his best solos are, but it works so well because it drives the point of the song home. And he's out there by himself; there's no rhythm guitar behind him. There is a certain sadness and revenge to it, and I know that sounds weird, but take a listen to the original Betty Everett record. You think, Goddamn! Some bastard just ruined somebody's life.

I told those guys, "I don't know if you know the original Betty Everett song, but the lyric is, 'I broke a heart that was gentle and true / I left a boy for someone like you.'" And so I told Ed, "When the chorus hits make your guitar playing like *Psycho*, like you're stabbing somebody." I told Dave, "Scream like in *Psycho*, like you're stabbing somebody." I wanted it to be like, Let's kill this fucker who's no good! [laughs]

SURPRISE MOVE

'That sucks. That's horrible.' Ted Templeman recalls his first impressions of "Jump."

"I was so wrong on that song," producer Ted Templeman tells *GP*. "Ed played me the riff and I went, 'Uh... I don't know. That's so pop.' He said, 'But I like it and I've been working on this for a long time.' So I said, 'Okay, Dave, write some lyrics!' So he got in the back of his red Mercury convertible and he wrote 'Jump.' And he said, 'What do you think about this?' and I said, 'That sucks. That's horrible. That sounds like somebody is going jump out of the window because he has so many issues.' And Dave went, 'No, "might as well jump" means for somebody to take a chance!' So I said okay.

"He just wrote it instantly. He wrote that thing so fast, it's ridiculous. But I didn't hear

it at first. Also, when Ed played me that riff, I thought, Oh man, that's not Van Halen, that's stadium music. [laughs] I wanted them to stay edgy the whole way. But Ed had the foresight.

"Late one night — and I've still got it — my answering machine went off, and it was Ed. He said, 'Ted, we've got to play something for you.' It was, like, three in the morning. He said, 'Ted, I'm coming to get you,' and he drove down in his Porsche and picked me up in Century City. He said, 'What do you think?' I thought it was great, but I just didn't want them to quite go that way. But I was wrong. They made a number one record." — Ken Sharp





Van Halen pose backstage in a stairwell at the Lewisham Odeon prior to their performance, May 27, 1978.

With Eddie and Dave as songwriting collaborators, there was a great creative dynamic, but there was friction too. How did that play out?

There was no friction with the first or second album, because we put those together in Pasadena. Ed would have a riff and Dave would have a melody and a lyric, and we would go from there. So they were writing, and it was the four of them rehearsing. We were working up songs in the basement of Dave's home in Pasadena, so everybody was relaxing. Ed would come up with a riff, and Dave was fast on his feet and would come up with instant stuff and double entendres and great little funny things.

"Dance The Night Away" was a change and a high watermark as a pop song. How many bands in the world can go out and play "Ain't Talking 'Bout Love" and "Mean Streets" and turn around and do "Dance the Night Away"? Like I said, it's like going from

"ERUPTION — IT JUST WENT, BOOM, AND WE GOT IT, JUST LIKE THAT"

the Kinks to the Beach Boys.

Speaking of the Kinks, Van Halen covered "Where Have All The Good Times Gone?" on *Diver Down*, a record split between originals and cover songs by the likes of Roy Orbison and Martha and the Vandellas. How did that record come about?

We got trapped on that record because Dave wanted to make a video, because of the popularity then of MTV. So we recorded "Pretty Woman" and then made a video to it. It was huge on MTV, so Warner Bros. said to us, "Listen, put an album out!" And so the managers and my record company are saying, "Go in and make that record!" But we didn't have the songs worked up. That's

why we did "Happy Trails." and "Dancing in the Street" — that was my idea. Ed had this melody on keyboard that I liked, and I said we didn't have a melody for this song. So I said, "Let's use that for 'Dancing in the Street.'" For a long time Ed was pissed off at me because he didn't want to do "Dancing in the Street" — he wanted his song.

I have some outtakes of the band doing "Happy Trails," and it is so fucking funny, because they start singing it and Ed goes, "C'mon Ted, don't make us laugh!" And I'm going, "I can't help it you guys, this is terrible." [laughs] And then they sing some more, and Ed goes, "Where's Ted?" I didn't want them to see me laughing, so I was down on the floor where they couldn't see me. [laughs]

So there was a lot that went on in the making of that record that was fun. Some of the band didn't remember it that way, but honestly, those guys were a lot of fun. All of them. ■





BREWER'S CHOICE

To cut *House of Axes*, bluegrass ambassador **Gary Brewer** picked a half-dozen vintage Martins from his collection of more than 100 — including a 19th century model among the rarest of the rare.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

IF THERE'S A home where any true acoustic aficionado would dream to reside, it's Gary Brewer's House of Axes. Brewer is best known as the leader of the long-thriving Kentucky Ramblers, a family band whose 2020 release, *40th Anniversary Celebration*, spent 16 weeks at number one on the *Billboard* Bluegrass Albums Chart, was the number-three best-selling project overall in 2021, and landed between releases by Ariana Grande and Rob Zombie on the Top Current Albums Sales year-end chart.

Brewer is quite a character, who prefers colorful clothes and refers to his high-octane Americana as "Brewgrass," but he's as legit as they come, with the history and testimony to prove it. Brewer's grandfather worked with the original Carter Family in the '20s, and the Brewer family is now a six-generation musical dynasty.

As Brewer explains, Father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe played his final recording session with him and was quoted saying, "This boy right here is 100 percent bluegrass! He comes from good stock." George Gruhn, acoustic guitar guru and owner of renowned

Gruhn Guitars in Nashville, sings his praises as well, saying, "Gary Brewer is to the guitar what Bill Monroe was to the mandolin."

Brewer has amassed a monumental arsenal of guitars, including 100 vintage Martins that date back to 1899. His new guitar concept project, *House of Axes* (SGM), is a straight-shooting showcase for his rarest and most prized acoustics. It's a multimedia affair, captured at Brewgrass Entertainment, headquarters for the family business, where he sat down with nine select instruments and proceeded to play them one at a time, offering insights on each before launching into stellar song performances captured raw in the moment with one take and no overdubs. You can watch them in a revealing series of YouTube videos or listen to the audio versions, where each introduction is broken out as a separate track.

What you'll experience is a master picker throwing down time-honored tunes from the classic bluegrass canon on museum-quality guitars. They come alive in his capable hands with every nuance of technique and instrumental overtone gloriously clear to hear. Each

axe has a tale to tell, and Brewer touches on them in the recordings and extensive liner notes. But as we discovered, there's a hell of a lot more to the story.

What inspired you to make *House of Axes*?

It's well known that I've got a good guitar collection, and every time I go out to perform, somebody asks, "Which axes did you bring?" I can't show them all, and I realize that some are rather monumental in the guitar world as well as to me, personally. That prompted me to record them on video and audio to let people see and hear them. The goal was to do so very clearly. We used the same pair of microphones with the dials set at zero, so everybody sure enough could hear the nuances of each guitar, from the highs to the lows and everything in between, kind of like being there. I wanted people to hear the insides of those guitars, not flavor 'em up, which happens a lot in the guitar world. They can be knobbed too much. You get more of the sound the player wants you to hear, but I wanted just the opposite. I wanted the listener to hear the guitar, and then the player.

How did you capture the tones?

There's a large-diaphragm condenser mic pointed toward the bridge, and a small-diaphragm condenser pointed where the neck meets the body, because I like a certain degree of string and finger noise — not too much, but just enough so the listener can determine when I'm sliding, hammering on or pulling off a note. I usually point the mic where the neck and body meet, rather than higher up between the 12th and 15th frets, where most people do. I still get the harmonics, like I do on "Sourwood Ridge," but they're not pulled out to stand out. I like the larger-diaphragm microphone pointed at the bridge because that's where the sound really resonates. I like to tap into as much of that as I can, to get the whole sound of the guitar without going into the sound hole.

What about picks and strings?

I use a pretty big thick pick, a triangular

BlueChip TAD50 for quick economy of motion [for insights on Brewer's pick preferences, see the *Learn* column, page 80]. I use Mapes strings, which is the oldest string company in the world. They've turned strings for everyone, including D'Addario. I use a special medium set of phosphor-bronze strings that Mapes makes for me, with gauges ranging from .012 to .056. To preserve them, they're actually coated in East Tennessee moonshine. They come in a vacuum-sealed envelope with three sets. As for the recording itself, the set on every guitar was at least a month old, and the ones I used on the 1899 Martin single-ought were over two years old.

Where does that jewel sit in your overall collection?

I've got over a hundred vintage Martins in my collection and nothing is newer than 1968, which is the last full production year using Brazilian

rosewood. Martin made about 1,959 of them, and there aren't many spoken for now. They've been lost somewhere. On *House of Axes*, I played "Sourwood Ridge" in Drop D tuning on the '68 D-28. That guitar is very special to me because it was my first Martin. My dad bought it for me when I was a young lad, and I recently gave it to my son Wayne for his 25th birthday. As for the 1899 single-ought, that's an incredibly historic Herringbone, as is my main axe that I've been touring with for over 40 years,

which is a 1941 D-28 Herringbone. I also have one from the year 2000, so I have three all-original Herringbone models from three centuries, which is pretty cool.

Can you speak to the significance of a Herringbone compared to, say, a standard Martin in style 28?

It signifies the herringbone binding around the front of the body, just like a herringbone necklace. Up the center of the back of the body is what they

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

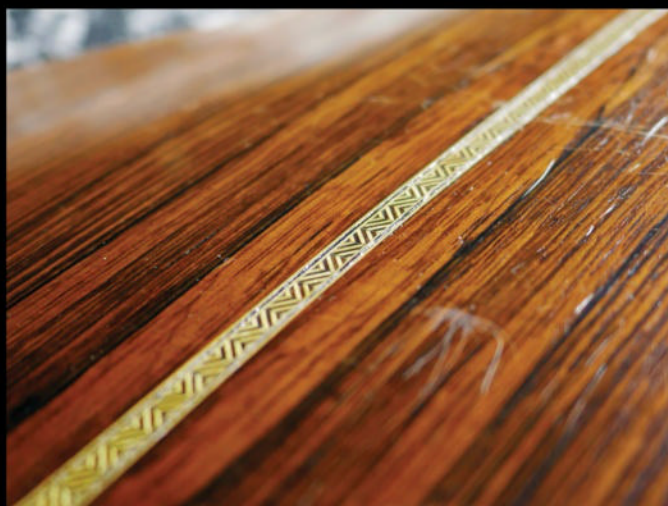
"WE USED THE SAME PAIR OF MICROPHONES, WITH THE DIALS SET AT ZERO. I WANTED PEOPLE TO HEAR THE INSIDES OF THOSE GUITARS, NOT FLAVOR 'EM UP"

Brewer with his 1959 Martin D-28 E.





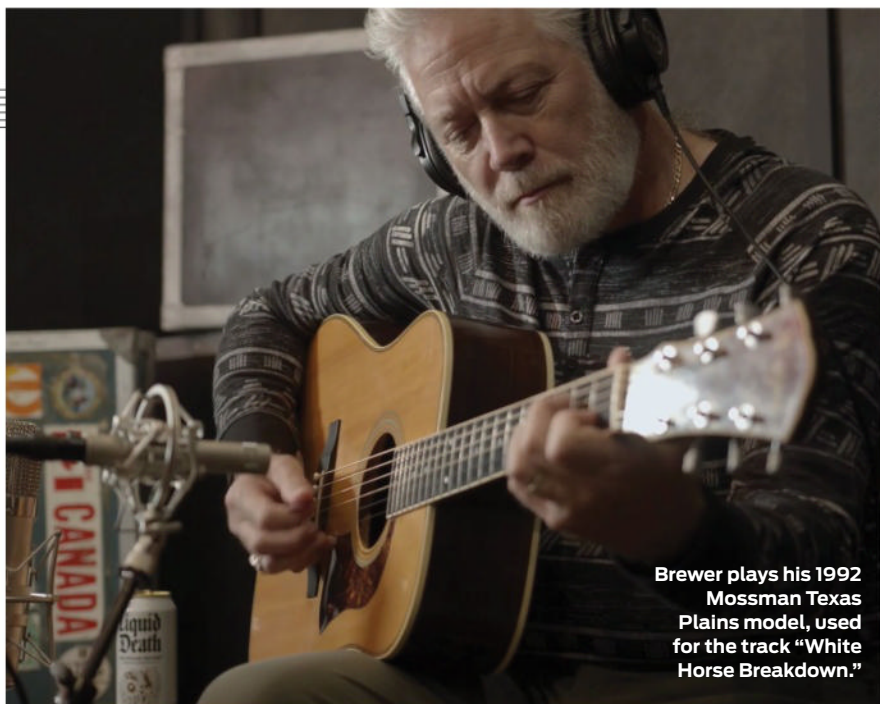
TOP LEFT: Brewer's ultra-rare, all-original 1899 Martin 0-28 Herringbone has herringbone binding, a zipper back, etched keys, ivory tuners, a notched headstock and ivory pins. The Martin logo is stamped on the headstock's back. The guitar is so rare, even Martin Guitars' own museum doesn't have an example. "They've offered an undisclosed amount of money, but I've told them no go," Brewer says. "It's a holy grail."



commonly call the “zipper stripe.” A Martin Herringbone is a very iconic and sought-after instrument. On a vintage Herringbone, each little piece is cut and set in there by hand, whereas today it’s just one long piece of binding. The luthiery workmanship on the originals is amazing, with pieces of light versus dark wood that gives that herringbone effect. My ’41 represents what collectors call the “true” Herringbone, which Martin only made from 1934 to 1944. Martin did make Herringbones in ’45 and ’46, but they aren’t considered true Herringbones because they didn’t have scalloped bracing or snowflake inlays on the fretboard; they just had the dots of a standard style 28. There are lots of little significant things that set each century of Herringbone apart. They call the 2000 millennium issue an HD-28 Herringbone. That’s basically a new version of my ’41 Herringbone, which is like a full-sized version of the 1899 0-28 Herringbone.

You only played the two vintage Herringbones on *House of Axes*, correct?

Right. Other than the inclusion of a few makes and models that are significant to me — such as my father’s 1957 Silvertone that I used on “Little Brown Jug,” or a guitar that I endorsed at one point or another, such as the 1992 Mossman Texas Plains model on “White Horse Breakdown” and the 1997 Stelling RHD-125 on “Tom Rock Twist” — the acoustics on *House of Axes* were mainly chosen for their historical importance and rarity. The 1948 D-28 I used on “Old Minor Joe” is one of 506 ever made. Tony Rice tried to buy that one off of me, but I’m a hard negotiator, and he didn’t get it! The gorgeous 2007 Martin D-41 Porter Wagoner Custom Signature that I used on “Southern Flavor” is number 24 of only 71 ever made. That was commissioned by Marty Stuart as a tribute to Porter, and it boasts both Marty’s and Porter’s signatures. The guitar on “Little Rosewood Casket” is one of only 176 Martin D-28s made in 1959 with an “E” designation, which stood for “electric” because it had a



Brewer plays his 1992 Mossman Texas Plains model, used for the track “White Horse Breakdown.”

“I’VE GOT OVER A HUNDRED VINTAGE MARTINS IN MY COLLECTION AND NOTHING IS NEWER THAN 1968”

rudimentary pickup system onboard. The capo I used at the fourth fret is an old spring type that belonged to Lester Flatt.

My main Martin, the ’41 Herringbone, is one of 183 ever made, and she’s still doing good. I can get any sound I want out of that guitar. My friends sometimes call it the Old Bone, or the Killer. You can hear that on the first track, Norman Blake’s “Old Brown Case.” On most dreadnoughts you lose a lot of power and rear end once you get up past the sixth or seventh fret, especially on the first few strings, but notice how I’ll go all the way up to where the neck meets the body and those notes are still as prominent as the bass notes.

The 1899 single-ought Martin Herringbone is one of only 49 ever made, and mine is all original. It has etched keys on a notched headstock with downward-facing tuners. The tuners and bridge pins are made of real ivory, which is wild to even think about today. Martin dug up some information for me. It was ordered from a catalog and delivered by horse to the original owner.

Tell us how you managed to acquire it.

I bought it from the daughter of the original owner. I had an annual festival called Strictly Bluegrass, and we were in the Kentucky Derby Festival doing the Pegasus Parade through downtown Louisville promoting the event. We had a sign up with a little old prop guitar, just for a visual. I had put “THANKS” in masking tape on the back, to be like Ernest Tubb’s guitar. An elderly lady who was close to her nineties said, “Play me one there on that guitar.”

I said, “Honey, it’s just a prop guitar. It doesn’t even have strings on it.” She said, “I have one just about that size. It’s an Italian model, something like a Martini. My mother bought it new, and I’d just about give that to somebody if they’d play it.” Of course, my radar went off, and I got her number. It was very near my birthday, April 19th, almost 30 years ago. I made arrangements for my dad and I to go over there. She brought that thing out and I’d like to have fell in the floor.

I called a friend of mine with some measurements. He told me, “Make sure you do not leave that house without that guitar.” I said, “Name a price,” and when



TOP LEFT: Brewer describes this 1948 Martin D-28 in the liner notes for *House of Axes* as “a really unique guitar,” and indeed it is. It’s one of just 506 manufactured and is all original. “It has some really pretty beauty marks,” Brewer says. “Looks almost like half of a coffee cup marking there, and it’s probably got one of the prettiest backs of any of my guitars.”



BOTTOM LEFT: Brewer’s 1941 Martin D-28 Herringbone is “my main axe that I’ve been touring with for over 40 years,” he tells *Guitar Player*. As he explains in the *House of Axes* liner notes, the guitar is all-original and is one of just 183 ever made. This guitar represents a true Herringbone, which Martin made between 1934 and 1944. “Martin did make Herringbones in ’45 and ’46,” Brewer tells us, “but they aren’t considered true Herringbones because they didn’t have scalloped bracing or snowflake inlays on the fretboard; they just had the dots of a standard style 28.”

TOP RIGHT: This 1959 Martin D-28 E (for Electric) was hand-picked by the original owner and had its pickup removed while it was at the factory. "So it never did make it out of there with the electronics," writes Brewer. "It's got the extra small neck and the most beautiful back that I guess I've seen on one with the beauty marks. My dad played this one for many years and recorded with it." It's one of just 176 made.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Brewer's 1968 D-28 holds a special place in his collection, as it's the first Martin he ever received, given to him by his dad when he was 14 or 15 years old. It was produced in the last full year that Martin used Brazilian rosewood, before dwindling supplies led to the use of Indian rosewood, in 1969. About 1,959 of these were made in 1968. Brewer's example is all original.



she did I told her, “Honey, that’s not enough money. That guitar is worth a lot more.” I tripled her offer and needless to say, I still got a heck of a deal.

What does it feel and sound like from a player’s perspective?

Amazingly, it’s a player’s guitar. A lot of the old parlor-type Martins weren’t up to today’s performance standard, but that one is. Because of the single-ought’s smaller body size measuring 13.5 inches wide at the bridge, it rides good under the arm and on the knee. It’s actually much larger than some of the smaller Martins of the era, and of course the

single-ought eventually evolved into full-sized dreadnought D-28. I like the different feel of the open headstock, and I appreciate having the tuning keys pointed down from its back, because if you need to reach up and make an adjustment, it’s right there where you can easily reach up with your left hand. Of course, it needs to be carefully placed in an appropriate case to avoid breaking the tuners, but otherwise, I don’t know why more guitars aren’t made like that. Anyway, it just feels and plays wonderful. Oddly enough, the neck feels a lot like a Gretsch 6120 hollowbody electric [Chet Atkins], which is a dream.

I’m honored and excited to put that guitar on *House of Axes*. I chose to play a song my paw-paw played, which is actually a mix-up of two old tunes: “Foggy Mountain Top/Lonesome Road Blues.” He never used picks; he was a two-finger player. I tried to play it just as close to the way he did, so I used my fingers. That alone speaks volumes in the guitar world, because the mics are set the same as for the other tracks played with a pick, and it holds up in terms of volume and clarity.

The tone is amazing, and to my knowledge this is the first time that guitar has ever been recorded. It is so rare they don’t even have one in the Martin Museum. They’ve tried every way to get that guitar from me. They’ve offered an undisclosed amount of money, and even other guitars, like the \$50,000 Celtic Knot, but I’ve told them no go. I had to work really hard to get that guitar. It’s a holy grail. 🎸

**“GARY BREWER IS TO THE GUITAR
WHAT BILL MONROE WAS TO THE
MANDOLIN” — GEORGE GRUHN**



LEFT: This 2007 Martin D-41 Porter Wagoner Custom Signature Model is number 24 of 71. Commissioned by Marty Stuart, it has Stuart’s signature inside and Porter’s signature inlaid on the 20th fret.



ARMED AND READY

A tribute to Michael Schenker's elegantly melodic metal riffing

BY JEFF JACOBSON

EQUIPPED WITH HIS trademark black-and-white Dean Flying V, Michael Schenker has spent the last half century wending his way through a rich musical life, including his early days with the German metal band Scorpions (as co-guitarist with brother Rudolph Schenker), a number of stints with UFO and a multitude of incarnations of his Michael Schenker Group (MSG). What has remained constant over the years is the guitarist's unique, high-voltage mix of rock, metal, blues and neoclassical styles, a penchant for writing snarling riffs, and his singular ability to make his guitar scream and cry with his killer tone and ferocious technique. In this lesson, we'll be exploring how to add some of Schenker's magic to your own playing. Having released virtually an album a year since 1980, Schenker has a host of material to draw from, but we'll hone in on some of his most celebrated works.

Aside from his ornate sense of melody, which will be the focus of much of this lesson, Schenker's legendary high-octane tone is what strikes the listener first. The foundation of his concise rig is the Flying V and two Marshall JCM 50-watt amps paired with Marshall cabinets loaded with Celestion Greenback speakers. While he sparingly employs two Boss effects pedals — a CE-5 Chorus Ensemble and a DD-3 Digital Delay — it's his artful use of his Dunlop Dimebag wah that is most striking. Instead of using the pedal



conventionally — rocking it back and forth, freely or in rhythm — the guitarist most often “parks” his in a stationary position, roughly halfway through its rotation, to act as an EQ filter. This creates a pronounced, narrow midrange “bump” in the frequency spectrum — what Schenker and others refer to as the “sweet spot” — defined by an infectious dark warmth that's equally at home in the heaviest songs and the most delicate ballads. The result is a key element of one of his signature lead tones.

My first encounter with Schenker's metal mastery was MSG's 1982 release *Assault Attack*, the only album featuring vocalist Graham Bonnet, who also famously lasted for only one show. (He was summarily fired for various onstage antics, including exposing himself, which he has indicated was accidental.) The songs are epic, and Schenker's lead work is captivating, darting back and forth between searing intensity and soulful beauty, often within the same song. One such classic is “Desert Song,” which we'll examine in depth, as it showcases more than a few hallmarks of the guitarist's captivating style.

The song's haunting main riff weaves a palm-muted open low E-string pedal tone through a melody based on the E Aeolian mode, or natural minor scale

(E, F $\sharp$, G, A, B, C, D) and harmonized in diatonic (scale-based) 3rds. **Ex. 1** is informed by this same approach. When strumming each dyad (two-note chord), be sure to release the palm mute from the previous open low E note quickly enough so that the fretted notes aren't muted and ring clearly.

Inspired by Schenker's soloing in the same song, **Ex. 2** demonstrates how he seamlessly weaves together elements from different musical styles. We're in the same key of E natural minor, and what begins as a standard rock lick dovetails effortlessly into an ascending neoclassical-flavored line built from an Em arpeggio (E, G, B). This leads into the phrase in bar 3, which is based on the E blues scale (E, G, A, B $\flat$, B, D). (Note that in this example the $\flat 5$, B $\flat$, is notated as its enharmonic equivalent, A $\sharp$, which is the $\sharp 4$.) Next up, in bar 4, is an ascending series of staccato notes (played short, as indicated by the small dots above the note heads), which are derived straight from the E natural minor scale. The phrase wraps with a big, one-and-one-half-step bend, a move influenced by players like B.B. King.

Before continuing, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out the very Schenkerian twist in Ex. 2's opening phrase. After the initial bend, many other players would

summarily end the lick on the root note E, as in bar 1 of **Ex. 3**. Others might end by going up to the 5th (B), as in bar 2. Schenker, however, would often resolve high bends to the lower-octave 5th (bar 3), creating a wide intervallic jump, which is a nice surprise for the listener, and also just darn tasty. (Notice, too, the use of a wide finger vibrato here, which is another hallmark of Schenker's lead playing and touch.) This kind of melodic adjustment may seem like a small thing, but it opens up new soloing possibilities, as it enables you to subtly but effectively alter licks you already know, with no heavy lifting. Simply displace one note down or up an octave.

At the 2:38 mark, "Desert Song" enters a quieter moment, a beautiful interlude that showcases Schenker's keen melodic sense. As the section continues, his main guitar is supported by a choir of overdubbed harmony lead guitars. For more information on how to approach that, see my tribute to Boston's Tom Scholz in the February 2023 issue. For this lesson, though, I'd like to instead go behind the scenes and explore some underlying concepts that can help you compose effective guitar melodies of your own. Keep in mind, Schenker's deft touch can't be discounted as a major factor in why his guitar sings the way it does. But that's a lesson for another day.

Ex. 4 is based on the "Desert Song" interlude and opens with a series of bent notes, creating a melody with minimal fret changes. Why is this so compelling? Mainly because the underlying chord progression provides movement of its own, with each chord change altering the harmonic context, or "flavor," of the mostly static melody notes. Sometimes you can simply let the chord changes do the work, and instead play a melody on top that complements this movement by offering some contrast, in the form of staying on the same note(s). (Quick tip: These elements work just as well for composing vocal melodies, or for any melodic instrument.)

Let's take a closer look at our example. Over the opening C chord, the main melody note, B, functions as the major 7th of the chord (C, E, G, B),

Ex. 1

D/E Em D/E Em D/E Em D C D (8va)

P.M. on 6th string throughout Harm.

Ex. 2

D/E Em D/E Em

8va

Ex. 3

E5

8va

while over the G chord, it functions as the major 3rd (G, B, D). Each of these functions brings its own character, or color, which changes along with the chords, even though the note itself pretty much stays the same. You can often find a single note that will sound great over a whole series of chords. For a fun example, check out Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim's "One Note Samba."

Even though we've just analyzed the first part of our melody — and this can indeed prove fruitful at times — I'm going to take a bit of a U-turn now and recommend that you don't do too much of this sort of thing. Instead, the key is to simply trust your ears. A note's relationship to a chord may not always make musical sense, but it might very well sound good, and that's what counts.

Another element of composing appealing melodies is the use of *motifs*, which are short melodic or rhythmic ideas that can be repeated and developed, via slight alterations. In bar 4 of Ex. 4, the first two beats present a rhythmic pattern, which is then recalled with different notes through beats 3 and 4. Notice also how the phrasing is slightly different: Instead of tying the third note of the motif to the following beat, as happens with beats 1 and 2, the third note is rearticulated, here on the downbeat of beat 4. The lesson here is to always strive to be open-minded and creative, as opposed to rule-bound, so as to avoid composing cookie-cutter melodies. Incorporating and developing motifs in your own licks and melodies can help to make them more cohesive, engaging and memorable.

Schenker was an early proponent of neoclassicism in rock guitar, and though he could shred with the best of them, he gravitated toward incorporating more lyrical classical-style melodies into his music. The instrumental track "Bijou Pleasurette," from the Michael Schenker Group's eponymously titled 1980 debut album, is a prime example of how the guitarist would don his arranger's cap to layer melodies. **Ex. 5** is based on this lovely piece and begins with a simple four-bar melody built from quarter notes

Ex. 4

1

C G

10 10 10 (10) 9 8 10

3

A/C# C Em

rhythmic motif -- repeat --

10 (10) 10 7 8 7 9 7 9 7 4 4 7 4

Ex. 5

1

Am Dm G C

Gtr. 1

5 4 7 6 8 6 5 4 7 5 5 6 5 7

5

Am Dm

Gtr. 2 (Gtr. 1 repeats bars 1-4)

5 4 7 4 5 7 5 4 5 4 7 4 6 8 6 5 6 5 7 5 7 5 4 5

7

G C Am

4 7 5 7 4 7 4 5 4 7 5 3 5 3 2 5 3 2 5 3 2 5 3 2 5 7

and eighth notes. Much as in opera, where two or more vocalists will simultaneously sing different melodies without creating a confusing mess, Schenker does a similar thing in this piece, adding a second melody, this time based on 16th notes, which informs bars 5–8 here. Varying the rhythm in this way allows each line, or “voice,” to come across clearly, despite the presence of overlapping notes. Layering melodies like this takes listeners through a melodic maze, with two or more lines simultaneously emerging together on the other side.

Schenker’s savvy at combining a sense of classical melody with raw blues-rock power found him crafting heavy riffs like the one that opens the classic UFO song “Rock Bottom,” from the 1974 album *Phenomenon*. It was the band’s third record but the first to feature Schenker, who had recently parted ways with Scorpions. Inspired by this barnburner, **Ex. 6** is drawn almost exclusively from the E blues scale.

However, Schenker nods to his classical side by including the note D $\sharp$, the raised 7th degree, borrowed from the E harmonic minor scale (E, F $\sharp$, G, A, B, C, D $\sharp$). It’s a subtle and very cool twist. Sometimes Schenker just flat-out has fun crafting playful-sounding riffs, and “Captain Nemo,” from MSG’s 1983 release, *Built to Destroy*, is a prime example of this aspect of his musicality. **Ex. 7** brings the song’s main riff to mind, as it similarly features notes fretted high up on the neck being pulled off to open strings. Doing this produces wide, angular-sounding intervals that make it sound as if the notes are bouncing across the room. After picking each fretted note, lightly rest the heel of your pick hand on the strings, just in front of the bridge, in order to dampen the open notes and prevent them from ringing too much. Even though this is a bit of an odd riff, it’s also infectiously melodic, yet another Schenker trademark.

In 1995, the guitarist reunited with UFO to release *Walk on Water*. By this time, Schenker’s writing and playing had evolved, while it retained the core elements that made his work during the

Ex. 6

N.C.(E5) (A5)

Ex. 7

N.C.(A7)

Ex. 8

1. 2.

D5 Bb5 F5 C5 Bb5 A5

80s so compelling. His guitar melodies now often leaned less on being overtly classical, in favor of a more modern rock edge, but his direct approach and tunefulness still guided his composing. A great example of Schenker’s mindset during this period is the majestic melody he plays behind the vocal during the chorus of “Darker Days.” **Ex. 8** is inspired by his playing on this track. Notice how the initial rhythmic motif, with the dotted eighth note followed by a 16th note, is developed in bars 2 and 3.

As he moved through the 1990s and beyond, Schenker continued his torrid pace of writing and performing, all while playing with the same fire and gusto he

had when he first burst onto the scene with Scorpions in 1972. Fifty years later, in 2022, the guitarist embarked on a world tour to celebrate all that he has accomplished so far in his career. You can still catch him gracing the stage, with the points of his Flying V astride one leg and his guitar aimed towards the sky, as if to summon the power of the metal gods. 🤘

Jeff Jacobson is a guitarist, songwriter and veteran music transcriber, with hundreds of published credits. For information on virtual guitar and songwriting lessons or custom transcriptions, reach out to Jeff on Twitter @jjmusicmentor or visit jeffjacobson.net.

Thick and Thin

Pick pointers with bluegrass master Gary Brewer of the Kentucky Ramblers

BY JIMMY LESLIE

TALK SHOP WITH Gary Brewer for a few minutes and one thing rings clear as a bell: There is rhyme and reason behind everything on his mind. And that mind is full of wisdom acquired over more than four decades playing bluegrass professionally, as well as know-how handed down from his dad and his grandfather, whose tenure in the original Carter Family band dates back to the early '20s. When *GP* went deep with Brewer on his new acoustic guitar concept project, *House of Axes* (see page 68), he went into the weeds on playing with a pick. Here, we share his knowledge and advice on the subject.

ORGANIC ISSUES

Real tortoiseshell picks were the thing back in the day, and I used to use them years and years ago. Not to make a funny out of it, but they're "picky" from an environmental aspect — not just about the animal, but also from a playing perspective. If it's humid outside, by the time you play an evening concert they start catching and catching. They get to feeling rough on the wound strings, due to the humidity. The best time to use something [*organic*] like a tortoiseshell is in the wintertime or in a studio where you don't have that environmental concern.

THICK DOES THE TRICK ON ACOUSTIC

I use a very thick pick, and I've got a theory behind that too. A harder pick is



a more economical choice, speed-wise. I play fairly aggressively, and if I bear down on a string with a heavy pick, I can move from one string to another very quickly and economically versus a pick that bends. That's because once I strike the string aggressively with a thinner pick, it must straighten back out for me to strike it again. Then it bends again, and so on and so forth. While this is happening, you get a whole lot of ticking sounds, and it's virtually impossible to play a hard rhythm while staying solid with the pick, especially for me because I play rhythm and lead at the same time.

On the other hand, I can stay solid and even with a thick pick. I like the harder pick for that reason alone — an economy of motion — and it gives me more power than a softer pick. Back when I used a regular plectrum, D'Addario custom-made signature versions of their purple picks for me in several thicknesses, from 1.14mm to 1.40mm. But I switched picks about a decade ago.

THREE SIDES IS BETTER THAN ONE

For about the past decade I've been using triangular picks. I endorse the BlueChip TAD50, which is a big, thick tri-sided pick [1.25mm]. I use three-sided picks because if I start getting a little wear on one side, I'll turn that pick in my hand to get the bite that I want from another tip. You've got two more choices with a tri-sided pick, so that's ideal.

I do that regularly, right during the middle of the song. If you inspect the *House of Axes* videos I posted on my YouTube channel [*Gary Brewer and the Kentucky Ramblers*], you'll see me flipping and turning that pick as I move from playing from one cluster of notes to another. ▀

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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EPIPHONE

1958 Korina Flying V and Explorer

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

WHEN GIBSON UNVEILED the Flying V and Explorer in its Modernist Series in 1958, their radical designs quickly proved the very definition of “ahead of their time.” Gibson president Ted McCarty and his team concocted the sharp angles and space-age looks to conquer the rock and roll revolution, but not too many notable artists were bold enough to embrace the daring styles, and relatively few were sold before the models were deleted from the catalog after 1960.

Today, most see these Modernist designs as having been aimed at musical styles that were yet to be born. After the Flying V’s 1967 reissue (and further iterations that followed in the ’70s), and the Explorer’s 1976 re-introduction after rock-leaning competitors began adopting the shape, these models quickly secured their iconic status in heavy rock and metal and have remained hotly in demand ever since.

Rarely, however, have they been available in anything close to the original specs, other than via the occasional runs from the Gibson Custom Shop. Usually built from mahogany or woods other than the korina of the 1958–’60 series, and often with other altered specs and appointments, the majority of the reinventions have honored the shapes of the originals while rarely capturing the full essence of the revolutionary 1958 guitars.

That’s the void that the Epiphone Inspired by Gibson 1958 Korina Flying V and Explorer seek to fill as closely as possible, given their accessible price point. And at first glance, each certainly nails the appearance and overall vibe of the Gibson originals, using the correct body woods, accurate-looking hardware and plastics, and more.

But hold on: Haven’t most Epiphones been inspired by Gibson models since the



The partnership with Gibson's Custom Shop brings improved accuracy and quality.



Kalamazoo maker acquired its New York City rival in 1957? Yes, but by name-checking its parent company in this recent series Epiphone is signaling the partnership with the acclaimed Gibson Custom Shop that has helped to bring improved accuracy and overall quality to guitars sold under the "Inspired by" banner. Manufactured by Epiphone's facility in China, the 1958 Korina

SPECIFICATIONS

1958 Korina Flying V

CONTACT epiphone.com

PRICE \$1,299 street

NUT GraphTech, 1.692" wide

NECK Korina, '58 Flying V (deep-C) profile

FRETBOARD Indian laurel, 24.75" scale, 12" radius

FRETS 22 medium-jumbo

TUNERS Epiphone Deluxe with push-in bushings

BODY Solid korina

BRIDGE ABR-1 Tune-o-matic and through-body stringing with brass "V" plate, gold plated

PICKUPS Gibson Burstbucker 2 rhythm, Burstbucker 3 lead

CONTROLS Two volume controls, master tone control, three-way selector switch

FACTORY STRINGS Gibson Brite Wire .010-.046

WEIGHT 7.1 lbs

BUILT China

KUDOS An impressively accurate take on the 1958 Flying V at its price point, delivering surprisingly versatile tones and great playability

CONCERNS None that the original design doesn't present. Might have been nice to see it in a gloss finish.

Flying V and Explorer are nevertheless designed and spec'ed-out in conjunction with Gibson's Custom Shop in Nashville, and the joint logo on the back of the headstock ensures that level of accuracy and quality.

Putting korina right in the guitars' names further emphasizes just how important this choice of wood is considered to be. Generically known as white limba, korina is thought of as a cousin to mahogany, although it's lighter in color and often lighter in weight. In addition, it presents its own sonic signature that is relatively well balanced but distinctive, with a sizzling presence in the upper midrange and a textured chewiness in the harmonic content. On both models, this korina is finished in a color Epiphone calls Vintage Natural, using a process referred to as aged gloss, but which most players would call satin. It works well for the general impression of each, although I think a fully buffed-out gloss finish would have looked great on these guitars.

The Epiphone 1958 Korina Flying V and Explorer have other specs and features in common. Both are available with either white or black multi-ply pickguards, as were the originals (the white version is reviewed here), with gold-plated hardware on all renditions. They have Burstbucker 2 and 3 (rhythm and lead) PAF-style humbuckers wired to independent volume controls and master tone controls. Pots are by CTS, with a Mallory tone capacitor and Switchcraft toggle selector and jack, and both have unbound fingerboards made from Indian laurel, a sustainable medium-brown hardwood that nicely approximates rosewood. Both also



have accurate '58 neck profiles that are full and comfortably rounded — a meaty handful that I really dig, and which you don't often find on guitars of this level.

1958 KORINA FLYING V

It's hard not to think "heavy rock" when a Flying V comes out, and the style certainly

became a badge of honor for many players rocking spandex, full stacks and poodle hair. But there's also something raw and rustic about a circa-'58 Korina V that reminds you they were applied to great blues and roots stylings by Albert

King and Lonnie Mack, as well as classic Brit-rock by Keith Richards, Dave Davies and others. Either way, however, it steers me more toward garage rock than metal, although the design is more versatile than might first be expected.

Rather than just being the same wood in different shapes, the Korina Flying V and Explorer present subtle but significant

THE 1958 KORINA FLYING V IS SURPRISINGLY EXPRESSIVE, PERHAPS MORE SO THAN YOU'D EXPECT



alterations — both from each other, and from more standard guitars — that help form their sonic characters. The neck tenon on each is quite deep, to enable the high neck/body joints, and the V shakes it up further with Tele-like through-body stringing, bringing the ferules, the body wood and the brass “V” tail plate into play.

Otherwise, Flying Vs are always challenging to play on the lap, and this one's no different. The rubber skid-mat inlaid into the thigh-side edge helps a little. Strap it up, though, and it's game on.

Tested through a Friedman Smallbox head and 2x12 cab, a custom 5E3-style 1x12 combo, and a Neural DSP Quad Cortex into the studio monitors, the Korina 1958 Flying V quickly expressed the boatload of sonic personality that has long made this design far more than just a funky shape. The combination of the light korina and through-body stringing, alongside the



The Burstbuckers did well into an Angry Charlie distortion or a Blackout Effectors Musket fuzz.

PAF-inspired pickup choice and the wood's own sonic characteristics, delivers a blend of midrange snarl and harmonic complexity — yet with a certain scooped airiness at its core — that works for more nuanced styles as well as it does for straight-up rock and roll. It's a lively, resonant guitar overall, and while a high-gain pedal easily helps it get heavy, this 1958 Korina Flying V is surprisingly expressive, perhaps more so than you'd expect, given the all-in style choice that its shape represents.

1958 KORINA EXPLORER

While a good 95 percent of what's been said about the Flying V goes for the 1958 Korina Explorer, the aesthetics of the different body shape, the six-a-side headstock and the use of a stop-bar tailpiece, rather than through-body stringing, account for the significant differences. The former means you can play this one while seated without constantly fighting to keep it from crashing to the floor, but the reconfiguration of that wood (and the

use of a little more of it) also changes the guitar's resonant characteristics and its fundamental tones.

Played through the same test rigs as the Flying V, the Explorer reveals a little more body in the low end and slightly more

thickness in the mids, while retaining the chewy, swirly overtones and high-end bite that helped give the Flying V its sonic personality. The Burstbucker pickups did well into an Angry Charlie distortion or a Blackout Effectors Musket fuzz for classic metal tones, while the Explorer dials back easily into more nuanced blues or power-pop voicings, proving itself surprisingly versatile.

THE EXPLORER DIALS BACK EASILY INTO MORE NUANCED BLUES OR POWER-POP VOICINGS, PROVING ITS VERSATILITY

CONCLUSION

One of the main takeaways here is perhaps the same one the originals delivered in 1958: These are surprisingly adaptable and expressive designs, so don't let their radical looks lead you astray. Epiphone's 1958 Korina Flying V and Explorer are both well-built and great-playing homages to these iconic models that are reasonably priced for what they deliver, and each is deserving of an Editors' Pick Award. **E**

SPECIFICATIONS

1958 Korina Explorer

CONTACT epiphone.com

PRICE \$1,299 street

NUT GraphTech, 1.692" wide

NECK Korina, '58 Explorer (deep-C) profile

FRETBOARD Indian laurel, 24.75" scale, 12" radius

FRETS 22 medium-jumbo

TUNERS Epiphone Deluxe with push-in bushings

BODY Solid korina

BRIDGE ABR-1 Tune-o-magic and stopbar tailpiece, gold plated

PICKUPS Gibson Burstbucker 2 rhythm, Burstbucker 3 lead

CONTROLS Two volume controls, master tone control, three-way selector switch

FACTORY STRINGS Gibson Brite Wire .010–.046

WEIGHT 7.3 lbs

BUILT China

KUDOS An impressively accurate take on the 1958 Explorer at its price point, presenting thick, rich, yet expressive tones and excellent playability

CONCERNS Again, might have been nice to see it in a gloss finish



DOUBLE TROUBLE

ALL-NEW BOLT-ON MODELS

The PRS NF 53 and the Myles Kennedy signature model build on years of careful study of pickup design and voicing. These models each feature new and unique versions of PRS's Narrowfield pickups to bring two distinct voices alive. PRS Narrowfield pickups are built to deliver great, thick single-coil sounds with the noise-cancelling benefits of humbuckers. Stop by your local PRS dealer to check them out and see which one is right for you.

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GUITARS



FISHMAN

AFX Mini Acoustic Pro EQ Mini, Broken Record, AcoustiVerb and Pocket Blender effects pedals

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

FISHMAN JOINS THE revolution for effects tailored to acoustic guitars with four AFX Mini pedals. They include the Pocket Blender AB/Y mixer, the Broken Record looper/sampler, the Pro EQ Mini preamp and equalizer and the AcoustiVerb reverb. Each pedal is voiced to play nice with acoustic amplification, something that Fishman, manufacturer of the venerable Loudbox, knows a thing or two about. The AFX Mini concept provides powerful 32-bit processing in a durable aluminum enclosure that has a footprint less than two inches wide, under four inches deep and not quite two inches tall. On the surface, each pedal is relatively straightforward, but there's a lot more under the hood.

AFX effects process in parallel, meaning the effected signal runs alongside the pure direct signal, not on top of it. The pedals can operate in mono with standard instrument cables, but they also have an option for dual-channel audio when using a TRS stereo cable (not included). You can then assign each pedal using a switch on the back to set the audio path to tip or ring, and choose between buffered or true bypass.

AFX PRO EQ MINI



Based on Fishman's Platinum preamp, the Pro EQ Mini provides up to 20dB of gain and impedance matching for a variety of pickup types. The Pro EQ Mini has a level control, an input trim to dial in the best sound with the lowest noise,

and five EQ faders — bass, middle and treble, plus low cut and brilliance — to aid in sculpting your acoustic guitar's voice.



In use, the EQ helped home in on the bass, treble and middle ranges of whatever instrument I tried, from a Taylor 816 Grand Symphony to a Cole Clark True Hybrid to a Martin CS-SC-2022, which are all very different. The brilliance control was subtle but handy, while the low cut was a godsend. One could argue that's the most important EQ control for an acoustic tone hound, as it sets the stage for where the signal sits in a mix.

On a big guitar, I used it to harness low-end boom, especially in conjunction with significant amounts of reverb. With thinner instruments, setting the low cut at the very bottom, bringing up a bit of the bass EQ and cutting some mids made the instruments sound much beefier without feeding back. The Pro EQ Mini has a phase switch to help curtail feedback, and the pedal can be configured as an audio mute, which is especially handy if you have no other mutes in your signal chain.

SPECIFICATIONS

AFX Pro EQ Mini

CONTACT fishman.com/afx

PRICE \$119

CONTROLS Level, input trim, level indicator LED. Switches: buffered or true bypass; audio path: tip (mono) or ring

FOOT SWITCH Assignable as on/off or audio mute

I/O ¼" TRS input and output jacks

BUILT China

KUDOS Very practical for sculpting awesome acoustic tones easily

CONCERNS None

AFX BROKEN RECORD



Here's a keep-it-simple looper/sampler that can hold up to six minutes of 24-bit audio, which can also be transferred to a computer. In sampler mode, the main foot switch can trigger audio to play once and then stop. The pedal

will remember what you've recorded even when powered down, and the same is true for the last recorded loop when in looper mode. That's how I was mainly interested in using the Broken Record.

When a looper has one button, that button must do everything, so you're going to have to use it in various ways, such as multi-tapping and holding. That's true here, and while it works as you would expect to record, start or stop play, overdub, undo or erase, it's a good idea to study the manual to get the gist. While I prefer a looper with at least two buttons, the AFX Broken Record functions and sounds as well as any one-button looper I've come across.



SPECIFICATIONS

AFX Broken Record

CONTACT fishman.com/afx

PRICE \$119

CONTROLS Level, LED indicator red/yellow/green. Switches: looper or sampler mode; buffered or true bypass; audio path: tip (mono) or ring

FOOT SWITCH Record/play/stop/overdub/undo/erase

I/O ¼" TRS input and output jacks, USB-C for audio phase transfers

KUDOS Simple operation with rudimentary controls, quality sound

CONCERNS One foot-switch does everything, so know your functions and keep track

AFX ACOUSTIVERB



The AFX AcoustiVerb has three reverb types on offer: spring, hall and plate. There's a mini-switch to toggle between them, as well as level and tone knobs (positioned left and right, respectively) and a larger knob to control decay time.

The controls only manipulate the affected sound, not the direct audio. I appreciated being able to dial in the desired amount of top-end shimmer without brightening the whole guitar tone. Turn it up and the selected reverb glistens. Dial it back and the effect tucks in to become a bit less noticeable.

The spring setting offers the familiar sound of a classic tube amp. Switching to the hall reverb is a significant step, as the effect opens up and really resonates. Switching to



plate reverb is less dramatic, the main difference being a more bellowing bottom-end resonance that becomes very evident when you suddenly mute a chord. I can see why the primary control is decay time, as it has the most dramatic impact, such as allowing you to make the hall reverb sound more like a room reverb. And I appreciate how the pedal lets the reverb spill over even after you hit the bypass button when it's in buffered mode. The reverbs are all very high quality, and the pedal proved extremely easy to use. I mostly left the level and tone knobs at noon and toggled between the three reverb types, depending on the tune, and adjusted decay accordingly. The AFX AcoustiVerb puts a lot of 'verby goodness at your fingertips.

SPECIFICATIONS

AFX AcoustiVerb

CONTACT fishman.com/afx

PRICE \$119

CONTROLS Level, tone, decay time. Reverb select: spring/hall/plate. Switches: buffered or true bypass; audio path: tip (mono) or ring

I/O ¼" TRS input and output jacks

KUDOS Intuitive layout, simple yet flexible.

Luscious reverbs

CONCERNS None

AFX POCKET BLENDER



This pedal for AFX chains is an AB/Y + D.I. with a two-channel mixer. It lets users of dual-element pickup systems balance the signals individually and facilitates sending them to separate amps with their own effects assignments — which I did, using a Taylor 816ce with a Fishman PowerTap Rare Earth.

It's pretty wild — and rather confusing. For instance, There are many modes to choose from and an indicator light that only indicates on and off, not mix A or B. (Fishman says that feature had to be sacrificed to keep the



circuitry completely analog with top-shelf components.) Still, the dual system is a ton of fun once you figure it out. I sent the Rare Earth's magnetic signal to a Hughes & Kettner TubeMeister 18 for a slightly overdriven tone to complement the very lively and ambient body sensor signal feeding into a brand-new Taylor Circa '74 amp (look for a review soon). I used that amp for loop beds created on the Broken Record and added plate reverb from the AcoustiVerb to make the percussives in my fingerstyle thump and pop. Blending the signals from the two amps into one dual-tone monolith was absolutely awesome!

SPECIFICATIONS

AFX Pocket Blender

CONTACT fishman.com/afx

PRICE \$89

CHANNELS 2

MODES 4-position toggle switch offers:

A+B/A, A+B/Mute, A+B/B, A/B.

CONTROLS Four input faders control tip and ring for each channel. Switches: ground/lift (on back). Foot-switch assignable to A/B mixes or global mute

I/O ¼" input jack, two ¼" output jacks for AB/Y and D.I.

KUDOS Astounding range of practical options for signal splitting, channel switching and AB/Y via relatively simple interface

CONCERNS Keeping track of A/B mix selection without indicator light

CONCLUSION

Fishman's AFX Minis offer a lot of options for the acoustic-electric enthusiast. You can be up and running with a basic mono signal in moments, and while most will take that path, others will enjoy going down the dual-audio-path rabbit hole to discover whole new worlds via an infinite number of tonal blends. To find that kind of flexibility and sonic superiority from a such a set of miniature and affordable pedals is hugely impressive, and earns the AFX Minis an Editors' Pick Award. 





SPECIFICATIONS

6505 1992 Original
CONTACT peavey.com
PRICE \$1,499 street

CHANNELS 2

CONTROLS Rhythm pre-gain, bright and crunch switches. Lead pre-gain, low, mid high. Rhythm post-gain, Lead post-gain, resonance, presence

REAR PANEL Mains voltage selector (100, 115, 220, 240 volts). FX loop send and return, preamp out and remote switch 1/4" jacks. Dual speaker jacks with impedance selector (4Ω, 8Ω, 16Ω)

POWER 120 watts

TUBES Five 12AX7A preamp tubes, four 6L6GC power tubes

EXTRAS High- and normal-gain inputs, channel-select switch, standby and power switches with LED indicators. Effects loop, preamp out. Two-button foot switch included

WEIGHT 43.5 lbs (as tested)

BUILT China

KUDOS A tough-sounding metal-oriented amp with a huge gain range and gobs of power. Its stripped-down feature set and easy-to-navigate control layout are perfect for those who like things simple and raw

CONCERNS None

PEAVEY

6505 1992 Original

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

HOW TIME FLIES! It's been 30 years since the introduction of the Peavey 6505, a high-gain tube head that was a fixture of the 1990s modern metal scene and beyond. Now it's back in the guise of the 6505 1992 Original, on review here.

The 120-watt head is a two-channel (dual-mode) affair with Rhythm and Lead channels, and it carries five 12AX7s in the preamp section and four 6L6GCs in the output stage. Its Tolex-covered birch-ply cabinet has perforated steel grilles front and back, and metal corner protectors. The steel chassis contains most of the components on a large PCB, which is connected to smaller boards that hold the preamp and power tube sockets and the rear-panel jacks and switches.

It's easy to navigate the control layout, which starts from the left with high- and low-gain inputs, a Rhythm pre-gain control, and accompanying Bright and Crunch switches, a Lead pre-gain control and three knobs for the passive low, mid and high EQ,

which are shared by both channels. Next in line are the Rhythm post-gain and Lead post-gain controls, and a set of global resonance and presence knobs.

On the rear panel is a voltage selector (100, 115, 220 and 240 volts) and a complement of 1/4-inch jacks for effects loop send and return, preamp out, and the included two-button foot switch for channel-select and FX loop on/off. There are two speaker jacks along with an impedance selector for 16-, eight- and four-ohm loads.

I tested the 6505 with a Gibson ES-335, a PRS Myles Kennedy signature [see review *here next month*] and a Knaggs Severn Trem SSS with three single-coils, running the amp into a 2x12 closed-back loaded with Celestion Vintage 30s, as well as a Universal Audio OX Amp Top Box to tamp it down through speakers and be able to hear it though studio monitors and headphones.

The amp's gain range is huge. I started by plugging into the normal gain input with the Crunch switch off and adjusted the Rhythm pre-gain for a glassy clean tone that sounded awesome with delay and reverb. The different guitars were easily accommodated with a little tweaking of the tone controls and setting the presence and resonance knobs about halfway up. However, even in this pristine configuration, the distortion starts coming on as soon as the Rhythm pre-gain is raised past noon,



and from this point on you can dirty-up your clean sound to the *n*th degree, setting the overall level to whatever it needs to be with the Rhythm post-gain control (effectively the master volume).

Getting into serious grind territory is just a matter of plugging into the high gain input and winding up the Rhythm pre-gain for a crunching rock sound that's happening even before you hit the actual Crunch button, which produces a gain kick that allows for any level of crushing distortion as you turn up the Rhythm knob — all while staying

very touch-sensitive and responsive to changes in guitar volume, allowing for quick sweeps between dirty rhythm and lead, and providing the ability to beef up the tones to any degree with the resonance control. Having the Rhythm channel alone would easily cover a rock gig, but as they say, "Wait, there's more!"

And more is what you get when entering into the 6505's hyperdrive mode by activating the Lead pre-gain control, which can unleash a huge amount of gain to take things into the realm of stratospheric sustain. With the knob at 11 o' clock or so, the distortion is furious but still detailed and responsive to EQ settings and playing touch. As you keep

turning up, the tones become ridiculously saturated, with a firmness and ballsy presence at the core, and a cool graininess that doesn't exhibit mushiness until pressed to the limits with the power stage fully cranked (a feat that required some power attention from the OX, since the 6505 doesn't have a low-wattage option).

One of the key elements at play here, especially at high volume, is the output transformer, and the short story is that Periphery guitarist Misha Mansoor was working with Peavey on his signature

investive 120 amplifier when he told the design team that his original 1990s 6505 sounded different than the new ones. They analyzed his amp and discovered that the tolerances of the output transformer had drifted over the years, requiring a reworking of the transformer for the investive, 6505 II and 1992 Original. The latter two were also updated with a switching-input power supply to operate on global voltages.

All of this emphasizes the benefits of

working closely with top-tier players on amp designs, along with everything else, so kudos to Peavey for doing what was needed to make the 6505 series and the investive as good sounding as possible.

In summation, the

THE 6505 1992 ORIGINAL IS AS RAW AND STRAIGHTFORWARD AS THE STYLE IT HELPED TO DEFINE

6505 1992 Original is about as stripped down as it gets for an amp that's still a contender in the metal scene, providing all the essentials needed for maximum heaviness at high volume. It might be somewhat primitive by today's standards, but if you don't need three channels, multiple FX loops, MIDI, noise gates, extensive foot switching and the like — all of which the investive 120 has to offer — the 6505 1992 Original is simply a great amp that's as raw and straightforward as the style it helped to define. **E**





DOD

Overdrive Preamp 250, Envelope Filter 440 and Meatbox Subsynth

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

FOUNDED IN 1974 by David Oreste DiFrancesco (who contributed the company initials) and John Johnson, Salt Lake City-based DOD became one of the major players in the burgeoning effects market of the 1970s and '80s. The trio of pedals featured here are part of a group of reissues that are underway now that DOD and its high-tech offshoot DigiTech are back in business under the ownership of Korea-based Cor-Tek, which is the parent company of Cort Guitars.

The Overdrive Preamp 250, Envelope Filter 440 and Meatbox Subsynth all feature analog circuitry, mechanical foot switches with a true bypass, input and output jacks, and a nine-volt adapter jack. They can also be battery powered, which is a convenience many pedals don't offer (adapter and battery not included). The bottom plate must be removed to install a battery and

there's not much else to see, just the back of the PCB covered by a piece of foam rubber.

I tested these pedals with a Fender Telecaster, a Gibson ES-335 and a new PRS Myles Kennedy signature model equipped with Narrowfield pickups, running them through Fender Deluxe Reverb and Tonemaster Princeton Reverb amps.

OVERDRIVE PREAMP 250



One of the company's earliest products was the Overdrive Preamp, which in time had "250" added to its name. Originally offered in a sheet-metal enclosure, the pedal eventually received a custom die-cast aluminum housing that differentiated DOD pedals from those of MXR, which mainly used Bud box enclosures. The Overdrive Preamp 250 on review here wears a gold sparkle finish and features gain and level controls.

Similar to the MXR Distortion+ but with silicon diodes that increase the output and dramatically change the texture of the gain, the ODP 250 dishes out grind from the moment the gain knob is cracked open and goes into toothy saturation from about 11 o'clock until the knob is maxed, which is where the distortion is the raspiest and the volume is the loudest. The output is

dependent on the gain setting here, so this is not a clean booster. The ODP 250 walks the line between fuzz and distortion, and it's a great all-rounder for lead and dirty rhythm, where its responsiveness to playing touch are welcome attributes. You may have to work the guitar's tone control to keep the high-gain grit in check, but it nails old-school rock distortion and is a nice contrast to the tube-style pedals so prevalent nowadays.

The Overdrive Preamp 250 hearkens to a time when designers were trying to figure out how to make solid-state pedals (and amps) that sounded like tube circuits, before Ibanez cracked the code with the TS-808. Ironically, Oreste made his first distortion pedal in the '60s while a missionary in South America, where local guitarists asked if he could build something to give them the "Satisfaction" sound. Since he didn't know about Keith Richards' use of the Maestro Fuzz Tone at the time, Oreste reverse-engineered the FZ-1's sound with a circuit that used cascaded 12AX7 tubes.

SPECIFICATIONS

Overdrive Preamp 250

CONTACT digitech.com

PRICE \$109

CONTROLS Gain, level

FOOT SWITCH Mechanical on/off



I/O Input, output, 9VDC jack (adapter not included)

DIMENSIONS 4.68" x 2.63" x 2.25" (LxWxH)

EXTRAS Analog circuit. True bypass with LED. Can be battery powered

WEIGHT .62 lbs

BUILT China

KUDOS A good all-around rock distortion box

CONCERNS Gain setting determines output. No tone control

ENVELOPE FILTER 440



The sparkle-green Envelope Filter 440 is a two-knob auto-wah that responds to picking dynamics to produce effects similar to working the rocker on a wah pedal. The 440's sounds can be shaped in various ways with the level

and range controls, along with a two-position toggle switch that alters the frequency sweep from brighter and more vocal in the up position (where the sound is the most wah-like) to bassier and whooshier in the down position.

Setting the switch up produced tones that instantly reminded me of the Grateful Dead's "Estimated Prophet" (Jerry Garcia probably tracked the funky lines with a Mu-Tron III pedal), while flicking the switch down yielded chewier textures imbued with



a "bow wow" inflection that can be cool for rhythm playing, where adjustments in picking can evoke an almost phaser-like swooshiness that sounds great with distortion.

SPECIFICATIONS

Envelope Filter 440

CONTACT digitech.com

PRICE \$129

CONTROLS Level, range, voice switch

OTHER I/O, dimensions, weight and country of origin identical to Overdrive Preamp 250

KUDOS Awesomely funky auto-wah sounds. Handy voice switch

CONCERNS None

MEATBOX SUBSYNTH



Another remake of a classic, the Meatbox Subsynth debuted in the '90s alongside the Gonkulator ring modulator, Milk Box compressor and others. It produces a subharmonic synthesized note in the

30–60 Hz range. This update sports red paintwork emblazoned with a fly, and four controls: octave (varies the amount of octave sound; full-up is 100 percent wet), low, output and sub (adds subharmonic content).

The effectiveness of the sub control begins around noon, and the sound gets progressively deeper and more rumbling as you turn it up. I liked using the Meatbox with octave and sub both around one o'clock and the low and output knobs at maximum. Pushing it with an overdrive pedal really makes this thing come alive, and I used both a TWA SH9 and the aforementioned Overdrive Preamp 250 to coax grinding, low-down tones that were a blast for low-string riffing.

The Meatbox tracks well on single lines and somewhat less so when playing intervals, which can induce a little gronkiness to the brew — all part of the fun of analog technology that's represented by this cadre of most welcome DOD reissues. **B**

SPECIFICATIONS

Meatbox Subsynth

CONTACT digitech.com

PRICE \$169

CONTROLS Octave, low output, sub, low

EXTRAS Allows splitting the output into wet and dry signals by using a TRS cable

OTHER I/O, dimensions, weight and country of origin identical to Overdrive Preamp 250

KUDOS Delivers a broad range of low-octave effects

CONCERNS None





SPECIFICATIONS

Ledges Tri-Dimensional Reverberation Machine**CONTACT** earthquakerdevices.com**PRICE** \$199

CONTROLS Length, mix and damping knobs. Mode switch (Room, Hall and Plate), six-position user-definable preset knob, preset save/recall with indicator to show operating mode (green: Live; red: Preset) **I/O** 1/4" TS input and output, 1/4" TRS expression input

OTHER Buffered bypass with tails, silent relay-based switching with Flexi-Switch Technology

POWER 9-volt DC, 75 mA**DIMENSIONS** 5 x 2.625 x 2.125" (LxWxH)**WEIGHT** 9.85 oz**BUILT** USA

KUDOS Great sounds from three versatile and usable modes. Easy-to-use, with benefit of six user-definable presets and expression control

CONCERNS None

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES

Ledges Tri-Dimensional Reverberation Machine

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

CONSIDERING HOW SO many reverb pedals today feature no fewer than five or six varieties of the effect, it's refreshing whenever someone comes out with a stomp box that keeps the number down to just a few essentials. Consider EarthQuaker Devices' new Ledges Tri-Dimensional Reverberation Machine, which offers Room, Hall and Plate reverbs. What, no spring reverb, you're probably thinking? I figure the omission is fine since guitarists who use spring reverb will probably already have it in their amp.

But EarthQuaker's uncommon approach goes beyond its choice of ambience effects, because Ledges' three reverb modes are interconnected to deliver the effect's full spectrum. Room's longest setting is Hall's shortest, while Hall's longest setting is Plate's shortest. Within each mode's range are infinite options, from boxy at Room's shortest setting, to endlessly reverberating at Plate's longest setting.

A handful of controls make dialing in your preferred sound easy. Mix controls the dry-to-wet balance, length controls the size of the reverb, and damping dials down the high-frequency content of the reverb to tame reflections. There's also a preset knob with six user-definable settings. The preset button lets you save and recall your favorites, and it indicates if Ledges is in Live mode, by glowing green, or Preset mode, by glowing red.

In addition, Ledges has a 1/4-inch TRS expression input on its right-hand side, and expression control can be mapped to length, mix or damping and saved in each preset. There's also a buffered bypass with tails, so reverb tails will continue even when you've switched off the pedal. As EarthQuaker users would expect, Ledges features Flexi-Switch Technology, the company's silent true-bypass relay-based foot switch.

EarthQuaker has plenty of experience making great-sounding reverb pedals, and Ledges is no exception. The sounds on tap here have realism, depth and plenty of

liveliness that lend guitar tones a three-dimensional quality. The reverbs cover the full spectrum by design, but you'll be missing a lot if you just think of them as progressively "larger" reverbs, as each has its own unique sonic character, with plenty of variety available. Room delivers everything from tiny crackerbox ambience to slapback at the far right of the knob. Hall is usually not one of my favorite reverb algorithms, but I found Ledges' style of the effect extremely likable and usable. With length at a minimum and mix at noon, it adds a nice moody presence. Turn up length and you're rewarded with loads of reflections and subtle modulations that evoke grand cathedral settings. Plate reverb is one of my favorite varieties for its smooth sheen, and while it's tempting to crank up length and enjoy those endless beds of pure unwavering reverb, I found this mode perfect for most styles with length set at minimum and mix and damping at noon.

Of course, being able to store six presets, along with expression control assignments, is a great benefit. I also enjoyed mapping expression to the length control in Hall mode and using an expression pedal to create dramatic swells of reverb.

Ledges sounds great and is a breeze to use. It should make a great addition for guitarists who want a versatile reverb that doesn't hog pedalboard real estate or come packed with algorithms they don't need. **A**



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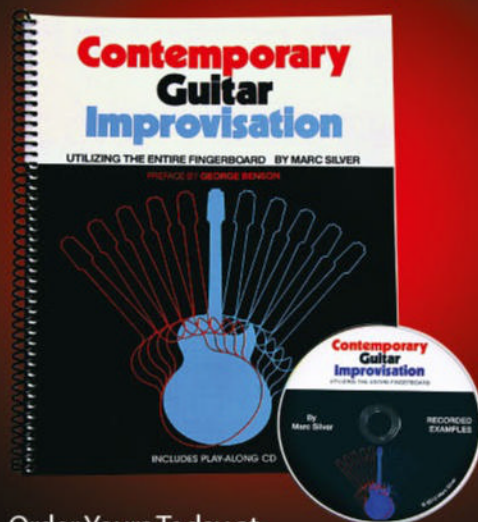
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How I wrote...

“Seventeen”

Reb Beach tells how Winger’s 1989 hit saved them from obscurity... and became a mark of hair-metal infamy.

BY MARK McSTEAD

“I THINK IT is definitely of its era,” Reb Beach says of “Seventeen,” the top-40 single that helped launch his band Winger into the mainstream in early 1989. “It has a huge production, a big chorus, a couple of shred solos...” In other words, everything required for a hair-metal hit. “I’ll take the hair-metal tag,” Beach concedes, “but I think a lot of our riffs were a little more progressive, you know?”

Indeed, “Seventeen” borrows from both the Beatles’ “I Saw Her Standing There” — via its reference to a 17-year-old beauty — and Led Zeppelin’s “The Crunge,” with its funky syncopated beat. Apparently, it was just what the doctor ordered for the young group’s success. Atlantic had released Winger’s self-titled debut in August 1988, but the album languished in the charts. “It just kind of got put on the shelf with the other hundreds of albums that Atlantic was releasing,” Beach recalls. “If a record didn’t stick within a few weeks, it was over as far as they were concerned.” It was the video for “Seventeen” that turned everything around. “We got one play on MTV at 1:55 a.m. On a Sunday morning, no less” he says. “And then, from there, everything just lit up.”

SPARRING PARTNERS

“Seventeen” was one of the first songs Beach co-wrote with singer Kip Winger, but their union was not a friendly one at the time. “We were both session players, and actually we didn’t really like each other,” the guitarist

explains. “We’d both had got the wrong impression of each other, and that had kind of stuck.”

It was their producer, Beau Hill, who suggested Beach bring his bag of riffs to Winger. “He said Kip was the man to turn them into songs,” the guitarist recalls. That included the “Seventeen” riff, which he wrote when he was himself just 15. But Winger’s ideas for “Seventeen” took him by surprise. “I played the riff for ‘Seventeen’ to Kip and he said, ‘That’s a chorus.’ I thought he must be kidding me. I couldn’t see how you could sing a chorus over it. But he fired up a drum machine, played a bass line under it, suggested we go to A in the verse, and it all came together really quickly on the spot. We actually wrote three songs together that first day.”

**“THE RIFF SOUNDS
CONFUSING BECAUSE
I HEAR EVERYTHING
ON THE UPBEATS,
WHICH GOES
AGAINST THE GRAIN”**

plugged it straight into a Marshall, although he doesn’t recall the model.

Beach is proud of the killer riff that opens “Seventeen” and notes that “there’s a lot more to it than meets the ear. People think delay was an important part of the feel for the riff, but I recorded that dry and added the delay in the production. It sounds confusing because I hear everything on the upbeats,

which goes against the grain. And our drummer, Rod Morgenstein, flips the beat around in the middle, which is a cool idea. I also love the funky feel in the verses. There’s definitely a lot more going on than there is for a typical band of the genre.”

And while Beach preferred to play his solos “on the spur of the moment and carry on until I screwed up,” he copied the solo for “Seventeen” from the song’s demo. “At first, I got compared to Van Halen, but by our second record, I think people realized that I had my own thing going on.”

BEAU’S JEST

The success of “Seventeen” couldn’t have come at a better time for Winger, who had been struggling onstage up to then. Their early live performances were, as Beach admits, “horrible.” “We put all the songs for the first album together in the studio,” he reveals. “In fact we never actually played together as a band until we started rehearsing for our first tour, where we were opening for Scorpions.” But by the time “Seventeen” broke through, they were a well-oiled machine.

Things went south, though, as grunge made Winger’s brand of music obsolete and changing attitudes made “Seventeen” a target for criticism. “It’s really just the one line: ‘Daddy says she’s too young, but she’s old enough for me,’” Beach says. “We didn’t even write that — it was something Beau Hill, our producer, came up with.

“But think of the Beatles with ‘I Saw Her Standing There,’” he says, pointing to the song’s initial lyrical inspiration. “We’re not pedophiles,” he adds with a laugh. “It’s just an ‘80s rock song, for god’s sake.”

Reb Beach (center)
with Paul Taylor (left)
and Kip Winger,
perform July 27, 1989.



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