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his demons,
reuniting Jane's
Addiction, and
why he's still
alt-rock's biggest
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THE JOURNEY IS THE DESTINATION

YOU CAN LEARN a lot about a person from the roads they've traveled. Our stories in *Guitar Player* often reflect on the personal and professional journeys of the guitarists we speak with, and that's especially true in this issue.

Let's start with our cover artist, Dave Navarro. There's no doubt he has one of the wildest and most varied career paths of any guitarist featured in this issue, or any other for that matter. From his stints with Jane's Addiction and the Red Hot Chili Peppers to his guest spots with artists like Alanis Morissette and Marilyn Manson, his movie appearances and TV show hosting gigs, Dave has taken his career in more directions than a commercial airline pilot. His brief early tenure in Jane's Addiction ended just before the band could enjoy the 1990s alt-rock explosion they helped bring about. But Dave quickly found gigs with a host of artists and has continued to be the most in-demand guitarist of the alt-rock era. That isn't just down to his playing, a fluid fusion of metal, hard rock and psychedelia, or his creativity as a sonic architect. It's also the result of being a genuinely nice and kind person with a generous spirit. Reading Andrew Daly's interview with Dave in this issue, I was struck by his candor, openness and humility. He serves the music and in doing so serves guitar and all that we hold dear about it. I extend my sincere thanks to him for going deep, personally and professionally, for this issue's cover story as the newly reunited Jane's Addiction make another crosscountry trek.

There are plenty of other great journeys represented in this issue. One of my favorites is described in our interview with Nashville guitar aces Tom Bukovac and Guthrie Trapp. As Tom relates, he moved from the stage to the studio to satisfy his homebody spirit, and went on to become one of the most-wanted guitarists in Nashville. Guthrie for his part tells how he traveled from bluegrass acoustic guitar to electric guitar and outlines the trips he took with his family as a child, as well as his decision to quit school in 10th grade, all of which informs his personality as a Nashville iconoclast who's not afraid to call it as he sees it.

And then there's Brian Ray, whose guitar travels have taken him from the great Etta James to the world-famous Paul McCartney; Jim Campilongo, who discusses his life on two U.S. coasts and whose catalog reads like a journey through music's most eclectic realms; and Mark Tremonti, who is once again back with millennium-era hard-rock act Creed following a highly successful and influential career with his own bands.

I write these editorials in the hours before press time for a reason — they help me reflect on what we've created in the issue, and they always make me proud of our team for bringing together such talented artists and their stories in such an informative and entertaining way. As always, I hope you enjoy the issue.

Christopher Scapelliti

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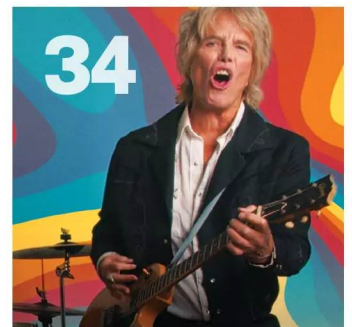
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ON THE COVER

Dave Navarro, photographed in Paris
by Kevin Nixon, June 26, 2024



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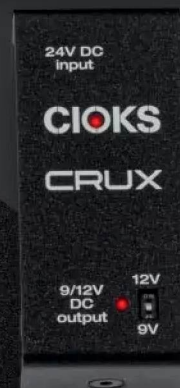
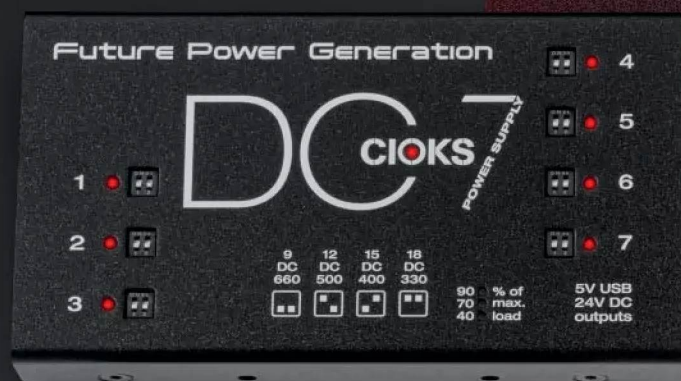
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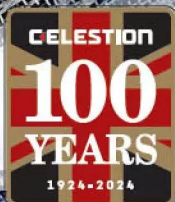
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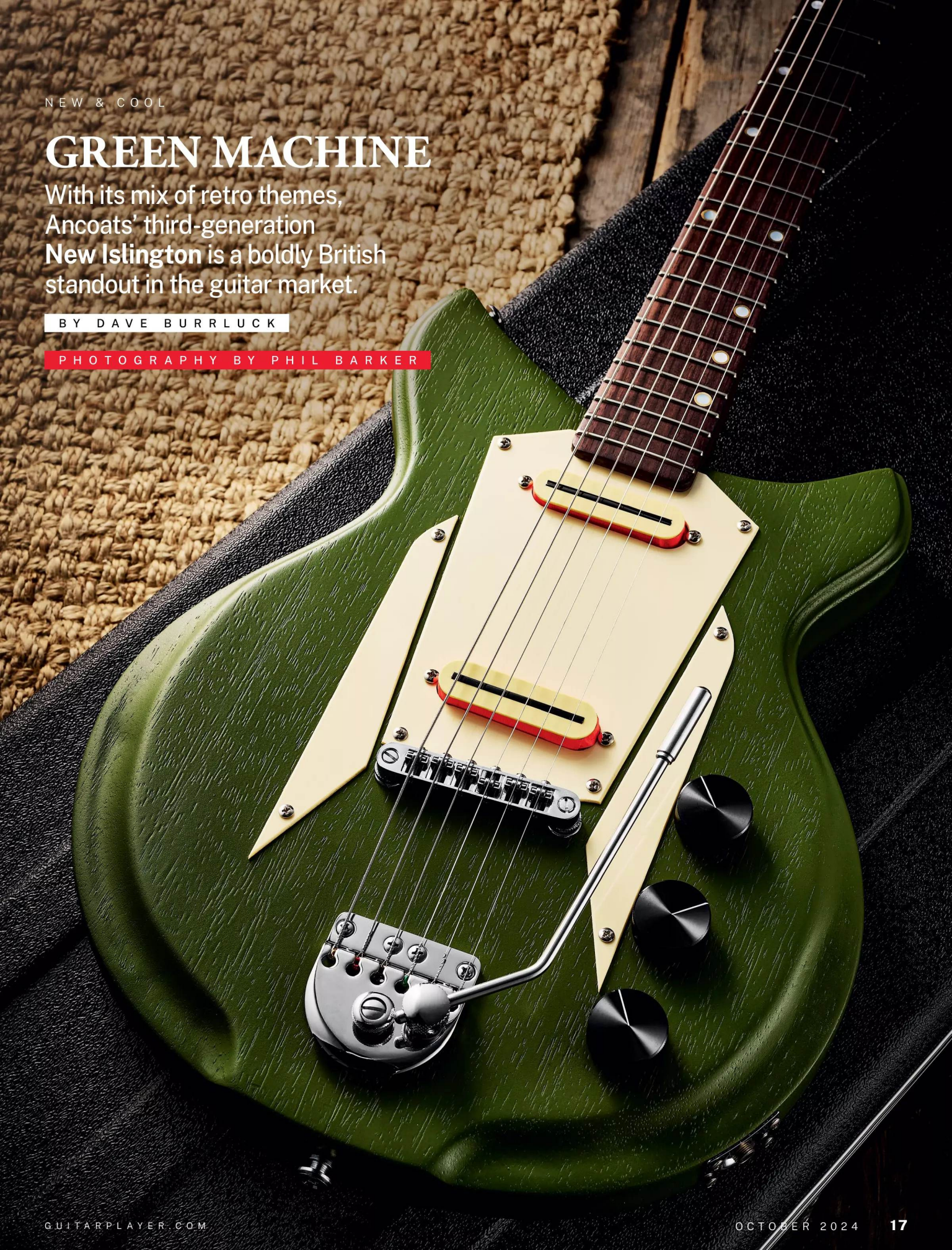
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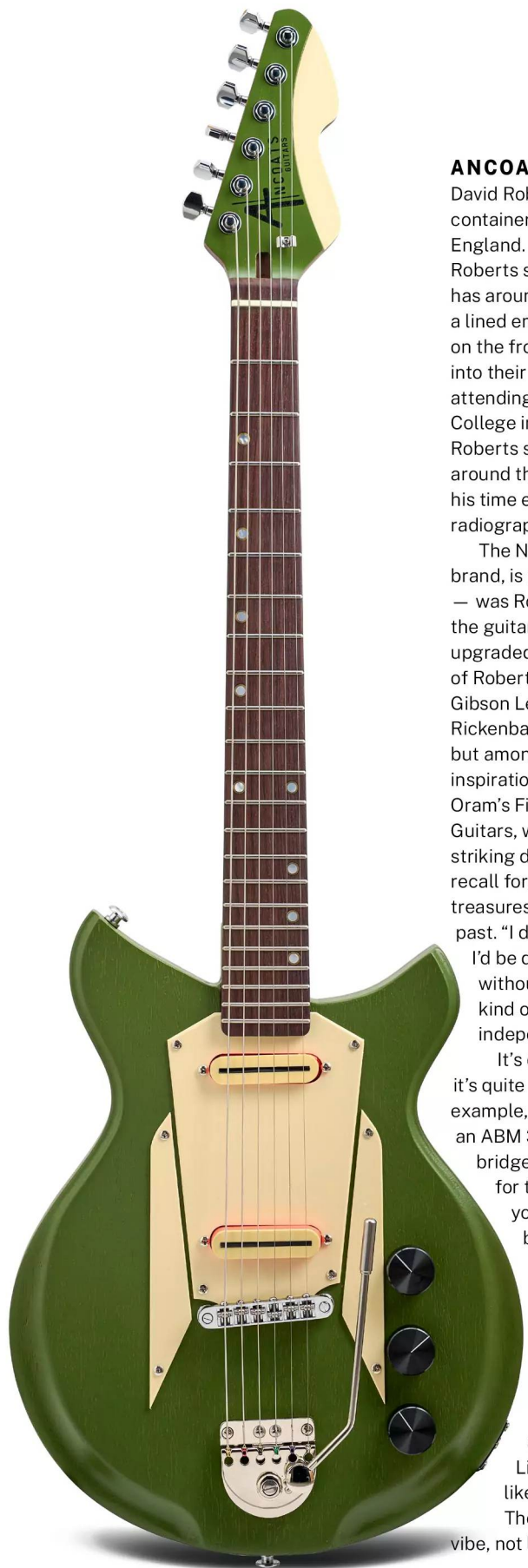
GREEN MACHINE

With its mix of retro themes, Ancoats' third-generation **New Islington** is a boldly British standout in the guitar market.

BY DAVE BURRLUCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL BARKER





ANCOATS GUITARS ARE made by David Roberts in a converted shipping container in Pollard Yard, Manchester, England. “It was an old parking lot,” Roberts says of the location, “but it now has around 130 shipping containers — just a lined empty container with patio doors on the front — and everyone’s turned them into their own start-up businesses.” After attending an evening class at Merton College in London about a decade ago, Roberts sold his first Ancoats guitar around three years ago and now splits his time equally between work as a radiographer and guitar maker.

The New Islington — which, like the brand, is named for an area in Manchester — was Roberts’ first original design, and the guitar you see here is the recently upgraded version three. It’s based on two of Roberts’ favorite guitars, a double-cut Gibson Les Paul Junior melded with some Rickenbacker style, but among his main inspirations are Matt Oram’s Fidelity Guitars, whose striking designs recall forgotten treasures from the past. “I don’t think I’d be doing this

without him,” Roberts muses. “He is kind of a trailblazer, one of the best independent guitar makers around.”

It’s certainly an original vision, but it’s quite a flexible platform, too. For example, the base model comes with an ABM 3250 hardtail through-strung bridge, while my example swaps that for the Göldo DG Shorty vibrato you see here (with a roller saddle bridge) that looks like it came off some ’50s European build. And while Roberts is yet another fan of lightweight obeche for the body, here you can swap that for swamp ash. There’s also a choice of scale length, fingerboard radius, pickup style and a huge color choice from the Little Green Paint Company, which like Ancoats is based in Manchester. There’s certainly an appealing retro vibe, not least in the optional German

THE NEW ISLINGTON MELDS A DOUBLE-CUT GIBSON LES PAUL JUNIOR WITH RICKENBACKER STYLE

carve around the top edges of the body, leaving the quite angular horns with just a small edge radius. The slab style is loaded with a three-piece cream plastic “rocket ship”



The vibrato adds some light offset-style shimmer.

pickguard, whose larger centerpiece holds the two original-design A Line single-coils, which are made by Green Pickups, another Mancunian enterprise. The three large-knobbed rotary controls — master volume, master tone and a four-way pickup selector with positions for parallel and series — are rear-mounted.

My example had a 24 ¾-inch scale length, a bolt-on neck of roasted maple with a typically deep caramel color, and a rosewood fretboard peppered with large brass-ringed mother-of-pearl dots on both sides of the dual 12th fret markers. Even the color-matched headstock, a new six-in-a-line design, dares to be a little different with its relieved plastic-faced edge on the treble side.

TAKE THE A LINE

Stylistically, it might be a little different, but along with a nice weight of 5.92 pounds, the New Islington feels rather



The A Line single-coil pickups are an original take on a hot Strat recipe with a central blade pole piece.

good whether seated or strapped on. The neck profile is quite a full-shouldered “C” shape with a central flat back, and it feels a little bigger than it measures: 1.673 inches at the nut, .787 inches deep at the 1st fret and .889 inches by the 12th. The fret gauge is good, too — a medium .104-inch width, with plenty of height at around .047 inches. There’s a little bit of fingerboard edge rolling, which is always welcome, and while the fret ends could be a little rounder and smoother, it’s a good player overall.

Green Pickups is a new brand for me, and on this platform the A Line single-coils (designed to be an original take on a hot Strat recipe with a central blade pole piece) come out shining. The bridge pickup presents a nicely twangy Strat-like voice contrasted by good depth with clarity at the neck. The parallel mix shouts Telecaster, and while

THERE’S PLENTY OF RETRO-THEMED APPEAL HERE WITH A VIBRANT FENDER-Y VOICE AND LIGHTWEIGHT FEEL

the series pickup combination loses some definition, it gives the New Islington a broad and pretty pokey fourth voice. There’s a very good quality of sound here.

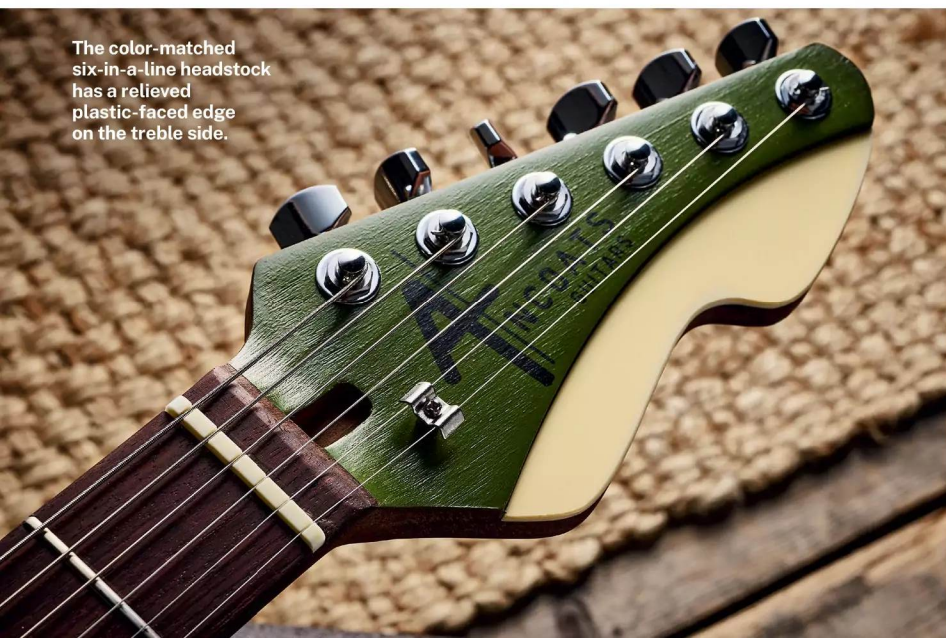
The vibrato adds some light offset-style shimmer, and once the strings have settled in there’s good tuning stability, although the string tree on the top strings snags the high E occasionally.

VINTAGE VIBE

With so many “new” designs barely moving from the classics, there’s plenty of retro-themed appeal here. There are a few minor quibbles, and unless you’re into offset vibratos you could save some money with the standard ABM bridge that Ancoats offers. But what the New Islington lacks on a couple of easily sorted fine details, it makes up for with a vibrant Fender-y voice, lightweight feel and original style, not to mention a welcome shout-out for Manchester craft. **B**

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The color-matched six-in-a-line headstock has a relieved plastic-faced edge on the treble side.



McKinley James performs with a Gibson ES-345.

FAMILY MAN

Armed with just his guitar — and his dad on drums — **McKinley James** conjures authentic '60s rock and soul on *Working Class Blues*.

BY GARY GRAFF

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEJANDRO MENÉNDEZ VEGA

PLAYING MUSIC WAS inevitable for McKinley James, even if it took a minute for guitar to become the 23-year-old's instrument of choice.

James grew up in what he calls "a super musical household" in Rochester, New York. His father (and now bandmate) Jason Smay was a touring musician, playing drums for the likes of Los Straitjackets and JD McPherson. "When his band or a musician friend would come through town, they'd always stay at the house," remembers James, who released his debut album, *Working Class Blues* (Archive Records), this past June. Mom was also talented, although not in the professional sense. "There was

always music and records surrounding me all the time, so from early on I just knew I was gonna do something in music."

James (who performs under his first and middle name) began on Hammond B3 organ, inspired by the Booker T & the M.G.'s records he heard at home, amidst his parents' extensive collection of rock, blues and R&B. But when he actually got to see the band via a VHS tape of the Stax Revue playing in Norway during 1967, James found a new love. He was just about 12 years old.

"That was the first time I'd really seen Booker T," he says. "I was loving the B3, but seeing Steve Cropper play guitar with that attitude and soulfulness, I was like, Okay,

a Hammond's fun but guitar is exactly what I want to do. From there I learned what his influences were and branched into soul and blues and rock and roll."

James' father was with Los Straitjackets at the time, so the aspiring axeman got himself a DiPinto Galaxie IV — which the group was using — and immersed himself in albums by Link Wray, Magic Sam and the Fabulous Thunderbirds. His father introduced him to hometown heroes the Soul Brothers Six, whose 1967 hit "Some Kind of Wonderful" made quite an impression on him. "When I heard that, I really gravitated toward soul, and it's never stopped," James remembers. "The tree branching was just massive at that point. I just wanted to get into everything."

He got good quickly and played his first gig when he was 14, a 30-minute slot opening for Chris Duarte at the Abilene Bar and Lounge in Rochester. At his father's encouragement, James started singing too. "My dad was like, 'You've gotta sing in some capacity because it means you'll always have more opportunities. If a band's looking for a guitar player and they see you can do background vocals, then you'll have a little

more chance of getting work.' At first I was, like, 'I just want to play guitar,' but when I got into soul music, I said, 'Okay, I'll give it a try.' And now I love it. I'm forever thankful for him telling me, 'You gotta learn to sing.'"

James began writing songs when he was 15, and by the time the family moved to Nashville in 2016 to be closer to dad's work with McPherson, he was a bona fide triple threat. He had already ended up in the cover photograph for Eric Church's *Mr. Misunderstood* album the previous year, and once in the city James landed a job as a jack-of-all-trades assistant at Dan Auerbach's Easy Eye Sound studio, which he says "was like going to college without going to college." And that was only part of the steep learning curve he experienced living in Music City.

"There was just more and more opportunity there — to play, to hear things, to meet people," he notes. "From day one it was great. My dad was like, 'Hey, it's Monday night, I'm gonna take you out to see Kenny Vaughan' at some small cafe. I got to see all these guys who were just monsters, just playing for tips. It really was intimidating at first."

But, he adds, it soon became encouraging. "The bar is set so high," James explains. "In Nashville, there's no slacking. Everybody else is better than you. You've got to stay on your chops. Every time I'd see somebody it was like getting a killer guitar lesson just by sitting 10 feet away and

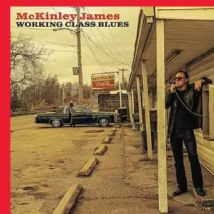
watching. That alone is a great reason to be in Nashville."

And as you'd probably guess, his peer group was a little different than the average teenager with more contemporary tastes in music.

"I never had friends in school who could relate to me, musically," acknowledges James, who skipped his high school graduation

ceremony in order to play a festival gig in Nashville. "I had friends you hang out with and stuff, but I never had a buddy in school who I could be like, 'Did you check this out? This is killer!' None of that. But that never stopped me. I was never like, 'Wait a minute: I don't have anybody I can turn to at school to bond over music with.' I didn't even care. It was, 'This is what I love, and this is it.' This is what I wanted to do, no matter what."

James and his father produced and recorded *Working Class Blues* at the Red Lodge in Nashville. The 11 tracks wear his influences on their proverbial sleeve, whether it's the Texas stylings of "Get to My Baby," "Crazy Over You" and "Call Me Lonesome," the R&B flavors of "Always on



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Working Class Blues

"Movin'," "Get to My Baby," "Always on My Mind," "Leadin' Me On," "Wait and See"

My Mind," the soulful lope of "Just a Little Bit," the easy sway of "Say Goodbye" or the retro-rock pep of "Wait and See." But James — who recorded the set with a '54 Stratocaster through a Peavey Pacer amplifier — worked hard to make sure the songs displayed some contemporary attitude with

the spartan voice-guitar-drums approach.

"There's no doubt I'm into old stuff, for sure," he admits, "but I only play and sing about stuff I can relate to. There's value to that. I want to make stuff that

"IN NASHVILLE THERE'S NO SLACKING. EVERYBODY ELSE IS BETTER THAN YOU. YOU'VE GOT TO STAY ON YOUR CHOPS"

anybody from any background can relate to, so that everybody's included. I'm not just writing music for the blues fans that nobody else will get. So I want to make sure it's fresh and relatable and bring that to a bigger crowd and not just be in a corner for a few people who will get it.

"When I listen to records by Bob Seger, even Eddie Money or Huey Lewis, I realize that's what they did. They were R&B and blues guys, but they made their music in a way that everybody could understand it and relate to it. But they never lost that old-school vibe."

James says touring is his primary goal right now, following a European run during the spring. "When you see us live, the show is super energetic," he crows. "When people see us, they're like, 'What, only two guys? Where is everything?' But this is it. The record's not a bunch of overdubs or anything. It's just us."

And James expects it will remain that way in the foreseeable future.

"The next record will be the same deal, but maybe different tone-wise," he says. "Maybe. I might want to make it a little bigger, a little more roomy sounding, but keep it in the *Working Class Blues* vein where it's still soul, a couple of blues and super-honest songs everybody can relate to. It won't be a stylistic jump — just an improved version of this record." ■



TIPSHEET

From electric blues to flamenco — Sue Foley has done it all and has advice to share for every guitarist.

BY JOE BOSSO

SUE FOLEY IS renowned for her dynamic electric blues playing. Even so, the Texas blues woman took a stylistic detour on her latest album, *One Guitar Woman*, by covering a range of styles, including flamenco, classical and Tejano — all on a nylon-string acoustic — while paying tribute to female guitarists like Memphis Minnie, Maybelle Carter and Sister Rosetta Tharpe [see our feature in August 2024].

“That’s the great thing about guitar playing,” Foley says. “There’s always a new mountain to climb. I tend to be restless and adventurous in general, and that certainly extends to my guitar playing. I’ve spent a lot of my life playing the blues, and I’ll always return to it, but there’s other kinds of music I still want to learn.”

Such as? “Well, jazz, for sure,” she says. “I can’t play jazz — yet. Harmonically, I’m really challenged. I know if I were to really try to stretch myself, that’s where I would probably try to go.”

While Foley ponders her next move, she took some time to offer some choice bits of advice for *Guitar Player* readers. “There’s a lot of technical tips you can get out there, but to me a big part of guitar playing is mental,” she says. “It’s funny how a lot of players can talk themselves out of trying something new or breaking out of their boxes. Just remember: There’s no rights and no wrongs. Play fearlessly and it’ll all sort itself out.”

1 ASK YOURSELF BIG QUESTIONS

“Learning the fundamentals of blues isn’t that difficult, really. Once you familiarize yourself with how the I, IV and V operate in the circle of fifths, you’re in a good place.

To me, those are the primary colors you need in order to paint a picture. But what I find fascinating about the blues — and much of it is mysterious, in a way — is just how many ways there are to express yourself using only a few colors.

“Blues music asks you some big questions, like, Who am I? What do the blues mean to me? What do I really want to say? It almost dares you to expand your mind and express yourself through your playing. It wants you to go to a deeper place all the time. I find that fascinating. To me, it’s a challenge every time I play, like, How am I going to play this solo and these licks that have been regurgitated countless times for almost 100 years in a way that sounds fresh and alive? How am I going to make them sound like me?”

“Asking yourself these types of questions is as important as any kind of technical practice you undertake. I guarantee you, whenever you listen to the greats, you can bet they’ve asked themselves these questions. I know this sounds kind of spiritual, but when you get down to it, that’s

really the essence of the blues. This is music born from a certain time and place, and whenever we play it, we’re paying homage to those spirits and keeping them alive.”

2 TONE COMES FROM YOUR PICKING HAND

“Of course, you need decent equipment to get a good sound — a good-quality guitar and amp, decent strings that aren’t too old. But the real secret about tone is that it comes from your picking hand. Your fretting hand is doing one kind of work, but for the most part it’s flowing in the same kind of general moment. But your picking hand is where you control your tone. It’s surprising to me that so few people really talk about it.

“When I was coming up, I spent a lot of time watching people’s picking hands. I used to go see Clarence ‘Gatemouth’ Brown a lot, and he had this amazing right-hand technique. He didn’t use a pick, and he did all these really interesting flourishes using all his fingers. It was like each finger was a paintbrush that he’d run across the strings. He could play fast and

“Jimmie Vaughan told me, ‘Solos are like little paragraphs.’” See tip 5 to help your solos tell a story.



“IF YOU WANT TO EXPAND YOUR PLAYING, AND IF YOU WANT A DOSE OF HUMILITY, PICK UP AN ACOUSTIC FROM TIME TO TIME”

wild, but when I'd watch his right hand, it was like he put no effort into it. It was all graceful swing. That's where his tone came from.

“In a different way, there was Albert Collins. He had another great right hand, and his tone could slice your head off. He used his fingers, too, and he played with very light strings. The way he dug his fingers into his strings and pulled the sound from them, it was like sparks flew.

“These kinds of players made an impression on me, and I decided to do away with a flatpick. I use a Golden Gate thumbpick, which I take on and off. Mostly I just play with my fingers so I can feel the flesh on the strings. What I like about that is how intimate it feels — there's nothing that separates me from each string. I can pluck each string lightly, or I can dig in and get tough. I can run my fingers softly across the strings, or I can hit 'em hard. Playing this way, my tone comes straight from my picking hand, whether I'm going through an amp or not.”

3 IF YOU PLAY ELECTRIC, TRY AN ACOUSTIC

“It's easy to let your pickups and amp do a lot of the work for you, but if you want to expand your playing — and if you want a dose of humility — pick up an acoustic from time to time. I started on an acoustic, so I've always felt comfortable playing one. The way I generate sound on it is vastly different than on an electric. The sound basically comes from my stomach, which is pressed right against the instrument.

“It's an unforgiving instrument, which freaks a lot of people out. This is especially true if you're playing a nylon-string acoustic, which I've been doing a lot of lately. Don't expect it to have the same behavior and response as your electric. It's a whole different animal. So right away, adjust your expectations and approach. You're going on a new adventure.

“I would also recommend people either use a thumbpick or an open hand when playing acoustic. There are so many things you can do using your whole hand, and you can experiment in so many ways. But be patient. You're going to have to take baby steps. I remember my first flamenco guitar lesson: I had been playing for a couple of decades and I thought I was pretty good.

I went for my first flamenco guitar lesson, which was open hand, no picks, on a nylon-string acoustic. Between the time signatures and the techniques, it was like I'd never played guitar before. Believe me, it was a good dose of humility.

“The more I played on a nylon-string acoustic, the more I fell in love with its sound and feel. I surrendered to the sound and didn't fight it. And what was cool was when I found I could use a lot of the right-hand techniques I learned and apply them to my Telecaster playing. My fingers just flew across the strings.”

4 EMBRACE YOUR SUCKINESS

“We all hit a wall with our playing sometimes. I got in a rut myself with my blues playing. I'd been out on the road, and I could play different styles of electric blues, but then I started to think, What else is there? That's when I started to get into learning flamenco and classical techniques. It was this mountain I wanted to climb, and the only way to do it was through baby steps.

“Whether you want to learn a different style of playing or not, the important thing is that you can't give into your fear. If you're trying something new or difficult, you can't get freaked out if you suck at first. Keep

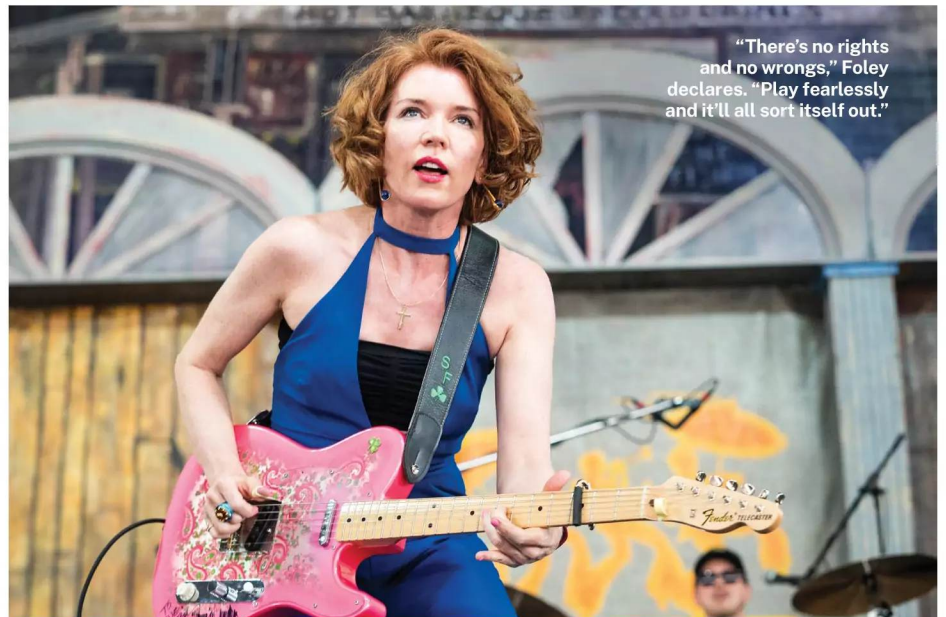
going. In a way, you have to be honest and sort of embrace your suckiness. Say to yourself, Okay, I really

suck at this, but I'm not going to stop. Each day you'll be a little bit better, and one day you'll be able to say, Hey, I don't suck anymore.”

5 SPEAK THROUGH YOUR INSTRUMENT

“Music is a conversation, and if you're a guitar player, you're speaking through your instrument. Think about it: If you're having a conversation with somebody, are you just going to blather all over them and yell at them? That's not a very effective way of communicating. Better to sit back and wait until it's your turn to speak, and when you do, try to add something meaningful to the exchange.

“If you try to adopt this attitude, you're going to find that you don't have to say everything all at once to make a point. Jimmie Vaughan once told me, ‘Solos are like little paragraphs in a story.’ That's a lesson I took with me, and it's guided me through the years. I don't need to blather on in my solos. If I have something to say, I'll say it. If I don't, I won't. If I perform a ballad that just requires me to play a melody, is that really so bad? I think not. That's what I need to add to the conversation.”





Ciari founder Jonathan Spangler holds the original prototype for the company's folding guitar.

FOLDED GLORY

With its innovative technology and updated Ascender model, **Ciari Guitars** is rising high as the industry's premier travel guitar maker.

BY ART THOMPSON

"I INVENTED IT because I wanted it," says Jonathan Spangler, founder and CEO of Ciari Guitars, talking about the creation of his Ascender line of folding-neck electrics. As a musician and an attorney whose job mandated extensive travel, Spangler needed a full-sized guitar that could fit into the space afforded most airline passengers — under the seat. His solution was a stealthy, collapsible guitar worthy of MI5

technology, featuring a patented mid-neck hinge and a concealed actuator lever on the back that unlocks the hinge, loosens the strings to three pounds of tension and allows the guitar to fold in half. When ready for action, the neck is unfolded and the actuator lever solidly locks everything in place, with the strings fully tensioned and needing only some tuning tweaks to be readied for play.

Spangler's journey into guitar making was unorthodox, to say the least, and began while he was working as a patent attorney for a Southern California medical-device firm that focused on spine surgery. "We unleashed a technology and an approach to the spine that had been deemed impossible before," Spangler says. "That was immensely rewarding, and in about 15 years we went from two million in sales to almost a billion. As we're talking, I'm looking at a jersey that [NBA Hall of Fame player] Bill Walton signed for me. He was one of our patient-ambassadors who said in no uncertain terms 'I was figuring out when and how to commit suicide because I was in so much back pain.' So to change people's lives and give them their life back, how do you put a price tag on that?"

Going from medical technology to guitar making is quite a leap. How did it come about?

We designed backward from my idea for a guitar that I didn't have to check at the airport. I wanted to have just two things I'm traveling with: my clothes and one personal item — meaning my guitar, my computer and headphones — and I didn't want to check anything else. So we started with that requirement and engineered our way to make it so.

You were obviously aware of other folding-neck guitars. Tell us about the approach you took with the Ascender.

I did survey the other options and certainly the Voyage Air [folding-neck acoustic] was one, but it didn't solve what I wanted because it can't fit under the seat. Then there was the way it folds into the playing position, toward the front of the guitar, so the strings go everywhere. So string management was also something we sought to solve with the Ascender. I've always said that sometimes it's better not to be first. It's better to come into an area and improve upon the baseline offerings.

How does your folding system differ from other designs?

Our folding system is really two things in combination. You have the mid-neck hinge and the actuator, which is what locks and unlocks the hinge and releases and tightens



The new Ascender — shown front, back and folded — is offered in different colors and pickup configurations.

style that's used in the Standard, Standard Plus, P90 and Duo. For the foreseeable future that will be our main body style, and I think it's a good-looking axe.

The new headstock looks more traditional.

Yes, it's an asymmetrical left-to-right moving wave. It's so hard to fashion something new in a headstock so I was happy when Bob Taylor congratulated me for our unique presentation.

So as it stands, you have six models including a three-pickup model on the horizon. What else do you have planned?

The yet-unnamed Ascender three-pickup model will address the needs of Fender players and keep furthering the brand, because it's not just a great travel guitar; it's a great guitar that travels. We're also working with Joe Glaser on a tremolo system. It's easier said than done given all the other moving parts, and we'll go wider and deeper on electrics before we shift into acoustic and bass.

Where are the guitars made?

The fingerboards and necks come from our shop in Nashville, and we're starting to get some second sourcing from other places — Mexico in particular because I'm in San Diego. Our hinges and actuators are international, so we say Nashville-crafted, because we use components sourced from here and abroad.

What's the origin of the name Ciari?

The radio-friendly version is it's a combination of *cirrus* — the high, wispy

clouds — and *aria*, for melody. The real story is that when we first launched, we got blowback from the name, which was an acronym for "Cock It And Rock It." I found out at the NAMM show early on that some people found it very polarizing. I had an artist who tried the guitar and loved it, but when he heard "cock it and rock it," he goes "I'm so disappointed," and he turned and walked away. I thought, Are you kidding me? Of all the challenges I have, you're offended by my playful way of explaining the mechanism! 🎸

the strings. Between those two, by far and away, the most critical is the mid-neck hinge. If we want this full-size guitar to fit under a seat, it has to fold in the neck. That's what drives the sizing in the folded state to be a personal item. It's been said that we over-engineered our system, but thank god we did, because it has to come back to baseline each and every time. It needed to be extremely robust, so it's made of 7075 aircraft-grade aluminum that is hard anodized, and then we added two carbon-steel strike plates that form the abutment joints, so when the 12th fret and the 14th fret come back together it always comes back to the exact same point each and every time.

Was real-world testing involved to see how it would stand up?

Well, there's a guy on YouTube named Justin Johnson who, for effect, would throw open the Ascender's neck like it was a shotgun, and it actually deformed the aluminum. He was like, "Watch this" — *whack!* So we had to fortify the design to ensure that even rough treatment would not impact the ability for this thing to be long-term robust. We've evolved in concert with [Nashville luthier] Joe Glaser, who has been a vital friend and ally through this whole process, so now we have these two hardened-steel strike plates that are adjustable in a center link of the three-part hinge. Our system rises and falls on that hinge, so that's why we over-engineered it. Now that the pandemic is over and music is back in venues, we have the right product when it's most needed because the Ascender is being played on stages worldwide.

The actuator that locks and unlocks the neck is another key element of the system.

How does it operate?

There's probably 50 different ways you can release a tailpiece and have it float on springs longitudinally, so to have it lock and unlock you have to move it about two inches. We evolved from a side lever to the new one that is more like an airplane throttle.

The look of the guitar has also evolved right along with the mechanism.

If you look at the Ascender Custom, which was our original body style, the upper bout was a tip of a hat to the Tele and the lower bout a tip to the Les Paul, but we were very careful not to run afoul of the trademark rights of Gibson and Fender. We wanted to be non-controversial on the body style because we were being so controversial with the back. People would say the mechanism was intimidating. So for that reason we wanted to be middle-of-the-road on the body style. But the look was too blasé. No one ever said "Damn that's a good-looking guitar." It was always, "Holy crap, that thing folds!"

How did you go about updating the Ascender's appearance?

Joe Glaser brought Grover Jackson into the mix and I asked them what would change if this was your guitar? The list was, like, 40 different things they would tweak and modify, and thank god they did because that's why we're north of 300 percent in Q1 of '24 over '23. So it was a focused and intentional exercise in making this thing as good as it can be. Grover said "Your guitar has to be sexy." So that's how we got to what is now the Ascender Standard body

"OUR SYSTEM RISES AND FALLS ON THAT HINGE, SO THAT'S WHY WE OVER-ENGINEERED IT"



Steve Hunter and Alice Cooper perform at the Alexandra Palace, London, October 29, 2011.

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

What does the Forrest Gump of rock call his best work? **Steve Hunter** picked this handful of tracks.

BY GARY GRAFF

THE MAN KNOWN as the Deacon has released plenty of his own music — a total of eight albums, including this year's *The Deacon Speaks*. But Steve Hunter's greatest fame comes from playing nice with others on a résumé of collaborations. He's been a member of Mitch Ryder's 1970s band Detroit, toured and recorded with Lou Reed, Alice Cooper and Tracy Chapman, and performed session work for Aerosmith, Peter Dinklage, David Lee Roth, Flo & Eddie, Leslie West, Glen Campbell, Jason Becker, Jack Bruce, Dr. John, Tommy Henriksen and many others.

"I always just saw myself as a guitar player in a session, or with a band," Hunter explains. The native of Decatur, Illinois, was inspired to play guitar from watching *The*

Lawrence Welk Show as a child and actually learned to play lap steel before moving on to a standard axe. His musical fluidity served him well in session work. "I would have to find something that fit the music, that fit the song, that fit the band," he says. "That was my job. I never went in with a preconceived notion, although sometimes the producer had an idea of what was wanted. But most of the time I was left to my own devices to come up with stuff, which is part of the reason I loved doing it. It was always different."

Hunter added a new wrinkle on *The Deacon Speaks*, however. He hadn't sung on a recording since 1977, but while working up an instrumental rendition of Willie Dixon's "Back Door Man," Hunter began singing the

lyrics and "found it a lot of fun to sing those words," he says. "It felt really good." It also sounded good enough for him to commit to singing most of the album's 10 songs, including his own "The Ballad of John Henry Gates," about his grandfather, and "Independent Soul," which was written by his wife, Karen. "The funny thing is that I've played behind singers, so I already knew how to do that. But here I was now, doing it for me, which was a whole new thing."

The Deacon Speaks includes three other Hunter originals as well as favorites from Jimi Hendrix ("Up From the Skies"), Bill Withers ("Who Is He and What Is He to You"), the Rolling Stones ("Waiting on a Friend") and, appropriately, Reed ("Sweet Jane"). And it's provided a welcome opportunity to let Hunter offer insight into five of those past collaborations that he's best known for.

"ROCK & ROLL" DETROIT — DETROIT (1971)



"When I first joined Mitch Ryder's Detroit, I didn't even know they were scheduled to do an album or had been signed. I just joined thinking we were

FUTURE/KEVIN NIXON

gonna tour and stuff. And, of course, that's how I met [producer] Bob Ezrin, while making that album. I wasn't much of a writer yet, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, so

I just kept my mouth shut and played guitar.

"Mitch had said something about a Lou Reed tune he would like to do called 'Rock & Roll,' but he said he would like to rock it up a little more, so I took that in. One night, I went to see Mountain play at Detroit's Eastown Theatre, and I was completely blown away. When I got home, I was pretty amped up and couldn't go to sleep, so I thought I'd have another listen to that Lou Reed tune. And the first thought that came to my mind was, I wonder how Mountain would do this song?"

"That's when the arrangement started to come together. I got that opening riff and the whole arrangement just came out of that thought. Many years later I met Leslie West and he said, 'You know, I can't tell you how many times people came up to me and said, 'Hey man, we really like your new single, 'Rock & Roll!''" [laughs] They thought it was Mountain, which is really funny. It made me feel like I was on the right track if it would fool people like that.

"Lou Reed actually heard our version of it as background music to a commercial for a drag-strip track somewhere on Long Island.

"I ENDED UP WORKING WITH LOU REED BECAUSE HE HEARD OUR VERSION OF A LOU REED SONG"

He said, 'Oh man, what's that? I love that!' So he tracked it down and found out who produced it and who had played guitar on it, and about a year and a half or so later Bob Ezrin contacted

me and said, 'Lou Reed wants me to produce his next album [1973's *Berlin*] and he'd really like you to play on it.' So the whole thing came full circle. I ended up working with Lou Reed because he heard our version of a Lou Reed song."

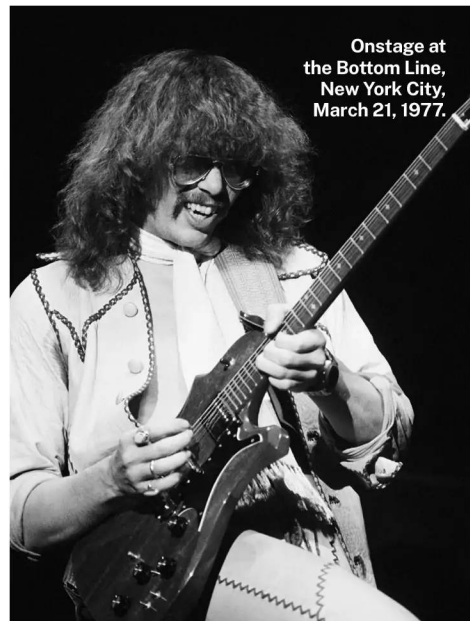
"BILLION DOLLAR BABIES" ALICE COOPER — *BILLION DOLLAR BABIES* (1973)



"Bob [Ezrin] called me up and said, 'I want you to do some overdubs on Alice Cooper's next record,' which was *Billion Dollar Babies*. I thought, Great!

because I knew we were gonna be in the Record Plant, which was my favorite studio. So I flew in, checked into the hotel and went right to the studio at, like, 10 or 11 at night. At the time I was using an SG, possibly through a Marshall amp.

"Bob said, 'Here's the first one I want you to play on,' which was 'Sick Things.' He said, 'At the end of this I'd just like some Clapton



rock blues.' It worked really well, and I just kept that thought through the remainder of the tracks I worked on, including the next song we did, which was 'Billion Dollar Babies.' [Alice Cooper guitarist] Michael Bruce played one solo, then I played the next solo and we kind of traded off through the song, and I ended up playing the solo at the very end.

"What was so cool was that I wasn't sure what to play for any of their songs at first. But then I realized, If you can find the blues in a song, you can play a solo anywhere. That's worked throughout my whole career."

"INTRO/SWEET JANE" LOU REED — *ROCK 'N' ROLL ANIMAL* (1974)



"I had worked on this intro thing for a few years, believe it or not. I started writing it when I was with Mitch Ryder and never got very far. Maybe

halfway through it. I thought, Maybe this is just an exercise or something, and kept putting it on the back burner. I even played it with the Chambers Brothers. I was with them for about a month or so and we used it as part of an intro for them — but not quite all of it, as it was still going through changes. Then I put it on the shelf again and forgot about it.

"I didn't think about it again until we were rehearsing with Lou for the tour that produced the *Rock 'n' Roll Animal* live album. I think it was the manager who said, 'We need you guys to jam on something so Lou can make his entrance.' I told Dick Wagner, who was the musical director, 'I've got this

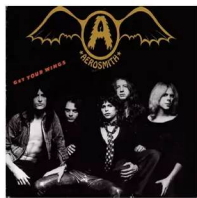




Hunter performs at Vredenburg in Utrecht, Netherlands, May 1, 1989.

piece. See what you think.' So I showed it to the band and we played it down, and it sounded fabulous. And that became the intro to 'Sweet Jane.' Of course 'Sweet Jane' was first recorded for the Velvet Underground's [1970] *Loaded* album. But for a lot of people who first heard 'Sweet Jane' on *Rock 'n' Roll Animal*, it's how the song is supposed to begin."

"TRAIN KEPT A-ROLLIN'" AEROSMITH — GET YOUR WINGS (1974)



"I was in New York City working with Bob Ezrin in the Record Plant. Bob was in the big room, which was Studio A, and he was editing the two-inch

tape, which is very tedious, very scary. You could screw it up, and then you're fucked, basically. So I left him alone and went out into the lobby to have a cigarette. And right across from me is the door to Studio C, which is the smaller studio. And the door opens and it's [producer] Jack Douglas. He looks at me and says, 'You feel like playing?' I said, 'I'd rather play than sit here.' He said, 'Okay, let me go ask Bob if it's okay if I borrow you.' So he went to talk to Bob and he said okay. So I grabbed our favorite amp, which was an old Fender tweed, and brought it into Studio C.

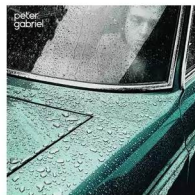
"I walked in, following him, and there was the whole band. It was all of Aerosmith. So I said hi, and we all shook hands — no big to-do or anything, just, 'Hi, how're you

doing?' I remember distinctly meeting Brad [Whitford], because he was a really nice fella. Joe [Perry] was very quiet, and Steve Tyler was kinda crazy and full of energy. But they were really cool guys. I liked them. I really didn't know how to act. As far as I was concerned, I was just there because Jack Douglas wanted me to play a solo. It wasn't weird, and I never got any bad vibes off of anybody. They all seemed kinda tired, like they had been working really hard to finish the album. But I never got any kind of vibe about whether they liked me being there or not.

"So Jack set me up in the studio, plugged me in and got this great guitar sound. I put the headphones on and asked him just to play the track so I could get used to it. I was noodling, just to find my way around, when Jack said, 'This is gonna be great, man, but you're stepping on the vocals.' And I said, 'Well, I don't have vocals in my headphones.'

"So he fixed that and we did one or two passes, and Jack says, 'Okay, that sounds great!' I thought I was just getting warmed up, but they were very happy, and that was it. We took the amp back to studio A and I went and finished my cigarette. And the next thing you know, it's getting airplay all over the world. I thought, Wow, that's good!"

"SOLSBURY HILL" PETER GABRIEL — PETER GABRIEL (1977)



"'Solsbury Hill' was one of the most interesting sessions for me. We were doing the album and apparently Peter was having some trouble with a couple of lines of lyrics in 'Solsbury Hill' [Bob Ezrin was unhappy with Gabriel's original last line of the chorus], so we kept putting it off. It ended up being the last song we recorded. I didn't even know if we were going to record it. But apparently he came up with a couple of lines that he loved, and so did Bob, so we recorded it.

"I remember Bob and Peter took me into Bob's office at Nimbus 9 Studio up in Toronto. Peter played it for me on the piano,

"IF YOU CAN FIND THE BLUES IN A SONG, YOU CAN PLAY A SOLO ANYWHERE"

and I realized it was in an odd meter, which petrified me, because I'd never played in an odd meter before, other than 5/4. [The song is mostly in 7/4

but uses 4/4 for the last two measures of the chorus.] But I thought it was an amazing song. You could tell right away just from the piano and the vocal.

"Bob said, 'I have this idea. I thought we could do some Travis picking on this, with acoustic guitars. He showed me what he was looking for, because he plays guitar, so between he, Peter and I, we worked out the guitar part. Again, I was petrified, 'cause now I had to play Travis picking and adjust it to play in 7/4, and I wasn't sure I was gonna be able to do that. But the song is so well written that when I sat down to work out the guitar part, it just sort of fell under my fingers, and it really wasn't a burden.

"I recorded three acoustic guitars playing the same thing. The first was recorded at normal speed, and we changed the speed of the tape a tiny bit slower and faster for the other two takes to get a very small difference in tuning. When you hear the three of them together, it's this beautiful chorus effect. It was a fabulous thing, and probably one of the most difficult things I had done up to then. But it was really good for me to do it, and I'm really, really proud of that song." ■



Hunter onstage with Peter Gabriel in New York City, March 1977.

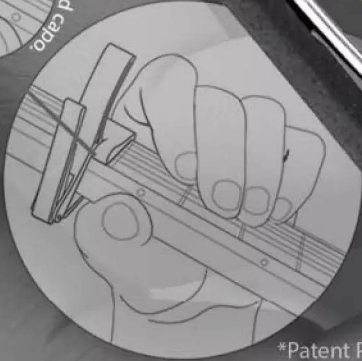
FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS (77); MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES (GABRIEL)



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The early Dean Z came from the initial order Sam Ash placed with the young company.

Dean's List

As domestic guitar makers earned failing grades, Dean rose to the head of the class with models like this 1977 Z Standard.

"THIS IS THE future of the guitar!"

That's what many guitarists thought upon first seeing a Dean guitar in the late 1970s. What most of us didn't know was that the revolutionary instruments from Dean's earliest years were designed and built by a teenage upstart whose mastery of quality manufacturing surpassed his years.

Precision engineering clearly ran in Dean Zelinsky's blood, as did the desire to create guitars that rocked hard. He was born in Chicago in 1957, the second of three sons of Robert Zelinsky, whose company manufactured custom fasteners, some of which were used on NASA spacecraft. After his father died in a crash while

piloting his own small plane when Dean was just 12 years old, the future luthier indulged an obsession with Gibson's Modernist Series guitars of the late '50s and the variations and reissues that followed. Rather than copy those models, he put his own spin on them, often adding Gibson-like features and giving the angular bodies striking flamed-maple tops and sunburst finishes, which had come into vogue as players began to appreciate the glories of late-1950s Les Paul "Bursts."

TRIPLE THREAT

Together with friends in marketing and manufacturing, Zelinsky pulled together a lineup of models by the end of '76. These went into production to make their debut at the next NAMM show, on January 21, 1977, a full month before Zelinsky's 20th birthday. They included the V, which unsurprisingly took inspiration from the Flying V; the ML, named in honor of a high school friend who had died of cancer not long before; and — the model shown here — the Z, which followed the approximate shape of Gibson's Explorer. All had V-shaped headstocks loosely inspired by Gibson's mythical Futura model.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- Distinctive angular Explorer-inspired shape
- Split-V (a.k.a. dove wing) headstock shape
- Solid mahogany body and neck, figured-maple top
- Ebony fingerboard
- Dean asymmetrical-V string plate
- Dual DiMarzio Super Distortion humbucking pickups

And by all accounts they blew the roof off the NAMM show, even though some examples suffered from finish checking after enduring a freezing three-day drive from Chicago to Anaheim in Zelinsky's heat-challenged Chevy van. Jerry Ash, then the owner of Sam Ash's seven-store national chain, was impressed enough to place an order with the young company.

OF THE FIRST ORDER

The pristine Z Standard shown here is one of those guitars. Gary Brody, its original and current owner, purchased it new on September 24, 1977, at the Sam Ash store



Dean's V-shaped headstocks were loosely inspired by Gibson's mythical Futura model.

BY DAVE HUNTER



line is these early units were made by any means necessary, meaning they used whatever parts were available, and some features changed and evolved as the process moved along. My guess is no two were made exactly the same. Something was always being tweaked.”

EARLY ADOPTERS

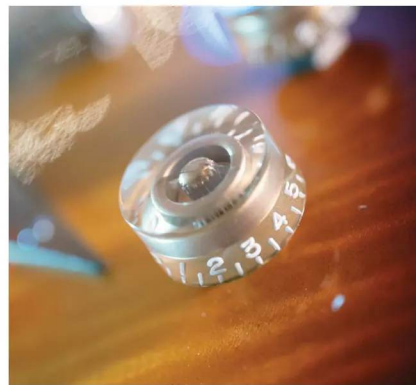
Dean guitars caught on fast with the heavy-rock crowd of the late '70s and early '80s. In addition to the production models bought by then-current and future stars — a young Dimebag Darrell acquired two in 1981 when he was just 15 years old — Zelinsky made custom guitars for several others, including the fur-covered guitar and bass played by Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill in ZZ Top's iconic “Legs” video.

Dean Guitars gathered a growing roster of star players, with Michael Schenker, Dave Mustaine, the guitarists from Kansas and Molly Hatchet, and Elliot Easton of the Cars among them. As for Zelinsky, he sold the business in 1991 to focus on raising a family with his wife, former *Playboy*

Playmate Suzi Schott, whom he'd met while hiring models to grace the Dean Guitars booths at trade shows. The brand went through a number of successive owners over the years

as Zelinsky formed a couple of new companies to get back into the business again on his own terms, first DBZ Guitars and then Dean Zelinsky Private Label.

But nearly 50 years after making their debut, original Dean guitars from the early years of manufacture are reminders of a time when rock was king and the guitar of the future was waiting down at your local music store. ■



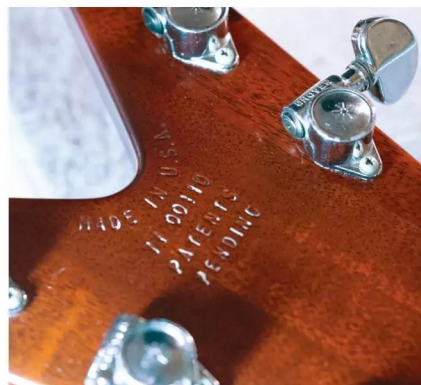
The set-neck Z Standard is made with a neck and body of solid mahogany, the former with an ebony fingerboard and the latter topped with figured-maple finished in Brazilburst, a rich tobacco sunburst color named by Dean's original marketing director, Zan Skolnick. The guitar was built to a scale length of 24 ½ inches (rather than the standard Gibson-like 24 ¾ inches) and sports a

fingerboard radius of 15 inches and a width of 1 ⅝ inches at the nut. Shallow neck depths of .7901 inches at the first fret and just .8499 inches at the 12th further support the premise

that it was designed for shred-certified speed. The same goes for the pickups, a pair of DiMarzio's popular Super Distortion humbuckers, made with powerful ceramic magnets and measuring a little over 12k ohms resistance in each position.

“While researching what I could about early Deans, it was almost impossible to find the exact same information from any two sources,” Brody reports. “The bottom

“THESE EARLY UNITS WERE MADE BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY, WITH WHATEVER PARTS WERE AVAILABLE”



in Hempstead, Long Island, New York. It carries the serial number 770110, indicating it is the 10th commercial unit produced by Dean (Zelinsky reportedly kept the first, a V, for himself).

“As the Hempstead location was Ash's flagship store, this was most likely the first Dean they brought in,” Brody says. “At the time, Hamer, who started the Explorer revolution, had a price tag of two grand. No way! Then these affordable guitars came out at a fraction of the cost, but they were still a lot of money for a young kid. I traded in two '70s Fender Tele Customs and paid cash to get it.”

BY JIM CAMPILONGO



Winning Hand

Lemmy, “Fast” Eddie and Phil upped the ante for hardcore rock on **Motörhead’s** *Ace of Spades*.

RELEASED IN 1980, *Ace of Spades* features the original Motörhead lineup of Lemmy Kilmister on bass and vocals, “Fast” Eddie Clarke on guitars and Phil “Philthy Animal” Taylor on drums. Many think this is a great record. Me? I think it’s one of the best rock albums ever made. Aside from the addictive quality of the music, Motörhead make the Rolling Stones sound like wimps and AC/DC like deep thinkers. Even the Ramones, monolithic as they were, would have probably rejected an offer to follow their set. Motörhead were the last word in non-punk guitar-based rock music. I mean c’mon —their drummer was nicknamed Philthy Animal!

Lemmy strums his distorted Rickenbacker bass with a pick, making it sound at times like a baritone guitar. “Fast” Eddie plays just the facts as he commits to wringing out the pentatonic blues scale for everything it’s worth.

His licks and solos are like short stories rushing to the point. Through it all, Phil plays drums like it’s his final moments on Earth. And Isn’t that what we want from a rock drummer? Last but not least, Lemmy’s throaty vocals and keen lyrics add a character that’s of a piece with the music’s attitude and raucous character.

Side one opens with the title track, a hit with a flat-five blues hook. The arrangement, performance, the mix... everything is perfect. As Lemmy sings “Playing for the high one, dancing with the devil / Going with the flow, it’s all a game



NOTHING LASTS FOREVER, BUT *ACE OF SPADES* MAKES EVERYTHING SEEM PRETTY DAMN GOOD RIGHT NOW

to me,” the music builds to an avalanche on its way to the chorus. I long for him to sing “the ace of spades” more than twice, but since he doesn’t, I have to play the track again, and again. It’s followed by “Love Me Like a Reptile,” a no-bullshit song of desire that leads us into “Shoot You in the Back,” whose lyrics read like a spaghetti western: “Your own life cuts you like a knife / The

rider wearing black / He’s gonna, he’s gonna shoot you in the back.” Eddie contributes a great wah solo here, too. The relentless pace continues with “Live to Win,” which re-assembles everything we’ve

heard Motörhead do before into something new. “Fast and Loose” and “(We Are) The Road Crew” are pure Motörhead, delivered by a band you know has lived every word.

Side two opens with “Fire, Fire,” another showstopper, featuring group shout-outs, an inspired drum break and some shredding that makes the song exactly what I want to hear from Motörhead. The

unapologetic “Jailbait” is a powerhouse tune whose memorable couplets include “I don’t care about our different ages / I’m an open book with well-thumbed pages.” “Dance,” “Bite the Bullet,” “The Chase Is Better Than the Catch” and “The Hammer” close the record with the relentlessness of a cheetah chasing down its quarry.

Granted, every Motörhead song has the same elements. Lemmy usually sings with a lovely distortion, favoring the minor third. Eddie plays a lot of second-generation Chuck Berry licks over songs that are rooted in the one, the minor third, the flat seven and major-fourth chord progressions, while Phil drives the band with the gas pedal floored. But I’m not complaining, Motörhead hit the spot every time.

Here I am at the ripe age of 66 writing about a record that came out 44 years ago. While Lemmy sang “I don’t want to live forever,” Motörhead make me rejoice that I’m still living. I know nothing lasts forever, but *Ace of Spades* makes everything seem pretty damn good right now. 🃏

Look for Jim Campilongo 4TET’s new album, *She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show* and read our feature on page 58.



BY TERRY CARLETON

Swede Charity

Designed for one guitarist's unique needs, this **1990 Swede** is built for comfort, not speed.

CUSTOM GUITARS CAN be odd instruments, designed to perform to the unique needs of their original owners. Consider the one shown here, made by Lloyd Johnson of Costa Mesa, California, who died in 2015. Known simply as Swede, he was an avid sailor, musician, inventor and model maker. After an accident that shortened two of his fingers, Swede designed this guitar to allow him to form chords more easily.

His friends Skip Allan and Cristine F. Todd told me how Swede loved to race his 20-foot sloop, and how he twice crewed on the winner of the Transpac Yacht Race from Los Angeles to Hawaii, with his guitar in tow. He also built

radio-controlled scale-model race boats to teach the art and craft of sailing, and designed electronics to advance sailboat racing.

But the Swede story I like most takes place during Hollywood's Golden Age. As Skip tells me, "Movie stars befriended Swede to help them with their yachts. Humphrey Bogart and his future wife, Lauren Bacall, were close friends with Swede, and he made sails for their fleet of boats, including

Bogie's beautiful, 55-foot yawl, *Santana*."

In 1945, Bacall commissioned Swede to build a scale model of *Santana*. Notably, his model was the only thing present as director John Huston gave Bogart's eulogy in 1957.

WEIRDO FACTOR

Nearly everything about this guitar is designed for function. The headless padauk neck meets the body at the 10th fret to accommodate Swede's shortened fingers, and the tuners are behind the bridge so he could have easier access to them. The bowl-shaped back, made from 15 strips of padauk, helps project the sound and positions the guitar to Swede's requirements. And with a spruce top that's 18 inches side to side, this guitar is huge.

PLAYABILITY & SOUND

For such a large instrument, it's a joy to play. It's a strummer for sure, but chords are easy, and it has a big warm sound. The neck is on the wide side, like a Gretsch acoustic, but the action is low and smooth.

VALUE

Since Swede's passing, this guitar has been handed down and around until it found a good resting place. I paid for it with a donation to the Inverness Yacht Club Youth Sailing program, one of Skip Allan and Swede's favorite causes.

WHY IT RULES

Like the Red Violin portrayed in the movie of the same name, this guitar seems to dictate what you'll do with it. When I first picked it up, for some reason I played "In My Life" by the Beatles, a song that, fittingly, is about friends, lovers, traveling, living and dying.

Thanks to Skip Allan and Cristine F. Todd for the stories and, of course, the guitar! Visit and/or donate to the Youth Program at invernessyachtclub.com/program-information.

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



AT LAST

IT'S TAKEN BRIAN Ray 50 years to put out his first album, but the 69-year-old has a good excuse. After all, he's spent that time on the road and in the studio working for and with some of music's greatest artists. That includes stints as Etta James' musical director and — his best-known gig — as Paul McCartney's longtime bassist and guitarist.

But at last (to quote James' signature tune), Ray has gotten around to putting his own music first, and the result is *My Town* (Wicked Cool Records), a star-studded package that reflects not only his years of experience and knowledge but also a number of famous friends he's made over the years. Although as Ray explains, perhaps none of this would have come to pass were it not for the woman who gave him his first big break.

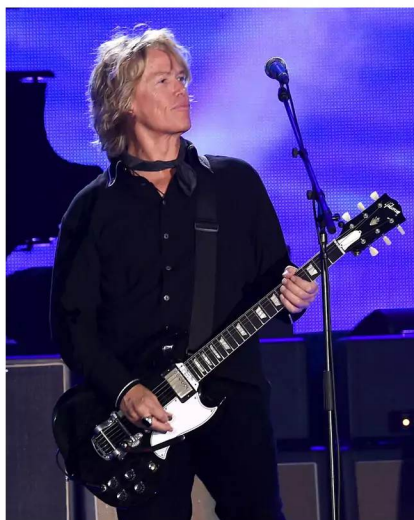
"When I first got with Etta James, I had just turned 18 and was a little blond greenhorn from Glendale, California," he tells *Guitar Player*. "Yet she took me in and kept me by her side for 15 years. We went from playing a cinderblock chitlin circuit blues gig in Colorado Springs to suddenly opening arenas and stadiums for the Rolling Stones from 1978 through 1980."

After James, Ray recorded with Smokey Robinson, Crystal Lewis, Rita Coolidge and Shakira, experiences that he treasures to this day. "If wealth were measured by talented friendships," Ray says, "I'd be the richest man on earth."

Indeed, life is what you make it, and often your relationships define all the above. To that end, when Ray looks back, his earliest days beside James register as the most critical. "She offered me the experience of a lifetime," he says, "without which I may not have been the right guy for Paul McCartney those many years later. Etta had a great phrase. She said, 'Brian, you've got to call on the warriors within!' I believe she meant

After 50 years as a sideman to artists like Etta James and Paul McCartney, **Brian Ray** takes center stage with his solo debut album. What took so long?

BY ANDREW DALY



access that primal fire in your belly and play from there."

That's good advice, and to Ray's (and James') point, he's been leaning into it hard since joining Paul McCartney's band in 2002. As a member of that ensemble, he's tackled the musical legend's catalog — from the Beatles to Wings and his solo efforts — with staunch musicality.

And sure, McCartney is a whiz on bass, guitar, piano and drums, and a songwriter for the ages. But what sticks out most for Ray is the person behind the songs. "He is a human so full of joy and song," Ray reveals. "He's always whistling a tune or patting out a rhythm, and his eyes often search the room as if he's writing something in his mind, looking for a rhyme or a riff."

Now, however, Ray is showing his own side as a songwriter and frontman with *My Town*. As he explains, none of it came easy. "This record is a culmination of seven years of inspiration, brainstorming, dead ends, rabbit holes and breakthroughs," he says. Most of

the songs originated as singles for *Little Steven's Underground Garage*, the SiriusXM rock and soul channel that focuses largely on garage-rock music of the '60s.

And while Ray plans to hit the road with McCartney soon enough, he has plans to support *My Town* too. And he has a yet-to-be-announced, kinda-sorta secret side gig in the pipeline, too. But for now, he's digging on the good vibes and sense of accomplishment of clearing one more career hurdle. "And after all that? Your guess is as good as mine," Ray offers. "But if it's anywhere near the last 50 years, it can't be too bad."

The songs on *My Town* go back quite a few years.

My Town started with a solo-artist singles deal at Wicked Cool Records in 2017, after a great run as part of the Bayonets, my band with [guitarist/producer] Oliver Leiber. Dennis Mortensen of Wicked Cool Records reached out to say that Steven Van Zandt wanted to offer a way to get my songs out there by releasing two vinyl singles a year, for a total of four songs. I loved that idea, as it left plenty of time to tour and record with Paul.

To your point, you've been a sideman for a long time. What moved the needle toward wanting to write songs for yourself?

My late sister Jean Ray was a songwriter, and I've been intrigued by songcraft since I was seven or eight. I've also written for others and had a big hit with a song I wrote for Smokey Robinson called "One



“WITHOUT ETTA JAMES, RAY SAYS, “I MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN THE RIGHT GUY FOR PAUL McCARTNEY”

Heartbeat" [from Robinson's 1987 album of the same name], which I re-imagined and included on *My Town*. It's easier for me to sing a song about a subject I want to talk about than to figure out what other people might want to sing.

What was the first song from this set that presented itself, and when did you know you were onto something?

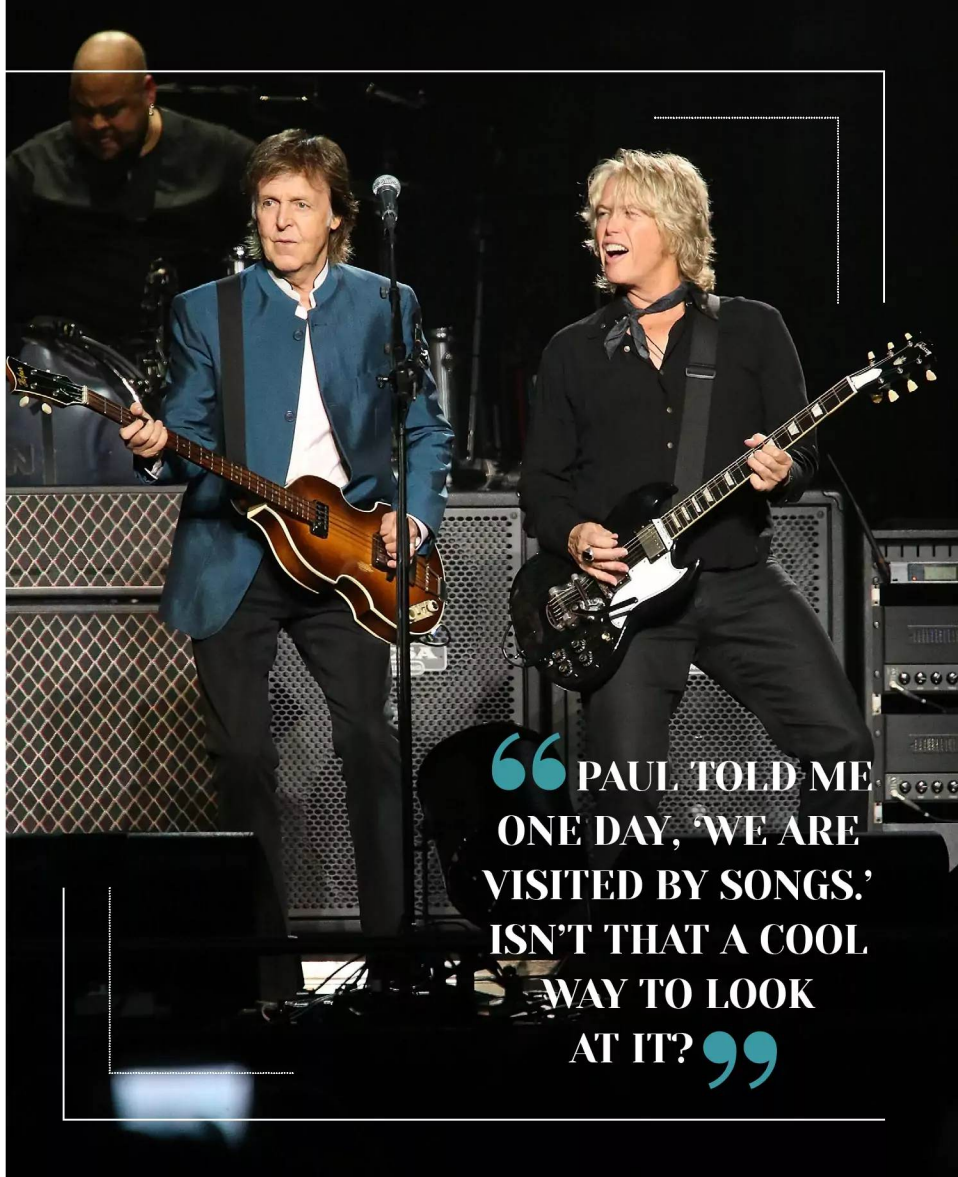
My first single for Wicked Cool Records was "Here for You," which was a great way to start. It's a song filled with hope for the future, written for my son James and his brother John. As for when I knew I was onto something, it was when Stevie and Dennis came to me after the first release. They told me they would love to hear me try some soul-influenced garage rock for my next single, and I came up with my Smokey Robinson cover. That's when I knew I was onto something.

Do you have a tried-and-true process for guitar tracking and dialing in your sound?

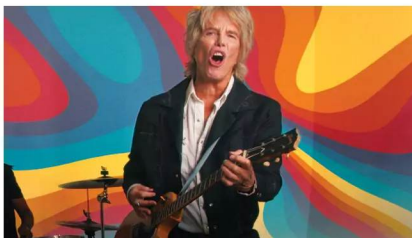
I usually picture the guitar sound that I'm going for in my mind. Before I even plug in a guitar, I try to define what that sound is that I'm hearing. Is it a Les Paul Junior through an old Marshall? Is it a Telecaster through a Vox AC30, or is it an old Teisco Del Rey through a Fender amp? I learned that as a producer: You "cast" your instruments like the actors in a film, and each brings a character to the overall sonic stage.

Going way back to the start of your career, you were the musical director for the great Etta James. I have to imagine that laid the groundwork for a lot of what you're able to accomplish now.

Anyone who saw Etta James perform live in the '70s and '80s can tell you that she was a singular singer and performer. She had such a great range, both vocally and emotionally. She could reach into your chest, pull out your heart, hold it up, and say, "Isn't that beautiful?" And then, put it back in your chest and kiss you on the forehead. Then she could turn around, kick off her shoes, rip into a rocker, and tear your eyebrows off with her blues-rock ferocity.



“PAUL TOLD ME ONE DAY, ‘WE ARE VISITED BY SONGS.’ ISN’T THAT A COOL WAY TO LOOK AT IT?”



How has playing alongside Paul McCartney impacted you in terms of guitar and songwriting?

Well, it goes without saying that Paul McCartney is the master of so many things. He's rock and roll's finest singer, bass player, producer and arranger, to say nothing of his stellar songwriting. There is no way a musician can spend as much time around Paul as I have and not get some of that on you. [laughs]

What's the biggest lesson you've learned from Paul over the past 22 years?

Paul told me one day, "We are visited by

songs." Isn't that a cool way to look at it? Inspiration through music, rhythm, lyrics and harmony is being sent to us like little aliens in UFOs. It's up to us as artists to be available and document it.

How does your approach change from when you're playing with Paul to when you're working solo?

Learning to play bass and having the guts to stand next to Paul while doing so was a challenge and honor. I didn't even look up for the first six months for fear of losing my place, because he's Paul freakin' McCartney!

And how about your gear?

As far as gear goes, I consider the original recording of whichever song we are learning and I do my best to approximate the role of that acoustic, electric, 12-string or bass guitar. Then I just try to get as close as possible to that with my own instruments, amps and effect pedals.

Do you have any always-on pedals or keys to your tone?

I don't rely on pedals too much in live shows with Paul. They're called effect pedals because I'll switch something on and off for effect. I play through two Divided by 13 BTR23 heads, set slightly different from each other. I'll use my volume and tone controls on the guitar and play dynamically with my hands.

I click on various drive pedals for solos, a midrange EQ for some of the old Beatles material, a delay here or there, or a Leslie or tremolo, as needed. While on bass, I play with old Fender basses and Ashdown Amps and a few effects when needed.

Are there one or two guitars that mean the most and inspire you?

My forever number one guitar is my



1957 Gibson Les Paul goldtop, which I purchased for \$850 in 1973 from my sister's boyfriend. That guitar looks like it's been ridden hard and put up wet because it has. The weather checking, missing finish and general wear are pretty impressive. The belt rash on the back is the size of Africa.

How did you decide who to have as guests on *My Town*?

I asked Smokey Robinson to guest with me because he's such a cool guy and we go back a long way. He came in and gave his all one day, which was magnificent.

I had written a song with my great friend Michael Des Barres called "Spellbreaker," and he said "yes" when asked to offer some of his trademark torn and burnished vocal licks.

Some of my other favorite musicians happen to be longtime friends, such as [bassist] Davey Faragher from Elvis Costello's band, [bassist] Scott Shriner from Weezer and [drummer] Erik Eldenius from Billy Idol. [Drummer] Abe Laboriel Jr. from Paul McCartney's band is also here. Adam MacDougall played fantastic keyboards here and there, and most of them added lots of backing vocals, too.

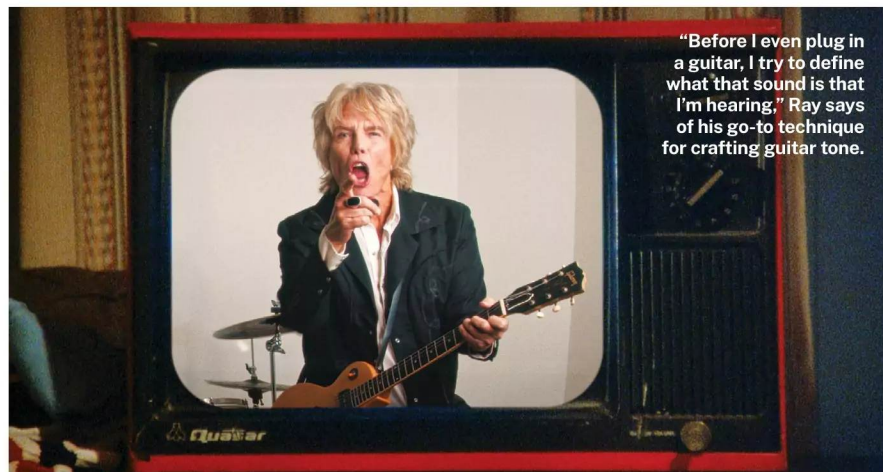


It's clear this record has a personal touch. Which song or songs from *My Town* mean the most to you?

My first single from this batch, "When the Earth Was Round." It's about romance in a post-truth world. We find the singer grieving the end of a recent relationship when his woman got lost in conspiracy theories and cultish thinking. I had a lyric in mind that I thought needed to be written, one which I hadn't heard addressed by anyone else.

What's up next for you in all lanes of your career?

These are the early days for the *My Town* album promotion, and I'm digging it. Soon after I will be heading out on the road again with the inimitable Paul McCartney, starting with dates in South America. There's also a rumor that I will be releasing a single as part of a side project sometime in the near future, so keep your ears peeled in the fall! ■



MAN IN THE MIRROR

He beat his demons and outlived the alt-rock explosion. Now as the original Jane's Addiction lineup reunites for another go, **Dave Navarro** sits down for a candid reflection on his life in music.

BY ANDREW DALY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN NIXON

MAKEUP BY JOAN PEIXOTO

In all likelihood, Dave Navarro was never going to find the world an easy place to fit into. Maybe because, as the child of divorced parents, he was living in two worlds, not one. But through it all, there was one constant: Music.

"Yeah... the family dynamic." Navarro pauses to consider the subject. "My parents were divorced, but music was always playing at both houses. My mom had eclectic taste. She loved funk, which was playing in the house a lot. But my dad loved Gordon Lightfoot, the Carpenters, Jim Croce and stuff like that. I would go from house to house and hear different styles of music. Which made

me wonder why my parents were ever married in the first place."

That split, as much as anything, may explain why Navarro was the perfect fit for Jane's Addiction, whose musical approach and aesthetic were divorced from the trends of their time even while, stylistically, the group fused elements of the dominant genres. Although they arrived on L.A.'s Sunset Strip in the late 1980s, the quartet — Navarro, lead singer Perry Farrell, bassist Eric Avery and drummer Stephen Perkins — was nothing like the fishnet-tights-wearing hair-metal acts dominating the scene. Even among the group's players, there was no congruity of musical style.



“Stephen was really into technical precision, like Rush,” Navarro explains. “I was into ‘60s and ‘70s guitar heroes, and, of course, Ed Van Halen; when that came out, it just changed everything. Eric was really into punk rock, and Perry was into the post-goth thing.”

“When we all got into a rehearsal room together and started playing, on paper it did not make sense. But in practice, it just clicked. We were doing something nobody else was doing at the time. Everyone was chasing the next Guns N’ Roses or Poison, but we didn’t want to be that.”

And they got attention for it. Rebuffing hair metal and ignoring the emerging grunge scene, the group saw their 1989 hyper-eclectic debut, *Nothing’s Shocking*, win over critics across the board. But MTV refused to air the music video for the album single “Mountain Song” due to its use of nudity, and nine of the country’s 11 major record retailers banned the album over the sculpture of bare-breasted conjoined female twins on its cover. As a result, *Nothing’s Shocking* sold fewer than 250,000 copies. But thanks to college radio, “Jane Says,” the album’s lead single, reached number six on *Billboard*’s Alternative Songs chart, giving the band an underground following and building momentum for what would become their breakthrough, 1990’s *Ritual de lo Habitual*.

But fame, money and the excesses that go with them would lead Navarro into a harrowing addiction to heroin. In some ways it was the culmination of a habit that had been growing since he was a teenager and experienced a devastating trauma. When Navarro was 15, his mother was murdered by her live-in boyfriend, setting off a chain of events that would forever change his life and lead him to take solace in hard drugs.

“My solution to a tragic event was more trauma. Nothing has brought me to my knees in life more than drugs did,” Navarro says. “I mean... my mom was killed in a really horrible way. Everybody loses a parent, you know? But not everybody brings themselves down by their own hand for years.”



..... Jane's Addiction pose in Chicago, November 27, 1988. (from left) Perry Farrell, Dave Navarro, Stephen Perkins, and Eric Avery.

Yet at the same time, the tragedy was the catalyst to Navarro committing himself to a music career. A guitarist since before the age of 10, he'd been inspired to play after hearing Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" and was spurred on by Van Halen's 1978 debut album. In 1985, he joined Farrell, Avery and Perkins in their newly formed motley crew of musical misfits. "We came together as four completely different people," Navarro says. "We never would have known each other otherwise."

It wasn't ever going to be easy, though. Jane's Addiction broke up in 1991, just as the alt-rock scene was taking off. "Everything exploded as soon as we packed it up," Navarro says. "We were right on the verge of it."

Still, Navarro quickly found his talents in demand. In his few short years with Jane's Addiction, he'd defined his own place in the scene with an uncanny ability to fuse modern rock, metal and psychedelia into his own signature sound. Whether pedaling a wah,

scraping guitar strings or using a vibrator to create squeals of excitement from his axe, Navarro broke new sonic ground and redefined hard-rock guitar pyrotechnics for an era in dire need of new guitar heroes. Before the earth covering Jane's Addiction's grave had time to settle, Guns N' Roses pegged Navarro as their replacement for the departed Izzy Stradlin. Though he was good friends with his prospective co-guitarist, Slash, Navarro declined. "Probably wouldn't have been the right fit," he offers.

Not long after, Navarro cleaned up his drug habit and emerged ready for a new challenge: taking over from Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist John Frusciante, who was dealing with his own substance abuse issues. Despite a rigorous initiation that included a debut gig at Woodstock '94 and internal struggles with his new bandmates, Navarro left his mark on the group with 1995's *One Hot Minute*, a heavier, psychedelic-tinged album that remains a bone of contention among RHCP fans.

Since leaving the Chili Peppers, Navarro has stepped in and out of the limelight. He contributed mightily to Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know," the hit single from her 1995 breakthrough, *Jagged Little Pill*. That same year saw him work with Janet Jackson, Nine Inch Nails and 4 Non Blondes, after which he continued his run as a stringslinger for hire with tracks for Christina Aguilera, Gene Simmons, P. Diddy and Marilyn Manson. Along the way, he's battled his demons once again, faced his mother's killer, played in supergroups, and uncharacteristically became an actor in film and TV, where he co-hosted two seasons of *Rock Star*. He even launched his own internet talk show, *Dave Navarro's SPREAD TV*. But through the various tangents of his career, guitar has remained a constant and a source of his salvation. As he explains, "It became my best friend."

Jane's Addiction has been another constant in his life, ever-looming in the background. Their 1991 breakup was followed by reunions in 1997, 2002 and 2008, with the latter two producing a pair of albums, 2003's *Strays* and 2011's *The Great Escape Artist*. So what makes this latest reunion any different? Quite

“Everyone was chasing the next Guns N’ Roses or Poison, but we didn’t want to be that”

a bit, Navarro says. “The older you get, the less ego there is, and we just feel like brothers,” he explains. “It feels like 1989 again, like the roots of where we started. We are really feeling the spirit, which is such a gift. And at our ages, to feel that again is pretty amazing.”

In addition to touring, Jane's Addiction has released a new song, “Imminent Redemption,” the original lineup's first new music since 1990, and Navarro says more is on the way. “Right now, we're putting a record together,” he promises. “We're going to do some single releases along the way until the record is done. But right now, we're out here on tour and having a blast.”

It's been a hell of a journey for Navarro, who, at 57, feels fortunate to be alive and back in the band where it all began for him. “I look around,” he says, “and I'm like, ‘We are the luckiest motherfuckers.’”

Adversity is something you're well-versed in, Dave. But looking back on your career,

it seems like it's tough to keep you down for long.

Thank you. I appreciate that. It's been a lot. It's been a lot. Fortunately, I'm out here now with the original members of this band, which makes every show really exciting. There was a long break between Jane's Addiction 1.0 and today.

Going back to the beginning, where did the guitar come in for you?

I was playing piano around age seven, and I was a skateboard kid. I was at a skate park and “Voodoo Child” came over the loudspeakers. I was like, “What is that?” I went inside and asked the person behind the desk. They told me, “Jimi Hendrix. You don't know Jimi Hendrix?” On the way home, I begged and pleaded to make a pit stop at a record store to buy this Jimi Hendrix record, and that's when I said to myself, Whatever this guy's doing, it's what I want to do. That was how I got started. He's the reason I do this.

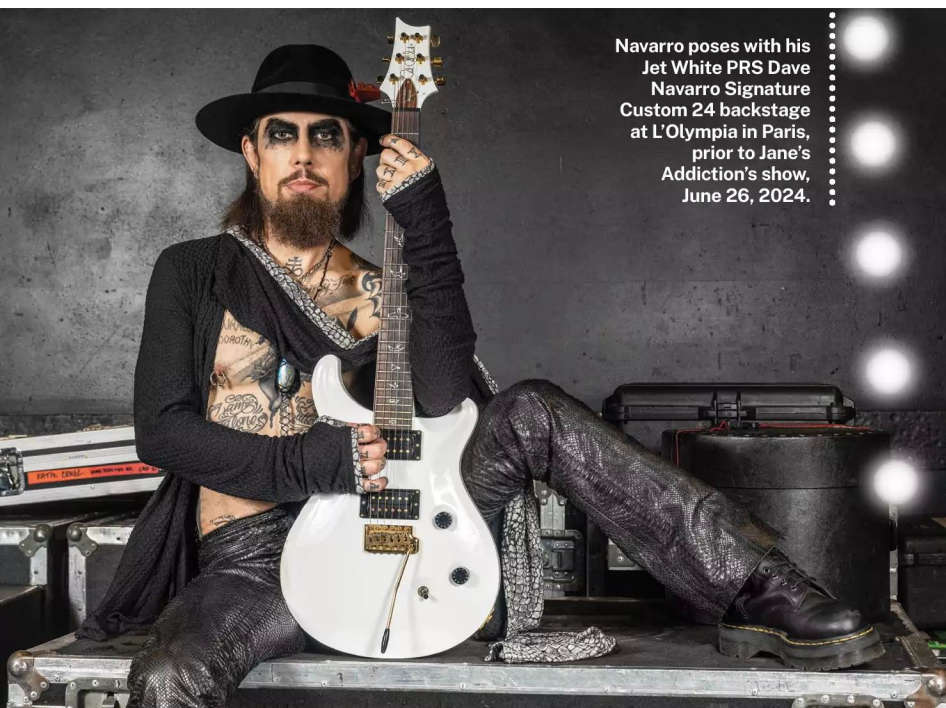
Did you grow up in a musical household?

It was somewhat musical. My father played piano, and my mother loved all sorts of music. I grew up with a lot of different types of music, like Roberta Flack, Stevie Wonder and Taj Mahal. My dad was into Broadway musicals, like *West Side Story*. It was very interesting to put all those pieces together, because the eclectic nature of my mom's music and the storytelling of my dad's exist in some of my favorite records. Like in *The Wall* and *Tommy*: They're both eclectic and they both tell a story.

So I was playing piano at age seven, and because my cousin Dan Navarro was a guitar player, we would see him play shows around L.A. [Dan Navarro was part of the songwriting duo Lowen & Navarro, who composed Pat Benatar's 1984 hit “We Belong,” among other songs]. He taught me my first guitar chords.

You're mostly self-taught though?

Yeah. I spent most of my youth buying and listening to records, trying to learn songs off those records. I didn't really have a guitar teacher. We had a record store in my town called Rhino Records,



Navarro poses with his Jet White PRS Dave Navarro Signature Custom 24 backstage at L'Olympia in Paris, prior to Jane's Addiction's show, June 26, 2024.



“Everybody loses
a parent. But not
everybody brings
themselves down
by their own hand
for years”

Navarro performs with the Red Hot Chili Peppers at the 1995 MTV Video Music Awards, September 7, 1995.



which went on to become a label, but back then it was just a little shop of used records. They had a record player in the back where you could listen to vinyl to see if you wanted to buy it. Whenever I got my allowance or came into some money, I would go straight to Rhino Records, grab a stack of records based on what was on the cover and go into this little booth and check them out. If I liked them, I'd buy them, take them home and try to learn them.

And how did that impact your idea of the guitar player you wanted to become?

Interestingly, a lot of them were bootlegs of live performances. And when I got Led Zeppelin bootlegs and Jimi Hendrix bootlegs, I noticed that the guitar solos were completely different from the ones on the records. And I thought, That's just how it's done! So when I started playing with other musicians, I would just improvise, every time. I thought, That's the rule.

As I got older and started going to shows, I realized that a lot of guitar players knew the solos and played them note for note. I thought it was a really strange thing; I judged it, like, You're not really digging deep and exposing yourself. It wasn't like the guys I grew up with and loved. But, of course, I came to appreciate all those players, and many of them were favorites, too.

Once you got into your teens, your resiliency was tested. It's a sensitive topic, but how did your mother's murder impact your outlook on life?

I pretty much decided on that day, Fuck everything else: school, what I'm being told to do and how people expect me to act. I'm doing music, and I'm doing it with my pals every single day, because you never know what the fuck is gonna happen. I was in high school with Stephen Perkins, and we were in a heavy metal rock band. Every day after school, we would go and play.

So I made a lot of great decisions for myself. And then there were a lot of poor decisions, certainly with drugs and getting into some really horrible ways of escapism. That's the path I went down.

In many ways. It's funny: Having been brought up with *The Wall* and *Tommy*, both those stories and those character arcs are so similar to mine. Both those records that I loved so much as a kid ended up mirroring my life in some ways. And I still can't get through those records without crying. It's just impossible.

That's an interesting parallel that I've not heard before. How so?

In *The Wall*, the main character turns to music, isolates himself, builds a wall around himself, doesn't trust anybody and kind of goes crazy. That happened to me. And then, with *Tommy*, you've got a kid whose father was murdered, and he shuts down. But then he became this Messiah-like figure when he started to speak, see and hear again, after being deaf, dumb and blind. But then he fell hard. And in the same way, I fell hard into drug addiction.

What you went through must have ripped you to shreds mentally, and the drugs obviously took a physical toll. But guitar seems like the place of stability between those two things.

Absolutely. There's no question that my instrument became my best friend and the only thing I really cared about. I would be in my room for hours and hours and hours and hours, just playing, escaping, growing and evolving. I'd also be learning about myself and creating false storylines and false narratives.

You take a tragedy like that and you kind of get into a creative isolated mode. It's very easy to come up with a false narrative and one that can be detrimental as you grow. I think that's one of the things that also led to my escapism through drugs.

But interestingly, those things springboarded you to greatness. I think it's interesting that Jane's Addiction came about as hair metal was cresting and grunge was about to take off. But you were neither of those things.

Some of those iconic Eric Avery basslines are straight-ahead and simple. They're kind of punk influenced, which is hard, fast and short, and don't really warrant a guitar solo, though I'd add one in there. Stephen's drumming was technically advanced, and Perry would come in and was such an incredible poet and had a knack for finding odd and memorable melodies off the top of his head. Once we started playing, I was just like, This is incredible.

We had a lot of challenges, though. We didn't want to be one thing; we wanted to be this expressive art collective, and I think that's what we ended up doing, unknowingly. Everyone kind of forced their influences into this thing, and we got away with it.

Going into Jane's debut record, *Nothing's Shocking*, harnessing all that must have been a real task.

Yeah, we were absorbing stuff like

sponges. I got deeply into Bauhaus, Joy Division, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and anything that was different, dark, weird and not flashy, technically. My playing became an amalgamation of all those different genres. I'm grateful for that, because when I was a young man playing guitar, I initially was like, "I'm a rock-and-roll lead guitar player. Period."

Can you give a few examples of how you applied that approach?

As I grew, I learned. I hung out with different musicians and players in different scenes and saw different bands. My playing evolved, and I touched upon all these different genres. I got really into punk, and I got really into melodic stuff and goth. My love for the hard-rock music I grew up on remained, but I added groups like Joy Division to it. It was like, Oh, you can get away with playing a song with only two notes on the guitar! That's all that's needed.

Polar-opposite cuts like "Mountain Song" and "Jane Says" come to mind as examples of what you're saying.

Yes! And then when you have a lyricist like Perry, you don't really have to be that busy. His poetry on those first

“Everything exploded as soon as we packed it up. We were right on the verge of it”

couple of records... it's pretty mind-blowing.

Give me a fly-on-the-wall perspective of you ruminating on your guitar parts for *Nothing's Shocking*.

When we'd write songs, we would jam. Perry would open his notebook of poems, start singing and just land on something unbelievable. That forged how I approached the guitar, the parts and playing them. I'm a fan of minimalism, noise, chaos and effects.

And then you'll peel off a ripping guitar solo...

Yeah, because at the same time I was into shredding guitar solos. [laughs] It's a very strange combination, but I found where it fits within this context. A lot of the differences we had musically and personally and just as people — that probably speaks to why we've disbanded so many times.

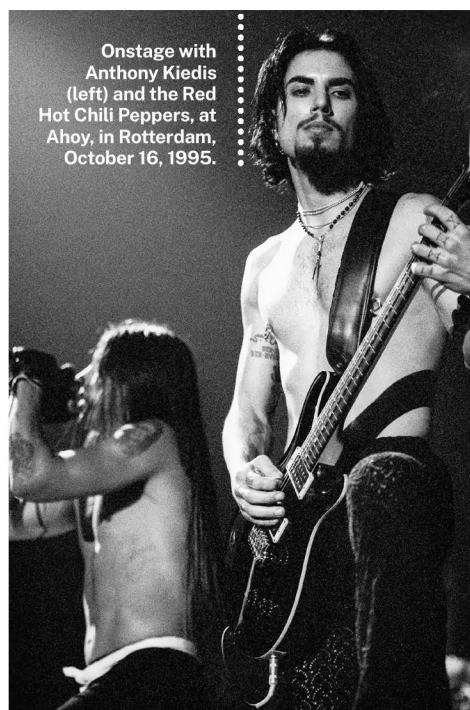
After *Nothing's Shocking*, you became

a rising alternative star when everyone was either shredding or focusing on dark, sullen rhythms. It must have been tough to grapple with success while also wading through addiction.

Well, you've got to understand that there was no internet at the time. I wasn't really aware that there was much success of any kind. I'd just show up at the gig, play the shows, and show up on tour. I didn't know if *Nothing's Shocking* made any kind of impact or if people felt at all differently about it, because I was on the inside. I didn't know any different.

So you felt no pressure going into *Ritual de lo Habitual*?

No, there was no pressure or mindset that I had to follow something up that was considered groundbreaking. Because we didn't know. We just kept doing what we were doing. And oddly enough, I would say about half the songs on *Ritual* were already written while we did *Nothing's Shocking*. During the *Nothing's Shocking* tour, we played pretty much the majority of *Ritual*. By the time we got into the studio, those songs were just done inside and out. We knew them. But the ironic thing is I was at the height of my heroin addiction. I have no



Onstage with Anthony Kiedis (left) and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, at Ahoy, in Rotterdam, October 16, 1995.



Navarro performs with Jane's Addiction at L'Olympia in Paris, June 26, 2024.



Performing onstage at Lollapalooza during the second Jane's Addiction reunion, August 9, 2003.

recollection of this, but the story goes that we went into the studio to record *Ritual*, we did it, and Dave Jerden, the producer, listened back and said, "We're not using these tracks. We've got to do it again."

You had to record the entire record again?

We actually had to go in and record it again. But I don't remember doing it twice. I barely remember doing it once. [laughs] I have a couple of flashbacks that I can picture; I remember what the studio looked like, and I kind of remember a face or two, but I don't know if it took a week — I don't know if it took three months. I just don't know. So if you're talking to someone who can't tell you that, then I certainly can't tell you my exact mindset doing it. I don't even know what street the studio was on or how I got there. [laughs]

It's incredible to hear that. Your performances, writing, tone and solos on songs like "Three Days," "Been Caught Stealing" and "Stop" were spot-on.

Oh, thank you. I was lucky to have an engineer named Ronnie S. Champagne. He was really a vital component in terms of helping me chase down tones and trying different guitars and amps. If I was like, "This isn't quite right," he'd help me find what was right. Ronnie was responsible for helping me find different textures, tones and colors on those records. I owe a lot of credit to him.

Was there much variation in your rig between *Nothing's Shocking* and *Ritual*?

I pretty much had the same pedalboard live and in the studio. Even now, it's mostly the same. I tried some rack-mounted stuff; I tried everything there is, but I don't know, man, there's something about just having pedals on the floor so I get to turn the knobs with my hands and see them. I just loved that.

And in the live setting, my tone was pretty much the same throughout the show. I can get away with changing it up and switching gears, but then, there's that bootleg philosophy of Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix that I listened to,

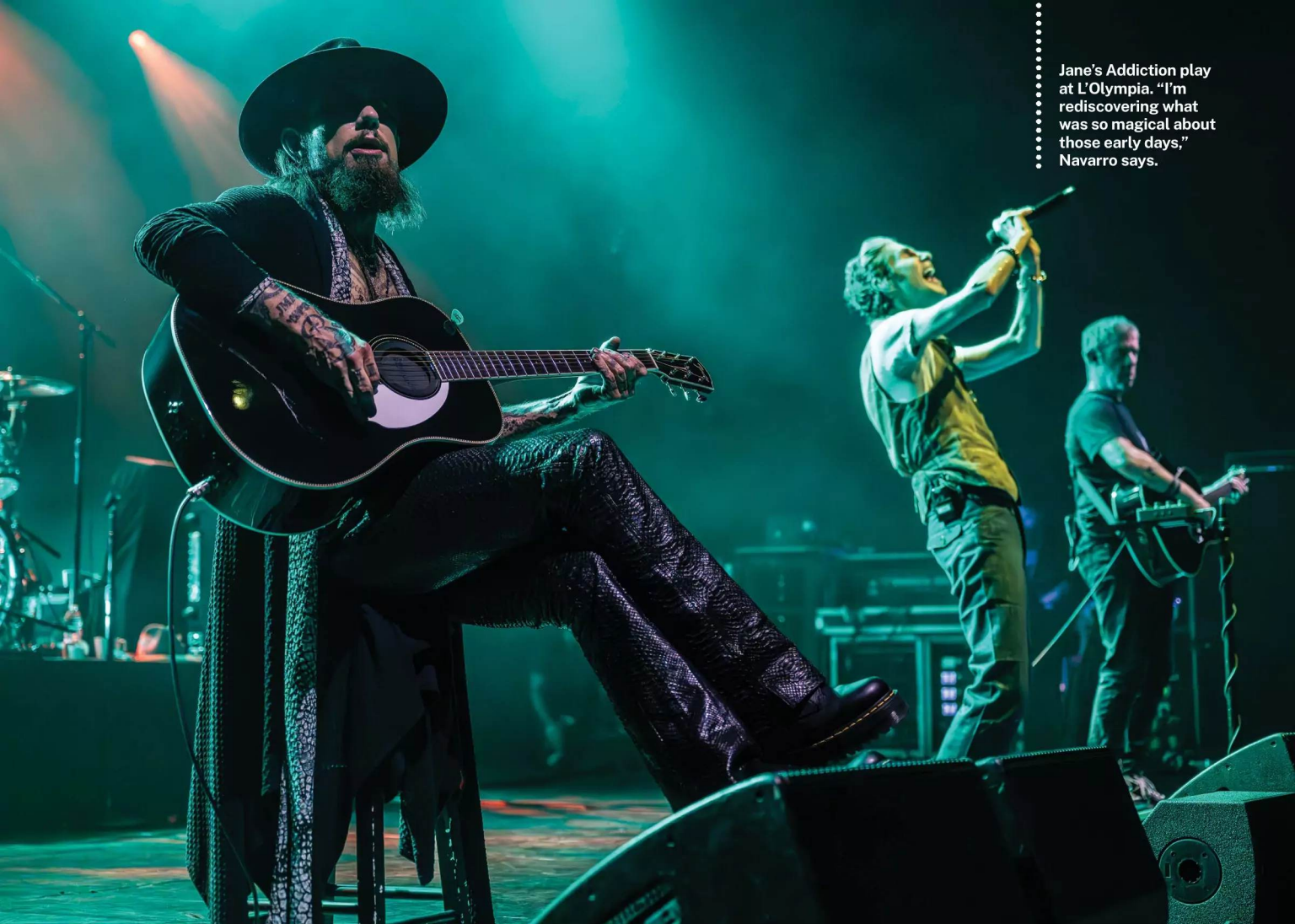
where I thought, Well, that shouldn't sound like the record live. If someone wants to hear the record, play the record. I'm doing it this way tonight.

So your addiction was at its height by the time *Ritual* was recorded in '90, and despite its success Jane's broke up in '91. How did you remain upright?

I'm not entirely sure. I think the band ended when it needed to. When it ended, I was relieved. It gave me a moment to pause and take a look at what was going on with my life and, certainly, with drugs. I pretty much went into treatment after that and got cleaned up. I wish I could tell you I have stayed that way ever since. I've been up and down.

Would you be alive today if Jane's didn't break up?

You know... it's a lifelong affliction, addiction. I'm good now, but it's been up and down. It's been really hard. I think if the band stayed together, I very likely would have died somewhere along the way. So I'm grateful that it happened.



Jane's Addiction play at L'Olympia. "I'm rediscovering what was so magical about those early days," Navarro says.

You were in demand almost immediately after Jane's broke up and found yourself the apple of Guns N' Roses' eye. I've often wondered how you would have shared space with Slash, as you're not a rhythm player like Izzy Stradlin.

Yeah, I don't think that would have been the right call at the time. I've played with Slash a million times since then. I love playing with Slash. But I think I'm a little more left-of-center than they were. Guns was pretty much a straight-up, in-your-face rock band, which I fucking love. But as a guitar player, I like to get down on my knees, turn delay knobs and make a bunch of noise like Kraftwerk or some shit. [laughs] That does not work for Guns N' Roses. But I think I found that in the Chili Peppers.

Whom you joined in '93. What was it like stepping in for John Frusciante?

That was a very difficult role to step into, because they were so set on what they were. It really was another trial by fire. All of a sudden, I had to work within another context that had completely

different influences, and these were musicians that I'd never worked with in my life.

Weirdly, it was kind of like the beginning of Jane's Addiction, where I've got these guys who don't play the same stuff that I do. With the Chili Peppers, I was in this band that doesn't play the same way I do — except now, we're doing it in Madison Square Garden. [laughs] I mean, my first show was at Woodstock! Talk about the pressure being insane.

That period of your career is often painted as tumultuous, but on the flip side, what did you get out of it?

Well, there's no question that I became a better guitar player as a result of having done that. Playing with Flea and Chad Smith was a crash-course master class in musicianship. I'm really grateful for the time spent with them, but it was a bizarre concept to join the group, and a very bizarre time.

Since then, in between Jane's reunions,

you've played with everyone from Ozzy Osbourne to Lou Reed to Corey Taylor to Post Malone, mostly with your Camp Freddy project. [Camp Freddy was a hard rock supergroup whose core lineup included Navarro and Billy Idol guitarist Billy Morrison, drummer Matt Sorum, bassist Chris Chaney and singer Donovan Leitch.] What did you take away from those experiences?

In order to do that group, I had to learn different styles of music for every song. Being in that band was one of my main teachers as a musician because I feel that the more musicians you play with, the greater your skills will become. That's just a fact.

Despite your struggles and being in and out of the limelight, what's kept you in demand?

I don't claim to be the master of any kind of skill. I don't claim to be the greatest soloist. I don't claim to be a shredder. I don't claim to be a great melodic player. But they're all elements of my playing. The best way I would

describe my playing style is to say it's expansive. That's how I view it. I really am grateful for all the opportunities I've had. As I said, these master classes I've had from playing with people I would never dream of playing with have been incredible. I remember sitting in my room listening to *Draw the Line* by Aerosmith, and then years later, to think I'd be standing next to Steven Tyler! So, all of that has been an education for me.

Are all these life lessons the key to why it's working now?

It takes a lot of years of growing up and maturity to figure out that maybe the thing you're wondering about is worth it after all — and that it really isn't that big of a deal in the end. When I think about being in my 20s, it was very hard to think that way. But you go and live your life, take some hard lessons here and there, and you go, God, what I had back then was a really beautiful thing!

Now it's easier just to let go of stuff and focus on the music. When I got into this band, I did not have my eyes on girls, I did not have my eyes on cars, and I did not have my eyes on money. I had my eyes on making music, and so did the rest of the guys in the band.

“When I think about my legacy, I don't think about what I've done; I think about who I've done it with”

Does that remain true for the group even today?

I think that's true today, yes. There's just something about that kind of passion that is super powerful. But again, with personalities involved, it makes it volatile. It's not easy, but it shouldn't be easy. It's kind of like Pink Floyd — to which I want to add that Gilmour is my favorite. He's the only guitar player who can make me weep with a melody.

You made a parallel between *The Wall* and your life earlier. Do you see parallels between Floyd and Jane's, too?

Sure. If you look at Pink Floyd, I mean, it's the same dynamic. Gilmour's introverted reflections in audio form contrasted with Roger Waters' outward aggression. They're two sides of the same coin. Those guys battled it out and rubbed each other the wrong way.

But that's what made them authentic. I know it probably takes a lot of balls for

a guy to sit here and compare his band to Pink Floyd, and I'm not doing that. What I'm comparing is the dynamics, personalities and approach. Pink Floyd was an art band when they started, and we were an art band, too, plain and simple.

I think it could be said that your authenticity is the reason that your career has remained so relevant.

I don't know. I took a lot of years off from music to work in other areas, mainly television and working as a game show host. And maybe that's counterintuitive for a guy who's talking about authenticity.

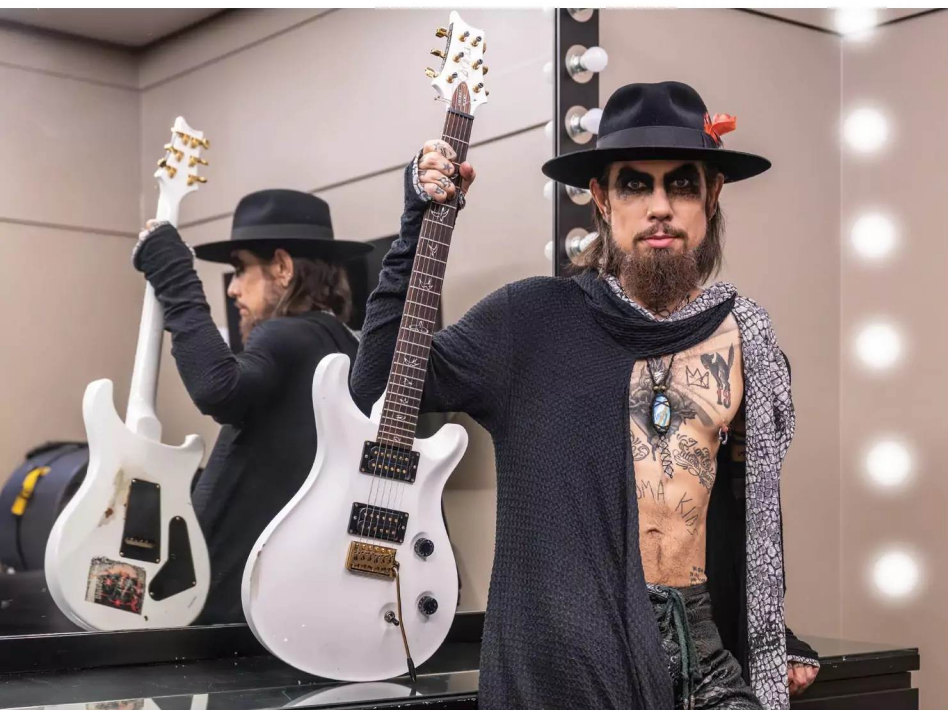
But right now, the band is kind of exploring its own authenticity again. We're out there and we've got some new music as the original lineup. And when we play live, it's just the four of us, minimal production and no other distractions. It's like when we'd play little punk rock clubs back when we were just starting out.

The group's new song is called “Imminent Redemption.” Based on what you've told me, it seems aptly titled.

We're finding the authenticity within something that we all thought was long gone. I really thought at one point, I am so over Jane's Addiction. I never want to go back. And now, I find myself here on tour with the original lineup and rediscovering what was so magical about those early days.

Given all that you've survived, do you ever think about what your legacy is?

Man, I don't know if I have the self-esteem to claim I have a legacy. The opportunities I've had, and the things I've done have been a true blessing in my life. Along with those gifts, life has been very, very difficult, and there's been a lot of pain and struggle. So when I think about my legacy, I don't think about what I've done; I think about who I've done it with. The people I've been blessed to play with — those people are part of the legacy story. I can't speak to it any other way or view it from the outside. ■



HIGHER

PLAYERS | MARK TREMONTI

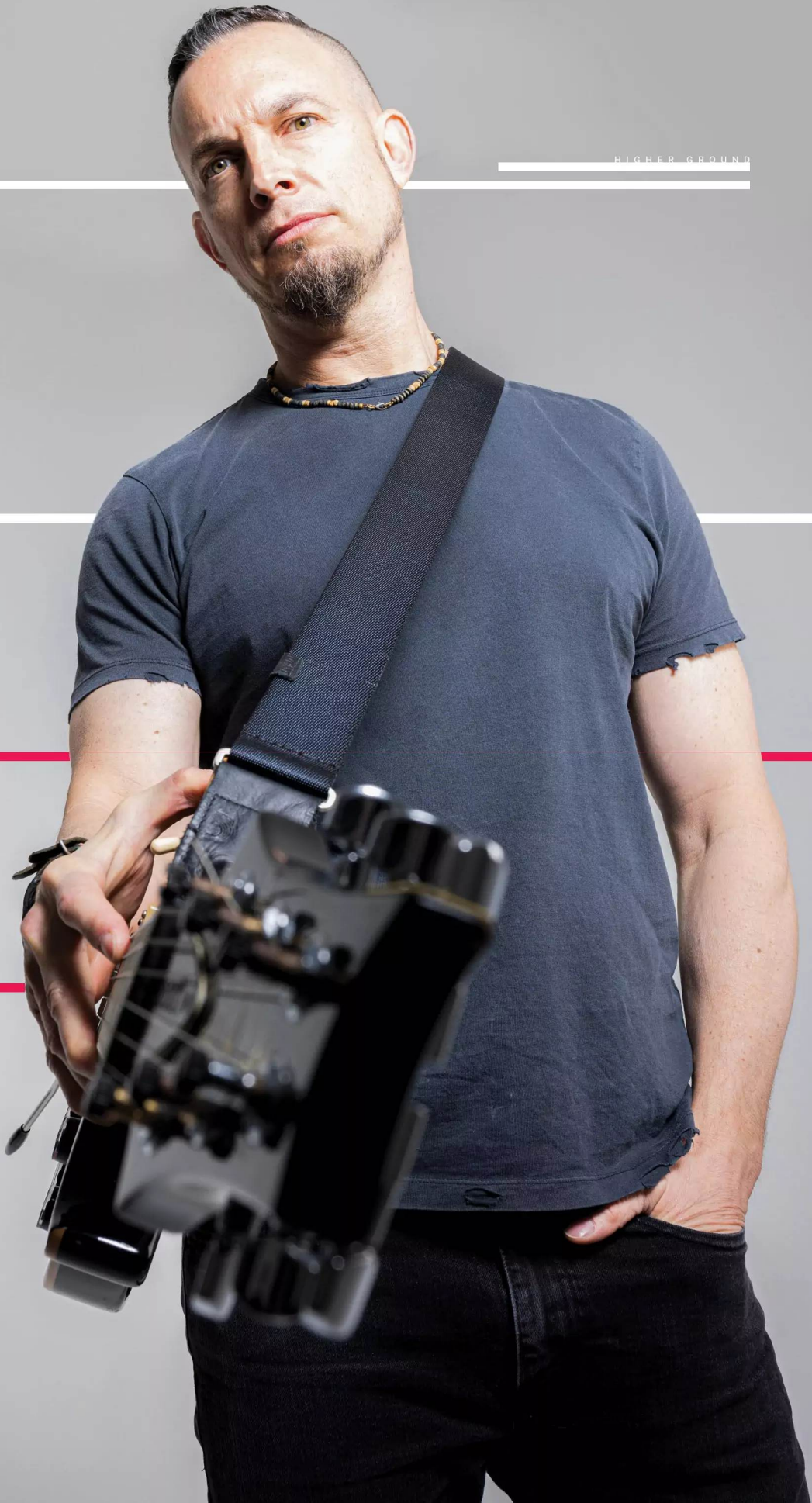
“Can you take me higher?” Creed asked in 2000. As their comeback tour gets underway, the answer is a resounding “yes.” **Mark Tremonti** reveals what’s in store for the group and hints at new music up ahead.

BY ANDREW DALY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHUCK BRUECKMANN

GROUND

HIGHER GROUND



MARK TREMONTI RECALLS the doubts that surrounded the early success of Creed, the post-grunge act he first made his mark with in the late 1990s. Seemingly overnight, the Tallahassee, Florida, quartet had a number two hit with “My Own Prison,” the title track from their debut album. With the song’s quiet-loud dynamics, Tremonti’s meaty-but-melodic guitar work, Scott Stapp’s chest-pounding vocals and the solid rhythm section of drummer Scott Phillips and bassist Brian Marshall, it was hard to tell if the band was catching the end of an old wave or the start of a new one. And journalists weren’t too shy to say so.

“Everybody was telling us that,” Tremonti recalls. “Even during all our interviews, it was, ‘Do you worry about being a one-hit-wonder?’”

“And then we had another song do well,” he says. And another, and another. By the end of 1998, “Torn,” “One” and “What’s This Life For” had gone, respectively, numbers three, two and one on *Billboard*’s U.S. Mainstream Rock chart, proving not only that Creed had legs but also a sound and style all their own. “After that, it was, ‘Your second record’s not gonna do well,’” Tremonti says. “But it just made us work harder.

I think that kind of doubt is really what helped push us to achieve success.”

Indeed, they did. Creed’s second record, 1999’s *Human Clay*, proved to be one of the biggest rock records of the decade, reaching number one on the *Billboard* 200 chart, while its singles “Higher” and “With Arms Wide Open” went to numbers seven and one, respectively.

Like many of rock’s greatest bands, for better or worse, Creed possessed that coveted lead singer/lead guitarist dynamic. And like most smash acts, the band was polarizing, but there was no

denying the magic between Tremonti and Stapp.

Tremonti nods in agreement. “We know how to work together,” he offers. “It’s always been me he sitting on the guitar, playing the music, and working together on melodies. And Scott was always a great lyricist. It’s just one of those things. We

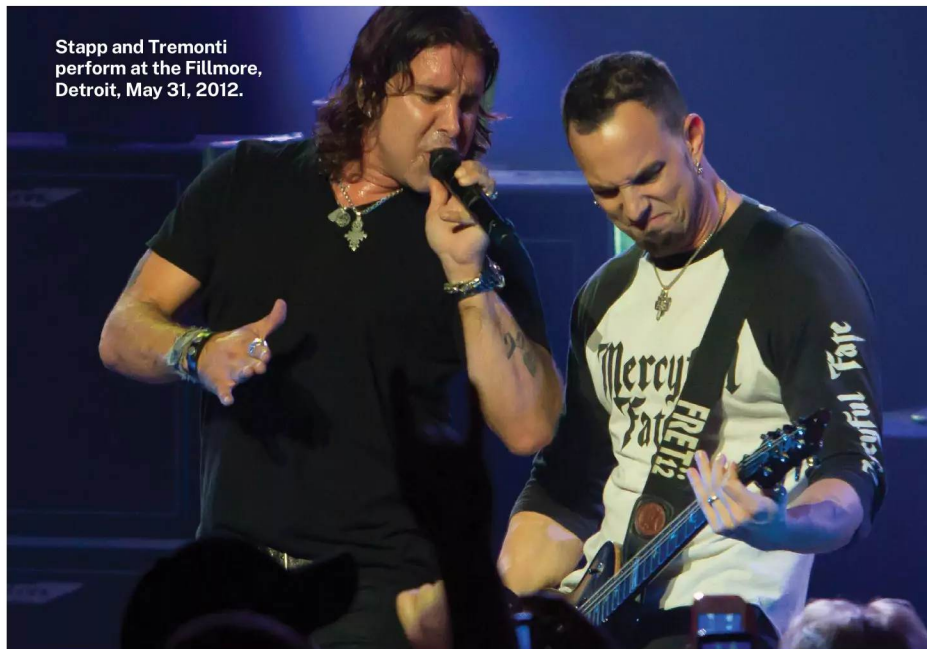
used to write songs onstage. Scott would say, ‘Hey, guys, let’s write something live.’ One time when he did that, I started playing the music for the chorus of ‘Higher,’ and he started just singing that lyric and that melody, right out of the gate. That’s how ‘Higher’ was written. And it became one of our biggest songs.”

More big songs were to come, though, including “My Sacrifice” and “One Last Breath,” which came off Creed’s third record, 2001’s *Weathered*. By then, the group had spent years dodging bullets from haters and had — no pun intended — weathered a few storms due to Stapp’s outspoken, if not outlandish, personality.

That, combined with the pressure of the music business, brought Creed to a crashing halt in 2004. They reunited in 2009 for an album, *Full Circle*, and tour, but the same issues dogged them, and by 2012, the reunion was a distant memory.

In the years since, Tremonti, Phillips and Marshall have worked together in Alter Bridge with vocalist/guitarist Myles Kennedy. At the same time, Stapp forged a solo career and continued his battles with substances, legal troubles and mental health difficulties in a very public fashion. All things considered, few observers expected Stapp to recover from his missteps with his career intact. Perhaps even fewer wagered on Creed getting back together for a third time, or expected the response to yet another

Stapp and Tremonti perform at the Fillmore, Detroit, May 31, 2012.





Says Mark Tremonti, "We'll always come back to Creed every couple of years." (from left) Scott Phillips, Scott Stapp, Tremonti and Brian Marshall.

reunion would be so rip-roaring as to command a full-fledged tour.

But here we are. Twelve years after Creed ended for the second time, they are prepared to take on the world. And much to Tremonti's delight, the world is ready to have them. "Seeing the reaction that we've gotten and the excitement that people have had about the tour coming out, it just rubs off on us," he says. "It makes us want to do it."

Of course, one has to wonder what makes this time different. "We've all had so many things going on with our careers," Tremonti says. "When you're younger and in a band, you tend to be possessive of your bandmates, which is understandable. But now that we've done so many different things, everyone is more open-minded about these side projects. We all understand that we're doing many different things — we have Alter Bridge and Scott has his solo band — but we'll always come back to Creed every couple of years."

"I THINK THAT KIND OF DOUBT IS REALLY WHAT HELPED PUSH US TO BE SUCCESSFUL"

When you first formed Creed back in the 1990s, what sorts of guitar sounds did you have in mind?

In the beginning I had no idea. I was just throwing darts and trying to invent what I could on the guitar, for years and years. I think I fell into my sound naturally because I never took lessons. I learned by just putting the guitar in my hands and seeing what sounded good to me.

So it took me 10 times as long to get to where other people would get by taking lessons, but it was worth it to me in the long run. I developed my own way of looking at the guitar through experimentation. And, of course, over the years, I started to know what I was doing on guitar.

Creed were tagged as post-grunge and alt-metal. Did that shape how you approached guitar, or your sound or the band's songs?

No. To begin with, I think our band was like a melting pot of different styles. I loved Alice in Chains and Soundgarden when they came out, but my influences came from way before them. I was the metal guy in the band, while Scott grew up listening to a lot of Elvis, the Doors and classic rock. He was very sheltered early on; I don't think a lot of rock and roll was getting played in his house. Brian was a Rush guy, Scott Phillips' favorite band was Living Colour.

So as the guy who wrote most of Creed's music, I would come with metal. And they would constantly push back on me, saying it was "too metal." I had to fit the mold with the rest of the guys, and that's how we got our sound.



“THERE’S NOTHING
I WANTED TO DO MORE
THAN THIS IN MY LIFE,
SO I WORKED AS
HARD AS I COULD
TO SUSTAIN IT”



"As the guy who wrote most of Creed's music," Tremonti says, "I would come with metal. And they would constantly push back on me, saying it was 'too metal!'"

I remember when those early records *My Own Prison* and *Human Clay* came out and noticing how huge the guitars sounded.

I was always looking for a percussive rhythm sound because I grew up listening to speed metal, Testament and Metallica, which have muted rhythms. So I worked on getting as big and tight a rhythm sound as possible.

In terms of gear, what were the keys to your sound back then?

I gravitated to Mesa/Boogie Rectifiers. I always coveted those amps when I worked at a guitar shop for a little bit when I was in college, but the Rectifiers were way too expensive for most people to purchase. They were just one of those things in the back corner of the shop that everybody wanted to plug into, and it blew me away. I finally got my hands on one, and it became the staple of my rig for many years.

But at the same time, I loved fingerstyle playing. When I was a kid, I bought a guitar magazine — it had

"I HAD TO FIT THE MOLD WITH THE REST OF THE GUYS, AND THAT'S HOW WE GOT OUR SOUND"

Bach's "Bourée in E Minor" in there, and I learned how to play that fingerstyle. It really helped me develop my finger-picking. And even though I liked that big Boogie sound, I also liked a nice clean tone with a lot of headroom, so I bought a Fender Twin '65 reissue, and that was a staple of my rig for a lot of years as well. But now, I've created a signature amp [with PRS] that does both those things.

Another key component to your rig is the PRS McCarty. I don't think I'm alone in saying that you were my first exposure to those guitars in the 1990s. What drew you to PRS in the first place?

That was another piece of gear that you'd find tucked away at a guitar shop, always on the top shelf. They were way out of

my price range. But I would always beg the stores to let me try them, and every time I played one, I just loved it.

One year, a gentleman named Jeff Lanahan, the artist's relations person at PRS, called me up and said they were interested in getting some guitars in my hands. They sent a McCarty, which is sitting next to me right now and is one of my favorite guitars. I wrote so much music on it. But when I played it live, it was a little different from what I was used to.

What was different, and why did you ultimately settle on the guitar you did?

I grew up playing a Les Paul, so I was used to the control layout, and where the pickup selector is situated. The McCarty just threw me. So PRS gave me one with the same layout as a Les Paul.

Then I noticed that the tone was a little rounder than I was used to, so they



Tremonti's Creed rig includes two pairs of PRS MT 100 heads and a simple pedalboard setup with a DigiTech Drop polyphonic pitch shifter, Boss OC-5 Octave, Ibanez TS808HW and Morley signature wah.



AMPED UP

What's Mark bringing on the Creed tour? Hint: It's loud, versatile and travels in pairs.

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY TIM TOURNIER

What does your rig look like for this tour? Will you be using the things you used back in the day, or is it like what you're using with Alter Bridge?

I'm strictly using my signature [PRS MT 100] amplifier. I'm an amp fanatic, and I've bought, sold and traded a lot over the years and kept the best ones. When I go on the road, I miss some of them, so I wanted to make an amp that does it all, and that's the MT 100. It has a big high-gain channel that does the heavy [Mesa] Boogie thing that I've always loved. It's a great balance between the percussive heavy, high-gain rhythm stuff that I do and the

lead at the same time. Because sometimes you can get a great rhythm tone, but then your lead tone suffers. So I had to find that perfect balance between the two.

That amp has a great clean channel, too. It's very vintage, yet modern.

"I'M ALL ABOUT THE BIG, STRAIGHT-AHEAD MEAT-AND-POTATOES SOUND"

Yeah, my clean channel is that very clean, high headroom, Fender Twin-on-steroids kind of thing. But you can also boost the preamp signal to make it break up slightly.

As far as the overdrive channel goes, how did you keep it from being similar to the numerous Dumble clones out there?

Well, there's a *million* Dumble clones out there. I've played almost all of them and own three. I love the expressiveness of those amps. So I took one of my favorites up to the factory and said, "Let's not try to do a Dumble; let's try to capture what it feels like when the pick hits the string on a Dumble,

because that's what I really love." So we just tweaked and tweaked and tweaked until we came up with this overdrive channel, which, to me, is very inspiring.

Can you pick out what the secret sauce is?

It's a sound that blooms. It's also a good channel that bridges the clean and the dirty

sounds. You can have that half-dirty thing, where you can dial the gain back and strum through a chord, and it can just be a little overdriven and sweet. So if you're playing a clean, fingerpicked part, that middle channel is perfect. On this tour, it's going to be two MT 100s, and they're going to be dialed in the same way. For some reason, to me, that's the best-sounding rig.

And what will your board look like?

I usually set my delay consistently for the entire set; I don't set it per song. And then, on the floor, I'll have a wah and an overdrive for leads, some kind of Uni-Vibe-style modulation pedal, and an octave pedal for any time I hit a big single-string riff and want it to jump out and be bigger. With that said, my rig is pretty simple. When it comes to effects, I'm all about the big, straight-ahead meat-and-potatoes sound. —AD

sent one with a different pickup. And this kept happening, three or four times. And I'm glad I was picky. I was never the type to be like, Oh, I get a free guitar, so I'm gonna play this onstage even if I don't love it."

So finally they said, "Let us design a signature guitar for you." At the time, only Carlos Santana was at PRS, so I was the second signature artist. It was a huge honor for me; I was a kid just out of college when it happened. One of the best days of my career was being at sound check and having my guitar arrive. Opening that case for the first time just blew my mind.

And what did your pedalboard look like back then?

I was always a wah guy. I grew up listening to bands like Metallica, and Kirk Hammett always used a lot of wah, so I'd always do that. I think he was the reason I tried a [Dunlop] Cry Baby for the first time. I love throwing a wah on a lead; it gives it a lot of character. So that's when I partnered with Morley pedals to do the Power Wah, which was a big part of my sound. I've had that in my rig for decades now.

And I use a handwired Tube Screamer [TS808HW] for my overdrive, which I haven't changed for years. Other than that, I've used a handful of Uni-Vibes. The Dunlop Uni-Vibe [UV-1] was my favorite for the longest time. I loved it.

Looking back on Creed's early era, from your perspective, did it feel like success hit Creed overnight, or did it feel more like a gradual thing?

It was definitely not an overnight thing. Every step we took, we earned it and appreciated it. We had to work our way up. It took two or three years before we got up to playing the large venues.

But there's nothing I wanted to do more than this in my life, so I worked as hard as I could to sustain it. We never



Stapp and Tremonti perform at Toronto's Danforth Music Hall, May 30, 2012.

"I DEVELOPED MY OWN WAY OF LOOKING AT THE GUITAR THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION"

felt like we could ever sit back and relax and enjoy the successes. We knew we had to work hard just to make sure we continued that run.

Given that you guys were at the top of the world for a bit, was it difficult to walk away in 2004?

Yeah. There were a lot of personal struggles within the band. When you have that amount of success and type of schedule, the pressure is just non-stop, you know? Tensions just rose, and it came to a head. We said, "We've had enough." But now, all these years later, we're so excited to get back into it, because we get to relive those days. And it's been crazy to see the response we've

gotten for this tour. My agent told me, "There is every bit as much of a desire for these concert tickets as you had at your peak." So I'm excited for my kids to go out there and see it [Tremonti and his wife, Victoria, have two sons, Austen and Pearson, and a daughter, Stella], because they didn't get to live it when we first went through it.

What brought you all to a point where you were ready to get back out there?

It all started back with the conversation I had with my manager at the time when I was doing a ShipRocked cruise. I said, "It would be cool if we could do some isolated shows on a cruise, where it's just Creed and other '90s bands." One thing led to another, and Scott — I hate to say "he was on board," but he was! [laughs] It got delayed by COVID, but afterward, my agent brought the idea up again, and we thought, Why not? Let's see how people react.

The response was so through the

**“ONLY CARLOS
SANTANA WAS AT
PRS, SO I WAS THE
SECOND SIGNATURE
ARTIST. IT WAS A HUGE
HONOR FOR ME”**

roof. It blew us away. The promoters of the cruise said that in their 21 years of business, this was the fastest-selling cruise they’ve ever had. We did a second one five days later, and that sold out immediately, too.

There were tons of people on the waiting list, but online, you had people saying, “This is BS; I can’t afford a \$2,000 cruise.” I mean, if you went on a five-day vacation at a standard hotel, it would cost you a lot more. But we knew eventually we would announce the tour, so we were like, “Just wait, folks.” And when that tour got announced, things just exploded.

So then we had to learn the songs again. My kids think that’s funny, but I tell them, “Hey, I’ve got 19 albums! I can’t remember them all!”

What have been some of the most challenging Creed songs to relearn after so many years?

The hardest are the ones from *Full Circle*. We’ve played them the least, so the muscle memory isn’t there like it is for the others.

And some songs are more difficult than you might think. For instance, a lot of people think a song like “One Last Breath” [from *Weathered*] is hard to play, because it’s fast and heavy. But sometimes it’s not the fast songs — it’s the ones that have a ton of fingerpicking, because a lot of focus goes into that. If it’s an intro, or just me and a vocal, and I miss a couple of notes or play a couple of wrong notes, everybody in the place is going to know it.

What’s it been like getting back in a room as Creed?

It’s been great. Me and Scott [Phillips] and Brian have been touring for almost 30 years, because we started Alter Bridge right after Creed. But when we got back with Scott [Stapp], it was great. We’ve

had some ups and downs, but we’re all excited about getting back on the road like the old days.

Like you said earlier, we do have a whole new fanbase out there, and we’re excited to play for all these folks. And one of the most surprising things is that the biggest part of our fanbase is between 25 and 35. Most of those people wouldn’t have been old enough to see Creed back in the day.

Are there plans for Creed to record new music?

Yeah. We would have written new music already if we hadn’t been shot out of a cannon trying to make this tour happen. We would have had to have a new record in the can a year ago to have the whole machine in place for this tour. But when we’re out on tour, you never know... In the dressing rooms, at sound check — we might get some new song ideas for the next one. ■

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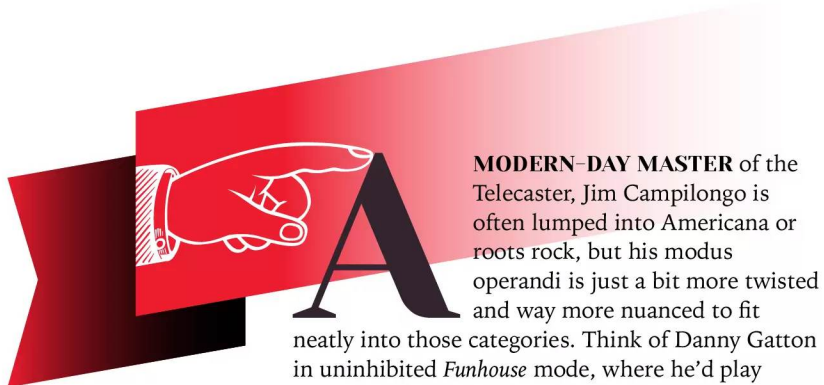
STRING CHARMER

Idiosyncratic, unpredictable and always entertaining, **Jim Campilongo** talks Teles, Roy Buchanan and his 4TET's new fire-breathing album, *She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show*.

BY BILL MILKOWSKI



||||| “I HAVE THIS ‘ONE EYE
ON THE AUDIENCE TO MAKE
SURE THEY’RE NOT BORED’
ASPECT TO ME. AND SOMETIMES
I WISH I DIDN’T” |||||



A MODERN-DAY MASTER of the Telecaster, Jim Campilongo is often lumped into Americana or roots rock, but his modus operandi is just a bit more twisted and way more nuanced to fit neatly into those categories. Think of Danny Gatton in uninhibited *Funhouse* mode, where he'd play everything from Duke Ellington's signature "Take the A Train" to TV themes like *The Honeymooners*, *The Untouchables*, *Perry Mason* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. Or Roy Buchanan delivering everything from a crying instrumental rendition of Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams" to the shit-kickin' anthem "Cajun," his own profoundly cathartic "The Messiah Will Come Again" or a faithful reading of Hank Williams' "Hey Good Lookin'" on his self-titled 1972 debut.

Campilongo swims in those same eclectic waters, and he manages to consistently deliver with unwavering commitment and virtuosity mixed with humor. A composer of more than 800 idiosyncratic ditties with tongue-in-cheek titles like "Awful Pretty, Pretty Awful," "I'm Helen Keller and You're a Waffle Iron," "Heaven Is Creepy" and "The Past Is Looking Brighter and Brighter," Campilongo has nodded directly to Gatton and Buchanan in past outings as well as to other guitar heroes like Les Paul, Chet Atkins, Jimmy Bryant and Link Wray. For his 16th release as a leader, the typically varied and endlessly entertaining *She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show*, he is joined by second guitarist Luca Benedetti, bassist

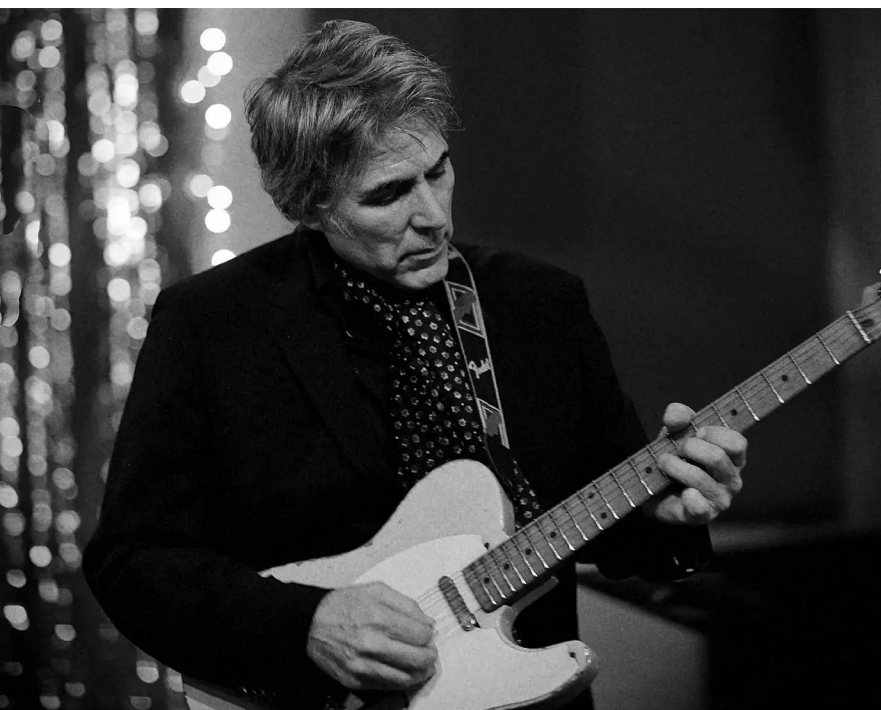
Jim Campilongo performs live. He held long-standing gigs in New York during his 21 years there, including at 55 Bar, the Living Room, the Knitting Factory and Rockwood Music Hall.

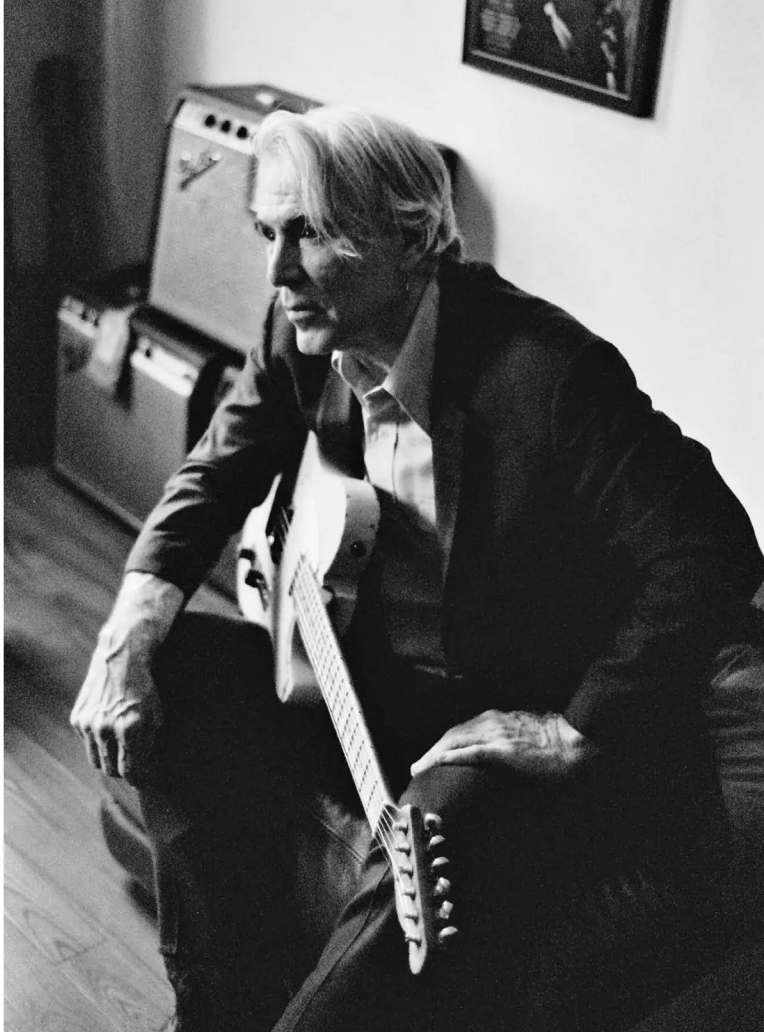
Andy Hess and drummer Dan Rieser, who comprise his 4TET.

A longtime contributor to *Guitar Player* (his popular Vinyl Treasures column has appeared monthly in the magazine since 2018), the San Francisco native worked with a Buenos Aires luthier named Rafa to come up with the Lumiere Jim Campilongo Signature T-Model guitar. For *Coney Island Freak Show*, however, he relied strictly on his 1959 Fender Telecaster.

After living in New York for 21 years (from 2002 to 2023), Campilongo returned to the Bay Area. With a full schedule of gigs through the summer, including a string of dates in Mexico City with a different quartet (keyboardist Erik Deutsch, bassist Fer Ruvel and drummer Jorge Servin), he was looking forward at the time of this interview to CD-release gigs with his 4TET at his old haunts in New York City in early September, followed by a two-month residency in Buenos Aires in September and October. We began our conversation by noticing some similarities in our musical tastes.

Looking at the archives of your Vinyl Treasures column, I was counting the number of those same records that I've loved over time, like Harvey Mandel's *The Snake*, Roy Buchanan's *Second Album*, *Guitar Sounds From Lenny Breau*, Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue*, Junior Brown's *Guit With It*, and so many more. All important albums for me. I'd also have to mention Pat Martino's *Joyous Lake*, which is like one





Campilongo with his gear in his old Brooklyn apartment on Grand Street. "I always really liked the people in New York, and I seemed to fit in," he says.

of the top 10 records for me. Pat had such a unique approach on that album that wasn't really jazz or rock; it was simply Pat Martino. It's probably his most fully realized album. And I'm looking forward to reading your book about Pat [Here And Now! The Autobiography of Pat Martino, *Backbeat Books*]. I just bought it on Amazon.

We really have a lot in common, aside from our mutual love of Pat Martino. Because I read an anecdote about your father telling you as a kid to "Come check out this guitar player on TV," which turned out to be the Roy Buchanan documentary, *The Greatest Unknown Guitarist In the World*, that aired on PBS in 1971. That exact scenario happened to me! I was in my bedroom when my father called out, "Hey, Bill, come see this guy. He's amazing!" I was 16.

What's really funny about that is... it's so unlike father. He was a truck driver. He delivered beer, and his musical tastes ran more along the lines of John Gary and the Tijuana Brass. So for him to call me in that night to see Roy Buchanan on TV is really unexpected. That's amazing that we share this same very specific scenario. I remember I dug that PBS documentary. I especially loved this segment where Roy is kind of detuning his E string as he's playing. And I was like, "Wow, that guy's really good if he

can do that!" Like, if I heard Allan Holdsworth, I would have been more impressed by Roy detuning the E string like that. I was 13 at the time that PBS documentary aired... 13 going on 16, 13 going on six. You know, that's the age where you bounce back and forth. But yeah, that Roy documentary was transforming for me.

And like Roy, you're a Tele man.

Yes. Basically, I use the same guitar and amp [a 1970 Fender Princeton Reverb] I've been using for 25 years.

I noticed on one of your earlier records [2006's *Heaven Is Creepy*], you list Carmine Street Guitars in New York City among your thanks on the back of the album. Did you hang out there?

Not a ton, but I always felt like it was home. When I first went to New York in 2002, I'd go there all the time because I kind of had nothing to do. There were just too many hours in the day back then. I'd hang up guitar lessons posters around town, then go to Carmine Street Guitars and hang out the rest of the day. And the guy in the back, the famous guitarist who played on Lou Reed records...

Robert Quine.

Yeah, he was always there in the back, but I didn't know who he was. I just regarded him as this crabby guy with sunglasses on all the time who lurked in the back room. Until one day the owner, Rick Kelly, came out and said to me, "Hey, Robert really likes your playing." I don't know if he heard my actual recordings; he might have just heard me playing in the store one day and for some reason liked it. It might have been a magical day where the sound was

really good and I was just kind of playing freely for about 45 minutes, but I think that might have been his introduction to me.

Now, I'm no solo guitarist, so

I was happy about it when Rick told me that Quine liked my playing. They were always so welcoming to me at Carmine Street Guitars, and it became a haven for me. Honestly, I didn't like New York when I moved there, because I couldn't get used to the weather. I mean, I had been in California my whole life. But I always really liked the people in New York, and I seemed to fit in. I kind of don't fit in as much in San Francisco because I'm a little more aggressive — a little more about work than most people.

|||||  **"TO SEE ROY BUCHANAN LIVE IS LIKE DECIPHERING THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS"**  |||||



The 4TET (top) and the cover for *She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show*. (from left) Dan Rieser, Campilongo, Andy Hess and Luca Benedetti.

I remember the first time I saw you play was at the Rodeo Bar on Third Avenue and 27th Street. Did my amp blow up the night you saw me there? Because that happened.

You also established long-standing gigs in NYC at the 55 Bar, the Living Room and Rockwood Music Hall.

I played 55 Bar the second Sunday of every month for 20 years. I also did the Knitting Factory, had a Monday night residency at Rockwood on the Lower East Side and a Tuesday night residency at the Living Room in Williamsburg.

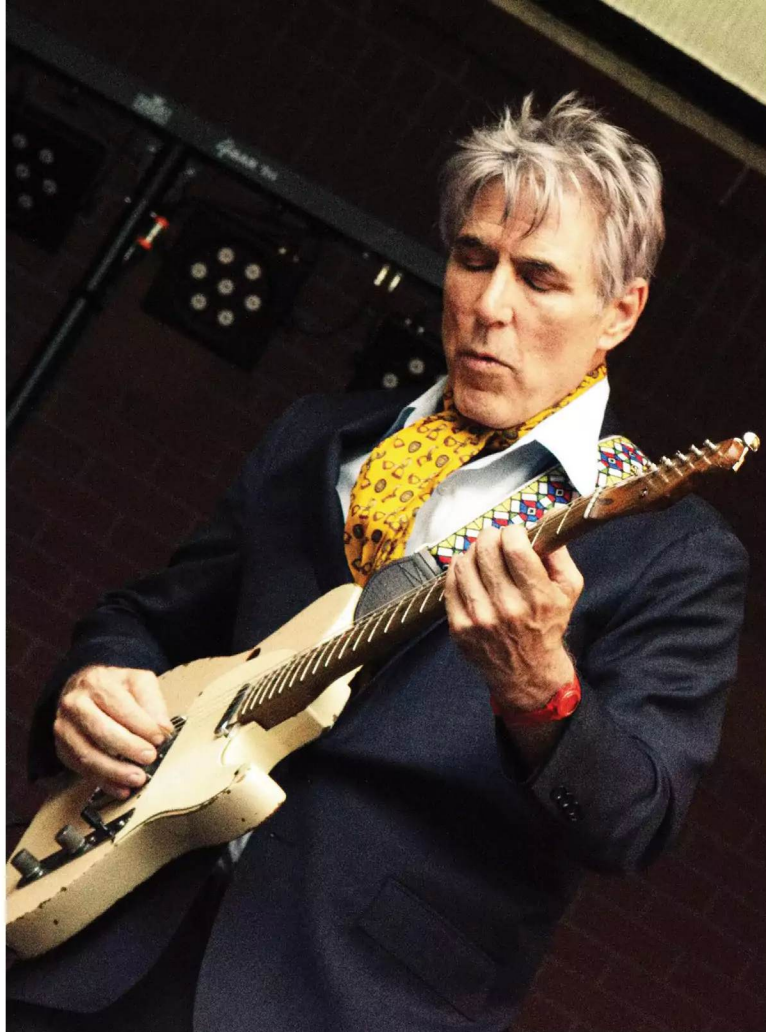
Right before COVID hit, I started to think about moving back to the Bay Area. I own a house here in the Bay Area that I put a down payment on back in 1994, and I paid it off every month by renting it out. It was just automatic for decades. Then, during COVID, I was having fantasies about running my hands through dirt and seeing worms in it, you know? So there was a lot of momentum for me to come back to a house that was paid for, with a backyard, and in Bay Area weather to boot. So I was in New York for 21 years, but two of them were during COVID.

I think the first record that I had of yours was *Orange*, the sparse trio album you did in 2009 with upright bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Tony Mason. That's a good one.

I especially love your version of "Chelsea Bridge," where you do behind-the-nut string bending that almost sounds like pedal-steel guitar or a whammy bar. You also utilize that same technique on "Sal's Waltz" and "Sleepyhead" from *Coney Island Freak Show*. When you go behind the nut, are you reaching over with the finger of your right hand or left hand? The left hand goes behind the nut, using only my first finger. Some people use both their index and middle fingers to get that same string-bending effect, but I'm opposed to that because it ties up too much of your hand, and then you're too committed to just being behind the nut. You're essentially living behind the nut in that case. Whereas, with the one-finger technique, just using my index finger, I can still get my fourth finger and possibly my third finger doing things on the fretboard.

A lot of people don't do it with just one finger because it hurts, and it definitely does hurt at first. But the other thing about this technique is, don't try doing it right behind the nut. It's about a half inch back from the nut. You have to move away from the nut, behind it, in order to get some elasticity. You don't want it too tight, and yet you don't want to be too far committed to behind the nut.

You also do some wicked volume-knob swells à la Roy Buchanan on "Chelsea Bridge" and "Blues for Roy," from *Orange*.



Campilongo occasionally uses hybrid pick-and-fingers style, as on his *Coney Island Freak Show* track “Thing.” “Because of the pedal-steel influence,” he says, “I like to just grab a chord with my right hand.”

Well, there’s two things to that. I pretty much never use my volume control for that effect; I use my tone knob. The volume knob thing, Roy did it, but you need a lot of headroom to do that, like a Twin Reverb or something. I found that it was a more dramatic sound to use the tone knob instead because you hear the whole process.

Now, if you’re playing with a loud drummer, you’re not going to hear the full effect of the swell with just the volume knob. Whereas, with the tone knob you hear the attack and then a vocal-like effect after the initial note. With the volume knob, sometimes it gets erased, where you only hear the last 30 percent of the swell. So I just use my tone knob.

I have a traditional Tele setup. I didn’t reverse the knobs or anything, like some guys do, and I don’t curl my little finger around the knob like Robbie Robertson or Roy. I do kind of a karate chop swipe from zero to 10, where I start with my little finger and it slides to my index finger, then my middle. The hardest part is really the picking, because the right hand is not stationary. So I just would practice, like, a major scale, going from the sixth string to the first string, and learn how to navigate that.

I think Roy Buchanan was the first guy I saw do that swelling technique, so I will give him credit

where credit’s due. And I remember hearing him do it on “Wayfaring Pilgrim,” from his record *In the Beginning*, and concluding that it had to be a tone knob thing. I think that’s where I would attribute it to, because he kind of starts with his vibrato-less low volume and all of a sudden it just erupts. So I concluded that was the tone knob, and that’s what you hear on “Blues for Roy.”

Talk about some other specifics of your playing on *She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show*. For instance, the opening track, “Dragon Stamp,” begins with a burst of growly distortion. Is that a pedal you’re using to get that very distorted tone?

“Dragon Stamp” has no effects. It’s just my low E string tuned down to A, so it’s pretty low. I’ve gone lower. On “Finger Puppet” from *Orange*, I tune that thing a full octave below E. But on “Dragon Stamp” it’s an octave below the fifth-string A. And when you do that, it sounds otherworldly, but you really need to pick close to the bridge. If you strike the strings by where the pickups are, everything becomes floppy. So you have to pick by the bridge where it’s tight. And then I also do a behind-the-nut bend on that detuned string, which really sounds crazy. I think it just goes to a IV chord, a D. And that’s the IV chord with a behind-the-nut bend. That’s definitely my favorite song on the record. If I could, I would have made that song one entire side of a record, but I do have this “one eye on the audience to make sure they’re not bored” aspect to me. And sometimes I wish I didn’t have it.

But “Dragon Stamp” came out good. It’s a strong opener. I asked Luca to come up with the song order, but I told him, “Only if ‘Dragon Stamp’ opens the

record. Everything else you figure out.” It’s definitely not the most commercial tune on the record, like “Sunset Park” or “Sal’s Waltz.” But I just really like that song, and it’s

“I’VE TOLD PEOPLE,
‘WRITE A SONG AND
BRING IT TO YOUR BAND.
THEY MIGHT MAKE
IT BETTER’ ”

the kind of record I would want to listen to if it opened that way.

You showcase some really expressive string bending on “Gee Baby, Ain’t I Good to You,” which also opens with a delicate solo guitar intro featuring some tasty chord melody playing.

Yeah, that’s just all left-hand vibrato. That song, to me, is more of a Luca Benedetti showcase. But if

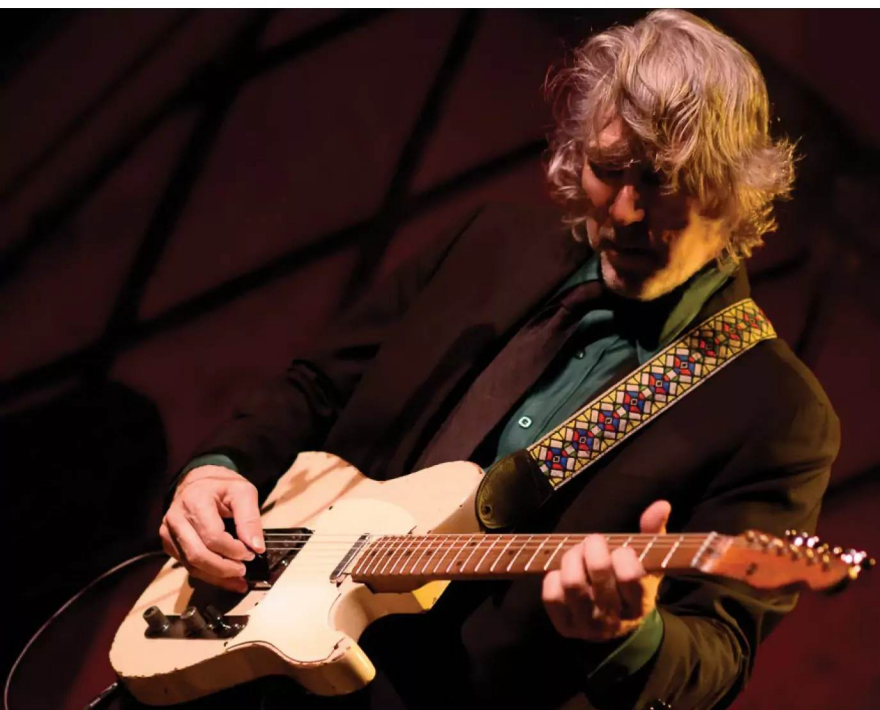
I do play the straight melody, like on this tune, I try to sound like a singer. I'm not a big fan of rock-bending playing, like Mick Ralphs of Bad Company. So, generally, if I bend that kind of way, I don't like to use vibrato, I just want to hear the bend.

And I learned that from seeing Roy Buchanan. When I first saw Roy — I saw him live, like, 10 or 20 times — it was in the late '70s, early '80s.

Obviously, pre-internet, where you just didn't see anybody that good play live. Now I see 11-year-old kids from China blowing my mind, but back then it was like, Well, I hear it on the record but I can't tell what he's doing!

But to see Roy Buchanan live is like deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls. And I remember seeing him play in a not-too-crowded club. He was between record labels and there were maybe only 25 people at the show, so you could just walk up to the front of the stage and be right next to him. And I remember seeing that he didn't use the vibrato, and it was shockingly intimate to me. I'm not saying I never use vibrato, because I do, but I was really taken aback by how intimate it was when I saw Roy that time. It was like hearing Billie Holiday or something. It just seemed way more intimate. So on "Gee Baby," I'm trying to play the melody like I'm a vocalist.

 **"I PRETTY MUCH NEVER USE MY VOLUME CONTROL FOR SWELLS. I USE MY TONE KNOB"** 



What's happening on "Thing"?

It's inspired by these suspended 7th chords that John McLaughlin plays on "Follow Your Heart" from the Joe Farrell album *Song of the Wind*, or on "Right Off" from Miles Davis's *Jack Johnson*. It's the John McLaughlin chord, with an extra note. It's that thing he does. So I was kind of inspired by that, and then I added G sharp on the bottom. And then I realized I could get it all on natural harmonics on the guitar, on the seventh fret or the ninth fret. But I came up with the chord first.

Are you fingerpicking on that tune?

On that one I use a pick, middle finger and ring finger and just play everything at once. I like the attack of everything simultaneously. When you strike a string with a pick, you're hitting the fourth string first, then the third string, then the second string, in a matter of microseconds. But because of the pedal-steel influence, I like to just grab a chord with my right hand.

What you're describing sounds like the Danny Gatton hybrid-picking technique — pick and fingers simultaneously, pulling the strings while picking.

Yeah, I loved Danny Gatton. That guy was the greatest. But I think I was doing it before I even heard Danny Gatton. I started doing that in 1980, because I was learning Merle Travis style then. I'm really into doing one thing one way. And I never wanted to put the pick in my mouth while I do something with my fingers of my right hand. And so I kind of forced myself to use a plectrum in combination with the middle, ring and little finger. And I don't use my middle finger a ton — certainly on chord voicings on a tune like "Perfect Sunday." That's all what one would call hybrid picking. I don't strum those chords; I pinch them out.

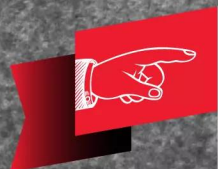
Something about those pinched chords on that tune triggered David Crosby's playing on "Marrakesh Express" for me.

Ha! Well, I like that song. I mean, to be honest, when I wrote "Thing" I thought, Yeah, that's pretty good but I'll never play it. The other day I was going through my iTunes folder and I have over 800 songs in there, and I'd say 700 of them have never seen the light of day. I even disrespectfully called it "Thing," which is almost like calling it "Song" or something equally demeaning. But I sent it to Dan Rieser, which was very uncharacteristic of me, and he really liked it. So I brought it to the band and it became better, which is a good lesson. I've often told people, "Write a song and bring it to your band, because they might make it better."



HERE & OPPOSITE:

Aside from his signature Lumiere guitar, Campilongo plays a Fender Tele through a 1970 Princeton Reverb. "Basically, I use the same guitar and amp I've been using for 25 years."



“Do Not Disturb” is a funky tune that kind of reminds me of Roy Buchanan’s “Filthy Teddy” from *Second Album*.

It’s more like me writing a ZZ Top tune, to be honest. That song came about during COVID, when it was really bleak, man. I’d go on these walks across the Williamsburg Bridge at, like, 5 a.m., when there’s not a soul around. And then the rest of the day I would watch *Breaking Bad* and make banana bread, or whatever one did during lockdown. But during these long, lonely walks I had an old iPod with a bunch of

music on it, including one folder called Classic Rock. And sometimes I’d listen to other stuff, but for some reason I always dug that morning walk with classic rock. So bright and early every morning I’m listening to ZZ Top, Mountain’s “Mississippi Queen” and “Inside Looking Out” by Grand Funk Railroad. And I think “Do Not Disturb” came out of that experience.

🎸 **“THERE’S STILL A LOT OF MOM-AND-POP STORES IN BUENOS AIRES. AND THE PEOPLE ARE REALLY INTO MUSIC... SO I LOVE GOING THERE”** 🎸

Is that more behind-the-nut bending on “Sal’s Waltz”?

Oh, yeah, a lot. I hit natural harmonics on the 12th fret, maybe the fifth, which are an octave higher of the open string, so they’re really easy to navigate. So let’s say I hit a harmonic on the 12th-fret fourth-string D, and then I quickly go down behind the nut and bend it up to E, and that’s the major third of the C chord. If I go another half step, it’s F, and that’s either the root of the IV chord or the dominant seventh of the V. I do some other stuff too, but I get a lot of mileage out of the same intervals. If you’re in A minor, then it’s a completely different thing. So the whole behind-the-nut bending thing is like applying a few things to a lot of context. And you have to have a Telecaster or something with a deeper dish. On a Les Paul you only get a half step, so I couldn’t go D to E on a Les Paul. It’s open D to E flat, which is great in E flat but not in C major.

I understand that you change strings a lot, regardless of what guitar you are playing.

Yes, I have to change my strings so often it’s incredible. If we took a song over five or six takes, I’d have to change strings in the middle of that. I remember when we were recording “Perfect Sunday,” I was like, “Look, we have to stop. I have to change strings.” They just become dead to me. And I know it sounds so Eric Johnson-y, if you know what I mean. It sounds completely irrational, but it’s



not. And I’ve had engineers who absolutely didn’t believe it. Once I brought, like, 20 sets of strings for an overdub session that was going to take two days. And by the second day, I took, like, three takes on a tune and the engineer looked at me and goes, “I hate to say it but I think you need to change your strings.” And the main thing is when they die they become out of tune on the 10th fret to the third fret. And “Perfect Sunday” was like a torture test for that.

What are the characteristics of your new Lumiere guitar?

The initial idea was about making a Telecaster like a Duo-Sonic. Now, Duo-Sonics were made in the



Campilongo's Lumiere Tele-style signature guitar leans against an amp (opposite, top) and is wielded in concert (above). "They're just starting to get orders for them," he says of the model.

'50s and I believe they were the lowest budget guitar available. But they're kind of amazing guitars. One thing is they're made from 1956 wood, but they have a kind of a brownish color called Desert Sand, with a gold anodized pickguard. And I swear, I could stare at it like it was Sophia Loren's face. It just captures my imagination. It's like something that's indelibly printed on you, like the Coca-Cola logo or the Fender logo. You just look at it and you're like, "Wow, that's perfect." And this guitar always looks that way to me. And so I told the luthier Rafa when I started working with Lumiere, "If we make this signature guitar, let's make a Tele that looks like a Duo-Sonic." And he came up with the idea of putting a Firebird humbucker in the neck position, which I really like.

So that's the Jim Campilongo signature Lumiere guitar, and they're just starting to get orders for them. Lumiere is one of the reasons I love Buenos Aires, and I've been going there over the past four years. The guys I play with down there now, drummer Sergio Verdinelli and bassist Mariano Otero, I was introduced to by Rafa. And the first gig we did together I was like, "Hey, we ought to get together and rehearse." But they were way more

|||||👉 "I TOLD THE
LUTHIER, 'IF WE MAKE
THIS SIGNATURE GUITAR,
LET'S MAKE A TELE
THAT LOOKS LIKE A
DUO-SONIC'" 👈|||||

interested in having me over for dinner than rehearsing. We ended up doing both and the gig went well. And I'm going back again for a two-month stay this fall, and I'm

really looking forward to it. To me, Buenos Aires is like a little behind the times from the United States, but in a really good way. While the U.S. is rocketing toward technology and corporations are investing in A.I., where you can't get a human on the phone anymore, there's still a lot of mom-and-pop stores in Buenos Aires. There's still newsstands, a lot of bakeries, great shoe repair places and cleaners. And the people are really into music, and they're really open minded and not obsessed with their cellphones.

So I love going there. I always play this place called Virasoro Club de Jazz, which is kind of like Barbès in Brooklyn — a neighborhood bar but twice as big. It's a place where you can work on your craft. But there's also the energy of the audience giving you energy that you give back to them, and then they give it back to you. I love that. ■



DOUBLE PLAY

When **Tom Bukovac** and **Guthrie Trapp** get together, you might expect a shredfest. But the guitar-slingers' cinematic new instrumental album is an exercise in economy, emotion and team effort.

BY ALAN PAUL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONICA BARANKO

GUITARISTS **GUTHRIE TRAPP** and Tom Bukovac are different in a lot of ways that become obvious just a few moments into a conversation with the pair. Trapp, from the Alabama Gulf Coast, is intense and fast talking, bursting with opinions and

ideas. Bukovac, an Ohio native, is calm and thoughtful, speaking in measured tones and chuckling at his friend's hyperactive mind. Their important similarity is equally obvious: They are two of Nashville's hottest, most in-demand guitarists and have popular, and excellent, YouTube channels.

Now the two longtime friends have collaborated on *In Stereo*, an album of instrumental music that defies expectations, filled with great playing that causes you to lean in and take note, rather than overwhelming you with waves of notes. As Bukovac puts it, "There's a lot of great soloing, but it's sort of hidden inside a cinematic framework."

The album is not available on streaming services, only on Bandcamp or through the guitarists' channels and websites, where it can be purchased on CD and vinyl or as a download. We discussed why this is and much more in a recent Zoom conversation.

At what point did you start to realize that you were going to be spending so much time in the studio? Did you guys each come to Nashville thinking you were going

to do a lot of session work, or did it develop?

GUTHRIE TRAPP I have had some good runs here, but I'm not a career session guy. I have ended up on some pretty cool records with some of my heroes, but I've never made my living playing commercial country music on Nashville records. Anytime I get a call to do anything commercial, I say that they've called the wrong guy. I'll do things that are more rootsy or play acoustic guitar or mandolin on some stuff. I've got the utmost respect for the session players in Nashville, and I am thrilled when I get to work with them in the studio.

TOM BUKOVAC I've lived in Nashville for over 30 years now. I toured with people for about eight years. I was getting bigger and bigger road gigs, and in 2000 I was touring with John Fogerty, who was opening for Tina Turner, playing in stadiums across Europe, when I decided to make the switch to being a full-time studio guy, which I'd never fully committed to doing. I didn't have a family to worry about, so I was ready to work anytime, and by 2004 I was working six or seven days a week. Some of it sucked, but I was learning how to be a studio guy, and there's so much to learn. It's a completely different toolbox.

Touring Europe with John Fogerty and Tina Turner without a family to miss sounds cool. Why did that one make you reassess?

BUKOVAC It was an amazing tour, but I've never really liked being on the road. I've done road gigs since with Joe Walsh, Vince Gill, Ann Wilson and others, but in the early 2000s I just wanted to be a studio guy. I'm a homebody and I love using the studio to its full potential. Getting really creative in there is where my heart is. It's an amazing feeling to play a great live gig, but it's a different skill set. Studio work can be painful at times. Guthrie did enough to see that a lot of it sucks. Sometimes you're playing really bad music, and he doesn't want to do that.

TRAPP Country music is the only genre where it's gotten away from the actual



"I've never really liked being on the road," Tom Bukovac states. "I just wanted to be a studio guy."

sound of the music as it's supposed to be. They should change the name to "southern pop." Studio musicians are never going to tell you about the records they had to

play on that were really bad. They're not going to tell you about the songs that they had to spend three days playing that were just the absolute worst shit you've ever heard in your life. I was raised around good music with good songwriters and a lot of bluegrass and acoustic music. So it was very painful to try and do that, and I'm not a good politician. I couldn't sit there and pretend that I liked the music. I was always the cat that was the oddball and the outsider. Same feeling I had in high school, which is why I quit two weeks

"WE WENT FOR A PINK FLOYD FEEL WITH EFFECTS AND SOUNDS AND HAVING A FLOW"

— TOM BUKOVAC

into the 10th grade. **BUKOVAC** People don't like to talk about the bad music, but that's how it's always been. Even in the heydays of the '50s and '60s, great

session players had to also play terrible music. It's part of the job. I don't play a lot of live gigs anymore and Guthrie's live chops are otherworldly. He could bust rocks with his left hand, and that just comes from playing live gigs over and over. It's a muscle that you must develop, and it goes away if you don't exercise it.

Let's talk about this record, and why you did it now.

BUKOVAC We've got a lot of mutual friends, and I've always thought he was

an amazing player who I loved watching play at my music store. I like guys who can play right in front of you and do something amazing. A lot of people can sound great on record with a lot of fixing, but I'm impressed by the old-school way: sitting in the room together and playing something amazing. Guthrie's got that in spades, so I thought it would be fun to write together and see how it turned out. And that's what happened

TRAPP We did it for the sheer love of making music. We paid for it ourselves, hired our buddies, and went to work with no talk about what people would like to hear. We just got creative. There's two words that come to mind on the creative side: *freedom* and *comfort*. On the business side, we made the decision to not put this up on Spotify, iTunes or any streaming service, and it was the best decision we ever made. The social media that we've developed through our crazy way of making a living over the

past 10 or 15 years really made it all happen. We released the record at midnight. By six o'clock in the morning the CDs were gone, and half the vinyl was gone.

That's amazing, but would it work for someone if they didn't already have the social media followings that you guys have?

BUKOVAC Probably not. But the thing about Bandcamp is that the artist gets a large percentage and...

TRAPP Buyers can contribute more if they want, and most people have been paying five to 10 dollars extra, which is unbelievable. We had no idea, really. I've never had a record make money before this. It keeps growing like gangbusters. We have a loyal niche following of people who love guitar, and when you have that, I don't think that streaming model is necessarily the best way to go. This is just another way to do it that musicians should be aware of.

You didn't make a blazing-solos record, which is more what I expected.

BUKOVAC That's what a lot of people expected, but it's not about that. He's an amazing soloist and I was just trying to make great emotional beds for him to do his thing over. He's like [former football running back] Barry Sanders: You don't know what he's gonna do. It's just fascinating to watch, because his instinctive improvisational skills are completely off the hook. It's fascinating and exciting. I tend to play more methodically, work things out and have melodies in my head, while he is a total gunslinger.

TRAPP I love the fact that we focused on groove, melody, feel and emotion. There's plenty of playing on there, but it's more of a motif, not just blazing. You can trust that if Tom is happy with the arrangement, it's great. You've never seen anything like watching him arrange these songs. Some of them started with riffs or segments one of us had, and



"We did it for the sheer love of making music," Trapp says of *In Stereo*. "We paid for it ourselves, hired our buddies, and went to work with no talk about what people would like to hear."

some of them we sat down together with guitars and started sketching things out. Tom can take these cool little pieces and arrange them into amazing songs.

A fun fact: There was a day or two with all the band members there when I looked at Tom and asked him if had any ideas, and he said, “No, do you?” I said no. So we sat down and worked up a couple tunes on the spot. Those songs might have worked out to be our favorites.

BUKOVAC I’m so used to arranging. I have a bit of ADHD, so we never stay on anything too long. I like to keep shit moving and have purpose. I’m proud of those arrangements because they go through a lot of mood changes. It’s hard to hold people’s attention with no vocals or lyrics. I wanted a record you could put on at a cool party and I wanted to connect the songs. We went for a Pink Floyd feel with effects and sounds and having a flow. David Gilmour has always been my favorite guitar player, so I can’t help it.

Talk a little bit about the gear you both used on the record.

TRAPP One thing to note for the guitarists out there is we didn’t use any big amps on this whole thing. It’s a small-amp record: I mostly used a little Kendrick amp and Tom only used a Princeton Reverb.

BUKOVAC And we didn’t use many guitars either. I mostly played a ‘62 Strat that I’ve since sold, a 1969 Les Paul Custom “Black Beauty” and a few other things: a Duesenberg, a 1966 Telecaster, a Harmony Sovereign acoustic and a 2000s Fender Stratocaster with a built-in speaker, from Japan. And he mostly played a Tele-style guitar.

TRAPP Yep. It’s a Danocaster Tele with Voodoo pickups, which Tom sold me because I was in gear hell when my number one got re-fretted and all screwed up. I’ve played the Danocaster ever since. And I just used a little pedal board with a vintage Nobles Overdrive [rehoused by XTS], a Strymon Lex, Cloudburst and Brigadier Delay; a T-Rex tremolo, an Xotic RC Booster and a Boss Tuner.



Guthrie Trapp plays the Danocaster Tele with Voodoo pickups he purchased from Bukovac “when my number one got refretted and all screwed up.”

Tom, you just said David Gilmour is your favorite guitarist.

Can you name any more of your biggest influences and how they still impact you?

BUKOVAC My two very favorite guitar players are Gilmour and Pete Townshend. I’m known for playing on country records, but my soul has always been with the Brits: Beatles, Stones, Zeppelin, Floyd, Genesis. It’s just in my DNA. Guthrie’s got an amazing history with bluegrass, which fascinates me.

TRAPP I don’t play anything that sounds like a lot of my influences. I love Mark Knopfler, David Gilmour, Ry Cooder, David Lindley, Wes Montgomery and Tony Rice, but a lot of my biggest heroes are my good friends in Nashville: Kenny Greenberg, Pat Bergeson, Jack

“WE DIDN’T USE ANY BIG AMPS ON THIS WHOLE THING. IT’S A SMALL-AMP RECORD”

— GUTHRIE TRAPP

Pearson, Tommy Emmanuel, and the great bluegrass guys like Sam Bush, and Jerry Douglas, who I toured with for six or seven years in my mid 20s, opening for Paul Simon for

three months. And now we’ve got Billy Strings carrying the torch.

What do you make of Billy?

BUKOVAC He’s amazing. I like to see anybody that can back it up and be successful. That boy can play — and he can sing. He added a little bit of rock star to the bluegrass format.

TRAPP We love Billy! He can sing and play his ass off. He knows the American Songbook so well. He can sing 600 songs in any genre and he has been adopted by the Grateful Dead

community, who were ready for something authentic, and that crowd is undeniable.

Guthrie, tell me about your bluegrass background and how and when you switched to playing more electric guitar? Were you one of those little kids in picking competitions?

TRAPP Yeah, I won some competitions early on, which is kind of silly to me now. I learned a lot at bluegrass picking parties. You see the kid in the back getting his chops together and moving up year after year, then eventually he ends up in the middle of the circle. You'll see that at bluegrass festivals in the parking lot

and at people's picking parties. That is an amazing way to learn how to play music, but I wanted to be heard, and playing acoustic guitar and mandolin as a soloist is just a nightmare that I don't have the patience to deal with. I always played a little bit of electric guitar at my uncle's house. He had an old Gibson ES-347 laying around and I'd play that. But it was mostly bluegrass gatherings.

I come from a family of adventurous

people, like real old hippies in the best way possible. My dad built the house we grew up in — a geodesic dome home that they still live in down there on the Gulf Coast of Alabama. When I was 10, me and my dad sailed to Mexico on a 26-footer. Two

years later we hitchhiked to Telluride Colorado for the Bluegrass Festival. In the mid '80s my dad promoted the New Grass Revival to the Gulf Coast, so I met all those guys. It was an eclectic way to grow up for sure, and I'm used to being the outsider.

BUKOVAC The geodesic dome says it all!

TRAPP It was an interesting way to grow up because I was usually the outsider with a unique name my friends and teachers could rarely pronounce correctly. I'd get a funny look from friends that came over for a birthday party and walked into a house that looks like a spaceship. But I wouldn't give any of that up now. It was an amazing way to grow up and forged the path for the rest of my life. My parents are amazing people and I couldn't have done any of this without their love and support and their impeccable taste for what we consider high-quality music. 🎸

“COUNTRY MUSIC HAS GOTTEN AWAY FROM THE SOUND IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE. THEY SHOULD CHANGE THE NAME TO 'SOUTHERN POP'”

— GUTHRIE TRAPP



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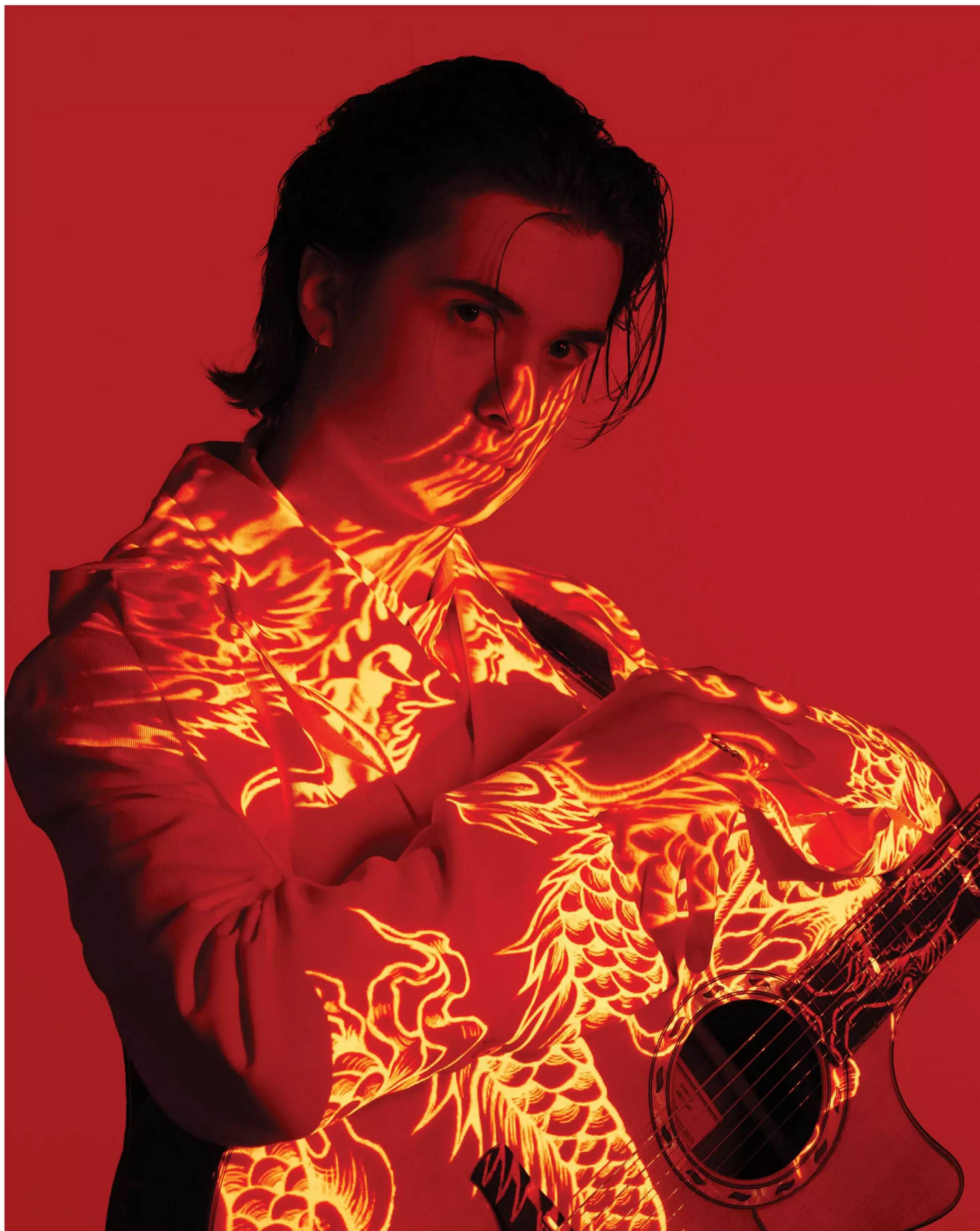
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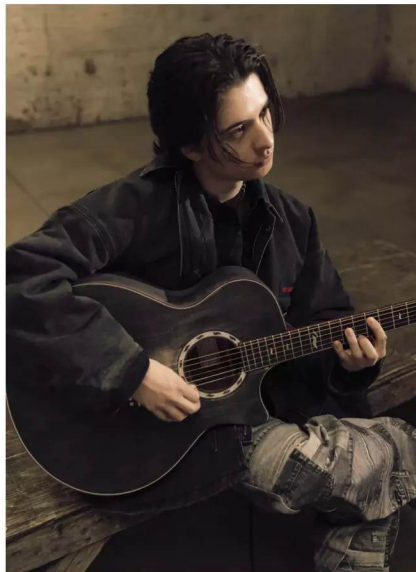
Purists say he's destroying guitar. But percussive fingerstyle phenom **Marcin** sees his fire-breathing guitar revolution as more of an evolution. And its time is now.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK FANCHER

THE NEXT BIG name in acoustic guitar may be a mononym. Marcin, as he is known, is just 23, but he's already on track to break into the mainstream in the same way as his acoustic predecessors Paco de Lucia, Tommy Emmanuel and Andy McKee. Born Marcin Patrzalek in Poland in 2000, the last Year of the Dragon, he's on fire in 2024, the current Year of the Dragon. In addition to winning two European talent shows and cruising into the *America's Got Talent* semi-finals in 2019 with his ninja-like chops and expressive stage presence, Marcin has racked up an incredible 1.61 million YouTube subscribers and earned a signature Ibanez model that has become one of the brand's most popular since it was launched in 2022.

Now he's truly going big with his Sony Classical Masterworks debut, *Dragon in Harmony*, released this September 13. Marcin has always excelled at creative arrangements of cover songs, and this new wide-ranging effort finds him tackling everyone from Nirvana and Mozart to Miles Davis and Led Zeppelin. The album includes guest spots from fellow Ibanez endorser Ichika Nito, who contributes electric guitar to "I Don't Write About Girls," as well as from Portugal. The Man, who appear



on "When the Light Goes." An undercurrent of electronic beats adds a modern quality to the 14-song affair, which is co-produced by Marcin and Dan Book (Shania Twain, Blink 182).

Marcin is a truly unique figure. Traditionally trained, he started playing classical guitar at age 10 and studied flamenco under Spanish maestro Carlos Piñana. But Marcin is a born non-traditionalist. Not only does he choose to perform standing up, he's downright flamboyant, using his whole body energy

to command his instrument and the stage. His modern percussive mastery combined with his classical/flamenco background makes him a singularly disciplined gladiator. But he's not caught up in the typical trappings of guitar idolatry or gear geekery. Marcin is all about maximum radical self-expression, and it's making him much more than a new guitar star. He's crossing over to a general population that simply appreciates accomplished original artistry and, of course, the circus-like nature of his high-wire act on six strings. He's sold out New York's Gramercy Theatre and the Troubadour in L.A. At press time he was gearing up to take over Times Square on July 19 as part of the TSQ Live summer events series.

Will he make a significant, lasting impact on the culture? Time will tell. In the meantime, there's no doubt that he's one of the most compelling players pushing the envelope right now. *Guitar Player* caught up with the young phenom to learn what's behind him and his acoustic percussive fingerstyle virtuosity.

You cover such a wide range of material and musicians. I'm curious to know who your guitar heroes are.

I was never — and am still not — a guitar geek. I'm not very deep into the guitar community, even though it's been

very kind to me. But I don't come from the same mentality as a lot of guitarists who chase after guitar legend status because I don't come from a place where that was very established. In Poland, admiration of the guitar legends hasn't been much of a thing, and the classical genre I come from doesn't have much of that anyway. Guitar is such a forgotten, underappreciated instrument because it's not in the orchestra, and it's not much of a solo instrument showcase.

You would not expect a guitar concerto to be popular. Guitar is not one of the cool instruments, even in the very uncool classical world. So I was in a very weird surrounding of people and influences, and I honestly never wanted to be like anybody else.

Even though Michael Hedges is the prototypical OG of the percussive style, I hadn't heard of him until maybe two years after I was already playing like that. His style seeped into the other players that I saw online. The one who truly resonated was Mike Dawes. Watching Andy McKee and the Canadian guys on the CandyRat label was obviously a huge deal. They were cool and getting the views, but I didn't necessarily want to be like them. When I saw what Mike was doing, I thought it was an evolution, and he was a bit more to the side of that little CandyRat corner, which I liked. I took technical influences from all of them, mimicking what they were doing on the guitar. But sonically and in terms of approach, I was not trying at all to be like them, because it's just not who I am.

There is no substitute for classical training. That's how Ralph Macchio's character in the iconic movie *Crossroads* beats Steve Vai's devil, you know?

Yeah, Paganini's Caprice No. 5. I appreciate the analogy. I will agree that the core discipline of classical techniques is unparalleled with other styles. Even when an electric player does something that makes people freak out thinking it's



"I WAS NEVER AND AM STILL NOT A GUITAR GEEK. I'M NOT VERY DEEP INTO THE GUITAR COMMUNITY"

so new, usually it's already happened in classical music. Not that players like Mike Dawes or Andy McKee are attempting to go in that lane. They have their own imaginations and styles, and they stick to that.

Are you a Paco de Lucia fan?

Yes, absolutely. That's maybe the only guitarist I would say was ever like an idol to me. I stay away from that word, but that's the one name in the guitar world I can mention. But not because of technique or anything other than his mentality, which was to bring flamenco — a niche genre with a traditional, local way of playing the guitar — to the mainstream and the public. That is a sign of a truly groundbreaking musician, and that's what I love doing. It's my mission. Paco de Lucia brought palmas — the percussive hand-clapping rhythms of Spanish flamenco — to the masses, and that's what I'm trying to do with percussive playing.

You've certainly got a large audience paying attention.

Well, the album starts with a double entendre, "Guitar Is Dead." And that's kind of the intro to the real first song, "I Killed It." It's essentially a cheeky

response to purist or obsolete thinkers saying that players like me, Tim, Ichika or any of the young players trying to change things in the guitar world are somehow destroying the legacy of the guitar. We're doing bad things, unthinkable and unlistenable, and that's not what you're supposed to be doing. That's not how you play the guitar. We are basically killing the guitar.

But if they're saying that evolution is a bad thing, then essentially the guitar is dead. I don't know what they want us to do. Play Cmaj#11 in a different position? That's not evolution. So either they are saying that guitar is dead because I killed it, and I'm the culprit who is messing it up for everybody. Or

I'm saying I killed it because I'm doing something right. I'm pissing off the right people, essentially.

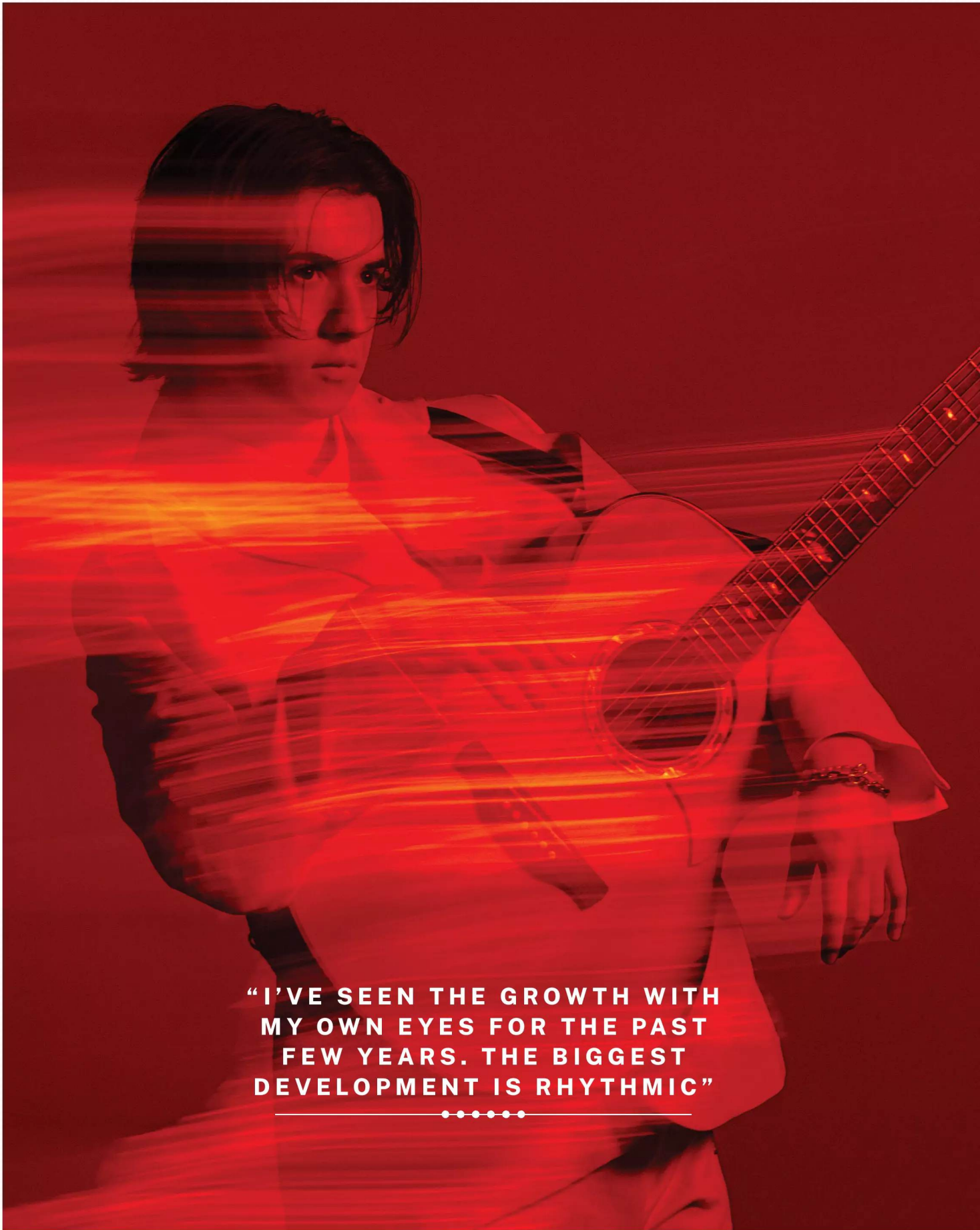
Being classically trained but focused on evolution, what are your thoughts on Segovia?

That's his voice in the sample on "Guitar Is Dead." He's the originator of the current classical guitar style. Everything that's happening in guitar is technically because of him. I saw a clip of a biopic called *Andrés Segovia at Los Olivos*. He's just sitting there in a beautiful house talking wisdom and one of the things he says is, "Guitar is a very complicated instrument, being the only stringed instrument that is really polyphonic. It is impossible to compose if you don't play it and play it well."

The concept is that the guitar is the only stringed instrument capable of composing layers. Violin or cello cannot. Piano can do it, but it lacks articulation. It's a very static instrument. Guitar is light, fluid, nimble, and it is polyphonic, which makes it very special. He's saying that when composers try to create for guitar, they cannot do justice to the instrument unless they also play it. He said a lot more, but I couldn't put a 40-minute sample on my record.



**“IF PEOPLE ARE SAYING THAT
EVOLUTION IS A BAD THING,
THEN ESSENTIALLY THE
GUITAR IS DEAD”**



**“I’VE SEEN THE GROWTH WITH
MY OWN EYES FOR THE PAST
FEW YEARS. THE BIGGEST
DEVELOPMENT IS RHYTHMIC”**



The single “Classical Dragon” is a smoking duet. How did Tim Henson from Polyphia end up as a featured guest?

Obviously, Polyphia is a big name in the world of guitar — maybe the biggest if you look purely at the guitar community. I felt they were the most exciting band or artist when I looked around a few years ago. I saw that Tim followed me on social media, so I sent him the track, not expecting anything. But he responded very quickly and positively. It’s a very guitar heavy song, like a guitar feast!

Henson also has a signature Ibanez.

Is that how you got involved with the brand?

No, I’ve actually been working with Ibanez passively since 2018 and actively since maybe 2021. I started on an AE900 that they sent me before we modified that into my signature MRC10. It’s great that Tim is with Ibanez, and so is Ichika Nito, who plays on my album as well. It’s like the new wave of guitar is heralded by Ibanez.

Your guitar has a little scratch pad on the top. Did you pick that up from Mike Dawes?

I guess you could say that, at least the concept of it. Mike’s guitar is different in that it’s made by a small company [Cuntz]. It’s not very accessible. Like my music, I wanted my guitar to be widely accessible. Accessibility and ease of use are important to me. People think there is a big barrier of entry to playing in my style because it looks intimidating to do what I do, which I want to say is kind of a plus for me. I’m not going to lie. It is a vastly different way of playing the guitar, but with my signature Ibanez, you get a very accessible instrument to start your journey with percussive playing and finish it. You can go forever.

The scratch pad is just a piece of unfinished spruce. There’s nothing fancy about it other than the shape, which I love. Before I had my signature model, I was adding tape and using glue to affix



“EVERYTHING THAT’S HAPPENING IN GUITAR IS TECHNICALLY BECAUSE OF SEGOVIA”

a scratch pad. We also reinforced the bracing — there’s a plate that supports the body — so when I slap my hand down to create a kick drum sound, it’s nice and tight and doesn’t resonate. There’s no note associated. The plate also protects the top from breaking.

And I wanted the guitar to be very easy to play. The action is so easy that you can execute everything you need to do on the fretboard with just your fretting hand doing hammer-ons and pull-offs, leaving the other hand free to do whatever else.

Those are the main modifications we made from the AE900. I didn’t need to reinvent the wheel, as that model is not even for sale anymore. My signature model is on the higher end of production guitars, so it’s not perhaps something you would purchase on a whim. But I’m working with Ibanez on some cool stuff for the future.

We’ll keep our eyes out for that. What’s your pickup and signal chain?

My pickup is a Fishman Rare Earth Mic Blend. It’s a dual-element pickup consisting of a magnetic soundhole pickup with a microphone attached. I split the signal and send it out through a stereo jack. The magnetic pickup

focuses on the strings. The microphone catches some of the string sound as well, but it’s mostly the body percussion and everything else. I use the same Boss OC-5 Octave pedal that everybody else seems to be using now, in Poly mode to add low octaves to the lowest notes I play on the bottom two strings while the top strings remain pure. Onstage, I use an audio interface to throw the signals into a laptop running Logic Pro, where I add some compression and

a little ambience.

I don’t use any of the electronics when I record. For that

I simply throw a single Manley microphone in front of my guitar.

Are you beginning to see your influence in young players looking

up to you and trying to cop your style?

Yes, and my style is difficult, but my greatest joy is seeing that mission fulfilled step by step by young people picking up guitars. Kids pick up the guitar to do something cool. You want to be good at something — look cool, sound cool — and you want to have your own thing. To see the acoustic guitar and the percussive style being considered a cool lane to pick — something unique where suddenly you’re not an outcast anymore — that’s been the biggest blessing for me.

Kids tag me in their videos when they play my songs and my arrangements. I’ve seen the growth with my own eyes for the past few years. The biggest development is rhythmic. I used to see a lot of them missing that key element, but now they play like they know what they’re doing. They understand the core concept of this style.

In addition to being a blessing, that’s also kind of a kick in the butt to keep evolving and not stagnate because there are other players chasing me. It’s a beautiful thing, the changing of the guitar status quo. We’re having a real moment, and I’m very lucky to be trying, at least acoustically, to spearhead the way forward. ■



WHAT BASSISTS AND DRUMMERS REALLY WANT

Want to get the best out of your bandmates? Here's the inside scoop that every guitar player needs — from industry pros who know.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

SO YOU THINK your bandmates are happy with your contribution as guitarist? That you're doing a great job and everything is peachy? Well, I conducted an expansive investigation to find out just what they're whispering to each other when we guitarists aren't around. This is information you need to know if your goal is to be a sought-after working musician — or if you just want to stop driving your bandmates crazy. Or even just really impress them.

The idea for this piece hit me when an old bass-playing friend contacted me over the holidays to purchase a block of

lessons as a gift for the guitarist in his band. He presented a long and well thought-out list of grievances, ranging from “his tones are awful” to “he plays too loud and doesn't pay any attention to the rest of the band's feel.” He ended with an exasperated, “He just won't listen to me.”

Yes, sometimes it's difficult to look in the mirror and be honest with ourselves about where we could use improvement as guitarists. So I sought out advice from some great bassists and drummers to get their points of view on how guitarists can become better bandmates. The

players I interviewed are all successful working musicians who have had countless experiences interacting with guitarists in all types of situations.

Now, you might already excel at all of the issues they raise, but you just might find one or two things that will make you see your role in the band a bit differently. The key here is not to take criticism personally. And while I'm sure we could tell bass players and drummers a thing or two, today we're in the spotlight. So let's sit back, take a deep breath and be open to improving our game, whatever level we may be at.

EUGENESERGEV

Cat Popper (catpopper.com) has been a sought-after bassist for many years, performing with everyone from Willie Nelson and Levon Helm to Jack White and Ryan Adams. She began our exchange by offering advice about how to set our stage volume, something that can be baffling when starting out. “Keep in mind that with blaring stage volume comes low-mid frequencies that can screw up lower-voiced singers and, definitely, the bass guitar, especially when there are keyboards or piano onstage,” she says. “There are many gigs I’m at where I know I won’t hear myself much at all — because if I turn up, it starts a stage-volume war, and the house suffers.” Sounds like we can be more aware that our volume and tone choices impact our band. For example, just because a tone sounds great in your bedroom doesn’t mean it will necessarily work with your band.

Cat also wants us to know, “I am listening to your solos and accompanying you! I got your back!” In turn, let’s pay more attention by listening to what’s going on around us, and consider what our bandmates are playing when we create our own rhythm parts and solos.

If you check out Jon Price on Instagram (@jonpricebass), you’ll witness some killer bass playing. Jon is a veteran of the New York City live music scene and is currently navigating the post-COVID era by playing jazz, funk and R&B gigs as well as teaching remotely. He is a rock-solid part of any rhythm section and a brilliant improviser. Jon offers this piece of tasty advice. “I often wish guitarists wouldn’t play the same stock chord voicings and licks,” he says. “It’s good practice to ensure you are hearing an idea before you start playing it, otherwise you just end up playing something similar to what you’ve done countless times before. I encourage players to literally not hold the guitar when they are coming up with a part. Listening and hearing, even singing, an idea is essential, rather than just letting your hand position dictate what idea you’ll come up with next.”

Jon also stresses how we can be better prepared for performing. “When you’re

practicing, make sure you set up all the elements as close as you can to the upcoming live situation.” This means practicing standing up, if that’s how you’ll be performing, using the same guitar, and even singing into an unamplified mic, if you’ll be contributing vocals. These “dress rehearsal” elements all contribute to helping you acquire the desired muscle memory for the upcoming performance.

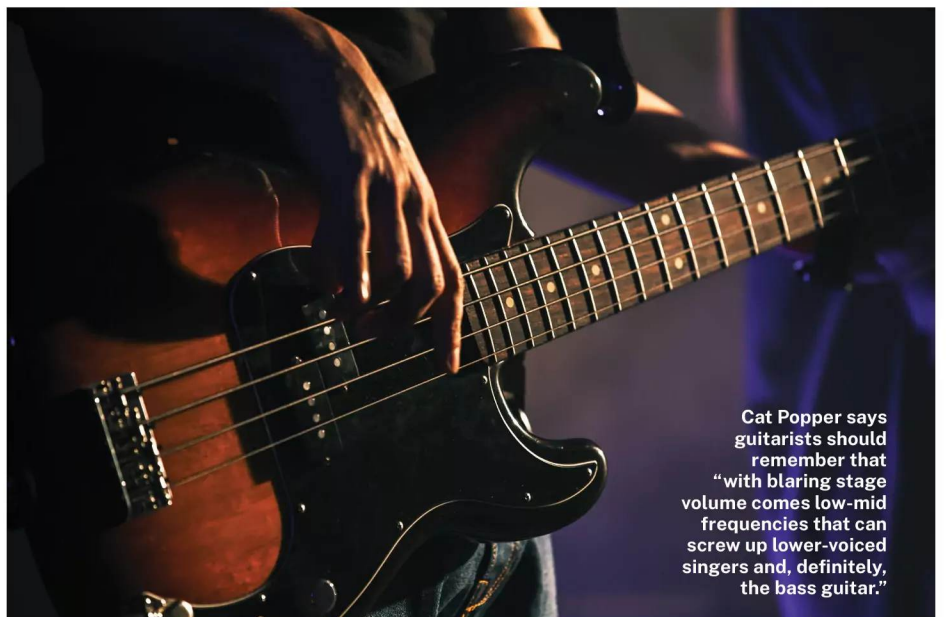
“THERE’S A LOT TO BE SAID FOR KNOWING HOW TO PLAY ON THE BEAT, BEHIND THE BEAT OR AHEAD OF THE BEAT”

Ryan Vaughn (@ryandrummerboy on Instagram) has been a freelance drummer for over 20 years. His credits include expansive TV work such as *The Masked Singer*, *Zoe’s Extraordinary Playlist*, and most recently as the house drummer for ABC’s *The Bachelor Presents: Listen to Your Heart*. Like Jon Price, Ryan brought up gig preparation — or lack thereof — as a problem. “The biggest thing that I notice in young players is a general lack of ‘homework,’” Ryan says. “Lots of

players can play, but very few truly prepare for a gig.” He encounters this often when playing gigs featuring cover material or songs by well-known artists. “Young players often don’t really spend time dialing in the sounds from the records that they are learning. In contemporary pop-rock music, sounds are everything.” (Ah, so we shouldn’t just buy the effects, we have to actually learn how to use them? Point taken.)

Ryan concludes by adding, “No one really cares about the gear or the chops a player might have. It always comes down to their preparedness and ability to make the band feel like they are living in the sound of the recorded songs that they are recreating live.” I learned early on just how awful it feels to be unprepared in rehearsal or onstage, and this can leave a lasting impression on other musicians. That’s not great if you desire a career in music. Using some of your practice time to fully prepare for a gig will always serve you well in the end.

Julia Adamy (juliaadamy.com) is a bassist with an extraordinary list of credits. She has performed at illustrious New York City venues such as Carnegie Hall and Radio City Music Hall, done TV work like *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *The Today Show*, and been a member of the pit orchestra for major Broadway shows



Cat Popper says guitarists should remember that “with blaring stage volume comes low-mid frequencies that can screw up lower-voiced singers and, definitely, the bass guitar.”

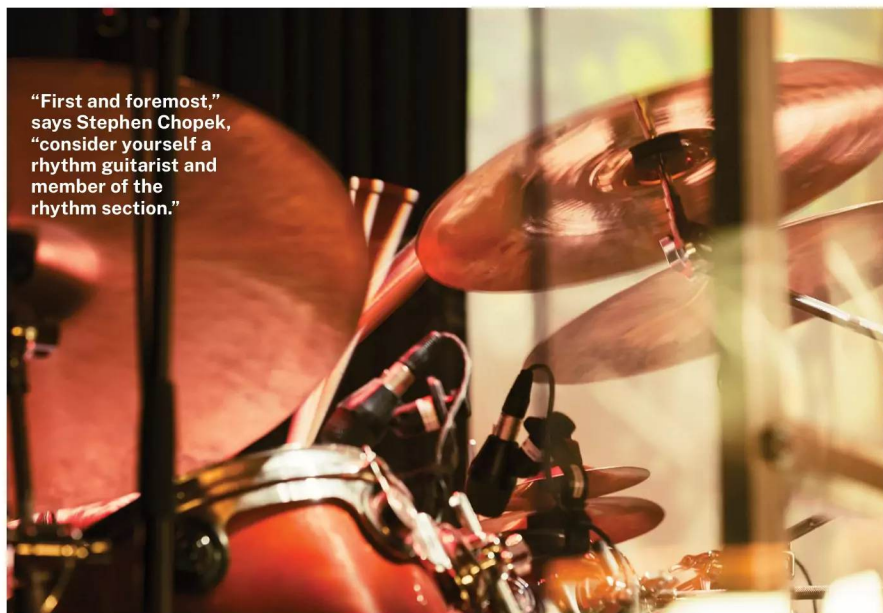
such as *Hamilton*, *Mamma Mia!* and more.

“There are two things that stand out to me when I think of great guitar players: feel and tone/sounds,” Julia says. Echoing Ryan Vaughn, she points out, “Some of the most creative players have a strong pedal game! Spend some time getting to know the ins and outs of pedals so that you know the full capabilities of them individually and paired together.” In the end, if we play great but with jarring or inappropriate tones, we’re not going to be asked to perform very much. As for feel, Julia advises, “Really work on pocket and being intentional about where the groove is placed, practicing along to records that feel good to you and trying to dissect where in the beat they’re playing.”

Not surprisingly, this emphasis on “feel” in relation to rhythm and time was also addressed by some of the drummers I spoke with. Understanding these concepts is a key element of what makes great players sound so good.

Elliot Jacobson (elliot-jacobson.com) — no relation to yours truly) has drummed with many artists, including Elle King and Ingrid Michaelson, and is also a busy session player. “Feel — in terms of straight to swing, on top of the beat to behind the beat — has always been huge,” he says, “the way playing 16th notes can sound so different from player to player, and how some players can’t adjust their feel at will.” This inability to adjust will inspire rancor from producers and bandmates alike, and conversely, having this skill will make you stand out in the crowd.

As Julia Adamy recommends, one way to accomplish this is to play along with your favorite records while focusing your attention squarely on the feel created by the bassist and drummer — as if they’re actually in the room with you. Why not step out of the box and instead of watching that seventh Tube Screamer demo, take a moment to watch any number of great videos where drummers and bassists talk about and demonstrate how to approach different feels and tempos? Feel isn’t simply magic that comes along out of the blue. Creating a good feel within your playing, as well



“First and foremost,” says Stephen Chopek, “consider yourself a rhythm guitarist and member of the rhythm section.”

as part of a band, is within your control if you’re simply open to learning how. More on this below!

An accomplished drummer, Stephen Chopek (stephenchopek.com) has toured and recorded with artists such as John Mayer, Charlie Hunter and Jesse Malin. He’s also a power pop singer/songwriter, who plays all the instruments on his 2021 EP, *Dweller*. Here, Stephen takes us a step further inside the concepts of feel and time. “First and foremost,” he says, “consider yourself a rhythm guitarist and member of the rhythm section. Keeping good time doesn’t mean you have to play

“REALLY WORK ON POCKET AND BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT WHERE THE GROOVE IS PLACED”

mechanically or sacrifice good feel, and the best ensembles are those that are all feeling the time together.” He implores us to be an active part of creating a song’s tempo and feel, and indicates that it shouldn’t all fall to the drummer. “The role of timekeeper shouldn’t fall solely on any one member of the band. That’s a lot of weight to put on one person’s shoulders, and if one player is feeling overburdened or stifled by the responsibility of having to do someone else’s job, the whole group will suffer.”

Stephen also points out some of the lingo we might recognize but not fully understand. “There’s a lot to be said for

knowing how to play on the beat, behind the beat or ahead of the beat,” he says. “A more helpful way to conceptualize these ideas is to play within the beat. Find where it is as a band and sit inside of it. As with most things, this is easier said than done!” That said, to accomplish this, Stephen recommends using a metronome when practicing — but he knows that some will be turned off by this advice. “If a metronome isn’t your thing, then set up a few loops and apply some practice routines to them at different tempos.”

Again, digging into some YouTube videos will reveal a wealth of information and make these concepts seem not so esoteric. Feel is somewhat esoteric, but that’s the nature of music and what makes it magical. The best musicians are in touch with how to actively contribute to creating this magic in an ensemble setting, and by simply making yourself aware of these concepts you’re taking a huge step toward achieving this goal. As Stephen points out, “The only way to get better at playing with other people is by playing with other people!”

So, in the end, are we perfect? No. But working toward being more skilled as bandmates and listening to others in the verbal and musical senses will help make articles like this no longer necessary! ■

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

EUGENESERGEV

Squeeze Box Logic

Using a compressor on an acoustic guitar signal chain.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

A COMPRESSOR IS one of the main tools in an acoustic player's box, but how to use one to best effect can seem mysterious. Go without, and the signal can sound weak. Squeeze the signal too hard and you lose dynamics. So what kind is best for a given application? And what's the deal with limiting?

Universal Audio is famous for its classic studio compressors, which are now available as both plug-ins and stompboxes. The Max Preamp & Dual Compressor [see review in September 2023] offers models of the 1176 Studio Compressor and Teletronix LA-2A, Studio Compressor plus a model of the MXR Dyna Comp and an emulation of UA's 610 tube preamp/EQ. I checked it out on my quest for a deeper understanding and referred to UA tech guru Drew Mazurek for insights.

ELECTRIC AND ACOUSTIC CONSIDERATIONS

A compressor shapes a signal's dynamic range by attenuating the loud parts and boosting the quiet ones via makeup gain or output. The higher the ratio, the more severe the squeeze. A ratio of 10:1 or above is considered limiting. Since electric guitars are usually run through everything from overdrive pedals to tube amps, there's often little need for a compressor beyond adding snap to clean rhythms or sustain without extra gain to a relatively clean lead — think Bonnie Raitt on slide.

I spoke to Bonnie recently, and she recalled, "When we were working on my

third album, Lowell George gave me one of those MXR compressors, and that's been the secret to my tone all these years." The Dyna Comp is a potent, colorful compressor that can sweeten up leads for acoustic rock. Its dynamic reduction might be too severe for acoustic rhythm, depending on player's attack and amount applied. But that's the essence of the compression enigma.

COMPRESSION VS. LIMITING

Limiting can yield a similar dynamic effect, but it works a bit differently. A limiter is designed to catch peaks, prevent audio clipping, and preserve sonic integrity. The UAFX Teletronix LA-2A pedal has a mini switch to select between Comp and Limit. I honestly don't hear a grand difference between the two, but either way it brings more guts to everything you play without being too squishy. I found it fantastic for set-and-forget applications.

COMPARISONS

The UAFX LA-2A delivers a warm and clear widening effect compared to the colorful Dyna Comp or UAFX 1176 Studio Compressor pedal, which I would generally describe as in-between the Dyna Comp and the LA-2A. Your guitar and its electronics play huge factors here. For example, while playing a Taylor 514ce, I tweaked the 1176 and LA-2A until their sounds were as similar as possible. But when I plugged in a Cort Solencanto nylon-string, it sounded great through the LA-2A but distorted

when I played it through the 1176 compressor.

MULTIPLE MUSICAL APPLICATIONS

Compression is overkill for aggressive Johnny Cash-style strumming on a dreadnought, because the dynamics are already consistently high. But for light fingerpicking, compression helps bring your playing to life. For varied arrangements, try adding momentary extra compression to, say, a sequence of harmonics that you want to pop out. Heavy compression works best for sustaining longer notes.

Multiple options are handy underfoot. You can have one pedal always on for light compression and another set for heavier compression that you kick on as needed. UA's Max dual-compression pedal is well-suited to this, as I found on a solo gig where I played nylon-, steel- and 12-string guitars. I set Comp 1 to its LA-2A model, and Comp 2 for a more severe squish via the 1176 or Dyna Comp models. It worked like a charm.

Having the right compression under foot makes a huge dynamic difference both onstage and in the studio. Check out a few models to see what works best for you. ■

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player- and Frets-related videos on YouTube @JimmyLeslieGTR, learn about his acoustic/electric rock group at spirithustler.com and his Allman Brothers tribute at allmondbrothers.com.



The UAFX Max Preamp Dual Compressor is one option worth considering. It has three types of compression, any two of which can be used individually, in series or in parallel.



YAMAHA

FS9 R Concert

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

YAMAHA HAS ITS sights set on a new acoustic high-water mark with the F9 Series. The first two models were a pair of dreadnoughts in rosewood and mahogany, the FG9 R and FG9 M, respectively, and now there are a pair of concert-style models in the forms of the FS9 R and FS9 M. All Yamaha F9 Series acoustics are made in Japan and feature a new structural design combining bolt-on and glued neck attachment and a distinctly Japanese aesthetic that adds elegance without being flashy. In addition, all feature tops of solid Adirondack spruce, which is generally considered to be an upgrade from Sitka. Impressed by the dreadnoughts at last year's NAMM show, I jumped at the chance to get one of the very first concert models when a review unit became available. Being more of a singer-songwriter fingerstylist interested in a chunky tone, I asked for the FS9 R made with solid Indian rosewood.

The first thing I noticed when taking the FS9 R from its fancy hardshell case was how fine the prime wood looked with its thin nitrocellulose lacquer finish. This Indian rosewood has the appearance of rich, dark chocolate. It's so dusky and has such perfectly tight grain lines that you almost don't notice them without a closer look.

The Adirondack spruce used for the top has similarly tight grains, but it's quite light, providing a particularly dramatic contrast to the rosewood and the ebony fretboard, headstock cap and bridge, as well as the large dark brown pickguard. That's the general aesthetic, a sharp contrast of light on dark — like a Milano cookie — accentuated by a wooden rope pattern in the soundhole rosette and body purfling. The light wooden stripe down the center of the back is like an exclamation point.

The next thing that caught my attention was the tone. This Indian rosewood sounds



As the interior label attests, the FS9 R, like all F9 series guitars, is made in Japan.

a heck of a lot like Brazilian rosewood, which is essentially not available on production models anymore due to its extremely high cost from being logged unsustainably and over-exploited. The reason players go bonkers for Brazilian is because it has a unique sound that's hearty, articulate and projective. This FS9 R has those qualities, along with fabulous resonance and surprising volume. Notes and chords seem to pop out of it, with very little string energy required to achieve significant top vibration.

The FS9 R has the balanced sound associated with a medium body size, with plenty of bass in the bottom end, a sweet punch in the mids and a nice sparkle on top, without being too shiny. The body size and specs are kind of 'tweener. I compared it side by side and back to back with a Martin OM and found the body sizes were almost identical. The FS9's frame is slightly deeper and the 25-inch scale length slightly shorter and right in between an OM and a triple O. As a result, it has a nice balance of string snappiness and playability.

The FS9 R has a rounded-V neck profile that I found easy to wrap my hand around, even though it's not particularly slim, and its semi-gloss coating provides a nice smooth feel as you slide from position to position. I also appreciated the unique little wooden inlays, designed to resemble Japanese Kumiki woodworking, that wrap from the top side of the neck into the bottom of the fretboard. Barre chords seemed to come a little easier than usual, so I assumed that the nut was around 1.7 inches, but to my surprise it turned out to be a standard 1.75 inches. String spacing was particularly comfortable

for fingerpicking. I tried several tunings, and the open-gear Gotoh tuners proved as functional as they are attractive.

The factory action was low and easy, which most players, me included, will appreciate. But so often that comes at the cost of tone: You need to play with a certain delicacy and can't truly dig in aggressively without getting a thin sound that's often the result of fret splat. Fingerstyle players like myself are hyper-aware of touch sensitivity because it's your actual fingertips and nails, not a plectrum, that are doing the touching. I wear fake nails and am so tuned into the sound of acrylic on steel that I can practically tell when it's time for a trim by the tone on the strings, which gets brighter as they get longer. The attack also becomes heavier, and lots of guitars with low action

and easy playability are simply impractical because they can't withstand the attack without sonic compromise. That wasn't true here. This guitar could handle

whatever I threw at it, even when my fake nails were a bit long. That kind of heartiness, along with such ease of playability, does not pass through these hands very often.

I don't see this quality in craftsmanship very often either. It's impeccable everywhere you look. That luxury quality is evident even when you shut your eyes and simply feel all around the guitar with your hands. Everything is so perfectly polished. I had my wife try it and she said, "It feels like dad's car."

The F9 Series is all about acoustic excellence. There's no pickup onboard, nor is one offered as an option. In the old days that was more of a concern, as an otherwise

dreamy gig guitar would need an invasive install, but now there are many non-invasive aftermarket options from the likes of L.R. Baggs, Fishman and others. It's not such a big deal to have your favorite pickup installed by a technician whenever you're ready to take the FS9 to the stage. That will incur further expense on an already significant investment, but it's the cost of doing business.

I've heard some snickering about why a company like Yamaha that's known for serving quality to the masses would put out a guitar with a practically boutique price of over \$6,000. That's the MSRP, but the street price is right around \$4K. That's still a lot of cheddar but seems to be the line everyone is shooting for, as it's on par with many similar offerings from other major manufacturers.

The fact is this particular Yamaha has a lot of boutique qualities. It's not only the nicest modern Yamaha I've ever played; it's also one of the more enjoyable concert-sized acoustics that's come through these doors in the past decade. My only gripe has to do with how quickly Yamaha wanted it returned, but I can see why they would want to pass this impressive FS9 R around to many reviewers as quickly as possible. In any case, it's an easy Editors' Pick Award winner. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

FS9 R

CONTACT usa.yamaha.com

PRICE \$4,099 street with hardshell case

NUT Bone, 1.75" wide

NECK Mahogany

FRETBOARD Ebony, 25" scale

FRETS 20

TUNERS Gotoh SXN510 Cosmo Black

BODY Solid Indian rosewood back and sides, solid Adirondack spruce top

BRIDGE Ebony with bone saddle

FACTORY STRINGS Elixir Nanoweb 80/20 Bronze Light

WEIGHT 4 lbs (as tested)

BUILT Japan

KUDOS Impeccable craftsmanship, delightful playability, highly resonate with impressive articulation and projection

CONCERNS None

THE FACT IS THIS YAMAHA HAS A LOT OF BOUTIQUE QUALITIES



RC DAVIS

Scirocco

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

THE LATEST COMBOS from San Francisco, California, amp maker RC Davis include the 30-watt Scirocco on review here and the 20-watt Rite Spot (\$1,995). Both are 19.5 by 10 by 15 inches, boast foot-switchable tube-driven spring reverb and tremolo, and share the same complement of tubes — two 12AX7s in the preamp, a 12AT7 phase inverter, an ECC99 reverb driver and a pair of 6L6s running in class AB for power. Both are also hand-built and have top-mounted controls, an aluminum chassis, point-to-point wiring, birch-ply cabinets covered in black Tolex and a silver grille. The Scirocco carries a 12-inch Celestion G12 Neo Creamback speaker while the Rite Spot has a 12-inch RC Davis custom Jensen. The Rite Spot clocks in at 20 pounds and the Scirocco 23 pounds, making them some of the easiest-to-carry tube combos in their respective power ratings we've reviewed.

The Scirocco I received was immediately put to use with a PRS Dustie Waring signature and an Epiphone JB 1963 SG Custom, where it proved itself a formidable amp capable of delivering clear, focused tones at impressively loud levels. I could get sounds reminiscent of my Fender Deluxe Reverb no problem, although the Scirocco's unique passive tone-stack has a 30dB range, and you have to take that into

account when setting the low, mid and high controls because they react differently than you might expect. The mid knob in particular adds sly volume boost when turned up, which I found to be an asset when playing with grind from a Fulltone OCD and a Keeley Muse Driver to get fat lead and dirty rhythm tones. You can also get a respectable thrash-metal sound by setting mid to zero and cranking the high and low controls, which is a place the Deluxe doesn't really go to, so points scored for RC Davis!

It almost goes without saying that it excels for clean sounds, and because there's no master volume you have a good range of crisp headroom to play with until the volume is turned up high enough to summon distortion from the preamp and power tubes. The amp feels very dynamically responsive when cranked—so fun to control for cleaner and dirtier sounds with the guitar—and the 60-watt Celestion G12 Neo Creamback speaker handled high volume quite well without drifting into harshness or losing its composure.

The spring reverb sounds sweet and reflective in a "blackface" kind of way, and it can get swampy and radiant when turned way up for a blistering Dick Dale-style surf attack. Kudos to the tube-driven tremolo, which delivers a smooth, organic pulse over a wide range of speeds and adds some shimmering texture when the depth control is turned up — killer for grinding Texas blues. The Scirocco also sounded great with a selection of UAFX delay and compression pedals, and, to push things in a badass Marshall direction, a Lion '68 Super Lead.

It all highlights the versatility of the Scirocco (and likely the Rite Spot too, if you

can get by with less power). It's a great choice for players who just want to run their guitar straight into a touch-responsive tube amp or those who seek a stout clean platform to use with pedals. The Scirocco's elegant build is apparent when viewing the neat hand-wired circuit with its Vishay caps, Dale and PRP resistors, ceramic tube sockets and Hammond transformers. It's a boutique affair for those who appreciate such things, and it won't break your back, all of which makes it a combo for the times and worthy of an Editors' Pick Award. **A**

SPECIFICATIONS

Scirocco

CONTACT rcdavisamps.com

PRICE \$2,295

CHANNELS 1

CONTROLS Volume, low, mid, high, reverb, speed, depth

POWER 30 watts

TUBES Two 12AX7s, one 12AT7, one ECC99 (nine-pin double triode), two 6L6

EXTRAS Normal and padded (-6dB) inputs. 1/4" jack for two-button foot-switch for reverb and tremolo (included)

SPEAKER 12" Celestion G12 Neo Creamback

SIZE 19.5" x 10" x 15" (LxWxH)

WEIGHT 23 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A lightweight, toneful tube combo with excellent reverb and tremolo

CONCERNS The absence of a standby switch might bother some since the amp has solid-state rectification

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VOX

VRM-1 Real McCoy and V846 Vintage wahs

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

THE 57TH BIRTHDAY of the first wah-wah might not seem an obvious year for an anniversary, but many guitarists will welcome accurate reissues of Vox's seminal pedals any time they come. Parent company Korg is celebrating the 1967 introduction of this eternally popular tone twister by releasing two variations on the wahs of the first two years — the Real McCoy and V846 Vintage reviewed here — as well as an all-chrome Limited Edition of the former (\$299 street).

The history of the veritable wah pedal is unusual, to say the least. While working as a Vox gear demonstrator in Los Angeles in 1966, session guitarist Del Casher was captivated by the sound produced by rapid rotation of the interactive mid control on a solid-state Vox Super Beatle amplifier, designed by JMI-Vox engineer Dick Denney and manufactured by Thomas Organ in California. Casher asked Thomas Organ engineer Brad Plunkett to replicate the circuit within a pedal, and the wah-wah was born.

Although Casher insisted the effect was for guitarists, Vox-Thomas Organ initially marketed it primarily to horn players as a way to mimic the “wah” produced by using a manual mute. Apparently no one at the company could understand why a guitarist would want to make the instrument sound like a horn. They also assumed horn players made up a bigger share of the market since big bands have several, whereas rock combos usually have just one or two guitarists. (No one seemed to realize big bands were a thing of the past while rock combos were ubiquitous.) As a result, the first Vox Wah released in 1967, represented

here by the Real McCoy, carried the name and photo of trumpeter Clyde McCoy and was voiced to suit that application.

Casher didn't give up, however, and convinced Vox to allow him to record a demo album displaying the wah-wah's use with guitar to make his point. He succeeded, and later in 1967 Vox released the V846 model, revoiced for guitar and represented here by the V846 Vintage.

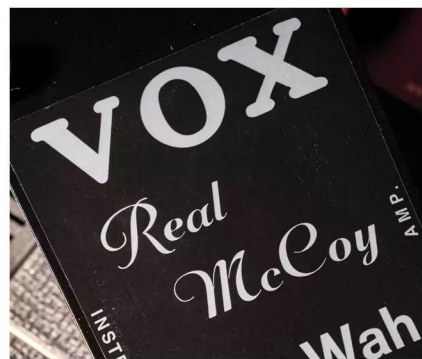
Vox tells us the effort to reproduce

accurate reissues began by acquiring two original condition 1967 Clyde McCoy and V846 pedals and replicating them down to the individual components. Vintage “halo” inductors, the heart of any wah's

voice, were analyzed, potentiometers were measured and matched to ensure an accurate sweep and frequency curve, and reproduction BC109 silicon transistors, carbon-film resistors and accurate capacitors were employed, while 3-D scans of vintage units allowed precise re-creation of the enclosure. Further verisimilitude was achieved with period-correct fonts on the bottom of each pedal and shipping boxes that include the company's 1960s catchphrase, “Vox: It's what's happening.”

For all that, the effort doesn't go as far as it did with the Vox V846HW hand-wired wah-wah pedal, which used breadboards rather than the printed circuit boards of

these new pedals, which are nevertheless loaded with hand-soldered components. Even so, a nifty '60s-era soft carrying bag completes the impressive presentation for the reissues, while details like battery-only power, lack of true bypass and no indicator light are reminders of the era's heart-warming inconveniences.



VRM-1 REAL MCCOY WAH REISSUE

As Vox puts it, “the Real McCoy is voiced for the iconic nasal tone of the original wah model, with an accentuated midrange that imparts a warm and melodic character to your guitar.” I tested it with a Fender Stratocaster and a Gibson ES-355 into a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo and a Friedman Small Box head and 2x12 cab, with Blackout Effectors Musket Fuzz and a Roger Mayer Spitfire Fuzz pedals occasionally engaged after it.

In general, the Real McCoy lived up to Vox's statement, although arguably with



The VRM01 Real McCoy is a faithful re-creation of the 1967 Vox Wah, down to its back-panel graphics (below).

THE V846 PROVIDES A TASTE OF THE SOUND THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND HITS

EXTRAS Input and output, internal 9V

more nuance than this description might imply. “Nasal” might indeed describe the frequency range accentuated by this circuit, but depending on which other wah-wah you’re comparing it to (and certainly the V846 Vintage in this case), I’d say maybe “warmer, throatier, and mellower” might also be appropriate adjectives. It does a good job of taming the Stratocaster’s potential bridge-pickup spikiness, for example, relative to many other wahs at least, and delivers a rounder, slightly darker rendition of that vocal-vowel sound that I believe a lot of players will enjoy. The throw from the rocker action is relatively short and sharp, as were the originals, so teasing out that chewy, vowel-per-note “talking” sound takes some precise foot work, but the circuit adds a little grind of its own that produces some appealing textures even in clean playing.

The Real McCoy also made a great partner to fuzz, and if it fell short of the icypick-sharp treble spikes that the combination makes via some other wah-wahs, the muscular midrange growl in its place might make it even more appealing to some players.

SPECIFICATIONS

VRM-1 Real McCoy Wah

CONTACT voxamps.com

PRICE \$279 street

CONTROL Rocker pedal

EXTRAS Input and output, internal

9V battery only

SIZE 10" x 4" x 3.15" (LxWxH)

BUILT Assembled in Vietnam

KUDOS A warm, mellow, midrange-emphasized wah-wah circuit that provides an admirable taste, both sonically and visually, of the first Vox wah of 1967

CONCERNS Some players will miss true bypass or quality buffered bypass, both absent here

V846 VINTAGE WAH REISSUE

Vox declares that “the V846 Vintage is voiced with an assertive tonal profile, with an extended frequency sweep and a strong emphasis on high frequencies.” In use with

the same guitars, amps and fuzz pedals as employed above for its sibling, these descriptions proved broadly true. Caveats are that the treble spikes really do define its most recognizable characteristic, to my ears, while the “extended frequency sweep” might not come across as such if you’re more familiar with the broader range of several modern iterations of the wah-wah, though it’s certainly here when compared to the more midfocused Real McCoy.

The V846 immediately jumps out as a little brighter and sharper at the top of its range, which really stabs the upper frequencies through the mix. There’s no way you’ll fail to get heard with this thing engaged. Into a clean signal chain this makes for classic disco-funk rhythm work and sparkly, spiky psychedelia when you want it. Engage either fuzz and it’s a razor’s-edge sonic combo capable of eviscerating lead work and tight, buoyant low-string riffs. And if the V846 Vintage arguably falls short of the dimension and throaty character of originals I’ve played in the past, it still provides an easy and enjoyable taste of the sound that launched a thousand hits.

SPECIFICATIONS

V846 Vintage Wah

CONTACT voxamps.com

PRICE \$279 street

CONTROLS Rocker pedal

The V846 Vintage Wah Reissue cops the looks and nearly the sound of Vox’s first wah voiced for guitar.

battery only

SIZE 10" x 4" x 3.15" (LxWxH)

BUILT Assembled in Vietnam

KUDOS A bright, eviscerating wah-wah that focuses on the extended treble of the second-generation Vox unit. Great for cutting through in partner with a fuzz pedal

CONCERNS Some players will miss true bypass or quality buffered bypass, both absent here

VERDICT

Both Vox reissues are admirable takes on wahs that helped establish one of the most enduring sounds in electric guitar. Though not inexpensive for offshore-built pedals, they’re more affordable and likely more durable than the originals. Bonus points, too, for the vintage-correct enclosures.

Regarding the lack of true bypass, I noticed a slight rounding-off of the highs and a little warming of the signal overall, although it didn’t impact the general bypassed tone dramatically. As for each pedal’s bid for authenticity, individual reproduction components don’t always precisely nail the specs, performance or tone of the originals, and even vintage pedals will vary in tone due to age, component drift and so forth. No matter how closely these hew to the originals or not, they sound very good and ably deliver a creative taste of yesteryear. **A**





(clockwise from left)
The Manchester 1290,
New Orleans 1250 and
Birmingham 1275.

TONESPEAK

Birmingham 1275, Manchester 1290 and New Orleans 1250

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

YOU'D BE FORGIVEN for thinking the quest for the perfect speaker concluded several years, if not decades, ago, but the folks at ToneSpeak beg to differ. Made in St. Paul, Minnesota, by MISCO (Minnesota Speaker Company), ToneSpeak is a new venture headed by former Eminence employees Cobi Stein and Anthony Lucas. If the model names imply that they're tramping the same old British- and American-style sonic ground, it's definitely with the intention of providing new levels of versatility and performance.

Reviewed this issue are the British-voiced Birmingham 1275 and Manchester 1290, and the American-voiced New Orleans 1250, each in eight ohms. (The lineup includes two more speakers in the 12-inch ferrite-magnet range, and one alnico-magnet speaker from each side of the pond.) "They all have the same 50-ounce magnetic motor, 1 3/4-inch voice-coil diameter, and basket and spider," speaker-designer Lucas tells me. "The biggest differences are voice-coil formers and cones to achieve the sonic differences in

our first five 12-inch ceramic models."

I tested each speaker in Baltic-birch ply and solid-pine 1x12 cabs, using a Fender Telecaster and a Gibson ES-355 into a 65amps London, a Friedman Small Box head and a tweed Deluxe-style amp, along with a selection of overdrive pedals.

BIRMINGHAM 1275

The Birmingham 1275 sounds like the best of the classic ferrite-magnet British speakers of the late '60s and early '70s. ToneSpeak blends characteristics of the Celestion G12M and G12H Greenbacks with an ability to handle more wattage (75 in this case) without stifling liveliness or vintage-leaning personality. Elements tweaked in the brew include a Nomex former for the 1 3/4-inch copper voice-coil and small dust cap, and a Kurt Müller felted-paper cone.

In use, the Birmingham's resolutely "M"-flavored Greenback underpinnings curb the occasionally strident bark that the heavy-magnet "H" versions can present in clean and pushed-clean settings. Lows are not boomy or overbearing but tighter and

fuller than the average Greenback, making for well-defined twang riffs on the Tele's wound strings. Highs are appealingly shimmering and pronounced without being spiky or harsh, and the midrange is characteristically plump without overshadowing the rest of the spectrum.

The speaker's 100dB (1W/1M) efficiency rating also delivers a little more volume per watt than typical G12Ms, along with crisper note articulation throughout the frequency spectrum. I found it sounded good both clean or with distortion applied, never losing its cool under the latter condition but sounding rich and full with the amp or pedal drive reined in — not a particular strength of many Greenback-inspired speakers.

SPECIFICATIONS

CONTACT tonespeak.com

PRICE \$149 street

POWER HANDLING 75 watts

EFFICIENCY 100 (1W/1M)

NOMINAL IMPEDANCE 8 ohms

MAGNET 50 oz. ferrite

TOTAL WEIGHT 12.98 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A great all-round British-style ferrite speaker that ably merges the "M" and "H" Greenbacks, while adding versatility and extra power handling

CONCERNS Arguably doesn't fold into speaker-generated distortion sought by those who enjoy 20- and 25-watt versions of this archetype

MANCHESTER 1290

The Manchester 1290 represents ToneSpeak's take on a high-wattage driver that captures vintage-inspired personality and responsiveness. Using Celestion's Classic Lead 80 as a jumping-off point, this 90-watt speaker employs a fiberglass coil-former and 1 3/4-inch copper voice-coil with large-diameter dust cap centered in an engineered-paper cone.



It all makes the Manchester 1290 a good choice for guitarists who want higher-wattage requirements in small cabs, although Lucas notes that the speaker is not designed exclusively for high-wattage amps. “We had always heard that high-power speakers can be sterile and only sound good when played really loud,” he explains. “We wanted to address that with the Manchester and make sure it sounded great at low volumes too.”

The Manchester 1290 showed a distinctively British character while proving somewhat more balanced throughout the spectrum than the Birmingham. It was also prone to a little less breakup relative to volume level. Displaying what I heard as

THE TONESPEAK NEW ORLEANS 1250 IS SIMPLY A LUSCIOUS- SOUNDING SPEAKER ALL AROUND

a bit less speaker distortion at any of the test amps’ edge-of-breakup settings, it admirably lived up to the goal of a more characterful voice at clean and semi-clean settings and presented no detrimental artifacts when used with the two lower-powered amps.

Hit with considerably more volume from the cranked 50-watt Friedman head, or slammed with any of several overdrive pedals, it remained tight and articulate through the distortion, without flubbing out on the low end or caving into a hazy slur in the midrange. Indeed, the Manchester 1290 might sound its best at medium-to-higher volume levels, but it still sounds great with far less wattage applied, which is saying something for a 90-watt speaker.

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$149 street

POWER HANDLING 90 watts

EFFICIENCY 100 (1W/1M)

NOMINAL IMPEDANCE 8 ohms

MAGNET 50 oz. ferrite

TOTAL WEIGHT 12.98 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A clear, full, detailed high-powered speaker that avoids sounding bland and sterile for lower-volume playing

CONCERNS None

NEW ORLEANS 1250

Hemp speaker cones can tame high-end spikes and present an overtly round, warm tone, although occasionally with a flabby low-end response and a slight lack of crispness and articulation in the upper mids and highs. ToneSpeak aims to counter this with the American-voiced New Orleans 1250, which uses a kraft-paper former in a 1 3/4-inch copper voice coil with large-diameter dust cap and a hemp-fiber cone, giving its own spin to a 50-watt speaker that resides broadly in the Jensen C12N camp. “While a darker tone was desired,” Stein says, “the focus was to eliminate muddiness and retain good clarity and definition.”

The New Orleans 1250 hits its marks with aplomb. Neither American nor British to my ears, it sounds rich, luscious and thick-

voiced with the character of a high-end guitar

speaker that’s been nicely broken in.

At clean and edge-of-breakup levels, the New Orleans 1250 brings to mind many red-wine tasting adjectives: sweet, plummy, juicy... There’s a comfortable darkness that rounds off the treble spikes, even from the Voxy 65amps London set pretty bright and the Tele’s high strings through the bridge pickup. Yet it does so without damping the shimmer and articulation, characteristics that I found especially appealing when merged here. The speaker also handled medium overdrive well, delivering a lush midrange grind and avoiding any major flub-out in the low end.

It can indeed go just a little woofy and woolly when hit with too much bass from the amp (and a low-string run from a neck-position humbucker, for example), but this is easily avoided when you’re working with it as your main speaker and adjusting the amp accordingly. It’s a fantastic pick for reducing the spikiness of an AC- or blackface-inspired amp, and simply a luscious-sounding speaker all around.

ToneSpeak’s lineup brings new and worthy qualities to a crowded market, and done so at reasonable prices for small-shop drivers. The Birmingham 1275 and Manchester 1290 hold their own against the popular contenders in those categories, but to my ears the New Orleans 1250 was the real surprise of the trio, and earns an Editors’ Pick Award for its combination of richness, warmth and detailed clarity. **A**

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE \$149 street

POWER HANDLING 50 watts

EFFICIENCY 100 (1W/1M)

NOMINAL IMPEDANCE 8 ohms

MAGNET 50 oz. ferrite

TOTAL WEIGHT 12.98 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A rich, luscious, yet articulate speaker that’s great at taming spiky amps, yet also an appealingly toneful all-rounder

CONCERNS Doesn’t excel at heavy distortion



STRYMON

BigSky MX

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

STRYMON'S BIGSKY MULTI-REVERB pedal has been a staple in my setup since it debuted in late 2013, and for two very good reasons. First, it offers 12 studio-class reverb algorithms that run the gamut from classic to futuristic. Second, those reverbs still sound vibrant, realistic and fresh more than 10 years after BigSky became the gold standard for reverb boxes.

I recently reconsidered that second point for one reason: Strymon's newly released BigSky MX pedal, which delivers new reverb machines, dual-reverb capability, full IR functionality and much more. Strymon didn't just revise BigSky's features for this new incarnation; they used the same kind of neural-tweaking techniques behind A.I. to create lifelike virtual spaces that respond to your playing.

That power comes via an 800MHz Tri-Core Arm processor (versus the BigSky's 366MHz SIMD SHARC), with 32-bit floating-point processing that makes these reverbs drip and shimmer with uncanny depth and realism. If you're looking for more natural-sounding and highly detailed ambience effects, as well as more extreme sonic adventures, BigSky MX has them.

WELCOME TO THE MACHINES

Like its predecessor, BigSky MX has 12 reverb engines. They include 10 found on the original pedal — Room, Hall, Plate, Spring, Bloom, Cloud, Chorale, Shimmer, Magneto and Nonlinear — plus two new offerings: Chamber and Impulse, the latter of which employs Impulse Responses (IRs).

In addition, Strymon created new algorithms for Spring, Plate, Hall, Room and Shimmer alongside the voices of the original pedal. Although the Swell and Reflections machines were deleted, the Swell feature can now be found in the Hall machine, while the psycho-acoustically accurate small-space Reflections machine seems unnecessary given the verisimilitude built into the MX.

The Impulse machine comes loaded with 22 impulse responses ranging from vintage and modern gear to acoustic spaces. You can add your own IRs of up to 10 seconds in length and edit them right in the pedal. As for the Chamber machine, it nicely fills a niche between Room and Hall settings. Chamber reverbs are larger than room reverbs and smaller than halls, making them perfect for those times when you want ambience that gets noticed but doesn't overwhelm. The Chamber engine in BigSky MX captures the right mix of warmth, focus and density to produce very useable and sophisticated-sounding settings. These have quickly become my go-to reverbs for playing and for mixes where I want to impart ambience that conveys intimacy or adds a splash of depth to my guitar or another instrument. The results sound professional and never crowd the mix.

DEEP DIG

Editing the MX presets is a breeze, thanks to the row of seven controls for decay, pre-delay, tone and modulation, the two user-assignable parameters per preset and the dry/wet mix knob. Going deeper into

each preset is equally easy: Just press the Value button at the upper right to open the menu and dig into a host of parameters for every engine. Best of all, you can swap out engines for each preset with a spin of the Type dial to quickly audition other reverb machines.

And while we're discussing parameters, the new stereo panning control is a useful addition that brings greater dimensions to the effects. Use it to place a reverb off-center or to situate two different reverbs wherever you'd like in the stereo field, whether for creative effect or to open more space in the mix.

Lest we forget among this wealth of new treats, the ability to use two reverbs in series or parallel is a powerful feature that opens up a host of sound design opportunities. For example, place Shimmer in series with a pre-delayed Chorale for a reverb that sings like a heavenly chorus. Or use Plate in parallel with the physics-defying Nonlinear reverb and pan them to opposite sides for a dramatically unusual panorama of sound. The stereo pan control really shines in these dual settings, opening the door to some wildly creative sound designs.

But perhaps the coolest thing of all is that all this power is available through the handful of controls on the pedals. No parameter is ever more than a couple of button presses away, with no smartphone apps or buggy Bluetooth connection to slow you down. For greater convenience, Strymon offers the free Nixie 2 software librarian that lets you upload and download patches, load IRs and gain real-time control of parameters from your desktop. Nixie 2 was in beta release at the time of my review and librarian functionality was limited, but it worked fine for importing IRs. The process was intuitive to follow, and once my IRs were

imported, they showed up in their own folder in the Impulse engine, where I was able to load and edit them. It couldn't be easier.

Other noteworthy additions to the BigSky MX include an easy-to-read high-resolution OLED display, discrete Class A JFET preamps for clean tone and less sensitivity to long cable runs, DIN and TRS MIDI jacks (BigSky offers just DIN), USB-C, expression control, and a dedicated Infinite foot switch in place of the third preset foot switch included on the original BigSky.

MX FX

As for its sound, the 3-D realism is remarkable. Comparing my original BigSky to the BigSky MX... well, there is no comparison. The improved detail, sonic nuance and sense of being within an actual physical space is apparent, and the new presets do a good job of demonstrating what this box can do. Some of my favorites include the Impulse engine's 250 Long, Gate Reactor and Slinky presets, the Magneto machine's Moody Bounce and SmartWhales settings, and the Chamber's Sweet Neck, Pretty Chamber and Warm Chamber offerings. Among the more extreme selections, I really like the Bloom machine's Little Burst and Fellowtron (a cool Mellotron emulation), the Chorale engine's Subtle Choir preset, and — for fun rhythmic playing — the Stutter Butr and ChoppedSprng presets in the Nonlinear offerings. In addition to the 100 factory presets, you can store 200 user presets, and all 300 presets can be overwritten.

The question for players who already own the BigSky will be "Do I need these improvements and new features?" You may not get the full benefit of them if you play

onstage and not in the studio. But if you record or simply enjoy playing with the best

gear you can afford, then it makes sense to consider upgrading. Granted, BigSky MX is not cheap, and players familiar with the original BigSky might miss that third preset foot switch and have no use for the Infinite switch that's replaced it. Undoubtedly some players may find the original algorithms more to their liking or prefer their less-detailed sound.

But that's how it goes with gear, and it's why many guitarists today still use pedals of previous eras. For that matter I own plenty of reverb pedals and have no plans to part with them. They all do something very well or exclusively their own. But with that said, BigSky MX will be replacing the BigSky as my go-to reverb pedal. I've heard nothing that covers all the bases with as much sonic diversity, flexible programming or pristine and detailed audio quality. For raising the ambience bar to a new level, BigSky MX earns our Editors' Pick Award. **B**

SPECIFICATIONS

BigSky MX

CONTACT strymon.net

PRICE \$679

REVERB MACHINES Room, Hall, Plate, Spring, Bloom, Cloud, Chorale, Shimmer, Magneto, Nonlinear, Chamber and Impulse

CONTROLS Type, Value, decay, pre-delay, tone, mod, param 1, param 2, mix

FOOT SWITCHES Bank A, Bank B (press A and B for Bank Down) and Infinite (press Bank B and Infinite for Bank Up)

I/O Left in, right in, left out, right out, USB-C, expression/MIDI in and out, power input

EXTRAS Free Nixie 2 librarian (Mac, PC) to organize presets and load IRs

POWER 9 VDC (adapter not included)

DIMENSIONS 5" x 7" x 1.87" (DxWxH)

BUILT USA

KUDOS Remarkable 3-D reverbs, new algorithms with greater realism and depth, Impulse machine with ability to load user IRs

CONCERNS None, but the price may deter some users



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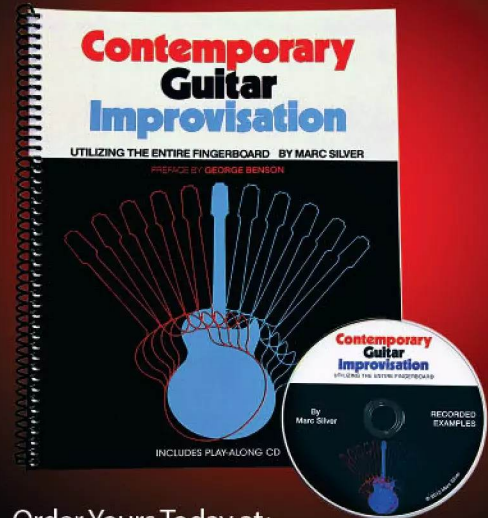
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How I Wrote...

"Don't Stop Believin'"

Neal Schon shares the secrets behind Journey's unstoppable hit.

BY GARY GRAFF

IF YOU'RE EVER at a sporting event — any sporting event — and they don't play Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," ask for your money back. The song — the second single from the group's 1981 album, *Escape* — is nothing less than a generational anthem. Written by guitarist and original member Neal Schon, frontman Steve Perry and then-new keyboardist and rhythm guitarist Jonathan Cain, it peaked in the Top 10 of the *Billboard* Hot 100, Mainstream Rock and Adult Contemporary charts and is part of the Library of Congress National Recording Registry. Inclusions in *Glee*, *Rock of Ages* and the series finale of *The Sopranos* led to sales surges and once again solidified the song's place in pop culture for new generations.

Which Cain believes is only appropriate. "There's a lot of small-town girls and city boys wanting to get on the midnight train to anywhere," he explains. "We worked hard to write songs to [fans] about their lives."

A CHORUS LINE

As for Schon, he says "Don't Stop Believin'" shows Journey at the peak of their powers, a three-headed songwriting team that made something greater than the sum of its parts.

"I had a rehearsal place in Oakland," Schon explains. "No one knew we were there and no one was gonna walk in and disrupt us. Jon brought in the quarter-pulse [rhythm] and the chords, which were kind of

like 'Let It Be' with a little twist. I started immediately looking for a Motown-type bass part to move it along, and I have to give credit where credit is due: Jack Bruce was my all-time favorite bass player, so that's where all those half-notes and the movement in the bass come from. It just created harmony between the vocals and the background vocals and everything.

"Like Sting says, the chord is not made until the bass player chooses what note he wants to play. There's a whole lot of truth to that. I love thinking about bass a lot more than I do guitar sometimes. You can change the note of a bass against a guitar chord and it changes everything.

"Jon had the 'Don't stop believin'" chorus, so we moved on trying to create the rest of the song. I came up with the B section — 'Strangers, waiting,' Perry goes, 'Oh, that's perfect,' so we threw it together. Those were the main pieces of the song.

As for the famous chorus? "It doesn't happen until the end," Schon points out. "I don't think any song that's become as big has ever had that. The first rule of songwriting is 'Don't bore us, get to the chorus!,' but we broke it. And the song works because it has something very interesting and melodic moving it along."

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

"For the guitar parts, I really wasn't thinking," Schon admits. "My best stuff

comes when I'm just reacting to what's around me. Before we got to the second verse, I started playing that arpeggiated guitar part. It was like something you might hear in a symphony and it felt like it was helping the track move along. And that in turn inspired Perry and Cain to write those lyrics about 'the midnight train to anywhere.' I came up with the part before the lyrics.

"That's the cool thing about when you write in a room with someone," he continues. "You can inspire and build off each other. You can always write a great song by yourself, but until you have a great band playing on it, it's not gonna sound like anything."

BIGGEST OF ALL TIME?

Since returning to the road in early 2023, Journey has moved "Don't Stop Believin'" from its usual spot as the last or next-to-last song of the night into an earlier slot. But Schon says the song isn't suffering for it. "I never felt like it was a closer, even though it's a massive song," he says. "It's a slower, melodic rock song with a great melody and a great message, so I felt like, Let's just be ballsy and stick it out there and play it for them early and keep everybody's attention. It puts everybody in a great mood."

As for why "Don't Stop Believin'" still resonates with new listeners after more than 40 years, Schon has no idea. In fact, he says he was shocked when *Forbes* magazine named it the Biggest Song of All Time in its March issue. "The results really speak for themselves," he says. "But 'the biggest song in the world'? Ever? That's, like, surreal." ■



"Believin'" co-writers (from right) Steve Perry, Neal Schon and Jonathan Cain perform in 1981.



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