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GUITAR WORLD





THE ANNUAL 2026

FEATURING

JOE PERRY VAN HALEN MEGADETH
KEITH RICHARDS RUSH
THE GREATEST GEAR OF THE 21ST CENTURY
THE KILLER GUITAR ALBUMS OF 1986
& MORE!

Digital Edition

FUTURE

VOLUME 1


Marsh

WELCOME

IN *GUITAR WORLD*'S 46-year run, we've proudly launched a number of special editions and spin-off titles, but never before have we compiled the year's best content into its very own annual – until now! And it's certainly one for the history books.

Inside these pages, you will find a hand-picked selection of all our favorite content from (mostly) the last 12 months, from exclusive cover features to lesson columns. We've got gear-focused conversations with Rolling Stones' Keith Richards and Aerosmith's Joe Perry; Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee giving us the inside scoop on Rush's return to the limelight; and an in-depth reflection of Megadeth's triumphant tenure with Dave Mustaine as he prepares to hang up his guitar for good. We count down the albums turning 40 in 2026 (1986 was chock-full of classics) and look back at the making of the Eagles' 50-year-old masterpiece, *Hotel California*. We'll help you fill those letters to Santa with the greatest gear this side of the millennium and 40 pedals that serious guitar greats can't live without. And if that's not enough, head to the back of the mag for a roundup of lessons from the likes of Joe Bonamassa, Charlie Starr, Mike Stringer and more!

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PORTRAITS BY ROSS HALFIN

GOING TO EXTINCTION

AS MEGADETH PREPARED FOR THEIR FINAL ALBUM RELEASE AND TOUR, DAVE MUSTAINE RECOUNTED SOME MEGA-MEMORIES, THE GHOSTS THAT STILL HAUNT HIM AND, OF COURSE, THE LEAD GUITARISTS HE PLAYED WITH ALONG THE WAY — THE GOOD, THE GREAT AND THE UNHINGED!

BY ANDREW DALY

DOWN

CIRCA

JUNK



YOU CAN LOOK at Dave Mustaine's career in two ways: as a revenge tour or as a story of perpetual redemption. If Mustaine's life, which is earmarked by iconic records like 1986's *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying*, 1990's *Rust in Peace* and 1992's *Countdown to Extinction*, is viewed through the post-Metallica-related revenge lens, then you might conclude that ol' Dave has done pretty well for himself.

Sure, Metallica is thrash metal's top dog, but Megadeth is one of the other three of that movement's Big Four along with Anthrax and Slayer. That means something. What also means something is that Mustaine, a fire-breathing, self-taught, V-wielding player, still endures at age 64 despite addiction issues, personality crises, a nasty arm injury, a cancer diagnosis and an ever-revolving band lineup. To that end, it's perhaps more astute to focus on the "perpetual redemption" angle, right?

After all, we're talking about one of rock and metal's most enigmatic and dynamic characters. And with that comes the push and pull between revenge and redemption — aka the naming of Mustaine's arc — that may never be finalized. At least, not now.

But maybe soon: Mustaine recently announced that early 2026's *Megadeth*, the band's 17th studio album, which features yet another new lead guitarist, Teemu Mäntysaari, will be their last. On top of that, the ensuing tour will be Mustaine's final trot around the globe.

Mustaine cautions that he isn't going anywhere anytime soon, as Megadeth's international fanbase dictates that a large-scale tour around said globe will be in order. As for that new album, it sounds decidedly old-school. You know, the kind of sound that made Mustaine a thrash metal legend back in 1986, 1990, 1992 and so on.

And then there's Mäntysaari, whom Mustaine believes will be a "star." His playing is something out of the Eighties and early Nineties, aka the era helmed by Marty Friedman, whom Mustaine calls "incredibly talented" and "incredibly mysterious."

As one listens to Megadeth's final record, one can't help but be transported back in time to the days when *Rust in Peace* made waves via Friedman's playing. But just because Mustaine is kicking it old-school doesn't mean he plans to cozy up with Friedman — or any other former Megadeth alumni — while on his final jaunt.

"We've already done that with Marty," Mustaine tells *Guitar World* [*Friedman joined Megadeth on stage twice in 2023 — February in Japan and August in Germany*]. "And, I mean, let's look at the other people we've played with... there's a lot of people. [*Laughs*] That would be a huge undertaking. I don't think I want to do that. I'd rather keep doing what we're doing and let the fans [*experience*] Megadeth music and be happy about it. It's not 'puppet show Megadeth.'"

Though he's not about to bring any old pals onstage, Mustaine admits some 'Deth-related ghosts still haunt him. "I wish I would have kept in touch with [*late drummer*] Gar [*Samuelson*]," he says. "You see that Ace Frehley passed away and how sad that is. Whenever stuff like that happens, I feel fortunate because I'm still kicking. But on the opposite side of the coin, I think, 'Fuck... that could have been me,' but by the grace of God, it's not."

Mustaine's words on life and death refocus the revenge versus redemption arc he's been penning since he was booted out of Metallica, picked himself up and formed the band that would feature him as one of metal's grizzliest warriors, akin to a man not to be messed with.

The fact is that when it comes to Megadeth, no matter what, there seems to be a hint of inherent darkness that lurches over the band. It's a matter of light and shade, hate and anger, life and death and revenge and redemption. Whatever that cocktail is, it's what makes Dave Mustaine and his band, no matter the members, tick.

With that dichotomy comes a harrowing impact that can sure as hell be felt, but not so easily defined. To this, Mustaine shrugs, saying, "I try to stay humble. I know we did something pretty monumental with creating a music style. You can't go anywhere and not hear people playing guitar like we did, and some of the drum patterns and chord changes — I hear that all the time in young bands, and it makes me very happy. I'm very proud."

After leaving Metallica, what was your vision for forming Megadeth?

When I left New York [*after Metallica*], I got home, dusted myself off, moved to Hollywood and was trying to piece together what was to be called Megadeth. The first thing I did was meet this guy in a building next to me named Robbie McKinney. He stayed in touch with me over the years. He's a great guitar player, but he wasn't the right fit. Then I ended up moving into an apartment, and you know the story about [*bassist*] David Ellefson living underneath me and me throwing a potted plant into his air conditioner... [*Laughs*] Anyway, we got into the studio together, started playing, had a drummer who then said to me, "I'm going to go find myself," and he left. We auditioned drummers, and we got Gar Samuelson, who was a mind-blowing jazz drummer. No one had ever given thought to doing jazz drumming in metal, but we did, and that's what set us apart.

How did you land on Chris Poland as your initial partner in guitar-related crime?

We were trying to get our guitar situation replaced because we temporarily had Kerry King [*of Slayer*] sitting in with us. So Gar said, "Hey, I know somebody," and we ended up auditioning Chris Poland. His playing was so bizarre and unorthodox that I thought, "If he could do this, this could be the missing ingredient we need. This could really set us apart from everybody else by not having the same wang-bar, doodly kind of stuff on the solos." So we hung out for a little while, and that's basically when we made the decision because, besides his incredible playing ability and a lot of the things we did in our private lives that we all did together, it wasn't hard to make friends and blend, if you know what I mean.

To your point, Chris was fabulous on Megadeth's first two records, *Killing Is My Business... and Business Is Good!* and *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?*. What led to Jeff Young replacing him for *So Far, So Good... So What!?*

Jeff Young is a great guitar player. It's unfortunate that the world knows that Jeff is a great guitar player, but they don't know how really bright he is. I saw something in Jeff when we hired him; it was kind of a strange occurrence. We had tried to find a guitar player, and I went with David Ellefson to the country club in Reseda, where we watched this band called Malice. Malice had this big, tall, good-looking guitar player [*Jay Reynolds*] that had a Gibson Flying V and was heavily influenced, to me, by Michael Schenker. We talked to him after his show, and then we met him, and I said I wanted him to be in Megadeth. He was excited about joining the band; then we

"I KNOW WE DID SOMETHING PRETTY MONUMENTAL WITH CREATING A MUSIC STYLE. YOU CAN'T GO ANYWHERE AND NOT HEAR PEOPLE PLAYING GUITAR LIKE WE DID"

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES



Megadeth in the Jeff Young era, February 1988; [*from left*] Young, Mustaine, David Ellefson and Chuck Behler

were in the studio recording *So Far, So Good... So What?* and I was like, "Okay, it's time to do your solos, man." He goes, "Okay, I'm gonna call up my guitar teacher, have him do [*the*] solos and then have him teach me." I thought, "Get out — you're pulling my leg." But no, that was true. That's what he wanted to do. I went along with it, and Jeff showed up, and like I said, Jeff was a really superb guitar player. He really had his own unique style, like Chris did, and we started working on the record.

What made Jeff stand out?

If I remember correctly, he was really influenced by the gunslingers that were coming out of Mike Varney's stable. One guy I know — I think his name might have been Tony MacAlpine — was just a mind-blowing talent. Another was Vinnie Moore. It was apparent that Jeff was a shredder. I remember standing out on Melrose Avenue, and I said to Jeff, "Do you wanna join the band?" He said, "Yes," and I thought, "Thank God. This is too funky right now." I didn't wanna go back to looking for another guitar player because we'd spent so much time looking for Jay, and then that whole thing happened, where he said, "I'm gonna have my teacher come down." That really threw me for a loop.

Sadly, Jeff didn't last too long, either.

After we parted ways with Jeff, we started looking for new guitar players again. It was difficult. I mean, you've got Chris Poland and you've got Jeff Young playing in your band, so how do you find somebody that's gonna compare with those guys? It's gonna be really hard, right? And it was really hard.

We had a guy come in from San Francisco, and he set up his amp, put on his guitar and goes, "Show me the songs." I looked at Ellefson, and I just went, "Oh, my God..." And then we had one guy who I'd never seen in my life, not once, and he comes in, sets up his stuff and he's got this bright green and fuchsia-colored Ibanez JEM with the handle on it — one of those Steve Vai models. We had this [*unspoken agreement*] where when an audition was over, I'd reach behind me and turn off my wireless setup. This guy comes in, starts setting up his guitar, stops for a second and goes, "Yeah, man, I wrote [*Megadeth's*] 'Wake Up Dead'..." I looked at Ellefson, and I reached back and clicked off my unit at exactly the same time David did. We just said, "Interview's over..." [*Laughs*]

How did you find Marty Friedman?

Marty's CD, *Dragon's Kiss* [*1988*], had been sitting on the counter in the management's office, and I remember walking past it. The cover was this black picture with bright orange lettering on it, and it was pretty eye-catching. But I just couldn't do it because of his hair. [*Laughs*]

His hair?

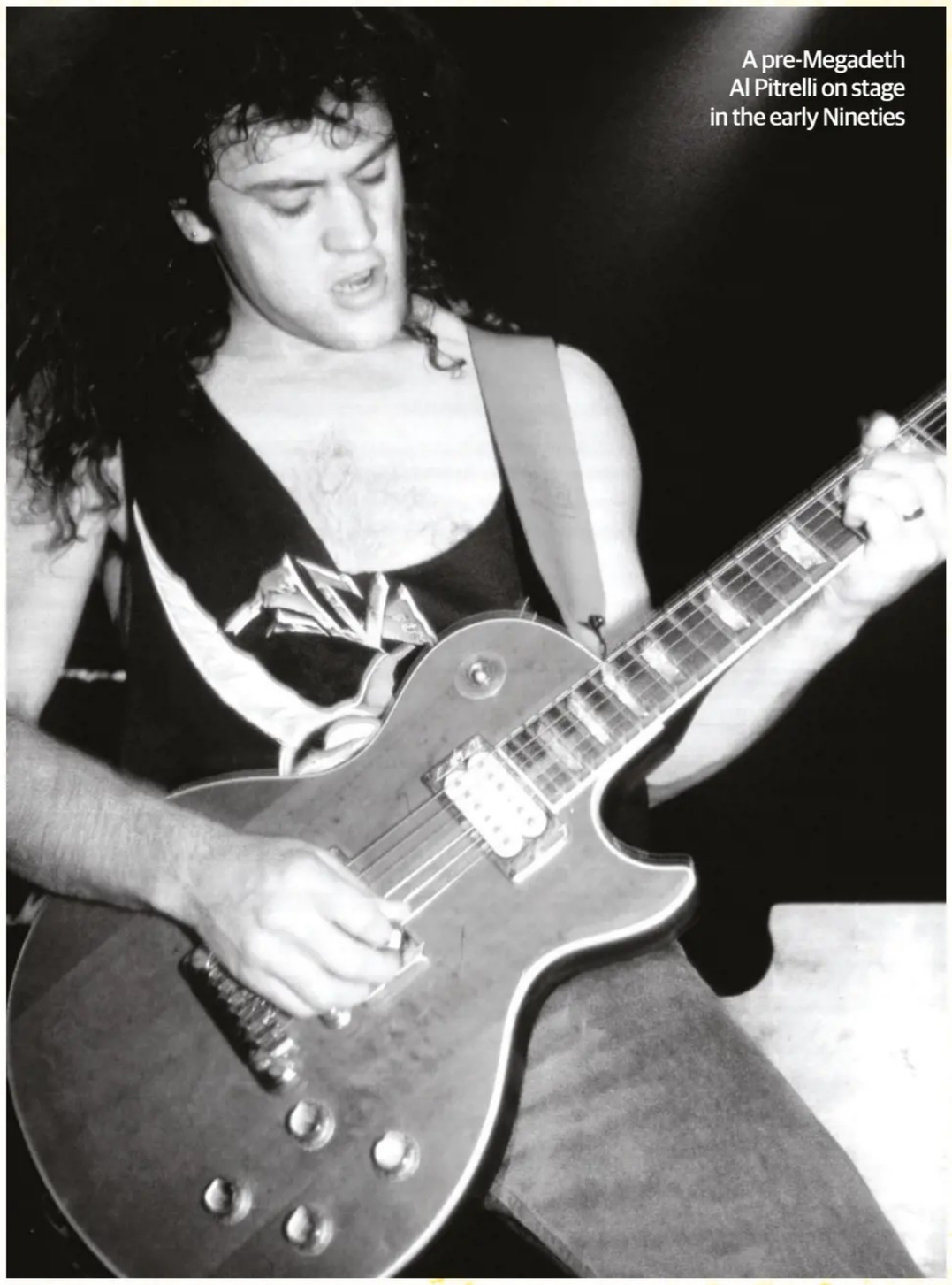
He had two different colors in his hair. His hair was black from the roots down to about his ear line, and then it was red all the way down to his armpits. I thought, "I can't do this," but against my will, I said, "Okay, let's do this..." So, he came in, and he walked in with a Carvin, which wasn't a company renowned for its guitars. He had this ADA rackmount unit, but I don't know what it was for or how he thought it was going to help him. [*Laughs*] By then, I had already had minimal success and had a lot of amps, so I said to my guys,

"WE'RE AN INTERNATIONAL BAND. WE'VE GOT FANS AROUND THE GLOBE, SO IT'S GOING TO TAKE TIME TO SAY GOODBYE"

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES



Marty Friedman in action with Megadeth in Philadelphia, June 29, 1991



A pre-Megadeth Al Pitrelli on stage in the early Nineties

LISA LAKE/GETTY IMAGES, STUART MOSTYN/REDFERNS

"Do me a favor, please set up a stack for Marty over there."

And when it came time to do the solo, Marty just popped in. We've been through guitar player after guitar player, and we get to the solo part in "Wake Up Dead," and he nails it. I just thought, "Oh, my God..." and I reached behind me, turned off my wireless, went out and called my manager and said, "I think we've got him."

It was the right choice, as *Rust in Peace*, *Countdown to Extinction* and *Youthanasia* were huge records in the Nineties when grunge was all the rage and metal was waning.

It had a lot to do with around 1992 when Nirvana had *Nevermind*. They were so successful that normal heavy metal closed up a bit and was done. Metal wasn't getting played on the radio anymore, but Nirvana was, along with all these bands from Seattle, like Pearl Jam, Mother Love Bone, Soundgarden and all those other bands. Those bands became the flavor of the day, and hard rock and heavy metal had to go underground, which is where most bands dissolved, sadly.

But Megadeth didn't. Did that make it all the more tough when you lost Marty after recording *Risk*?

That was a really weird period. I don't even know if Marty knows why we were brought together and why we were taken apart, but I had a fun time with Marty. But Marty is an enigma, and a very unique human being. I think you can ask any of the people who have played with him... he's incredibly talented, but very mysterious. He loves Oriental music, and we were able to make that work with Megadeth, so it's sad that we stopped working together.

You two seemed to have a unique musical chemistry. Plus, he brought stability to the lead-guitar spot, a notoriously volatile spot for Megadeth. It must have been painful to have him leave.

I had a couple of songs that I needed to write to get the feelings out of me from Marty leaving. There were a couple of songs I wrote that were cathartic to be able to talk about what happened.

Which songs were those?

"1000 Times Goodbye" [*from 2001's* The World Needs a Hero] wasn't written to or about Marty, but about the feelings I was going through. It was inspired by that because I was very confused. I hadn't really had somebody that I cared about that much walk out. It was the first time I'd ever had that happen, and I didn't know how to deal with someone I really respect... I don't want it to come off weird, but I really did enjoy Marty's goofy one-liners and the stuff we did together.

Marty's leaving, combined with an arm injury that nearly ended your playing career, led you to fold Megadeth in 2002, but you came back in 2004 with Chris Poland back on lead guitar on *The System Has Failed*.

Let me explain about Chris Poland coming back; he wasn't invited back to play with me on a permanent basis. In the same way as the Metallica thing, I thought I was done. I thought my arm was done. I was going to do one more record, and then I was going to hang it up. So I asked him if he would come and play the solos, and that was it. Nothing more. And he did well; it was neat to see him play again.

Aside from Chris, you ran through Al Pitrelli, Glen Drover and Chris Broderick. That level of volatility from the lead guitar spot must have been challenging.

Oh, yeah, it was tough. I had to have a lot of mentors. I heavily backed into martial arts and had several spiritual mentors that I worked really closely with for a while



Glen Drover performs in 2007. "A first-class guitarist," Mustaine says



A post-Megadeth Chris Broderick on stage in New York City

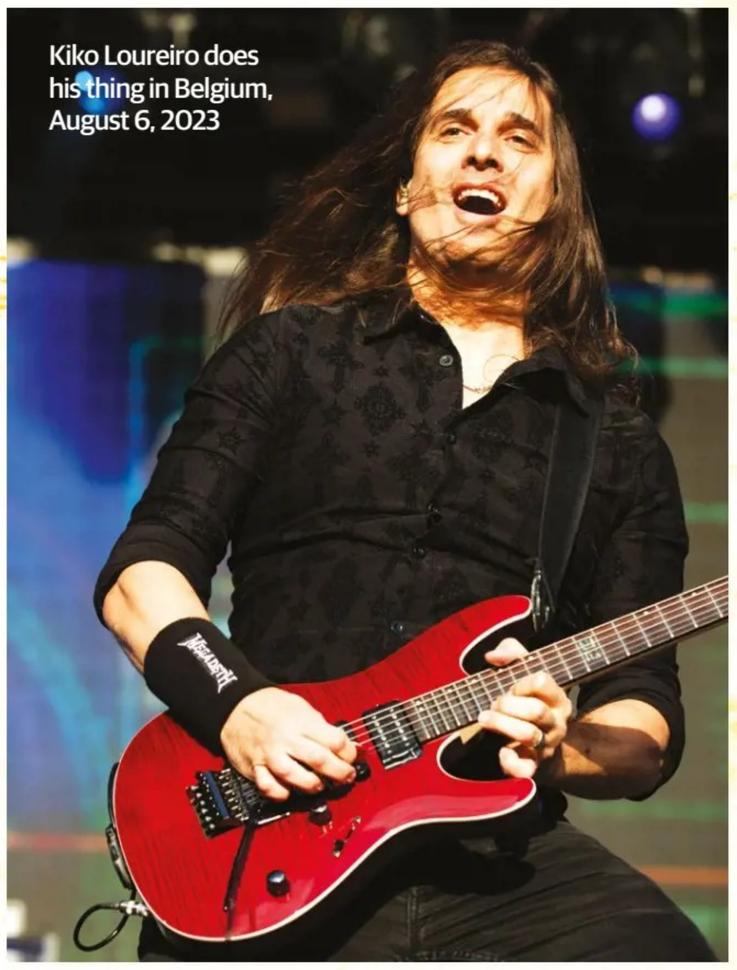
because I was sad. I felt like I'd lost my mojo. Do you know what I mean?

It can be tough when you're putting everything you have into something, and there are perpetual roadblocks.
Yeah, absolutely. But I really enjoyed playing with Glen. He and his brother [*drummer Shawn Drover*] came in after a really ugly period where we tried to get the *Rust in Peace* lineup back together, which wasn't meant to be. Working with Glen and Shawn was enjoyable because a lot of the hardcore Swedish, Danish and English heavy metal that I loved, they knew. We would play it a lot, and that was great. Shawn is a really amazing drummer, and his brother is a first-class guitarist. And here's a thing people don't know: the two of them can switch instruments without missing a note. They both play guitar and drums, and they're both exceptional at it.

It seems as if Kiko Loureiro's arrival in the band before *Dystopia* stabilized Megadeth. You had a lot of success with that record, and its follow-up, *The Sick, the Dying... and the Dead!* Was it painful to have him leave, sort of like it was with Marty?
No. By the time Kiko had come, I had pretty much galvanized myself toward people. And by that time, Kiko just started feeling like he was being away from home too much. I did tell him we were gonna be doing a lot of touring when we first met, and unfortunately, I'm the leader of a band that requires more time, you know? But I hear from him every once in a while, or I'll see something that somebody sends me, and I smile. Kiko was a good guy.

With Teemu Mäntysaari in the fold, Megadeth still seems to have a lot left in the tank. Is it hard knowing you're releasing the band's final record and embarking on its final tour?
We do have a lot left in the tank. And it might seem counterintuitive, but I also think that if people look at what I said, you know, this being our last studio album, and the part about touring, we're an international band. We've got, by the grace of God, fans around the globe, so it's going to take time to see everybody and say goodbye to everybody.

With this being Megadeth's final tour, once you hit the road, will you be exclusively using your new signature gear, or will you bring out any old gear to make the occasion?
I don't have any old gear for old time's sake. [*Laughs*] I've got one Jackson, but my [*new*] Gibsons are the guitars I want to be playing.



Kiko Loureiro does his thing in Belgium, August 6, 2023

And this isn't some product-placement thing; those guitars are exactly what I want and what I've always wanted. We made some slight adjustments to the guitars. It's kind of like a modified F1 [*race car*] where, over time, there are a couple of things you can do and bring along with you from what you've had in the past. I think that's where we're at right now with this, the new custom guitars. They're like hot rods. The only thing we're contemplating now is making the legs have points.

How do you hope to be remembered as a guitar player?
As someone who made a difference. GW

"I DON'T HAVE ANY OLD GEAR FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE. MY NEW GIBSONS ARE THE GUITARS I WANT TO BE PLAYING"

LARRY MARANO/GETTY IMAGES, ROY ROCHLIN/GETTY IMAGES, ELSIE ROYMANS/GETTY IMAGES

WARCHEST

AN ALBUM-BY-ALBUM GUIDE TO MEGADETH'S EXPLOSIVE STUDIO OUTPUT — FROM THEIR 1985 DEBUT TO THEIR 2026 FINALE

BY GUITAR WORLD STAFF AND ANDREW DALY



KILLING IS MY BUSINESS... AND BUSINESS IS GOOD!

COMBAT, 1985

Still bitter about being fired from Metallica, Dave Mustaine returned with a band fashioned from his own imagination. The songs were sharp and socially aware, while the music was surprisingly mature. Mustaine had immediately made his intentions clear — namely to take the thrash beast he'd helped create and give it a rounded metal education. It didn't chart on the *Billboard* 200, but it was loved from the start.

GUITARIST: CHRIS POLAND



PEACE SELLS... BUT WHO'S BUYING?

CAPITOL, 1986

Originally recorded for Combat Records, this was switched to the much bigger Capitol label, with the band given the budget to completely re-mix. The result is a true landmark album. Forget about thrash; here was Mustaine leading a charge through the whole spectrum of musical emotions. The title track itself is something of an epic, showcasing Megadeth's startlingly creative process. Meanwhile, Chris Poland's playing is nothing short of brilliant.

GUITARIST: CHRIS POLAND



SO FAR, SO GOOD... SO WHAT!

CAPITOL, 1988

Two years after *Peace Sells...*, a new Megadeth lineup landed on their feet with a record that refused to conform to expectations. While the cover of Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K." seemed somewhat superfluous, Mustaine was at his finest on the emotional "In My Darkest Hour" — a tribute to the late Cliff Burton of Metallica — and the haunting "Mary Jane." We also don't mind "Hook in Mouth" and "Set the World Afire."

GUITARIST: JEFF YOUNG



RUST IN PEACE

CAPITOL, 1990

The debut album from arguably Megadeth's finest lineup, with Mustaine and long-time bassist Dave Ellefson being joined by guitarist Marty Friedman and drummer Nick Menza. Trying to come to terms with his substance dependence, Mustaine became much more politically charged in his lyrical themes, exploring the implications and ramifications of war. The music is, at times, breathtaking, with Friedman proving he could cope with the considerable demands put on the guitarist in this most exhaustive of metal bands. "Hangar 18" is a striking moment of genius.

GUITARIST: MARTY FRIEDMAN



COUNTDOWN TO EXTINCTION

CAPITOL, 1992

Max Norman, the man behind Ozzy Osbourne's solo success, was brought in to co-produce with Mustaine, and his obvious commercial leanings can be heard in the way many of the songs here are structured. Gone were the sprawling epics, only two tracks — "Sweating Bullets" and "Ashes in Your Mouth" — were over five minutes in length, and many had an almost traditional arrangement. However, "Symphony of Destruction" was a triumph and remains a Mega classic. Was this an attempt to challenge Metallica's success with the Black Album? If so, it worked to some extent, as *Countdown to Extinction* came up just shy of the mark, making it to Number 2 on the U.S. charts.

GUITARIST: MARTY FRIEDMAN



YOUTHANASIA

CAPITOL, 1994

Now the band were really starting to alienate some of their diehard fans. Almost divorced from the quality that had made their early albums so successful, Megadeth were moving inexorably towards melodic hard rock. Norman's guidance saw them become virtually one-paced, which meant that songs like "Train of Consequences" weren't given the credit they deserved. While "A Tout Le Monde" provided a moving interlude, nevertheless it appeared that Mustaine had lost touch with his roots.

GUITARIST: MARTY FRIEDMAN



CRYPTIC WRITINGS

CAPITOL, 1997

Often dismissed as the worst album of the band's career, *Cryptic Writings* actually saw Megadeth get back in touch with their thrash roots, on songs like "FFF," "She-Wolf" and "Vortex." And "I'll Get Even" saw them re-igniting a creative spark. The problem was in the production. Mustaine has in recent times expressed his regret at the decision to bring in Dann Huff, known for his work in melodic rock circles — far removed from where Megadeth should have been. And it cannot be denied that this record suffers from a somewhat tame timbre.

GUITARIST: MARTY FRIEDMAN



RISK

CAPITOL, 1999

The last Megadeth album of the 20th century and Friedman's farewell performance. Part of the problem here is that tracks like the single "Crush 'Em" are so smooth that they positively glide, rather than truly bombing along in Mega style. Mustaine has claimed that the decision to take Megadeth even further into the jungle of melodically-driven music was suggested by Lars Ulrich and, as the album title suggested, it was a real risk. Again, the production from Huff was a problem, and the album suffers for it. However, it couldn't be denied that Mustaine was still a formidable songwriter, as he proved on "Prince of Darkness" and "Breadline."

GUITARIST: MARTY FRIEDMAN



THE WORLD NEEDS A HERO
SANCTUARY, 2001

A new label, a fresh guitarist (Al Pitrelli) and a return to the hard stuff. After the hard-rock dabbling of the Nineties, the band got suited up in body armor and plunged back into the metal melee. While this was not a complete return to the band's original principles, the album had just enough rough and tumble to keep diehard fans satisfied.

GUITARIST: AL PITRELLI



THE SYSTEM HAS FAILED
SANCTUARY, 2004

After calling time on the band due to a career-threatening arm injury, Mustaine intended this as a solo return. This was subsequently changed, although it was very much a Mustaine-plus-hired-hands effort. A darker, more insidious record than *The World Needs a Hero* — it offered no solutions but highlighted current social and political problems and inconsistencies. However, what it did do was put Megadeth right back to the fore. They were once more metal heroes.

GUITARIST: CHRIS POLAND



UNITED ABOMINATIONS
ROADRUNNER, 2007

Although Megadeth were once more a true band, it was obvious that the songs were the product of Mustaine's mind. However, if *The System Has Failed* was a little inconsistent, this time it was clear Megadeth had found their range again. A cover of Zeppelin's "Out On the Tiles" and a re-visit of "A Tout Le Monde" (with a guest appearance from Lacuna Coil's Cristina Scabbia) apart, it was an album pulling no punches. In keeping with modern cynicism, Mustaine showed himself to be as angry and agitated as he was in 1985. *UA* topped the *GW* readers poll for 2007's best metal album.

GUITARIST: GLEN DROVER



ENDGAME
ROADRUNNER, 2009

Endgame features yet another new lead guitarist entering MegaDave's midst. This time around, it's Chris Broderick, who came in hot, adding bouts of old-school thrash meets new-school edginess. The result is an album that felt like a true band effort that was still clearly spearheaded by Mustaine, who continued to run the gamut of lyrical topics, ranging from *Lord of the Rings* themes to the Great Recession. Songs like "Head Crusher" and "44 Minutes" showed that Mustaine wasn't just back at it, but aiming to properly reinstate the Megadeath machine atop the proverbial MegaMountain. And once again, this barn-burner topped *Guitar World's* end-of-year poll for the best metal album of 2009.

GUITARIST: CHRIS BRODERICK



TH1RT3EN
ROADRUNNER, 2011

For the first time since the halcyon days of Marty Friedman, Megadeth made an album with the same lead guitarist as the previous one. Also noteworthy is the return of founding bassist David Ellefson, whom James LoMenzo had previously replaced. The results were good, if not outstanding... in a way. The Al Capone-inspired "Public Enemy No. 1" was kind of weird, but also kinda awesome in that Mustaine continued to push his lyrical ideas past their limits. And then there's a cut like "Sudden Death," which found Mustaine and company pummeling away at full blast with intent to kill.

GUITARIST: CHRIS BRODERICK



SUPER COLLIDER
UNIVERSAL, 2013

Three albums in a row with a guitarist not named Marty Friedman? Madness! Sadly, this would be Broderick's Megadeth swan song. Thankfully, he went out with a bang, as *Super Collider* was handily the band's best since the vaunted *Rust in Peace*. This is not to say *Super Collider* is as good as *Rust in Peace*, but that Mustaine had harnessed some sort of latter-day resurgence, landing Megadeth back among the genre's best and most consistent bands. Evidence can be found in songs like "Kingmaker" and "Burn!" Though great things were to come, it's a shame Broderick didn't stick around to challenge the vaunted Friedman era for consistency and dominance. That aside, he did find his way onto *GW*'s cover (our June 2013 issue), becoming the first Megadeth guitarist to share the cover with Mustaine since Friedman back in 1991.

GUITARIST: CHRIS BRODERICK



DYSTOPIA
UNIVERSAL, 2016

It's not hyperbolic to say that *Dystopia* was the best Megadeth album since the band's first few beloved records. But this time, this isn't just because it's good, but because it's truly great. With former Angra guitarist Kiko Loureiro aboard, Mustaine found the best foil he'd had since the Eighties, leading to the creation of a modern metal monster. "Fatal Illusion," "The Threat Is Real" and "Post American World" are commentaries that pummel the listener into blissful submission. *Dystopia* is top-tier Mustaine, so it's no wonder that it nabbed him a Grammy for Best Metal Performance.

GUITARIST: KIKO LOUREIRO



THE SICK, THE DYING... AND THE DEAD!
UNIVERSAL, 2022

Mustaine & Co. carried the momentum from *Dystopia* into the sessions for *The Sick...* leading to another late-career metal masterstroke. But there was more at play here, such as the Covid pandemic and Mustaine's throat cancer diagnosis. These issues shrouded the album in darkness, which is fitting for Mustaine's vibe anyway. "We'll Be Back" netted Megadeth another Grammy nod for Best Metal Performance, which was icing on the cake given all that Mustaine had been through. On the downside, this record put a period on Lourierio's tenure, ending his time in the band... and leaving fans wondering what could have been.

GUITARIST: KIKO LOUREIRO



MEGADETH
FRONTIERS, 2026

Given the fact that Mustaine and his band of merry men had nabbed two Grammys after the release of the band's previous two records, and that their live show is as hellacious as ever, it was a surprise to hear that *Megadeth* will be the band's final album. But it's not all bad, as newbie Teemu Mäntysaari made like it was 1990, delivering a Friedman-ish performance across "Tipping Point," "I Don't Care" and "Let There Be Shred." Mustaine is going out like he came in: kicking, screaming and delivering blood-boiling rock just as he did in '85.

GUITARIST: TEEMU MÄNTYSAARI

Megadeth — the final lineup; [*from left*] Dirk Verbeuren, Dave Mustaine, James LoMenzo and Teemu Mäntysaari

THE LAST NOTE

DAVE MUSTAINE TAKES US THROUGH THE INSPIRATIONS BEHIND MEGADETH'S FINAL ALBUM — TRACK BY TRACK — AND REVEALS HIS MOTIVATION FOR RE-RECORDING METALLICA'S "RIDE THE LIGHTNING"

BY ANDREW DALY

IT SEEMS THAT Dave Mustaine's wild heavy metal journey is ending via one final Megadeth album — January 2026's self-titled release — and a globetrotting tour. To that end, he tells *Guitar World*, "We have a lot of territories we need to play before we stop. We've got a lot of stops to get to so that we can see everybody. It's more than just weekend-warrior stuff here in the States. We're not just here traveling in a Winnebago." [*Laughs*]

It's hard to imagine the metal landscape without Mustaine, a man whose playing is as fiery as his personality. Thankfully, those traits come across throughout *Megadeth*, meaning that Mustaine is going out with a massive bang — a bang that will punctuate a hell-raising career of music-making that'll be remembered for as long as any of us are still here.

But Mustaine still has a lot in front of him, namely the aforementioned new album, which he discusses below, track by track. As is the case with any Megadeth offering, the themes run a wide gamut, but it's the album's final track, "The Last Note," that seems the most symbolic.

"It's like we're playing to carry on forever," Mustaine says of the song. "For people who know my music, it'll carry on. I know it will."



"TIPPING POINT"

THIS SONG CAME along in the middle of the recording process; the songs were numbered, and "Tipping Point" was Number 9, so we had gotten through a good portion of the record by the time we started working on it. As far as performing in the studio, we had some crude racks from Lowe's or Home Depot, and we had all of our amps stacked up there. We had our Marshalls and a bunch of other amps I've never seen before, all the stomp boxes and stuff. This song came together pretty easily. The hardest part was knowing when to stop, because Megadeth songs reveal themselves — if that makes sense. The first time you listen to it, it sounds like something, and then you listen again, and you hear so many things you didn't hear before. The easiest way to say it is that it's like peeling an onion, and every time you listen to it, you hear a little something more. Teemu [*Mäntysaari*] is definitely going to be a star. The guitar work he did on this record was just amazing.



ROSS HALFIN

"I DON'T CARE"

IT'S SONG NUMBER 2, but it was song Number 4 in the list of songs. That was the order the songs were penned — not as far as their importance. "I Don't Care" is really a super-punk track I had been hanging onto in my head for a long time and thinking about, you know, how aggressive it would be to do a really great skating video, or any of those extreme sports. It just kept fueling the song. When it was time to sing the lyrics, I don't know what I was thinking, but I went up and just spat out these lyrics — and all that stuff came out the second time I sang it.

The first time I sang it, it reminded me a lot of Nirvana and then Fear. I was in one of those little obnoxious Dave Mustaine moods, and I got through the first pass. Then the producer, Chris [*Rakestraw*], goes, "You need to just go 'da da da da da' during that middle part there." I kind of tilted my head, went in there and just said the most obnoxious things I could say — and there you go! [*Laughs*]

The fun part about doing the guitar layering was, when we started with the main riff, we added another, which was all down-picking the same chords. Then we had another layer that went on top that was like when you do the first note and then an octave higher — that jazzy kind of chord, where you can slide it, like a George Benson chord. At the very end, there was one more layer that's a cross between a percussive sound and a little bit of a pinch sound.

"HEY GOD?!"

WHEN WE STARTED this one, it had different lyrics. We went through numerous ideations where the song stayed the same, but the lyrics were really hard to come down on. I spent so much time getting this lyric right that I lost it, and I just wrote down what ended up becoming the final lyrics. A lot of the thought process for the retirement stuff was swirling around in my head around that period. The thoughts would come and go, but that's when I zeroed in on those lyrics.

The song — the music — was written; it was the second musical track we were working on, but the lyrics took forever. But when we finally got to that place, about how we're nearing the end here, that's when these lyrics came up. It's funny because there's a lot of those, I don't know if "slogans" is the right word, but they're like wives' tales and limericks and stuff like that about footprints in the sand, looking back. And there was only one set of footprints. And you say to God, "Where were you?" And God says, "Well, those footprints were mine, when I was carrying you." I thought, "That's a really cool concept." It's like the old poem that says something like, "It's better to live your life like there is a God, and when you get to Heaven, find out there is none, than to live your life like there's no God and go to Heaven and find out that there is." I thought, "That's pretty heavy."

"LET THERE BE SHRED"

"LET THERE BE Shred" has nothing to do with AC/DC's "Let There Be Rock," although I'm a huge AC/DC fan and I love that song. Teemu is such an exceptional talent that he really lit a fire in me for my playing. We were joking around and constantly talking about how we have to make this record absolutely shred and that we needed to put a lot of solos in it. I think we accomplished that.

We didn't write songs like [*we used to in former*] periods of Megadeth's lifetime. We had songs that were great songs, but were fit for a time, like the *Countdown to Extinction* years. Those songs are classic, but they're not fast by today's standards. The songs people like are like those on the new record, but, you know, different songs for different times.

A pretty unique thing about "Let There Be Shred" — in terms of the guitar duels Teemu and I were doing — is that he would do all the shred stuff, and I'd do all the hippie stuff. I thought that was really fun, based on what the lyrics were about, because it was supposed to be a guitar challenge. I think if we did a video, it'd be really great to get a bunch of super-amazing young guitar players in there just going for it, and then the song ends and it's me standing out in front of the audition place with my guitar case like, "Wait a minute, I'm, I'm here..." [*Laughs*] It's kind of like a David Lee Roth video.

"PUPPET PARADE"

WHEN WE WROTE this song, we knew the melody was really catchy. As for the guitar parts, the rhythm is close to several songs we have, but it isn't the same. We didn't want to borrow anything from ourselves, but the simplicity of the riff makes it really catchy. Sometimes you want it to be super-explosive, but the riff doesn't call for that; the riff calls for a simpler performance. Maybe you take out one or two rhythm notes; maybe that's the difference between good and great.

With "Puppet Parade," the rhythm in the beginning is really cool and hooky. The chorus is from when I dug into trying to sing again, you know — really sing along with the song. Believe it or not, the chorus was one of the hardest parts on this song. Not the lyrics, but the music. When we got that done, we knew it was going to be a catchy song. And Teemu did a great guitar solo; we both did.

"ANOTHER BAD DAY"

THIS WAS FUN to write. I'm inspired by things from my past and from when I was growing up — especially videos and movies. "Another Bad Day" reminds me of that Madness video for "Our House" [*1982*], where everything's fucked, and you can cross that with that 1993 Michael Douglas movie, *Falling Down*. There's a whole meltdown — he's got a baseball bat, his car breaks down. That's my visual for this song. [*Laughs*] He wakes up and has no idea what's going on. He's losing everything, and his normal routine is gone. The song discusses the hardships in life. I've had a lot of experiences like that; these things happen to everyone. Singing about it sometimes makes it a little bit easier for people who are struggling with stuff like this.

"MADE TO KILL"

THIS WAS ONE of those songs where the first half is like the second half, but it's telling a story. There's the first half, and then it goes back to the beginning, and I think there's some really cool riffs in there. The lyric ideas talk about the state of affairs in our country right now, where people are so agitated that they start organizing. I'm not saying one side's right or one side's wrong; I'm saying this is what's coming next if things don't change.

"I WANTED TO PAY MY RESPECTS TO JAMES HETFIELD, WHO I THINK IS AN AMAZING GUITAR PLAYER, AND LARS ULRICH, WHO WAS AN EXCELLENT SONGWRITER"

"OBEY THE CALL"

THIS WAS THE second-to-last song we wrote. We had some pretty good soloing and trading off, if I remember right. Teemu had the majority of the solos, and it was kind of a follow-up to [*the cover art of 2018's*] *Dystopia*, that kind of bombed-out city, where everything's all fucked up. I've written about this a lot of times. The first time I really got into something like this was when I saw the Jean-Claude Van Damme movie *Timecop* [*1994*] and we were finishing up *Rust in Peace*. We had just finished "Poison Was the Cure," and we needed a little bit more for the record, and David Ellefson had written this part, which we ended up using as the beginning of "Poison Was the Cure." I watched *Timecop*, and I had this dream where I had my own vision of what it would look like. The lyrics were me dipping my toe into full-on apocalypse stuff.

"I AM WAR"

IT'S SIMPLE, BUT the lyrics are deep. I'm a big fan of Sun Tzu and *The Art of War*; it's something every band leader should read. It's not generally made for musicians, but the credo throughout the book — the "not

taking shit from anybody and knowing how to defeat your enemies and how to be a warrior" part — really inspired me when I first started getting into martial arts. When I heard businessmen were reading it, I figured, "Shit, I'm gonna read this for sure now." So I did, and it's very difficult to understand, but I got through it and read it a second time. It's like our records, where it reveals itself as time goes on. That's important when you're trying to learn something; you learn it like you're gonna teach it. When you learn something and somebody makes it too fucking difficult, you're not gonna learn it. It's the same with martial arts — and with guitar. I thought this was really cool. The song shows the dichotomy between these two approaches to war. One is the leader going to war and trying to win; the other person tries to win and then goes to war. He is somebody who will plan out his attack, like a reaction to a response.

"THE LAST NOTE"

THIS STARTED OUT as a very sad song. It was actually called "Jumpers," because it was about the dilemma on the Golden Gate Bridge — the tragic problem they have there with people ending their lives on the bridge so often that they've got a police force just for the bridge. There's a clip that shows several people jumping off the bridge and what happens when someone jumps. They hit the ground with such velocity that their bones turn into splinters, which go upward, piercing every organ in their body. As soon as the rescue team gets there, they go to where the person jumped and throw this flare off the side of the bridge. It goes into the water and floats along with the current so that you can see the body trail. It's gnarly stuff when you think about it.

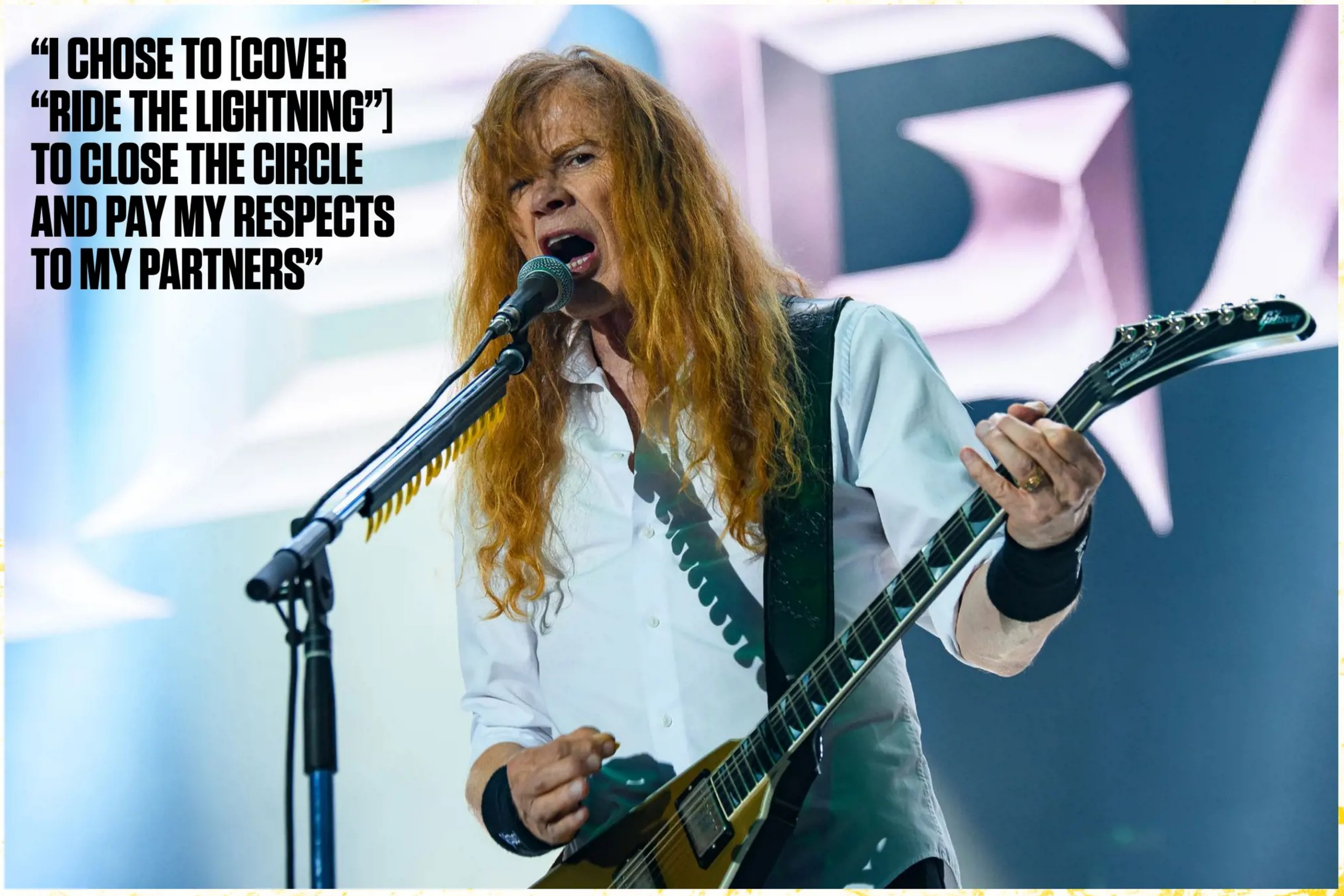
I wrote a song about it, but when it was time to sing it, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. There was no way I could get any emotion behind it. I mean, I sang it well, but it just didn't sound good. There was no way I could make that something somebody could sing, so we changed it to "The Last Note."

I was out last month [*October*] during our European/U.K. tour, and some of the first interviews we did there were with some really rugged guys — strapping guys from Scandinavia. A couple of them said to my face, "When I listened to 'The Last Note,' it brought a tear to my eye." And I went, "What?" — because this was the first time we'd done any press on this record. Imagine that I haven't spoken to anybody since we shut the record down, and this was one of the first times I heard from anybody about the record, and certainly about that song. When these two guys, in two separate interviews, said the same thing — one said it brought tears to his eyes and the other said it almost made him weep — I was like, "Mission accomplished."

"RIDE THE LIGHTNING" (BONUS TRACK)

THE MAIN REASON I chose to do this was to close the circle and pay my respects to my partners. I thought this was a really great way to do that. Whenever we select any other band's music to go on our albums, sometimes there's a lot of thought behind it and sometimes there's not. This was one of the ones that we thought long and hard about, because all I wanted to do was play the song I wrote with the guys in Metallica. I wanted to pay my respects to James Hetfield, who I think is an amazing guitar player, and Lars Ulrich, who was an excellent songwriter. I remember when I was there and we were putting these songs together, Lars didn't just sit there; he was very instrumental in making these songs. Of course, when we got into making demos of these songs, it was fun to do the recordings, but we were never really able to do a full-on produced version of "Ride the Lightning," and I would have loved to have heard that. I gotta tell you — listening back to James' original vocal performance, it was really tremendous. Anyway, there's no big strategy; I have respect for the guys, and I just wanted to show that. And it's a hell of a song! GW

"I CHOSE TO [COVER "RIDE THE LIGHTNING"] TO CLOSE THE CIRCLE AND PAY MY RESPECTS TO MY PARTNERS"



Look What the Cat Dragged In!

A very *Guitar World* guide to the most significant guitar albums to turn 40 in 2026

ON THE SURFACE, guitar trends in 1986 looked downright wild and perverse — a weird parade of shred-happy virtuosos, anthemic power pop heroes, dirtbag metalheads and eccentric alt-rock outsiders.

But the truth is, the music provided a perfect soundtrack for any typical American high school in the mid-Eighties. Hot blonde cheerleaders and their varsity boyfriends — both with perfectly feathered hair — boogied to the glossy, arena-sized riffs of Bon Jovi's *Slippery When Wet* and Van Halen's *5150*. Meanwhile, the heshers in blue denim smoked cigarettes, slugged sloe gin behind the bleachers and skipped class with Metallica's *Master of Puppets* or Megadeth's *Peace Sells... but Who's Buying?* blasting through their Walkmans. And in the drama wing, the theater kids tried in vain to avoid being shoved into lockers while finding solace in the Smiths' *The Queen Is Dead* or R.E.M.'s *Lifes Rich Pageant*.

Beneath the Aqua Net and denim jackets, 1986 was a year of transition — a crossroads for the guitar. The instrument was everywhere, but what it meant was changing fast. Eddie Van Halen had redefined its possibilities, but his success with *5150* also symbolized the new mainstream, namely pop hooks and corporate sheen. Underground metal bands like Metallica and Slayer were weaponizing the guitar into something brutal, while alternative acts like the Smiths, the Cure and R.E.M. were rediscovering the beauty of jangle, texture and restraint.

It was a year when the guitar tried on every mask it could find — virtuoso flash, suburban rebellion, romantic angst and emo defiance — and somehow, all of it made sense. The same radio waves that carried "You Give Love a Bad Name" also hummed with "Master of Puppets" and "Fall on Me."

In hindsight, 1986 feels like the last great year before the guitar world split into tribes. Metal would get faster, pop slicker and indie more self-conscious. But for a brief, chaotic moment, it all coexisted in a glorious collision of energy and experimentation.

In 1986, guitar was at the crossroads. The instrument was everywhere, but what it meant was changing fast

The albums of 1986 capture a turning point when the guitar was still king, but the kingdom was fracturing in fascinating ways. Whether you worship at the altar of tone, technique or attitude, the records represented in this issue of *GW* reveal how the instrument kept reinventing itself in the face of pop polish, metal fury and indie rebellion. They're proof that in 1986, no matter your tribe or taste, the guitar still had something to say — and it was loud, proud and gloriously unhinged.

If *The Breakfast Club* summed up 1985 by locking five clashing archetypes in detention and showing they weren't so different after all, 1986 was the year their soundtracks collided. Metal, pop and alt-rock might have seemed like separate worlds, but they were all driven by the same instinct — the guitar as voice for identity, angst and escape.

Or, in the words of *The Breakfast Club*'s stereotypical athlete, Andrew Clark, "We're all pretty bizarre. Some of us are just better at hiding it, that's all."

BY BRAD TOLINSKI

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES



RUN-D.M.C. FEAT. AEROSMITH
"Walk This Way"

In '86, the ingenious blending of rock and hip-hop resulted in anything but a novelty hit. Joe Perry explains...

BY **ANDREW DALY**

LOOKING BACK AT the then-improbable collaboration between Aerosmith and Run-D.M.C. on a rock/hip-hop reboot of "Walk This Way," guitarist Joe Perry says, "It was a lot of fun and definitely a high point of our career." His second point cannot be overstated. By 1985, Aerosmith were experiencing a commercial stasis, and their ballyhooed comeback album, *Done with Mirrors*, stalled on the charts. The revamped version of "Walk This Way" blasted them back into the mainstream while also introducing Run-D.M.C. to a wider audience.

Unbeknownst to Perry, Run-D.M.C. (Joseph "Run" Simmons, Darryl "DMC" McDaniels and DJ Jam Master Jay) were fans of the original track. At the same time, Perry was "just getting into hip-hop." So it was kismet when Rick Rubin brought the guitarist and singer Steven Tyler together with the pioneering Queens-based hip-hoppers to create one of music's most celebrated crossover hits. (In 1975, Aerosmith's original "Walk This Way" reached Number 10 on *Billboard*'s Hot 100. Run-D.M.C.'s remake hit the top five, and its video was a smash.)

What did you think of hip-hop when you first heard it?

My son, who was 11 or 12, was blasting it in his room. I dug the groove. It was really basic music; it's all about rhythm and guys standing on a street corner with a boombox. The lyrics reflected how they were living.

By the Eighties, a lot of people were calling "Walk This Way" proto-hip-hop.

The lyrics were a story, and there was a rhythm in hip-hop, so to me it was a natural progression from the blues. But to think that "Walk This Way" was proto-rap, that's another story. I guess that's a discussion — or an argument. And even if it's an argument, which it shouldn't be, it's just a point of view; nobody's right or wrong.

Were you into the idea of collaborating with Run-D.M.C.?

Rick Rubin heard something. He had to convince those guys [*because*] and they were kind of tentative. But Aerosmith was up for anything. That's why our music goes from hard rock to almost heavy metal to blues to ballads. We thought, "Let's try it!"

Aerosmith were touring at the time. What was the recording process like?

We were, I think, in North Carolina. They sent us plane tickets, and me and Steven went to Queens. I brought my guitar, and there was Rick, an engineer and the guys from Run-D.M.C., and one was late because they had towed his rental car. [*Laughs*] He was flipping out because he didn't know what he was gonna do about it, but Rick kept saying, "Listen, you've got Aerosmith here. Focus. We'll take care of the car later. Don't worry about it." After that, everybody settled down.

What was the recording process like?

We got the drum beat down, which was the common ground for the song — from our version and theirs. I think Rick said, "You're using the drums to rap to anyway; you might as well take it all the way. Let's try it."

Is it true you also played bass on the updated track?

There were these three kids in the studio sitting on the couch. We were introduced to them, and I didn't know who they were, but they were cool guys and a little younger. We were listening to the mixdown, and Rick said, "I think we need to put a bass on it." We looked around the studio, and there were no basses, but one of the kids said, "My apartment ain't too far, I got a bass."

Who were the three kids?

The Beastie Boys! [*Laughs*] He went to his apartment and was back in 15 minutes with a P-Bass or a Jazz. Anyway, I played the bass.

The track kicked off your second run to glory. How do you look back on that?

It was definitely a leg-up. We're just proud to say it was a meeting of two styles of music. And the video speaks for itself. We got Black rappers on MTV. The only Black cat on MTV at that point was Michael Jackson; at least, that's what we heard. I'm proud of that.



THE BANGLES
Different Light

Vicki Peterson on the California girls' hit second album, an intoxicating blend of Sixties pop smarts and Eighties sheen

BY **BILL DeMAIN**

THERE WERE A whole lot of pharaohs walking the earth in 1986. Even Princess Di and the Statue of Liberty were striking poses. The craze was all thanks to the Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian" — and its MTV video.

"Those moves still follow us," says guitarist Vicki Peterson. "But fun as it is, I remember thinking the label would never have the balls to release it as a single, because it's just too weird!"

But really, at a time when Madonna and Phil Collins ruled the charts, the Bangles were different. Four friends who were "obsessed with the Beatles, jangly guitars and harmony singing," their 1984 debut *All Over the Place* had landed as a charming throwback. "It had a glorified garage band sound," Peterson says. "With *Different Light*, we embraced sonic techniques and production values that were more of the moment. Also, I think there was our own ambition plus pressure from the label to get more commercial success. So they were pleased when Prince offered us 'Manic Monday,' because that was a stake they could put in the ground."

The Purple One was a fan. "He would come to our shows and sit in," Peterson says. "We'd get a note from the tour manager — 'Prince is here and would love to play with you.' It was like, 'What? Here, my take my guitar, please!'"

That led to a demo of 'Manic Monday' arriving at the studio. "It was very well

mapped out," Peterson says, recalling that Prince suggested they just add their vocals over his tracks. "Normally, people were happy to take his tracks, because he's Prince. But we wanted to do the song our own way." It was the right move. The push and pull of Debbi Peterson's drums and Michael Steele's bass, Peterson's layered fuzz guitars and that powdered-wig harpsichord hook provided a bed for their lush harmonies. "Luckily, Prince liked what we did," Peterson says. "He came to a rehearsal, listened, gave us the thumbs up and walked out. All in his enigmatic style."

Working 12-hour days at Sunset Sound, with producer David Kahne, the band adopted an approach typical of the time. Peterson says, "Our normal modus operandi had been tracking live in the room, all four of us, sounding like a rock band. But here, we'd go back, then systematically replace sounds one by one — snare drum, bass, all my guitars. It was sort of ridiculous, really."

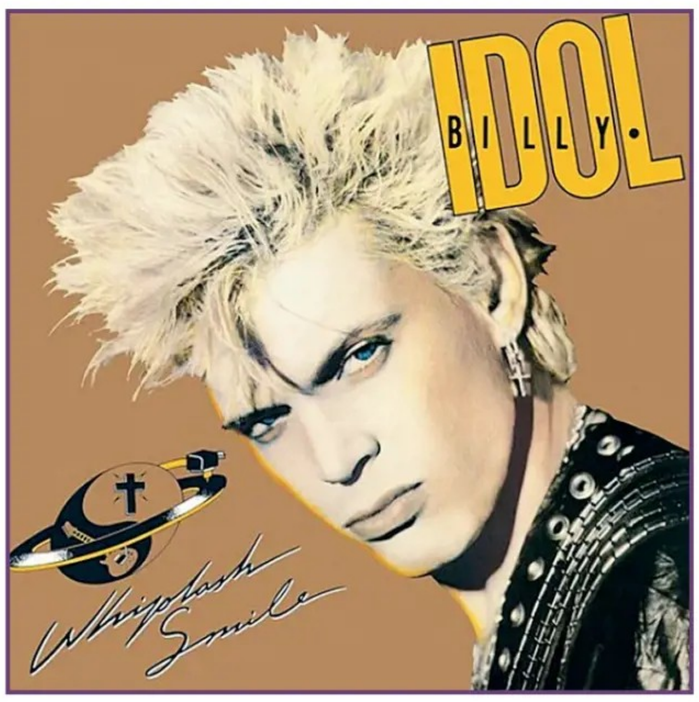
For guitars, Peterson kept it simple, using her "Frankenstein Strat, with a '65 neck on a '67 body," and a '73 Les Paul Custom, plugged into a Fender Deluxe or Fender Super. "My pedalboard would eventually evolve into insanity," she says, "but then, my favorite box was the Ibanez Tube Screamer. It still is."

Though Peterson says the sessions were mostly fun, she's still bugged by how Kahne pitted them against each other in "sing-offs." Especially on "Walk Like an Egyptian." She says, "For whatever reason, he didn't think Debbi's voice sounded good on it, and he kicked her out. That didn't go over well. And it became pretty obvious that David preferred Susanna's voice over the rest of us, so more songs got shifted to her."

The album's four singles ("If She Knew What She Wants" and "September Gurls" were also covers) grabbed so much airplay (Peterson says "constant touring hadn't left much time to write originals"), that listening now to the garage-meets-Motown blitz of "In a Different Light" and the beatnik bop of "Return Post" can feel like hearing a lost Bangles album.

Forty years on, Peterson has mixed feelings about *Different Light*. "It's like a middle child," she says. "Obviously, it's very important because of what it did for our career. But maybe I value it less because the singles were covers. As a songwriter, that always gets me a little bit. After the first record, I remember thinking, I don't know how anyone ever makes a second record, because it was incredibly draining. I'm proud of us for being tenacious and really going for it.

EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS



BILLY IDOL
Whiplash Smile

After the Wedding: Steve Stevens remembers the early days of true international stardom

BY JOE BOSSO

FOLLOWING THE 1981 breakup of his punk band Generation X, singer Billy Idol left the U.K. and began a solo career in New York City. There, he hooked up with Manhattan's best-kept guitar whiz secret, Steve Stevens, and the two got off to a fast start with the dance rock hit "White Wedding" off 1982's *Billy Idol*. A year later, things broke wide open with the multi-platinum *Rebel Yell*, which included a trio of radio and MTV smashes: "Flesh for Fantasy," "Eyes Without a Face" and the blitzing title cut.

"We were in an enviable position going into our next record," says Stevens, speaking about *Whiplash Smile*, the 1986 album that marked his third collaboration with the English rock singer. "We had success behind us, and with that came a fair amount of freedom. We had powerful management and a great relationship with our record company."

Stevens and Idol agreed they wouldn't try to replicate past hits. "The last thing we wanted to do was make *Rebel Yell Part 2*," Stevens says. He cites the 1985 remix compilation set *Vital Idol* as the future-forward direction they wished to follow. "Gary Langdon from Art of Noise did an incredible remix of 'Flesh for Fantasy,' and we said, 'That's where we want to go,' the guitarist says. "We're going to employ more of the new gear and make a very modern record."

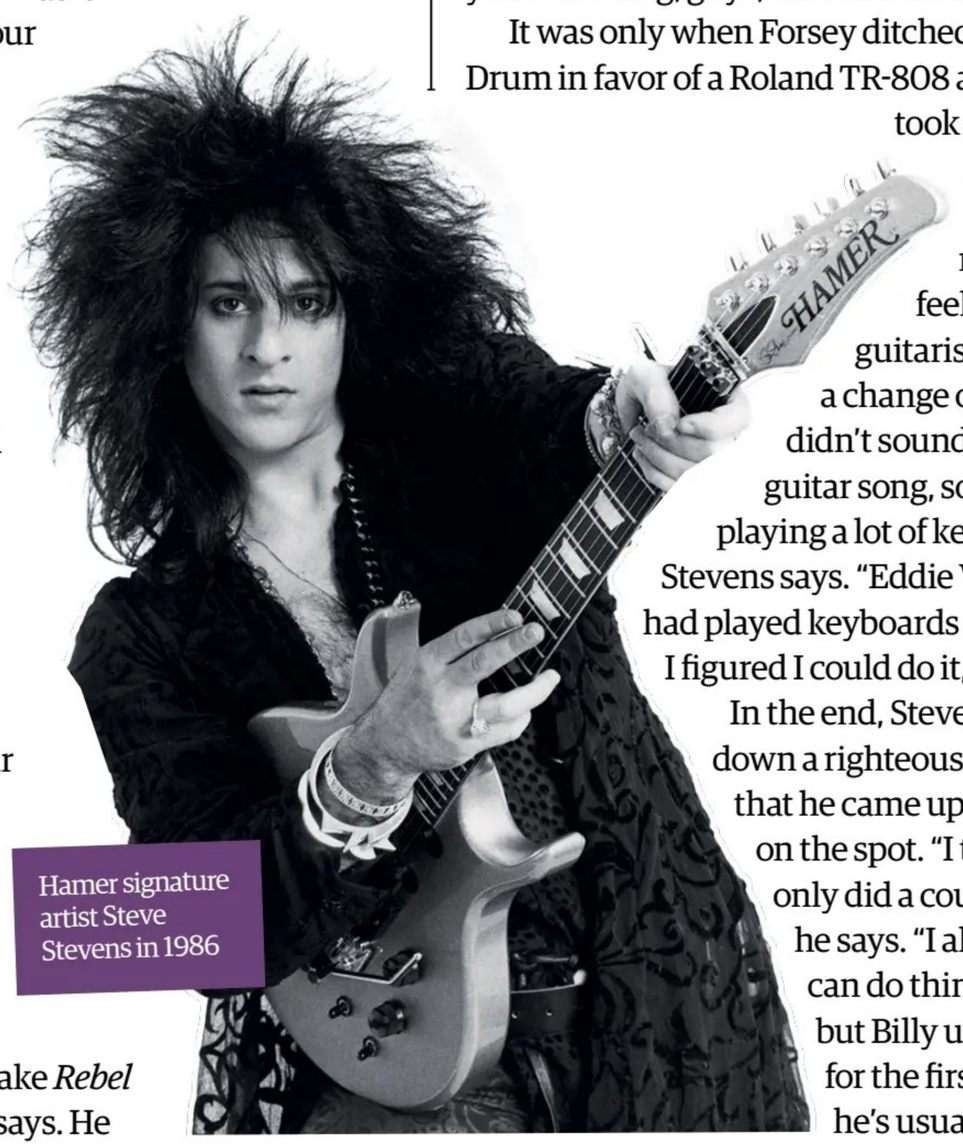
There would, however, be growing pains — a particular source of frustration was the matter of drums. Originally, the idea was to incorporate Thommy Price's live drums with Linn Drums, but as Stevens recalls, the technology required to marry the two just wasn't there yet. "Our producer, Keith Forsey, was a master at drum machines, but he could only do so much with what existed at the time," he says. "In the end, we went with the programmed drums."

The songwriting process for *Whiplash Smile* was a decidedly low-tech process. "Billy and I would just sit in a room with our guitars and go, 'What have you got?'" Stevens says. Among the album's songs the two wrote together were "World's Forgotten Boy," "Soul Standing By" and "Man for All Seasons." The guitarist singles out his solo in the latter track as a favorite. "That's where I slipped in a little Wes Montgomery inspiration," he says. "I always had to maintain a punk rock ethos, and punk wasn't about shred, so I thought, 'If I do a shred alternate picking solo but do it clean like Wes, I can get away with it.'"

At first, Stevens didn't know what he could do with "To Be a Lover," a cover of William Bell's 1968 soul ballad that had been reinterpreted by Al Kooper, Lee "Scratch" Perry and George Earl, whose reggae approach appealed to Idol. "That had a slow tempo, but Billy said, 'I hear it fast,'" Stevens says. "I was still saying, 'I don't get what you're hearing, guys, but I'm here to help."

It was only when Forsey ditched the Linn Drum in favor of a Roland TR-808 and the song took on a swinging, soulful rockabilly feel that the guitarist had a change of heart. "It didn't sound like a big guitar song, so I wound up playing a lot of keyboards," Stevens says. "Eddie Van Halen had played keyboards on 'Jump,' so I figured I could do it, too."

In the end, Stevens did lay down a righteous guitar solo that he came up with right on the spot. "I think we only did a couple of takes," he says. "I always think I can do things better, but Billy usually goes for the first take. And he's usually right."



Hamer signature artist Steve Stevens in 1986



THE CHAMELEONS
Strange Times

The Chameleons' third album might be the greatest British record you've never heard

BY HENRY YATES

SOME OF THE most glorious British guitar music of the Eighties was born under the glowering skies of the city of Manchester. And while the Chameleons never matched the commercial heights of city brethren the Smiths and New Order, those who did discover the band's third album, *Strange Times*, were forever marked by the experience.

"I'd forgotten how much this album meant to me," posted Oasis's Noel Gallagher on Instagram in 2018. "It came out in '86, when I was 19. I've been listening to it every day since and I have to say it's blown my mind — again. It must have influenced my early years as a songwriter because I can hear me in it everywhere."

Fronted by the shamanic vocals of Mark Burgess, with Reg Smithies and Dave Fielding handling guitars, the lineup only had a scattering of embryonic song ideas when they loaded into Jacob's Studio in Surrey for a five-week session. But the bonhomie — and perhaps some leftover mojo from the studio's recent residents — fed into an album that is lusher, dreamier and more melodic than their post-punk debut, 1983's *Script of the Bridge*, or its follow-up, 1985's *What Does Anything Mean? Basically*.

"The Smiths had just been in doing *The Queen Is Dead*," Smithies says. "I've got a memory of doing backing vocals with Dave and we couldn't stop laughing. And I remember a bird getting in the control room — it took us ages to get it out!"

Somewhere amid the merriment, the band — with producer David M. Allen — captured an album that conjures its own unique headspace. While the nuts and bolts have faded in his memory, Smithies believes he used a Gibson SG and a Squier Strat into a rental Mesa Boogie, with vibes courtesy of Boss delay and chorus pedals, plus the otherworldly repeats of Fielding's Roland Space Echo.

"We generally wanted the record to have a live feel," he says. "Dave and I didn't compete with each other, and it helped that we had different sounds... Dave was and is a much better guitar player than me, but my strength was riffs."

The synergy is obvious on "Mad Jack," "Caution" and "Swamp Thing," with the guitarists weaving hypnotic soundscapes decorated by chiming, delay-soaked arpeggios that at times bleed into feedback and foreboding. "The pop mainstream back then was just catchy love songs, but we related more to the alternative side," Smithies says. "We were lumped in with the goth thing, but we did what we wanted. My favorite guitar moment on *Strange Times*? 'I'll Remember.' We split up not long after, so it's an apt song to end the record."

Thanks to that first parting of '87, the Chameleons missed the mid-Nineties Britrock boom they had helped inspire. But the band's second reunion since 2021 has stuck, and Smithies still enjoys the patronage of Interpol and the Smashing Pumpkins, as well as namechecks from the likes of Alcest frontman Neige ("The Chameleons were just as good as anyone else in the post-punk scene," he told *Louder*).

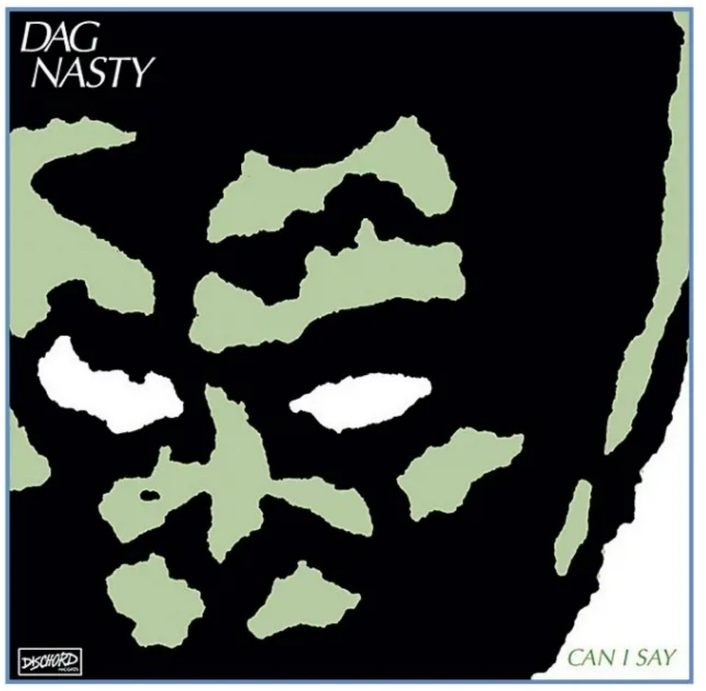
"I've never met Noel Gallagher, but I've heard he liked *Strange Times*," Smithies says. "I met Billy Corgan briefly when we supported the Mission on a recent U.S. tour. He was talking to Wayne Hussey.

I was about to go onstage and I got a selfie with him to send to my son, Joe, as he's a big fan. We also did a gig in Seattle not long ago; Krist Novoselic from Nirvana turned up and bought our 2025 record, *Arctic Moon*."



The Chameleons on a tour stop in Minneapolis in 1987

JIM STEINFELDT/GETTY IMAGES



DAG NASTY
Can I Say

Brian Baker of cult hardcore practitioners Dag Nasty takes us back to the bad old D.C. days

BY GREGORY ADAMS

BRIAN BAKER WAS too young to drive when he started playing the early Eighties punk circuit as the teenage bassist for Minor Threat. By 1986, he was in the driver's seat — both as the founding guitarist and creative force behind melodic D.C. hardcore quartet Dag Nasty, and as the guy who owned the van. With the latter in mind, Baker credits his dad — and misappropriated tuition funds — for getting him on the road.

"He gave me the check and, wouldn't you know, instead of registering for college I bought a van," Baker says now with a laugh. "I didn't let him know I'd stolen his money until I had made something of myself... By the time I told him, he was cool about it."

After Minor Threat broke up in 1983, Baker practiced with Glenn Danzig's then-developing Samhain project, but it wasn't a match. He also briefly performed with punk-provocateurs the Meatmen while attending college but abandoned both pursuits to start Dag Nasty. While often rooted in the furious pace of first-wave hardcore, 1986 debut album *Can I Say* also endures as a scope-expanding proto-emo classic — reflecting Baker's love of heart-pounding hooks and Captain Sensible's jangle-jolted guitar sound on the Damned's 1982 album, *Strawberries*.

"I'm not going say I had a notepad of things to do, but I was consciously [*thinking*], 'We need a couple ragers that sound like Minor Threat,'" he says, "Also, the music that was not specifically trying to be fast was a reflection of what I liked to listen to."

Dag Nasty initially featured Baker, bassist Roger Marbury, drummer Colin Sears and gruff-but-energetic frontman Shawn Brown.



Dag Nasty's Brian Baker on stage in Sacramento with Bad Religion in 2014

After cutting a demo on Halloween '85, Baker brought Dave Smalley of Boston hardcore outfit DYS into the fold as a screamer who could match unbridled fury with melodic flair. They "slightly tarted up" eight early songs for the *Can I Say* sessions at Don Zientara's Inner Ear basement studio in Arlington, Virginia.

Baker's solo on the power-shuffled "Thin Line" is anything but wispy; the "Justification" demo's slender vibrato passage evolved into rock-scorched dynamism for the LP. Sometimes he hot-shotted things even more in concert: "As I got more comfortable playing guitar, and more familiar with the songs, I would probably cheese it up a little bit — but I wouldn't change the core of it."

His setup comprised a Seventies Les Paul goldtop, a 100-watt JMP 2203 Mk2 and a Marshall 1935B 4x12. The most crucial part of *Can I Say*'s tone ended up being an MXR chorus laying around Inner Ear. While omnipresent on the album, Baker felt the pedal design was "clumsy," so he opted to bring a roadworthy Boss CE-3000 Super Chorus on tour instead.

Interestingly, Smalley wasn't road-ready either. Just as Dag were about to promote *Can I Say*, their frontman pulled out of the project. "We were going to open for the Descendents on a huge summer tour… and Dave decides he's going to go do graduate school, something that *wasn't* being in Dag Nasty." Vocalist Peter Cortner handled those dates. Shortly after the tour, Baker moved into Descendents bassist Doug Carrion's L.A. basement and started playing in Doggy Style, a party band making music with a "regrettable Chili Peppers flavor to it." That bottomed out for Baker quick — he and Carrion bounced to D.C. and restarted Dag Nasty with Cortner and Sears. They slowed the tempo for 1987's *Wig Out at Denko's*, "a weird-sounding record that sounds like people who went to California and smoked some pot."

Dag's demo-era lineup reunited in 2012 but have been relatively dormant since 2018. Baker's primarily focused on his 30-year run with Bad Religion. Despite *Can I Say* ending with "Never Go Back," he says the door remains open for Dag Nasty's return.

MIIKKA SKAFFARI/GETTY IMAGES



DAVID LEE ROTH
Eat 'Em and Smile

Steve Vai pays affectionate tribute to his first truly high-profile gig

BY ANDREW DALY

DESPITE HAVING SERVED under Frank Zappa, releasing one non-genre-conforming solo record (1984's *Flex-Able*) and scoring a key — and now legendary — role in *Crossroads*, which hit theaters in March 1986, Steve Vai was still relatively unknown in the land of regular humans. But after joining the solo band of former Van Halen frontman David Lee Roth, he'd become a household-ish name.

"At 26, I got to live the ultimate guitar rock-star fantasy," Vai says. "I wish every rock guitarist could experience a piece of that, but it would need to be the Eighties when that type of thing was flourishing."

The "thing" Vai is talking about is glammed-out shred, which was popularized by Eddie Van Halen (and a few others), who, in the eyes of Roth's fans, Vai was about to be directly compared to. Not that this bothered Vai.

"I believe I worked well in the band because I've had rock in my blood since I was a teenager," Vai says. "I was able to authentically express that, with my quirk, of course."

Also helpful was Vai's habit of coming in behind iconic shredders. "I've been lucky that way throughout my career," Vai says. "I replaced Warren Cuccurullo with Zappa, Yngwie with Alcatrazz and Edward with Dave. Somehow the fans kept welcoming me in. Maybe they just like watching a guy try to keep his head above water!"

In all fairness, judging by Roth's debut solo record, 1986's *Eat 'Em and Smile*, Vai did more than keep his head above water. Tracks like "Yankee Rose," "Tobacco Road," "Shyboy" and Vai's favorite, "Big Trouble," tell the story of a match made in hair metal heaven.

Eventually, Vai would break out solo and turn the guitar world upside down, but he couldn't have done it without having served under Roth. "I always look for things I haven't done before, or I haven't really heard from any other guitar players," Vai says. As for how he looks back on working with Diamond Dave — one of music's most notorious characters — post-Van Halen, Vai smiles, saying, "He was a handful in the best possible way. Working with him was like being strapped to a rocket made of charisma and fueled by tequila."

How did you end up playing guitar for Dave?

I was living in a little apartment on Fairfax in Hollywood when I heard he was looking for a guitar player. For some strange reason, I just knew it was my gig. It wasn't an ego thing — I didn't think, "I deserve this" — it was more like a quiet voice inside saying, "This is yours." The next day, the phone rings; it's David Lee Roth. Turns out [*bassist*] Billy Sheehan had mentioned my name. Dave tells me he's putting together a band for an album, a tour and even a movie, and he asks if I want to come down and jam. I knew they'd been trying out other guitar players, but once we started playing together, it just clicked. Sparks were flying, musically speaking.

How did you handle being compared to Eddie Van Halen?

I knew all ears would be on me. It was probably the most coveted guitar chair in rock at the time. I adored Edward's playing, so from a fan's point of view, I understood that people would be skeptical. I would've been too. But competing with Eddie Van Halen? Forget it. You don't compete with Mount Everest — you just admire it. My mindset was simply to contribute something authentic, be myself and let that speak for itself. Once the album came out and we hit the road, the reception was fantastic. I didn't feel the backlash people warned me about. I think fans realize you can't replace Edward, you can only bring your own voice.

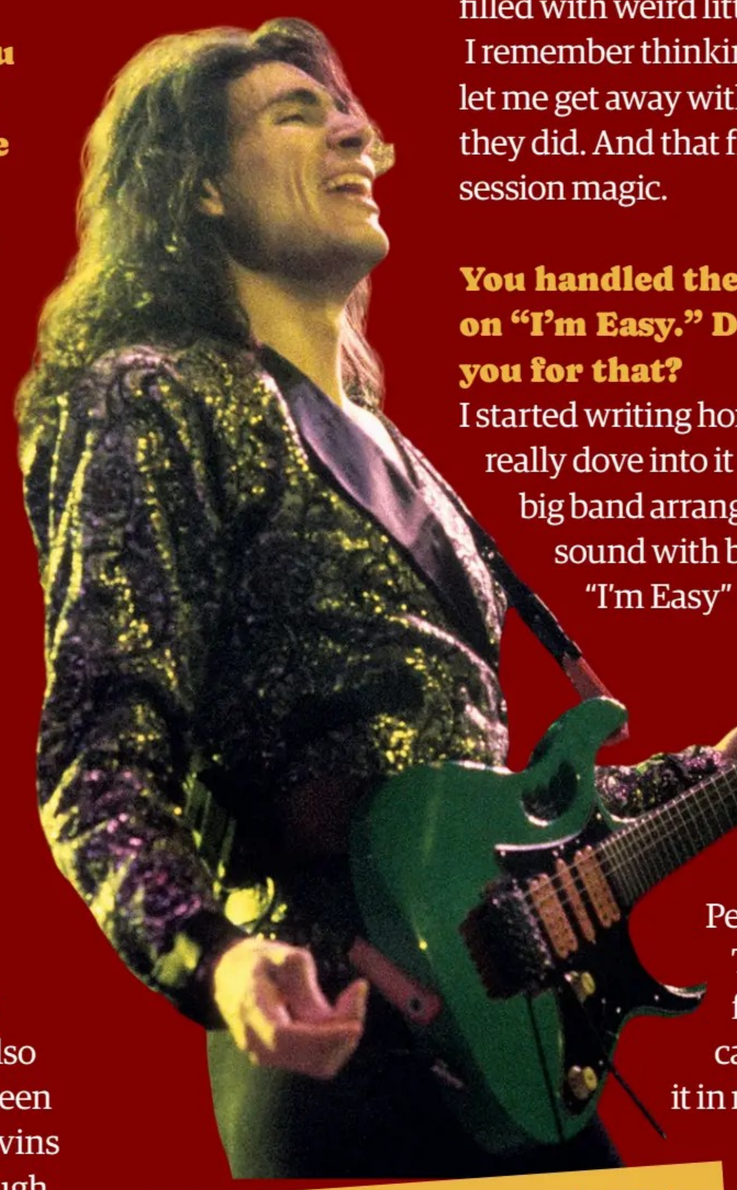
What did Dave expect from you?

Dave wanted a young hotshot who could play their ass off. He wanted a supergroup with players who could really throw down, and he nailed it: Billy Sheehan, Gregg Bissonette and me. It was wild chemistry. I knew I had to supply some riffs, and the ones I did resonated with Dave. He has a great ear for what works for him and what doesn't. As a soloist, I was quite the "shredder," and that was popular at that time. I knew that was

important to Dave, but he was also interested in solos being a musical statement and not just a flurry of notes.

What gear did you use in the studio, and what was the vibe like?

When I joined Dave, I was embarrassingly inexperienced with what people would call "big rock guitar tone." I didn't even own a Marshall! I was using Carvin X-100B amps, which I brought into the studio for *Eat 'Em and Smile*. I tracked a few songs with them using my yellow Jackson Soloists and also my pink one. I also used my Charvel "Green Meanie." But the Carvins weren't cutting through for the more aggressive tracks. Luckily, Steve Stevens was recording across the hall. I mentioned my tone troubles, and he lent me one of his favorite Marshall heads and cabs. Boom! Instant magic. I ended up using his rig for most of the album. Thanks, Steve. You saved my sonic bacon.



Steve Vai on stage with David Lee Roth's band in Oakland in — you guessed it — 1986

Ted Templeman produced Van Halen and Roth. What was he like?

He was brilliant. I learned a ton from him. He gave you total freedom, but his suggestions were so insightful that you wanted to follow them. I came from a background with Frank Zappa, where precision and complexity ruled the day. Ted taught me the opposite — how to capture raw energy. He knew how to bottle the chaos of young lunatics like us and make it sound big, tight and alive. We respected him as the Yoda that he is.

What do you remember about working on "Yankee Rose," "That's Life" and "Tobacco Road"?

I knew this record would be forensically examined, so I leaned into my quirks. I've always had this playful, slightly mischievous streak in my playing. One such example is my "guitar talking" technique. I thought it'd be fun to open the album with it, just to grab people by the ears.

"That's Life" was pure Dave — swagger, humor, and showbiz all rolled into one, and I was happy to support it. And "Tobacco Road"? That was a blast. Dave suggested it, and I went home and cooked up a guitar arrangement filled with weird little twists and turns. I remember thinking, "There's no way they'll let me get away with all this nonsense." But they did. And that freedom made the whole session magic.

You handled the horn arrangement on "I'm Easy." Did Zappa prepare you for that?

I started writing horn charts in high school and really dove into it at Berklee. I've always loved big band arrangements. It's like sculpting sound with brass. Doing the horns for "I'm Easy" was... easy.

What's your favorite guitar moment from *Eat 'Em and Smile*?

Perhaps my solo on "Big Trouble." I had full creative freedom on that one, and it came out exactly how I heard it in my head — melodic, daring and unapologetically "Vai." To me, it didn't sound like Edward or anyone else, and that's usually a sign that I was hitting the mark I set for myself for this record. And the riffing with Billy on "Shyboy"? Total mayhem. Imagine two electric eels wrestling inside a transformer. That's what it felt like.

Were you satisfied with the album?

It felt gloriously surreal to listen to that record from top to bottom and be embraced by its audio energy elixir. I still feel that when I listen to it now. A part of me ponders, "How the heck did we do that?" We were holed up in Dave's basement for about a year putting this thing together, completely under wraps. I couldn't tell anyone what we were doing, so I had no clue how it would land. But I loved it. It had energy, humor and attitude. It felt alive.

Were you prepared for the popularity that followed?

One funny moment — I was at the gym, walking through the parking lot and nearly got hit by a car. The driver slams his brakes and yells, "Hey, you dumb fuck — watch where you're going!" All the while, he was blasting "Bump and Grind" at full volume while headbanging. I just smiled and thought, "At least he bought the record!" [*Laughs*] Soon we were playing to 20,000 people a night.

Would you do anything differently?

That gig was a gift for many reasons. It launched me into a whole new world and taught me how to command an arena stage. I can't think of anything I would have done differently. It was financially rewarding, too, but after a 45-year career, I discovered that success is very nice — the money, fame, respect and so on. It's all quite fine and good, although it does come with certain challenges. But of vital importance is the people you meet along the way, the experiences you have with them and the bonds you create. This is the real payoff, and when I look back at *Eat 'Em and Smile*, those are the things I'm most appreciative of.

To this day, Billy, Gregg and I are unbelievably close. They're like brothers. There's no way to put a value on our friendship that could compete with worldly success. I could even pick up the phone and call Dave. We were actually good friends back then. He was like a mentor to me in many ways. When I look back, I thank my lucky stars. The whole thing feels extraordinary to me now. Touring, the videos, the huge stage, crazy clothes, girly hair, the backstage parties, the mayhem — it was outstanding.

Beyond that, what does *Eat 'Em and Smile* mean to you?

In all the bands I've been in, be it Frank Zappa, Alcatrazz, Roth, Whitesnake and the others, I knew there was a brand of music bubbling up in my imagination that I had to get out. Those eccentric ideas were there for as long as I can remember. When I quit all those bands to make [*1990's*] *Passion and Warfare*, I thought it might be the end of my career, but it was an easy choice. If you don't allow your true creative impulses to manifest, it usually leads to depression.

I was fortunate in that *Passion and Warfare* and my brand of music and playing found an audience that has sustained me and my music. When I think of *Eat 'Em and Smile*, it's like a wild, beautiful chapter in a fairy tale. Somehow I got to be one of the characters.



David Lee Roth (wearing an *Eat 'Em and Smile* T-shirt) backstage in Detroit, September 26, 1986

CLAYTON CALL/GETTY IMAGES, ICON AND IMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



Europe's John Norum [*left*] and John Levén stay hydrated in Minneapolis, May 7, 1987

JIM STEINFELDT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

EUROPE

The Final Countdown

John Norum on the album that put Sweden on the rock 'n' roll map

BY HENRY YATES

PRE-1986, SCANDINAVIAN ROCK was a minor import for the U.S. — while the sluggish international sales of Europe's first two albums suggested the Swedes were doomed to their domestic market. But as guitarist John Norum remembers, everything clicked with *The Final Countdown*. First came a deal from Epic Records, then the hook-up with Journey producer Kevin Elson and, finally, the hot-streak of singles that beamed the parent album to Number 8 on the *Billboard* charts.

Among the highlights were the jawbreaker chorus of "Rock the Night" and the tear-streaked power-ballad "Carrie." But to discuss *The Final Countdown* without landing on the title track is futile. Forty years later, all roads lead to that deathless synth hook and space-exploration lyric (sketched by frontman Joey Tempest as early as 1984), while the dazzle of Norum's neo-classical solo still holds shivers. The song has been streamed 753 million times; factor in the ad-sync revenue and the money it must have made is unfathomable. But the guitarist didn't feel history in the making when Tempest first presented him with the demo tape. Back then, Norum admits he thought the



nascent track was "dreadful," already irritated by hearing that keys lick "over and over again," and fretting that the hard-rock band he co-founded in 1979 was rapidly "turning into Depeche Mode."

On the flipside, Norum "liked to try new things." As the guitarist beefed up the demo's weedy tone with Marshalls and a rhythm part like stampeding hooves, he slowly sensed the song's potential. "I'm a huge UFO fan," he says, "so that galloping feel came from Michael Schenker's playing on 'Lights Out.'"

As for the inspiration behind the solo, Norum cites two more giants. "The technique comes from Ritchie Blackmore, but at the same time, I was friends with Yngwie Malmsteen and we were hanging out a lot. My guitar style was a lot more frantic back then, but that's the way it is when you're in your early twenties. I played that solo on a 1965 Strat. I bought it in 1984 and it's the only guitar I've kept from then. I paid, like, $900 for it, and today it might be worth $45,000."

With four decades' hindsight, Norum has no doubt *The Final Countdown* changed the band's trajectory. But today, he takes a beat to consider whether the runaway success of Europe's third album was worth the price they paid for it. With chart placings came pressure, and soon the guitarist cut an unhappy figure who hated the "teenybopper" image. He criticized his band and numbed the circus with unhealthy amounts of alcohol.

"Fame isn't really my thing," he says. "I've never been that kind of person: 'Look at me, everyone!' It's just not important to me to be in the spotlight and out on the ramp doing guitar solos. I'm quite introverted, so I ended up drinking and partying way too much, and I got stuck in that thing. It's never fun to wake up with a hangover when you have a gig that night and still 20 more shows on the tour."

Norum had split before 1988's *Out of This World*, but he returned in 2003 to find *The Final Countdown* had grown in his estimations. "The title track was originally in F♯ and it's now in F, so it's darker and doomier-sounding — not so square, like it was in the Eighties. Now, when we play it live, it sounds so much heavier. The reaction — you can see all these happy faces out there. I like it a lot more now than I did then."



THE FABULOUS THUNDERBIRDS
Tuff Enuff

London was calling for Jimmie Vaughan in 1986, where album sessions alongside Dave Edmunds led to a classic LP

BY ANDREW DALY

BY THE MID-EIGHTIES, Jimmie Vaughan had been hammering away with the Fabulous Thunderbirds producing four under-the-radar albums and garnering a cult following. This, along with the fact that Robert Cray, many Alligator Records artists and Jimmie's little brother Stevie Ray Vaughan were enjoying success, meant that blues and blues-rock were on the rise in an otherwise sparkling metal- and synth-laden era.

This leads us to 1986's *Tuff Enuff*, the Fabulous Thunderbirds' fifth long-player, produced by Dave Edmunds, recorded in London. It's the album that took Vaughan and his cohorts in a decidedly more commercial direction. Proof of this comes by way of the title track, which was featured in two 1986 films, *Gung Ho* and *Tough Guys*, as was its follow-up single, a cover of Sam & Dave's "Wrap It Up." But wait, there's more! "Tuff Enuff" even made a few appearances in *Married... with Children*.

"Tuff Enuff" remains the Thunderbirds' only Top 40 hit, cementing the album's mainstream status. Vaughan dialed in with *GW* to briefly discuss the record.

What was it like working with Dave Edmunds?

We had a good time! We rented an apartment in London, and we went to the studio every day. It was a lot of trial and error with Dave — a lot of just trying to find out what worked, fine-tune it and then do it again.

Dave is quite the guitar player himself. Did that impact your approach?

Dave is a fabulous guitar player. He plays more fingerstyle than I do, though. I just play with a pick and my fingers sometimes, but Dave is fabulous. He was also fabulous at mixing. But it's been 40 years, so it's really tough to remember all of it!

What gear did you use while recording *Tuff Enuff*?

Fender Bassmans and Super Reverbs. That's what I've always used — except for a Marshall every once in a while — because the Fenders sounded great. But back then I didn't use flatwound strings; I converted to those about 10 years ago.

How did the title track come together?

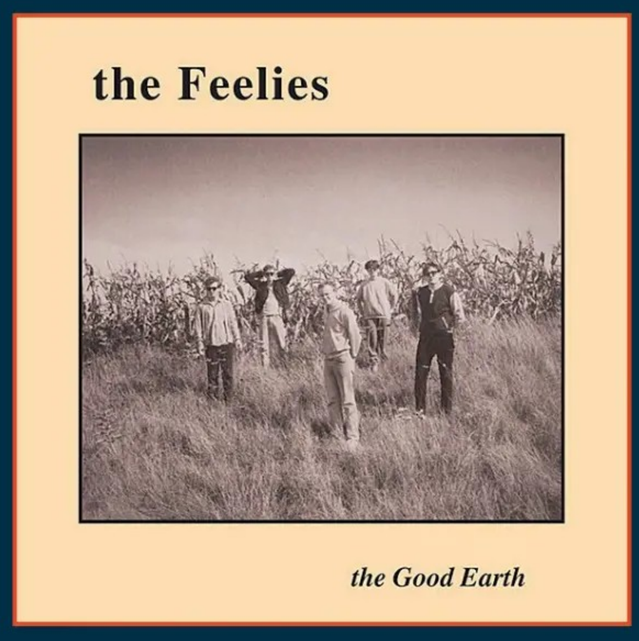
That was Dave Edmunds. He was into the six-string bass, which he used on a lot of his records. That's part of what the sound there is, and it's overdubbed three or four times.

When you look back on *Tuff Enuff*, which is a big favorite among T-Birds fans, how do you feel about it?

I think it sounds great — it still sounds good. Once we figured out the mix, and we liked it, I thought it was fabulous. It sounds silly, but if you mix something the way you like it, you'll always like it. I don't know what else to say other than that!



[*from left*] The Fabulous Thunderbirds' Jimmie Vaughan, Preston Hubbard, Fran Christina and Kim Wilson in 1986



THE FEELIES
The Good Earth

Feelies guitarist Glenn Mercer recalls the pressure of coming up with a killer sophomore album — and recording it with R.E.M.'s Peter Buck, no less

BY JOE BOSSO

"IT WAS A pretty important record for us," says Glenn Mercer, singer and guitarist of New Jersey-based indie rock giants the Feelies, speaking of the band's 1986 album, *The Good Earth*. "Our first record, *Crazy Rhythms*, got a lot of favorable reviews, so it wasn't set in stone that a follow-up would do well. Plus, we took a lot of time between records. We pursued offshoot bands. I guess we didn't really have long-range goals at the time."

They might not have been career strategists (the band is legendary for its extended hiatuses), but the Feelies nonetheless made an impact on emerging post-punk and "college rock" bands like R.E.M. and Yo La Tengo, who were greatly influenced by the group's minimalist, edgy rhythms and the hypnotic guitar interplay between Mercer and co-six-stringer Bill Million. While Mercer often took on the role of lead guitarist, much of the time he and Million "wove" parts in a way that was reminiscent of both the Stones and the Velvet Underground. (Mercer's off-handed, almost whispered vocals, often buried in the mix, also bore an unmistakable Lou Reed influence.)

"I don't know if we ever really analyzed what we do," Mercer says. "A lot of it's just instinctual. I think the sound we got on *Crazy Rhythms* that people point to came about because the bass and drums are very tight, but Bill and I are very loose.

LYNN GOLDSMITH/GETTY IMAGES

That creates a friction because things aren't precise."

By the time the Feelies felt ready to record their second album, they had a new rhythm section (drummer Anton Fier and bassist Keith DeNunzio were out, drummer Stan Demenski and Brenda Sauter were in). At the same time, their stature among indie rock fans had grown to mythic levels. One such admirer, Peter Buck, encountered Mercer at a party and offered his services. "He was very cool," Mercer says. "He said, 'I love *Crazy Rhythms*, and I hear you're going to make a record. If there's anything I can do to help you guys out, let me know.'"

As co-producer (along with Mercer and Million) of *The Good Earth*, Buck's approach was more along the lines of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." "Peter didn't come to rehearsals or do any kind of pro-production," Mercer says. "He wanted to make an honest-sounding record, so outside of a few suggestions here and there, he didn't really interfere. What he did was more encouragement than trying to steer us in any sort of way."

Although generally not known as a huge lead guitar fan, Buck was especially encouraging when it came to Mercer and Million's solos. On the meditative epic "Slipping (into Something)," the two guitarists engage in a blissed-out interlocking raga-like improv that recalls Robby Krieger's early work. Mercer takes the solo spotlight on a few cuts, most notably his dramatic, searing leads on "On the Roof" and "The High Road."

"Peter said he liked how the solos were like mini songs within the songs," Mercer says. "Typically, half of the solos were worked out, and the other half were improvised. The last thing I wanted to do was waste a lot of time in the studio and lose our momentum."

Prior to 1986, the Feelies had only played a handful of club gigs per year, but upon the release of *The Good Earth*, they logged their biggest number of dates to that time (31), which included an East Coast run of shows as openers for R.E.M., who themselves had just graduated to large-scale venues such as New York City's Felt Forum and Philly's the Spectrum.

"For me, there was always a certain degree of discomfort no matter what stage I played," Mercer says. "I wasn't even comfortable playing a club like Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey. Playing those big places with R.E.M. was no different. I would look down at my pedals, maybe the monitors. A few times I'd look out and check out the first couple of rows of people, but I never looked out beyond that."

TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

HUEY LEWIS AND THE NEWS
Fore!

Chris Hayes looks back on the making of a classic album – but one with none of the influences you'd expect

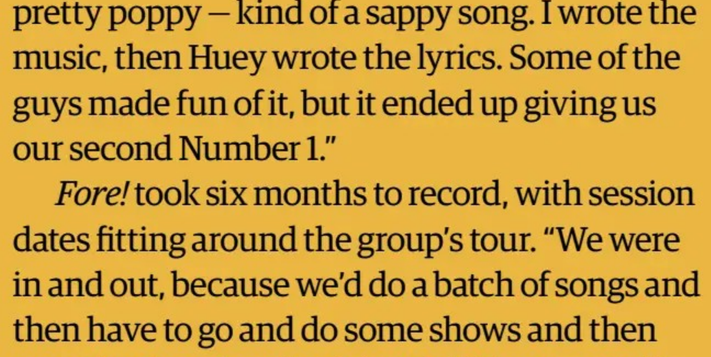
BY **JOE MATERA**

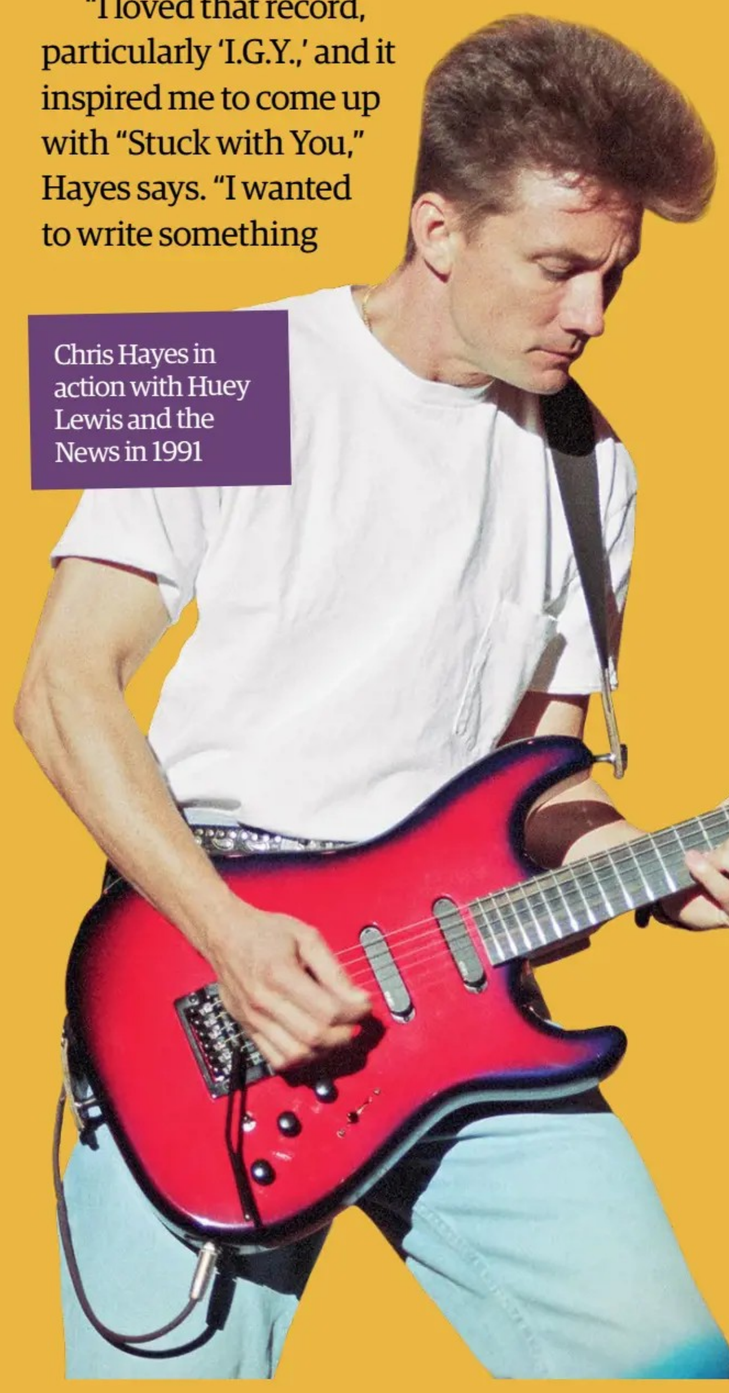
BY THE TIME Huey Lewis and the News began working on their fourth studio album, 1986's *Fore!*, the group had seen their third album, 1983's *Sports*, top the U.S. *Billboard* 200 chart and earn them four U.S. Top 10 singles. On top of that, their single "The Power of Love" – the theme to 1985 movie *Back to the Future* – gave the group their first U.S. Number 1. They were now under enormous pressure to deliver more hits.

"Though we were busy touring after *Sports* came out, we were always writing a little bit here and there," says former News guitarist Chris Hayes. "We realized we were going to have to make another record, so we started writing in earnest. At one point we had around eight songs. Bob Brown, who was our manager, came to me and said, 'Hayes, I need you to write another hit!' And it's not like I could actually just do it whenever."

Hayes – co-writer of "The Power of Love" and "I Want a New Drug" to name a few – went home and wrote. Well, after listening to jazz and Donald Fagen's 1982 album, *Nightfly*.

"I loved that record, particularly 'I.G.Y.,' and it inspired me to come up with "Stuck with You," Hayes says. "I wanted to write something with that sort of groove. 'Stuck with You' is pretty poppy – kind of a sappy song. I wrote the music, then Huey wrote the lyrics. Some of the guys made fun of it, but it ended up giving us our second Number 1."





Chris Hayes in action with Huey Lewis and the News in 1991

Fore! took six months to record, with session dates fitting around the group's tour. "We were in and out, because we'd do a batch of songs and then have to go and do some shows and then come back and get back into it," Hayes says. "It took us quite a while, but we got it done."

When it came to the guitar tones, Hayes adhered to a streamlined setup. "I used a 1985 Gibson Spirit II prototype for the leads through a 50-watt Marshall combo with a 12-inch speaker, and I used that with a 4x12 cabinet," he says. "I just cranked that up all the way and it sounded pretty good. For the rhythm stuff, I used a Fender Strat through a Sixties Fender Black Panel Deluxe. I'd record all the stuff pretty dry and then monitor it with some effects on, just so that it would sound good while I was playing it. But all the signals went dry to tape, and then effects like reverb and delays got added post."

Looking back, Hayes affirms *Fore!* is his favorite LP in the Huey Lewis and the News *oeuvre*. "It was the last record we made that was still more kind of rock-oriented," he says. "There were some great guitar songs on that one. But as we did the fifth record and then the sixth, radio stations were kind of moving away from guitar-oriented music. All these metal guys were doing acoustic versions of their songs, so electric guitars were kind of going out of favor."

METALLICA

Master of Puppets

The making of the album that marked Metallica's epic leap from the underground to immortality

BY **BRAD TOLINSKI**



"THE CALL OF Cthulhu," written by American author H.P. Lovecraft, was first published in *Weird Tales* in February 1928. The story describes an ancient, nightmarish being rising from the sludgy depths to wreak havoc on mankind. One Lovecraft scholar called it one of the writer's "bleakest fictional expressions of man's insignificant place in the universe."

Metallica bassist Cliff Burton — an aficionado of science fiction, horror and outsider art — was a huge fan of Lovecraft and passed his obsession on to his bandmates: singer-guitarist James Hetfield, lead guitarist Kirk Hammett and drummer Lars Ulrich. It's no surprise the group quickly embraced Lovecraft's work, particularly the Cthulhu Mythos, an interconnected universe of slimy, godlike entities.

But where most readers were repulsed by Cthulhu, Metallica found kinship. The creature, described as having "an octopus- like head... a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws and long narrow wings," mirrored the band's own shocking emergence from the San Francisco Bay Area scene in 1981. With their pimpled faces, denim vests and blistering speed, they were the monsters of their moment — reviled by a music industry obsessed with MTV-friendly darlings like the Police, Van Halen and Hall & Oates.

Lovecraft's vision of ancient gods slumbering beneath the sea struck a deep chord with Metallica. Beneath the band's speed and ferocity was a fascination with power, fear and the limits of human control — the same themes that haunted Lovecraft's fiction. That sensibility first surfaced on *Ride the Lightning*'s instrumental closer, "The Call of Ktulu," a wordless epic that proved heavy metal didn't need lyrics to conjure terror. Guided by Burton's classical instincts, the track unfolds like a symphony of dread, its shifting moods and minor-key melodies suggesting a vast creature stirring from its underwater tomb.

With *Master of Puppets*, Metallica expanded that universe, marrying brute force with a sense of grandeur and narrative precision few metal bands had attempted. "The Thing That Should Not Be" wasn't just a sequel to "Ktulu" — it was the sound of the monster fully awakened. Hetfield's preposterous down-tuned guitar growls like a leviathan rising from the depths, while Ulrich's drums land with the weight of collapsing stone. Even Hammett's solo feels less like a burst of virtuosity and more like an unholy incantation, each note squiggling around like the tentacles of Cthulhu (or Ktulu) himself.

Four decades later, its shadow still looms. Every modern metal band borrows something from *Master of Puppets*' DNA

"The idea for that song was to create something even slower and heavier than 'For Whom the Bell Tolls,' from our previous album," Hammett said. "People often talk about how we brought a new level of speed and velocity to metal, but we were also exploring the opposite. 'The Thing That Should Not Be' helped usher in a slower, sludgier form of extreme metal.

"Yeah, I was completely thinking of H.P. Lovecraft when I played my solos on 'Thing.' I did all of it in less than 45 minutes, which was quick for me, and I was so stoked afterwards. It was the last solo on the album."

If "The Call of Ktulu" suggested awe before the unknown, "The Thing That Should Not Be" plunged straight into it. The lyrics draw directly from Lovecraft's imagery — "Not dead which eternal lie/Stranger eons death may die" — while the music lumbers with deliberate menace, rejecting the speed-metal gallop of earlier tracks. In slowing down, Metallica discovered something even heavier: atmosphere. They transformed Lovecraft's sense of cosmic insignificance into sound — a grinding, inexorable reminder of how small we are in the face of forces we can't comprehend.

At its core, *Master of Puppets* was the sound of four musicians operating at full power. Burton gave Metallica its intellectual backbone — his love of classical harmony, prog, and horror fiction added an almost symphonic weight to the band's ideas. Hetfield gave those ideas muscle and direction; by 1986 his songwriting had evolved beyond thrash templates into something closer to architecture — riffs built like fortresses, lyrics exploring control, manipulation and the loss of free will.

Ulrich's drumming, often dismissed as blunt force, was meticulously composed — every fill and accent placed for maximum impact. And Hammett, the band's conduit to melody, expanded his vocabulary to match the songs' ambition, blending modal leads, whammy-bar dives and harmonic twists that gave the record

its emotional lift. Each song pushed the chemistry to new extremes: the title track's epic construction, "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)"'s shifting moods, "Disposable Heroes"' relentless propulsion. And then, of course, "The Thing That Should Not Be" — slow, grinding and otherworldly, the sound of a band unafraid to explore the bottomless depths of the soul.

In hindsight, *Master of Puppets* captures the moment when Metallica's youthful aggression evolved into something far more profound. Lovecraft's monsters were metaphors for unseen power, and Metallica's music tapped into the same current.

Released on March 3, 1986, *Master of Puppets* — without a single music video or major radio hit — sold more than 500,000 copies in its first year, spending 72 weeks on the *Billboard* 200 and ultimately going gold. It was a staggering achievement for a band that played faster (and sometimes slower) and louder than almost anyone on Earth. Word of mouth, relentless touring and the sheer force of the music turned Metallica from cult heroes into the new standard-bearers of metal.

The record's power lay in its unity. *Master of Puppets* followed the sequencing the band had perfected on *Lightning*: a blistering opener ("Battery"), an ambitious title track, and a mid-album ballad that showcased unexpected vulnerability. Each member added a crucial piece to the puzzle. Hetfield's rhythm guitar was a weapon of precision — machine-tight down-picking that carried both aggression and groove. Ulrich's drumming, equal parts tactician and timekeeper, gave the music shape and drama. Hammett balanced brutality with melody, crafting solos that soared rather than shredded. And Burton, ever the architect, added color and depth, fusing Bach-inspired counterpoint with the visceral weight of thrash.

"I was using my black Gibson Flying V, my Charvel, my black Ednacaster, and I also had a red Fernandes Strat that they sent me out of the blue," recalled Hammett. "But perhaps most significantly, I bought a new black Jackson Randy Rhoads Flying V that I picked up straight from the factory. I was super-stoked because they gave me a discount on it. When the guitar was finished, they said, 'Just come down, it'll be done by the time you get here.' I drove down there from El Sobrante straight to the Jackson factory in the San Dimas area, and as I walked into the door they were literally just finishing screwing the tuners on.

"They put strings on it and handed it over, so no one else has ever had that guitar in their possession, which is unusual. I got it fresh off the workbench, and it's probably the guitar that I had on the road the longest. It's been consistently on the road since 1985."

The title track, "Master of Puppets," remains arguably their defining achievement — a sprawling eight-minute suite built on shifting tempos and intricate time signatures. It moves from rapid-fire chromatic riffs at over 200 beats per minute into a haunting, clean interlude where Hetfield's melodic solo gives way to Hammett's searing virtuosity. The rhythmic trickery keeps the listener unsteady, mirroring the lyrical theme of addiction and control.

Even at its most punishing, the album carries an almost classical sense of balance. "Disposable Heroes" and "Damage, Inc." unleash pure velocity, while "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)" slows the pace to expose the band's melodic core. And then there's "Orion," Burton's magnum opus — an instrumental elegy that swells from serene arpeggios into a thunderous finale. When Burton died in a tragic bus accident later that year, the song took on an even deeper resonance, transforming *Master of Puppets* into both a triumph and a requiem.

"By the end of the *Ride the Lightning* tour, we were almost becoming telepathic," Hammett said. "We were better players, and the new material we were writing for Master of Puppets was stronger. We were just really hungry to make something great — something that would stand the test of time."

Four decades later, its shadow still looms. Every modern metal band borrows something from its DNA — the precision of Hetfield's riffing, the narrative ambition of its structures, the balance between speed and sophistication. Like the Lovecraftian horrors that inspired it, *Master of Puppets* endures because it taps into something eternal: the fear and fascination of losing control. In the end, it's not just Metallica's masterpiece — it's the album where heavy metal looked into the abyss and found art staring back.



Metallica backstage in Chicago, April 5, 1986; [*from left*] Cliff Burton, Lars Ulrich, Kirk Hammett and James Hetfield

ICON AND IMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

OZZY OSBOURNE

The Ultimate Sin

How Jake E. Lee found his voice and identity while making his second — and final — record with the Prince of Darkness

BY **ANDREW DALY**

WHEN JAKE E. Lee was hired by Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne in 1982, he was a young gun with no experience and huge chops. The former led to a lack of songwriting and publishing on his first record with Ozzy, 1983's *Bark at the Moon*.

Lee wasn't happy, and he wasn't going to allow a sequel to unfold during Ozzy's next record, 1986's *The Ultimate Sin*.

"They realized they got away with something on *Bark at the Moon*," Lee says. "They knew it was something that would never happen again."

At the time, Ozzy was fresh out of rehab, and Lee, who had been waiting in the wings, was in possession of a rippin' demo that he and bassist Bob Daisley had put together. Ozzy wanted the songs. Lee wanted a fair contract. "I told him, 'I'm not doing anything until I get a contract,' and so, that came pretty quickly," Lee says. .

"I wanted to hear the guitar like an orchestra," he says. "Kind of like having violins on top, cellos on bottom and then having moving and melodic parts," he says. "It was about more than basic chords and one guitar sound. That wasn't my vision."

In the end — and with Ozzy and Sharon's blessing — Lee got to make a record he was proud of. *The Ultimate Sin* went on to be a hit, though its synth-heavy production did alienate diehards and pissed off metal journalists.

And by 1987, after the tour for *The Ultimate Sin* ended, Lee, who had become increasingly independent, bored and free-thinking, was fired by Sharon and Ozzy, putting an end to a tumultuous five-year, two-album tenure. In short, Lee couldn't be tamed.

"I like that viewpoint," Lee says with a laugh. "Keep going! But I remember we had a big band dinner, and Ozzy raised his glass and said, 'This is a toast to Jake E. Lee, who practically produced this record and was a very important part of making it.' Maybe he felt like my part was getting bigger than a band member should be. I don't know; a lot of things came with that. We were writing for the next record; I was pushing boundaries and getting rejected. I was bored with the restrictions. I'm sure Ozzy didn't like that. But as far as *The Ultimate Sin*, I stand by it."



The story goes that while Ozzy was in rehab, you wrote a lot of music that would end up on *The Ultimate Sin*.

Yeah. While he was in rehab, I had one of those four-track cassette recorders, which were high-tech at the time. [*Laughs*] I had a Simmons drum machine and a bass that Charvel gave me, and I'd sit there and make my own demos. That's when I came up with everything that's on *The Ultimate Sin*, except "Shot in the Dark."

And then Bob Daisley assisted the with lyrics, right?

Yes. Bob and I got together, and he put his stamp on everything, which means he made everything a little better. [*Laughs*] He'd add parts or ask, "Why are you doing this part here? You don't need that," kind of like an editor — but he would also contribute stuff.

Did Ozzy like what you'd put together?

I gave him the tapes, which were probably 14 or 15 songs, and he liked most of them. There were a few rejects, where I'd tried to push things a little more prog at some points. I was trying to push the envelope and was honestly getting a little bored with having this hard rock, heavy metal limitation.

You weren't appropriately credited for your songwriting on *Bark at the Moon*, and it's known that you refused to move forward with *The Ultimate Sin* until you were presented with a fair contract. Was that something that lingered over the sessions?

No. It was something that lingered over the *Bark at the Moon* sessions. When those were done, I became unhappy, so with *The Ultimate Sin*, before I gave him my demos, I said, "I want a contract that says exactly what I'm gonna get out of this record. I need songwriting credit. I want the publishing I deserve."

"It's the first record where I knew who I was and what I wanted to do as far as guitar"
Jake E. Lee

How did Ozzy take that?

Really, that was it. It's not like I wanted points off the record; I just wanted songwriting and publishing. I said, "Give me a contract that says that, and we can move forward." There weren't any problems.

Another layer of confusion came by way of the bass. Bob Daisley assisted with songwriting and the bass parts. But then Greg Chaisson was hired and fired, giving way to Phil Soussan. The belief is that Bob wrote the bass parts and Phil played a version of those, but Greg has claimed otherwise.

Bob and I had demoed the songs, and Bob's basslines were on there. Greg was only there for maybe two days, and to be honest, I don't think we auditioned anyone else. And he didn't hear any of the new material; it was all older Ozzy stuff. You're not gonna give someone you're auditioning a copy of a new album. And you're not gonna say, "You're not hired, give me the tape back..." [*Laughs*] So Greg didn't write any basslines for *The Ultimate Sin*. But then Phil got the job, and he basically took Bob's parts and simplified them. Bob does some really cool stuff on bass, and I would say Soussan simplified them. That would be the nicest way I could say it. He took the basic bass parts from Bob and kept them simple.

For your part, a song like "Never" has some pretty inventive rhythm playing that was unique and less primitive for the time.

Artistically, I felt more orchestral. I approached it by building things with moving parts for the rhythms, rather than just playing power chords. I looked at it more like jazz guitar, with weird shit where I'd play a progression of chords and then look for a melody within them to put on top, bottom, or maybe in the middle of the chord so that it was moving.

The rhythms made your playing unique, but the leads soar, too.

A lot of players didn't focus on rhythm guitar and would say, "Where's the lead? Okay, here it is," and then only shine on the lead. For me, rhythm was always the most important part. But for the solos, I would try to take it somewhere else. You've established a verse, bridge and chorus, and I would then like to go somewhere else for the solos.

What was the key to your tone on tracks like "Shot in the Dark," "The

Ultimate Sin" and "Lightning Strikes"?
I did everything on the white Charvel, my main guitar. I'd play all the basic rhythms and solos on that, then I'd double it with the blue burst or the purple burst to give it a different sonic stamp. For amps, I had a '69 100-watt Marshall plexi and an early aluminum-faced one from '70 or '71, which was more aggressive than the plexi. Depending on the song, I'd use either/or. If I doubled something, I'd always use the amp I didn't use the first time.

Ron Nevison, who had a reputation for being a guitar-forward producer, was behind the glass for *The Ultimate Sin*. What was it like working with him?
Terrible. [*Laughs*] It was butting heads from the beginning. Ozzy gave us a list of producers, and it wasn't my choice per se, but he asked me, and I thought Nevison was a guitar producer since he'd worked with UFO and Led Zeppelin, so he had my vote. I'm not saying that's why Ozzy picked him, but that's where my vote went.

What made working with Ron so terrible?
I'm a nighttime guy, right? To me, rock is nighttime music you play in clubs until closing time. It didn't feel like a daytime thing to me. I recorded at night, and that's how we did *Bark at the Moon*. Max Norman, who produced that, was cool with that. Ron Nevison wasn't. He told Sharon [*Osbourne*] that he wanted to start no later than noon. Sharon told me that, and I said, "Noon? I'm not even thinking about waking up then. I won't start any earlier than 6 p.m." So right off the bat, we had problems, and Nevison told Sharon, "I know a lot of guitar players… we don't have to use him. We can use other people to come in and play the parts. I have all the demos."

How did Sharon react?
It was ridiculous. He obviously had no idea what Ozzy was. He's not somebody who brings in fucking guitar players. But Sharon told me that, and I said, "Really? And what did you say?" Sharon said, "I told him he was out of his fucking mind. You're playing the guitar. How about we start at 3?" That was a good compromise, so I said I'd come in at 3, but I never did. I'd get up, look at the clock and if I saw it was 3, I'd say, "Oh, shit, I better get ready…" But I never showed up earlier than maybe 4. I just hated the idea of forcing myself to wake up and play during the day. It felt wrong to me to make an album that would last forever that way. It irked me.

Once you got that out of the way, were you able to find common ground?
No. [*Laughs*] When I came into the studio for the first time to record, I always played inside, where my amp was, because I like getting feedback. The headphones have to be really loud, but that's my problem; I like playing in the room. But I went into the room, and it was fucking freezing. I was like, "What the hell? Can you warm up the room?" Nevison said, "No. I like my musicians to be awake. The cold keeps them awake and alert." I said, "Fuck you. You know what it also does? It makes my fingers fucking slow because they're frozen. I can't play like that." So we argued about the temperature in the room, which I won.

How did you win?
I said, "I'm just not fucking playing when my fingers are fucking cold. Fuck you." [*Laughs*] He acquiesced, but then, for every song, I liked to tune my amp depending on what I was doing. I might like it more aggressive for one song, and sweeter for another. So, I went into the room, and he goes, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm tuning my amp for the song…" He goes, "What was wrong with the last sound?" I said, "Nothing… for that song…" He said, "I think all the guitars should sound the same," which was another argument I wouldn't relent on. I said, "No, I'm not playing the same guitar sound." My vision for *The Ultimate Sin* was *not* a single sound done in one day.

What did you think the first time you listened back to *The Ultimate Sin*?
When I heard the first mix, I hated it. [*Laughs*] It was keyboard-heavy, and I talked to Ozzy on the phone and said, "What do you think?" He said, "Too many fucking keyboards!" I said, "Exactly!" Sharon said, "We're remixing the whole album." She told Nevison, "I want Jake there, and I want Jake to approve of the mix as you're mixing it," which Nevison hated. But I made sure the guitars were actually there, though I still think it could have been more guitar-heavy. After that, I gotta admit, I liked it.

The album sold well but was scolded by old-school fans and the press.
It got shit on a lot. A lot of people said, "This is Ozzy's worst record ever." Ozzy even said in an interview that he didn't like it and that it was terrible. By the late Nineties, I thought, "I guess it was a shitty record. I just really sucked on it." I wouldn't listen to it.

The general viewpoint on the album has changed over the years. Has yours?
I didn't listen to it for maybe a dozen years. Then a friend of mine said, "You don't listen to it? It's great. What are you talking about?" And then Chris Jericho told me, "*The Ultimate Sin* is the best" and started pointing out things I did on it, and I was like, "You really like it?" I went back and listened to it front-to-back, and I thought, "This is actually a pretty good record. Why was this shit on so much? Why did I think it sucked when I worked so hard on it?" Now I think it's a really good record. I don't care what anyone says. It's fantastic. I don't know why it got shit on. I don't care.

What did it teach you about yourself?
It's the first record where I knew who I was and what I wanted to do as far as guitar. *Bark at the Moon* was me as the new kid thrown in there, and the first time I'd recorded professionally. *The Ultimate Sin* is where I found my voice and my identity. And with all the guitar parts… I wouldn't change a thing. There's stuff on *Bark at the Moon* that I would change, but not on *The Ultimate Sin*. I found my identity, but now I'm thinking, I found my identity, and at the time people thought it sucked. But I stand by it. I played everything the way I felt I should, and I carried that over into Badlands. *The Ultimate Sin* established who I was as a guitar player. GW



Ozzy Osbourne [*left*] and Jake E. Lee do their thing in New York City in 1986

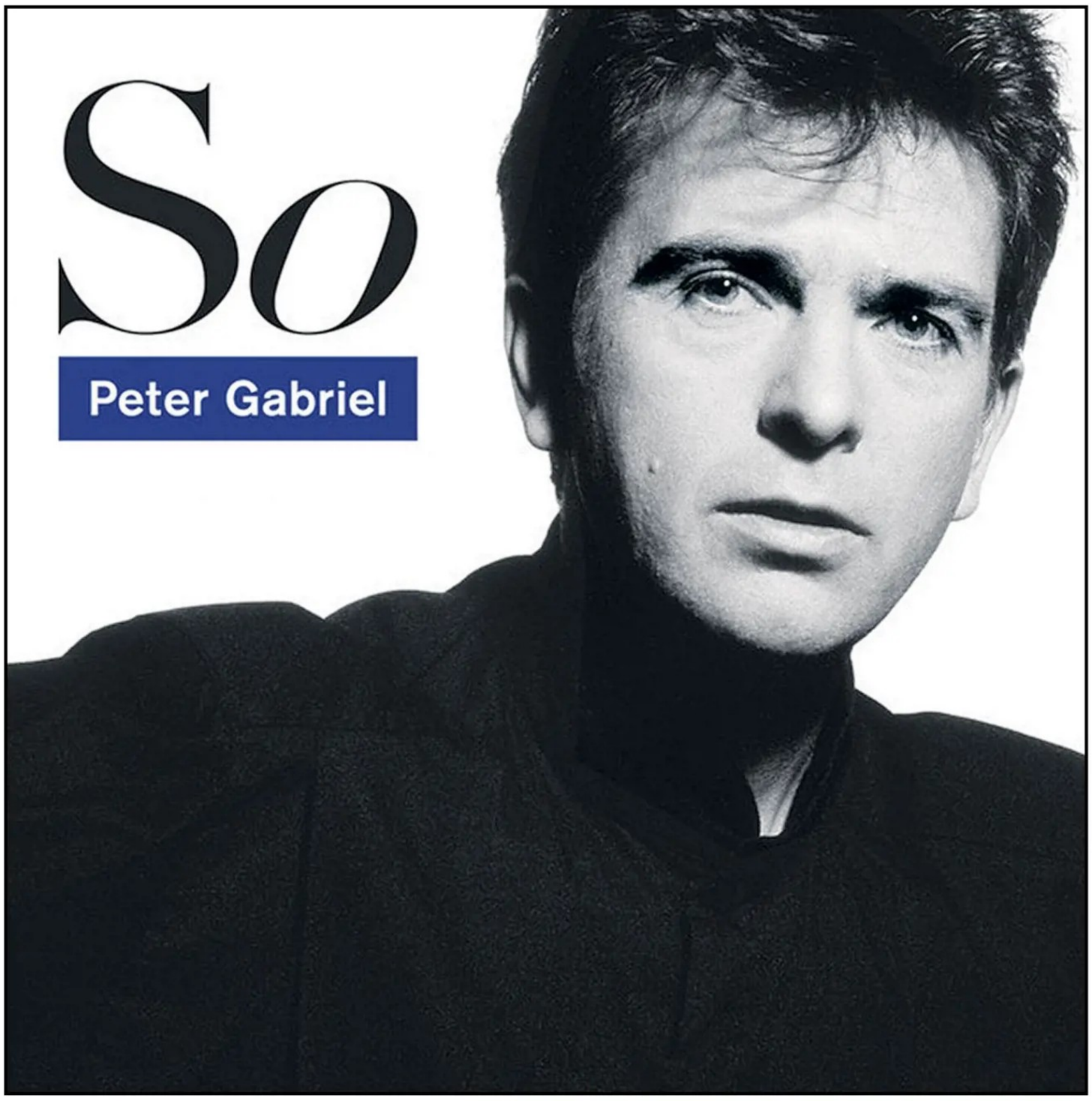
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PETER GABRIEL

So

It was Hammer time – "Sledgehammer," that is – for former Genesis man Peter Gabriel in 1986. Guitarist David Rhodes takes us back to the *So* sessions

BY ANDREW DALY



PETER GABRIEL'S TIME with Genesis in the Seventies – not to mention his early-Eighties musings as a solo artist – had granted him a reputation as a musical maverick who merged modern prog with all sorts of weird sounds, leading to such cult favorites as "Biko" and "Shock the Monkey." The latter of those songs, which dropped in 1982, was the closest Gabriel had come to large-scale chart success as a solo artist. But that was about to change with 1986's *So*, the record that gave us decade-defining hits in "Sledgehammer," "In Your Eyes" and "Big Time."

But Gabriel didn't do it alone. He had a versatile band that included guitarist David Rhodes, a fellow free-thinker who had been with the frontman since 1980.

"When we're all together, I think we do a quite idiosyncratic thing, obviously, under Peter's guidance and leadership," Rhodes says when looking back on the elements that had given *So* its magic. Gabriel's leadership, along with the playing of Rhodes and a host of session aces and other pros (including Kate Bush, Stewart Copeland and Nile Rodgers) helped send *So* to the top of the charts worldwide, and many of its tracks are concert – and Spotify playlist – staples.

"It's just a thing where the longer you're with people, you almost do things without thinking or talking about them," Rhodes says of *So*'s vibe. "You feel your way through. And I knew Peter has things he likes and things he doesn't like."

Where were you at as a group going into the sessions for *So*?

Peter had decided to move away from the more experimental side of his third and fourth self-titled albums from 1980 and '82. It was a very conscious decision on his part to come up with material that would make a very good and accessible record. So there was a lot that went into it, which paid off, thank goodness. [*Laughs*]

At that point, you'd been with Peter for about six years. How had your technique evolved in that time?

I was never that interested in technique, but I think my groove playing improved. When you're playing with great people, you've got to keep up.

How did "Sledgehammer" come about?

When we were initially recording it, Peter just sat at the piano and played a few chords. Then he went to [*fellow* So *guitarist*] Daniel Lanois and me, and we started playing along with him. Whenever we were working on a demo or trying to build it up, we'd fill up a reel of tape of us just playing the groove and going through the changes. So it felt good – and then [*bassist*] Tony Levin came in and was playing a little rubber-band bass on quite a lot of things. I'm sure he didn't play it on the finished thing, but it was great. Whenever he played it, everybody smiled. We had Chester Thompson come in to play on "Sledge" at one point, but that didn't work out. Tony did his part, which was great, and then [*drummer*] Manu Katché was brought in. "Sledge," I think, was a couple of passes for him because he had a plane to catch. It was all just instant, exciting and great.

How about "In Your Eyes," which became one of the Eighties' biggest anthems?

Peter is very keen on those high, jangly sounds; he really likes those on his tunes, so we were doing that. I think I would play a 12-string that Peter had – an old Shergold 12-string that was a dog to play, but it had a nice sound. At the time, we didn't have enough tracks because it was all on tape, so Dan Lanois and I would actually record to one track; we'd ask each other, "Were you good that time?" It was just playful. That was all a very good experience, but, of course, there were bits when things didn't go so well.

For example?

There were some bad tech issues, I seem to remember. We had the rhythm tracks done, and then the slaves made from them to try and keep the tracks pristine – you know, the master reels. You want to work with the secondary reel [*the slave*] because it doesn't matter how much it degrades. You're putting on good information, but you're not screwing up the drums or the bass; those remain great. I think what happened was that one of the machines was running slightly slower than the other, and it led to all sorts of problems for a while.

What does the enduring success of *So* mean to you?

It was surprising, but it was wonderful. We did the record, it did well, we toured a lot and people loved it! With that, you go, "Yeah... this is very cool." [*Laughs*] I guess it meant a lot to a lot of people, which is a lovely, wonderful thing.

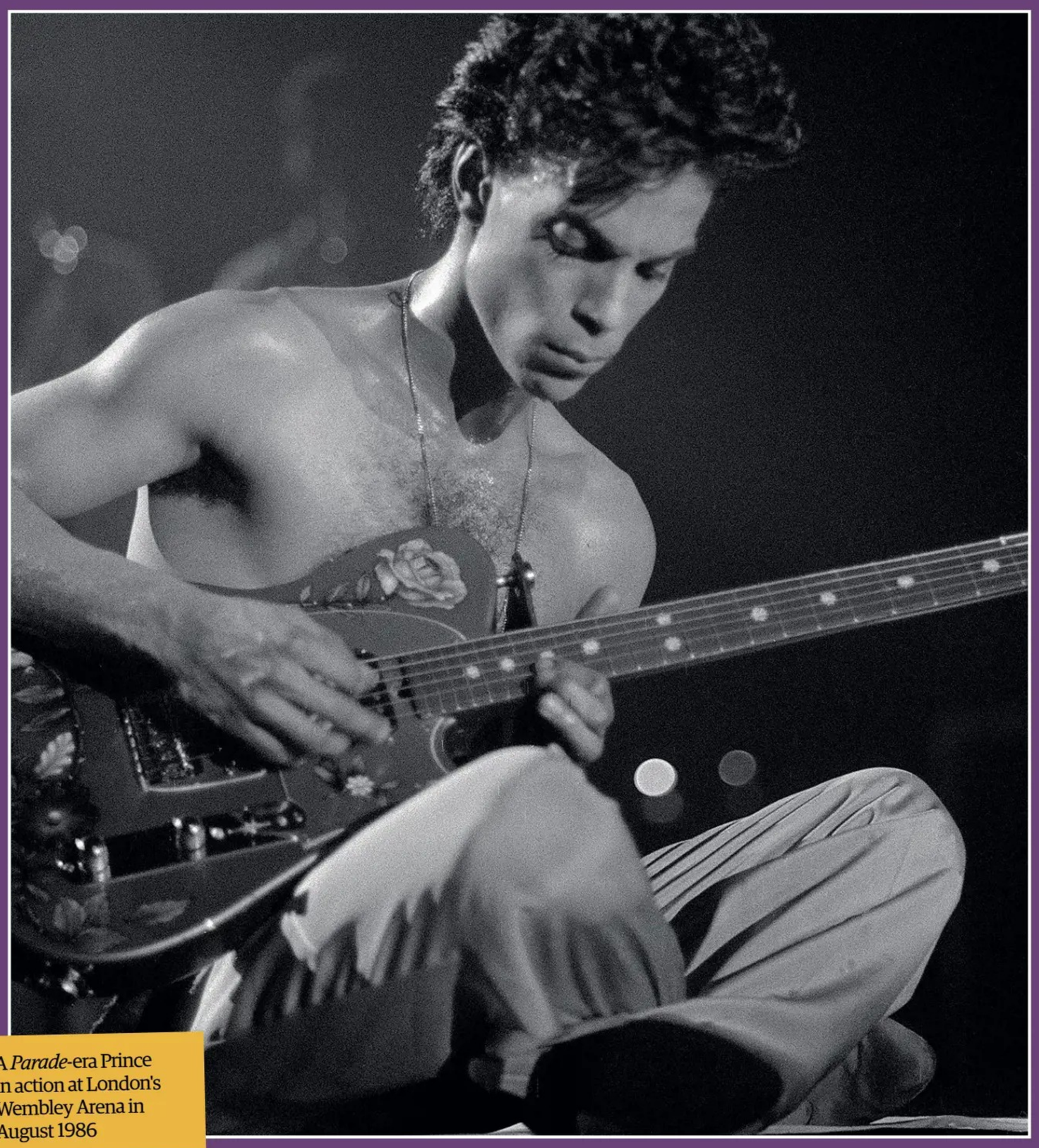


PRINCE

Parade

Stung by the critics, March 1986 saw the Purple One come back swinging with this sporadically brilliant curio that – "Kiss" aside – you've probably forgotten

BY HENRY YATES



A *Parade*-era Prince in action at London's Wembley Arena in August 1986

***PARADE* BEGAN WITH** a bruised ego. In 1984, the 25-million-selling *Purple Rain* had set a sky-high bar. Now, the critical consensus was that Prince had fumbled the follow-up with *Around the World in a Day*. "A not very convincing approximation of McCartney-esque Beatles innocence," sniffed John Rockwell of *The New York Times*, "clashing egregiously with his own image of defensive arrogance..."

While a lesser artist would retreat to lick their wounds, the Minneapolis peacock was so headspinningly prolific in that period (he fired out albums at one-year intervals all through the Eighties) that *Parade* arrived almost immediately to course-correct his career. Flanked by his band of the era, the Revolution, Prince was spilling over with ideas to the extent that he reportedly sketched *Parade*'s four opening tracks – "Christopher Tracy's Parade," "New Position," "I Wonder U" and "Under the Cherry Moon" – in a single session.

The received wisdom is that Prince stepped away from the guitars on *Parade*. True, there is no skyscraping outro solo to match "Purple Rain." But there are myriad flashes of quirky brilliance, all smaller but still potent. Try the squelchy, highly processed lines in "Girls & Boys," evoking Robert Fripp on Bowie's "Fashion" or the indecently funky hits that underpin "Mountains."

"I'm sorry," Revolution guitarist Wendy Melvoin told *Rolling Stone* in 1986 when speaking of the telepathic jams between herself, Prince and keys player Lisa Coleman, "but no one can come close to what the three of us have together when we're playing in the studio. Nobody!"

Meanwhile, just as he had on *Purple Rain*'s "Computer Blue," the bandleader invited his female protégés to co-write several *Parade* standouts, including "Sometimes It Snows in April," decorated by Melvoin's ringing acoustic fingerstyle. The guitarist was more prominent still in the video for flagship track "Kiss," perched on a stool with a Gibson Byrdland as her boss cavorts shirtless.

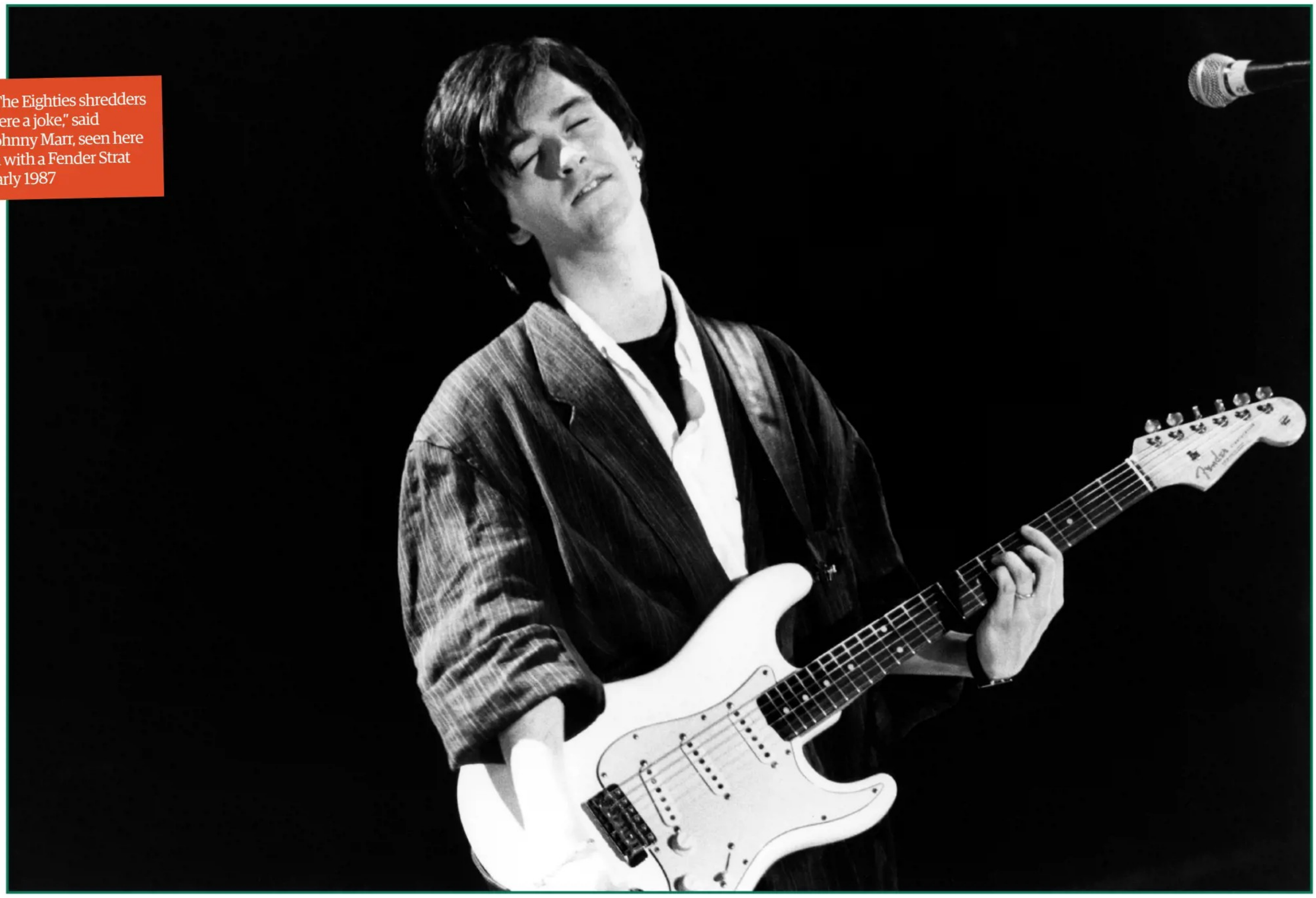
In fact, during that period, Melvoin was more closely associated with a Rickenbacker 330, but as she told Guitar.com in 2022, spec was much less important than spirit. "Prince was much more concerned with your performance rather than the actual sound of the guitar. He wasn't really one of those guys that dictated the tone. I learned early on in a band situation that as a rhythm guitarist you shouldn't make your distortion as loud as the lead guitarist because they'll kill you! I had to kind of sit right underneath him, so he could be the main attraction."

According to the *Parade* album credits, for the studio take of "Kiss," Prince played all the guitar parts. But it's surprising to learn, through an interview with original producer David Z for *Sound On Sound*, that the global smash that went on to top the *Billboard* chart in February 1986 almost didn't make the cut. "'Kiss' was so different to everything else out there that the Warner Brothers executives freaked out when they first heard it. When I talked to the Warner A&R guy he said, 'Oh man, Prince really screwed up. It sucks.' At that time, however, Prince had enough power to go, 'That's the single and you're not getting another one until you put it out.'"

The less said about the movie that was soundtracked by these songs, the better ("*Under the Cherry Moon*," wrote Kevin Lally in *The Courier-News* of Prince's directorial debut, "is the kind of embarrassment that makes your mouth gape"). But while *Parade* went on to sell a speck of *Purple Rain*'s numbers, this underrated corner of the catalog saw the Purple One's reputation restored among critics.

"It's the sound of Prince at his most effortless and assured," wrote *The Guardian*'s Simon Price. "Cohesive and ice cream-cool, nobody would guess it was a soundtrack for a (sub-par) film. And it has 'Kiss' on it..."

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



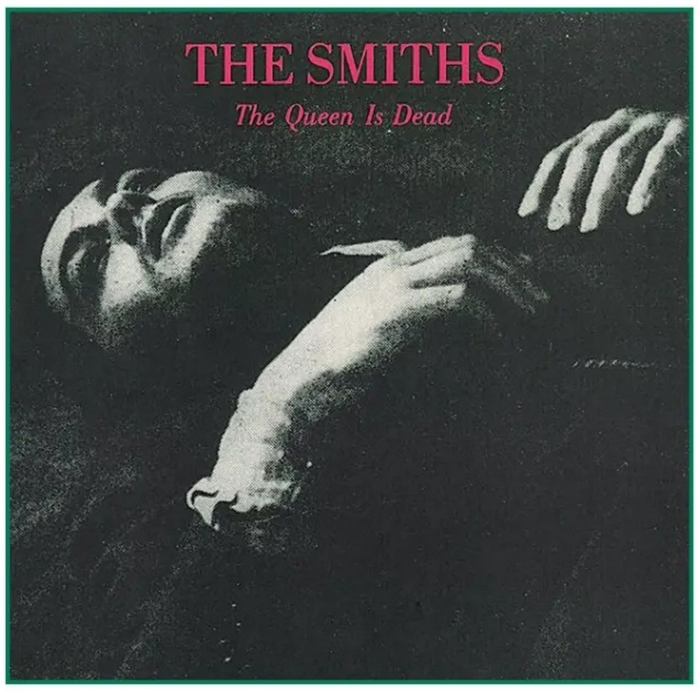
"The Eighties shredders were a joke," said Johnny Marr, seen here in with a Fender Strat early 1987

THE SMITHS

The Queen Is Dead

It was a square peg amid the shred scene and almost sank Johnny Marr, but the Smiths' majestic third album ended up as the jewel in their crown

BY **HENRY YATES**



IT WAS THE summer of 1985, and Johnny Marr was a man out of time. Three years earlier, while still a teenager, the guitarist had co-founded the Smiths in Manchester, England, with vocalist Morrissey (bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce completed the lineup). But the crystalline chime of his Rickenbacker 330 was still a lone voice in the era of sweep-picked flash. "The Eighties shredders were a joke," Marr told this writer in 2009. "That's guitar playing as an Olympic sport. If you're into decent music, it's just offensive."

What, then, did Marr deem 'decent music'? In their early career, the Smiths had covered more ground than their indie-jangle elevator pitch would suggest, roaming from the swampy tremolo judder of "How Soon Is Now?" to the airtight Chic-inspired funk of "Barbarism Begins at Home" and the ringing doublestops of "This Charming Man" (a track Marr always denied was influenced by African highlife, but it sure sounds like it).

But the band's opening albums had been patchy, and now, as he sketched out the songs for third release *The Queen Is Dead*, the guitarist knew nothing less than a masterpiece would do. "It occurred to me one afternoon that the next Smiths album had to be a serious piece of work," wrote Marr in his 2016 autobiography, *Set the Boy Free*. "The stakes had got higher, and greatness was a possibility for the band if we were prepared to go for it. I stood and thought about it, and then I said to myself, 'You're going to have to dig deep, whatever it takes'."

The material took shape fast. Marr remembers sitting nose-to-nose with Morrissey to present the new songs on his 1971 Martin D-28, and in a single evening, the pair had chased down the foundations of "Frankly, Mr Shankly," "I Know It's Over" and "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out."

"We didn't waste any time," he wrote of his ferocious work ethic in the period.

Likewise, as the band loaded into London's RAK Studios, the 21-year-old guitarist became the driving force. When he wasn't out on the floor with a rig that included a '78 black Les Paul Custom (later loaned to Noel Gallagher) and a '63 L-series white Strat, Marr was to be found presiding over the mixing desk from morning until midnight, fueled by an endless stream of joints and strong coffee. "Smoking pot in the studio never hindered me – it helped me shut out the outside world just enough to do the job," he reflected. "I didn't need anything else in my life. My world was the studio, and I tried to ignore everything that might distract me."

That was easy: these were songs you could lose yourself in. *The Queen Is Dead*'s opening title track began with Joyce's tribal tom

DONNA SANTISI/REDFERNS



The Smiths' Marr [*left*] and Morrissey on stage in Newcastle in January 1986

tattoo, but it's Marr's thrilling wah-soaked outro that defines it, the guitarist channeling the Velvet Underground's "I Can't Stand It" as he beats his Les Paul almost into matchwood. "Johnny did that pretty much live in one take," recalled engineer Stephen Street. "It was just one of those inspired performances. He just got this great harmonic feedback from his Les Paul and as he changed the angle on the wah pedal, it changed the note."

At the other extreme, there was the melancholy shimmer of "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out," Morrissey's ode to doomed romance and shared suicide ('To die by your side, well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine') driven by a stuttering chord sequence that held magic even in embryonic form. "I decided to record it using the Martin acoustic I'd written it on," explained Marr, "and it felt like the music was playing itself. We were high with it, and after just a few takes, we had one of our best ever songs — something that felt at the time like pop music and beyond."

With the possible exception of the turgid "Never Had No One Ever" and the demented rockabilly of "Vicar in a Tutu," *The Queen Is Dead* demanded front-to-back listening. There was the sardonic swipe at label boss Geoff Travis on the aforementioned "Frankly, Mr. Shankly" ("It was in total contrast to the others and sounded like an eccentric vaudevillian romp"). There was the grave-waltz of "I Know It's Over" (one of the few songs where the Smiths deserved their miserabilist reputation). "I'll never forget when Morrissey did that vocal," Marr told journalist Johnny Rogan. "It's one of the highlights of my life."

Conversely, that desolate number was countered by the spring-heeled rhythm punch of "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side" and "Cemetry Gates." "I was on the train," reflected Marr of writing the latter song, a joyous Kinks-influenced sunbeam that belied Morrissey's lyric about exploring tombstones. "And I was thinking, 'Right, if you're so great, first thing in the morning, sit down and write a great song.' I started with the 'Cemetry Gates' B-minor-to-G change in open G."

At the album's midpoint, meanwhile, was "Bigmouth Strikes Again," its visceral minor-key assault establishing Marr among the most muscular players in British indie-rock. "I wanted something that was a rush all the way through," said the guitarist, who described the song as his take on the Rolling Stones' "Jumpin' Jack Flash." "I thought the guitar breaks should be percussive, not too pretty or chordal."

Finally, signing off the album was "Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others," a baffling ode to the differing dimensions of the female form that would have been a throwaway curio without the hypnotic glide of Marr's folk arpeggios. "Some things just drop out of the heavens, and 'Some Girls' was one of them," he reflected. "It's a beautiful piece of music."

So *The Queen Is Dead* was done, and Marr knew "no one could touch us — that was the peak of the Smiths' career." An unequivocal triumph, then? Not exactly. The laser focus of helming the album sessions weighed heavy on the guitarist, whose weight fell to about 98 lbs. as he ran on nervous energy, brandy and cocaine. "I rarely thought about food unless it was absolutely necessary," he recalled. "I'd just get on with recording and sometimes someone might make me a sandwich."

The music was just one of the burdens carried by Marr. Facing legal action over the Smiths' move from Rough Trade to EMI — and serving as the band's de facto manager, right down to the logistics of van hire — it's easy enough to join the dots between the over-worked, rail-thin figure haunting the mixing desk and the borderline-alcoholic who would soon write off his BMW, then walk away from arguably the most important British guitar band of the decade at the peak of its powers. "The more bitter the split became," Marr wrote of his 1987 parting with the band, "the better off I felt out of it, and soon I was just happy to be out of it altogether. I was in charge of my own life again."

But that was all to come. For just a heartbeat in the summer of 1986, the Smiths were the greatest band in Britain. With 40 years of hindsight, it might seem gloriously unlikely that *The Queen Is Dead* came into our lives the same year as Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, Van Halen's *5150* and Poison's *Look What the Cat Dragged In* — and stranger still that the album defied the zeitgeist to achieve gold sales in the U.S. But perhaps that just speaks to the magic of a charmed 12 months in music, when it seemed anything was possible.

For just a heartbeat in the summer of 1986, the Smiths were the greatest band in Britain

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

VAN HALEN

5150

How Van Halen defied the odds with a new singer and a new sound

BY CHRIS GILL

VAN HALEN WAS the world's biggest rock band at the beginning of 1985. Their *1984* album had sold more than five million copies in the U.S., reaching Number 2 on the *Billboard* 200 albums chart (their highest position to that date, held back only by the juggernaut that was Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album) and delivering their only Number 1 single, "Jump." The supporting tour was a massive success, selling out all 101 shows.

Eddie Van Halen hoped to propel the band to even greater success, starting work in early 1985 on new musical ideas at his 5150 studio with Donn Landee, who engineered all six of Van Halen's previous albums and had become the guitarist's studio sidekick. Meanwhile, singer David Lee Roth released the four-song *Crazy from the Heat* EP, recorded with Van Halen's producer Ted Templeman and released in late January 1985.

Eddie didn't mind the singer's extracurricular activity at first and spoke positively about Dave's solo record in interviews. The EP's music bore no resemblance to Van Halen material, and the general consensus among the band members was that Roth deserved the opportunity to release some creative steam as long as it didn't interfere with the band. However, when Roth showed up at a handful of sessions to write lyrics and work on melodies for the next Van Halen album, he seemed detached and disinterested. Eventually, he stopped showing up altogether, choosing to conduct interviews and promote his EP instead.

One evening in late March, Eddie invited Dave to his home to discuss Van Halen's future plans. The guitarist was shocked but not surprised to find out that Roth had received an offer from CBS Studios to star in a film with a $20 million budget. While Ed wanted to release the next Van Halen album before the end of 1985, Dave wanted to take a full year off to make his movie. The singer suggested a short summer stadium tour as a compromise, but the guitarist refused to go out without any new material. Roth also invited the band to record music for the

film's soundtrack, but Van Halen shot that offer down as well. A stalemate was reached, with both parties refusing to budge.

Many sources cite that meeting as the end of Van Halen's classic era with David Lee Roth, but the singer's departure actually became official and final almost four months later. Dave assumed that his bandmates would wait for him to return to Van Halen after the film was finished, while Eddie was convinced that the singer would eventually come to his senses and join the band in the studio. The situation became more complicated when the band fired its manager, Noel Monk, after he demanded a new contract that would have paid him more than any individual band member. Without an authoritative mediator to guide and advise them, the friction grew.

Initially, Ed pitched the idea of making an album with several of his favorite singers. "We bounced around the idea of doing a record with me writing all the music and having everyone from Joe Cocker to Phil Collins to Mike Rutherford sing a different vocal on each track," Van Halen told Steven Rosen in May 1986. "But Alex talked me out of it. He said that would be just a one-shot project, and it made me realize that I wanted a family."

Ed also reached out to Pete Townshend around this time to pitch ideas for a collaboration, but that effort never went further than the exchange of a few telegrams. When the guitarist found out that Roth was putting together a band to record music for his movie and had reached out to Billy Sheehan (who accepted) and Yngwie Malmsteen (who declined), he realized Van Halen should probably start looking for a new singer as well. He made a genuine offer to Scandal vocalist Patti Smyth, but she turned it down because she was pregnant and concerned about the band's reputation as hardcore partiers.

News of Roth's and the Van Halen camp's extracurricular activities appeared in music publications like *Rolling Stone*, convincing many fans that the band was finished. Privately, Eddie Van Halen clung onto hope that Roth would return, but his attitude soon changed thanks to some matchmaking assistance from his friend, exotic car dealer Claudio Zampolli. One day in late June 1985, Sammy Hagar dropped by Zampolli's L.A. shop on Wilshire Boulevard to check out Ferraris. Ed had purchased several Lamborghinis from Zampolli, and during a recent friendly chat he mentioned that he was looking for someone to replace Roth. Zampolli told Hagar about Van Halen's predicament; Hagar gave Zampolli permission to pass along his phone number to Ed; Ed called to set up a meeting and audition.

Hagar was an enticing prospect to replace Roth. His solo career was on an upward trajectory at the time, with his three most recent albums (*Standing Hampton, Three Lock Box* and *VOA*) achieving Gold certification and *VOA* ascending toward Platinum, thanks to the ongoing popularity of his need-for-speed anthem "I Can't Drive 55." In between he joined the supergroup Hagar Schon Aaronson Shrieve (HSAS), which showed that he could be a team player as well as a solo frontman. The Van Halen brothers were also big fans of the albums Hagar recorded as lead vocalist for Montrose in the mid-Seventies. An added bonus was that Hagar had recorded the *Montrose* and *Paper Money* Montrose albums as well as *VOA* with Van Halen's producer Ted Templeman.



Van Halen 2.0 (aka Van Hagar) provided a perfect soundtrack for the rest of the dayglo/just say no Eighties

Ed remained unwilling to give up on Roth until July 15, 1985, when Hagar dropped by 5150 to play and record a few new songs with the band. As Van Halen played the first song, "Summer Nights," Hagar came up with lyrics and a vocal melody on the spot. "In 20 minutes we had a complete song," Edward told Rosen. "We all freaked out."

"Believe it or not, I just started singing 'summer nights' for the chorus," Hagar told John Stix in 1986. "They all looked at each other and said, 'Wait a minute, the guy can sing!'"

Although the Van Halen brothers and Michael Anthony decided to hire Hagar on the spot that day in July, the public announcement followed a few months later, even though the news leaked almost immediately. In August, the band issued a statement confirming that David Lee Roth was no longer a member of Van Halen. However, Hagar's official induction waited until September 22, 1985, in the middle of Hagar's final concert performance with his former backing band at the Farm Aid concert in Champaign, Illinois. Actually, co-host Gary Beaty of The Nashville Network prematurely spilled the beans during the live broadcast a few seconds before Eddie Van Halen joined Hagar on stage, confirming the rumors once and for all.

Before the duo played their first notes, Sammy fumbled with a banner and joked that it read, "My dick's too small." From that point onwards it became obvious that the Red Rocker was not going to be David Lee Roth 2.0, as the former Van Halen frontman would never speak of "Little Dave" in such self-deprecating terms. Hagar and Roth both were high-energy,

dynamic performers who let expletives fly like a sailor with his dinghy caught in a zipper, but Hagar was more down-to-earth and less intimidating, with more working-class appeal.

Hagar's lyrics may not have been as clever as Roth's — Sammy's innuendos were more single than double entendre — but they were direct and arguably more relatable, if perhaps too obvious. While Roth was prone to unapologetic braggadocio, Hagar offered a less threatening approach and more modest personality — consider Roth's "Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love" compared to Hagar's "Why Can't This Be Love," or "guaranteed to satisfy" in "Ice Cream Man" to "you're never satisfied" in "5150."

After the Farm Aid appearance, the new line-up of Van Halen spent most of October 1985 writing and completing material for their first album. Recording started in November at Ed's 5150 studio with engineer Donn Landee behind the mixing console. The band wanted Ted Templeman to produce the album since he had already produced nine albums in total with Hagar and Van Halen, but much to their dismay they discovered that Templeman was unavailable due to his commitment to produce David Lee Roth's *Eat 'Em and Smile*. Instead, Ed and Donn presumed the producer roles until December, when they hired Foreigner guitarist Mick Jones, who previously co-produced all of his own band's albums.

"Sammy and [*us*] were all thinking we didn't want to do the whole thing on our own because we need an outside opinion," Van Halen said. "Mick was playing in town with Foreigner and called Sammy to invite him to the show. Sammy asked if Mick wanted to co-produce our album and he said yes. Actually we were almost done with it, but Mick helped us organize everything and polish it up. He changed a few things, especially on 'Dreams,' which is like a different song than it originally was. He got a hell of a vocal performance out of Sammy on that song, too."

5150 ignited a David Lee Roth vs. Sammy Hagar debate that still rages, even as it becomes more and trivial with the passage of time

Eddie Van Halen's guitar tone on *5150* went through a dramatic sonic shift compared to the albums he recorded with Roth. Although he previously used an Eventide H949 Harmonizer on various earlier Van Halen tracks, here he used it almost nonstop to create a stereo chorus-style effect by using one H949 panned right with a slight pitch detune, another H949 panned left with a different micropitch detune setting and his dry signal panned to the center. Landee occasionally patched in delay from a Roland SDE3000 or Lexicon PCM70 to add space and reverb-like resonance. The guitar's midrange was also more focused, providing more breathing room for Anthony's bass.

5150 was also the first album Ed recorded without using his original Frankenstein guitar, now replaced in the pecking order by the Kramer 5150 guitar he built himself, featuring a single Seymour Duncan JB humbucker and Floyd Rose vibrato. Previously he tuned his guitar down ¼ to ½ step to accommodate Roth's vocals, but here he generally used standard pitch. For "5150," Ed used his 1958 Gibson Flying V tuned down a half step (to D#) with the low E string tuned further down a whole step drop D tuning-style (to C#) to record the main rhythm track and overdubbed the solos using the Kramer 5150. "Good Enough" features Ed's Kramer "1984" guitar with the low E string replaced by a low A string from a bass (tuning low to high is AADGBE) to provide the vibe of a baritone guitar on the rhythm parts while allowing Ed to still play his regular lead parts.

Ned Steinberger gave Ed a Steinberger GL2T headless guitar with a TransTrem system at the 1985 Summer NAMM convention in New Orleans. Ed immediately put this new toy to good use, writing the songs "Summer Nights" and "Get Up" only a few days after first receiving it and expertly employing the TransTrem system. "You can use the vibrato bar to take whole chords up or down and they'll stay in tune," he said. "You can also lock the bar in different positions to instantly transpose keys. It's kinda like a capo, but you can go up or down in pitch."

Other guitars featured on *5150* include a Fender Stratocaster with the bridge/middle pickup setting on "Best of Both Worlds" and a Kramer Ferrington acoustic-electric for the acoustic guitar tracks on "Dreams." Ed's number one 1968 Marshall model 1959 Super Lead plexi remained his amp of choice, plugged into a single 4x12 Marshall cabinet miked with either Shure SM57 or SM58 mics.

Ed's keyboard excursions continued to evolve on *5150*, with several songs prominently featuring synths. An Oberheim OB-8 preset with a sweeping sawtooth oscillator patch provided the ersatz distorted "guitar" riff on "Why Can't This Be Love." Organic-sounding OB-8 string patches layered with an acoustic Steinway piano with MIDI controller capabilities provided lush textures on "Dreams" and "Love Walks In." Ed played Fairlight CMI and E-mu Emulator II sampling keyboards for the horn section hits and slappy bass on "Inside," which unfortunately instantly made it the most dated-sounding track Van Halen ever recorded.

When the newly revamped Van Halen released *5150* on March 24, 1986, the album proved that lightning can indeed strike twice. The album benefitted from the momentum of *1984*'s phenomenal success, and Sammy Hagar brought along a new group of followers to compensate for the David Lee Roth die-hards who broke ranks. It was also the first Van Halen album to reach Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart, reaching that milestone only one month after its release date, although it took about eight years to reach the stunning 5x Platinum sales figure that *1984* achieved in just one year.

Of course, *5150* also ignited a David Lee Roth vs. Sammy Hagar debate that still rages today. Although Roth didn't match his previous band's success when he teamed up with the incredible line-up of Steve Vai, Billy Sheehan and Gregg Bissonette to record *Eat 'Em and Smile*, he delivered one hell of an album to satisfy the old-school fans. Meanwhile Van Halen 2.0 (a.k.a. Van Hagar) maintained a large dedicated following and found new fans as they provided a perfect soundtrack for the remainder of the dayglo/just say no Eighties. As Hagar sang on perhaps his most eloquent performance with Van Halen, it was the best of both worlds.



The photo shoot for our September 1986 cover took place in Rockford, Illinois, March 16, 1986. Van Halen brought along his custom "Red Cloud" Kramer Ripley



PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES, FUTURE (COVER PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN)



XTC

Skylarking

How Andy Partridge & Co. created a stripped-down masterpiece, despite butting heads with their big-name producer

BY **ANDREW DALY**

XTC'S 1986 ALBUM, *Skylarking*, is fairly beloved today, but for Andy Partridge, the British band's co-founder, chief songwriter and guitarist, it was difficult to make. The main issue? His disagreement with producer Todd Rundgren over its direction.

"Going in, there was weirdness in terms of having to shut up and obey," Partridge says. "I'm certainly not used to that."

Skylarking was recorded at Rundgren's Utopia Sound Studios in Woodstock, New York, where the atmosphere, combined with Rundgren's arguably unorthodox style, apparently proved somewhat oppressive.

"There was an almost macho climbing over you [*in order*] to break you," Partridge says. "And I know why he wanted to break you. He wanted to move on quickly to the next project. That's all there was to it. It was a money-making machine that wouldn't make so much money if you took more time to get things right."

Despite this, on the strength of the polarizing track "Dear God," *Skylarking* launched XTC into the mainstream musical orbit in the U.S.

"What can I say? It was a difficult birth, but the baby came out okay," Partridge says. "It's a miracle baby. It captured us and our musical interests pretty well at a time when our songwriting and the band were on a new career trajectory."

Skylarking took XTC in a bold new direction.

I don't think it's a very guitar-y album. It seems to have been kidnapped by keyboards — but it was written on guitar. We were in a difficult place. Virgin felt we weren't selling enough, and that's because most of the production was dealt with by "that weirdo, Andy."

Is that why Todd Rundgren was chosen to produce?

It was a case of removing me and shutting me up. They insisted, "You have to sell records in America. To do that, you'd better have an American producer." They gave us a list of half a dozen producers who were selling well in America, and, to be frank, I didn't recognize any of them. We didn't pick one, so they said, "We'll give you a list of another six — but you've definitely got to have one of these. If not, you're going to be off the label." In hindsight, that might've been a great thing. But the only name on the list that anybody recognized was Todd Rundgren.

You said a lot of the songs from _Skylarking_ were written on guitar. What guitars did you use?

I had a Martin D-35. I still have it. It's not in great condition and really needs some TLC. Some things were falling out with that, so I treated myself to a Japanese-built Telecaster, a Squier. I walked into a shop, and they had about five or six Teles. I tried them all, but they didn't speak to my hands. They spoke to my ears, but not my hands — and that's very important. There's got to be that physical — and mental — marriage with my guitar.

The fella in the shop said, "There's one more. It's a Squier and it's made in Japan." That one felt great. It sounded the same, if not better, than the U.S. ones, and it really spoke to my hands. I brought that one to the States, along with my trusty Ibanez Artist, which I'd had since '77. Those were my go-to guitars.

Skylarking is considered loosely conceptual, but you encountered issues with Todd regarding song selection and running order.

It became obvious that it was going to be a light album. The whole concept of the summer day was nailed in place by Todd before we even got to Woodstock. He took the songs, spliced them in order and said, "This is how you're going to play it." This was very alien to us. He said, "You're going to be recording these songs in this order." Before we even stepped on a plane, I disagreed with him. I thought, "I don't know whether that song is so strong. Why hasn't he picked this tune?"

It goes without saying that you and Todd didn't get along. But do you think that tension helped improve the album?

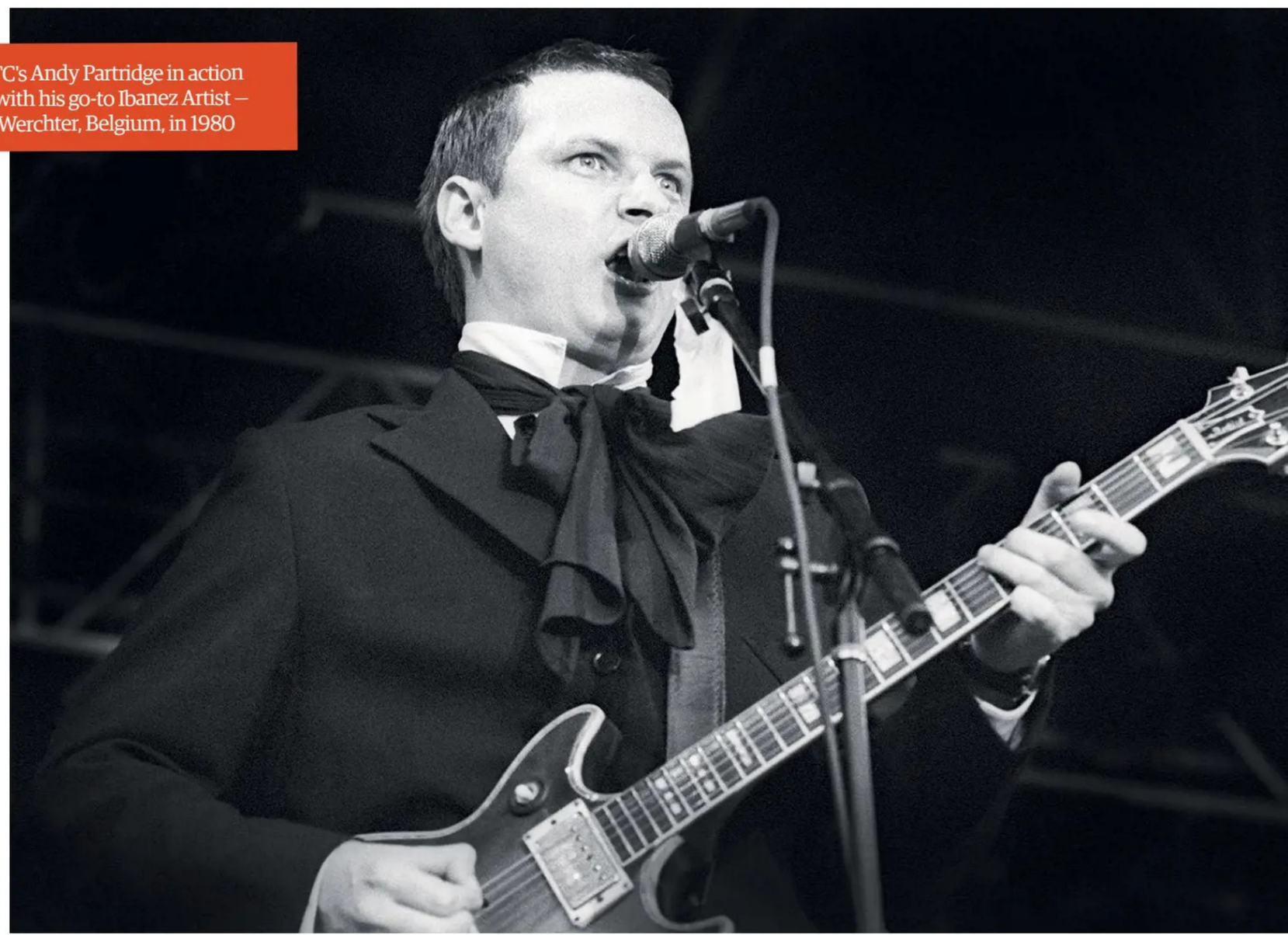
We butted heads terribly, but the album was made despite having our ankles bitten all the time by this rottweiler. It was a case of... how shall I describe it?

Perseverance?

Yeah, I think it was a case of perseverance. He had some positive points, but there were a lot of negative points I could've done without. To be a producer, you have to have great bedside manner and pull out the best performances from the band.

Todd didn't do that?

His arrangement skills were fantastic. But he didn't have the bedside manner, friendliness and enthusiasm to say, "Come on, lads! That was a great session yesterday. What have you got for me today?"



XTC's Andy Partridge in action — with his go-to Ibanez Artist — in Werchter, Belgium, in 1980

GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES



Partridge performs with XTC on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, April 6, 1982

Some might say *Skylarking* had a few mixing and polarity issues.

Todd's skills as an arranger were immaculate, but his engineering was so slapdash as to be "demo" standard. When we got back to England, Dave [*Gregory, XTC guitarist*] did an interview and said, "Hmmm, maybe Todd should stick to producing himself." I thought, "Whoa, Dave, where's this coming from?" But his engineering is demo-quality because he's used to banging down stuff for himself, so he doesn't have a high personal standard. His engineering is certainly not on patch with other engineers we've used, who I think have been immaculate. We weren't allowed to attend the mixes, which pissed us off. It's like, "Whose baby is this? Is it your baby? No, it's ours!" It was very difficult for us to take.

[*Editor's note: In a 2023 interview with Steve Jones of Jonesy's Jukebox (available on YouTube), Rundgren says that, early in the mixing process, XTC said, "We're going home to England; we're not going to stay for the mix."*]

Nobody was happy with the mixes, but we couldn't spend any more money. I attended the mastering in England, and the engineer said, "There's no bass on it. There's no top on it." He did what he could to get it to a higher standard. We figured that Todd's studio was mis-wired – where it sounded fine in one place and out of whack elsewhere. This is quite common.

Despite all that, "Dear God" became a sensation.

Actually, there's something I'd like to put straight about "Dear God." There's a lot of talk on the Internet that I insisted on the track being taken off the album. That's not true. I'll tell you who wanted that track removed – the Geffen record label.

Is that because of its polarizing subject matter?

I was invited into the Virgin offices in London, and they said, "Geffen is really worried by the nature of this track. They would really like it if you could take it off the album." They said, "They think it's going to damage you in some way." Fuck knows why that would be.

How did you react to that?

I thought, "Well, this undermines some of the lack of confidence I had in certain things about that song..." I didn't know if I did the subject proud – and it's a massive subject, you know, human belief. I was also feeling a bit icky about the little-girl voice. It was too sugary sweet and sickly for me. I wasn't totally happy about that. So, with Geffen saying, "Can you take it off?," I thought, "Okay. Alright..." But it was not me who took it off the album, though I seem to have gotten the blame for taking that off the album.

Ironically, the label wanted XTC to break the U.S. market, and "Dear God" did exactly that.

That song was thrown away onto a B-side, and DJs started flipping it over. People would ring in, saying, "If you play that song again, I'm going to firebomb your station!" Or they'd say, "That's the best thing you've played in years. Play it again!" It accidentally became the tool that opened up our careers in the States. Weird, isn't it?

While there were a lot of issues, *Skylarking* is considered one of the great albums of the Eighties.

It's the great missing Dukes of Stratosphear [*a psychedelic pop group Partridge formed in 1984, basically an XTC spin-off*] album. Apart from the problems in its creation, it chimes pretty decently with us for where we were at.

Would you change anything about it?

It's pointless to have regrets. It came out fine. It didn't come out how any of us thought it would, but it came out fine. And it's not such an American album; it's more of a British psychedelic album. It's a good snapshot. GW

WATAL ASANUMA/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES



ROSS HALFIN



TOYS IN THE ATTIC

PART 1
GUITARS

From a Blade Runner to a B.C. Rich to a nearly forgotten Black Burst, Aerosmith's Joe Perry reveals the stories behind nine standouts from his impressive guitar collection – and nominates the coolest pointy ax of all time

BY ANDREW DALY

SINCE HIS EARLIEST days with Aerosmith, Joe Perry has been the epitome of guitar-related cool. Sure, he's got the licks, the songs and the solos, but he's also got a massive cache of iconic, quirky and downright badass guitars.

Asked what drives him to accumulate guitars for which most players would give up their firstborn child, Perry tells *Guitar World*, "When you really boil it down, you sometimes play a guitar because it looks absolutely cool. [*Laughs*] And you can love the way it looks, but it has to inspire you when you play it. There are other times where you don't care how it looks – just that it plays amazingly. Some guitars are meant to be."

Perry should know. His arsenal has everything from sought-after '59 bursts to straight-up mongrels he's built himself. Of course, Perry understands that values can vary, but he's more interested in versatility.

"There are no bad sounds – there are just sounds," he says. "You want sounds you can put in your catalog of paint colors, so to speak." This is why, despite the volume of guitars in his stable, Perry insists he's not a collector. "You never know when something might turn up," he says of his insatiable thirst for new tones. "That's why half the guitars in my collection are oddballs."

Perry's mindset stems back to his early days, when your guitar was your livelihood, and whatever it gave you was all you had. "There were collectors out there who were buying stuff left and right," he says. "And there were other guys who had a [*single*] guitar, and if you wanted something else, you sold the one you had – or you traded up, down or sideways."

Despite his open-minded nature, Perry does have a few guitars that have become attached to his leather-clad hip. Guitars like his '59 Les Paul, B.C. Rich Bich, Billie Guitar and his beloved Burned Strat are just a few of these, all of which – along with a few others – we'll touch on soon.

Ever the tone hound, Perry is still searching, tinkering and building. Lately, he's been working on custom guitars with Florida-based independent guitar maker Dazzle. Beyond that, like the rest of us, he peruses the Internet, thumbs through guitar mags and pays one too many visits to Reverb.

"There's just a lot of great guitars out there," Perry says. "I've got plenty of things on my list. It's about build quality, which can be hard to find if you're talking about guys building them in their garages. [*Laughs*] But those can be great too, and there's great stuff coming from Gibson, Fender and PRS. Some aren't to my taste, but the workmanship is amazing, so if you're willing to look, there's a lot of great stuff out there."

1959 GIBSON LES PAUL



Let's start off with this iconic guitar.
I bought that guitar... I guess it had been around Boston. Different people had it and sold it, and then I came across it — and for a good price! I can't remember what I paid for it, but it was around $2,500.

It was your main Les Paul in the Seventies, but you sold it after you left Aerosmith in 1979.
Yeah — I had a few extras, but I wasn't really into collecting guitars. If I needed a guitar, I'd just go down to the music store and buy one, usually a new one. After I left Aerosmith, I needed money for Christmas, and I remember selling it for $4,500.

Do you remember who you sold it to?
I'm not sure, but once it left my hands, I lost track of it. That had to be 1980 or so.

You tried to track it down but had trouble finding it.
After Aerosmith got back together [*in 1984*], we owed the record company a lot of money and had to buy our way out of our old record deal. That's how low we'd sunk as far as the business end of things. It wasn't until we signed to Geffen Records that we started to have a little money, and I thought, "It would be great if I could track down some of the guitars I lost." I started making calls and talking to some of my techs, and it seemed like every six months, the dollar signs in front of those '59s were going up. But I really wanted to try and get back some of the guitars I'd had, and I remember calling everybody.

It was Aerosmith's Brad Whitford who told you that Slash had it, right?
Yes. I told Brad, and he said, "I know where it is." I said, "Really? Where?" He opened up *Guitar Player*, I think, and there was a spread of Slash's guitar collection, and right in the middle of it was my '59 Les Paul — right there in the magazine.

Is it true that Slash wasn't really into selling you the guitar?
Right. We'd gotten to be friends, and when I asked him, he went, "Oh, man... don't ask me that." I said, "I'll buy it back and pay whatever you want." But he said, "Don't ask me, please!" He didn't want to let go of it, but I'd call him every once in a while and say, "What do you think? Have you changed your mind?" It got to the point where he wouldn't take my calls because he knew I was gonna ask him. He hated saying no, and I realized I was potentially losing a friend over this thing. I finally said, "Listen, I'm not gonna ask you again. It's not even an issue. It's your guitar. This is fucking up our friendship, so no more."

Slash did end up giving you the guitar back, years later.
A few years went by, and word got to him that it was my 50th birthday and we were having a huge blowout. My wife, Billie, was throwing this incredible party for me, which I'm not usually big on, but I figured, "Why not? I'm 50!" I asked Cheap Trick if they'd come and play and I'd sit in on a set. When we were getting ready to go up and do the set at a restaurant that Steven [*Tyler*] and I owned in South Boston near the Cape, where we all lived, I got up on stage, and my guitar tech goes, "Slash wanted me to give you this," and it was the '59. It was dead silent in the room. I was just blown away. But that was it — I got it back.

Aside from it being a highly desirable burst, what makes it so special?
That guitar — in my hands — is special. It's kind of an oddball, because the serial number actually says it's a 1960, but everything about the guitar that the experts can deduce — as far as the finish, and the way the neck meets the body — says it was built in 1959. It was probably made with parts left over from 1959, but it has a 1960 serial number. It doesn't matter — it is what it is. It's got the PAFs, and if '59 or '60 affects the value, I'm not really concerned with that. Maybe it's an issue for the insurance company, but whatever. [*Laughs*]



"When I left the band, I put most of my Aerosmith guitars aside and basically put this guitar together out of Warmoth parts"

FENDER/ WARMOTH "BURNED STRAT" (AKA THE "RAT GUITAR")

Speaking of guitars you regularly work into your sets, you seem to be attached to a mongrel dubbed the "Burned Strat." It's been altered a lot over the years.
It's kind of a work in progress. The inspiration for putting it together was when I left the band, I put most of my Aerosmith guitars aside and basically put this guitar together out of Warmoth parts. I was going back to playing clubs and theaters, just cruising the country in a van with a band and playing. In a way, that guitar fit in with my philosophy of leaving the Aerosmith thing to the side and

LATE-SEVENTIES B.C. RICH BICH 10 SUPREME

What's the story behind your 10-string B.C. Rich?
When I started my relationship with B.C. Rich, they were different-looking guitars, but you could tell they were built really well. The neck went all the way through the body, and they had all these touches, and it sounded incredible. I thought B.C. Rich was definitely top-notch as far as workmanship. The only thing that bothered me about them was that they had all these switches and, like, three boosts, which was kind of overkill because they had some pretty good PAF reproductions in there. You didn't need three boosts, so there was a lot going on. After one of mine was stolen, I didn't have time to go to the factory and talk to them, so they just kind of handed me the next guitar, which was this 10-string.

What did you think of it?
I guessed the theory was that if you set it up with the right strings, you could play it with more attitude than a regular guitar. You could get vibrato off the strings and do things you normally wouldn't do — and experiment. It really worked for some things because as soon as you bend the strings, they don't bend in tune, so there are certain places where it works and others where it doesn't.

Did you eventually get comfortable with the onboard electronics?
There was a period where I unhooked all the electronics except for the volume and one tone knob. I kept hitting all the other switches and knocking the boost on when I already had a fuzz pedal on, so I thought, "Maybe I'll cut that stuff out and the guitar will breathe a little more." But I eventually put it back to the original specs. Also, for a short period of time, I took off the extra four strings and played it like a normal six-string, but that kinda defeated the purpose.

You used it with Aerosmith, but it was one of your main guitars after you launched the Joe Perry Project in the Eighties.
I played it on a few Aerosmith songs in the studio when I first got it, and I played it live a bit. But it was kind of near the end before I left, so it was funny that it ended up in the photo on the *Live! Bootleg* album. I was surprised, considering how [*infrequently*] I played that guitar, but it became one of the top three guitars associated with me. [*Laughs*] I still work it into a couple of songs in the set because nothing else sounds like it.


"I guessed the theory was that if you set it up with the right strings, you could play it with more attitude than a regular guitar," Perry says

COURTESY OF JOE PERRY, AARON PE

playing this one guitar that I'd put together. You can tell it was played a lot because I did a lot of shows back then, and there's just a sound and a feel to it. It had a left-handed neck and body, and it was my go-to guitar for those three years. When it was time to start going back on the road with Aerosmith, I thought, "Well, I'll pull that one out" because it symbolized so much of me; it had a sound and felt really comfortable.

That guitar was the inspiration for the current Burned Strat, right?
Yeah. I didn't want to take a chance on the original guitar being lost, so somewhere around 2001, me and my tech put another one together with the same philosophy — just bits and pieces, you know?

What does that guitar actually consist of?
It's the same guitar as far as the Fender body and Warmoth neck. It's kind of a relic; I've changed the pickups, the vibrato bar and the bridge. I carved off more of the body to make it comfortable, and I even put it in the freezer overnight and then took a blowtorch to it so the finish would crackle, which gave it a jump-start to the way it would look over the years. I've taken a Dremel to it for different reasons, just to make it a little more of this or that. [*Laughs*] There's a company called Vega-Trem, which did the tremolo; it's basically a refined version of the bridge Leo Fender designed, but it's machined a little better. So I can divebomb on it and use it as another musical tool — but I also can get the classic vibrato sound.

Based on a few photos, it appears you swapped the pickups fairly recently for a pair of Seymour Duncan P-Rails. How do you like them?
They're great. Each one has a P90 and a Strat-style pickup in it; those two sit in a humbucker slot [*Seymour Duncan's website describes P-Rails as "versatile humbucker pickups that combine a Hot Rails coil with a Vintage P90"*]. We went from three pickups to two, but with those pickups, there are really four positions, and you can switch them with the microswitches we added. I can have the pickups separate or together, and the toggle lets me pick which one I want and when. I can pretty much do anything on that guitar.

You played that guitar at the MTV Video Music Awards with Steven Tyler and Yungblud last year. Did you also use it on the recent *One More Time* EP?
Absolutely. On the EP we did with Yungblud, everything you hear I did with that guitar and just a few foot pedals. I think that shows the variety of tones you can get out of it. It's got fat frets, and I use a hybrid set of strings with it because it has that vibrato; it's like a light set of .09's on the top, and then a set of .08's on the bottom. That way, I can bend notes the way I want, and it also saves my hands because the arthritis is starting to kick in, but it's nothing I can't play through. At this point, it is and will continue to be my "desert island guitar," but you never know. [*Laughs*]

DAZZLE GUITARS



AARON PERRY, COURTESY OF JOE PERRY

How about the custom guitars you've recently built with Dazzle?

I've got a couple. I was introduced to a guy named Cody Henderson, who builds guitars and owns Dazzle. If you've seen any of the shows Aerosmith did in Las Vegas or at Fenway Park in Boston, I played a guitar that basically looked like plexiglass but was milky in color, and it lit up with what looked like Christmas lights on the inside of it wherever there was space on the face of the body. That one was opaque plastic, and the lights were powered by a battery pack and a transformer. With all that shit taped to the guitar, it would last only a few minutes, so I would only use it for one song. But Cody also had regular ones without all that, and those look really cool. They've got a double cutaway, so it's a different look. It doesn't look like a Les Paul or a Strat — but it doesn't look too wacky, either.

How do they play?

They play great! You can get to every fret, so it's like an SG in that way, and he put the Vega-Trem vibrato on there. Since we've stopped touring, I've had a chance to play them, and I'm really impressed with the build quality. Cody is a player and has his own band, so he knows what it's like to have an electric guitar in his hands. He knows what it's like to stand in front of an audience and that you need to make sure everything works. They're just really cool guitars.



Is there an off-the-beaten-path guitar you've always thought was underrated?

I'm not a guitar snob. I don't care if it just came off the bench yesterday. If it feels right, sounds right and checks the boxes, I'll play it. But I've always liked Vox teardrop [*Mark series*] guitars because they're cool-looking. I remember pictures of Brian Jones playing one back when Vox was handing out equipment left and right, when they started out. I've played a couple, and they're not hot, output-wise, but they definitely have their own sound. I've got a couple of them, but I'm not gonna take a Sixties Vox and start cutting it up; you can't do that. [*Laughs*] There were people in the Seventies, me included, who were doing pretty stupid things like that.



[*above and right — also seen on page 48*] Creations by Florida-based guitar maker Dazzle. "Since we've stopped touring, I've had a chance to play them, and I'm really impressed with the build quality," Perry says

Can you reveal some of those atrocities?

Things like getting a goldtop and scraping off the gold, only to find a very plain piece of maple underneath. If we had thought it through, we would have realized, "Well, they know this is gonna get painted over, so why would they put a beautiful maple top on this?" But you hear these stories of someone scraping off the gold, and there was a great piece of maple underneath, although I don't personally know of anyone who had that happen. And we'd change pickups out a lot — things like taking out a PAF and putting in a hotter Seymour Duncan.

In your defense, these guitars weren't considered halcyon in the way they are now. Time has done that.

Looking back, it's one thing to do that with a "parts" guitar; that's why I like having the Rat guitar, the Burned Strat. If the Dremel slips and I put a gouge in it, it's no big deal. But you're not gonna take a '57 Strat and start mucking around with it and then totally wreck it, you know? I guess if you're not gonna play it, and something is holding it up, you can change it. You don't know how much that'll knock off the value of the guitar, but you'll get to play it, so maybe it's worth doing. It's one of those conundrums. But I got a Vox teardrop reissue for maybe $500, and I tore everything out and off except for the neck. Me and Cody put a Vega-Trem vibrato arm and trem on it and some P-Rail pickups, and we experimented by putting a boost on it — built-in. It didn't work out well. [*Laughs*]



Why is that?

We were losing too much tone, so we decided against it. It actually plays really well, but since Aerosmith has stopped touring, my opportunities to pull out that guitar and play it are few and far between, so it's sitting in my studio. I play it quite a bit, and if you didn't know any better, you'd think it was an average Vox teardrop guitar. But the whammy bar does everything I want it to do, and it sounds great.



If you didn't have any of your noteworthy guitars and just picked up something



random, would that inherent know-how guide you?

I'm not a technique guy. I play guitar to play the song. That's it. That's why the guitar really exploded, you know? It was a lot of fun to go into mom-and-pop guitar stores and find them in every city. If you had a family shop that had been around for decades for a generation or two, there was always something in the back, some weird thing. God knows there's enough custom stuff out there, but sometimes you'll see something you haven't seen before. Those are the kinds of things I look for. There might be that guitar or amp you find, and you might use it on a track when you're looking for a particular sound. You just never know! GW

GIBSON B.B. KING LUCILLE CUSTOM "BILLIE GUITAR"

There's also the one you've dubbed the "Billie Guitar" because it has a picture of your wife, Billie, on the body.

I got that in the Nineties. The main reason for that guitar is that I love history, and I was looking back and fascinated by what they call "nose art." Pilots would have artwork on the nose of their planes in World Wars I and II, and it would be pictures of their favorite movie starlet or their wife, and they'd name the plane after them. I thought, "Why not do that with my guitar?" That was the main reason I picked that body style — the B.B. King Lucille body. It doesn't have F-holes; I wanted something with plenty of room for the artwork.

Who did the artwork?

[*Aerosmith drummer*] Joey Kramer's drum tech, John Douglas. He's also a painter, and his artwork is online so you can look it up [*johndouglas.com*]. I took some pictures of Billie with a Polaroid and got the guitar from Gibson, who were in on the plot. I had them paint it pearl white but without the final touches so that John could paint it. There's a picture on the front of the guitar and on the back, and I picked white because I thought the artwork would stand out. Again, I was driven by the visuals. [*Laughs*] After John painted it, it went back to Gibson, and they put the neck and their touches on it and finished it with the electronics and this and that. That happened in Nashville, where I got to go to the factory and check out the stuff at the Custom Shop.

What did Billie think of it when she saw it?

She had no idea this was going on. [*Laughs*] Billie just stood there for a second, and they came out with this guitar case and said, "Close your eyes." We opened it up, and she turned beet red. Long story short, she wouldn't come out when I'd put the guitar on; she'd kind of leave the side of the stage because she was so embarrassed about it. She's not somebody who looks for the spotlight, but she got used to it. Sometimes I would stand out at the end of the ramp, and the girls in the crowd would point to the picture on the guitar and want to know who it was. I'd point to my wedding ring, and they would melt. [*Laughs*] They thought it was so romantic!

It's become a staple of your arsenal when you play "Cryin'," so it must be solid.

It turned out that the guitar sounded great. Having the minimum amount of electronics in there, and the pickups, which are hot-rodded Seymour Duncan JBs, really worked. There's just something about it; that guitar has some magic to it. It's one of my top touring guitars, and I've used it in the studio a lot, too.



AMPEG-ERA DAN ARMSTRONG

Your see-through Dan Armstrong is pretty rare. They're going for big bucks these days.
I think they reissued those. Well, maybe they're bootleg Chinese ones, because I see them pop up every now and then. I figured somebody had to be out there making them, but they didn't make many in the beginning.

What led you to pick up that guitar?
I remember being in a music store in, like, 1971, and because the Rolling Stones were using all Ampeg stuff, and I'd seen pictures of Keith Richards playing it, I figured I'd try one out. As it turned out, it's solid as a rock. The neck doesn't move, and it stays in tune, so it's been a really good slide guitar for me. It's actually my go-to for slide.

Did you modify it?
With the clear-body one, if you could get the right pickup in there – because some of the pickups they came with weren't great – it was good. I had somebody build a little thing so I could put a Seymour Duncan in there, but now it's straight-up original with the original pickups, which sound really good. I use that guitar when I play in open A or open G. They have a great feel and a flatter neck radius, which really lends itself to slide. They are great, cool-looking guitars, so it checks both boxes.



"I'd seen pictures of Keith Richards playing it; I figured I'd try one out"

EARLY-NINETIES GIBSON CUSTOM SHOP LES PAUL BLACK BURST

A guitar you played a lot around the *Get a Grip* and *Nine Lives* eras – but that doesn't get talked about much these days – is your Black Burst, which started out as a Custom Shop build and later inspired your first signature guitar.
That's right. After I'd had the guitar, Gibson approached me to do a signature since there were a fair amount of pictures of me playing a black Les Paul. I had some horses at a farm in Vermont, and I fell in love with this breed called a Friesian, which are solid black, from Holland. They're pretty rare. I'd go to horse shows, and I managed to find a farm that had one or two, but what stood out about them was that they have

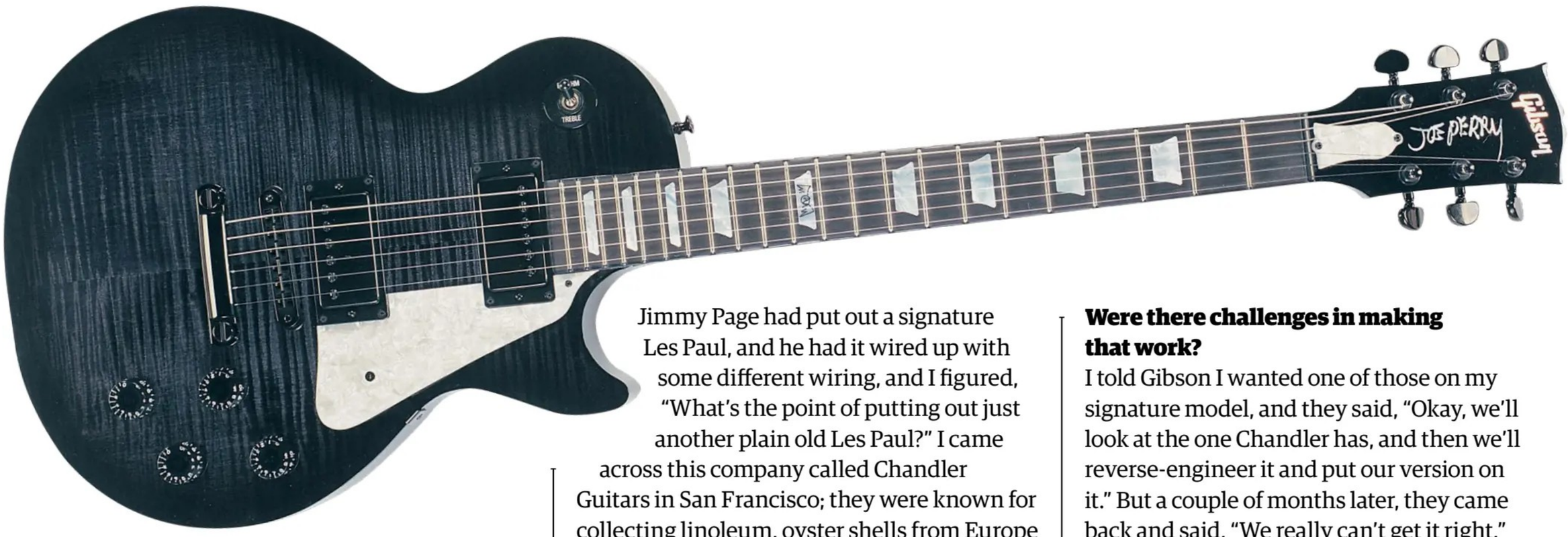
MID-EIGHTIES GUILD X-100 BLADE RUNNER

I've always wondered about the Guild X-100 Blade Runner, which you used in the "Walk This Way" video with Run-D.M.C. in 1986.
That one falls under the category of, "Holy shit, this is too cool looking to believe." [*Laughs*] It has EMG pickups; I'm not a big fan of those, but I get the philosophy behind them, and they are really cool. That's just what came in there, and even though I'm not into EMGs, there isn't a piece of equipment I can put down, because you just never know.

Your philosophy of "there are no wrong tones" comes to mind.
There are no wrong sounds. Even if you put a patch cord in and it's crackling, you never know! That crackling sound could turn into a rhythm track, so my philosophy, as you said, is that there are no wrong sounds or tones. And with the X-100, I played it because it sounded cool, and there was just something about it. And for certain sounds, man, those EMGs are great. I can get a great heavy sound out of them, and I tried different versions of them, and for what they are, they're great.

How did you get the Guild, and what led you to use it in the Run-D.M.C. video?

AARON PERRY, NIGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS



long manes, and the manes are curly and just look beautiful. I wanted to kind of get that look on a guitar, which called for a really good maple top and a relatively light burst.

What's noteworthy about your signature Les Paul is that it felt classic but looked very modern, complete with some interesting onboard effects.

Jimmy Page had put out a signature Les Paul, and he had it wired up with some different wiring, and I figured, "What's the point of putting out just another plain old Les Paul?" I came across this company called Chandler Guitars in San Francisco; they were known for collecting linoleum, oyster shells from Europe and even tortoise shells with amazing colors and patterns. This stuff was incredible. But another thing they'd perfected was a push/pull knob for the tone control, where you'd be able to put on a wah effect when it was popped out. You could set it and hold the note, and then bend up and pop that thing on and get the wah-wah effect when it was time to cut a solo. It was just another taste, really.

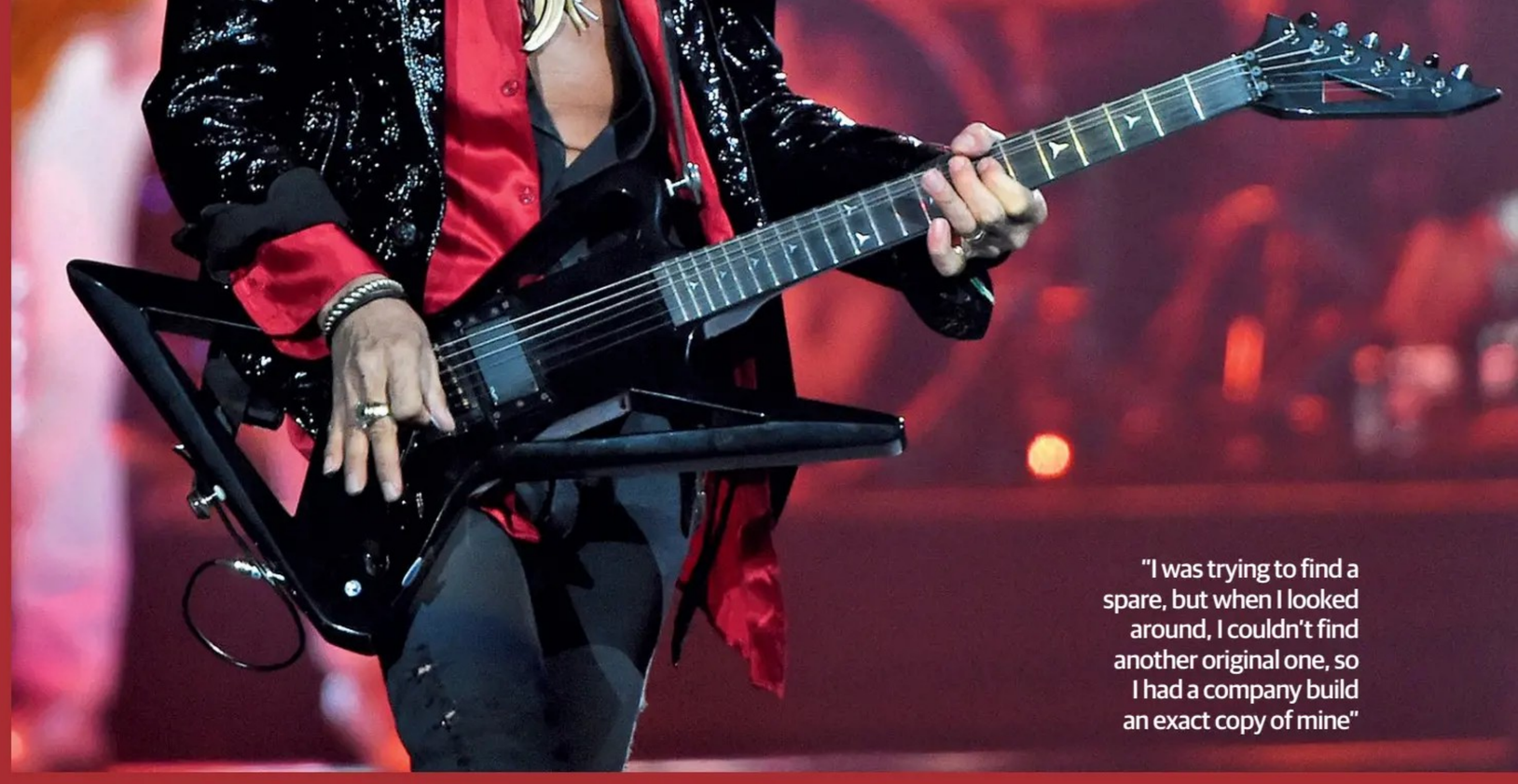
Were there challenges in making that work?

I told Gibson I wanted one of those on my signature model, and they said, "Okay, we'll look at the one Chandler has, and then we'll reverse-engineer it and put our version on it." But a couple of months later, they came back and said, "We really can't get it right," though I'm not sure they put enough time into it. But who knows? They said, "We really can't reproduce it the way Chandler does," so they went to Chandler and bought all of the ones they had in stock, which I've heard was anywhere from 100 to 250. So the first run of those guitars have that in it. If you can get one that has that, which they call the Tonex, the push/pull knob for the wah, that's gold.

We were doing *Done with Mirrors* [*1985*] when we were getting back together, and Guild was trying to make a comeback. The Guild rep would come by our rehearsal space and show me a few pieces. And as soon as I saw the Blade Runner, I said, "That's mine. I gotta have that." I mean, it's too cool. It's the ultimate pointy guitar. [*Laughs*] That's why I used it in the video. It's an iconic shape, and it's kind of light. They cut the wood all away, and it's full of holes, so it's comfortable to play.

I was actually trying to find a spare, but when I looked around, I couldn't find another original one, so I had a company build me an exact copy of mine. I wanted one I could bring on the road and not be afraid of getting it stolen. That's another one that checks all the boxes. For certain sounds and songs, you can't beat it, and for looks, it's amazing.





"I was trying to find a spare, but when I looked around, I couldn't find another original one, so I had a company build an exact copy of mine"

FIFTIES GIBSON LES PAUL JUNIOR

What's the story behind your black Gibson Junior double-cutaway with the hard-to-miss pearl inlay?
I'm pretty sure it's a '56. It's one of those Juniors that started off with cherry stain, but it wasn't a burst — it was just a cherry stain. It's got one P90. I actually had two of them in the mid-Seventies, like the ones Johnny Thunders and Leslie West played. They're killer guitars. It's just volume, tone and a P90, and it screams. I was lucky enough to get two of them.

You broke one of those guitars while on stage, correct?
Yeah. We were doing a show at a festival and I threw this thing up in the air at the end of a song. This was before wireless, so it went to the end of the patch cord and came down on the neck — and the headstock snapped off. I remember thinking as it was going up in the air, "Wow, I can't believe it. That looks so cool." And then, on the way down, I was thinking, "Holy shit, what did I do?" [*Laughs*] After it came down and was broken, Steven grabbed it and wanted to throw it out into the audience, so I had to wrestle him for it. [*Laughs*] I knew we could fix it, you know? I got it back and gave the pieces to my guy, and the show went on.

Did you add the pearl inlay after you repaired the headstock?
I had some marble gargoyles in the backyard of the house I was living in, and I took some Polaroid photos of them and sent them to Gruhn Guitars in Nashville to see if we could incorporate them. A lot of people think the picture on there is a decal, but it's all mother-of-pearl inlay work, and it's still a killer guitar. It sounds great, and it's one that comes to the studio with me as well as on the road.

I still have its brother, and that one is all original except for the chrome Grovers that pretty much everybody put on their Fifties and Sixties Gibsons if the tuning pegs started to rot, which they did quite a bit.

We've covered eight guitars, but you've got hundreds. Given your love for tinkering and open-mindedness regarding tones, do you think you'll ever find one guitar to rule them all?
My rat guitar, the Burned Strat, pretty much checks all of the boxes. It takes a guitar a while to settle in because they're not designed to play with really light strings. I'm making generalizations here, but Strats and Les Pauls were designed to have heavier-gauge strings. I bet when you took a Tele out of the box in the Fifties, it had flatwound strings on it. [*Laughs*] I'm sure Joe Bonamassa could tell you more about that than I could, but they were designed to have heavier strings — and not really roundwound. But over the years, we've managed to adapt and deal with that, so it takes a while if you're gonna use the vibrato bar, and not just to divebomb. It takes a while for the guitar to settle in.

Have you found that since you've gone to lighter strings and the Vega-Trem that the Burned Strat has come into its own?
Yeah. The lighter the strings, the harder it is to get that to work. When you get a Strat-style guitar with that type of bridge, it takes a while for things to settle in. I don't know... maybe that's part of the voodoo, if you want to put it that way. So, with that guitar, if I'm doing a show, I can do things where I can trust it and count on it. I know it's gonna stay in tune. Of course, you never know if you're gonna break a string, and with a floating bridge, when that happens, you're fucked. [*Laughs*] It's a roll of the dice, but I trust that guitar. I would use that one, even when I have access to all of my stuff.

At the end of the day, when it comes to "desert island guitars," it's a matter of taste. It's not one-size-fits-all.
Right. It's about what you're looking for as far as the song. I'm driven by the song, you know? I have a couple of hardcore rules, like when you're playing live, you follow the singer. And if the song starts to sound like a trainwreck because somebody fucked up, just follow the singer and it'll be less noticeable. Hopefully, there's a certain amount of charm to having a trainwreck onstage. [*Laughs*] If anything, it proves we're not playing to a tape.

The other thing is, like I said before, there are no wrong sounds. There might be a wrong sound for a particular song, but you keep searching until you find the right one. I have guitars that I paid $100 for, and they're on some of our biggest hits. They worked in that particular situation.

Has anything new, gear-wise, caught your ear or eye?
I get guitar magazines all the time. I get *Guitar World*, and I look at the back pages for new pedals and whatever else, just messing around with different speakers and things. They all go down in the book, you know, in the back of my mind. I'm not organized enough to actually have everything in files on a computer, but I know where to get a particular sound or feel. It's all built around what works for the song.


KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE

"Steven Tyler grabbed it and wanted to throw it out into the audience, so I had to wrestle him for it"

TOYS IN THE ATTIC:

PART 2 AMPS

A decade-by-decade guide to Joe Perry's amps – and exactly where he stands on modeling

BY ANDREW DALY

SOME GUITAR GREATS are historically associated with one guitar and one amp. For instance, you've got your Brian May (Red Special into a Vox AC30), your Angus Young (Gibson SG into a Marshall) and your Eddie Van Halen (Frankenstein into a 5150).

But Joe Perry is not one of those guitar greats. This guy plugs a host of iconic guitars into all sorts of amps; well, let's make that all sorts of tube amps. Beyond that, he likes to play the field.

"I'm not an amp snob," he says. "I won't say I can't use this or that amp. I'm gonna give everything a try. You never know what you're gonna discover. Some of the oddest guitars and amps I have are ones I've used on some of my favorite songs. You just don't know."

It's that philosophy that has kept Perry merrily bouncing from amp to amp. Be it Ampeg, Music Man, Fender or Alessandro, he has tried – and loved (to varying degrees) – them all. Still, as amp-curious as he is, he always seems to come home to Marshall.

"You can put Marshall down for every decade," he says, foreshadowing the list below. "There'd be times in the studio or for a one-off gig, and you'd have to rent something, and it was usually a Marshall. Back in the day, it'd be a roll of the dice because you didn't know if they were taken care of. But if you were lucky, and you got a good one, they were great."

With that in mind, Perry guides us through his amp choices throughout the decades.

"You can put Marshall down for every decade," Perry says

AARON PER

1970s

FOR THE FIRST Aerosmith album [*1973's* Aerosmith], I used an Ampeg V4. I probably used that for the first couple of tours, too. I didn't want to sound like everybody else, and everyone was using Gibson Les Pauls and Fender Strats with Marshalls, so I used the Ampeg because you were pretty much in the same range, but it sounded a little different. But it really comes down to how you play. Everybody sounds a little different, and the go-to amps for the kind of music we were playing were [meant] to give you a little more, to reference *This Is Spinal Tap*, "11"! [*Laughs*] But I always liked that early rig because it wasn't too distorted or too loud. When that happens, you lose the tone of the guitar.

We had Marshalls, too, but in the late Seventies, the longest-tenured amps we had for touring were some of the first Music Mans. Leo Fender had basically sold Fender, and he started Music Man. He put out an amp that was about the size of a [*Fender*] Twin, and it was a 100-watt head. We got lucky and had a couple of the first ones, and they were pretty loud. For at least a year's worth of touring, we were pretty much using only those Music Man amps and heads [*HD-130 heads customized by Andy Topeka*]. We had them made with LED lights — a string of them — so the harder you'd hit the amp, the more the lights would light up. It was kind of cool. And we had the Aerosmith logo on them; we still have a couple of them around.

1980s

I OFTEN HAD vintage Marshalls, like 100-watt plexis and Super Leads. Everyone was tweaking them, just trying to get a little bit more out of them to get what they were looking for. So my go-to studio amps were always some sort of Marshall or Fender. Then Fender started reissuing older stuff, and I got some of that, which I still use. When we started playing bigger places, I was really surprised by how loud the audience was. In some buildings, the audience would be cheering — and sometimes it was louder than the band! [*Laughs*] It was kind of about a balance of finding the right sound on stage and needing to hear the vocals, and everybody had a different way of dealing with it. But just about everybody was using Marshalls in hard-rock land.

I was trying everything. Someone would come out with something new, and I'd get one and try it — especially in the studio. You never know when you're gonna come

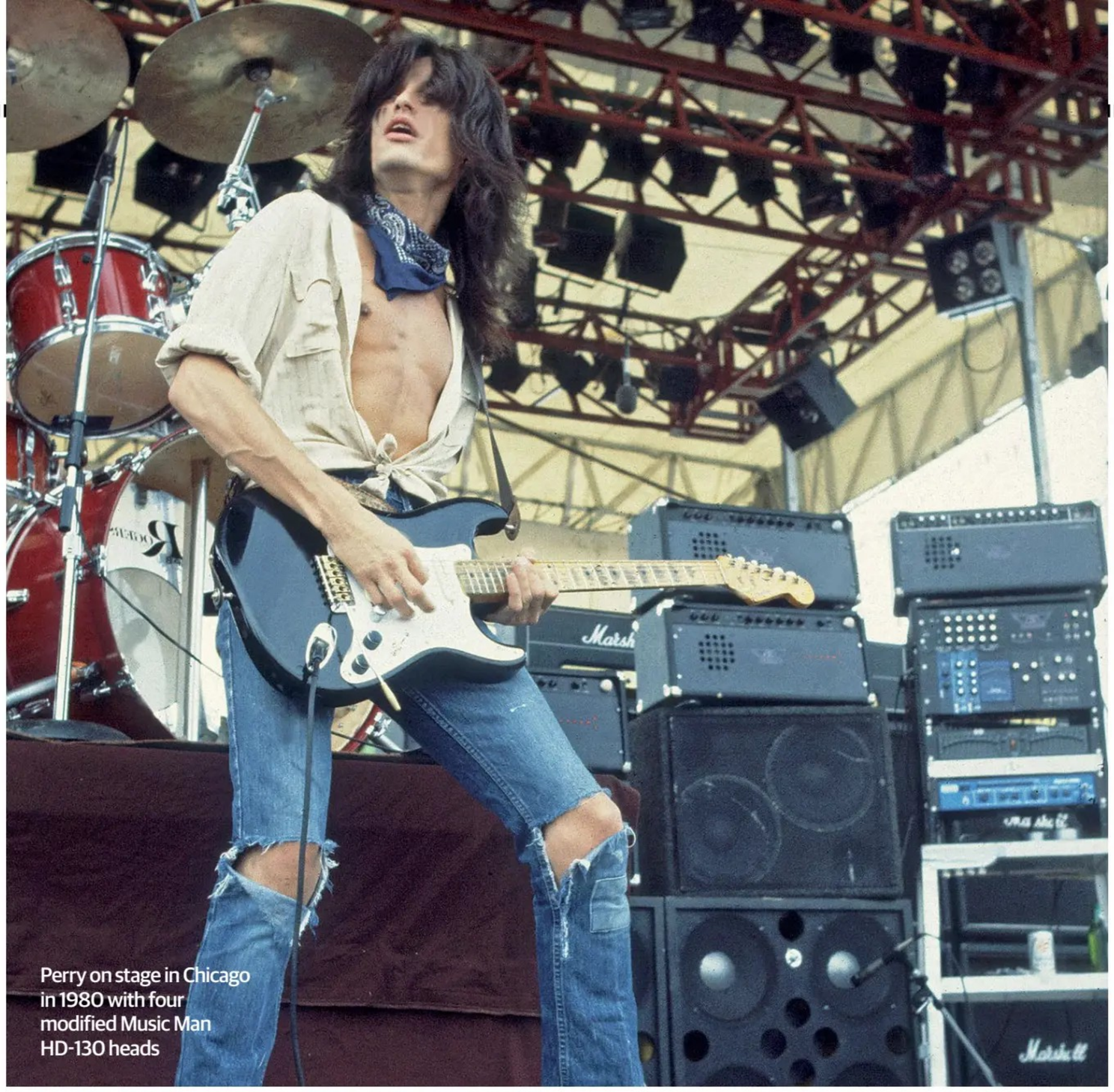
"I didn't want to sound like everybody else, and the Ampeg sounded a little different"

JOE PERRY



Aerosmith perform at Boston College, September 29, 1973

RON POWNALL/GETTY IMAGES



Perry on stage in Chicago in 1980 with four modified Music Man HD-130 heads



David Gilmour's Alessandro Redbone Special

across some kind of sound that would fit. For example, there was a song called "The Movie" on *Permanent Vacation* [*1987*], and I found a sound on the Roland synth you can hear on the song. It sounds like bubbles coming up in the instrumental.

1990s

AGAIN, I TRIED just about everything, including transistor amps. Whenever they would come out with something, I'd give it a try. In the early Nineties, Fender put out these dark gray amps with red knobs. I know guys who worked with them, and they made it work, but I never liked them. Some of that stuff with transistors, as soon as you turned them up, they started to sound like aluminum foil. [*Laughs*] So I tried a lot of this stuff but would never use it. I still have some of it because you never know if there's a sound you can get out of it; there might be a place for it on a recording. We'd go off to record an album, and we'd bring a little bit of everything back then, because you just didn't know what you were gonna use. But the bottom line is, if I was doing basic tracks, chances are I'd be using a Fender or a Marshall — something high-wattage.

2000s–present

THE CHOICES ARE pretty much infinite now. People used to think that to make a record sound big, you had to have a full-on stack. But it's really hard to do a record like that because of the volume; you'll blow out the microphones. So I like to try a lot of boutique amps. One of the standouts is Alessandro [*High-End Products*]. George Alessandro consistently hits the nail on the head. Someone told me that they were backstage checking out David Gilmour's latest rig, and Gilmour had an Alessandro amp; it was kind of the core of his rig! Boutique amps are great because you can find something that gives you a different tone or feel, and it's refreshing. You wanna keep changing things up because you can get bored, but then you swing back around to the old standards, which is mostly some vintage Fender stuff — Vibroverbs, Twins and [*Band*] Masters — and Marshalls, like the JCM800, which is at the top of the list.

And then, with modeling, I know guys who swear by it. There's a lot going for it, and you can get a lot of different sounds, and they're easy to transport, but I don't know. I guess if I were in a jam and had to do a gig, I'd figure out how to make one work, but if I had the choice, I'm gonna use my tube stuff.

Anyway, here's an example of me following my ear. A while ago, my guitar tech sent me a Fender Champ-size speaker cab with an old Jensen 10" and an Orange Terror Stamp pedal-size amp. It has 12ax7 tubes and transistor power. It's a great low-volume practice amp. Since all my bigger "choice, vintage studio stuff" is up in Boston, I've been messing with small Alessandro, Supro and Zinky boutique stuff with vintage speakers. But the Orange was sounding pretty cool, so I used it on the first Aerosmith/Yungblud stuff.

Also, because my backline gear was in a truck going from gig to gig and I couldn't get to my Alessandro and other stuff, one thing led to another. During the last four months, jumping from studio to studio, I just brought the Terror Stamp with me and used whatever 10" speaker cab I could plug into. By the time we were finished, I had used the Orange on every track on the new Aerosmith/Yungblud EP, *One More Time*. I used that along with — say, at Johnny Depp's studio — one of his vintage Fender amps. And at NRG Studios [*Los Angeles*], it was just the Orange. For the [*2025*] Video Music Awards, I used a Fender Vibroverb and the Orange. I used the same rig for the Bad Company induction ceremony at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in November. Who knew?

Back when Aerosmith would pack all our "good stuff" to send to the studio at the start of a record, we'd still rehearse but with some of the "not so A-list" gear. After a week of playing through that stuff, I'd be nailing some great sounds out of the "B list." It was good stuff to the point of saying, "I've gotta bring this too," and that would end up being the startup rig when the tape started rolling. If it sounds good, that's all that matters — no matter what the logo says. That's probably why it was so hard to give a simple answer to what amps I use, decade by decade! GW



PAUL NATKIN/WIREIMAGE, JOBY SESSIONS, OLLY CURTIS/FUTURE

TOYS IN THE ATTIC

Joe Perry walks us through his at-home pedalboard — and his pedalboard methodology

BY ANDREW DALY

PART 3 EFFECTS

What pedals are you using these days?
It's really just my pedals strung together on the floor, but you'll get the idea of what my show board is like. The show board is packed away with all the touring gear. But whenever I can get doubles, I do. Obviously, this isn't possible with the old stuff. For instance, I have an old Electro-Harmonix Queen Triggered Wah — a unique-sounding pedal. It took me years to find a second one.

Do you have all your vintage pedals at home?
Most of my vintage pedals are up at the Aerosmith warehouse. I mostly use that stuff in the studio because very few have direct bypass, though some pieces have been updated with that feature. I'm able to find relatively new stuff that can do the job. I have a pristine Echoplex, but Fulltone makes a copy [*Custom Shop Tube Tape Echo*] that can't be beat. It's the best tape echo out there. They even interchange the tape cartridges with Echoplexes. I have five of them!

Why do you feel the Fulltone comes the closest?
The Fulltone's preamp acts like a boost pedal but also adds true tape warmth. Set it with one repeat and almost no delay, and it thickens your sound and adds a little "it"! For that style of playing, it's a killer setup.

What mistakes do you see other players make with pedals?
There's a big difference between a distortion and a boost pedal. If your amp doesn't have a master volume and gain control, you might need a boost pedal to get some hair on the sound. Most pedals are a combination of



Perry's Strymon Zuma power supply — and one of his Klon Centaurs



Fulltone Fulltone MDV-3 Deja Vibe


Prescription Electronics Experience fuzz/octave

COURTESY OF JOE PERRY

boost/distortion, so you can add distortion as an effect and just a boost. But most modern amps distort if you turn them up. If they have a master volume, you should be able to get your basic sound without help from a pedal — and certainly not from a boost pedal.

Why is that?

The boost is meant to kick the amp's preamp into distortion. If you're looking for a saturated sound, ala Eddie Van Halen and the shredders, you might use a couple of pedals to get that sound. But that's what you need to accommodate that style of playing. For that, the actual tone of the guitar doesn't matter. You could use a '59 PAF, a new Seymour Duncan JB, or anything in between.

What if you don't want that?

If you really want to hear the tone of your guitar — your Strat, Tele, Les Paul Junior with P90s — you set your amp to a really "right on the edge of breakup," cleanish sound, so that you hear your guitar tone. Then add a pedal for your "more" sound. Too many people use too many drive/distortion pedals and wonder, "Where's my tone?"

How do you control that with minimal pedals?

You should be able to use your guitar's volume knob to control your sound rather than having the volume knob all the way up. Because as soon as you drop it a bit, your sound goes away. You should be able to drop the guitar's volume and get a real usable, tone-rich sound. Of course, that's assuming you have a high-quality volume knob; I've had volume knobs that act almost like an on/off switch, which is junk. [*Laughs*] In my world, less is more as far as boost and distortion pedals, but it's up to you [*in terms of*] what works for you.

Do you have a personal methodology in terms of setting up your pedalboard?

I don't know what the general rule on this is, but I like to put reverb and delay pedals closest to the amp. In terms of my "always on" pedals, like compression, my guitar goes there first. The rest is trial and error. You might find that when you use a fuzz, it works better after your flanger. It might add harmonics and sustain that turns the flanger into a different beast. So, aside from the compressor first and the reverb and delay, I try different orders. But I recently got a replica of an old British fuzz; it was recommended [*to be placed*] before a compressor. I tried it, but it didn't work for me. Something to think about.

Is there another pedal you always have on your board?

A Warm Audio Jet Phaser. It has a flange and a fuzz built in, but it also needs a volume boost. When it's on, the volume drops, so — depending on the song — I might put a clean boost right after it. I might hit the boost pedal when I hit the Jet Phaser.

Do you have any other staple, "gotta have it" pedals?

I have an original Klon — three or four of them — and I can't go anywhere without it. I've got a Fulltone [*MDV-3 Deja*] Vibe. It's kind of like the original. I have an original, but I like having them both. And getting to what I "have to have," there's the Fulltone version of the Echoplex. I had it tweaked by the guys at Fulltone, and it sounds as good as or better than the original — without all the fuss.

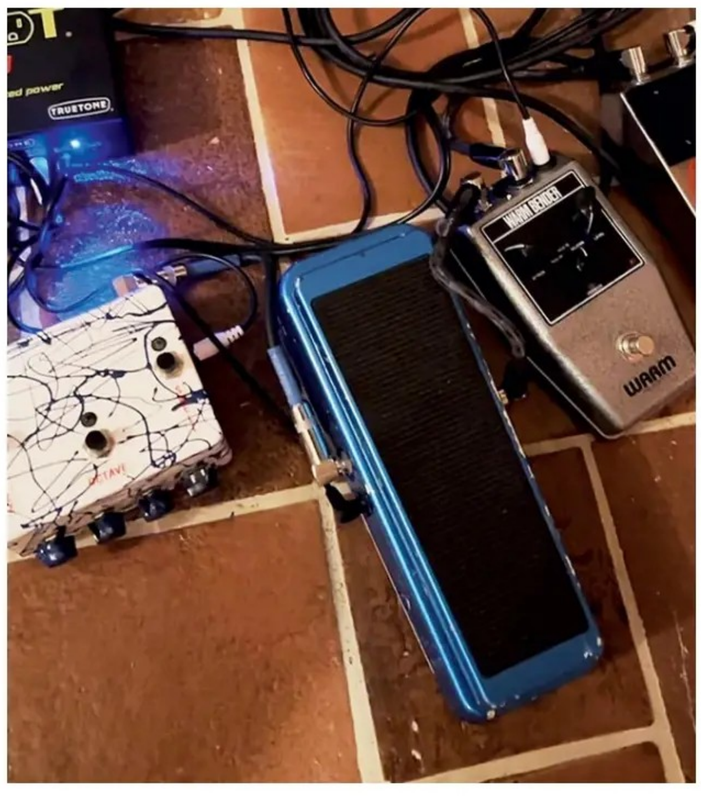
I've also got a Prescription Electronics Experience fuzz/octave. It's kind of like the Jimi Hendrix thing. I've also got a modified EHX POG [*Polyphonic Octave Generator*] with an expression pedal that I use to bring it from bass to treble with my foot. I have a real Tone Bender fuzz, but I've been using the Warm Audio Warm Bender Fuzz with true bypass. I've also got an Xotic Effects XW-1 Wah modified with a short throw, so it goes from bass to treble. It's just a great-sounding wah. GW



Fulltone Custom Shop Tube Tape Echo



Warm Audio Warm Bender





Modified Electro-Harmonix POG (Polyphonic Octave Generator)



Warm Audio Jet Phaser

COURTESY OF JOE PERRY

KEVIN MAZUR

Stone Free



One drops everything when offered an out-of-the-blue interview with Keith Richards. One also picks up pearls of wisdom about his new ES-355, "ornery" Chuck Berry and what can only be described as, um, guitar lust

BY JOEL MCIVER

"THIS IS KEITH" is a pretty mundane phrase, but when you answer your phone and you hear those three simple words growled at you by the most distinguished rhythm guitarist of all time, they make a lasting impression. The 30-minute interview that follows is no less impactful. Even at 82 years old, Keith Richards is in devilish form, prone to laughing hysterically at his own jokes, dropping clusters of F-bombs, mocking some of *GW*'s more naive questions and generally behaving like the snaggle-toothed Captain Jack Sparrow caricature that all Rolling Stones fans recognize and appreciate. Talking to him, you don't feel like you're in the company of some godlike rock star; you feel like you're backstage at a Stones show, laughing it up over life's more surreal and stupid moments.

Still, Richards, who was infamously labeled "mad, bad and dangerous to know" more than half a century ago — and with good reason (you already know the coke, heroin and switchblade anecdotes) — is a mellower character these days than the terrifying Glimmer Twin persona of decades past. He's a well-spoken fellow; you can still hear traces of the suburban London accent that he shares with his fellow Stone Mick Jagger as he talks enthusiastically and at length about all things guitar. He's a committed lover of his instrument — almost literally, by the sound of it — and is especially keen to discuss his latest signature model, the Gibson Keith Richards 1960 ES-355 Collector's Edition.

Built by hand at Gibson's custom shop in Nashville and available in a limited run of 150 units, 50 of which are signed on the F-hole label and headstock and 100 on the label only, this guitar comes in at a marriage-destroying $29,999 and $19,999 respectively, in other words too expensive for you and me; well, maybe you but definitely me.

The point of the new ES-355 model is that Richards' original, which has been 3D-scanned by Gibson to make the new version a millimetrically-identical copy,



The Stones in 1978. "There's something between us," Richards says of Ronnie Wood [*left*]. "It was the same with me and Mick Taylor and with Brian Jones"

occupies a rare spot in guitar history; he used it (among other guitars) to record the Stones' seminal *Sticky Fingers* and *Exile On Main St.* albums in 1971 and '72, and has used it on every Stones tour since 1997. If you ever get your hands on one, count yourself lucky.

The same adjective applies to Richards himself. He's still in pretty good shape despite an early-career adherence to the rock 'n' roll lifestyle that few could possibly survive; he's an acknowledged legend in his own lifetime; and he still wants to be better at what he does. I was expecting him to be pretty jaded at the prospect of yet another guitar-related interview, but the opposite turned out to be true. You'll enjoy the chat that follows, even if your relationship with your instrument isn't quite as intimate as his.

Hello, Keith. Are you at home in Connecticut?
I am, yes. We're absolutely snowed in. Nobody can get here except a man with a snowplow. He's working away right now. I quite like it, because it means I can't get out.

This new Gibson ES-355 of yours is pretty tasty, isn't it?
Yeah, yeah! What a surprise, and what a fuckin' honor. I tell you, when they came at me with this one, I was like, "How can I refuse?" It was a shock to me at first, because when I started, the idea of even owning a Gibson was pretty much out of the picture.

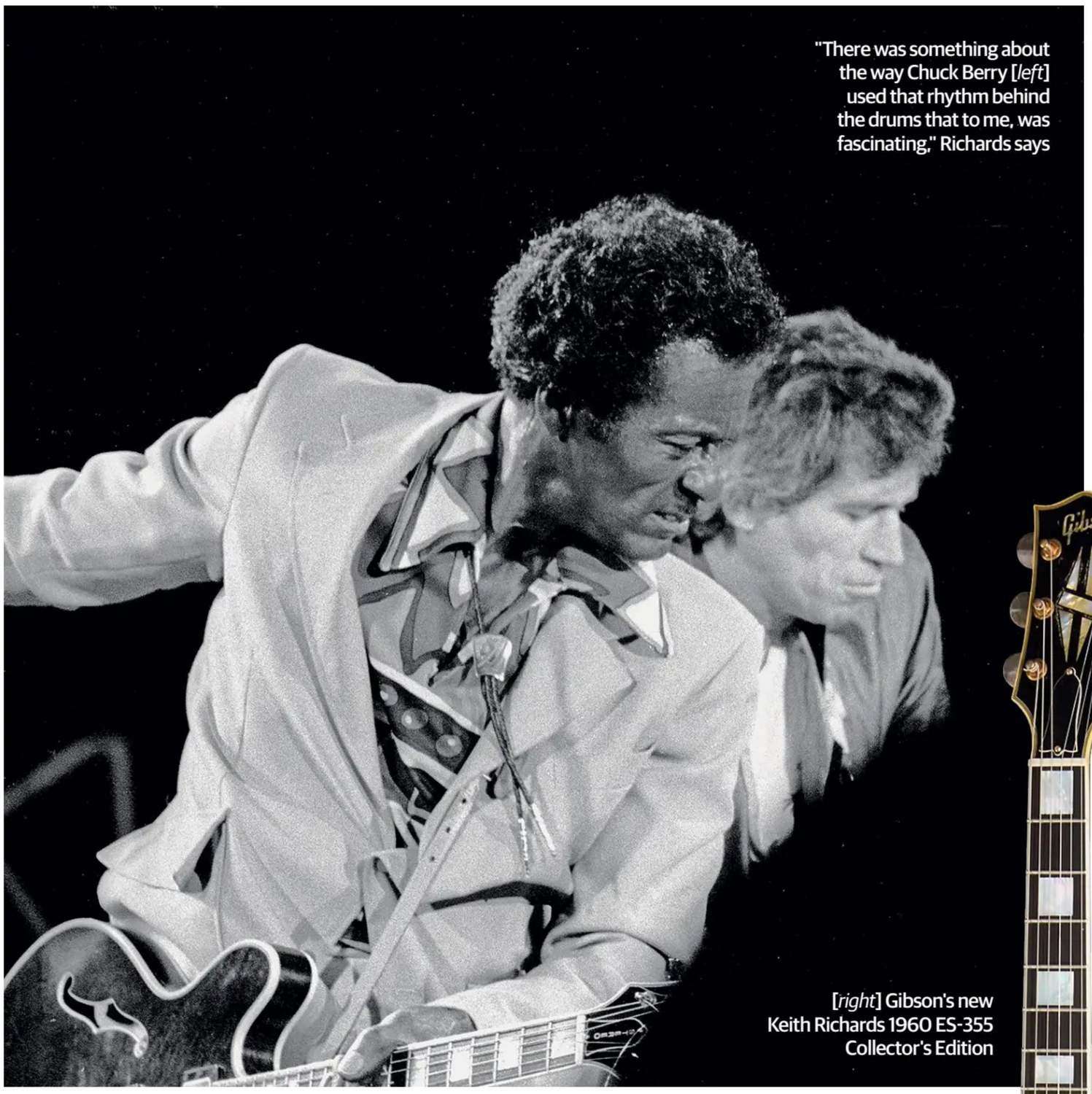
There are only 150 of them. How many of them are Gibson giving you?
Oh look, I have enough guitars already.

> "When I started playing, the idea of even owning a Gibson was pretty much out of the picture"

Is it true you have 3,000 guitars in your personal collection?
It's something like that. You can call my guitar man, Pierre de Beauport, if you want the exact number, but it's around there. But it's not like I go around buying them or anything; a lot of these guitars have been given to me. I've never seen them all. I actually only use about... well, the working number is about 15 guitars in the rack, for different sounds and whatever. But the other 2,900, I don't know. They're taken care of, though. I mean, this is a prime collection.

You're known for putting groove into your playing and hanging back behind the beat.
It's actually nothing you can put into words, because it's just the way I feel the rhythm. I always say that I can only do this because I've been blessed with the best drummers in the world. I have the luxury of knowing that the guy knows what he's doing, you know.

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



"There was something about the way Chuck Berry [*left*] used that rhythm behind the drums that to me, was fascinating," Richards says

[*right*] Gibson's new Keith Richards 1960 ES-355 Collector's Edition

Were you the first guitar player to bring that swing to rock music?
Well, if you think about it, it's the other way around. Rock music came out of swing music. You listen to any of the old Thirties and Forties big bands; they're playing as much rock 'n' roll as Bill Haley or Little Richard. The essence of a lot of it was in those big bands and their rhythm sections.

You played with Chuck Berry in the Eighties. What was he like?
Chuck, as a person, was an ornery old fucker — a *lovable*, ornery old fucker.

Why do you admire his guitar playing?
The same thing you're talking about; there was something about the way he used that rhythm behind the drums that, to me, was fascinating. He said to me, "I was just playing with the right guys, [*bassist*] Willie Dixon and [*pianist*] Johnnie Johnson." And that's the way I feel about the way I play — lucky to play with the right guys. We're talking about a mysterious thing, a thing called feel, a thing called groove. Luckily you can't put your finger on it, you know. But I try! [*Laughs*]

Is the way you weave lead and rhythm parts playing with Ronnie Wood an unspoken thing?
Oh, absolutely. There's something between us. It was the same with me and with Mick Taylor, and also with Brian Jones, back at the beginning. You'd meet the right guys and automatically they knew that "You take over here, I'll come in underneath," and there was a beautiful little ballet going on. That's amazing, and that's what makes it worth doing, you know — this interconnection between musicians.

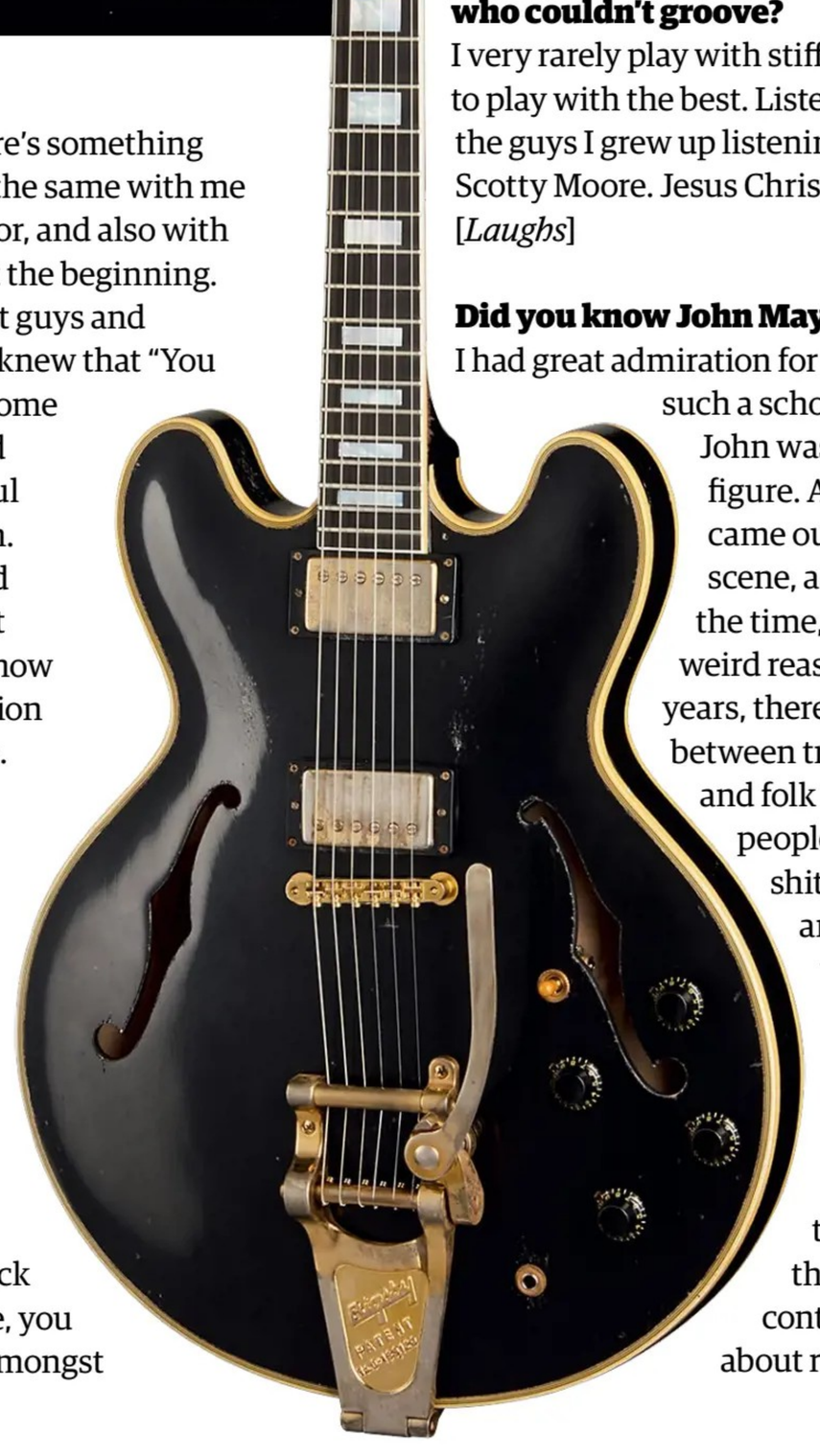
When it works, it seems almost telepathic.
Yeah, it is kinda telepathic, in a way. I suppose. You can put that word on it. [*Shouts*] Ronnie! [*Laughs*] And it's something you don't wanna fuck with. Once it's there, you don't talk about it amongst yourselves. It's an unspoken reliance upon each other, which is a beautiful thing.

"I very rarely play with stiffs! I've been lucky to play with the best. Little Richard, Scotty Moore... Should I go on?"

You mentioned Brian Jones, who we rarely discuss as a guitarist. What was his playing like?
Personally, he was the first steel slide player I heard. His middle name could have been Elmore, because he used to just play Elmore James stuff. He was really, really in front of that game, and that's what I really admired about him when we first started playing together. This band was started by a piano player, Ian Stewart, and he had Brian with him. Once I heard Brian playing Elmore James, I thought, "I've found a guy here who I can mess with," and then we got into Jimmy Reed stuff and, of course, Muddy Waters, all of that... I wouldn't call it a university education. [*Laughs*]

Have you ever played with a guitarist who couldn't groove?
I very rarely play with stiffs! I've been lucky to play with the best. Listen, I've played with the guys I grew up listening to. Little Richard, Scotty Moore. Jesus Christ, should I go on? [*Laughs*]

Did you know John Mayall?
I had great admiration for John. He was such a scholarly guy about it. John was sort of a shadowy figure. A lot of those guys came out of the folk music scene, as it was known at the time, because for some weird reason in those early years, there were hierarchies between traditional jazz and folk music. You know, people got fussy about shit. Anyway, it was amazing to me that these guys were dying to play music that comes from thousands of miles away and that it resonated with them. Therefore the resonation continues; music is about resonation.



JAMES FRAHER/REDFERNS, GIBSON



Richards on acoustic in 1984. "You can't become an electric guitar player without knowing where the damn thing comes from," he says

LUCIANO VITI/GETTY IMAGES

Did you like the British folk guitarists?
Yeah, I did listen to them, and they were good pickers, you know. Wizz Jones used to come round to my house and hang out for a few free cigarettes and show you a lick or two. Do you remember Wizz Jones? He was an incredible guy. I really actually admired those guys. Bert Jansch was fuckin' amazing. And unrecognized, really, for how great they were.

When you got into open-G tuning on five strings, it seemed to change your whole view of guitar playing.
It did, actually, and anybody that tries to get into it, it changes their fucking mind, too. [*Laughs*] Because it is a really strange setup, especially if you're used to six-string guitars. You have to reconfigure everything, and you realize you've restricted yourself to five strings and three open notes [*GDGBD*], you know. You have to learn to play the chords. I figured it out. It's still fascinating. I'm still rambling around in there, looking for stuff.

Is the objective of the partial chords you often play to strip the music down?
Yeah, basically, because with five strings in open G, your bottom string is a G, so you're immediately stripping away a whole load of possibilities of being Jimi Hendrix. [*Laughs*] Also, if you get into it, you find a million other things people haven't explored before, or at least, very few of us have. For me, it started off as an interesting sort of experiment and then I suddenly found that, hey, this is the stuff.

You mentioned Hendrix. Did you ever want to be a virtuoso soloist yourself?
No, I have never really wanted to go down that path. I mean, with solos, I admire the virtuoso and the technique and the nimbleness, but at the end of the day, what are you soloing over? You're the icing on the cake. And I'm the cake!

So what did you think of the Sunset Strip shredders that got big in the Eighties?
[*Laughs*] I laughed my fuckin' head off! Like, "Oh my God, what have we spawned?"

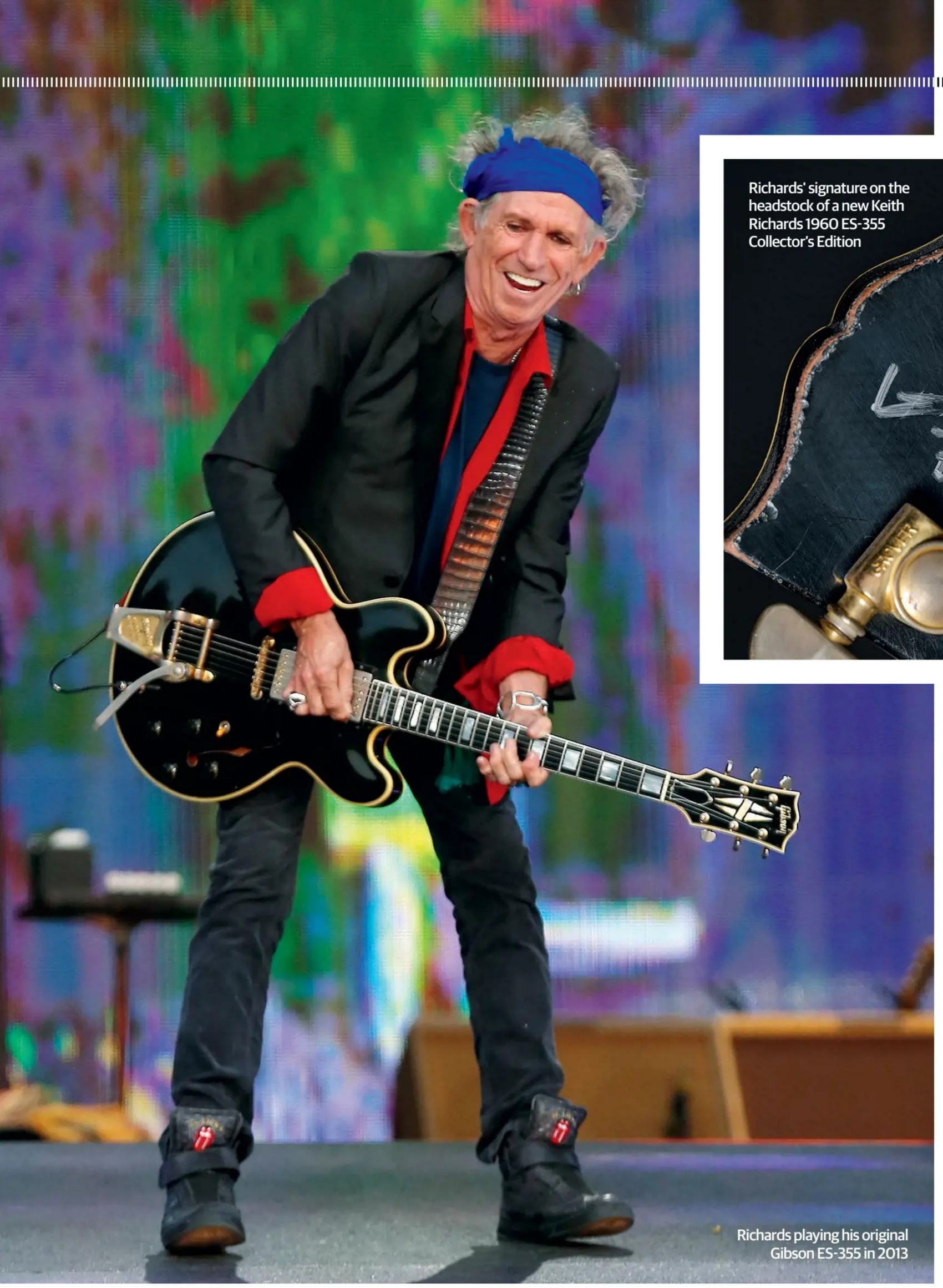
They were skilled players, though.
Yeah, they were good pickers, and they had a hit record here and there, but that's pop music. Look, as long as you've got something to solo over, then go. But that never appealed to me. What appeals to me is what's going on underneath. What I really do love is two or three guitars playing together, because that's what fascinates me. Just one guy soloing means nothing much to me. Right?

> "With solos, at the end of the day, what are you soloing over? You're the icing on the cake. And I'm the cake!"

Do you play fewer notes these days?
Yes, I do, because I'm not as fast as I used to be. [*Laughs*] I tell you what, at my age, what I find most interesting about the guitar is you can compensate for certain disabilities and nimbleness and find other ways of getting around the problem, and it still teaches you another thing – you never stop learning with the damn thing. I love it and it's my friend forever. If I had to, I'd fuck it.

Noted. Are your hands holding up OK at age 82?
Well, I do have arthritis and very large knuckles. They don't hurt, but it does get in the way sometimes. I'm going for a wider fingerboard for that reason.

Do you warm your hands up before a show?
I sit on 'em. No, I do have one of those hand pumps, you know. I'm really lax, quite



Richards playing his original Gibson ES-355 in 2013



Richards' signature on the headstock of a new Keith Richards 1960 ES-355 Collector's Edition

honestly. I just look at my hands and my hands look at me, and we say, "Well, let's see what we can do today." And that's the way I play guitar. I look at it and I say, "We've got nothing else to do. Come here. I love you!" [*Laughs*]

What's your favorite song ever?
What, just one? Oh man, you're sticking me against the wall. You're killing me here.

It's what we do.
Yeah! I gotta go with Robert Johnson's "Come On in My Kitchen." It's all there — originality, everything. It's fantastic.

And if you could only play one guitar for the rest of your life, which would it be?
Whoa... you're a firing squad, ain't ya? I have a little black Gibson looking at me right now, a 1936 acoustic, broken, battered. I'd keep that one with me.

You've often said acoustic playing is at the heart of what you do.
Well, you can't become an electric guitar player without knowing where the damn thing comes from. If you don't get the basics, where do you think you're going to end up? [*Laughs*]

Are you still learning as a guitar player?
Who isn't? That's the beauty of the thing. My teacher never stops teaching. I've been at it for years now and he still knows more than me.

Have you got any advice for our younger readers about guitar playing?
I cannot give you any advice, kids. If you love the thing and feel like playing it, just dig in and find out yourself. It's a great pal, and when there's nothing else around, there's always a guitar. It becomes a friend, a real deep friend, and also a challenge. It looks at you across the room and leers at you. [*Laughs*] "Come on, you ain't got nothing out of me yet."

It's been 11 years since your last solo album. Will you do another one?
I'm thinking about it. I never plan these things. [*Rolling Stones drummer*] Steve Jordan and I were having a chat about it the other day, and usually you start by just saying, "Let's go in and cut a track or two." Sometimes that's what happens, and other times you say, "Hey, here's another one, and here's another one." So I'm not counting it out.

Are you still inspired to write songs?
Oh, God, long may they come. They come out of nowhere. They come out of babies' mouths, they come out of a car crash; you never know. Everything's a song.

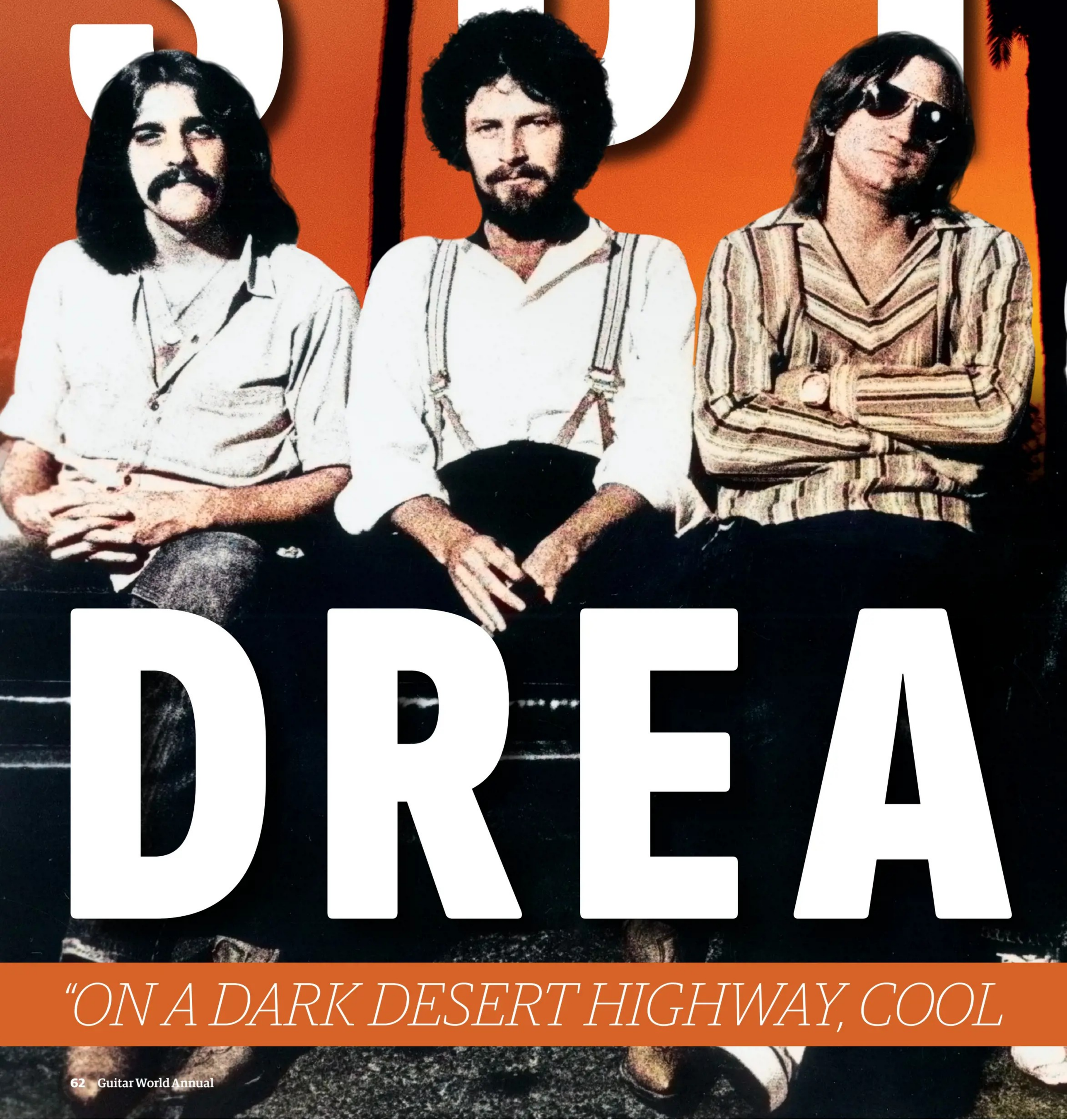
They say the best songs come when you're feeling anger and frustration. Is that true in your experience?
Anger and frustration help for a while, but you'll never make a living at it.

What makes you happy these days?
Well, breathing. [*Laughs*] No, this winter my grandkids have been around. They're all ones and twos and threes; it's fascinating to watch. I'm starting to get the hang of it, you know. Over this winter, they've been my inspiration.

What are your goals at this point?
To make it to the next winter! GW

SIMONE JOYNER/GETTY IMAGES, GIBSON

SUB



DREA

"ON A DARK DESERT HIGHWAY, COOL

THE EAGLES' 1976 MASTERPIECE, *HOTEL CALIFORNIA*, WAS RECORDED AND RELEASED, DON HENLEY AND PRODUCER BILL SZYMCZYK REVISIT THE MAKING OF THE EAGLES' 1976 MASTERPIECE, *HOTEL CALIFORNIA*

Mexican reggae! Gunslinger duels! Chainsaws! Fifty years after it was recorded and released, Don Henley and producer Bill Szymczyk revisit the making of the Eagles' 1976 masterpiece, *Hotel California*

BY BILL DEMAIN



IF YOU TAKE a night drive through the Mojave Desert, you will see the glittering sprawl of Los Angeles appear on the horizon to the west, 90 miles out. It hovers there as an otherworldly dome, mirage-like, beckoning. Technically, its hazy golden glow is a result of light pollution intensified by water vapor and clouds, which reflect the city's eight billion watts of power. But a century's worth of dreamers and small-town escapees know the real reason for the glow. It's the promise: the promise of palm trees and perpetual sunshine, of being in the movies or on hit records, of achieving the big American Dream. ▶

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



WIND IN MY HAIR..."

"The desert is where mirage and myth are created, and so is Hollywood," Eagles founding member Don Henley tells *Guitar World*. "We are just as susceptible, now, to illusion as the pioneers were — if not more so."

That mirage, myth and illusion was immortalized on *Hotel California*, the Eagles' big American dream-come-true. "*Hotel California* was obviously our creative peak," Henley says. "Every band, every artist, has one." Released 50 years ago — on December 8, 1976 — it's not only their personal best, but the third-best-selling album of all time, at 32 million copies and counting (the Eagles' *Their Greatest Hits (1971–1975)* is Number 1). The epic title track inspired a thematic album about the toll of dreams, touching on fame ("New Kid in Town"), the high life ("Life in the Fast Lane"), relationships ("Victim of Love") and westward expansion ("The Last Resort"). The message throughout was that dreams often look different up close and have a way of vanishing in thin air.

"We were always keenly aware of the transitory nature of fame and fortune," Henley says. "The entire *Desperado* album was basically about that. We had witnessed all the wreckage alongside the Yellow Brick Road. Pop culture, for lack of a better term — and which might be an oxymoron — is all about the new. You grind away for seven or eight or 10 years, and suddenly, boom, you're on the radio; your face stares out from a billboard on Sunset Boulevard. Then your sophomore album flops, your record label drops you, and you're right back to square one — 'Please drive through.'"

While square one wasn't part of the Eagles story, chasing the new was. And the turmoil and pressure to keep outdoing themselves led to substance-fueled power struggles that turned once-close friends into rivals and led to a breakup three years after *Hotel California*. As Glenn Frey once said, "We made it, and it ate us."

Significantly, the mythic desert passage is one that all five band members on the album had made respectively in the late Sixties and early Seventies. It was a more innocent time, as they relocated from the South and Midwest with hopes of being part of the burgeoning hippie country scene in and around Laurel Canyon and nightclubs like the Troubadour.

The spot where everyone from Kris Kristofferson to Carole King made their debut is where Henley first joined Glenn Frey for a beer, starting a friendship and the creative nucleus for the Eagles. Back then, the two would ride around L.A. in Frey's '55 Chevy, nicknamed Gladys, "plotting and planning." It took a while for things to take shape. Both were already in groups signed to the same indie label. Henley's Shiloh made one album, produced by Kenny Rogers. Frey's Longbranch Pennywhistle (with J.D. Souther, a key collaborator on *Hotel California*) did one that included Wrecking Crew cats James Burton and Larry Knechtel. Neither record troubled the charts.

The duo joined Linda Ronstadt's touring band in 1971, which soon added bassist Randy Meisner of Ricky Nelson's Stone Canyon Band and guitarist Bernie Leadon of the Flying Burrito Brothers. The proto-Eagles quartet played together only once, during Ronstadt's engagement at Disneyland, on the Coca-Cola Terrace in Tomorrowland. It was a prophetic spot for the birth of a band that would become as ubiquitous — and successful — as America's favorite soda.

Within two months, thanks to help from Jackson Browne, they'd signed to David Geffen's Asylum Records. Their first two albums — *Eagles* and *Desperado* — produced by Glyn Johns, were released in 1972-73, inside 10 months. And thanks to "Take It Easy" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling," the group quickly climbed to the top of the country-rock heap. But they craved a bigger heap, especially when they found themselves on the bill with arena rock acts.

"Opening for Jethro Tull and Yes was odd because it was such a mismatch, musically, but it did have the effect of toughening us up,"



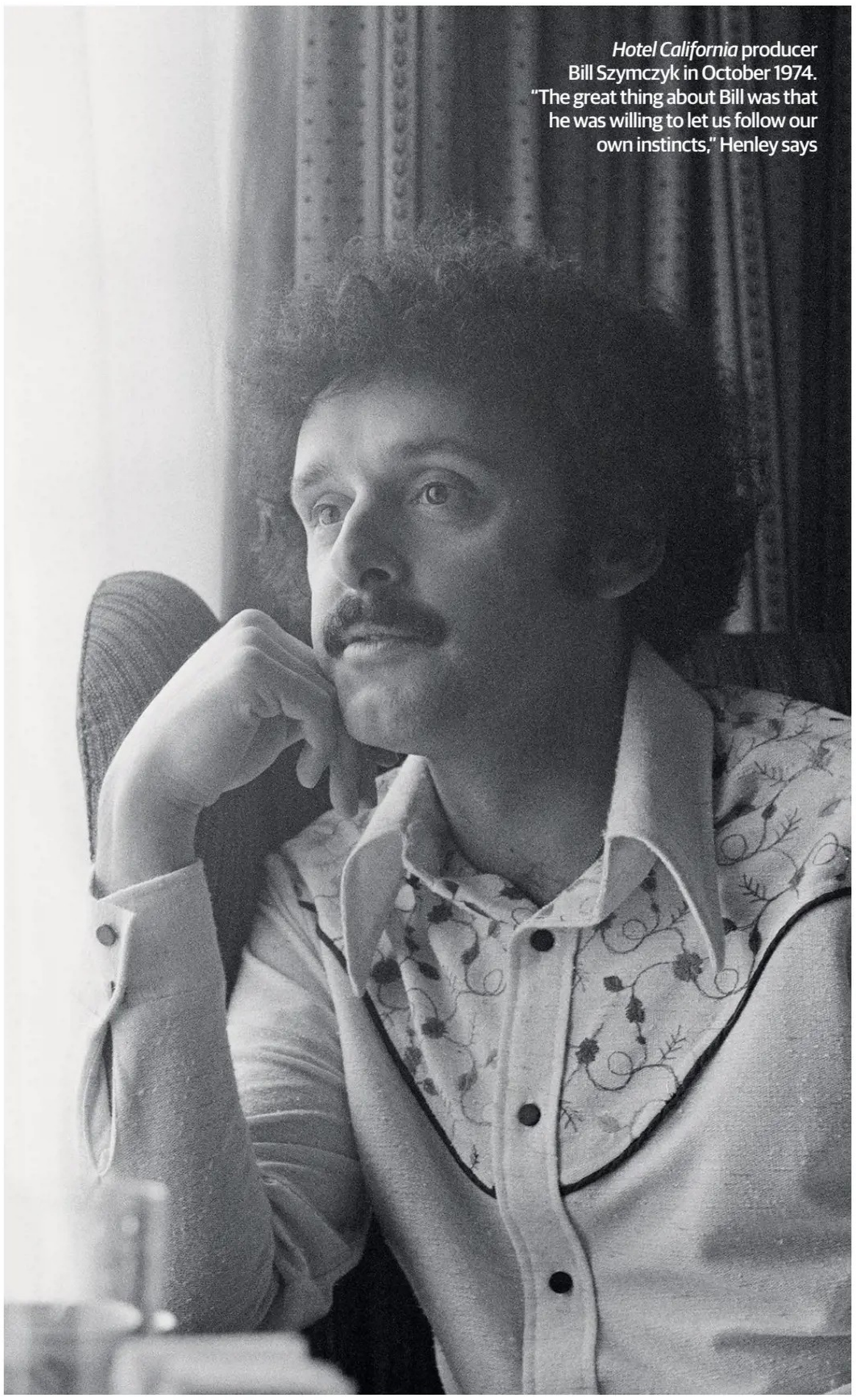
The Eagles on the U.K. leg of the *Hotel California* tour in early 1977; [*from left*] Randy Meisner, Glenn Frey, Don Henley, Don Felder and Joe Walsh

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

"HOTEL CALIFORNIA WAS OBVIOUSLY OUR CREATIVE PEAK. EVERY BAND, EVERY ARTIST, HAS ONE"
DON HENLEY



Don Henley steps out from behind his drum kit in April 1977



Hotel California producer Bill Szymczyk in October 1974. "The great thing about Bill was that he was willing to let us follow our own instincts," Henley says

GUS STEWART/REDFERNS, MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Henley says. "But our main problem was that we didn't have a repertoire. We had released only one album, and 'Take It Easy' was our only hit song at that point. But somehow we survived. Glenn was right saying so-called country rock had its limitations in terms of commerciality, but I think we defied those limitations as we expanded our stylistic perimeters to include more different veins of music. Ronstadt did that, too."

In the studio, the toughening up got a boost from a new producer. "My first thought was, 'I don't want to do a cowboy band!'" *Hotel California* producer Bill Szymczyk tells *Guitar World*. "But they wanted to rock. They'd started their third album with Glyn, who was one of my heroes. But they weren't happy. Glyn was a taskmaster and had rules about no drink or drugs in the studio. Meanwhile, the guys had heard *The Smoker You Drink, The Player You Get*, which I did with Joe Walsh [*in 1973*], and said, 'Who produced this?'"

"OPENING FOR JETHRO TULL AND YES WAS SUCH A MISMATCH, MUSICALLY, BUT IT DID HAVE THE EFFECT OF TOUGHENING US UP"
DON HENLEY

"Bill was – and is – a lover of rock 'n' roll, blues and funk music," Henley says. "He had produced Edgar Winter and B.B. King, among others. After a long day of grinding away on our own material, Bill would put an Ohio Players or a Parliament album up on the big playback speakers in the studio, and we'd kick back and listen. It was fun. The great thing about Bill was that he was willing to let us follow our own instincts, which, at that time, were leaning more toward rock and R&B."

Szymczyk called Johns to get permission to take over the album. "The answer was, 'Better you than me, mate!'" A week later, they cut "Already Gone," a rousing rocker that gave Frey a chance to bust loose with some razor-tooth lead guitar. Suddenly, the band was getting the edge they wanted. "It was the beginning of a great marriage," Szymczyk says, "with each album doing better than the one before, and then *Hotel California*, which was the high point of their career – and mine."

For 1974's *On the Border*, they added hotshot guitarist Don Felder, who'd been touring with David Blue and Crosby & Nash. Bernie Leadon, who'd played with Felder in high school bands, said, "Felder was a really



Joe Walsh plays slide on a heavily customized Gibson EDS-1275 in 1976. "Joe, being a bona fide rock 'n' roll guitar slinger, was the perfect foil for Don Felder," Henley says

great guitar player, but when he joined, I could see the writing on the wall for me. I thought, if I'm going to leave, better that a friend of mine gets the gig." Leadon stayed for 1975's *One of These Nights*, which further upped the ante on extended solos (the title track and the underrated "Visions" were both six-string showcases). "We were balls to the wall on that album," Szymczyk says. "They wanted to rock, and we proceeded to damn-sure rock."

With each album came more fame, more pressure to outdo themselves and more substances. In the mid-Seventies rock world, cocaine was the drug of choice. "It was a writing tool, but one that brought out the worst in everyone," Frey once said. But even without drugs in the mix, there was always creative friction between Henley and Frey. "It was the Lennon and McCartney thing," Szymczyk says. "Don writes this way, Glenn writes that way, but together they write better than they do separately. There was always a lot of competition. Frey was competitive in everything! Darts, shooting pool, you name it. He wanted to win. Henley wasn't as up front about it, but he knew very well what he had, talent-wise. We called him Golden Throat."

Since the days of cruising around in Gladys, there was one thing the two leaders did agree on; they wanted their band to be the biggest on the planet. And that meant pushing the rock sound to the limit. As Leadon predicted, that put him in their crosshairs. The guitarist had played lead on "Take It Easy" and "Tequila Sunrise." He'd co-written "Witchy Woman." His background with the Flying Burrito Brothers had imbued the Eagles with country-rock cred.

For all that, his relationship with them was never easy. Exhaustive touring (he'd already logged five years of roadwork before he joined) and the drug use (he'd kicked those habits) only deepened his discontent. "None of it sat well with Bernie," Szymczyk says. "The further we went into rock, the less he liked it." He remembers asking the guitarist what he thought of a take of "One of These Nights" with Leadon replying, "I think I'm going to go surfing." Things came to a head one night in 1975, backstage at the Orange Bowl. As Frey was rallying the band, Leadon poured a beer over Frey's head and walked out.

Enter Joe Walsh. Late of the James Gang, Walsh was three albums into a successful solo career in 1975. He was already friendly with the Eagles from crossing paths on the road. When they approached him, his response was, "Being part of a group would take a whole lot of weight off my shoulders."

But it's easy to forget what a mismatch it seemed. Walsh recalled in *The Guitar Greats*, "I think 80 percent of people said, 'That's stupid — there's no way it's going to work.'"

Not only did it work, it changed the band's energy level. "For starters, things got louder," Henley says. "Joe, being a bona fide rock 'n' roll guitar slinger, was the perfect foil for Don Felder. They propelled one another in a friendly-but-competitive sort of way. We had upped our horsepower. This is not to take anything away from Bernie, who was

"MOMENTUM IS IMPORTANT. ONCE YOU'RE ON A HOT STREAK, IT'S WISE TO TRY TO MAINTAIN IT, OTHERWISE YOU GET FORGOTTEN"
DON HENLEY

RICHARD CREAMER/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES





THE ULTIMATE ONE-TWO PUNCH

Hey, why release one multi-platinum album in 1976 when you can release two?

BY BILL DEMAIN

A MONTH BEFORE the Eagles started recording *Hotel California*, Asylum Records released *Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975)*, a compilation of 10 songs from the band's first four albums. Four LPs into a career might not seem like the moment for a "greatest hits" compilation, but, as the band's manager, Irving Azoff, put it, "We decided it was time to put out the first greatest hits — because we had enough hits." Except there was no "we" in the decision.

"All the record company was worried about were their quarterly reports," Eagles founder Don Henley once said. "They didn't give a shit whether the *Greatest Hits* album was good or not. They wanted product."

The album — released February 17, 1976, the same year as the massive *Hotel California* — was the first ever to receive RIAA's Platinum certification. It is now the best-selling album of all time, quadruple Diamond — more than 40 million copies. "The numbers are staggering, and I try not to look at them any more," Frey once said, pointing out that greatest-hits albums are for "kids and people who don't usually buy records."

It boosted sales of all previous Eagles albums and primed the pump for *Hotel California* to be the most anticipated release of 1976. While there's no question that *Hotel California* is a classic, it certainly didn't hurt to have *Their Greatest Hits* riding shotgun.

— and still is — a highly skilled musician."

"As we got into *Hotel California*, it was like, 'This is a match made in heaven,'" Szymczyk says. "The friction with Bernie was gone, and it was replaced with somebody that could just blister with a forceful edge."

Speaking of forceful edge, in Walsh, the Eagles now also had a resident bad boy and gleeful wrecker of hotel rooms. His instrument of choice was a chainsaw. Dressers, chairs, tables got sliced, diced and tossed from windows.

"Keith Moon and Joe were good buddies, and that, of course, led to some mischief," Henley says. "It was amusing for a little while, but it eventually became a very expensive hobby, and we were beginning to get barred from some of the hotels we liked to stay in. So, after a while, the chainsaws got locked away in storage and other kinds of dramas replaced the 'remodeling' of rooms and hallways."

He adds, "But, at least Joe got a hit song out of it," referencing 1978's "Life's Been Good."

In 1976, the Eagles played 68 shows worldwide, from Tucson to Tokyo. For most bands, that would not be a year to make a new album. But the Eagles did, grabbing studio time whenever and wherever they could. "

The demands of touring definitely made it more difficult for us to stay in a creative space, particularly in terms of songwriting," Henley says. "But, because we were young — and driven — we managed to learn how to juggle. Did the work suffer? Probably, but we did the best we could, given the circumstances we were in. It's a demanding job, feeding the machine. The machine is always hungry.

"But momentum is important," he continues. "Once you're on a hot streak, it's wise to try to maintain it. Otherwise, you get forgotten or replaced pretty quickly. Back in the Sixties, the Beatles had set an impossibly high bar, both in terms of quality and quantity. So record companies had come to expect an album or two every year. But the Beatles had been able to stop touring and focus solely on recording. Touring was a necessity for us so that we could pay for rent and gas."

The first sessions for *Hotel California* were in March at Studio C, the coveted big room at the Record Plant in Los Angeles, with Szymczyk back behind the board. "We'd do two or three weeks, then the band would go back on the road," he says, recalling they had only one finished song — Meisner's "Try and Love Again." Beyond that, just a "handful of fragments, licks and phrases." As Walsh said in *Buzz Me In*, "We took all of that, put it on a table and said, 'Okay, let's pretend this is a jigsaw puzzle,' and we started piecing things together."

The jigsaw puzzles could be complex. On the surface, the album's first single, "New Kid in Town," is a soft-rock sigh. But structurally and harmonically, it's one of the most-involved Eagles songs. Henley says, "That one was mostly J.D., with some essential input from Glenn in terms of words, melody and arrangement, and a few lyrical

"DON FELDER AND I WORKED REALLY WELL TOGETHER. IT WAS COMPETITIVE. WE LIKED TO KICK EACH OTHER IN THE BUTT!"
JOE WALSH

contributions from me. It's a great piece of work."

Modulations, shifting choruses, meticulous ornamentation from Felder on electric and Meisner on the guitarrón Mexicano, wrapped in a harmony cascade that earned a Grammy for Best Vocal Arrangement ("It had parts out the wazoo," Szymczyk says). How did those beautifully complex arrangements get written?

"Well, nobody 'wrote' anything; it wasn't that formal," Henley says. "We did everything intuitively, including vocal harmony arrangements. First, we'd decide who was going to sing the lead vocal and then assign harmony parts around that, depending on the key of the song and where the melody sat within the chord progression."

In the studio, they worked from "2 to 2, with a dinner break at 7," usually at Dan Tana's, a favorite red-boothed old Hollywood eatery, next door to the Troubadour. Though friends dropped by the studio, mostly it was the band and Szymczyk, who they nicknamed "Coach."

They said I was the Don Shula of rock 'n' roll," he says, referencing the Miami Dolphins' legendary honcho (who was at the helm for their perfect 1972 season). "I was a player's coach more than Shula," says Szymczyk with a laugh. He kept a keen eye and ear on the sessions and was a wizard with a tape-editing razor. And on *Hotel California*, he had to lay down what he called "the six o'clock rule" to make sure recreational activities didn't derail progress, including his own.

"Everything was getting a little out of hand by three in the afternoon, so I was like, 'Okay, enough of that. No beer, no blow, no reefer, no nothing until six."

That worked for a few weeks; then the grumbling started. Szymczyk says, "I'd be changing reels in the control room, and I'd hear them muttering, 'Is it six yet?' followed by 'It had better be.'"

On the initial pressings of the album, "It is six o'clock yet?" was etched into the runout groove of Side A.

On Side B, the etched phrase was, "VOL is five-piece live."

"That's because we were proud that we got that song, 'Victim of Love,' in one take without any edits," Szymczyk says. The rocker began with a Don Felder guitar instrumental that he passed to Henley and Frey. They brought in J.D. Souther again, who came up with the concept — that having a broken heart is like being a victim of a car crash. In that scenario, all three were frequent car crashers, burning through relationships. "Dudes on a rampage" was how Henley described it.

When it came time to do an album, he and Frey would usually move in together. Before *Hotel California*, they were briefly ensconced in a Beverly Hills house that once belonged to actress Dorothy Lamour. With panoramic 360-degree views, it was nicknamed "the Eagles' nest." They were an odd couple — Henley the tidy one, Frey the lovable slob, leaving mountains of cigarette ash everywhere. The togetherness might not have helped their friendship, but it was great for songwriting.

"Victim of Love's" tale of betrayal and disillusionment was paired with a stuttering, crunchy groove. Felder had assumed he would sing lead, but after a week's worth of takes, his vocal was deemed "not up to band standards." Henley recorded the lead while manager Irving Azoff took Felder out to lunch to break the bad news.

In the summer, Szymczyk moved the sessions to Criteria Studios in Miami. "The guys were actually quite happy to be out of L.A. and away from all the partying and the hangers-on," he says. The only challenge in Miami was the occasional ear-splitting squall coming from the studio next door, where Black Sabbath were recording their 1976 album *Technical Ecstasy*.

Meanwhile, in the world outside the studio, the United States was basking in its bicentennial. On the surface, the country's 200th birthday was all stars and stripes, but that was tainted by a Watergate hangover and relentless dark stories in the news.

"The 'peace and love' idealism of the Sixties had faded by the beginning of the decade," Henley says. "The so-called counterculture, due in part to its own excesses, had disintegrated. The U.S. was trying hard to focus on the bicentennial, but the Cold War continued and the Boomer generation had slowly realized that the same corporate forces that had always been in charge were still, in fact, in charge, and there was an air of capitulation. There were now the realities of jobs and families to consider. Gone was the dream of a new kind of America; gone was the appetite for rebellion. 'We haven't had that spirit here since 1969.'"

One of the album's standout tracks was both a celebration and critique of L.A.'s decadence and the band's own excesses — "Life in the Fast Lane" could've been subtitled "Nervous, Edgy Feeling."

"There are a great many of our songs that could be retitled 'Note to Self,'" Henley says. "Excess — too much of a bad thing or a good thing — was a subject we examined, both from a personal perspective and an American cultural standpoint."

The song's classic riff began as what Walsh called his "coordination drill."

"I had this lick that I played that I would warm up for a show with," he told Paul Shaffer on *Plus One*. "It's an exercise between your right and left hand, faster and faster. I was



GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

The Eagles (probably singing Steve Young's "Seven Bridges Road") in the Netherlands, May 11, 1977



Don Felder with his 1959 Gibson Les Paul in May 1977. "I played that on just about every Eagles record that I recorded with a Les Paul," he says

ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS

EAGER FOR ACTION

A guide to Joe Walsh and Don Felder's *Hotel California* gear

BY BILL DEMAIN

"JOE WALSH AND Don Felder would show up for a session and unpack a minimum of 30 guitars and five or six amps apiece," *Hotel California* producer Bill Szymczyk says. "It was, 'Let's try this with that.' What I remember most, though, throughout *Hotel California*, was a whole lot of Gibson Les Paul with a lot of Fender Telecaster."

No one can be sure exactly how many — or which — Les Pauls make appearances on *Hotel California*, but we do know about one of them: Felder's famous 1959 Burst, which was painstakingly reproduced by Gibson in 2011. As he told *Guitarist* around that time, Felder bought the original guitar from a traveling dealer who was famous for his superb stable of vintage axes.

"His name was Tony Dukes," he said, "and every time we'd go through Texas, Tony would show up. He was a horse trader, and he always had something in his truck you wanted. He would show up in a station wagon or a truck that was full of Les Pauls, Teles and Strats, and I bought probably 20 pieces from him over the years. It must have been about 1974 or something, right after our first big hit, *One of These Nights*, when I started making money. He came round, and I think I bought three or four pieces from him — the Les Paul, a Tele, a Strat and some other stuff." And, as he told *Guitar World* in 2013, he plugged his LP into a Fender Tweed Deluxe — "just kind of cranked up, with just the guitar into the amp."

"The acoustic guitar in the intro to 'Hotel California' is a Takamine 12-string with a DeArmond pickup," Felder added. "We mic'd the acoustic and put that in the center of the mix. Then we took the pickup's output and ran it through a [*Maestro*] Echoplex and a Leslie. We mic'd that in stereo so it has this left-to-right kind of swirling, ethereal characteristic."

"For recording acoustic guitars, I usually used a Neumann KM84," Szymczyk says. "Don had a pickup on his guitar running to a pair of little Orange amps, and we mic'd them in stereo. The initial opening-guitar intro is an acoustic guitar in the middle and an amp on both sides, with a chorus that is flowing back and forth between the two amps."

"Felder and I always found that if we both used single-coil or double-coil [*guitars*], there wasn't enough contrast to give the songs any personality," Walsh told *Total Guitar* in 2012. "It just turned into a guitar wall." That's why he famously played a Telecaster on "Hotel California," which was perfectly paired with Felder's Les Paul.

"I played a Tele, through — I think — the Roland Cube, which I used a lot back then," Walsh added. It was most likely the same Roland Cube he and his Strat used on "Life in the Fast Lane." On the *Hotel California* tour, Walsh also used a Fender Black Panel Deluxe Reverb, a Fender Tweed Deluxe and a Mesa Boogie Mark I.

just playing, warming up for the show, and Glenn comes busting in my dressing room and says, 'What the hell's that?' 'I don't know, it's just this lick I warm up with.' He said, 'No, that's an Eagles song, dude!'"

On *In the Studio with Redbeard*, Frey said the title came one day after a crazy car ride with a drug dealer nicknamed "The Count." Going 90 mph, Frey asked the dealer to slow down, and the answer came — "It's life in the fast lane!" With that title, he and Henley wrote the lyrics and melody together.

"We knew it was going to be the most rock 'n' roll thing the Eagles had attempted so far," Walsh said. "They turned me loose on that one."

And what guitar was he using? "That's a Strat," Walsh told *Total Guitar*, "and the amplifier was probably this little orange Roland Cube I was using a lot back then. I found it to be a pretty darn good little amp for recording with a Strat, by turning it up pretty good to make it work."

The killer riff doubled with guitar and bass, cliff-hanging power chords and trademark four-part harmonies on the chorus. This was a classic Eagles record, yet one that sounded like nothing they'd ever done. And as sonic icing, Szymczyk employed a Jimi Hendrix trick — the "*Electric Ladyland* two-track flange technique" — to add a whooshing sound to the song's off-ramp exit. "When I suggested phasing at the end of the song, Henley and Frey were skeptical," he says. They thought it might sound too much like the Small Faces' "Itchycoo Park," which Szymczyk says was the inspiration. "I just wanted listeners to feel the rush of the wind in their hair!"

An ocean breeze was in Don Felder's hair the afternoon he got the idea that would become "Hotel California." In his Malibu beach house, noodling on a 12-string Martin acoustic, he hit on a Spanish-sounding chord progression. He put it down on a reel-to-reel four-track, then layered on syncopated electric guitars and a samba beat from a Rhythm Ace drum machine. He sent it off to Henley and Frey on a cassette with another dozen snippets. They liked what they called "the matador in Mexico" vibe of it and experimented with lyrical and melody ideas.

Henley took the cassette in the car, his favorite place to write. He says, "I think it has something to do with movement and a constantly changing view. Just sitting in a room and trying to find inspiration can be stifling; it's a static situation. Driving, if you're not in heavy traffic, creates a feeling of flow that can free the imagination and call up memories and images while the music's playing."



The Eagles on stage in 1977, with Felder [*center*] and Walsh [*right*] sporting the Les Paul/Telecaster combo heard on "Hotel California"

RICHARD E. AARON/REDFERNS

After a week or two, the song took shape. "The hotel concept came first, and then the melody," Henley says. "Sometime in May of '76, Glenn and I had gone to see Neil Simon's play *California Suite* in Los Angeles. But that was after we had come up with the hotel concept; seeing the play was a 'field research' trip, just to see if it would help us to flesh out our initial idea. But it wasn't very helpful; it wasn't dark and spooky enough for what we were after."

Or maybe the title influenced them, because their spooky inn became the Hotel California, and in turn, a metaphor for everything from the myth-making of the American Dream to an artist's search for the muse and spiritual meaning.

The recording of the song took some searching, too. "We cut the track several times, first at Criteria Studios, shortly after Felder had given me the demo," Henley says.

"The Miami recording was a rough arrangement with the working title 'Mexican Reggae.' The second time we cut it was at the Record Plant in L.A., after Glenn and I had come up with some ideas for lyrics and melody, but that recording turned out to be in the wrong key, at least for singing. There was often a schism between what key was best for the guitars and what key was best for the lead vocal. At the end of the day, though, the vocal has to take precedence. There are workarounds on the guitar — tunings, capos, etc — but you can't capo a voice. Or at least you couldn't then. So we ended up cutting the final track in Miami in the key of B minor with the choruses going to G major."

Szymczyk recalls that the final version consisted of "33 separate tape edits from five different takes."

Aside from being the album's thematic centerpiece and the Eagles' best song, it also rode out on one of rock's most iconic guitar duels, with Felder and Walsh trading sizzle and sting, one-upping each other, then finally merging in triumphant two-part harmony. "We worked really well together," Walsh told *Guitar World* while promoting *Analog Man* in 2012. "It was competitive. We brought out the best in each other. We liked to kick each other in the butt! He would play something, and I'd get an attitude, like, 'Oh yeah? Listen to this.' And he'd go, 'Wow, listen to this!'"

"For two days, we workshopped the hell out of that," Szymczyk says. "We had amps out in the studio, but Felder and Walsh were in the control room with me, one to the right, one to the left, like gunfighters! Felder was the ultimate technician, always a tad on top of the beat. And Walsh was the ultimate 'feel' guy, always a tad behind it. Together, they were phenomenal. Those two days were one of the high points of my career."

"There are at least half a dozen guitar tracks on the original recording," Henley says. "In live concert settings, this required Felder to play a double-neck guitar, with the

"WE KNEW 'LIFE IN THE FAST LANE' WAS GOING TO BE THE MOST ROCK 'N' ROLL THING THE EAGLES HAD ATTEMPTED SO FAR"
JOE WALSH

12-string neck being capo'd on the seventh fret for the intro and the breakdown, and the six-string with no capo for the single-line phrases and the tag solos. One of the unique things about the song is that it ends with extended dual guitar solos. Skynyrd had done something like that a couple of years earlier."

Another thing it shared with Skynyrd's "Free Bird" was a length that wasn't exactly radio friendly — six and a half minutes, to be exact. "The label wanted us to do a single edit, and we all said no way," Szymczyk says. "Obviously, we were right to."

After seven months of off-and-on recording, the album wrapped in October.

The cover artwork, designed by John Kosh (who also handled *Who's Next* and the Beatles' *Abbey Road*), featured a photo of the Beverly Hills Hotel taken from a cherry picker 60 feet above Sunset Boulevard at dusk. Built in 1912 in a Mediterranean Revival style, the pink stucco hotel had hosted famous guests from Marilyn Monroe to Frank Sinatra. A month after the album came out, when the hotel learned that the Eagles had used the image without permission, they threatened a lawsuit, then dropped it when they realized their bookings had tripled because of the record's success.

Hotel California was released December 8, 1976, and certified platinum in its first week. It went to Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200, where it stayed for eight weeks. Reviews

"FELDER AND WALSH WERE IN THE CONTROL ROOM WITH ME, ONE TO THE RIGHT, ONE TO THE LEFT, LIKE GUNFIGHTERS"
BILL SZYMCZYK

were glowing. *Creem* said there were "no weak tracks; the music flows majestically every step of the way." *Phonograph Record* praised its "peerless harmonies" and said it was "pretty and punchy, as the best albums of fellow troubled hedonists Steely Dan and the Beach Boys are." *NME* said, "There's no laurels-resting, and a lot has gone into its meticulous crafting."

While Szymczyk calls the record a "quantum leap forward," Henley's estimation is more modest. "I don't know if I'd call it a 'quantum leap,'" he says. "*One of These Nights* had three big hits on it. But, in terms of growth and consistency and range, I'd agree that *Hotel California* was an improvement."

But the 10-month, 72-date world tour that followed was so grueling that the band's road crew nicknamed it "The Prison California." Everyone traveled with their own little entourage, and Walsh and Felder briefly entertained the idea of forming their own band.



Felder [*left*] and Frey on stage in Los Angeles in 1976

In *History of the Eagles*, Henley said, "Glenn and I saw ourselves as the leaders, but other people saw us as dictators. You just cannot have five leaders in a band. It doesn't work." But according to *To the Limit: The Untold Story of the Eagles*, even the two leaders had stopped talking and would only communicate through second parties. There were also cocaine-induced physical ailments. Stomach ulcers all around. Henley suffered back pain. Frey's nasal lining was shot (he'd have two surgeries before getting his nose repaired with teflon). By the end of the tour, Meisner had become persona non grata after refusing to sing "Take It to the Limit" at one show; he left the band shortly after.

The Eagles managed one more album, 1979's difficult *The Long Run* ("We called it 'The Long One,'" Szymczyk says) then broke up after a benefit concert where Frey and Felder openly threatened to fight each other on stage during the performance. It would be 14 years before they reunited.

Despite one album of new material in 2007, the Eagles have become a heritage act, playing the hits — albeit one of the highest-grossing ones on the circuit. After Glenn Frey died in 2016 at age 67, they soldiered on with his son Deacon and Vince Gill taking his place. And so it's gone over the past decade. Meanwhile, there are at least 10 high-profile Eagles tribute bands who are on the road as much as the Eagles were in their Seventies heyday. And though classic rock radio has mostly disappeared, subscription services have kept the music playing. "Hotel California" alone passed two billion streams on Spotify in October 2025.

During the Eagles' 2026 residency at Las Vegas's Sphere, Henley confided to *CBS Sunday Morning* that "This year will probably be it. I've said things like that before, but I feel like we're getting toward the end."

Meanwhile, their Sphere setlist contains the three key tracks from *Hotel California* — "New Kid in Town," "Life in the Fast Lane" and, of course, the title song. With sold-out audiences singing along to every word and guitar lick, this is music that is now an indelible part of musical culture. It's a reminder of how the world felt and sounded in the mid-Seventies, and also how the American Dream continues to roll along that desert highway, toward the light, but surrounded by the dark.

It makes the album sound just as relevant as it did 50 years ago. "I could make a case for it," Henley says. "The political chicanery, the national delusion, the undoing of decades of environmental progress, the rebirth of the military-industrial complex. I've lived long enough to see that we go around in circles. I think it was Mark Twain who said, 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.'" GW


ALEX LIFESON



RE-ENTER...

STAGE LEFT

Rush's Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee give us the inside story on their utterly unexpected return to the limelight

BY JOE BOSSO

SO, GUYS, ANYTHING new? Here at *Guitar World*, we believe in hitting artists with the hard questions first.

"Not much at all," Geddy Lee deadpans. The bassist is speaking via Zoom from his home studio, a wall of basses behind him. "I've just been playing a lot of cards with Al, trying to win some money off him."

"He always does," says Alex Lifeson, joining in on Zoom from his own home music sanctuary. "He's vicious at Go Fish."

While we're on the subject of games, suffice to say that nobody — including, for the longest time, Lee and Lifeson — had "Rush going on tour in 2026" on their bingo cards, and it wasn't until the spring of last year when the idea started to look like a distinct possibility. Even after the two had finally come to a decision that yes, this was going to be a thing, they kept word from leaking out for months.

"Nobody knew," Lee says emphatically. "I didn't even tell my kids."

"In this day and age, it's so difficult to keep a secret," Lifeson says. "We did our best to keep it quiet, and we were pretty successful, I think."

The announcement was made almost casually, during a private event for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, last October, when, responding to an intentionally placed "fan" question asking if the band would ever tour again, Lee answered, "I kind of think we should tour next year."

Initially, the tour, dubbed Fifty Something, was a relatively short run of seven major cities, but following near-instantaneous sell-outs, more cities were added, and then more, and as it now stands, the tour will encompass North America, South America and Europe, 86 concerts in all, and won't wrap until April 2027 in Helsinki, Finland.

"It was very surprising," Lifeson says of the reaction from fans.

"We knew there were fans that wanted us to come back," Lee says. "We'd get messages from fans all the time and they want to see Al and me playing together again in whatever form we had chosen. We're very fortunate we have such a loyal fan base, but I don't think Al or I or anyone associated with us expected the overwhelming response to the very first announcement. It's very nice, very gratifying."

Lee admits to feelings of frustration following the conclusion of Rush's last tour, R40, in 2015. In his view, the band was playing at peak form, and both he and Lifeson wanted to keep going. Drummer Neil Peart, however, had other ideas about how he wanted to live the rest of his life. "He was so happy being a full-time dad," Lee says, "and his body just said to him, 'That's enough as a touring musician. I can't do it anymore.'"

RICHARD SIBBALD

Over the next few months, Lee and Lifeson accepted Peart's decision. "That's life – no hard feelings." Lee says. "The man certainly earned a break from the madding crowd."

Following Peart's tragic death in 2020 from glioblastoma, Lee and Lifeson gradually occupied themselves with various activities. Lee, who already published his first book, *Geddy Lee's Big Beautiful Book of Bass* in 2018, cranked out two more: 2023's *My Effin' Life: From Holocaust Roots to Rock and Roll Stardom* and *72 Stories: From the Baseball Collection of Geddy Lee*. "Writing my first book was very gratifying," he says. "It taught me that instead of banging out notes, I can bang out words. It sent me down a different path."

Lifeson posted a couple of solo instrumental tracks, "Kabul Blues" and "Spy House," on his website before forming an alt-rock band called Envy of None with bassist Andy Curran, guitarist Alfio Annibalini and lead singer Maiah Wynne. The group issued a self-titled debut in 2022 and a follow-up, 2025's *Stygian Wavz*, but played no live shows. "I really didn't have any interest in going back on the road," Lifeson says. "I felt like I was really done with that."

The former bandmates reunited on stage a few times in 2022, first with Primus to celebrate *South Park*'s 25th anniversary (the show's co-creator, Matt Stone, played drums on "Closer to the Heart"), and they performed mini-sets of Rush classics at a pair of tribute concerts for the late Foo Fighters drummer Taylor Hawkins, during which they were backed by a number of drummers: Dave Grohl, Tool's Danny Carey, Red Hot Chili Peppers' Chad Smith and former David Bowie sticksman Omar Hakim. "The Taylor Hawkins tribute shows were pivotal for a lot of reasons," Lee says. "Obviously, we got a chance to pay tribute to Taylor, but also we got a chance in our own way to pay tribute to Neil, which was long overdue. To play our songs again with some other brilliant musicians, it showed us that our music is still alive."

Riding high from those shows, the two briefly considered taking things a step further and playing together in an official capacity. "But it didn't work out," Lee says. "No sense dwelling on it, just move on with your life."

For Lifeson, that meant tending to his health. Stomach surgery to correct a hiatal hernia resulted in gastroparesis, a chronic condition in which the muscles in the stomach don't move food as they should for it to be digested. The guitarist visited a wellness clinic in Austria and learned to manage the condition through strict lifestyle changes (alcohol, smoking, gluten, lactose and junk food are out). Once he was back home, he would get together with Lee, just like always, and soon they began jamming. Then they began jamming on Rush songs, just two old friends having a blast.

Only it wasn't that simple. This wasn't just two old friends having a blast. It was something more than that... but what? Could they really tour once again as Rush? Should they? Warming up to the idea took some time, especially for Lifeson, who had previously stated that Rush's touring days were over. And the biggest question of all was, if they did play live again, who would sit in that drum seat? As Lee says, "How do you ask someone to replace a guy who's irreplaceable?"

Through his bass tech, John "Scully" McIntosh, Lee was tipped off about Anika

"We always saw each other anyway every couple of weeks for dinner or drinks"
GEDDY



Geddy Lee (with his Seafoam Green 1962 Fender Jazz) [*left*] and Alex Lifeson (with his Gibson Custom Les Paul Axcess) in the band's rehearsal space

RICHARD SIBBALD



Nilles, a German composer, producer and music educator, and as it turns out, a virtuoso drummer (her resume includes a 2022 tour with Jeff Beck). As Lee recalls, "We did a Zoom call together and said, 'Look, we're thinking of going on the road, and obviously we need a drummer. Would you be interested in playing some Rush songs with us?' That's really all we asked. She was totally game for it and said, 'That sounds great.' So she hopped on a plane and played with us for a week, and it was on the last day Alex and I looked at each other and went, 'Wow, I think we have a drummer... Now what the fuck do we do?'"

When was it exactly when you two started playing Rush songs together again?

GEDDY LEE: I would say it was in late 2024. I had just finished my third book, and I was sitting down here looking at all these bass guitars, and they were making me feel very, very guilty. So I started getting my fingers back in shape — and they were really out of shape. I came down every day and played, and I was having dinner with Al one night and I told him, "Yeah, I'm getting my fingers back in shape. I've been writing a bit of lyrics and stuff. Maybe we should jam." We always saw each other anyway every couple of weeks for dinner or drinks or something.

Al came over and we just started jamming and having fun the way we always do after we drink too much coffee. [*Laughs*] We're having a laugh. Then Al, I think, or one of us suggested, "Let's play a Rush song for fun and see if we can remember it without doing any homework." Of course, we could only remember parts of them. That's kind of how it started.

Aside from Rush songs, what else were you jamming?

LEE: We were just jamming, making shit up. That's what jamming is.

When two guys from Rush get together to play Rush songs, what do they play?

ALEX LIFESON: There are only like a thousand songs to choose from. We tried to get the easiest ones —

LEE: There are no easiest ones. [*Laughs*]

Was it just the two of you playing on your own, or did you have any sort of rhythm loop for accompaniment?

LEE: It was just the two of us. Sometimes we'd pull up the song and play along with it just to see — "What the fuck does that sound like?" That would help you remember all the things you forgot. I think Al remembers "Freewill" being the first song we tried.

LIFESON: Sure it was, yeah.

LEE: Which for a bass player is not a walk in the park. That was interesting to see my fingers tell me to fuck off. But it was fun. We ended up really laughing. And when we walked away from that goofy session, not only had we put some interesting jams down on tape, which I don't know what'll ever happen with them or they'll remain in the bin, but we walked away with this smile. Playing our songs was so much fun.

The next time we got together to jam, we started challenging each other — "Can you remember this one?" Then we would flail through it. After enough of that, we started getting this sheepish grin at the end of our sessions. It was like, "What are we doing

"I really didn't have any interest in touring. I felt like I was done with that"
ALEX



Lifeson [*left*] and Lee with new drummer Anika Nilles. "She's a bit younger than us, and she likes to remind us of that," Lee says

here? Are we doing something? Are we quietly tricking each other into going back on the road?" But that was still a ways away before we could agree to that.

What was that moment like when one of you finally said it out loud? Who was the first to say it?

LEE: I don't know how that went. In the past, it was usually me who would say, "Hey, Al, do you want to do some shows? Do you want to think about this?" But I was a bit sheepish to do that because we've already been down that road and it didn't work out after the tribute shows for Taylor. We went down that road a little bit, but Al wasn't into it for a lot of reasons. I don't know who... I think we both just kind of gravitated to looking at each other saying, "This is kind of fun."

LIFESON: I remember Ged saying, "We should get together. You should come over, have a coffee. There's some stuff we need to talk about." I went over and we did exactly that. We kind of talked about, "Why don't we just play one of these days? Just play some stuff, maybe work on some stuff or whatever." That's what led to that. I think Ged knew I was not really enthusiastic about even considering going back on the road, doing a tour, especially something that's turned into this size of a tour. I think he was cautious and just wanted to have... I mean, we've been playing together for 60 years, and he just wanted to play together. That's what we did the first day, and we were laughing and smiling and really enjoying it.

Like he said, we were jamming. We were playing bluesy stuff and whatever, and that led to playing a Rush song or two. That eventually led to playing maybe more Rush songs, and then the ball started rolling and it started to grow on its own, and it seemed to have a life of its own and an energy of its own. Everything started falling into place and moving toward ultimately getting together and doing this tour.

I needed convincing, for sure. Once I felt better – I got my health in order at the beginning of 2025, and that was one big hurdle for me. I was not feeling well enough health-wise to go back onto the road or to commit to doing anything with that sort of thing in mind. But as the time went by and I felt good, and we started playing more and other ideas came up, it seemed natural that we would follow through with this and really start playing together. It's one thing to do one song, but it's a whole other thing to do 40 songs. And I'll tell you, it's hard. It's hard, hard, hard, but it's really exciting, and it feels really good when the songs start coming together, and the fingers start going to the right places and it all comes back to you. Muscle memory is a mysterious thing, but it's beautiful.

"Kirk Hammett gave me one of his Greenies. I've been having fun with that"
ALEX

That must have been a strange and incredible process. As you said, you needed convincing...

LIFESON: It was gradual. When we started really sounding good together again, like more recently, when I could see a faint light at the end of the tunnel, it almost turned a switch on for me. I went from having self-doubt and not being really positively sure that I really wanted to do it... but I'd made the commitment. It was at that moment that I realized that, yes, this is going to be a good thing. It's going to be a good thing for me personally and for us.

RICHARD SIBBALD

No doubt you were also considering your health and wondering, "Physically, should I do this?"

LIFESON: Well, I just concentrated on my digestive system. [*Laughs*] That was the main problem I was dealing with. I've had arthritis for years, and I'm pretty successful in dealing with that, but it was the digestive issues that were the real problem. Millions and millions and millions of people go through that sort of thing. I managed to find a good way to mitigate some of the worst parts of it, and I just feel so much better about my energy and everything in my life, really.

Would it be right to assume that numerous drummers have approached you two over the years?

LEE: Well, yes. I mean, people who are close to us — good friends that are successful drummers — would never infer something like that because they have too much respect, not only for Neil and for the situation... They were grieving as well, so they wouldn't be so selfish as to say something inappropriate like that. There were many other drummers who reached out to me in the aftermath of Neil's passing that were pushing themselves, and that was most distasteful to me. It was completely inappropriate timing. Of course, we have some great pals who are amazing drummers in their own right, and they're in very successful bands. We didn't really know where to begin to look when it was time to choose a drummer. We started with Anika because she had been recommended to me, and I had done some research on her. I loved her vibe and her diverse style, and I had her in mind in case I was going to do some kind of project.

We didn't have a list. We never, ever accumulated a list of drummers. When Al and I finally said, "Okay, I guess we're getting serious. Who's going to sit in that impossible seat?" How do you ask someone to replace a guy who's irreplaceable?

It's daunting. We started with the name that was already on my mind. We called her up, she came, and we hit it off. Once we were sure... She brought a lot to the table, but more than her chops, more than her guts and her willingness to sit in that hot seat, she brought an intelligence and a story. I love her story. This is someone who grew up in Germany in a family of musicians. Her dad was a drummer. She's played drums her entire life. She doesn't even remember the first time she picked up sticks. It's who she is. I thought, "Wouldn't that be nice to bring someone so fresh in our midst to inspire Al and me?"

She's a bit younger than us, and she likes to remind us of that. Every time we tell a story about a gig in 1971, she goes, "Wow, I wasn't even born yet." I'm just a big fan of hers, and I think Al has become a big fan of hers. Part of this little journey we're on now is about rooting for her. I really want her to succeed in this moment because she's taking all the heat. The fans love her right now, but they're going to scrutinize her, and she's up for it. I just love that about her.

"We said, 'Let's see if we can play a Rush song without doing any homework'"
GEDDY

Did you give Anika a big list of Rush songs to prepare for when she came to play with you?

LEE: We just picked a few classic Rush songs. I said, "Learn these as best you can and let's see what happens." It was very casual, very relaxed, and it wasn't an audition. We said



[*from left*] Lifeson, Peart and Lee in 1977

to her, "We're not auditioning drummers, but your playing really interests us. So just come and let's see what happens."

LIFESON: I didn't know what the expectations were. I probably thought, "She's very good. She seems to have a good grasp of the songs technically." But there was something that was just not quite there. It wasn't really until the last day that suddenly she sort of blossomed and understood better what we were kind of looking for or going after. And then after that, it's just been better progressively through the whole year of rehearsals we've been doing.

LEE: On the fifth day, this is what happened: We'd gone four days and Al and I hadn't even talked about her. We only had her for a few days, so we wanted to work through all these songs and see her reactions. See her gut feel, learn a little bit about it. We didn't know her. She was a complete stranger, really. She was a bit intimidated when she first arrived, of course, because she'd heard of the band, but she wasn't a Rush fan. She didn't know the songs intimately. Of course, she knew songs like "Tom Sawyer," and she knew of our reputation, and of course, there's no drummer on the planet that doesn't know who Neil Peart is and doesn't revere that name. It was a tall order for her, but we were so busy working through these songs that we hadn't chatted.

On the last day I said, "Al, can you pop into my house? We have to talk about what's going on here." [*Laughs*] He came over and I said, "What do you think?" And he said, "I don't know. What do you think?" I said, "I don't know. What the fuck are we doing?" [*Laughs*] We talked about her pros and cons. There was a sliver of doubt. Her technique was incredible, her facility... Playing the fills was the last problem she would've had. She nailed the fills. That's not the thing. There's a lot more to playing a Rush song than the fills. It's the feel. It's the nuances. Our music is idiosyncratic, and that just takes time.

We've played Rush songs with maybe five or six different drummers over the last few years. Every time you sit and play a Rush song with a drummer, I don't care who they are, there's an adjustment. There's a little translation that Alex and I have to do with the drummer about this little part or that little part. That's normal. But we just weren't sure because this was all new to us. So we went to that last day with an open mind, but a little doubt. And song after song we played with her, she just killed it. I mean, she understood all those little things that Alex and I had been telling her all that week, and she processed it and delivered. That's when we looked at each other in the studio and went, "Yep, we have a real problem, because now we have a drummer and we're going to make a commitment."

For Anika, it wasn't just about recreating the records. It was about bringing her own perspective to the music.

LEE: I don't know if Al feels the same way, but I think she's very respectful of whose parts she's playing. She understands that air drummers for the last 45 years have been out there mimicking some of those parts. She wants to do that justice. At the same time, she's a completely original and independent creative force, but she's sublimating a bit of that for the sake of a tribute to Neil. At the same time, the more she knows the songs, the more confidence she has with the songs. There are moments where she's now able to put her own special sauce on this song or that song. We'll start looking for moments to let her stretch out. We already have a couple in the set where I look at her and go, "Anika, this is free time. You go wherever you want to go, and I'll be there. We'll meet you there."



Nilles makes her Rush debut at the 2026 Juno Awards in Hamilton, Ontario on March 29

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS, CINDY ORD/GETTY IMAGES

I look at it like this: There have been phases to this adventure. Phase one was her understanding Neil's role in Rush. Phase two is like, we've learned all the songs, now let's have some fun with them. Now we're massaging the arrangements and seeing how they can go. At the same time, we're not out there to turn it into a new thing. We're there to represent our songs with our hearts and with our best playing fingers forward. And we want fans to celebrate that music with us. The mandate isn't to change everything. The mandate is to be respectful of the arrangements of the song at the same time elevate from the norm.

You've hired Loren Gold as a touring keyboardist, so it's something of a new presentation.

LEE: That's correct. That's what we wanted. When people come in and look at the stage setup, it's not a trio. It's not Rush 2.0. It's a new time and we've got a different vibe, but the music is treated respectfully.

Alex, are there any new guitars you'll bring out on the road?

LIFESON: Yeah, a few. Kirk Hammett gave me one of his Greenies. I've been having fun with that. It's a pretty raunchy Les Paul, for sure. The Gibson Custom Shop did such an amazing job on it. The relic'ing is just spectacular. It sounds really, really great. There's a couple of other Les Pauls. [*He gestures to an Explorer on the wall*] Oh, and I just got this from Gibson. This is a guitar that Cesar [*Gueikian*], CEO of the company, made with some of the craftsmen there. He sent that along for me to check out, so I've been fiddling around with that. It's so different for me in terms of its shape and style. I've got to get used to it.

My original ES-355 has gone to someone else, but I have one of the reissues that I'll have on the road. I'm still sort of building that arsenal. I think I had 23 guitars on the last tour. I'll probably have 15 or 16, something like that. I don't know how many Ged's going to take out this time around. Ged, I think you had probably 25 basses on the last tour.

LEE: Last tour, I had 27 vintage bases that I played. I don't know if I'll get through 27 this time, but it's a slightly shorter show and I've fallen in love with my beautiful '62 Jazz Bass. I'm going to play that on quite a few songs, but I'm also planning to bring some unusual things out. I've got a couple of classic Rickies that I'll bring out. I've got some Hofners and T-birds that I've fallen in love with. I'm going to have, I don't know, maybe 10 to 15 instruments I'll try to work into the set.

At the end of those five days you did with Anika, if things didn't work out, for whatever reason, would that have been the end of this experiment, or would you have regrouped and tried something else?

LIFESON: Who knows? I mean, it's impossible to say.

LEE: My gut tells me we would have regrouped and looked elsewhere, but I'm very happy we didn't have to do that. We're really lucky. And also with Loren Gold, our keyboardist — I met him in 2014 when I did a charity show with the guys from the Who in London for their 50th anniversary, ironically. We kind of hit it off. Again, he was one of those names that just stuck in the back of my mind. And when we talked about adding a keyboard player, his was the first name that came to mind. We're very fortunate that the two people who were top of our minds both have worked out really, really well. That's a little bit of a blessing from above, I think. Someone's looking after us there.

Of course, as you said, Neil is irreplaceable, and he's beloved by the band's fans.

"It feels good when it all comes back to you. Muscle memory is beautiful"
ALEX

That said, people seem to be very excited to see Anika play with you guys.

LEE: We're very gratified with how well she's been welcomed by the Rush family, so to speak. They haven't even heard her play one note with us yet, and there's already this kind of outpouring of love for her, and they've shown her tremendous kindness, which I know is inspiring for her. It's been very gratifying to see the response.

She must be a real inspiration to female drummers around the world.

LEE: Yeah. I think that's a great part of her story. I love that part of her story. I've gotten mail from young girls, older women saying, "Right on, man. Thank you."

And now she's part of your story.

LEE: Totally. But let's be clear: We did not hire Anika Nilles because she's a woman. We hired her because she's an incredible drummer, and not just an incredible drummer — an intelligent, hardworking, responsible... I couldn't even get her drunk last night! [*Laughs*] I tried. She's a unique individual. In many ways, she reminds me of the big goof who sat on the throne before her. She's a total professional, a work-first person. The fact that she's female and she's doing that for women musicians around the world, that's a bonus. It's not the reason she's in that seat. GW



Lee at the 2026 Juno Awards

CINDY ORD/GETTY IMAGES

CLOSEST TO THE HEART

The 20 greatest Alex Lifeson guitar moments from Rush's studio catalog

I'VE NEVER BEEN very confident, to be honest with you, as a player," Alex Lifeson told *Guitar World* in 2025. "I've always felt like I had to work hard, and maybe I didn't appreciate that I have a natural talent for playing guitar."

Anyone who's heard his work as one-third of the prog-rock institution Rush — from those crashing, Pete Townshend-like chords to his dramatic, shimmering arpeggios — knows he's being charmingly modest. That, or maybe he just needs to re-examine his own songs.

But that's where we come in. To celebrate his 2026 reunion tour with bassist Geddy Lee — which follows the 2015 R40 run, their final outing with late drummer-lyricist Neil Peart — let's take a closer look at 20 of Lifeson's finest studio guitar moments.

"WORKING MAN" (FROM 1974'S *RUSH*)

Rush were still in their embryonic Led Zep-worship mode in 1974, but they did scrape together one genuine classic for their self-titled debut — an overdriven riff monster with icked power chords, bluesy shredding and a nimble, octave-ascending riff halfway through that feels worthy of spawning its own song.

"FLY BY NIGHT" (FROM 1975'S *FLY BY NIGHT*)

"Fly by Night," the bruising title track from Rush's second LP, opens with a flurry of guitar moves that wound up becoming Lifeson signatures. The triumphant D major, the resounding sus chord, the beautifully tense and chromatic arpeggio — there are so many little moments, just in the first 10 seconds, that can make any Rush fan smile and nod with recognition. Guitar-wise, it's all building to a killer post-chorus solo, stacked with bluesy bent notes and pinched harmonics.

"THE NECROMANCER" (FROM 1975'S *CARESS OF STEEL*)

In a 2018 *Guitar World* feature, now-former Gwar guitarist Pustulus Maximus broke



down his love for "The Necromancer," a nearly 13-minute psych-prog fantasy behemoth from Rush's third LP. "The beginning sounds very much like Pink Floyd, but Lifeson's solo in the rock part has an amazing groove and feel," he said, describing the epic's ebb and flow. This one's definitely unique in the band's catalog — from that stoner-ific intro section, with reversed guitars and chorus-y guitars rising like weed-smoke plumes, to the sheer ferocity of the solo and the clean-tone jangle that follows. "The Necromancer" is (understandably) a divisive Rush song, but no one can doubt its merits as a well-rounded guitar showcase.

"2112" (FROM 1976'S *2112*)

It almost feels unfair to cite "2112" as a song, given that it sprawls out over seven sections and nearly 21 minutes — occupying the entire first side of Rush's titular breakout LP. But Lifeson really swings for the fences throughout this grand conceptual work: nailing those enormous delayed chords in Overture, bathing his arpeggios in cinematic chorus throughout "Oracle: The Dream," adopting an almost punk-like energy during the climactic attack of "Grand Finale." One of his most genius moments actually involves the technically weakest playing; at the beginning of "Discovery," his out-of-tune plonking approximates our protagonist stumbling upon a guitar ("What can this strange device be?" Lee sings) and figuring it out in real time.

"CLOSER TO THE HEART" (FROM 1977'S *A FAREWELL TO KINGS*)

Despite being heralded as an elite of heavy prog guitar, Lifeson has a real knack for gentle, pastoral playing. As he explained to *GW*'s Acoustic Nation, the band workshopped their earliest material using acoustics and a cassette recorder — then bringing in the amplification and energy later on. "Closer to the Heart" shows the best of both worlds, as Lifeson builds from chiming 12-string to, eventually, anthemic harmonized solos.

"XANADU" (FROM *A FAREWELL TO KINGS*)

The mighty "Xanadu" expertly illustrates how Rush did so much with so few pairs of hands: Lifeson and Lee tag-team the driving main riff with maximum creativity, tackling the descending lines in unison or veering apart for added color. The standout guitar section happens immediately, with Lifeson adding ambient volume swells over Peart's drifting chimes.

"LA VILLA STRANGIATO (AN EXERCISE IN SELF-INDULGENCE)" (FROM 1978'S *HEMISPHERES*)

The winking subtitle points to the band's underrated sense of humor — and on this hypnotic instrumental, Rush use Lifeson's ever-vivid real-life dreams as a launching pad for some of their wildest genre flips and tightest ensemble playing. Across nearly 10 minutes, the trio explore everything from psychedelia to hard rock to jazz-fusion, with Lifeson the obvious star of this dreamscape. His solo swells during A Lerxst in Wonderland might be the most evocative playing in his catalog.

"JACOB'S LADDER" (FROM 1980'S *PERMANENT WAVES*)

After a bright, strident opening march, Rush chase the storm clouds into one of their heavi-

est-ever riffs. Lifeson is at the top of his game here, layering his guitar theme into octaves for even more impact. Rush were rarely more intense than they were on "Jacob's Ladder."

"FREEWILL" (FROM *PERMANENT WAVES*)

Despite all the recorded evidence to the contrary, Lifeson and Lee are mere mortals. When they started jamming again after a long hiatus following the R40 tour, the guitarist told *Ultimate Classic Rock* that they sounded like a "really, really bad Rush tribute band." The toughest nut to crack was reportedly the surging fan-favorite "Freewill," which features one of the most frenetic guitar solos he ever tracked. "There's a lot of notes," he said. "The solo is crazy."

"YYZ" (FROM 1981'S *MOVING PICTURES*)

It's the most fittingly proggy sidebar in Rush history; the band's first Grammy nomination came with "YYZ," a track built around a rhythmic Easter egg nodding to Morse Code for a Toronto airport. Just perfect. The song's main riff is already ace enough, showing just how much mileage you can get out of two notes if you put your mind to it. But the piece becomes a classic when Lifeson stretches out — the solo at the midway point is deliciously disorienting, peaking with a virtuosic run of finger-tapping.

"LIMELIGHT" (FROM *MOVING PICTURES*)

"Limelight" is up there with the most poignant Rush tracks, channeling Peart's fame-induced isolation into four minutes of sleek (if still proggy) radio-rock bliss. Lifeson's dreamy arpeggios and chunky chords are already enough — it's just a bonus that he churned out a god-tier, whammy-filled solo on his Hentor Sportscaster, a Strat outfitted with a Gibson humbucker and a Floyd Rose tremolo. "It was the perfect selection to create the soulful, elastic and unstable character for the solo of that song," he told *Guitar World*.



FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS



"THE ANALOG KID" (FROM 1982'S *SIGNALS*)

"*Signals* was a weird record for me," Lifeson told *Guitar World* in 2025, noting that their heavier use of keyboards created "more of a fight for space with the guitar." But that argument shouldn't apply to "The Analog Kid," which saves most of its synth presence for some booming pads on the chorus. Elsewhere, Lifeson takes charge — including on the solo, which features a nifty harmonizer-type effect.

"DIGITAL MAN" (FROM *SIGNALS*)

Upon first listen, "Digital Man" sounds more suited to a list of Geddy Lee's finest moments, given his wildly melodic and grooving bass line. You might even look first to Peart, who adds some tastefully placed tom-tom fills and fierce hi-hat work. But Lifeson also deserves marquee mention, anchoring the track with his stabbing, Police-like chords and a woozy solo with a touch of David Gilmour in its bluesy bends.

"KID GLOVES" (FROM 1984'S *GRACE UNDER PRESSURE*)

Is this Lifeson's ultimate guitar solo? The tremolo-bar madness, the blue-sky harmonics, the brushes with ska and rockabilly — all packed into one blistering run that somehow feels both composed and improvised.

"HAND OVER FIST" (FROM 1989'S *PRESTO*)

Why did Rush never play "Hand Over Fist" live? Why did they refrain from releasing it as a single? No great answer. This punchy rocker is a highlight from the sadly overlooked *Presto*, with Lifeson leading the charge. He does a bit of everything — that trebly funk-rock intro, the busy bluesy groove, the squealing pinched-harmonic leads, a less-is-more solo with some majestically sustained notes.

"LEAVE THAT THING ALONE" (FROM 1993'S *COUNTERPARTS*)

As the Eighties wore on, Lee's keyboards grew to be a little controversial, both within and outside the band. After a series of more atmospheric, synth-heavy LPs, *Counterparts* arrived like a welcome punch of heaviness, offering more of an overall sonic balance — and much-needed presence to Lifeson's riffs. "Leave That Thing Alone" is a perfect example, highlighted by his skyrocketing, psychedelic solo.

"TEST FOR ECHO" (FROM 1996'S *TEST FOR ECHO*)

Lifeson was so enthused about his guitar tone on "Test for Echo" — a roiling, textured wave of acoustic and electric — that he gave *Guitar World* a thorough, multi-paragraph breakdown. He used a Les Paul Custom and a Godin Acousticaster, tuned down to D standard, through a variety of heads and cabinets. But the most important element here is the vibrancy of his riff writing, which suggests that perhaps Rush had been soaking in Tool's recent work.

"EARTHSHINE" (FROM 2002'S *VAPOR TRAILS*)

Lifeson once again sounds like he's channeling Tool and other modern prog-metal throughout *Vapor Trails*, often exploring ultra-dark guitar tones via modern-sounding production. Of course, the album's sound was, to put it mildly, polarizing, and Rush released a remixed edition in 2013. "Earthshine" might be the album's sonic and songwriting peak, with a choppy riff pogoing off Lee's high, yearning vocal.

"BRAVEST FACE" (FROM 2007'S *SNAKES & ARROWS*)

When you've been a rock band for three decades — especially one with a sizable fan base — it's hard finding new pathways to explore. It's admirable, then, just how different Rush sound on "Bravest Face." Here, Lifeson often zigs when you expect him to zag, moving from a grungy atmosphere into a raw acoustic riff and a solo with a strangely laid-back, bluesy vibe.

"CARNIES" (FROM 2012'S *CLOCKWORK ANGELS*)

"Carnies" is easily one of Lifeson's simplest guitar riffs — but it also might be his heaviest, built on some borderline-metal harmonics that carry the entire song. But he also manages to work in some experimental flourishes, including a kaleidoscopic tremolo effect that lends itself well to the subject matter. "It's almost like a carousel," he told *Guitar World* upon the album's release. "Ged and I were like, 'Oh, my God, that's so cool!' It really sounds like you're on this horsey going up and down." GW

Guitar World would like to thank Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars for the kind loan of the incredible sparkle finish Sixties Strat that appears on this spread.
vintageandrareguitars.com

THE PEDALS THEY CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

Pedals have provided some of the most thrilling guitar tones in history, from "Purple Haze" to "Comfortably Numb." To celebrate decades of stellar sounds, we asked 60-plus guitar greats to choose their ultimate stompboxes

COMPILED BY **AMIT SHARMA**
WITH JASON SIDWELL, DAVID MEAD AND JAMIE DICKSON
PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

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MICHAEL AMOTT
MXR PHASE 90

"I HAVE SO many phasers, but the one I usually go back to is the classic Phase 90. It just sounds how I imagine a phaser to sound in my head. I have all these custom-shop ones from Japan or whatever, but they don't really sound like the ones I heard on those famous records. I even have the EVH one [*MXR EVH Phase 90*], but I kinda prefer the regular Phase 90. I run it with the speed at zero, and it gives everything this extra fatness and slight sense of movement. I like the 3D kind of depth it brings."

ARIELLE
J. ROCKETT ANIMAL

"MINE IS THE old model that looks like a bread box. I love it because no matter what amp I put it in front of, it breaks things up beautifully with just the right amount of gain – especially when I don't want to kill everyone's ears with volume. The gritty saturated tone is so minimal, and it creates smooth Dumble-like tones, plus other sounds more associated with Fender, Marshall and everything in between. If I could only have one pedal, this would always be my first choice."

JOHN BAIZLEY
FTELECTTRONICA SCHUMANN PLL

"I USED THIS analog harmonizer pedal a lot on the last Baroness album, as well as a handful of tracks from *Purple*. The builder's name is Schumann, and I believe he only makes two pedals – both of which are ridiculous and unique. They're very pricey; the PLL I used actually belonged to our producer, David Friddman. It's very bizarre with lots of weird knobs and dials with some kind of envelope follower, while also having this very rich fuzz tonal characteristic."

LARI BASILIO
JHS MORNING GLORY

"I LOVE THE articulation and dynamics of this pedal! It's easy to dial in and has been my main overdrive for many years. Most of the time I use it on the red channel and then I control the amount of the drive according to what I need in each specific situation. The tone control will also depend on my mood, but usually it's not too bright. You can hear this pedal on songs like 'Not Alone' [*transcribed in our March 2023 issue*], 'Far More,' 'Fearless' and 'Your Love'."

JENNIFER BATTEN
DIGITECH WHAMMY WH-1

"I DISCOVERED THE DigiTech Whammy pedal not long after they released it in 1989. I used it all over my debut record, *Above, Below and Beyond*. I mostly used the whole-step-down mode for slide effects. I loved it so much; it inspired several tunes, including 'Cat Fight' (octave-up mode); I discovered you can make it sound like an angry cat. I also dedicated a tune to it called 'Whammy Damage.' I had a Whammy pedal under each foot so I had to sit down to play it. I had my left foot set to an octave down and the right set to an octave up. I played three octave riffs and arpeggios in the same spot."



Extreme's Nuno Bettencourt performs in the U.K., December 20, 2017

[1] Arch Enemy's Michael Amott: "I run the Phase 90 with the speed at zero, and it gives everything this extra fatness and slight sense of movement"
[2] Arielle: "The J. Rockett Animal breaks things up beautifully with just the right amount of gain"
[3] Lari Basilio: "The JHS Morning Glory is easy to dial in and has been my main overdrive for many years"

NUNO BETTENCOURT
PRO CO RAT

"I GENERALLY PREFER going straight into my amp, except for this Rat pedal that I've had for ages. It's supposed to be a distortion but I turn the distortion all the way off. It's there purely to tighten up my bottom end, especially for single-note riffs like 'Suzi (Wants Her All Day What?)' from *Extreme II: Pornograffitti*. I'm the only guitar player in the band so I want to cut through and sound big. The only way to get the response I need is through a Rat pedal. It's been there since day one and ain't going anywhere. I tried playing without

NEIL LUPIN/REDFERNS (NUNO)



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"I had a Whammy pedal under each foot so I had to sit down to play it," Jennifer Batten says. "I had my left foot set to an octave down and the right set to an octave up"

one and fuckin' hated it! Other players think it's not doing anything and would probably wonder if the battery is dead. It doesn't change a single thing *except* for the tightness of the bass frequencies."

JOE BONAMASSA
IBANEZ TS9 & TS808 TUBE SCREAMER

"MY MOST-USED pedal over the years has been the Ibanez Tube Screamer in both the TS9 and TS808 configurations. Historically, I have been in very different musical situations requiring different amounts of gain structure. A 'green box' is usable in almost any situation with almost any amp. It gives you a nice step up in the mid-range frequencies (around 800Hz) that is useful for not only soloing but for power chords and big rhythms. There have been many versions of the Tube Screamer, and many boutique copies have been made over the years, but for my $80 you can't beat a reissue Ibanez TS808 to create a great sound with both Fender and Gibson electric guitars."

NILI BROSH
XOTIC EP BOOSTER

"I'VE BEEN USING this pedal for as long as I can remember having a board, and it's probably the [*only*] one I've used. It's been my 'always on' pedal in just about every rig, regardless of the different amps I've plugged into over the years. I use it in front to color the overall tone, and I've found it always adds body, rounds everything out and kicks in an overall warm, mid-rangey 'oomph.' The funny thing is I usually have it dialed all the way down, but I wouldn't be able to live without it."

CHRIS BUCK
ANALOG MAN KING OF TONE

"I ALWAYS HAVE mixed feelings about recommending this overdrive because people end up spending silly amounts of money on second-hand ones. But I've used it a hell of a lot. Essentially it's voiced around the Marshall Blues Breaker, and whatever you stack it with, it will improve things exponentially. It's just one of those 'make better' pedals. It does low-gain stuff particularly nicely, very dynamic and responsive. I have both sides always on, with all dials pointing to around one o' clock. I never set anything to be a huge gain or level increase. I dial in very clean amp tones, nothing gets too gainy early on, and then I like to incrementally add — that's how you stack loads of pedals against each other."

[4] Bettencourt: "The only way to get the response I need is through a Pro Co Rat" **[5]** Nili Brosh: "I use the EP Booster in front to color the overall tone" **[6]** Cardinal Black's Chris Buck: "The Analog Man King of Tone does low-gain stuff particularly nicely, very dynamic and responsive" **[7]** Rusty Cooley: "I've been using the Maxon OD808 since the Nineties. It's not an effect pedal like a delay or a flanger so it can go unnoticed if you don't know what you're listening for"

BUMBLEFOOT
MORLEY 20/20 BAD HORSIE

"ONCE YOU GO switchless, there's no going back! You press down and it's on. Let go and it's off. No more stomping on the toe end, or thinking it's off when it's on! The best part is you can do it all seamlessly, which can lead to new writing ideas, like I did on the Sons of Apollo song 'Goodbye Divinity.' I keep the Contour and Level both at around 10 or 11 o'clock, but I usually don't engage the Contour mode."

DENNIS COFFEY
DUNLOP CRY BABY

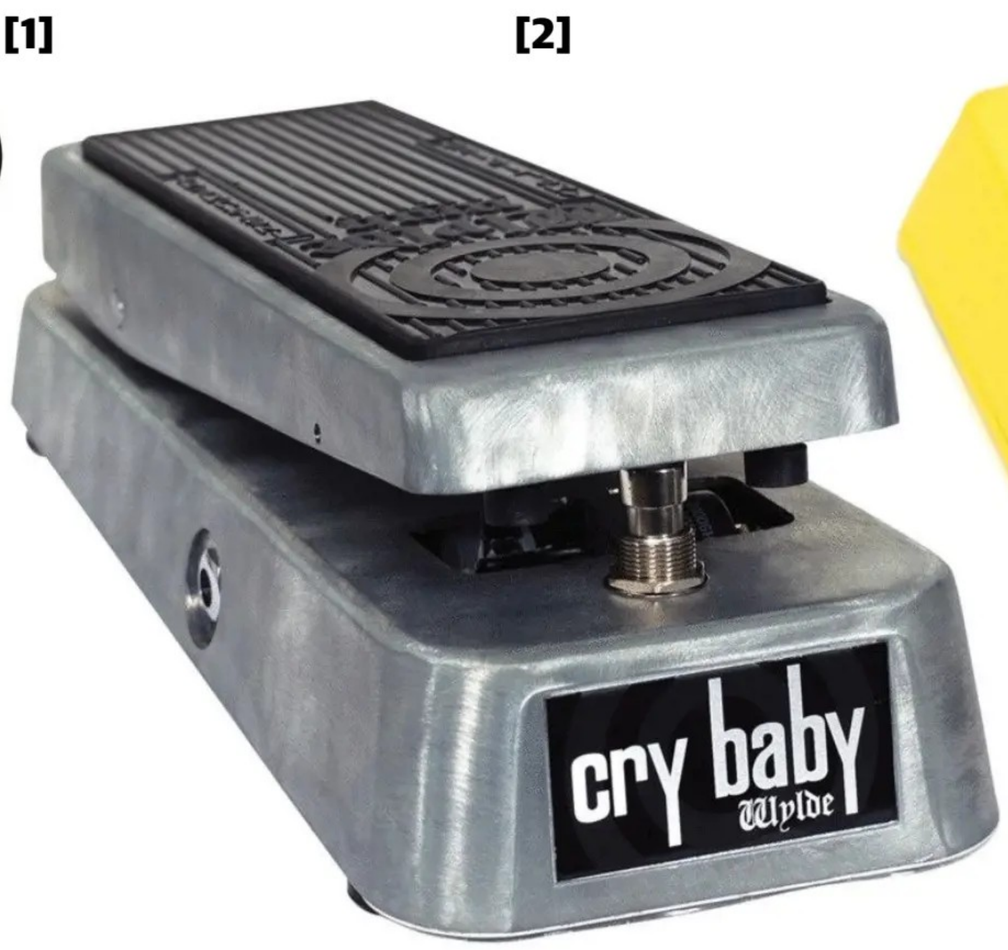
"MY FAVORITE/MOST used pedal of all time was the Cry Baby wah. I first used it on 'Cloud Nine' for the Temptations at Motown in Studio A in Detroit. It was the first time a wah-wah pedal was used on an R&B record. I was the only musician to play at Motown in Detroit and Mowest in L.A. The guitar player for the Jackson 5 in L.A. left the band during a rehearsal so I was called in to play the entire show without a rehearsal. The Jackson 5 then included both Michael and Janet. I donated one of my guitars and wah-wah pedals to the Motown Museum in Detroit. I set them up next to the chair I used to sit in as a Funk Brother."

JOANNA CONNOR
BOSS CE-2 CHORUS

"I KNOW MANY guitar players will choose some kind of overdrive/dis-



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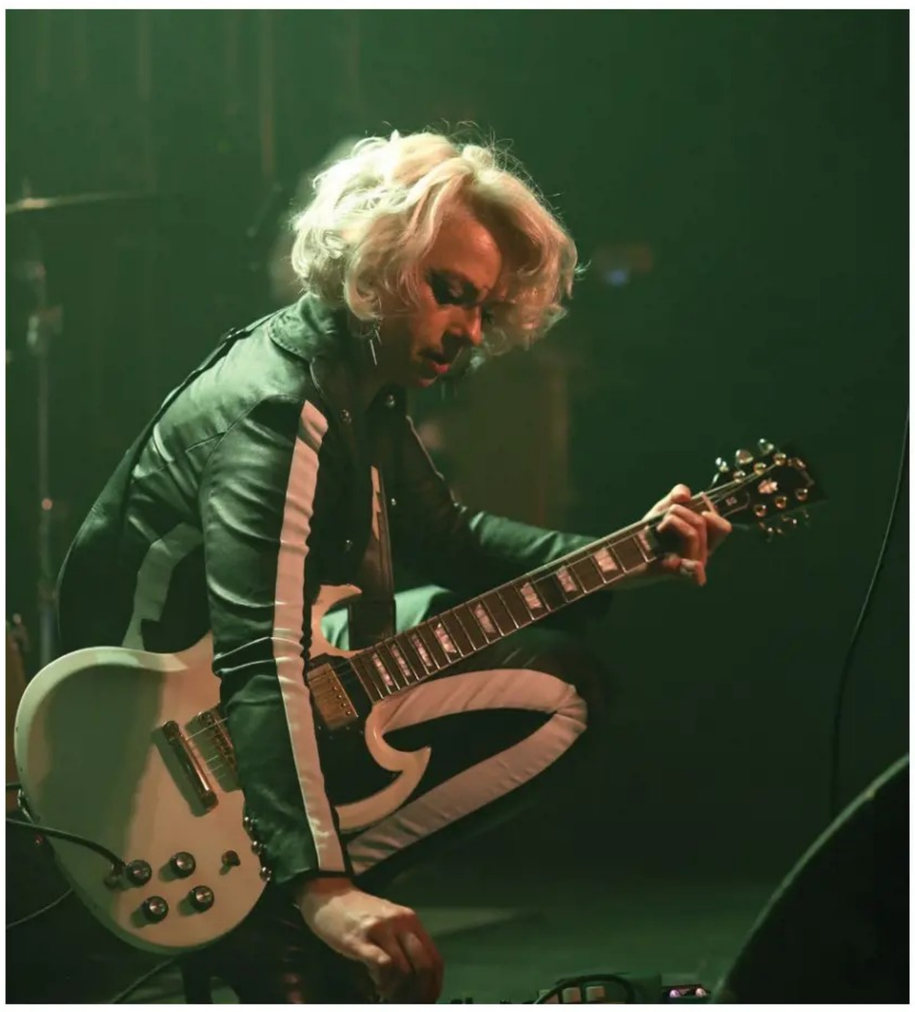
tortion, because we as guitar players love to solo, and I do also. There's nothing like just letting it all go on six strings. But I will tell you, I started as a singer and rhythm guitarist. I still love to play rhythm guitar, driving the groove, composing on the stage and in the studio. I love a pretty thick and clean guitar tone for chords/comping, so my go-to pedal for all of this is a Boss CE-2 Chorus, and now I use a Boss CH-1 Super Chorus. I like to flavor that up with some type of analog delay. I can get dirty with an overdrive. However, having a clean amp with a chorus is also mandatory for me in my guitar palette."

RUSTY COOLEY
MAXON OD808

"I'VE BEEN USING the Maxon OD808 pedal since the Nineties. It's not an effect pedal like a delay or a flanger so it can go unnoticed if you don't know what you're listening for. I don't use it for more overdrive or gain; I set the overdrive usually to nine o'clock and the balance to three o'clock and tone around 11 o'clock. This combination gives my tone a little more cut and clarity, especially on the low end, and the notes on the high end a little more legato fluidity, and pick harmonics jump right out."

BILLY CORGAN
ELECTRO-HARMONIX OP-AMP BIG MUFF PI

"IT WAS AN incredible honor when [*EHX founder/president*] Mike Matthews asked me to get involved with the reissues of this pedal, because it fuckin' changed my life! That sound is *the* sound... the ultimate high-gain 'vroom'! The Soviet version was never quite the same. If you want the *Siamese Dream* creamy tone, this is it!"



HARRY HERD/REDFERNS (FISH)

Samantha Fish makes a few adjustments in Oxford, England, October 15, 2022

PHIL DEMMEL
DUNLOP ZW45 ZAKK WYLDE CRY BABY

"LIVING SO CLOSE to the Dunlop compound in California, it makes it easy to stop by and have the killer crew there add the Auto Return function to my wahs, activating the effect by just stepping on it slightly. I prefer it because the initial sound is the closed signal of the wah, which is more ear-pleasing. I like the half-cocked tone (a la Schenker/Rhoads) for some more dynamic sections, and I enjoy the full sweeping range of the ZW45 for both solo accents and putting some sprinkles on rhythms. No dials, no knobs, just rad!"

RICHIE FAULKNER
MXR M148 MICRO CHORUS

"I USE THIS on *everything* and actually just leave it on for about 99.9 percent of the set. I tend to have it around the 12 o'clock position, and I find it gives a beautiful movement to everything that makes chords and single notes pop. It adds almost a type of EQ that you can't get from a conventional EQ pedal. [*It's*] perfect for when you need that extra push over the cliff!"

SAMANTHA FISH
ANALOG MAN KING OF TONE

"THIS IS MY GO-to pedal, especially in situations where I can't fully crank my rig. It sounds like a nice tube amp breaking up. I have several really fun pedals where the tonal disparity is pretty wide, when I'm obviously going for wild sounds... but I utilize this one in a more subtle way, so it gets used a lot throughout my shows."

KIRK FLETCHER
CATALINBREAD TOPANGA

"MY DESERT ISLAND effect pedal will always, hands down, be a reverb. One of the great things about the Topanga is having that volume control, so you

[1] Billy Corgan: "It was an incredible honor when [*EHX founder/president*] Mike Matthews asked me to get involved with the reissues of the Electro-Harmonix Op-Amp Big Muff Pi" **[2]** Phil Demmel on the Dunlop ZW45 Cry Baby: "No dials, no knobs, just rad!"



[4]



[5]

can hit the front of your amp a bit harder. I find the reverb gives you this pillow effect to the notes. I flipped when I heard records like *Blues Is King* by B.B. King and the West Coast players who came later, like Hollywood Fats or my friend Junior Watson. The Topanga gives this classic blues guitar sound that I love very much."

ROBB FLYNN
ELECTRO-HARMONIX ELECTRIC MISTRESS FLANGER/FILTER MATRIX

"THIS IS ONE of the stomp boxes I've used religiously on every album, probably for about 30 percent of each entire record. I'm always layering it in there. Without it, you just don't get that watery sound. I have one of the big old ones that's like 10 inches across. It's definitely one of the secrets to our sound."

ROBBEN FORD
STRYMON TIMELINE

"THE STRYMON TIMELINE delay is the most essential pedal on my board. It's incredibly versatile: basically, I like some reverb and a couple of delays, long and short – the Strymon timeline has those things, and it just reacts the best. It has just the best clean, studio quality down. I'd also have to mention the Hermida Audio ZenDrive, because that's been my overdrive pedal of choice for as long as I can remember. Nothing has matched it – it's just the right amount of clean, the right amount of distortion, the most direct, uncompressed overdrive sound."



[6]

MARTY FRIEDMAN
MAXON AF-9 AUTO FILTER

"THE PEDAL I'VE used most, by far, is this one. As a matter of fact, it's the only pedal I use consistently. My settings are all switches and faders down to zero. If I'm feeling saucy, I'll raise the sensitivity fader up to about one... that's it! You can barely tell this effect is on, but it adds a slight 'human' element to the notes, and shapes the attack in such a way that in combination with the way I express notes, really helps get my point across when playing melodies."



[7]

ERIC GALES
TECH 21 BOOST DLA

"MY GO-TO 'always on' pedal is my Tech 21 delay, which is why it's probably the one I've used the most over the years.

[3] Judas Priest's Richie Faulkner: "The MXR Micro Chorus is perfect for when you need that extra push over the cliff!"
[4] Kirk Fletcher: "One of the great things about the Topanga is having that volume control, so you can hit the front of your amp a bit harder"
[5] Robb Flynn: "The Electric Mistress is definitely one of the secrets to [*Machine Head's*] sound"
[6] Robben Ford: "The Strymon Timeline is the most essential pedal on my board"
[7] Marty Friedman: "The Maxon AF-9 adds a slight 'human' element to the notes"



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It's the tan-and-burgundy one. I have it set to quarter-note delay and never turn it off... I just love that delay!"

PAUL GILBERT
MXR SCRIPT PHASE 90/LED

"MY WHOLE OBSESSION with phasers and flangers comes from songs like 'Ain't Talkin' Bout Love' and 'Unchained' by Van Halen, as well as Alex Lifeson's tone on tracks like Rush's 'The Spirit of Radio.' If I want to sound like Eddie on the first Van Halen album, which I do very often, I'll plug in my script Phase 90 and put the knob around eight o'clock... that's as close as you'll get!"

GUTHRIE GOVAN
FRACTAL EV-1 EXPRESSION/ VOLUME

"THIS WILL PROBABLY horrify some of the purists out there, but for most of my live shows in recent years I've been using a Fractal FX8 to replace my old pedalboard. It weighs less, plus there are certain tones and changes that would be hard to capture using my traditional bunch of pedals on the floor. So the EV-1 works really well for me. I just enjoy having real-time control over the level of gain hitting the amp's front-end at any given moment, plus it can double as a kind of manual noise gate."

DAVID GRISSOM
XOTIC EP BOOSTER & LINE 6 M9

"I USE THE EP Booster with the internal dip switches in vintage mode. Unlike other boost pedals I've tried that usually sound transparent and sometimes add top end, the Xotic adds warmth, volume and fattens my tone just enough as long as it's in vintage mode. I've used a Line 6 M9 since they came out many years ago. Yes, you eventually have to replace the footswitches, but the variety and quality of delays, accuracy of the tap tempo, the best pitch vibrato I've found, great tremolos and a bunch of other stuff – like the phase shifter I need once a year – make it a musical Swiss Army knife. [*It's*] a very organic-sounding multi-effects box."

JOEL HOEKSTRA
FULLTONE FULL-DRIVE2

"I'M NOT MUCH of a pedal guy these days, but the one that I've fallen back on the most over the last 20 years has been my Full-Drive2. It's perfect for pushing the front end of Marshalls. It's a very versatile-sounding boost pedal with two stages, but it doesn't alter the raw tone of the guitar and amp. I usually pull the volume knob up for the cleaner boost set to 12 o'clock, have the tone set to 12 o'clock, depending on the amp the distortion and boost set anywhere from 12 o'clock to cranked. I find between the two stages of this pedal and a channel switcher on the Marshall, I'm able to get pretty much everything I need for a gig."

MARK HOLCOMB
STRYMON BIGSKY

"THIS IS A GREAT reverb pedal for noodling endlessly, and if I'm not careful I can spend an hour spacing out playing really sparse single-note stuff without getting bored. I've used it to ignite song ideas so many times. I like the Shimmer setting with the Decay jacked all the way up, a bit of Mod at around two or three o'clock on the Mix knob. You get this gorgeous, airy, almost sci-fi-sounding tone that lends itself to playing *less* – it almost puts you in this role where you feel more like a sound designer."

SCOTT HOLIDAY
ROGER MAYER OCTAVIA

"THIS REHOUSED AND repainted (by yours truly) Octavia has been used on every album I've made over the last 15 years. The fuzz just feels so forward and aggressive while also doing that cool touchy octave thing

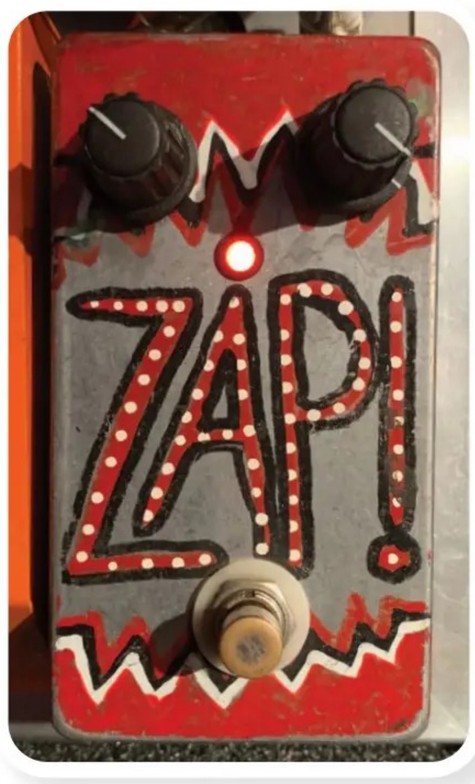


PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS (GALES) JORDI VIDAL/REDFERNS (GILBERT)

[*above*] Eric Gales in the Netherlands, March 16, 2018; [*facing page*] Paul Gilbert with a pedal or two in Spain in May 2007

[1] Gales on the Tech 21 Boost DLA: "I have it set to quarter-note delay and never turn it off"
[2] Gutrhie Govan: "The Fractal EV-1 can double as a kind of manual noise gate"
[3] Joel Hoekstra: "My Full-Drive2 is perfect for pushing the front end of Marshalls"





[5]

when played with less input gain. I've named it 'Zap!' and have used it on Rival Sons tracks like 'Electric Man,' 'Open My Eyes' and 'Do Your Worst,' though I think you can hear the pedal's character best on 'Secret' from *Great Western Valkyrie*."

GARY HOLT
KHDK PARANORMAL PARAMETRIC EQ OVERDRIVE

"WHAT'S BEEN INDISPENSABLE in my rig for quite some time is some form of parametric mid-band. Though it's not a pedal, I used to run the PreSonus EQ3B with the mids boosted and the low and high band kept flat, which would allow me to dial in almost like a wah kind of attack. It would get me a super-aggressive mid-range. Which is why both of my signature KHDK pedals are overdrives with a parametric mid-band. You can dial it in to get the ultra crunch... I couldn't live without it!"



[6]

BILLY HOWERDEL
ELECTRO-HARMONIX SYNTH9

"I LOVE ELECTRO-Harmonix. I'm always blown away by what they're doing. The pitch tracking is always incredible! The Synth9 is a favorite, though I also kick in the mellotron Mel9 a bit too. You have to use things like that sparingly. I don't run through a lot of pedals, to be honest, but these are my go-tos."

SCOTT IAN
MXR EVH90 PHASER

"FOR ALL OF the Eighties and a lot of the Nineties, I stuck with my TC Electronic Booster+ Distortion. But one pedal that's remained on my board from back then right to the present day is my MXR Phase 90. Whenever I have to play a harmony solo or some kind of lead, like in 'Got the Time,' I always kick it in. Eventually I changed to the EVH version because I thought the box looked cooler!"

NICK JOHNSTON
LOVEPEDAL PICKLE VIBE

"I ABSOLUTELY ADORE this vibe. It's a pedal that truly makes me play differently. When I need to change my phrasing or my approach to a solo, I'll often turn it on just to see what sort of weird stuff comes out. It's a very inspiring and exciting little box. I used it on songs like 'Wide Eyes in the Dark' and 'Every Drop of Blood Part II.' Those solo sections are quite long and after a certain point, I begin to rely on the rich sound of the vibe to take me in a different direction, ultimately letting the solo tell a more interesting story."

[7]



BILL KELLIHER
MXR SUGAR DRIVE

"I WOULD SAY the one pedal I just couldn't live without is my MXR Sugar Drive. It's a great little distortion but can be used as a boost. I find it takes those round edges of any amp, then straightens and tightens them up. I use it in conjunction with a Marshall JCM800, a Victory Kraken or my signature Friedman Butterslax head – either way, it's always a winning combination."

[8]



WACLAW "Vogg" KIEŁTYKA
MORLEY STEVE VAI BAD HORSIE CONTOUR WAH

"IT WOULD BE a toss-up between this and my Boss NS-2 Noise Suppressor. I love the Bad Horsie (because it doesn't need turning on or off, and it just sounds perfect for what I need. I've been a Steve Vai fan since I was a kid and this pedal definitely has his touch in the sound. It's also built like a Kalashnikov; mine has worked for years and never disappoints."

DAVE KILMINSTER
BOSS TU-3 CHROMATIC TUNER

"MY FAVORITES ARE the MXR Micro Amp, Electro-Harmonix Small Stone

[4] Periphery's Mark Holcomb on the Strymon BigSky: "It almost puts you in this role where you feel more like a sound designer"
[5] Rival Sons' Scott Holiday: "This rehoused and repainted (by yours truly) Octavia has been used on every album I've made over the last 15 years"
[6] A Perfect Circle's Billy Howerdel: "The EHX Synth9 is a favorite, though I also kick in the mellotron Mel9 a bit too. You have to use things like that sparingly"
[7] Nick Johnston on the Lovepedal Pickle Vibe: "It's a pedal that truly makes me play differently"
[8] Mastodon's Bill Kelliher: "The Sugar Drive is a great little distortion but can [*also*] be used as a boost"



[1]



Phase Shifter, Fulltone Deja'Vibe and Hermida ZenDrive. [*But*] the one pedal I always use is a Boss Chromatic Tuner. I don't like to hear bands tune up on stage; it always sounds like amateur night. Also I'm a little obsessive about tuning. During a show I'll constantly check my guitar – sometimes between every song – and even though it's usually fine, I check it anyway. When touring with Roger Waters there can be up to four guys all playing guitars at once, so if something sounds a little off then I can stand there with a grin of confidence thinking it's not me!"

RICHIE KOTZEN
SOBBAT DRIVE BREAKER DB-3

"I THINK OVERDRIVES are very personal to the player. Some people are happy to use whatever, but for me it's very important for the drive to be correct. The one I used for many years, that we actually emulated with my signature Tech 21 Fly Rig, is made by a Japanese company called Sobbat. It's probably the greatest I've ever tried. There was the original Drive Breaker, and then the later versions had a boost built in as well. They're hard to find, but if you get your hands on one, honestly, that will be some of the best overdrive you'll ever hear."

JOEY LANDRETH
CHASE BLISS AUDIO THERMAE

"NO MATTER WHAT overdrives, fuzzes or tremolo pedals/units I use, the one thing I really hate to be without is my delay. I don't just depend on it for a tasteful solo sound or to take advantage of its pitch-shifting fun stuff, but I most often use it set really short to add a thickening effect to my sound. I also love to blend in a tiny amount of around 80ms to 90ms to make it kind of sound like you're in a room that's giving you a little reflection off the walls. Of course, long modulated delays for more ambient textures are a must for me as well. Then, of course, you get into the pitch-shifting wildness that is a rabbit hole so worth falling down. I'm always trying different drive circuits, different fuzzes and I love analog modulation of just about any kind, but I'm hard pressed to leave the house without my Thermae."



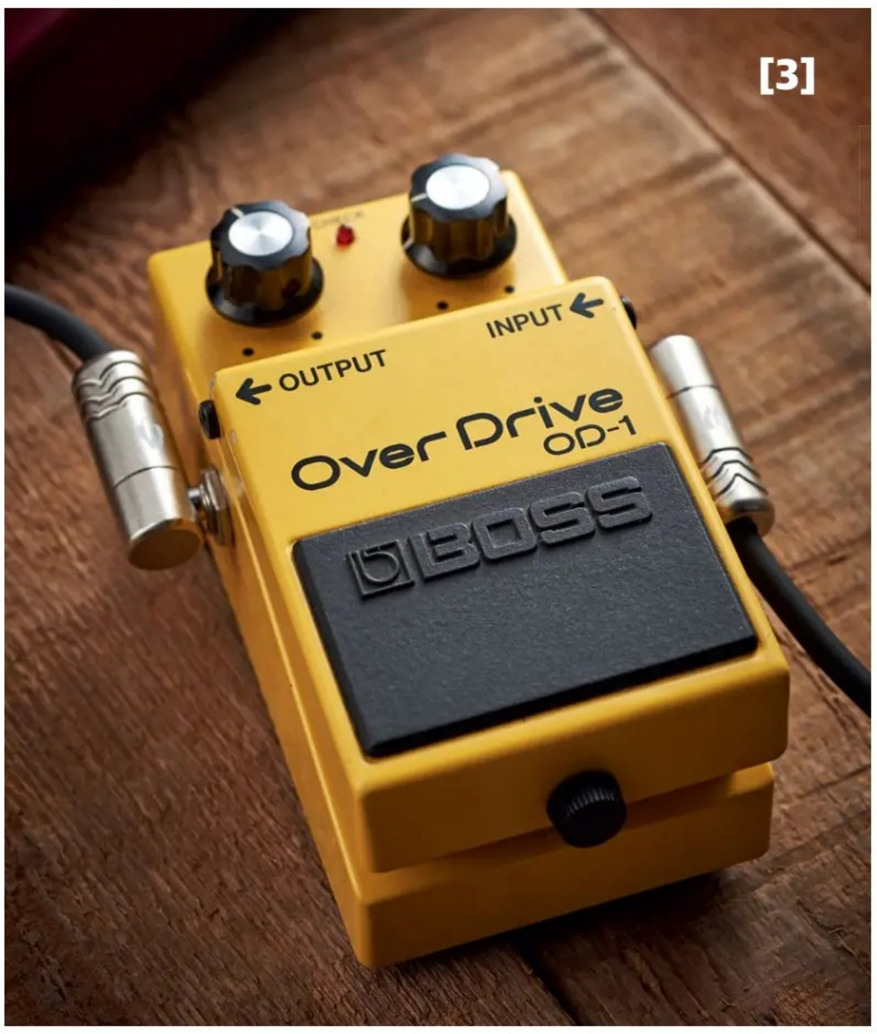
Sophie Lloyd and Machine Gun Kelly in Chicago, July 29, 2022

[1] Richie Kotzen: "The overdrive I used for many years, that we actually emulated with my signature Tech 21 Fly Rig, is made by a Japanese company called Sobbat"

RONNI LE TEKRØ
BOSS OD-1 OVERDRIVE

"THE BOSS OD-1 Overdrive – as heard in all my music since 1982, including my new album, *Bigfoot TV*. [*Having*] no tone control is an advantage regarding pedals."

BARRY BRECHEISEN/WIREIMAGE (LLOYD)







MARK LETTIERI
LINE 6 M5

"I'VE HAD A JVH3-modded M5 on my board for more than 10 years now. There are loads of sounds I've used countless times, and the synth/filter section is my go-to anytime an artist or producer wants something 'weird.' The mods helped clean up the overall tone, plus improve user functions. I suppose I could have upgraded to a [*Line 6*] HX Stomp by now, but I love the simplicity of the M5. As the saying goes: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it!'"

SOPHIE LLOYD
FRIEDMAN BE-OD

"I'VE BEEN A fan of Dave Friedman's amps for a long time. His reputation for delivering the ultimate rock/metal tone is second to none. I wanted his Brown Eye head for years, but being a struggling student at the time I couldn't afford one. When I learned about the pedal version, I got it as soon as I could. There are six knobs to dial it in perfectly, from light breakup to the hardest saturated gain I've ever heard. The internal gain trim pot is another cool feature. This pedal took my playing to the next level."

STEVE LUKATHER
GURUS ECHOSEX 2 T7E

"THE DELAY PEDAL is always the most important one on the board. It's hard to pick just one brand because I use several different ones, though not at the same time. I'm not a MIDI guy anymore! I like to run my delays through my amp's effects loop to give the sound some depth. Usually, I go for a ping-pong stereo delay but not too much. David Gilmour and Joe Walsh had a profound influence on me with their tasteful use of delays. Gurus and Foxgear delays have been a big part of my sound in recent years, and I find they've been able to open up my tone in ways other pedals haven't."

GEORGE LYNCH
IBANEZ TS808 TUBE SCREAMER

"IT'S NOT AN exciting answer, unfortunately. I almost want to lie and make up something cooler: 'Here's one I built as a kid out of radio parts!' But [*mine*] is a very special 808 Tube Screamer, a second-year Malaysian chip. I don't like the Texas Instruments double chip ones, though some of the JRCs are pretty good. They all vary somewhat. I also have to mention that I've always been a delay/echo guy, because I play *to* the echo. I really can't stand dry guitar! In some ways the delay is more important than the overdrive, but that Tube Screamer has been the most consistent pedal on my board."

ERJA LYYTINEN
TC ELECTRONIC FLASHBACK

"I STARTED USING the TC Electronic Flashback delay years ago; its strength is the natural sound it maintains while using it. The different delay effects work beautifully, and my favorite positions are Mod and Tape. You can vary the speed of delay and the amount of feedback and level, and there are some fun delays, like ping pong and reverse, but also a looper. This pedal also has a useful stereo output. I often add delay when playing slide guitar solos to achieve a big and airy sound and prolong the notes. Can't play a gig without a delay!"

[2] Joey Landreth (The Bros. Landreth): "I'm always trying different drive circuits, different fuzzes, and I love analog modulation of just about any kind, but I'm hard pressed to leave the house without my Thermae"
[3] Ronni Le Tekrø on the Boss OD-1 Overdrive: "[*Having*] no tone control is an advantage [*with*] pedals"
[4] Mark Lettieri on the Line 6 M5: "There are loads of sounds I've used countless times, and the synth/filter section is my go-to anytime an artist or producer wants something 'weird'"
[5] George Lynch: "Mine is a very special [*Ibanez TS*]808 Tube Screamer, a second-year Malaysian chip"

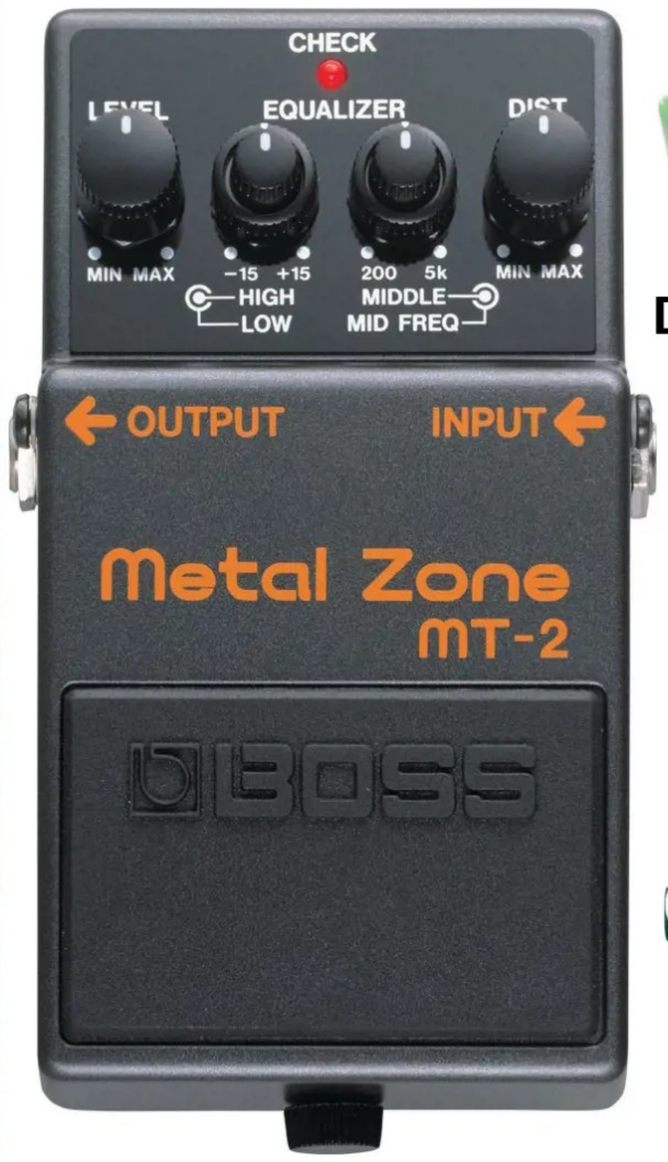
PHIL MANZANERA
DUNLOP FUZZ FACE

"OF COURSE, IT's never about just one pedal. Right from the beginning of me using guitar pedals I would combine with echo. That said, the 1969 Dunlop Fuzz Face is the one because Jimi Hendrix used it. I was just blown away by everything about his playing and look."

STEVE MORSE
TC ELECTRONIC FLASHBACK

"THE DELAY — WHETHER it was my tape echo back in the day, or my Lexicon Prime Time, or my present Flashback delay pedal (with my custom TonePrint parameters) — adds space, air, modulation (on my TonePrint, anyway) and sustain. I originally found that setting the Echoplex tape delay, or any other delay, to output ONLY delay, then putting that through a separate amp gave me undisturbed dry sound and would open up the sound by adding an additional source. I've always used my Ernie Ball volume pedal to











bring in that delay smoothly, as you would with a mixing console fader... and, just as importantly, to reduce the delay smoothly, when a fast passage is being played. I also use a second Flashback delay with the same parameters but set at the smallest possible delay, which gives a very nice stereo chorus as well. But if I forgot my tuning pedal or my channel switcher, I'd drive back home and get them, too!"

SIMON NEIL
BOSS MT-2 METAL ZONE

"IT'S FUNNY; EVEN on recent recordings, I would try every distortion pedal in my collection and on the market, and every time I heard a sound that excited me, it was the Metal Zone. Even after trying to move on and evolve, it's still on top of my list. The combination of that with a Strat does something for me... my sound really comes alive with that pedal. And it's all *because* of the saturation. I've got it within half a millimeter of my exact settings – if one of the knobs gets knocked even slightly, that's my whole sound gone to shit!"

JARED JAMES NICHOLS
IBANEZ TS9 TUBE SCREAMER

"IF THERE IS one guitar pedal that has never left my side, it would be my 1983 TS9. Simply put, when I think of overdriven guitar tone, I think Tube Screamer. I got my first one just three weeks after starting at age 15. I still have it and use it to this day. Ultimate inspiration in a pedal."

ED O'BRIEN
HOLOGRAM ELECTRONICS INFINITE JETS

"I LOVE THIS thing; it's such an amazing synth pedal. It helps create sounds that are really different, the kind of tones where you're never quite sure how you got there, but you did! It's one of those go-to pedals when I need something unusual. It makes my guitar stutter or sound like an accordion with this backwards reverb. It's seriously good!"

ORIANTHI
KLON CENTAUR

"MY FAVORITE AND most-used pedal is probably my old Klon, which I got a long time ago. It can glorify just about any sound. I use it in the studio and



MARK HOLLOWAY/REDFERNS (NEIL)

Biffy Clyro's Simon Neil in action, November 15, 2022

[1] Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera: "The 1969 Dunlop Fuzz Face [*not pictured!*] is the one – because Jimi Hendrix used it"

[5]



[6]



[7]

[8]



"It's perfect for Robin Trower or Jimi Hendrix-y-type stuff, because it sounds just like a Univibe," Zakk Wylde says. "I use it all the time, even on this Pantera tour for tracks like 'Planet Caravan'

live sometimes... especially if I'm sitting in and not bringing my own amp. It can work as either an overdrive or a magical transparent booster. I usually set the gain around one o'clock, treble halfway and output at around one o'clock. You can hear it on recent songs like the RSO track 'Blues Won't Leave Me Alone' and my [*2022*] single, 'Light It Up'."

BRAD PAISLEY
WAMPLER PAISLEY DRIVE DELUXE

"THIS DEFINITELY WOULD be my only desert island pedal. It's a two in one, with my Paisley Drive on one side and then the Wampler Underdog on the other, which has the thickness of a fuzz without being fuzz. It's perfect for the single notes singing-type things. I've done a few last-minute gigs and if I can throw a delay pedal in there with this overdrive, I'm covered."

JOHN PETRUCCI
TC ELECTRONIC MIMIQ DOUBLER

"THIS HAS BEEN my favorite pedal for many years. Although you won't be able to hear it on any of my studio albums, you will absolutely hear it any time you come to see me play live, as well as on Dream Theater's most recent live release, *Distant Memories*. It's become a staple in my touring rig because it's the best pedal for emulating a double-tracked guitar. It randomly offsets the pitch and time of your guitar based on how it detects the picking transients in your playing, so it sounds incredibly natural and convincing. I use two Mesa/Boogie JP-2C heads in stereo and set the Mimiq for one double (it can do up to three) with one head panned hard left and the other hard right. I keep the effect and dry knobs all the way up and set the tightness control very low to where the millisecond offset of the second head is in the range of about seven to 10. I'll never play a live show again without one in my rig."

DIAMOND ROWE
DIGITECH WHAMMY 5

"IT WAS A happy accident that led to my new-found obsession with this. I have always been a shredder at my core, but I love finding ways to make ominous noises or adding dark layers to heavy rhythms. While writing the title track of the last Tetrarch album [*2021's* Unstable] I realized how many cool sounds I could achieve using this one pedal, from high shrieks to low octaves. The most fun thing has been figuring out how to incorporate it in my solos."

[2] Boss MT-2 Metal Zone
[3] Jared James Nichols on the Ibanez TS9: "I got my first one three weeks after starting at age 15. I still have it and use it"
[4] Radiohead's Ed O'Brien: "Infinite Jets is one of those go-to pedals when I need something unusual"
[5] Wampler Paisley Drive Deluxe
[6] Tetrarch's Diamond Rowe: "The most fun thing has been figuring out how to incorporate the Whammy 5 into my solos"
[7] Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail
[8] Kim Thayil: "In the early days of Soundgarden, I often used an Ibanez Stereo Chorus"

JOE SATRIANI
VOX SATRIANI BIG BAD WAH

"BEFORE I DID these signature wahs with Vox, I had a long string of Cry Babys. But I started searching for more of a vintage kind of sound. We changed a few things in the crossover point lower in the mid-range, because I always felt they would lose power there. It also has a drive control and two voices – a vintage one, which is what I mainly use and another that has this really deep sweep. So it's like two or three pedals in one, which is fantastic!"

JAMES "Munky" SHAFFER
ELECTRO-HARMONIX MICRO SYNTH

"THIS HAS BEEN all over some of the recent Korn albums and has become my favorite pedal. It's a great way to layer and add in tractor noises that sound a bit like a monster truck! It just *has* to be in my live rig – I'll tag it into the front and end of songs here



[1]



[2]



[3]

and here, like the beginning of 'Here to Stay.' It's like a Trent Reznor bit-mangled sound with an octave that I add through the parameters, depending where I am on the neck."

JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR
ELECTRO-HARMONIX HOLY GRAIL

"THE ONE I'VE used the most is probably the Holy Grail. I'm not much of a pedal fan, to be honest, but I love me some reverb – and playing vintage Fender Bassmans, I don't have that option. I started using the Holy Grail after Jake [*Kiszka*] from Greta Van Fleet turned me on to it. It's a great authentic reverb, takes up hardly any space on the board and I leave it on for the whole show. Simple and effective."

KIM THAYIL
IBANEZ CS9 STEREO CHORUS

"IN THE EARLY days of Soundgarden, I often used an Ibanez Stereo Chorus. I frequently wrote and played parts containing arpeggios with open strings, harmonics and feedback. The chorus effect would augment these ideas, allowing them to cut through on recordings while giving them a shimmering ambience. In later years I became fond of using Dunlop Cry Baby wahs. During solos, I could generate a bright tone that could scream through Chris [*Cornell's*] rhythm guitar, if he was playing, and Ben [*Shepherd's*] bass distortion, if he was using it. Over time, my left foot was almost as integral to my solos as my left hand... kick out the jams, motherfuckers!"



JIM BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES (THAYIL)

Soundgarden's Kim Thayil shows off his Chris Cornell shirt before performing at Safeco Field (now T-Mobile Park) in Seattle, August 10, 2018

MICK THOMSON
BOSS NS-2 NOISE SUPPRESSOR

"THE BOSS NS-2 is probably the pedal I always need and use the most. It's somehow like an extension of my





[4]



[5]

thoughts and intent. It holds a note until I don't want it to and only very rarely opens unintentionally. If only it didn't dull your tone so noticeably in a studio; you can get away with it when playing at live SPLs [*sound pressure levels*]. Almost perfect..."

DEVIN TOWNSEND
MAXON OD808 OVERDRIVE

"**I COVETED DELAY** pedals in my youth and eventually graduated to dozens of them in my chain at all times, though I'd say the most-used analog pedal for me is the Maxon OD808 Overdrive – set as a clean boost for high-gain amplifiers. The overdrive is on zero, tone at noon and level full. It takes meaty, but 'wooly' sounding amplifiers, like a Rectifier, and tightens everything up, adding compression to the low end and a reliably satisfying 'scrunch.' In fact, it can take amplifiers that previously had no right in producing thrash metal tones, and make them do it convincingly so. I've tried many Tube Screamer-type designs but the Maxon remains my top choice."

MARK TREMONTI
G-LAB SD-1 SMOOTH DELAY

"**MY SIGNATURE MORLEY** wah is my favorite pedal of all time and probably the one I've used most. But one pedal I simply can't live without is my delay. I can't stand going in without it. It feels awkward and my leads have no vibe. I own a ton of delays, but I use the G-Lab. I don't know if they make them anymore, so whenever I find one I'll buy it so I have enough for life."

STEVE VAI
DIGITECH WHAMMY DT

"**MY FAVORITE PEDAL** changes through time, but right now I'd have to say it's my DigiTech Whammy, the DT version. I ended up using it a lot on my *Inviolate* album and the subsequent tour. It's a full and fat-sounding pitch-shifter, and the latency is tolerable. At this moment in time I seem to be addicted to its instant pitch shift interval button! This pedal aids in creating audible illusions that are engaging and seemingly impossible."

TROY VAN LEEUWEN
EVENTIDE H9

"**THE EVENTIDE H9** has so many functions for one small pedal with two buttons. It's very versatile and I use it all the time. It's a digital pedal but I use it for reverbs and delays, stuff like that. There's just something about the way it sounds in front of an amp, with a little bit of dirt dialed in. I don't like using an amp's effects loop; I prefer it all in front. A big, dark reverb will all of a sudden sound that much more menacing... a great pedal!"

[1] Slipknot's Mick Thomson on the Boss NS-2 Noise Suppressor: "It's somehow like an extension of my thoughts and intent"
[2] Alter Bridge's Mark Tremonti: "I own a ton of delays, but I use the G-Lab. I don't know if they make them anymore, so whenever I find one I'll buy it so I have enough for life"
[3] Queens of the Stone Age's Troy Van Leeuwen: "The Eventide H9 has so many functions for one small pedal with two buttons"
[4] Steve Vai: "My favorite pedal changes through time, but right now I'd have to say it's my DigiTech Whammy, the DT version"
[5] Cory Wong: "The settings I use on the Ego are pretty much all of the knobs at noon"

CORY WONG
WAMPLER EGO

"**IT MIGHT SOUND** a little absurd to pick a compressor, because it's not as 'fun' of a pedal, but I've grown to love having one in my chain to help fatten the sound and attack. The settings I use on the Ego are pretty much all of the knobs at noon. If I'm looking for a little more subtle compression and more of a pop sound, I'll dial the blend knob back to around 10 o'clock. Adding a compressor to the front end of the chain really helps the guitar tone and playing to sound that one more level of 'pro.'"

ZAKK WYLDE
DUNLOP ROTOVIBE

"**WHEN YOU THINK** about the three pedals every rock or metal guitar player needs, it will always be an overdrive/distortion, a wah and some kind of modulation. I guess the one that's been on my board for the longest is actually my Rotovibe. It's perfect for Robin Trower or Jimi Hendrix-y-type stuff, because it sounds just like a Univibe. I use it all the time, even on this Pantera tour for tracks like 'Planet Caravan.' It's a great pedal because you can actually control the Leslie speed as well as a few other things... I love it!" GW

THE GREATEST GEAR OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Over two and a half decades worth of the guitars, amps, effects, tech and innovations that changed how we play, listen and create

WORDS BY AMIT SHARMA

LIST COMPILED BY THE EDITORIAL STAFFS OF GUITAR WORLD AND GUITARWORLD.COM
QUOTES COLLECTED BY ANDREW DALY, AMIT SHARMA, JON WIEDERHORN AND DAMIAN FANELLI

A **LOT CAN** happen in 25 years. We've seen digital products go from strength to strength. At the turn of the millennium, such tools were probably best described as sufficient, while even analog purists would be forced to admit that the hardware and software of today is undoubtedly groundbreaking. Overall, the general template for guitar building hasn't changed too drastically, though there has been serious innovation in places, best evidenced by the 2019 arrival of Fender's Acoustasonic line, which blurred the line between electric and acoustic instruments. Similar things can be said in terms of pickup manufacturing; on the surface, it seems like business as usual, but inventions like the Fishman Fluence series have completely reimagined how we go about capturing the sound of strings vibrating through wood. The boutique pedal boom has led to people waiting months (and even years?) for their own custom-built unit, and secondhand overdrives eventually changing hands for several thousands of dollars – something few would have predicted a handful of decades ago.

And then there's been the rise of smart amps – powerful devices small enough to fit into a backpack several times over, many of which coming with an abundance of effects, backing tracks and tools to learn, all controlled via their own dedicated apps. Even smaller parts like bridges and strings have been through various stages of evolution to help players sound bigger and better.

For this roundup, we've selected 50 of the most pioneering releases from the last 25 years, all presented in roughly chronological order. Enjoy!

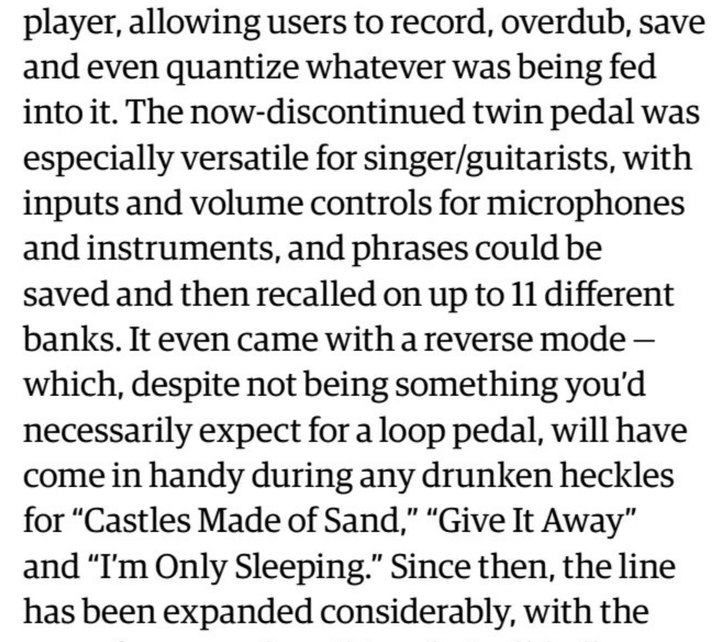
PRS SE Series

After 16 years of making guitars almost every player wanted but few could afford, PRS stunned the world in 2001 with the introduction of the SE series, their very first overseas-made line, which started off with an affordable take on the Carlos Santana signature model. Since then, the range has expanded with Custom 24, McCarty, semi-hollow, hollowbody, extended range and more signature models, almost always sitting as the highest-quality and best-sounding guitars of their price range.

Truth be told, there was still a fair bit of distance between the early SE instruments and the Core series, though in recent years PRS has been narrowing the gap by offering bird inlays, shallow violin carves, quilt tops and higher-grade electronics with switching — all well-considered upgrades to create the PRS "experience" regardless of an instrument's place of birth. Though the guitars were originally made by World Musical Instrument Co. Ltd. in Korea, since 2019 most SE models have been built at the Cor-Tek factory in Indonesia, with acoustics and hollowbody models being manufactured at Cor-Tek's Chinese factory. It's a winning formula that soon turned them into the third-best-selling guitar brand.

Boss RC-20 Loop Station

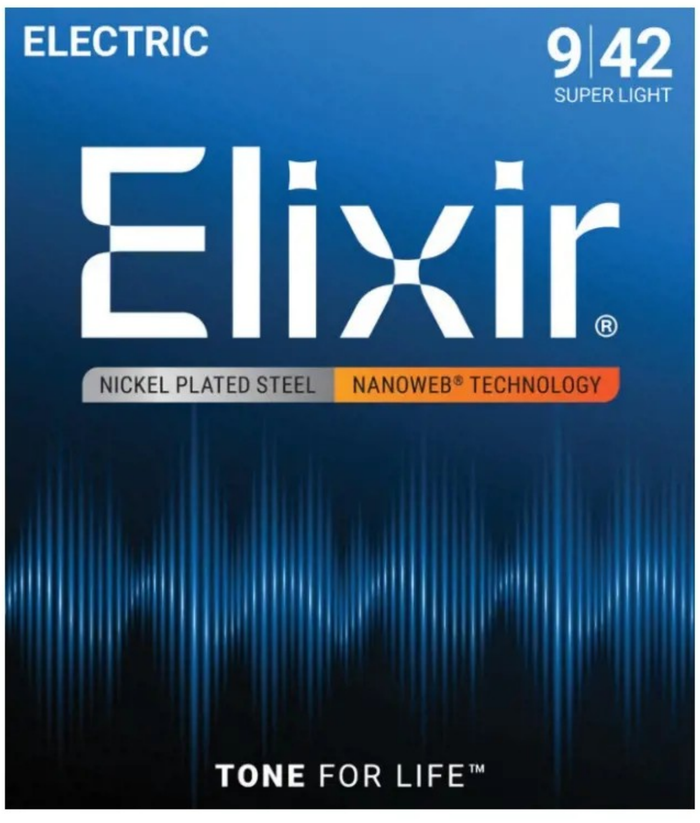
The very first Boss loop station was released in 2001 and changed the game in terms of what could be sonically achieved by one player, allowing users to record, overdub, save and even quantize whatever was being fed into it. The now-discontinued twin pedal was especially versatile for singer/guitarists, with inputs and volume controls for microphones and instruments, and phrases could be saved and then recalled on up to 11 different banks. It even came with a reverse mode — which, despite not being something you'd necessarily expect for a loop pedal, will have come in handy during any drunken heckles for "Castles Made of Sand," "Give It Away" and "I'm Only Sleeping." Since then, the line has been expanded considerably, with the manufacturers describing their all-bells-and-whistles RC-600 as "the most advanced looper on earth."



FUTURE, BOSS, ELIXIR

Elixir Nanoweb Strings

Though Elixir initially launched in 1997 with their ultra-thin polymer-coated strings, it was the arrival of their anti-rust Nanoweb sets four years later that really left its mark on the guitar-playing universe. With most of us tending to prefer the sound of new strings while also being less keen on spending the money and time required to replace each set, the idea of long-life strings that keep their clarity and resonance was always destined to be a big hit. Thanks to the Nanoweb coating, all the sweat and grime would be kept away from the string itself, retaining the higher levels of brightness and sustain you'd expect from a fresh pack.



Notable endorsees have included John Paul Jones, Kaki King, Johnny Hiland and Bernd "Bernth" Brodträger.

Analog Man King of Tone Overdrive

How long would you be prepared to wait for your own custom-made boutique pedal? In the case of Analog Man's King of Tone dual overdrive, the current build time is estimated at around five years. The pedal was launched in November 2003 by Mike Piera, who took inspiration from the Marshall Bluesbreaker overdrive and added in his own modifications, including the internal DIP switches to select varying modes of gain.

It's an incredibly versatile pedal in that sense, famous for its highly dynamic touch-sensitive response at lower levels and more of a full-throated roar when turned up. Famous users over the years have included Noel Gallagher, Brad Whitford, John Petrucci, Samantha Fish, Gary Clark Jr. and Radiohead's Ed O'Brien, which shows how it's the kind of twin drive that can thrive in just about any kind of rig and musical environment.

MIKE PIERA: "I'd been working with Jim Weider from the Band. He liked the sound of his Fender Deluxe Reverb when it was cranked up. César Díaz heavily modified it, and it sounds great, so we tried to create an OD pedal that emulates his amp. He was using an old Ibanez TS-808, but he was tired of the excessive mids, compression and loss of low end. By modifying the Marshall Bluesbreaker (BB), we achieved the sound he wanted and also made it compatible with other amps. It'll make a Vox amp sound like a cranked Vox or a Marshall sound like a cranked Marshall. The way I think of the King of Tone is that it takes any amp and turns it into a four-channel amp (off, yellow, red, both sides)."

JIM WEIDER: "The King of Tone is more of a natural amp breakup compared to other overdrives I've tried. With the yellow channel having a slight amp crunch and the red Channel distortion, I can always count on getting my tone. After years of working on it with Mike Piera — changing caps, selecting the right resistors and countless hours of A/B testing against my Deluxe — I feel we've come up with a pedal you can depend on to get your tone and feel to perform at your best."



Line 6 POD XT

It might look severely outdated all these years later, but the original kidney-bean POD was an





industry-first for bringing high-quality modeling tones to guitarists around the world for relatively little money. In 2002, they unveiled the POD XT, which featured newly updated amps and effects that felt discernibly closer to the real thing, sharing the same kind of technology found in their Vetta amps released the same year. Looking back now, it'd be easy to think these classic Line 6 units were just for bedroom players, but guitarists like Misha Mansoor were using POD products for what would effectively go on to become Periphery. Elsewhere, super producer Trent Reznor was using Vetta amps in Nine Inch Nails, and Weezer even went as far as ditching their tube amps for 2001's Hooptie Tour in favor of the POD Pro rackmount system.

IK Multimedia AmpliTube

You could probably say with a degree of certainty that it's plug-ins in particular that have come the farthest over the last 25 years. IK Multimedia played an instrumental role in that journey, having launched AmpliTube in 2002 as a standalone amp- and effects-modeling software platform. Since then, they've put out signature collections for Joe Satriani, Brian May, Alex Lifeson and Dimebag Darrell — giving users the chance to emulate the tones of their biggest heroes for relatively little money. The latest version, AmpliTube 5, was released in 2020; the company even came out with a free version, AmpliTube 5 CS, downsized for beginners and players with less to spend.



FUTURE, EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS, LINE 6



Apple GarageBand

Released in 2004 as a more user-friendly, lightweight and free alternative to their Logic Pro flagship, GarageBand was responsible for getting new generations of music creators into the art of production. And though it lacked the depth and control of its bigger brother, it was a wonderfully convenient entry point for those looking to expand their knowledge on recording, looping and mixing — turning any bedroom with an Apple computer into a highly functional digital studio. John Mayer joined Steve Jobs on stage for the launch, giving the world its first taste of the revolutionary DAW's potential, armed with some keyboards and a Jimi Hendrix Monterey Strat. He later noted how the software had "brought music composition and production into the lives of millions of people who might have never had access to it otherwise," praising GarageBand as "Steve's way of giving people the tools to discover the music within themselves." Other musicians who have used the software to demo — and even create final versions of their tracks — include Trent Reznor, Danielle Haim and St. Vincent.

Electro-Harmonix POG and 9 Series Pedals

Given its legendary status as a cult classic, it's almost hard to believe that the Electro-Harmonix POG was only first introduced in 2005; it's the kind of pedal that feels like it's been around a lot longer. The Polyphonic Octave Generator, made by the New York City company founded by Mike Matthews in 1968, has been used by everyone from Jack White and John Frusciante to Josh Homme and Joe Satriani, and in more recent years we've seen Royal Blood frontman Mike Kerr using one to turn his bass into a guitar, with unquestionable results. Last year, the company announced a new flagship version, the POG3, to deliver lightning-fast tracking and perfect polyphony over four octaves, covering a whole host of 12-string, baritone and organ sounds. The 9 series has been successful for similar reasons, giving guitarists an opportunity to turn their instrument into a synth, piano, choir, flute, sax or even an entire orchestra.







JOE SATRIANI: "The POG can make your guitar sound like Jon Lord playing his organ through a Marshall 1959 stack with everything on 10! It has its subtleties, but I use it for its brutal intensity. When you hear the pedal's tone generation, you can't help but be inspired to create new riffs and chord voicings. There's nothing quite like it; it's as simple as that. It instantly transforms the sound of your guitar into something bigger. EHX has a long history of creating game-changing devices; it's in their DNA."

Fractal Audio Axe-Fx

The analog-versus-digital debate wasn't really much of a debate until 2006, when Fractal Audio released the first Axe-Fx — a modeling processor that sounded virtually as good as the gear it was cleverly emulating. It didn't take long for guitar giants such as Steve Vai, John Petrucci, Dave Mustaine and Phil Collen to incorporate the technology into their live rigs, with James Hetfield, Kirk Hammett and Guthrie Govan even professing to have used Fractal gear to make albums in the studio. And it's not just the high-gain players who have embraced the company's innovations; John Mayer shocked the world by admitting he'd used an Axe-Fx alongside his favored Dumbles on his 2021 album, *Sob Rock*, while elsewhere units have been spotted on stage behind the Edge, Keith Urban and Mike Dawes.

DEVIN TOWNSEND: "Axe-Fx puts all the struggle of solving how to route your patches with an analog gear into a reasonably simple, compact and infinitely tweakable package. It may not be as 'sexy' as analog gear, and if you have no need for extensive effects or patch switching, it might not be for you. But for me and my workflow, I've invested a ton of time into learning the technology, and it pays big dividends. I'd still be in the same place if it didn't exist — only with a lot more patch cables."



AARON MARSHALL (INTERVALS): "Axe-Fx has been the most consistent modeler of its class/kind over the last 25 years. Cliff Chase's approach to modeling is more in-depth and accurate — in my opinion! — than Fractal's competitors. The Axe-Fx is the only modeler I know of where dialing in an amp isn't about aiming for approximations



of sounds using a limited range of curated controls. It's about sitting with the amp manufacturer's official manual, applying those concepts to the model inside the Axe-Fx and achieving the exact results you'd get if you were dialing in the real amp. Between that level of accuracy and the front-end feel being shockingly indistinguishable at times, there really isn't much more to say."

Orange Tiny Terror

Anyone who's toured with an Orange head or cab will tell you, they can be weighty beasts indeed – sonically and physically. Which is perhaps why the introduction of the Tiny Terror series in 2006 was such a big hit, and helped popularize the "small but mighty" concept of lunchbox amps internationally for the industry as a whole. In the years that followed, the British company released the twin-channel Dual Terror, the metal-voiced Dark Terror and the miniature Micro Terror, as well as signature versions for Slipknot guitarist Jim Root and ex-Mastodon six-stringer Brent Hinds, who sadly passed away in August.

EVH 5150 III 100W head

Though the 5150 name stretches as far back as the early Nineties, when Eddie Van Halen famously partnered up with Peavey for his own amp line referencing a beloved 1986 Van Halen album, the series was reborn in 2007 through a deal with Fender for the all-new EVH range. These Mark III amps quickly struck a chord with high-gain players, with the likes of Scott Ian, Joe Duplantier and Wes Borland depending on the earth-conquering 100-watt heads live and in the studio. With a lineup that now includes EL34 and 6L6 power tubes and lower-watt combos, they've become one of the most highly regarded go-to amps for modern metal. In 2021, a year after the rock virtuoso's passing, EVH expanded the 5150 series with the Iconic line, which was co-designed with original 5150 engineer James Brown.



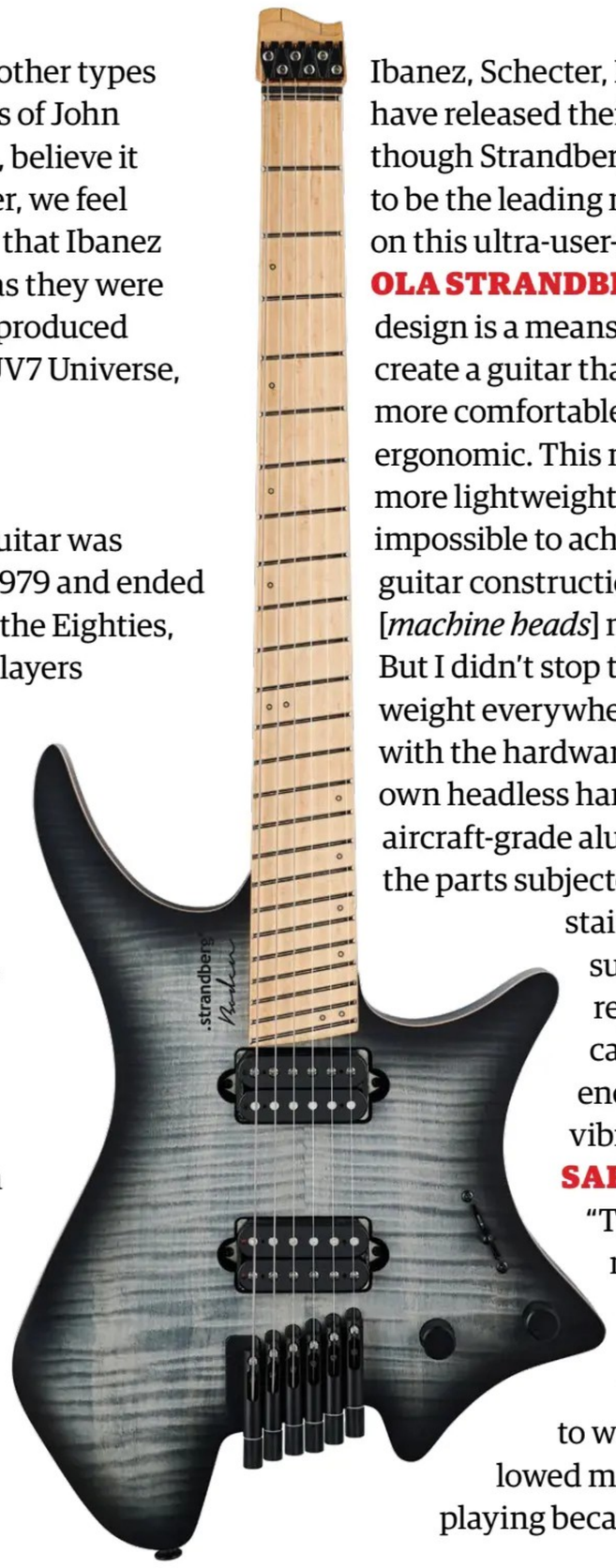
Ibanez RG2228

The world's first mass-produced eight-string electric was unveiled by Ibanez in 2007, and it'd be fair to say things haven't been quite the same ever since, with other companies like Jackson, Schecter and ESP jumping on the bandwagon soon after. This initial run of extended-range instruments from Ibanez ended up being popularized by tech-metal giants such as Meshuggah guitarists Fredrik Thordendal and Mårten Hagström, Tosin Abasi, Dino Cazares and Misha Mansoor –

and since then, we've seen other types of eight-strings in the hands of John Petrucci, Matt Bellamy and, believe it or not, John Mayer. However, we feel it's important to remember that Ibanez was first on the scene, just as they were with the world's first mass-produced seven-string — Steve Vai's UV7 Universe, launched in 1990.

Strandberg Boden

The world's first headless guitar was released by Steinberger in 1979 and ended up becoming a hallmark of the Eighties, ending up in the hands of players like Allan Holdsworth, Eddie Van Halen and Mark Knopfler. When the decade came to an end, however, these instruments practically disappeared into obscurity. That is, until Swedish engineer Ola Strandberg started building his first ergonomic guitars in 2007, with models like the Boden signaling a new dawn for headless instruments, which led to artists like Plini, Per Nilsson and Jordan Rudess signing up to endorse them. Since then, other companies — including Ibanez, Schecter, Kiesel and Mayones — have released their own headless designs, though Strandberg are widely considered to be the leading modern-day specialists on this ultra-user-friendly style of guitar.



FUTURE

OLA STRANDBERG: "The headless design is a means to an end. I set out to create a guitar that would be easier and more comfortable to play, by being more ergonomic. This means making the guitar more lightweight and balanced, which is impossible to achieve with a conventional guitar construction that relies on heavy [*machine heads*] mounted to a headstock. But I didn't stop there. I chased lower weight everywhere I could find it, starting with the hardware itself. I designed my own headless hardware out of lightweight aircraft-grade aluminum, keeping only the parts subjected to wear and tear in stainless steel and making sure they were easy to replace. I was also very careful to maximize the energy transfer from the vibrating strings."

SARAH LONGFIELD: "The Boden is so much more comfortable to play than other guitars. It's lightweight, great to travel with and inspiring to write with. I'd say it's allowed me to push the limits of my playing because I'm not restricted in literally any way, thanks to the design choices that went into it."



MXR Carbon Copy Delay

Much like the POG, the Carbon Copy is the kind of pedal that feels like it's been around for a lot longer than it actually has. The MXR pedal was unveiled in 2008 and played a huge role in renewing the popularity of analog delay circuits, with the dark lo-fi tones of the bucket brigade repeats adding an ambience that did not distract from the notes that followed. The term bucket brigade device

III's a Charm

Wolfgang Van Halen and EVH's Matt Bruck revisit the trial-by-fire development of the EVH 5150 III 100w head — and salute its legacy

BY ANDREW DALY

WOLFGANG VAN HALEN was only 16 when the EVH 5150 III dropped in 2007. Since then, the guitar amp his father Edward made famous has become a huge success. With that, Wolfgang has made an observation, telling *GW*, "I feel like you can't be in a metal band without at least having a 5150 or using a ripoff of some sort."



CHUCK BRUECKMANN

"It's one of the most successful amp brands of all time," adds Matt Bruck, the man who helped EVH develop the amp. "The legacy continues. We were incredibly fortunate to have Ed for the time that we had him. I'm humbled and honored by what it is, but I'm not surprised."

"There's a lot of pride involved," says Van Halen, who plays 5150 IIIs live and in the studio. "I certainly have no problem representing and using it at every opportunity. The amp is really Matt and my dad's baby. I'm just happy to be here and see it happen."

What do you remember about how this amp was put together?

Bruck: The process was long and difficult, because the amp was reimagined from the ground up, which meant we had to establish a new foundation to build up from. This meant a new chassis and formulating the transformers, which are amazing, built like a tank and over spec'ed — the way they should be if you're going for something great.

Van Halen: I remember Dad testing it up in the studio. You could hear it from the bottom of the house, this slight feedback. As you went up toward the studio, it started to get louder. Then you opened the door to the first room, and it was a little louder. When you opened the door to where the guitar was, there was a guitar sitting there, with every knob pinned, feeding back. He literally kept it there for a week, just to crash test it and make sure it didn't explode. [*Laughs*] I think that's the most rigorous testing an amp could go through.

Bruck: I wrote down all this shit so I'd have some facts, but I forgot about the story Wolf just told. I'm so happy he laid it out because it's true. We were just getting to the end of development, which took about a year and three quarters, and the last phase was called "crash testing."

Was "crash testing" a phrase Eddie coined, so to speak?

Bruck: It was where he would just try to destroy a piece of equipment. [*Laughs*] It was so when it went to market, it would be reliable. He just dimed the thing, left it leaning against the cabinet and created this eternal feedback loop. I was terrified the place was going to burn down.

What was Eddie's reaction to that?

Bruck: I was saying, "It's going to get hot. It's going to explode. We're going to have a fire." He was like, "Don't worry about it. We'll see how long it goes." After about five days, he was like, "Okay, it passed the test." That gives you insight into the uncanny genius and how much of an outside-the-box thinker Ed was.

Van Halen: It was like Dad's version of how they test video game controllers — where they have a robot pressing a button three million times before it breaks. It was the amp version of that. [*Laughs*]

continued on page 102



(BBD) came from how firefighters would pass buckets down a line to extinguish a fire, with a certain amount of spillage and time lost with each handover. In pedal topology, it refers to how continuous filling and emptying of capacitors inside the BBD chip slow down and change the character of the signal, causing a delay as it passes through.



YVETTE YOUNG: "I became acquainted with the Carbon Copy while recording the first Covet record, *Effloresce*. My MXR rep at the time recommended it, and I love how the repeats sound — so rich and warm, especially when switched on bright. It's a quintessential part of the Covet sound now, with any riff that involves a pronounced cascading delay."

Charvel USA Pro-Mod San Dimas Style 1, Style 2 and So-Cal Style 1

Back in 2008, Charvel announced the return of some of their American-made classics, and it didn't take long for people to marvel at the quality of builds and tones. Superstrat fans delighted in the San Dimas Style 1 and So-Cal Style 1, which came with DiMarzio humbuckers and a top-mounted Floyd Rose tremolo, while those more comfortable with a Tele shape could find similar features on the San Dimas Style 2. These guitars are now manufactured overseas and continue to do well, though it's the USA models from the years around the initial release that really left their mark on shredders all around the world.



ANGEL VIVALDI: "After eight years with Ibanez, I was looking for a new home, and was sent a few Jacksons and a Charvel. I wasn't expecting the Charvel to resonate as much as it did, but it just felt right in my hands. That Charvel created a domino effect in terms of what I looked for. It was a balance of classic and modern specs, which was an ethos I carried in designing my signature Charvel Nova models."

Fender Jim Root Telecaster and Jazzmaster

Though he started his career in Slipknot playing Jackson and PRS guitars, it was the group's third album released in 2004 that saw Jim Root embracing classic Fender designs. This led to the launch of his first signature model, the Jim Root Telecaster in 2007, which was later followed by his own Jazzmaster signature in 2014. At a time when most metal players were using modern-style instruments, some might say the Slipknot guitarist helped kickstart a trend of high-gain players using traditional shapes and offsets.

"When you first pick up a Tele or a Jazzmaster, you're not sitting there thinking about doing neoclassical scales or shredding, per se," Root told us last year. "But the more you play them, the more you start doing that kind of stuff. And then if you play the songs that are in your set that do have solos, it's like, "Wow! They kind of rip!"

Mooer Mini Pedals

The arrival of Mooer in 2010 signaled the beginning of the Chinese pedal boom, with quality parts and tones coming at a fraction of the usual price. Their Micro pedals were also popular for taking up very little pedalboard real estate, allowing guitarists to have almost double the amount of tonal options at their feet. The Shenzhen-based electronics brand took that concept even further in 2013 with the Spark series — a basic footswitch

CHARVEL, FUTURE, JESSE GRANT/GETTY IMAGES

What went into voicing the 5150 III?
Bruck: People don't talk enough about what it takes to voice a circuit — you know, the proper this, the proper that — and the gain boosting of the circuit. Ed was brilliant at it, and it was very instinctively led; he wasn't a mechanical engineer. Transformers are the heart and soul of an amp. And more important than anything, having our own spec of transformer — that's the only way.

Please explain the role of the amp's transformers.
Bruck: In a 5150, the transformers are important because voicing is important to the quality and purity. Use crap, and you'll get crap. Use high quality and you'll get high quality. Once we established the transformers and basic circuit, it was an endless cycle of sound testing and revisions. Ed would play, listen and render his opinion of what it needed, what it had, what he wanted and so on. The electrical engineers from Fender R&D would go back and work on it and render circuit revisions based on Ed's notes, then bring it back for him to play and test again. That cycle of play, evaluate, deliver notes, render revisions was like rinse and repeat about 700 times. We were developing the 5150-III 4x12 cab at the same time, with a lot of thought and experimentation going into the cab. The same play, test, revise exercise was used for the cab until we nailed it, so there was double duty going on.

The voice of the 5150 III is now everywhere you look.
Van Halen: I'm out here opening for Mark Tremonti, and I let him borrow one of my 50-watt amps for the Alter Bridge writing sessions. He and Myles Kennedy said they loved it so much and were like, "We need that." Mark has one now. He loved it so much that he put it into his setup with Creed.
Bruck: Wolf pulls it forward into "Gen. 2 Van Halen." It had done its thing with his dad, and here we are in the second generation. Every record Wolf has made has been with a 5150 III.

Did the success of the 5150 III surprise you?
Bruck: I wouldn't say I was surprised, but I'm always measured whenever we do anything. I'm proud as can be over the longevity and success it's had. When you think about things Eddie Van Halen did, the way he touched people, he shared a lot of magic with us during his time here.
Van Halen: I see people play it every place I go; for instance, I saw that Gojira had a wall of them on both sides. It's just so sick. And I'll never forget when people were unsure if Fredrik Thordendal was going to be on the newest Meshuggah album, and then they made an in-the-studio post of a 5150 III. It's so cool that my favorite bands are like, "Yeah, we need this."

Why do you feel the 5150 III has endured?
Van Halen: It just sounds so fucking good. [*Laughs*] And it's so easy to make it sound good. It's as simple as that. It's plug and play.
Bruck: I'd nominate the incredible clean tones Wolf's achieved on record on that amplifier. Even I was like, "That's the clean channel?" Wolf spends most of his time in the blue channel and solos in the red channel, but it's versatile. The clean tones on that amp are really good.

Does the 5150 III's versatility still surprise you, and have you tried to push it to new places?
Van Halen: I'm not one to try and outdo my dad in terms of innovation. I'm just happy to be here and do things that make me happy and bring me purpose, but not having to worry in terms of how it's going to sound is a wonderful thing.

How do you view the legacy of the 5150 III?
Bruck: On the Mount Rushmore of all-time greatest amps, there's a 5150 III.
Van Halen: When you see people with Kempers and modelers; nine times out of 10, it's some sort of bullshit with a name like "Unchained Tone" or "Meanest Streets." [*Laughs*] Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.
Bruck: While it was difficult and immensely challenging, I think everyone that worked on the 5150 III found incredible gratification at the success, the amp and its offspring have achieved since it was released in 2007. Ed had a few more ideas for things he wanted to do with the 5150 III when he passed, and we are most definitely working on those as we speak.



'Casting a Long Shadow

Slipknot's Jim Root on the signature-model Fender Telecaster that *no one* saw coming

BY ANDREW DALY

FENDER TELECASTERS AREN'T generally associated with heavy metal, but that didn't stop Slipknot's Jim Root from slapping his name on one in 2010. The result was a guitar that enraged purists but was beloved by metalheads. Most importantly, Root loves it, too. "It doesn't matter what producer we're with," he says. "Every time we record, as soon as I play the white Tele, they're like, 'That's the one.' I don't know what it is, but whoever selected the wood for that guitar did a great job. It's not a Slipknot theme or a Jim Root theme. It's just a classic workhorse that makes you want to play it."

According to the *GW* gang, your signature Tele is one of the 50 most important pieces of gear of the last 25 years.
That's wild. I still think of myself as a kid from Iowa trying to make it. In some way, it's a level of validation that what we do matters. It's a weird dream, because when you see iconic shapes of guitars, you automatically put them with an artist. I don't know if I'm at that level, but I guess if somebody sees a black and white Tele, that'd probably automatically go to me.

How did your Fender collaboration happen?
I was endorsed by the Fender Custom Shop, and they wanted to push me toward Charvel. Their prototypes weren't landing, so I talked to Alex Perez [*from Fender's research and development team*] — who, if it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't be a Fender artist — and I said, "Can we just come back to the Fender side of things?"

Why a Tele?
Just the juxtaposition of the Tele — and the purists will probably cringe — but just something you wouldn't expect. If I walked on stage with a Jackson or B.C. Rich, that would be typical, so I wanted to take something classic and iconic and make it functional for what I do.

Was Fender immediately up for it?
I told that to Alex, and he was all about it. And I think Fender, at the time, needed something to, not erase the stigma of being an iconic, older company, but bring them into more modern times. It made sense, and Fender was down. I got lucky. The stars aligned!

What went into your Tele's design?
I wanted to be minimalist with it. I almost thought about trying to see if we could lose the pickguard, but I wanted it to be traditional looking. I went with the modern string-through, hardtail bridge and the EMG pickups I was already using. I wanted it to be a workhorse I could bash around, beat up, hit with metal pipes and get thrown into kegs without breaking in half. [*Laughs*] I wanted the fretboard radius as flat as possible, since I was fond of the Charvels and Jacksons I grew up playing.

Were you happy with it right away?
When I got the first two prototypes, I had the white and the black, and I'm still using them. They felt comfortable, hung just right off my shoulder, and the ease of playability was great for grinds, breakdowns and complicated chord movements, as well as some soloing.

What makes your Tele more than just a guitar with a name on the headstock?
I didn't want to put out a guitar with a bunch of tribal S's and my Slipknot number on it somewhere. One of the things we talked about was having my name on the back of the headstock, so if someone is in a country, hard rock, indie or pop band, they wouldn't be scared off by the guitar.

Is that why your Tele has had longevity?
The classics never go out of style. That was my philosophy with the guitar. Trends come and go, but true things stay iconic forever. People gravitate toward it because it's a classic shape that has inspired people. That rings true today.



with mini knobs by the connection points at the top — and have since expanded into instruments, amps, multi-effects and audio interfaces. It hasn't all been smooth sailing, however. In 2019 it was reported that Electro-Harmonix had won a long court case against Mooer, citing that their Mooergan and Tender Octaver pedals were exact copies of their C9 Organ Machine and Micro POG.

GARY HOLT: "I've got the Mooer 005 Brown Sound 3 dual-channel pre-amp, which is a 5150 Micro pedal that fits in your pocket. I've plugged it into the effects return of a Marshall Jubilee combo, and it's so crushing. I sent a video of it to Scott Ian, and I said, "Check this out, dude!" And when we did the final Slayer show in Santiago, Chile, for 60,000 people, Scott used it as his primary tone — this little Mooer pedal!"

Two Notes Torpedo VB-101

Home recording for tube-amp purists got a lot easier when French company Two Notes released their Torpedo VB-101 studio rack in 2010. The speaker and microphone simulator allowed users to plug in their amplifiers direct for silent mic'ing, with control over the usual parameters such as the choice of speaker and microphone, as well as the placement of that microphone. It would kickstart a whole wave of impulse response devices, saving time and money by streamlining the recording process with dependable studio-grade results. Two Notes would continue to innovate in this field with reactive load box products like the Torpedo Reload and Torpedo Captor, which also boasted attenuation technology for those



EverTune Bridge



Aftermarket bridges have been around for decades, though it's the EverTune units that have really stolen the show over the last 15 years. It's a mechanical system of springs and levers designed to keep your instrument in tune under any conditions while maintaining constant tension. Naturally, it's the kind of thing that comes in handy and saves countless hours in the studio, though more and more artists have been seen using the EverTune live on stage, from Brian "Head" Welch and Matt Heafy to Steve Stevens and Devin Townsend. At the end of the day, it really doesn't matter how good you are if your guitar isn't in tune, right?



DIAMOND ROWE (TETRARCH): "We play six-string guitars, but our main tuning is drop A, which is relatively low, especially for a six-string that isn't a baritone. The EverTune makes everything so much more stable as far as tuning and string tension, which is such a huge help in the studio and live. With each passing year, I see more and more people with these bridges, and with the rollout of the bass bridge, I think it's game over."

TC Electronic PolyTune



Until the PolyTune came along in 2010, it'd be fair to say that the Boss TU pedals were the industry standard for floor tuners. What set the revolutionary TC Electronic device apart, however, was the ability to check all six strings with one single strum at any given time, saving precious seconds on stage while under the unwavering glare of any crowd. With users no longer required to check each string individually, the pedal naturally ended becoming a best-seller for the company, and its success has continued through its various incarnations including mini versions, clip-ons, darker Noir enclosures, apps and plug-ins.

TREY GUNN: "I was searching online for clip-on tuners and came across the PolyTune. It's the only tuner I use! I have one clipped onto all of my main instruments. It's ridiculous how well the 'poly' part works; for my instrument, the poly isn't relevant since I don't have any open strings. But just using it as a regular tuner, it's super accurate — and my favorite."

Martin LX1 Little Martin and Taylor GS Mini

Travel guitars have become a thing over the last few decades, with artists like Ed Sheeran, Damon Albarn and Taylor Swift being known to use mini acoustics on stage and in the studio. They're the perfect instruments for tour-bus jams, backstage warmups, busking or even just to have lying around in the living room. Naturally, the biggest brands in the acoustic world were quick to put out models that could produce big tones in petite packages — both of these featuring sitka spruce tops, with the main differences being the material used for the neck, back and sides, scale length and fingerboard.



ED SHEERAN (IN 2013): "I had been playing this same model [*Martin LX1E*] for six years, carrying it on public transport, sleeping at friends' houses. Carrying a huge case never appealed to me; I just put it all in a rucksack and had everything in one bag. I played small-ish venues then, so I didn't need a big sound. But the bigger the venues got, I realized I could play arenas and stadiums with this guitar. It has a huge sound. It's done everything I've needed it to do."



Snark headstock tuner



The first Intellitouch headstock tuners arrived in the Nineties, measuring sound with a contact microphone that sensed vibrations from the wood in order to show the user how far off they were from any desired pitch. Companies like Boss and Korg then came into the picture, making the units smaller and the displays larger and brighter, though it didn't feel like clip-ons posed a threat to floor or rack tuners till the 2010 arrival of Snark tuners. They were highly accurate and didn't distract as much from the instrument in our hands. They've since launched Snark Rechargeable, Snark Super Tight and Snark Air — the latter of which remains hidden behind the headstock, leaving audiences unaware of your diligence.

FUTURE, MARIANO REGIDOR/REDFERNS, MARTIN, SNARK



Kemper Profiler

The Axe-Fx did a lot to change perceptions about digital gear, but for some guitarists, it was a little too in-depth and challenging to navigate. Kemper debuted their Profiler at NAMM 2011 and it immediately made waves for being more vintage-inspired, at least at surface level. The technology inside was in fact quite the opposite and incredibly forward-thinking, allowing guitarists to create "profiles" or captures of existing amps by sending a series of blips and beeps out, then measuring the response to create a digital replica. With an assortment of effects and more storage space than any guitarist could ever possibly need, it soon joined Axe-Fx at the very forefront of the digital revolution and remains one of the market leaders to this day.



Famous users over the years have included Tony Iommi, Pat Metheny, Cory Wong and Steve Lukather.

MICHAEL WILTON (QUEENSRŸCHE): "Kemper is the best of the 'box units.' It's a sophisticated analyzer that copies your amplifier sound(s). The big difference for me is consistency. That is key, and it's the game-changer for being on tour. For the touring musician, it's a complete no-brainer. Back in the heyday we had huge touring budgets and room for large travel rigs. Now you can store all your best amps on a USB stick. This allows you to load and unload on any Kemper. It gives complete consistency of the sound for fans."

TC Electronic TonePrints

Danish company TC Electronic became front-runners in the smartphone age, thanks to the TonePrint series launched in 2011, which allowed users to beam artist and custom presents from their phones and into dedicated delay, reverb, chorus, flanger and vibrato pedals on the board. By signing up players as esteemed as Robben Ford, Albert Lee, John Petrucci, Paul Gilbert, Joe Perry, Orianthi and Steve Morse to design their own



tones, users were able to gain instant access to the sounds of the world's greatest guitarists. In 2020, the concept was taken a step further with the introduction of the Plethora X5, a multi-effects unit with five blanket virtual pedals that users could switch in and out at their pleasure. Its success led to the launch of the X3 in 2022 and this year's single footswitch "Swiss army knife" X1 version.

STEVE MORSE: "Tore Mogensen [*formerly with TC Electronic*] worked with me to get a TonePrint that would work well with a short delay (like a chorus setting) and a longer, repeating one. Being able to load a nice reverse sound effect into one allowed me to recreate some of the reverse effects from our recordings. It's nice that they always include a way to loop – for a quick jam session on your own... The ability to choose a carefully tailored custom TonePrint and turn it into an inexpensive, great-sounding pedal makes it a no-brainer to have."



Yamaha THR

Named after the concept of a third amp – its designers noting how musicians would have a main tube stack for larger stages and a combo for small venues and rehearsals – the THR series was launched in 2011 as a desktop answer to amplification, providing big tones at low volumes. Users could choose between Clean, Crunch, Lead, Brit Hi and Modern channels, and also switch between a number of effects including delay, reverb, tremolo, chorus, phaser and flanger. Another big part of the appeal was the vintage aesthetic, with faux tube lights glowing within the metal grille – when in actuality it was Yamaha's Virtual Circuitry Modeling technology at the core of the tone.

"Each model is based on a real amp, but they're all modified," said Yamaha Global Guitar Strategy Manager Julian Ward at the time of release. "It's not a copy of that amp; it's our version. It's a bit like boutique-amp manufacturers. They were modifying circuits with physical components and a soldering iron. We're effectively doing the same thing with software."

Strymon BigSky Reverb

It almost feels like reverb pedals were just humble reverb pedals until the BigSky came along in 2013, ushering in a new era of pro-studio quality reverb units that sounded as gargantuan as they did pristine. The days of choosing between spring and plate were clearly long gone: this floor-based workstation coming with more options than ever, ranging from the classic and traditional to the ultra experimental and ambient. The BigSky also boasted hundreds of customizable preset slots, MIDI and USB functionality, a dedicated infinite/freeze footswitch for creating atmospheric pads to play over and even the

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option to use two reverbs at the same time. There was a good while where the BigSky and Timeline delay, released in 2011, were the cream of the crop go-to pedals for time-based effects on any professional's board.

BLAKE LEE (LANA DEL REY): "I was at Electric Lady Studios working with Lana, looking at clips of the pedal, and she said, 'We need that!' We ordered one and used it while writing 'Cruel World.' It's really easy to use for the amount of sounds it can give you, and the Cloud and Bloom settings are inspiring. The BigSky has many high-quality reverbs in a compact package, and it can transition from subtle verb to smear and obscurity very quickly."

DigiTech Drop

DigiTech has produced a number of designs over the years, but let's face it, the Whammy will always be their greatest creation. In 2014, they reimagined some of the core features encased within their bestseller as a smaller-sized stompbox in place of the original expression pedal design. It quickly made headlines for its smooth and natural polyphonic tracking that could take players from one semitone to one whole octave down, as well as a momentary/latching switch for new sonic textures that could be used as a rhythmic effect. With its fast reaction time and realistic pitch-shifting, it struck a chord with guitarists looking to create baritone and seven-string sounds without wanting the hassle of traveling with one.



Fishman Fluence Pickups

In all fairness, pickups haven't evolved all that much since Seymour Duncan and DiMarzio started building aftermarket units for players on the hunt for new tonal horizons. Some are vintage-voiced and passive while others might be scooped and modernistic using an active circuit, with varying degrees of brightness and power in between, though it's all been relatively the same kind of technology. That all changed in 2014 when Fishman — a company highly lauded in the acoustic world for their pickups and amps — decided to move into the electric field with their all-new Fluence line, consisting of one single-coil set and a choice between Classic or Modern humbuckers. Instead of using the traditional wire-wound coils that are susceptible to the manufacturing tolerances and tonal inconsistencies, their designs incorporate a combination of new technologies including Fluence Core "coils" and true Multi-Voice electronics, benefiting from the same kind of quality control you get with 3D printing. Since then they've released signature sets for the likes of Mick Thomson, Tosin Abasi, Devin Townsend, Stephen Carpenter and Tim Henson, stealing some of the thunder from active-circuit specialists EMG.



JENNIFER BATTEN: "I was using — and later demoing — the Fishman TriplePlay MIDI system, so I got to know the Fishman staff. Then, hearing about how quiet the pickups are was intriguing; finally, knowing that Greg Koch uses them exclusively made me dip my toe in the water. He's always got a killer, fat, beefy tone. He tours with a big casket-sized guitar case with a Tele, Strat and Les Paul, which are all stocked with Fishmans. Anyone who has ever had miserable buzzing through their pickups in a club with crap electric would be impressed by these. I've had that club noise ruin entire nights for me. Ground lifts and various hum eliminators rarely work, but the pickups do. The happier you are with your sound, the easier it is to create without fighting the sonic elements. I really like the Modern in the bridge plus Fishman's Strat singles HSS combination. The modern breaks up in a really pleasing way, and I'm super happy with it on recordings. I'm really doing a deep dive into the modeling world, combined with IEMs."

Blackstar Fly 3 Mini Amp

It would be fair to say until the Fly 3 arrived in 2014, mini amps were quiet and sterile-sounding tools that didn't make practice all that fun. Blackstar, however, had other ideas and designed something that was impressively loud for three Watts — with two channels, tape delay and their patented Infinite Shape Feature (ISF) to fine-tune your sound accordingly. Since then, it's been a big hit in dressing rooms and tour buses around the world — the perfect portable warm-up tool for any kind of guitarist before they hit the stage. As well as versions for bass, acoustic and Bluetooth, they've also released signature runs for artists like Def Leppard, Jared James Nichols, the Dead Daisies and Bones UK.





DOUG ALDRICH (THE DEAD DAISIES): "I love that it's battery-powered, so it's easy to take anywhere. It's super lightweight and sounds better than anything I've heard like it. The sounds out of this amp are amazing and truly give you the sound of a big back-line amp. For practice, the clean channel is perfect; it has a tiny kind of compression, and you can really work on things. Its sounds have kept me occupied for hours in a hotel room, and I've used it for years to write songs."

FUTURE, FISHMAN

ToneWoodAmp and Yamaha TransAcoustic

Some might say adding effects to an acoustic guitar will end up being a distraction from the acoustic experience as a whole. That's fair enough; there are plenty of people out there who just want to strum without needing to plug anything in. Which is precisely why the ToneWoodAmp, released in 2014, was such a brilliant invention and ended up receiving a big thumbs-up from players like Andy McKee, Mike Dawes and Larry Mitchell. A non-invasive unit attaching to the back of any acoustic using an internal magnetic X-brace, it could add effects like reverb, delay and tremolo to the guitar's natural sound. Two years later, Yamaha announced their first TransAcoustic model, which came with built-in reverb and chorus, thus giving users another way of hearing effects without the need to plug anything in.



MIKE DAWES: "The concept of getting essentially wireless reverb and other effects to emerge from the sound hole of my favorite guitar was something I'd never considered, and it's been a total creative game-changer. It's just better and easier, honestly. I can stay on my couch, or on tour in a hotel away from my nice studio gear. I can get studio-grade effects anywhere, and because I'm often travelling, it's just perfect for me. It's also great for writing, as you'd imagine, as it's always ready to accompany inspiration."





Ernie Ball Music Man St. Vincent Signature

Though St. Vincent's signature model is technically a gender-neutral affair, it made waves in 2015 for being the first guitar designed from the perspective of a female player. "For me a guitar that is not too heavy is really important because I'm not a very big person," she told *Guitar World* not long after the launch. "I can't even play a Sixties Strat or Seventies Les Paul. I would need to travel with a chiropractor on tour in order to play those guitars." In the same interview, she revealed how most guitars would "cut across one of the best features of the female body, which is your waist" and why she was "glad that another guitar exists that is sympathetic to the female form," bringing her great pride in her role as "a beacon for women." The St. Vincent line has gone from strength to strength with various updates since its launch, and it has ended up in the hands of Tom Morello, J Mascis, Emily Roberts, Mateus Asato, Willow Smith and — most impressively — Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel.



Line 6 Helix and HX Stomp

Announced in 2015, the Helix series was Line 6's way of declaring they were not going to get left behind in the modeling phenomenon they were instrumental in pioneering. The breakthrough HX engine boasted dual-DSP processing to deliver a level of realism that the company had never achieved before, bringing with it a whole new playing experience. With 12 footswitches, multi-color LED rings and a graphic display, plus MIDI capabilities and four assignable effects loops, it was the most comprehensive floor-based system of its time.

"Helix is the start of a new chapter in the way guitarists relate to technology," said Line 6 President Marcus Ryle around the release. "Line 6 has spent over 25 years refining and evolving modeling technology. We are confident that Helix will sound and feel amazing to both analog purists and tech savvy players alike."



VERNON REID: "It's remarkable that the same pedal [*HX Stomp*] has been supported through firmware updates a decade on. It's further remarkable that the Helix line will still support that multi-effects pedal after the introduction of its new Stadium flagship model. There's a loyalty to its customer base that is unprecedented. There are many other modern guitar products I admire, but the support I've gotten from Line 6 Director of Artist Relations Matt Ferguson and Chief Product Design Architect Eric Klein has been phenomenal."

Yamaha Revstar

The first new guitar line from Yamaha in over a decade was launched in 2015, with many noting how it seemed more vintage-leaning in both sound and aesthetic. The instruments took influence from classic Yahama designs from over the years – such as the headstock of the SA15 from 1966, the double cutaway associated with their Bob Marley-approved SG1000 and the contoured scratchplate and offset silhouette of the Super Flighter series from the late Seventies. The new range ended up being adopted by modern trailblazers





like Matteo Mancuso and Chris Buck, who had no trouble showing the world just how good these guitars could sound in the right hands. From the super affordable and Indonesian-made Element and Standard models to the Japanese-manufactured Professional flagships, they soon built up a reputation for being some of the finest instruments to be found in various price brackets.

CHRIS BUCK: "I loved the idea of being able to put my stamp on a new guitar that didn't come with the baggage of legacy guitars. It felt like an opportunity to grow with the guitar. On a purely practical level, one thing that drew me to the Revstar was that it combined elements of two of my favorite guitars: the simplicity and versatility of the Telecaster, but with the gravitas and presence of a Les Paul. Over time, it has become an integral part of my sound, and of all the guitars I've played, it is the one on which I've felt most at home."



ALEX KAPUSTIN PHOTOGRAPHY/LINE6, FUTURE

PRS Silver Sky

The Silver Sky, first launched in 2018 as part of the American-made PRS Core series, may not have been the company's first John Mayer signature, but it certainly will be remembered as the bluesman's most infamous. Taking obvious cues from vintage Stratocasters — specifically a 1964 model belonging to Mayer — it also blended in some of the modern features PRS is renowned for, offering players a best-of-both-worlds kind of scenario. But PRS borrowing so heavily from arguably the world's most nostalgic design brought its fair share of criticism, becoming one of the industry's most controversial releases since Gibson's ill-fated robot tuners of 2007.

"It was not going to work with Fender," said Mayer in a 40-minute Instagram livestream. "They weren't gonna be able — one way or another — to bring the vision I had to life. So, not pissed off, I wanted to go somewhere where they could bring that vision to life. And it made a lot of sense to go to Paul Reed Smith because that's the guy who started the company. To be able to call the guy who started the company and talk directly about ideas and how to build them, that's good for you. It's good to have artists be able to call the guy who runs the company." The SE version was introduced in 2022, built with a poplar body instead of alder; it ended up becoming the best-selling guitar on Reverb for two consecutive years.

Taylor V-Class Bracing

A revolutionary approach to bracing from Taylor, unveiled at NAMM 2018, could very well be the biggest development in the acoustic world since the introduction of the electro-acoustic. Instead of relying on the traditional X-style design that was by that point more than a century old — a tried-and-tested method that created an inherent trade-off between volume and sustain — Master Designer Andy Powers [*pictured right*] engineered a way to increase both while also improving intonation. The company explained how the new V-Class bracing method controlled the flexibility of an acoustic's top, creating a more orderly rocking motion across both sides to produce greater volume, while maintaining stiffness along the middle for extra rigidity to keep the strings in motion. The general consensus was overwhelmingly positive, with users noting how these newest models were resonating and ringing better than ever before.



ANDY POWERS: "We believe V-Class bracing allows the acoustic guitar to do things it had never really done before. For decades, electric guitars had been evolving with new pickups, amps, pedals and other technology, but acoustics were largely sticking to what had become a common form. With V-Class, the acoustic guitar offers fundamental musical improvements — it plays more in tune across the neck, sustains like crazy and — at the same time — has the volume and dynamics players want. It opened the door to a new era of design for us that allows us to evolve as musicians evolve — and gave musicians a tool that can inspire them in new ways. To me, fresh musical inspiration is what makes a game-changing idea. At Taylor, V-Class reinvigorated our passion to improve the options we offer players. We feel this platform will allow us to continue developing a wider range of voices to serve and inspire players long into the future."



Boss Katana Amp

First introduced in 2016, the Katana helped turn Boss into one of the world's biggest amp companies in a relatively short space of time. Using a combination of analog circuitry and digital signal processing, the series became famous for offering a whole range of amp models and effects as well as other extras in one complete package, with more functionality, versatility and affordability than almost anything else out there. Another key factor in their rise to fame was the sheer amount of power they could offer — though they shared a lot in common with practice amps, the Katanas were made loud enough to grace all kinds of stages the world over. The updated Gen 3 models were unveiled last year, joining the higher spec Katana Artist, the wireless Katana-Air, the Katana:Go for headphones and Katana-Mini.

When Silver Strikes Gold

John Mayer talks *GW* through his acclaimed PRS Silver Sky, while its maker — Paul Reed Smith — reveals the science that went into the guitar's development

BY ANDREW DALY

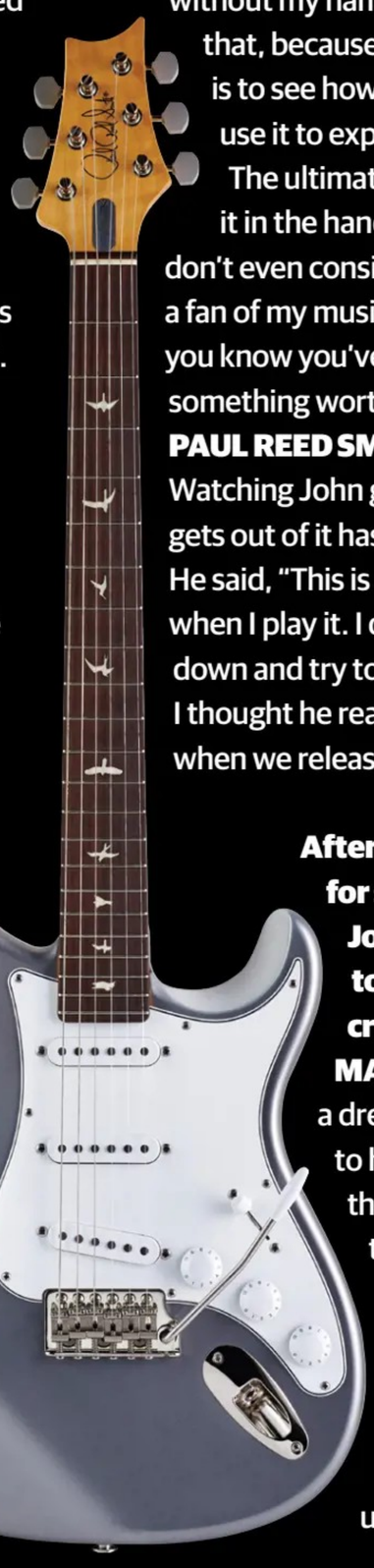
WHEN PRS DROPPED its USA-made Core Silver Sky in 2018, they weren't just releasing a John Mayer signature six-string, and they weren't trying to break the Internet; they were reinventing the wheel, to speak. The wheel in question was the Fender Strat, a guitar brandished by everyone from Jeff Beck to David Gilmour to Mayer himself. But Mayer — and Paul Reed Smith — wanted something different, something fresh, new and inventive. This would require forward thinking, painstaking effort and, to be frank, balls. Of Mayer's general mentality toward the Silver Sky, Smith says, "He's not messing around. If he had a guitar that he liked better, he would use it."

The Silver Sky, be it the Core or SE model, has been a sensation since its release. But beyond its favored status, it's a guitar that Mayer actually plays.

"I'm so glad I don't have to pretend to love them," he says. "I'm not playing something else in the studio, because this is the guitar I always wanted to own. I can't outplay it. That's the dream."

Now that Mayer's dream has become a reality, has his appreciation for the Silver Sky grown? "Let me answer it like this: I love guitar players. I adore their minds — they're closed until they're open, and when something opens it, they tend to give respect to whatever it was that could manage to change it." Mayer knew that changing — and opening — minds would take time. "I knew the Silver Sky would take years to take its place in the world," he says. "And I say this cautiously, but it feels like it's become pretty widely accepted. You can accept it and still not dig it, but what's happened over the past several years is that people have kind of agreed it has a right to exist."

The Silver Sky has continued to be a bestseller. PRS now offers an affordable yet high-quality SE version, making the guitar accessible to a broader audience.



The Silver Sky is on our list of the 50 most important pieces of gear of the last 25 years. What does that mean to you?

JOHN MAYER: It's definitely one of my proudest accomplishments in my life. I wanted to design — or redesign, to get ahead of any objections there — an instrument that players can use to make their music on. The guitar is usually referred to as a Silver Sky without my name attached. I love that, because my favorite thing is to see how other guitarists use it to express themselves. The ultimate dream is to see it in the hands of people who don't even consider themselves a fan of my music. That's how you know you've created something worthwhile.

PAUL REED SMITH: It's an honor. Watching John get the tones he gets out of it has been fascinating. He said, "This is what I need it to do when I play it. I don't want to look down and try to find where I'm at." I thought he really did a great job when we released it.

After playing Strats for so many years, John, what led to the guitar's creation?

MAYER: It's been a dream for many years to have more input on the design of a guitar than simply having a signature model. I was looking to create something based on the past but fully updated to have a modern-day ethos. And PRS saw the vision there.

As you were retooling an iconic instrument, the Silver Sky's general specs were important. What went into them?

SMITH: We spent a huge amount of time on the headstock shape, pickguard shape and body. We retooled the knobs, jack plate, pickup covers, bobbins, magnets and windings. The way we finished the body, how we leveled the necks, frets and nuts we used was different from anything we'd done before. There wasn't anything that was left untouched until John was happy.

What was your goal for the pickups and their voicing, John?

MAYER: I wanted to sound like I've been known to sound, but with a little less midrange dip. As I get older, I understand and enjoy a little more midrange. It's pleasant to me now. Those deep EQ carve-outs are super fun, but after thousands of hours of playing, certain frequencies have made permanent grooves in my brain, and I want to cut new ones next to, but not on top of them. Maybe that's the definition of evolution, I don't know. [*Laughs*]

Paul, what went into voicing the pickups?

SMITH: We went to a soundcheck with a Silver Sky prototype at this huge indoor arena in Washington, D.C. I was standing on the stage, and John had his '64 Strat that he played "Gravity" on, and he compared it to the Silver Sky prototype. And the Strat's pickups had 6 dB more bass and 6 dB less harsh high end — they were louder. Everything about them was different. I had wound the Silver Sky pickups exactly the way you see on the internet, but they were off by 6 dB in every direction. I said to him, "If I can measure the Strat's pickups on my pickup machine, I can do it."

John said, "I can live without it for one day." His tech, René Martinez, gave me the Strat. I put it in the back of our car and said to my wife, "Whatever you do, don't get in a rear-end accident." [*Laughs*]

What did you find while evaluating the Strat's pickups?

SMITH: I did the sacrilegious thing: I unsoldered the bass pickup, which I don't think had ever been done before, took it out, and put it in my pickup machine. What came up on the screen was something we'd never seen the likes of. I was like, "Whoa!" We soldered the bass pickup back in, put the guitar back together, took it back to John, and I started calling electrical engineers about why I was seeing wildly different results. It was that bass pickup that "Gravity" was recorded on, right? And we got it. Not only did we get it, you're talking about having to do it exactly the same — it's not easy. The magnets, wires and bobbins are from different factories. But we got it. It was very difficult, but it also was joyful.

You also reworked the neck profile, correct?

MAYER: Before creating this guitar, I didn't understand what neck radius meant. I just looked at the guitars I loved the most, and they were 7.25". That was my measuring stick. Now that I know the math behind it, I still don't think about it. The difference between 7.25" and 9.5" is less significant than your strap being an inch higher or lower. I'll fight anybody on that. The reason I believe this is because every guitar is different and has about 100 points of variation. Neck profile helps sort out neck profile, which is only one of many details. So the only way to truly compare radii is to build two molecularly exact copies of the same guitar with just that difference. But we have to try and organize these details in some less-chaotic way, which is why we debate 7.25" vs 9.5". I can do everything on this neck that I could do on a 9.25". If the guitar is set up correctly, if the frets are level — which these are — you can do anything you want in regard to bending strings on this neck radius.

Why has the Silver Sky resonated with so many people?

MAYER: I think it's because I really play them. I designed a guitar that I track-tested. It's like a sports car that can hug a turn at 100 mph — whether you're on the track or just driving down the coastline, you know the performance capability is there.

Fender American Acoustasonic Series

Is it an electric or an acoustic? The answer is neither, or perhaps both, depending on your viewpoint. In any case, when Fender launched their very first guitar from the Acoustasonic series in 2019, the world stopped and took notice because it was unlike anything else we'd ever seen. "Our objective was to develop an acoustic guitar for contemporary artists," said Fender CEO Andy Mooney around its release. "The end result of our three-year R&D exploration met all these criteria and exceeded our most optimistic expectations with the launch of the American Acoustasonic Series. If the American Acoustasonic were a car, it would be a high-performance SUV. It is not just a state-of-the-art acoustic guitar that sounds great on stage — it's a state-of-the-art electric guitar that sounds great on stage. That's a challenge Fender was proud to take on."

Fender Tone Master Amps and Tone Master Pro

At Summer NAMM 2019, Fender debuted the Tone Master series, reimagining some of their best-selling amps using digital technology — which, against all odds — ended up sounding very close indeed. Even the aesthetic was kept faithfully close to the originals, with only the keen-eyed among us being able to discern the differences between a real Deluxe Reverb and Twin Reverb against these latest iterations. Given how nostalgic guitar players are about amps of this ilk, the new designs had to deliver the goods tonally, and their success led to the release of the Tone Master Pro in 2023, housing all kinds of amps, effects and impulse responses into one cutting-edge floor processor. The digital workstation soon ended up in the hands of tone connoisseurs like Jim Root, Joe Satriani and Mike McCready, which helped confirm their ingenuity.



Neural DSP Quad Cortex and Plug-ins

For a company founded in 2017, Neural DSP has come a very long way. The Archetype plug-in series saw them partner up with artists like John Petrucci, Cory Wong, Plini and Gojira, and it was this technology that paved the way for them to launch their first hardware device, the Quad Cortex, back in 2020 — which quickly developed a reputation for being the gold-standard in digital modeling. In 2024, they continued these industry-leading innovations with the introduction of the Nano Cortex. "One of the conversations we had was about what type of gear guitarists will use in 20 or 30 years from now," CEO Doug Castro told us last year. "From that, the dream of the Quad Cortex came about. A lot of the features that are in the Quad Cortex stem from asking those simple questions, and then we realized there's no reason to wait 20 or 30 years to do it. We thought, 'Can we do it 10 times faster?'"



CORY WONG: "I started using the Quad Cortex because I developed the Archetype Cory Wong plugin with Neural DSP, and I knew they were the most capable of creating great-sounding and feeling amp mod-



els and pedals. I've tried them all, and after developing the Archetype CW, I knew I had to have it in my touring rig. It's made it so much easier to have a consistent rig from the studio to the stage, and it ensures every show has a consistent and reliable tone. It's all I use now; I can have the same studio and stage setup/sound. I found that certain modeling gear was good for one or the other. The QC just works for everything."

Positive Grid Spark

Having started out as software specialists before moving into the realms of hardware, it's hardly surprising that Positive Grid ended up being responsible for the world's most successful smart amp series – through which they kick-started a whole revolution of feature-rich and app-controlled devices to help us practice, develop and learn.



From designing your own digital pedalboard to lessons and backing tracks, there was certainly a lot to like, but what really stole headlines was the Smart Jam function where users could play a riff into the amp and have a virtual band join them in a matter of seconds. Since then, the company has launched the Spark 2, which Nuno Bettencourt famously described as "like taking Madison Square Garden wherever you go" – as well as the Spark Mini, the pocket-sized Spark Go,

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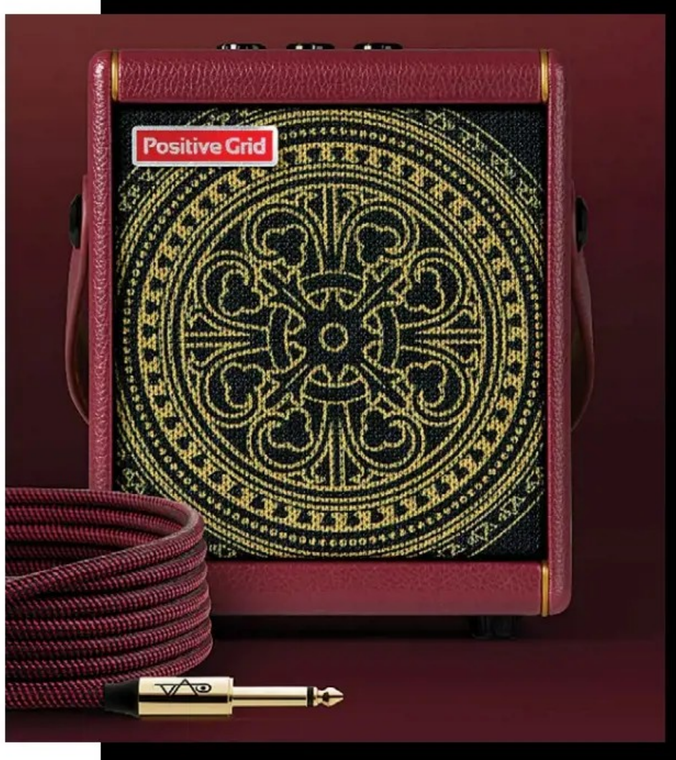
Positive Energy

Steve Vai hails his signature Positive Grid Spark Mini Vai, a tool that punches above its weight

BY ANDREW DALY

TO SAY POSITIVE Grid's Spark Mini is essential to Steve Vai would be an understatement. "I carry one in my luggage at all times," he says. "I have one for my dressing room and one on the bus. Before every show, I use it to warm up, and I've even used it in the studio directly into my DAW."

After years of dealing with archaic and unreliable tech, Vai was overjoyed to discover the reliability and larger-than-life sound of the Mini. This led him to develop a signature version of the Mini, the Spark Mini Vai. And, yeah, he loves it.



"Virtually every guitar-player friend of mine that I gifted one to is over the moon with it," he says. "They write me all the time and tell me how much they love it... even people I didn't think I'd ever hear from."

It goes without saying that the Mini, in all its forms, changed the game for guitar players on the road, in small spaces or on a budget. It allows players of all shapes, sizes and skill-sets to feel like they're dominating the stage without a massive Marshall cabinet taking up space.

"It takes the headache out of having to fiddle with page after page of digital controls," Vai says. "Every time I go to plug into my Spark Mini Vai, it feels like Christmas. As soon as I received it, I knew it was going to be useful. I just didn't realize how useful and indispensable it'd become."

What's your history as far as this class of amp goes?

Ever since mini-cassette recorders were being used – before tiny amps for guitars were even a thing – I'd check out virtually everything that was coming out. First there were small amps, but they were still too big and clumsy to throw in your luggage. Eventually, those novel little cigarette-pack-size amps started to emerge, but they were horrible sounding. Then, a category of portable guitar headphone amps and multi-effects units started to become popular in the mid-Nineties and 2000s, when digital signal processing got small and cheap enough to put into a pocket-sized box. The original Korg Pandora PX1 came out around 1995. It was a palm-sized digital multi-effects processor with amp modeling and a headphone output.

When did things start to change, leading to the Mini class of amps?

Other companies such as Korg, Line 6, Zoom, Tascam, Boss/Roland, Vox and Yamaha started creating these pocket guitar processors, and I used many of these. A lot of them had the ability to load tracks to play along with. The challenges were that you had to use headphones, they could be a bit complicated to use and edit, and they always seemed to be missing something "real" in the tone; a lot of latency and thin tone was just something you tolerated. The tones were very digitized-sounding. So none of these pocket rockets were ideal, but it was what was available at the time. Once I tried the Spark Mini, the light bulb went [*on*]. It was perfect for me. It's small enough to take virtually anywhere – you just plug and play – and it sounds real right out of the little speaker. It has four instant presets, which is all I really needed; it has jam tracks, and you can upload anything to it. It has an aux-in, so you can plug any backing-tracks player into it.

Where does the app fit in?

The app allows for virtually endless combinations of amps, cabinets, microphones, effects, and so on. It has a headphone input when I don't want to disturb anyone. And the AI function blew me away! You can describe the kind of sound you're looking for, and it pulls from its plethora of digital delights to create a tone that is its idea of what your description sounds like.

How did the Mini Vai happen?

I reached out to Positive Grid and started a relationship with them to create a signature Spark Mini Vai that has various accoutrements that reflect my workflow and aesthetic.

Why do you feel the Mini is worthy of being on this list?

It's real. It's such a well-received device because it's so easy to use and travel with. You can dig into it, and it responds like an amp usually does. If I didn't have it, at this point, I'd probably just warm up without anything, because I'm done with those little pocket boxes. And none of the other smaller amps, that are not quite as small, have a sound I can hang with.

POSITIVE GRID

the wireless Spark Link and various XLR-equipped PA versions.

Gibson Murphy Lab Guitars

Having helped establish Gibson's Historic Division and Custom Shop in the early Nineties, Master Artisan Tom Murphy has built up an impressive reputation for being the company's in-house expert on the process of aging guitars. He is practically unrivalled on the art of accurately making new guitars look, well, aged, with extensive knowledge on the tools and techniques required to do it well. Which is precisely why Gibson announced the Murphy Lab back in 2019 — a back-to-the-future department within the Custom Shop where the man himself would be overseeing meticulously aged reissues of golden-era guitars and signature models.



JOE BONAMASSA: "In terms of the 'vintage Les Paul' world, there isn't one 1959 neck shape. Different serial-number ranges within '59 have different shapes and contours. They tend to be slightly more tapered than '58s (with exceptions) and slightly larger than mid-to-late 1960s. The Murphy Lab has done a good job coming up with a version that represents all the different variations of a '59 neck. And the aging is great, if that's your thing; it's not for some, but to each their own. As for other models, we can delve just as deeply into the subtleties and variations, particularly by model/year and in some cases, by color. I just used the '59 Les Paul as the main example. [*It's the*] same as buying a vintage Les Paul or Gibson; the instrument should make you want to play. It should inspire you, challenge you and — when it's sitting on the stand — make you feel like you own the coolest guitar in the world. Gibson loaned me a killer Murphy Lab Les Paul for a Brazilian tour last year and didn't get it back. [*Laughs*] The Amos Flying Vs came out great. That was particularly a challenge for them because the aging was so specific. I thought they nailed it, though."



Martin SC-13E

One of the more memorable moments of NAMM 2020 was the unveiling of the Martin SC-13E, which challenged tradition with its offset body shape and accessible cutaway for easy reach into the upper frets. The innovative Sure Align Linear Dovetail Neck Joint is what helped this instrument offer electric-like playability. The company also revealed how this development allowed the neck to be removed in just three minutes, opening up a whole world of possibilities for replacement necks further down the line. Other notable specs included the Tore Tension X Brace visible underneath the soundhole and the Fishman MX-T system, also placed in the soundhole, with the tuner, volume and tone controls stealthily facing up as the player looks down.



FUTURE, NICK RUFO



ANGELA PETRILLI: "Back in 2019, Martin invited me to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, to check out the SC-13E a few months before its unveiling at the 2020 NAMM Show. This guitar is all about innovation. The linear dovetail neck joint design, which allows access to the fretboard, makes this guitar the one I often use at acoustic gigs where I play lead. Its S body shape visually sets it apart from other acoustics. It has its own unique sound, yet it reminds me of

a cross between an OM and 000 — my favorite acoustic body shapes."

Fender H.E.R. Stratocaster

In 2020, American R&B singer/songwriter made history as the first Black female artist to have a signature guitar. It was also one of the most visually distinctive Strats Fender have ever produced, thanks to its Chrome Glow finish, inspired by the multiple Grammy winner's favorite nail polish color. "I think it will inspire a lot of young Black girls — and actually a lot of young girls in general — to pick up the guitar, which is something we don't see enough of," she told GuitarWorld.com's Amit Sharma in the days following the big announcement. "I used to walk into Guitar Center and pick out a pink bass or something I might have seen another female artist play. That's the key thing for me, just to inspire, so I can't wait to see this thing I created in the stores and in the hands of people who love my music!"

Universal Audio UAFX Pedals

The studio and recording gear specialists announced their expansion into the world of guitar effects in 2021 with the introduction of the dual-footswitch Golden Reverberator, Starlight Echo Station and Astra Modulation Machine. And though these products were virtually guaranteed to be of high quality given the level of expertise behind them, there was still a big buzz coming from people surprised by the brilliance of what they heard. This led to the more pedals following suit, with a notable emphasis on amp emulators — from the Dream '65 Reverb, Ruby '63 Top Boost and Woodrow '55 launched the following year to the Lion '68 Super Lead, Enigmatic '82 Overdrive Special and ANTI 1992 which came soon after. The UAFX line was also updated with single footswitch pedals like the





1176 Studio Compressor, the Brigade Chorus & Vibrato and the Heavenly Plate Reverb.

Gibson/Epiphone Greeny Les Paul Standard

There seem to have been a lot of changes in recent years at Gibson, and they've all been steps in the right direction. Some might say the Greeny series was emblematic of a new strategy that saw them signing high-profile artists for a run of guitars, starting with a limited run through the Custom Shop before making their way to the regular Nashville team and trickling down to Epiphone and Kramer. Of course, there can only be one Greeny — the '59 Les Paul first owned by Peter Green before ending up in the hands of Kirk Hammett — but the reissues gave everyone the chance to own a piece of history, at just about every kind of price point. Since the Greeny line, similar things have happened with signatures for Jerry Cantrell, Adam Jones



FUTURE

Ibanez TOD10N Tim Henson Signature

Polyphia guitarist Tim Henson got his first Ibanez signature back in 2019, though it's the TOD10N model of 2022 that really got the industry talking, mainly thanks to the hollowbody electric nylon-string design. Henson took influence from a late-Nineties Ibanez guitar, the SC500N, and decided to make his own version of it some 20 years later, featuring a solid Sitka spruce top, sapele back and sides, a walnut fretboard and a Tree of Death pearloid inlay. "Basically, it's really thin, really light and really fun to play," he said in a demo video for Sweetwater not long after the release. "When you play unplugged, there's this nice little soundhole that hits you up in the face, so only you get to hear yourself practicing, which is kinda cool."



JACKSON, FUTURE

Jackson American Series

Starting with the Soloist SL3 launched in 2022, Jackson's American series ushered in the brand's first range of guitars to be made entirely in Fender's California factory. The company likened the new line to a "long-awaited homecoming" and promised these instruments would be "radically engineered for speed" while also delivering "precision and power, taking the best of the best from Jackson design history to create an elite tool for the modern player". Given the success of the range so far, it would be fair to say it's been "mission accomplished." The Virtuoso models, launched the following year, were equally as impressive — as was the campaign behind it, roping in the likes of Marty Friedman, Misha Mansoor, Debbie Gough, Dave Davidson and Clint Tustin for an explosive instrumental collaboration aptly named "The Virtuoso Mega Shred."

MARTY FRIEDMAN: "Because of that rare kind of dedication to a guitar ad from everyone, I was inspired to play some wild stuff on the track, which I am quite happy with. I'm sure the others felt the same, and the vibe at the shoot was like no other guitar ad I've ever done. It was like we were at the forefront of the image of 'heavy rock guitar,' either getting a massive facelift or going down in flames. Of course, the guitar itself is awesome, but Jacksons have always been!"



IK Multimedia TONEX and TONEX One

Having brought their software credentials into the physical market over recent years with products like the AmpliTube X-Gear range, IK Multimedia debuted their TONEX pedal in 2023, allowing guitarists to store and play AI Machine Modeling sounds live on stage. As well as offering thousands

Nylon Nights

Polyphia's Tim Henson on the acoustic-electric Ibanez TOD10N that bears his name

BY ANDREW DALY

AFTER LEARNING THAT his signature Ibanez TOD10N, which debuted in 2023, has been named one of our 50 most important pieces of gear of the last 25 years, Tim Henson tells us: "I'm honored! My guitar came from the necessity to evolve my sound. It's amazing that it's been so impactful to enough people that it made this list."

Since its wide-scale release, the TOD10N has become not just a tool for Henson, but a hallmark. "It's become a staple of my playing," Henson says. "It also seems to have started a nylon-electric movement among other players, which is something I'm super happy to have helped kickstart in the modern era."

Henson has been playing his TOD10N on tour with Polyphia in front of stadium-sized crowds. "If you were to get this guitar as a Christmas gift or something of that sort, you could take it from your bedroom all the way to stadiums," he says.

As for where he plans to take his signature line next, he says he wants to produce a whole line of different-tiered instruments. "I had no idea what the price of the guitar was going to be until announcement day," Henson says. "When I got the copy, I read '$700' and thought, 'Damn... this guitar is super affordable; that's incredible.' To have so many wonderful qualities at that price made me realize it can only get better from here. For people who are looking for better electronics and higher-quality and craftsmanship, there are awesome things coming their way."



GINA WETZLER/REDFERNS

What led to the creation of the TOD10N, and what was your goal?

I wanted an acoustic guitar I could play more technical riffs on with the same ease an electric guitar would provide. I realized a lot of our riffs that are based around the harmonic minor scale sound super "Spanish" when played on a nylon-string. Another path I visualized for the instrument was to create my own guitar samples that I could make beats from.

What experiences with previous guitars impacted how you designed your Ibanez?

I discovered the Ibanez SCN500 at a music store in Cologne, Germany. I had no idea a nylon-string S series existed, and my first thought was to try out some of our more technical riffs. It worked like a charm, so I bought it and then asked Ibanez to make me a modern version. After presenting them with an early demo of our song "Playing God," the fire was lit to create the guitar that prompted these questions.

The first time you played your signature Ibanez, what were your thoughts?

I was extremely impressed with the craftsmanship, especially in comparison to its predecessor, the SCN500. It was a lot lighter and felt a lot more "alive," as it has a chambered body. The TOD10N uses Ibanez's FR shape, so imagine a hollowed-out version with a classical headstock. The result of that is very fast but acoustically loud, in comparison to a fully electric guitar — or even the SCN500. We went through a few prototypes before landing on the version that we brought to retail.

Why do you feel the TOD10N has resonated with so many people?

Number one, the aesthetics. It looks really beautiful. That alone will get it into the hands of a player. That's where the magic comes. Number two is the guitar itself. It's incredibly light, almost like a toy. And it's fun to play, again like a toy. But it's not a toy; it's an incredible instrument that I'm about to use today to play to 50,000 people in a stadium as we start our tour supporting System of a Down.

of amps, pedals and effects, players are also given the ability to capture their own rigs using the dedicated app in as little as five minutes, and then save those rigs onto the device itself. The following year, they released the TONEX One — a set and forget single pedal version with less controls but the same kind of technology — blowing minds for being the most powerful amp modeler of its size.

JHS Notaklön Overdrive

There's no pedal more mythical than the Klon Centaur designed by Bill Finnegan in the mid-Nineties, which explains the amount of copies — affectionately referred to as klones — being produced by various companies around the world at a fraction of the resale price. JHS took the concept one step further in 2023 by designing a Klon-style pedal that users had to assemble themselves, adding an element of DIY and creative adventure to tonal crafting. What made it even more innovative was the simple-to-follow instructions and solderless design, which even came with a tube of that infamous black goop used to conceal the "magical" diodes encased within the original pedals. It was a masterclass in marketing, bolstered by the now-legendary slogan "It's not a Klon 'til you build it." Retailing for just $119, JHS was also very vocal about how its version saved you $7,881 off the going rate for a secondhand original, which in many ways felt like the deal of the century.

Marshall 1959 and JCM Modified Series Amps

When we think of famous recordings by GN'R, Van Halen and Mötley Crüe, it's hard not to envision the Marshall logo. Of course, these game-changing guitar players weren't using stock Marshalls; engineers like José Arredondo and Frank Levi modded the circuits to shape the EQ curve and amount of gain available. This year, the U.K. company finally caved in and released their own official versions of these modded amps in the form of the 1959 plexi and the JCM800. New plexi features include the Master Volume tweak, a switchable bright cap, a gain boost and a switch to choose between diode or transistor clipping, while the JCM800 boasted a gain boost, a mid-boost and a tight switch.

"Modified connects us with a long-standing tradition of modifying Marshall amps that dates to the 1970s," Marshall said upon the amps' release. "Artists were looking to get something different from the industry-standard amps of the time. Marshall mods were sometimes about getting 'more' — more distortion, more sustain, a bigger sound. Other times, they were about versatility, allowing musicians to achieve sweeter tones or to get the best from their heads without driving them to ear-splitting volume levels." GW







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B6AMAG



TALES FROM NERDVILLE

BY JOE BONAMASSA

Weighty Work

How to craft "heavy" riffs

I RECENTLY GOT back off the road with my band Black Country Communion, which features Jason Bonham on drums, Glenn Hughes on bass and vocals — the "Voice of Rock!"— and the master of the keyboards, Derek Sherinian. The conversation came up about the difference between what I do in my "day job" with my regular band versus when playing and writing for Black Country Communion. BCC is a "heavy" band; the songs are in a hard rock style, as opposed to the bluesier context of my normal band. Much of the difference, guitar playing-wise, comes down to the approach.

Contrary to what one might assume, with the heavier music and chordal work with this band, I don't need tons of gain on my guitar because everyone else is distorted! Glenn's bass is distorted, and Derek's Hammond organ sound is very overdriven, too (à la Deep Purple organist Jon Lord's, which was routed into a Marshall amp). So my job is to find the spot in the middle and play cleaner, which results in a big, heavy band sound that also maintains clarity between the instruments.

A good example of this is the song "One Last Soul." **FIGURE 1** is played along the lines of the tune's main riff, which is built primarily from power chords played on the bottom three strings in drop-D tuning (low to high: D, A, D, G, B, E).

In the realm of "heavy rock" guitar, I was very influenced by Free guitarist Paul Kossoff. **FIGURE 2** offers an example of this that moves through a series of chord voicings sounded on the middle four strings, shifting between A5, D/A, G5/A and Dsus4/A voicings in a manner akin to how Kossoff would craft his rhythm parts. As you can see, just moving one note in the voicing "tells the story" as I move from chord to chord. I've discovered that the music will sound heavier and deeper if I scale back the voicings.

Leslie West's riffs with Mountain, which are some of the heaviest ever, were often either single-note lines or two- and three-note chord voicings. **FIGURES 3** and **4** offer two examples of riffs played in Leslie's inimitable style, exemplified by Mountain classics like "Never in My Life" and "Nantucket Sleighride."

All of these types of chord voicings are really important in making the band sound a certain way. When writing this kind of music, I try to subtract from the chord voicings and eliminate any unneeded notes.

As shown in **FIGURE 5**, I mute the 3rd string when playing a low E5 chord, and also mute the 5th string on D/F♯ and Gsus2. You'll find that your riffs can sound heavier if you approach your guitar parts from this point of view.

The music of Black Country Communion is very much inspired by the classic recordings of bands like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Free, Mountain and others.

When approaching writing a heavy riff, sometimes simplicity wins the day. Our namesake song, "Black Country," was written by accident. I was at Glenn's house — we've

FIG. 1

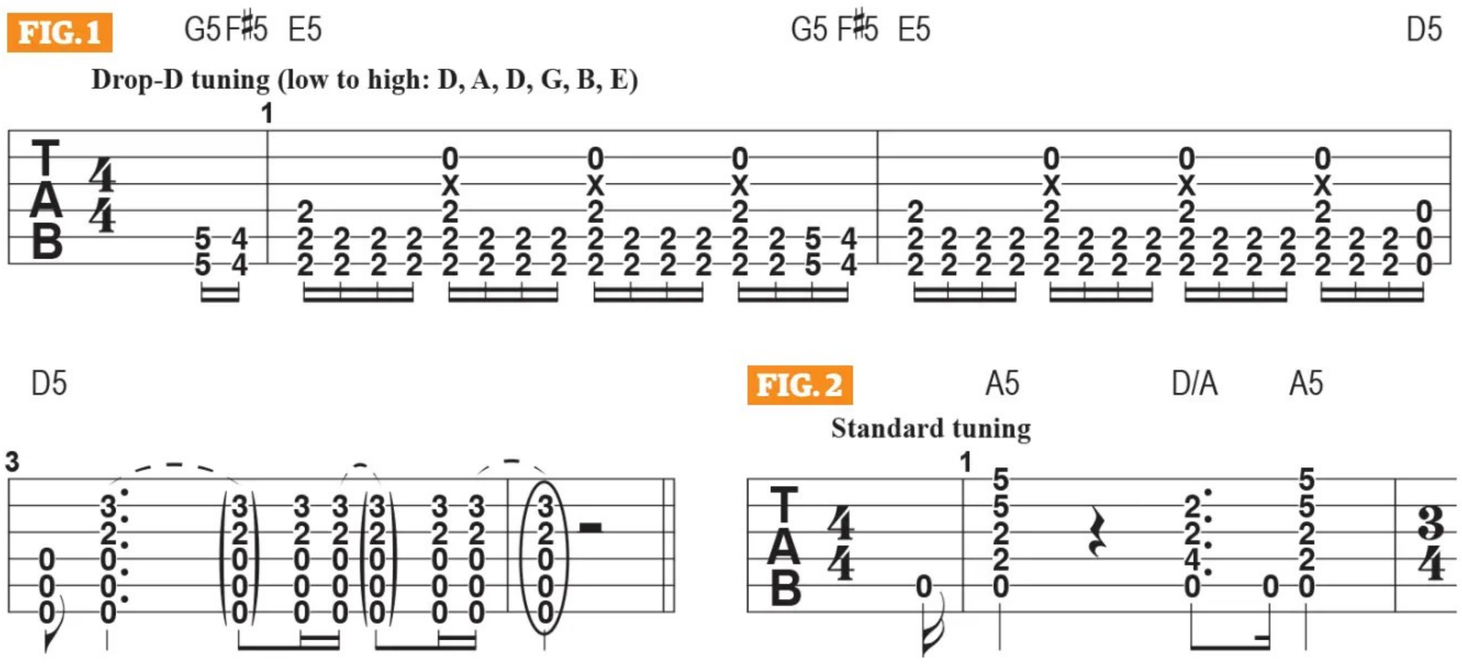


FIG. 2

FIG. 3

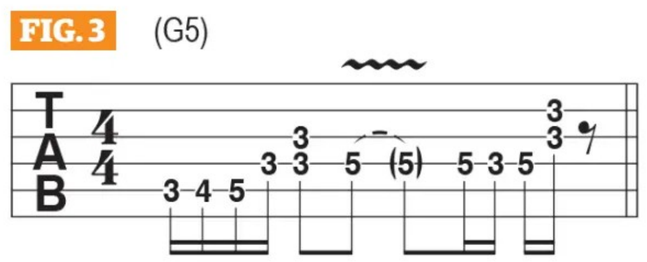


FIG. 4

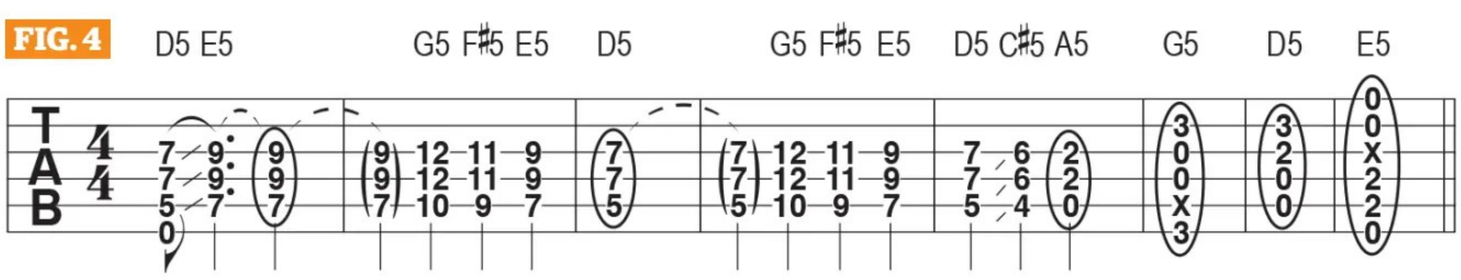
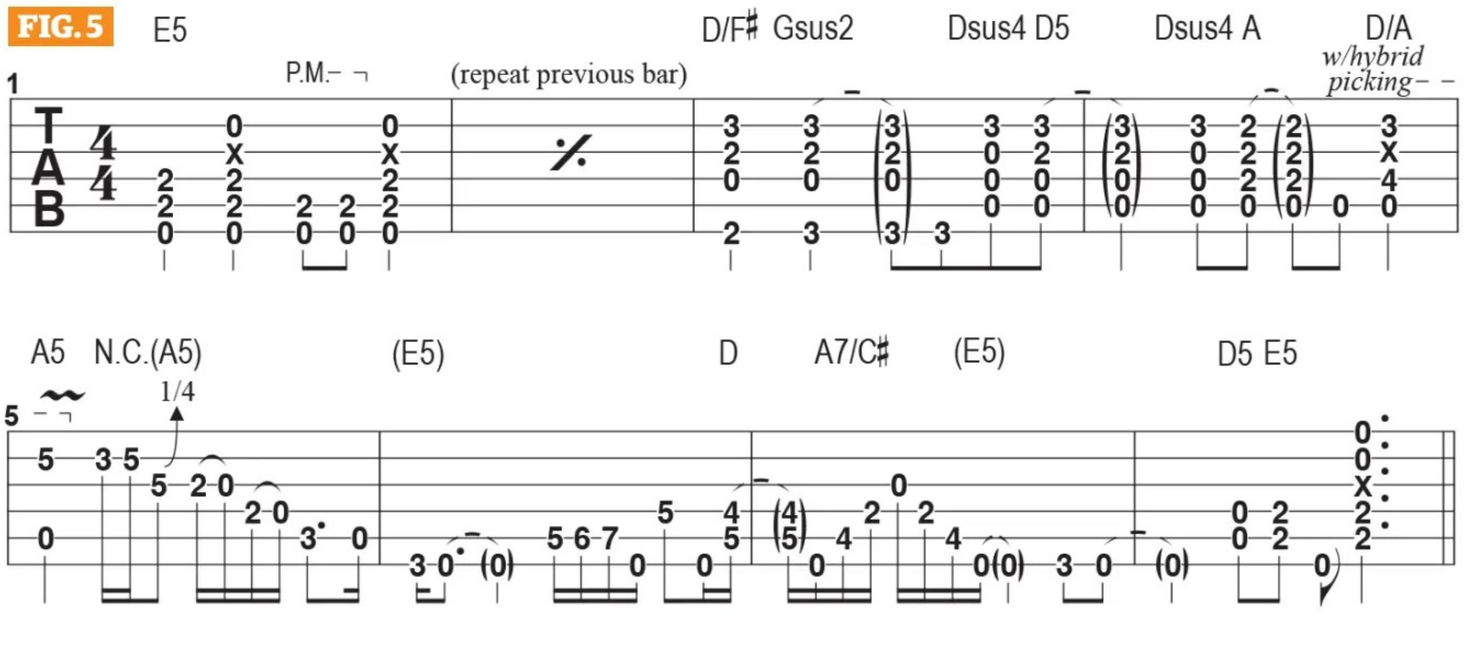


FIG. 5



JEFF FASANO/GUITAR WORLD

written all our songs in the same writing room so far, with me playing a guitar through an old Epiphone amp. We were just talking and wrapping up the day, and without any thought I began playing the riff in **FIGURE 6**, which is based on the E Phrygian mode (E, F, G, A, B, C, D). I play 16th-note triplets with repeating E notes followed by a slide up one fret to F, a slide back down to E and a pull-off to D. On beat 4, the riff ends with the notes A, B and D played in slower eighth-note triplets. Glenn heard it and said, "What's that?" I said, "I don't know!"

Next thing you know, he's doubling that riff on bass, and the pieces started to fall together into a song. **FIGURE 7** shows the big D5, E5 and A5 power chords we move into, after which the lick modulates up a 4th to A Phrygian (A, B♭, C, D, E, F, G), as shown in **FIGURE 8**, before reverting back to the riff in E. As a heavy song, it coalesces when the band plays it in a tight, precise way. This is where, for my guitar part, palm muting (P.M.) comes into play. Palm muting effectively reigns in the sound here; without it, the guitar riff would sound like a mess. It's all about chiseling out the riff: I will alter the amount of palm muting as I play the riff, in order to change the feel and expressiveness of it, and I'll also rotate my pick to a different angle for a sharper sound.

I take a similar approach with my tune "The Ballad of John Henry," as illustrated in **FIGURE 9**. This riff is based on E minor pentatonic (E, G, A, B, D), and part of creating it was deciding where to play the open low E note in conjunction with the fretted E on the 5th string. For the G5 and A5 chords in bar 2, I thumb-fret the 6th-string notes and include all of the strings in the voicing except for the G string, which I mute with my fret-hand fingers.

When playing the song live, I add an Em chord to the riff, as shown in **FIGURE 10**. In bars 1 and 3, on beat 3, I fret E and G notes on the A and D strings, respectively, and strum across all six strings to get the open top three strings into the voicing. **FIGURE 11** shows the entire section, leading into the pre-chorus riff in bars 3-8, which features sliding octaves that move between C, B and A, with an Am9(no3) chord sounded in bars 4, 6 and 8.

And — are you ready for this? — most of my favorite heavy riffs are played in standard tuning, although Black Sabbath, Jimi Hendrix and others made things just a little heavier by sometimes tuning down. GW

For a video of part 1 of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/holiday2025
For part 2, go to guitarworld.com/january2026



JEFF FASANO/GUITAR WORLD

Getty

FIG. 6 N.C.(E5)

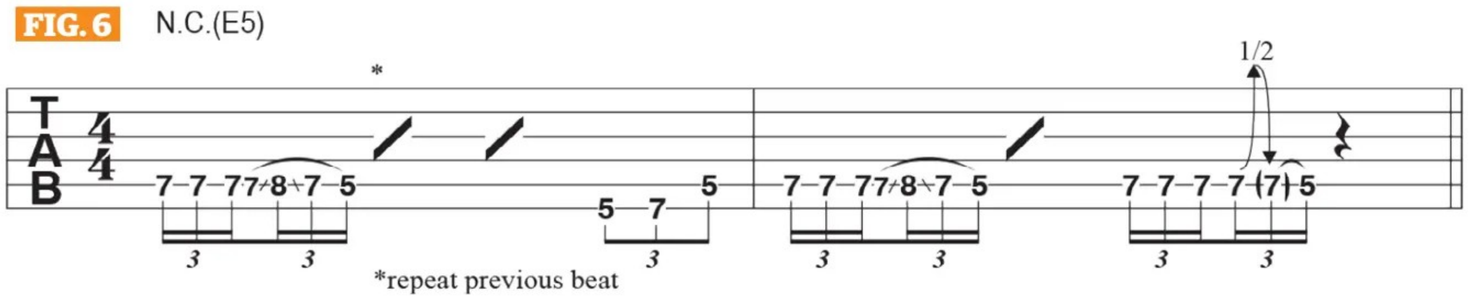


FIG. 7 D5 E5 A5

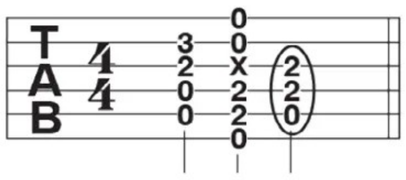


FIG. 8 N.C.(A5) (E5) E

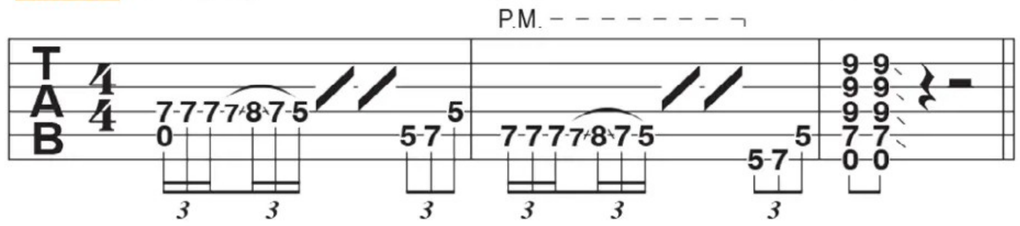


FIG. 9 (E5) G5 A5

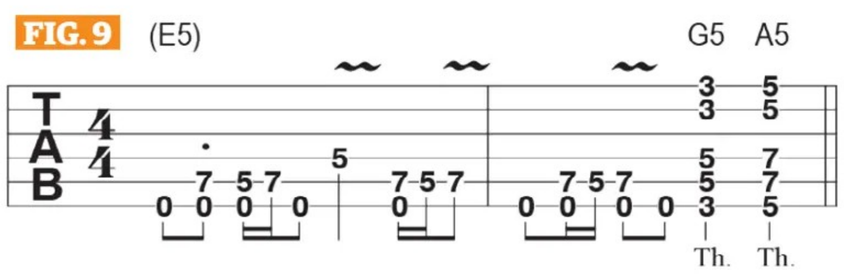
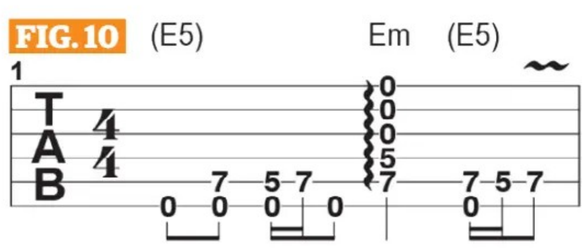


FIG. 10 (E5) Em (E5)



G5

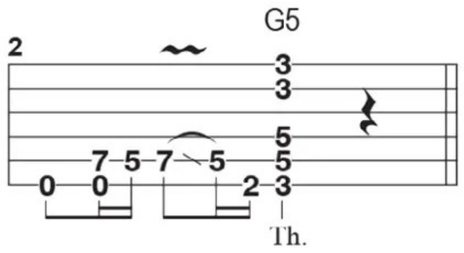
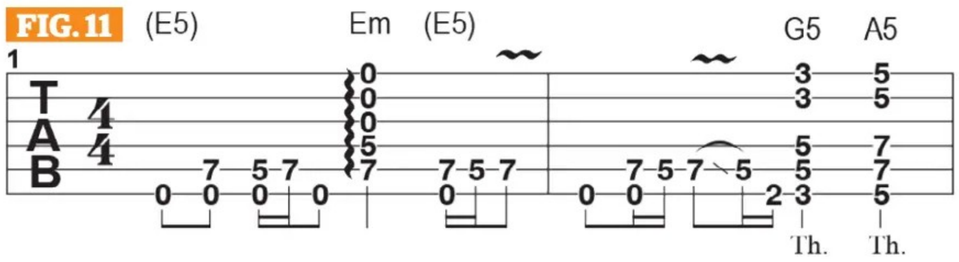
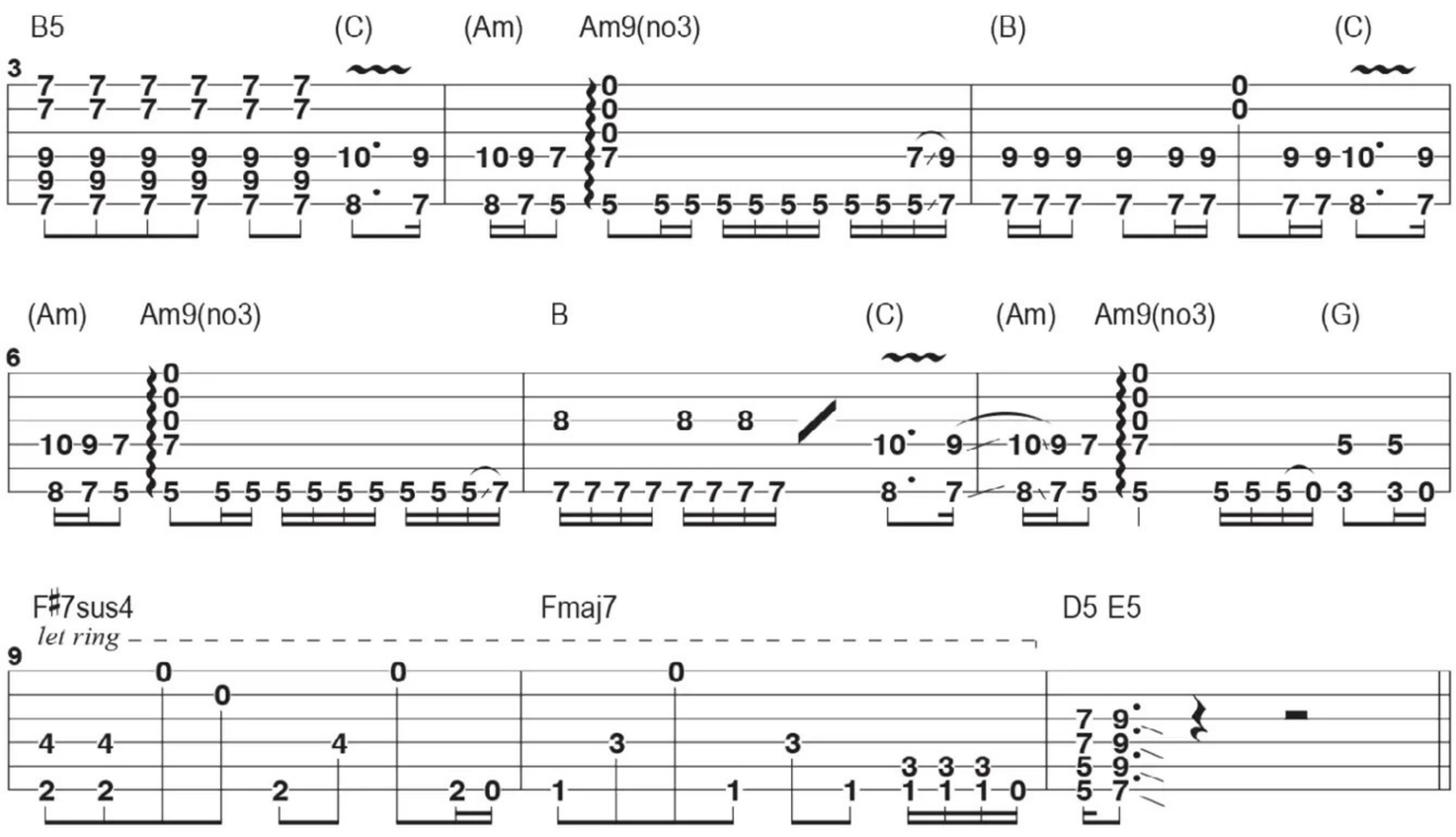


FIG. 11 (E5) Em (E5) G5 A5





Joe Bonamassa is one of the world's most popular blues-rock guitarists — not to mention a top producer and de facto ambassador of the blues. His latest albums are 2026's *B.B. King: Blues Summit 100* and *The Spirit of Rory Live from Cork*. Point your eyeballs at jbonamassa.com.



WORKIN' MAN

BY CHARLIE STARR

G Whiz

The joys open G tuning

HELLO, AND WELCOME to my new column for *Guitar World*! Over the course of these lessons, I will be sharing and demonstrating my approaches to rhythm playing, soloing, slide guitar, open tunings and songwriting, all of which have contributed to the music I've written and recorded with my band, Blackberry Smoke.

I'd like to start off with a look at open G tuning, which I used to write the Blackberry Smoke song "Ain't Much Left of Me" from our 2012 album, *The Whippoorwill*.

When I started writing songs for the band back in 2001, the very first one I wrote was in open G tuning, a tune called "Sanctified Woman." That song kicks off with a rhythm part along the lines of **FIGURE 1**. I begin with a G5 chord fretted on the 6th, 4th and 3rd strings, wrapping my thumb around the top of the neck at the 5th fret to sound the low G. G5 switches to Gsus4 and then G, sounded with the open 4th, 3rd and 2nd strings, followed by D5 and C5 chords sounded by barring across these strings.

This proved to be a great jumping off point for the band. There were just three of us at the time — me, Brit and Richard Turner — and when I played that riff, one of them said, "Oh, I like that! What is that?"

Open G tuning is achieved by tuning your 6th, 5th and 1st strings down a whole step while leaving the 4th, 3rd and 2nd strings tuned normally, resulting in (low to high) D, G, D, G, B, D. Strumming across the open strings in this tuning yields a very full and resonant-sounding G major chord.

I discovered open G tuning when I was about 12 years old, while checking out a transcription of the Rolling Stones song "Honky Tonk Women." Keith Richards, as most of you know, has written many classic songs in this tuning.

Open G tuning is also great for slide guitar, as demonstrated in **FIGURE 2**. I begin by sliding into a D chord, and then drop down to C, B♭, A and G, followed by a stock G5 voicing played on the top four strings. The figure continues with more open G-type licks played with the slide.

I became fascinated with the alternate chord forms that the tuning could facilitate. **FIGURE 3** is a great example: fretting the 4th, 3rd and 2nd strings at the 2nd, 3rd and 1st frets, respectively, combined with the open 5th and 1st strings, yields a great-sounding C9/G voicing that's not possible in standard tuning. As demonstrated in **FIGURE 4**, one

All examples are played in open G tuning (low to high: D, G, D, G, B, D).

FIG. 1

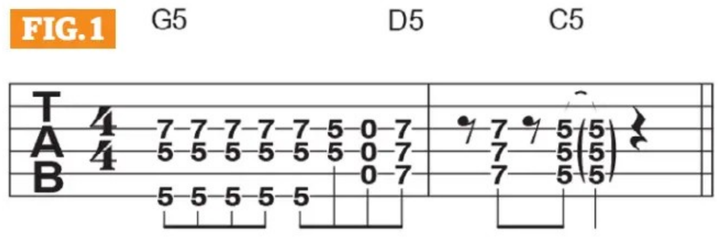
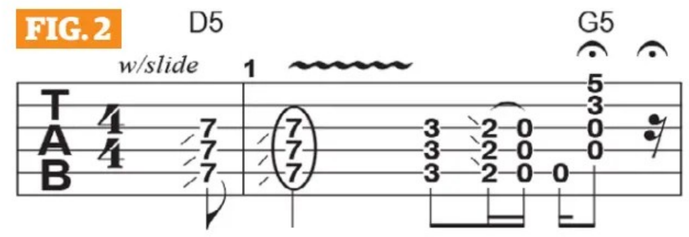


FIG. 2



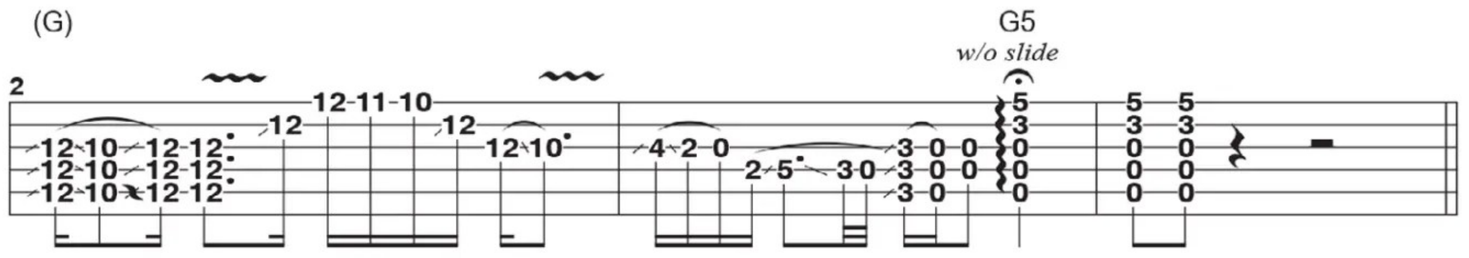


FIG. 3

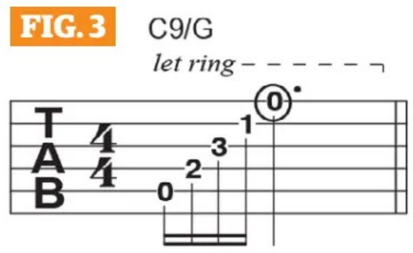


FIG. 4

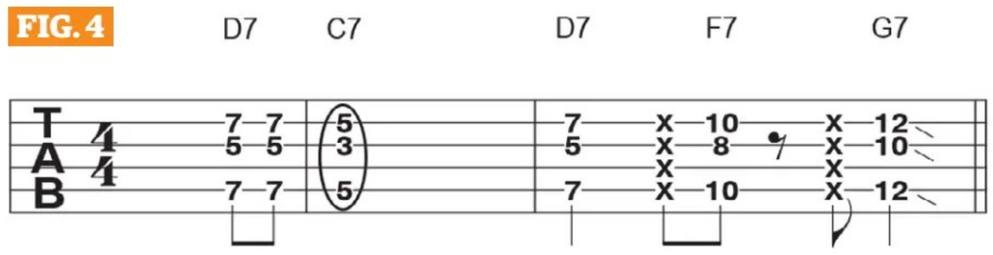


FIG. 5 "Ain't Much Left of Me"

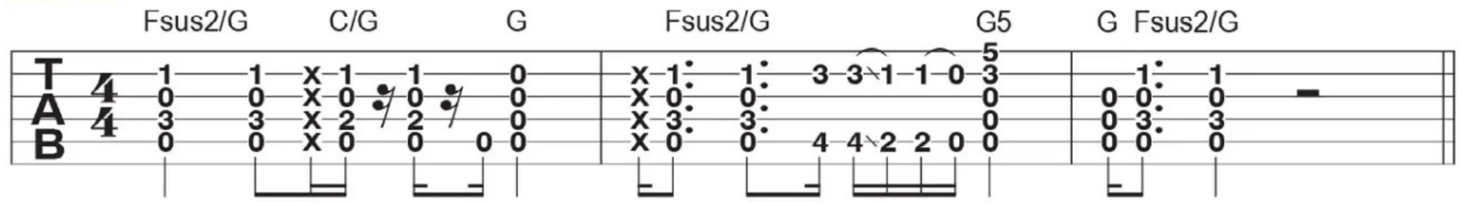
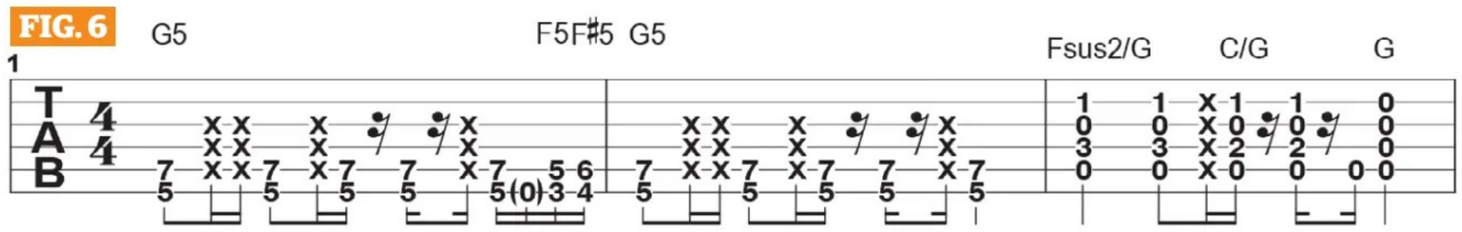


FIG. 6



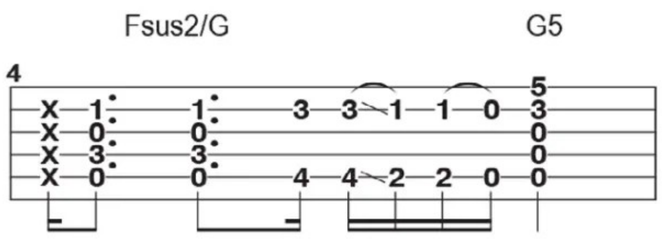
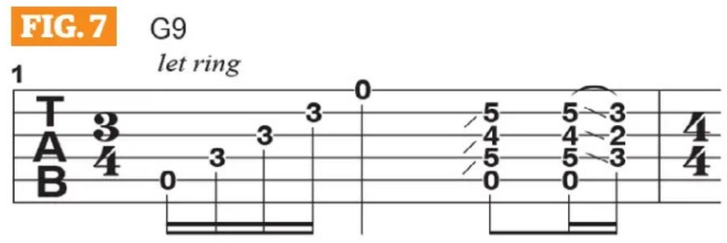
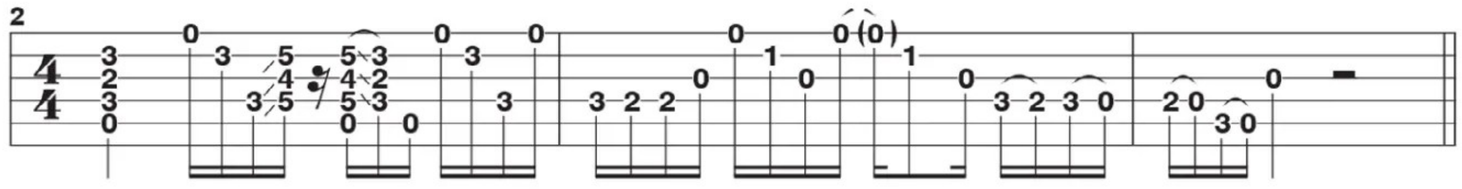


FIG. 7







Getty

can also find unique "grips" for dominant 7th chords like D7, C7, F7 and G7.

As I mentioned earlier, "Ain't Much Left of Me" is played in open G tuning. I didn't want to copy Keith Richards or Rich Robinson from the Black Crowes. I wanted to try to find my own guitar voice, which I'm sure was true for the Delta blues masters like Son House and Charlie Patton. **FIGURE 5** illustrates the tune's main riff. Bar 1 is based on Fsus2/G to C/G to G, repeated in bar 2 and then capped off with descending slides on the 5th and 2nd strings. Bars 1 and 2 of **FIGURE 6** show the basic groove between G5 and F5, and the main lick is revisited in bars 3 and 4.

I'd written another part, shown in **FIGURE 7**, that's based on arpeggiations and sliding chord forms combined with single-note riffs, which became the basis for the song's intro.

Once you've got the hang of the intro and the main riff from the Blackberry Smoke song "Ain't Much Left of Me", allow me to provide some additional examples of the benefits of playing in open G tuning, by sharing how I play other sections of the tune, including the slide guitar solo.

The verse section is built from stop-time chord hits on G, followed by F/C to C and then G to F/G to C/E, accentuated by the band with big "crashes." This is played twice and then leads us into the chorus section.

FIGURE 8 illustrates the chorus. Starting in bar 1, on the V (five) chord, D, which I embellish "Keith Richards" style, with accents on G/D, bar 2 moves to Am7. To play this voicing in open G tuning, fret the 5th string at the 2nd fret, to sound the low A root note. Bars 3 and 4 move from G to D, respectively.

Bars 5-9 wrap up the chorus section, starting this time with held C and D chords, after which we return to the intro figure: Fsus2/G - C/G - G, shown in bar 9.

In devising a solo section, I thought it would be cool to get away from the "home" key of G for a minute and bring in a repeating chordal figure of F7 to G7 to solo over, as tabbed in **FIGURE 9**. Because of the open G tuning, the chord shapes are a little different than normal, but therein lies the beauty of an open tuning, as it avails you of all kinds of chord and riff choices that aren't possible in standard tuning. In other words, the tuning encourages creativity in devising rhythm parts to solo over.

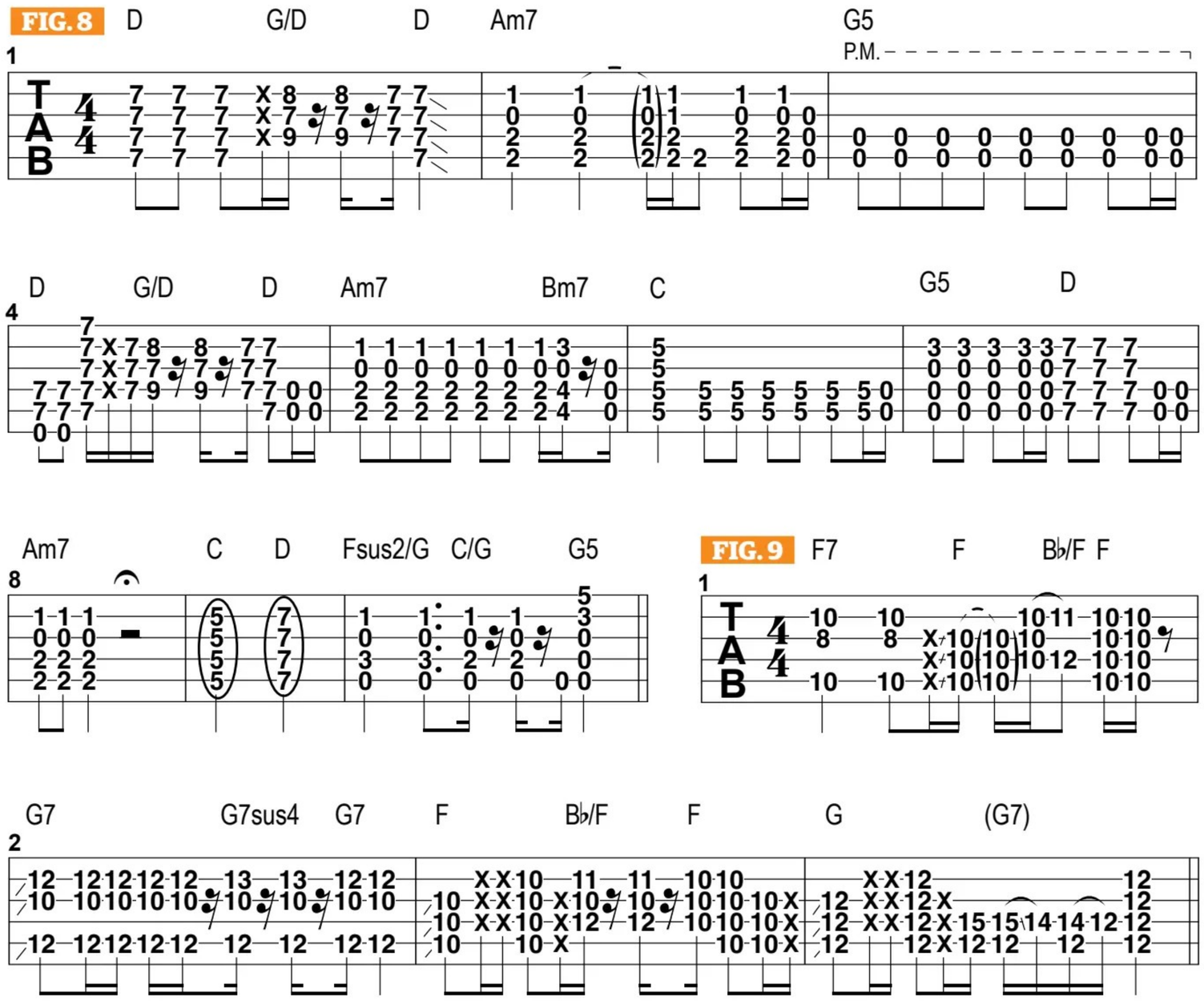
FIGURE 10 illustrates the slide solo. In bars 1-6, the chords alternate every bar from F7 to G7. After the F7 in bar 7, bar 8 moves to D.

The lines I play in the solo relate specifically to the alternating chords: over the initial F7, I slide into licks based around an F major triad (F, A, C), and over G7, the licks are based around a G major triad (G, B, D). This triad arpeggiation approach establishes a strong connection between the improvised solo and the supporting chords underneath.

Bar 8 depicts the end of the solo, played over D, and bar 9 brings us back to the arpeggiated figures from the intro. And then we do it all again, moving back through the verse, chorus and outro sections.

This song is a great workout in open G tuning, for chordal work and soloing. There's lots to discover when using open tuning! GW

For video of part 1 of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/holiday2025 For part 2, go to guitarworld.com/january2026



JOBY SESSIONS/FUTURE

Charlie Starr is the frontman and lead guitarist for Blackberry Smoke, an Atlanta band that's been country-rocking its way around the universe since 2001. Their latest albums are 2024's *Be Right Here* and 2025's *Rattle, Ramble & Roll: The Best of Blackberry Smoke, Volume 1.*



HARDWIRED

BY JAMES JARED NICHOLS

Bend to Your Will

Expressive string bending

AN ESSENTIAL TECHNIQUE all electric guitarists should strive to master is the art of string bending, which can be used to create personally expressive, vocal-like sounds in unique ways. String bending first grabbed my attention when I heard "Iron Man" by Black Sabbath. Guitarist Tony Iommi begins the song by bending his open low E string behind the nut, raising then lowering the note's pitch to create a spooky moaning sound. When I heard that, my first thought was, "well, you can't do that on a piano!"

My next pivotal encounter with string bending was hearing Eric Clapton's solo in Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love." When I heard those opening notes, I thought, "that sounds like a voice!" It's so soulful!

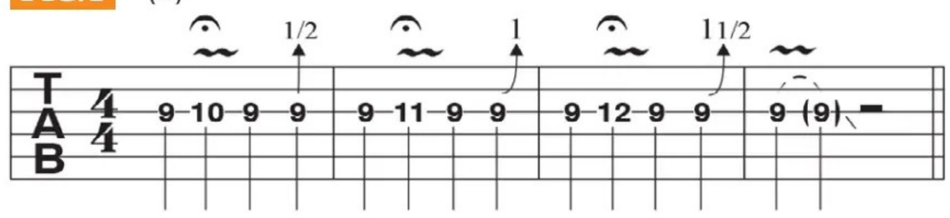
My awareness of string bending then snowballed through listening to such great blues-rock guitarists as Jimi Hendrix, Leslie West, Robin Trower and Johnny Winter. The takeaway was that, even though all of these players were utilizing the same bending techniques, each was able to create thoroughly unique sounds with them.

A good initial approach to string bending is to first play two separate notes that are a half step, or one fret, apart, then bend the lower note up to match the pitch of the higher one, as demonstrated with the notes E and F in **FIGURE 1**. In bar 2, I then play E and F♯, which are a whole step (two frets) apart then proceed to bend the E note up a whole step to F♯. In bar 3, I then do the same thing with E and G, bending the E note up one and one half steps, the equivalent of three frets. Listen carefully as to strive to match the "target" pitch of each bend. Let your ears guide and control your fingers.



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FIG. 1 (E)



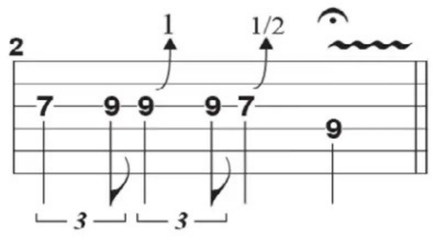


FIG. 2 (B7)

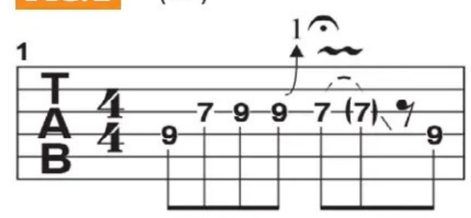


FIG. 3 (B7)

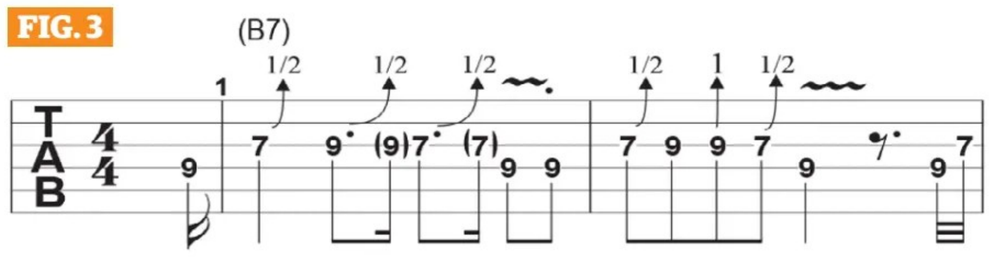
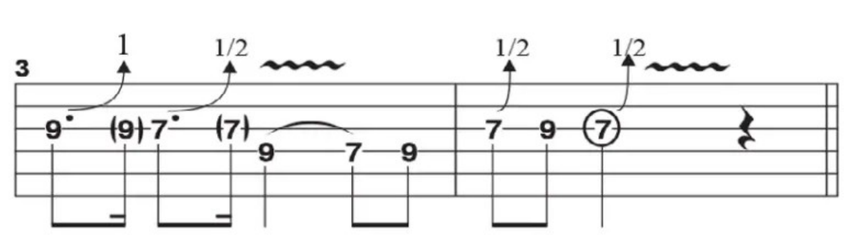
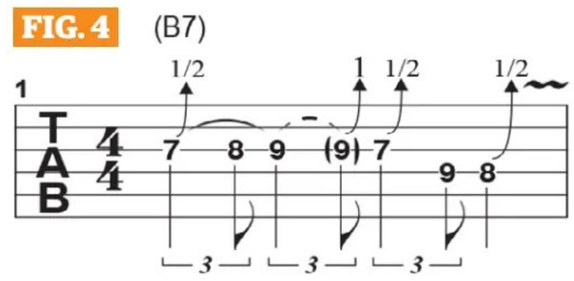


FIG. 4 (B7)





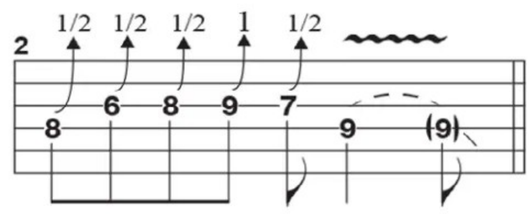


FIG. 5 (B7)

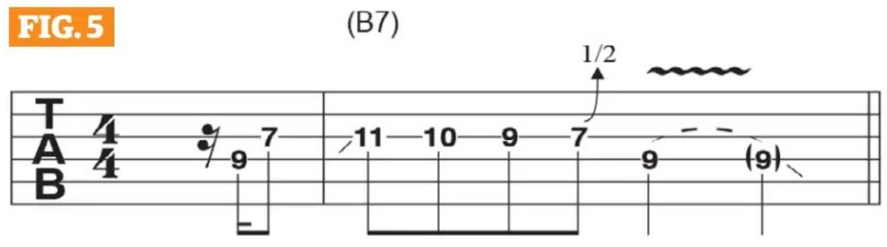


FIG. 6 (B7)

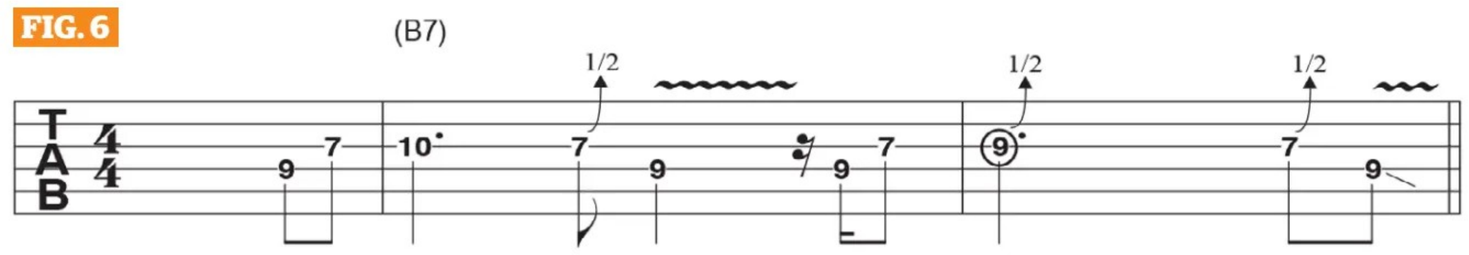


FIG. 7 (B7)

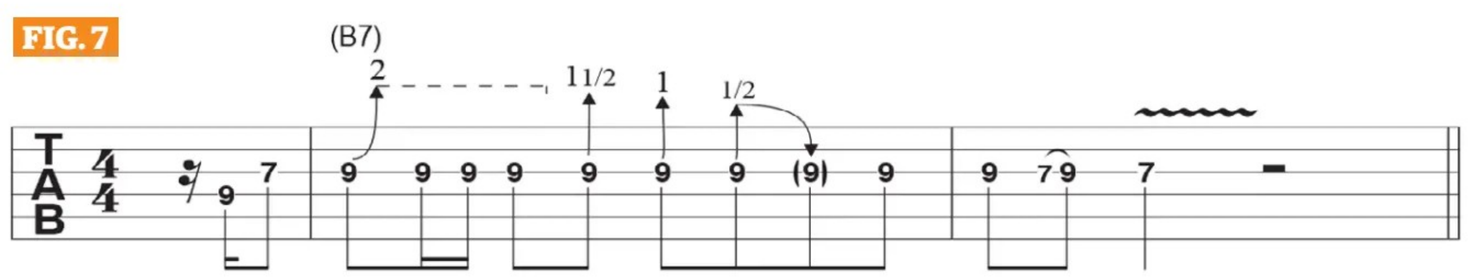


FIG. 8 (B7)

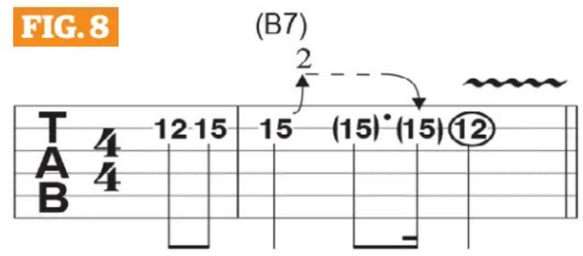
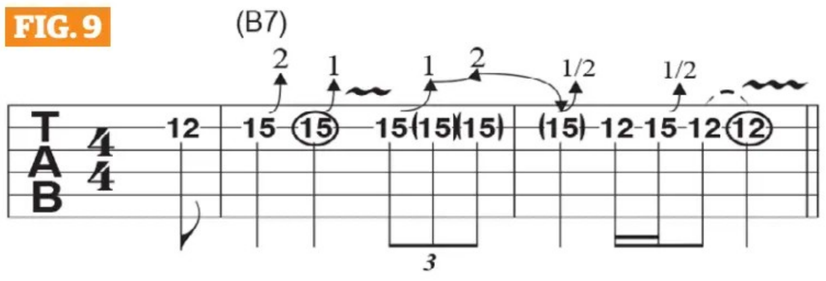


FIG. 9 (B7)



In **FIGURE 2**, I play a two-bar phrase based on the B minor pentatonic scale (B, D, E, F♯, A) and bend E, the 4th of B, up a whole step to F♯, the 5th. Then, in bar 2, I bend D, the minor 3rd, up a half step to the major 3rd, D♯. In **FIGURE 3**, I liberally bend several notes, yielding even more of a "vocal" sound.

I take this approach a little further in **FIGURE 4** by starting with a half step bend from D to D♯, followed by hammer-ons to D♯ and E then a whole-step bend from E up to F♯. Bar 1 ends with A♯ bent up a half step to B, and in bar 2, I combine unusual half- and whole-step bends to produce a unique sound and melody.

A great note to bend up to is the ♭5 (flatted 5th). Sticking with the key of B, that would be an F note. In **FIGURE 5**, all of the notes are fretted; in **FIGURES 6** and **7**, I use half- and whole-step bends from the 4th, E, to sound the 5th, F♯, then the flatted 5th, F.

Great masters of string bending to listen to for inspiration are Buddy Guy, Otis Rush and Albert King. **FIGURE 8** is played in Buddy's style, featuring a big two-step bend, the equivalent of four frets, and a gradual release. **FIGURE 9** is played in Albert's style, with five distinct pitches sounded from a single fretted D note on the B string's 15th fret.

Bending strings may cause your fingertips to hurt a little, but it's worth it to discover the many expressive sounds that can be attained via this highly expressive technique. GW

Time Warp

Playing behind, ahead of or on the beat

AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT of playing music is being aware of "where" you're playing in the beat and how it relates to the groove being laid down by the rhythm section. This concept can be broken up into three approaches: playing *behind* the beat, playing *ahead of* the beat or playing squarely *on* the beat. How a guitar player chooses to interact with the beat, or pulse, will have everything to do with the feeling of the music and the expression being communicated to the listener. This is, of course, true for all instrumentalists, regardless of musical style.

When I was first learning to play the music of my biggest hero, Mountain guitarist Leslie West, I was thinking, "Why does it sound different when I play the 'Mississippi Queen' intro, as compared to when he does it?" I'd be playing right "on the click," meaning that I was following metronomic time. We've been taught to practice with a metronome, and develop solid time at different tempos.

That said, I eventually discovered that many of my biggest heroes often played "behind the beat," meaning that they'd play just a little bit slower, or "late," so that the riffs would sit "back" in the pocket. Another great example is Paul Kossoff's rhythm playing on the Free classic "All Right Now." **FIGURE 1** is played in this style, as I alternate between A5, Dadd4/A and D/A chords.

If you were to measure that against a click, when I'm playing a riff like that I'm deliberately pulling back on the beat just a little bit to change the feeling of the music.

If I'm playing a lick like **FIGURE 2**, which simply moves between the notes G and E in the key of E, I'm thinking in my head about slowing down a little, so that the notes are falling just a hair behind the quarter-note pulse. When you're playing against the groove of the bass and drums, you can really hear the difference, and this approach is very effective.

You can also play "on top of the beat," which means playing either squarely on the beat or a little bit ahead of it ("early"), which will give your playing a sense of urgency.

Some of the greatest examples of hearing how a guitarist can manipulate the way to relate to the beat are in the live recordings of the band Cream, featuring Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker. "Spoonful" is a great example, and **FIGURE 3** is played along these lines. The feeling is that the band is a little bit ahead of the beat and Clapton is pulling back against the groove.

FIG. 1



FIG. 2

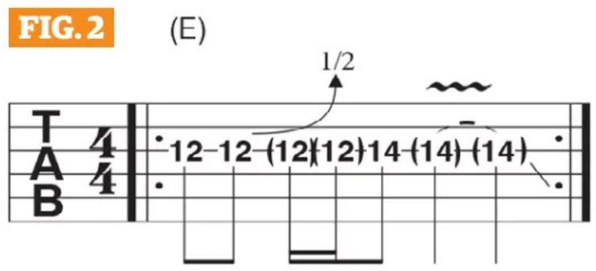


FIG. 3

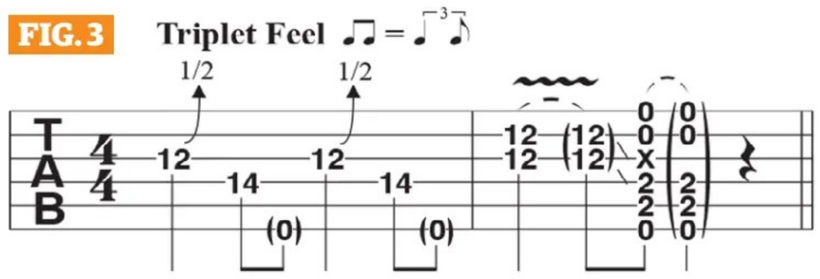


FIG. 4

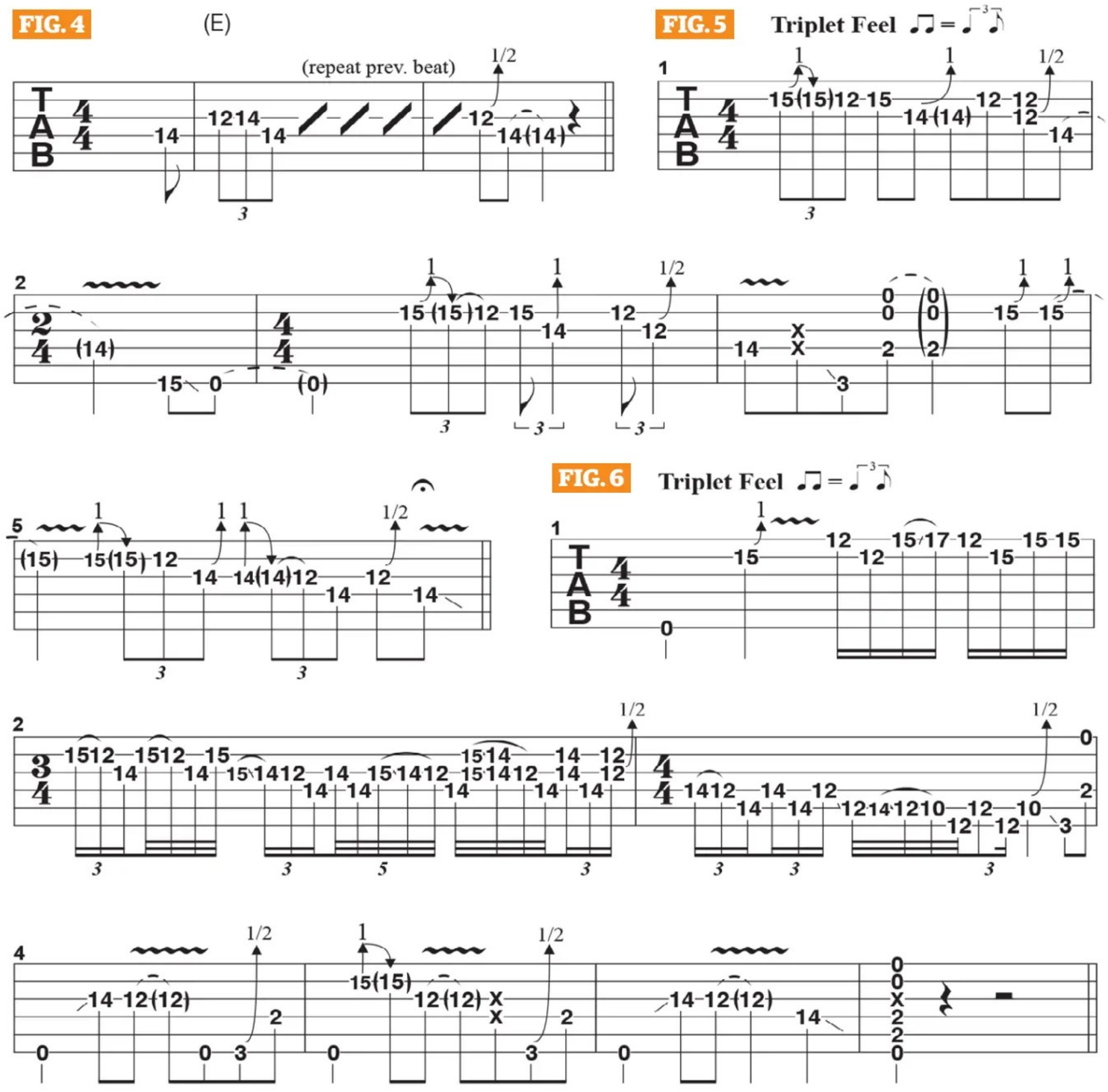


FIG. 5

FIG. 6

" How a player chooses to interact with the beat will have everything to do with the feeling of the music"

In **FIGURE 4**, I play a repetitive lick that moves between G, A and E, and I can subtly "warp the time" – speed up or slow down – to create tension in the music. **FIGURE 5** is another example of this approach: though I'm not changing the notes much, I am changing how the phrases "sit"in the beat, which has a distinct effect on the feeling of the music. It's like driving a car – you can speed up or slow down while traveling through the musical landscape to discover a variety of expressions.

In **FIGURE 6**, I start by playing on the beat then switch to playing way ahead of it in bars 2-3 then pull the phrases back behind the beat for dramatic effect. GW

For video of the Bend to Your Will lesson, go to guitarworld.com/holiday2025
For video of the Time Warp lesson, go to guitarworld.com/september2025

Jared James Nichols is a true blues-rock titan with two signature Epiphone Les Paul models (and a Blackstar amp) to his name. His latest album is 2026's *Louder Than Fate*. For more information, head to jaredjamesnichols.com.



FOLLOW THE GROOVE

BY CORY WONG

The Right Stuff

Developing Nile Rodgers-style funky strumming

IN THIS LESSON, I'd like to talk about the paramount importance of the right, or pick, hand — how it's the keeper of time and the thing that gives us the groove while we play. I'll demonstrate some examples and practice tips for you to work on to help develop your strumming technique.

When it comes to strumming, I subscribe to the "steady motor" method, keeping my hand in perpetual motion, in an unbroken down-up "pendulum" pattern, most often in a 16th-note rhythm, even when I'm not hitting every 16th note. As shown in **FIGURE 1**, I'm strumming steady 16ths in an alternating pattern while dampening all of the strings with my fret hand.

In **FIGURE 2**, I apply this strumming technique to a chord progression. Notice that, in bar 1, on beat 2, I strum G5 and let it ring for the equivalent of three 16th notes as my hand keeps moving before striking the chord again. In bar 2, I switch to eighth-note accents on beats 2 and 4. In **FIGURE 3**, the technique is applied in a funk context. Here, I repeatedly strum a G9 voicing, interspersed with muted-string accents.

In all three examples, my right hand is doing the same thing, moving down-up-down-up in 16th notes, which may be counted "1-ee-and-uh, 2-ee-and-uh, 3-ee-and-uh, 4-ee-and-uh." Any note or chord that falls on a downbeat ("1," "2," "3" or "4") or eighth-note upbeat ("and") is sounded with a downstroke, and anything that falls on the second or fourth 16th note of the beat ("ee" or "uh') is caught with an upstroke. This way, I never have to think about my strokes, as the continuous motion will make those decisions for me.

Are there times when I'll change my strumming approach? Absolutely — this is just a general guideline.

When moving my hand like this, I don't always strum the strings, even though the down-up motion is constant. There are three sounds that you can get: a chord (or note), a muted-string accent ("x"), or nothing at all — silence. In funk-style music, the most effective rhythm parts combine notes, chords and dead-string accents with space, which together create the desired syncopated rhythms.

FIGURE 4 illustrates an example of this. On beats 1 and 3, I sound C9 on the downbeats and on the last 16th-note upbeat ("uh"). On beats 2 and 4, the downbeats are silent while the muted-string accents through the rest of the beat are strummed in steady 16ths. In those holes of silence, my right hand is swinging over the strings without touching them.

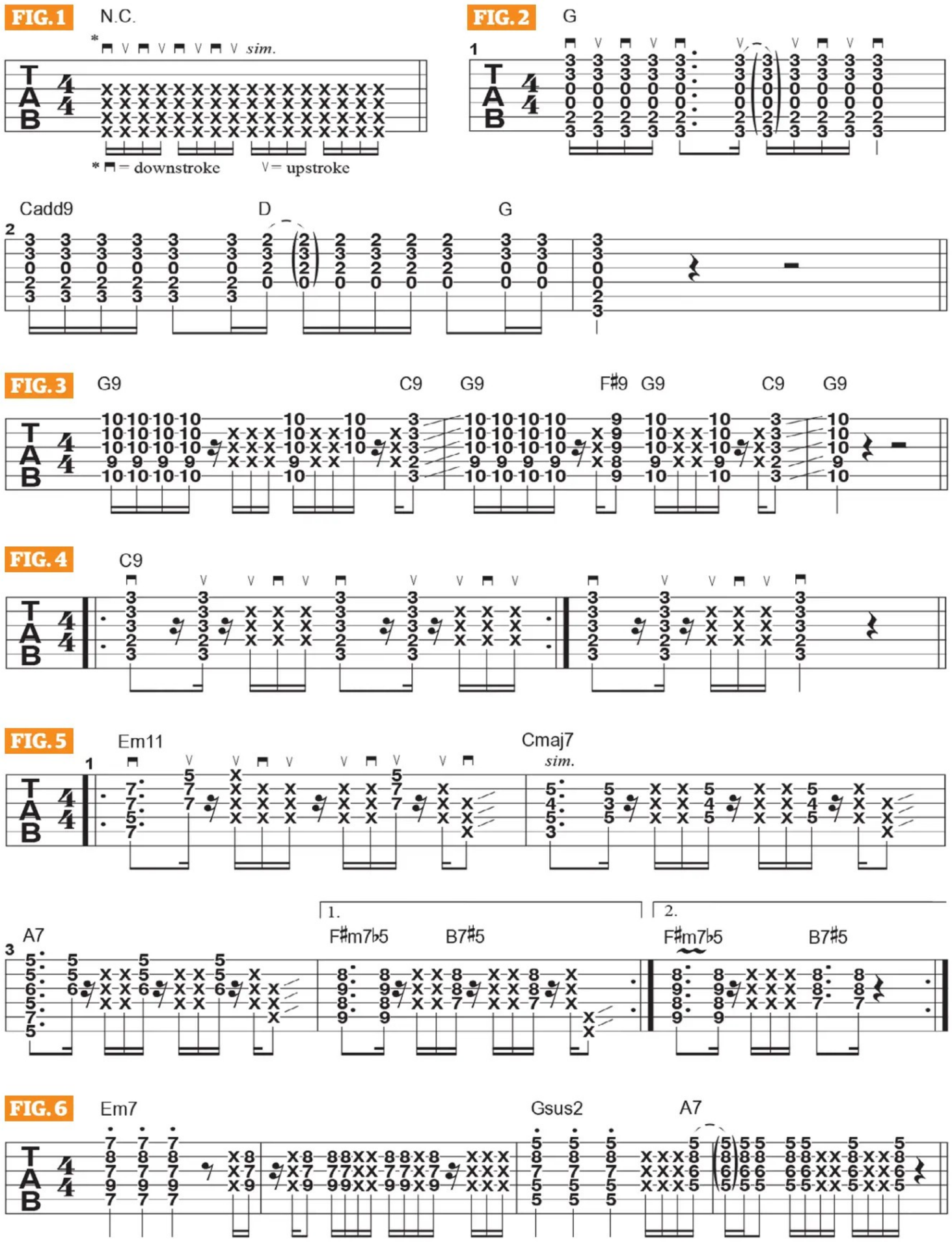
I learned a lot about rhythm guitar from listening to and watching Nile Rodgers and Prince play, and also chatting with Nile about rhythm guitar techniques.

FIGURE 5 offers an example of a chord progression played in Rodgers' rhythm style. For my tune "Cosmic Sans," the main chord progression is Em11 - Cmaj7 - A7 - F♯m7♭5 - B7♯5. If I were to strum a full barre-chord voicing for each chord, it would feel too "chunky." Instead, I do what Nile advised me to do — "Fret the whole chord form, but only sound parts of it at certain times, moving your right hand from the lower to the higher strings; that will add clarity and definition."

Nile will often move back and forth between full chords and smaller voicings, as in **FIGURE 6**. His tunes "Good Times" and "Le Freak" are great examples of this.

To me, solid pick-hand timing when strumming is where the groove is: the pick hand is the timekeeper, and I've spent a lot of time working on exercises designed to bolster my strumming competence. Next, I'd like to share some more of these exercises.

One of the interesting things that I did to develop my strumming technique had nothing to do with my wrist motion or how to hold the pick. I actually had teachers in college tell me that my technique was terrible



TAICHI NISHIMAKI

and say "you should hold your pick this way!" Everyone's bio-mechanics are different and unique, in terms of what works best and most efficiently. So, I don't swear by my technique; I swear by my ability to control my right-hand movement and the exercises I used to get there.

An unorthodox approach I took was to borrow something from my old marching band drum line exercises and adapt them to guitar. In hitting the snare drum, I'd practice the typical "stick control" exercises of "right-left-right-right" (RLRR) or "left-right-left-left" (LRLL) and I practiced "grid-ing" drills of shifting accents from one 16th note to another. I realized that this approach could enhance my right-hand technique.

Let's next develop upon these examples with steady 16th-note strumming on fret-hand-muted strings, utilizing the "steady motor" approach of down-up-down-up alternate strumming on every beat, as shown in **FIGURE 7**. If you verbalize the four beats of 16th notes in each bar as "1-ee-an-da, 2-ee-an-da, 3-ee-an-da, 4-ee-an-da," the pick strokes are down-up-down-up, etc., with "ee" and "da" being strummed with upstrokes.

When strumming this way, your have three options: hit a note or chord, play a "chuck" (muted-string strum) or play nothing – just let your hand swing over the strings.

FIGURE 8 illustrates a "grid-ing" exercise to strengthen pick-hand control for strumming, achieved through shifting the accents. We begin with one bar of accenting the four downbeats (1, 2, 3 and 4), strumming them a little harder than normal. This is followed by a bar of accents on "ee," then a bar of accents on "an" and ending with a bar accenting "da."

Now let's switch the accents to two beats each, as shown in **FIGURE 9**. On beats 1 and 2, I accent the downbeats, and on beats 3 and 4, I accent "ee." In bar 2, I accent "an" in the first two beats, then "da" in the last two.

In **FIGURE 10**, I shift the accent forward on each beat, which is a little more challenging to do. Proceed slowly at first while tapping your foot squarely on each beat, then gradually increase the tempo.

The next step is to work in some chords. In **FIGURE 11**, I press down on an E9 voicing at the same accent points specified in the prior examples, moving from one 16th-note accent to the next on each successive beat. In **FIGURE 12**, I apply this approach to a more traditional funk rhythm part with changing chords. As you'll discover, rhythm parts like these are much easier to play once you learn to control how your two hands work together in laying down a solid rhythm part. GW

For video of part 1 of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/september2025
For video of part 2, go to guitarworld.com/october2025


Getty

FIG. 7 ⊓ = downstroke V = upstroke

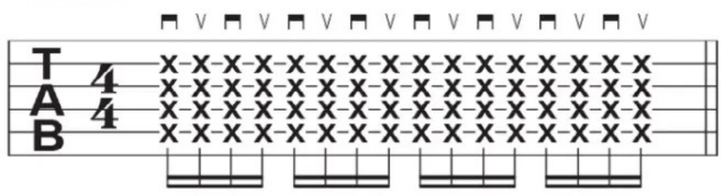
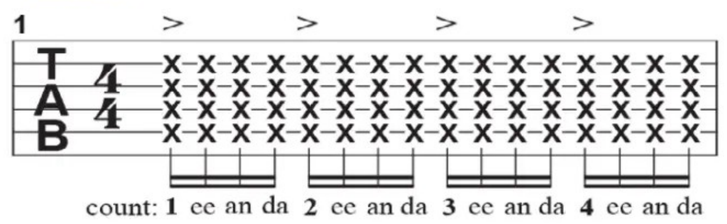


FIG. 8 > = accent (strum harder than normal)



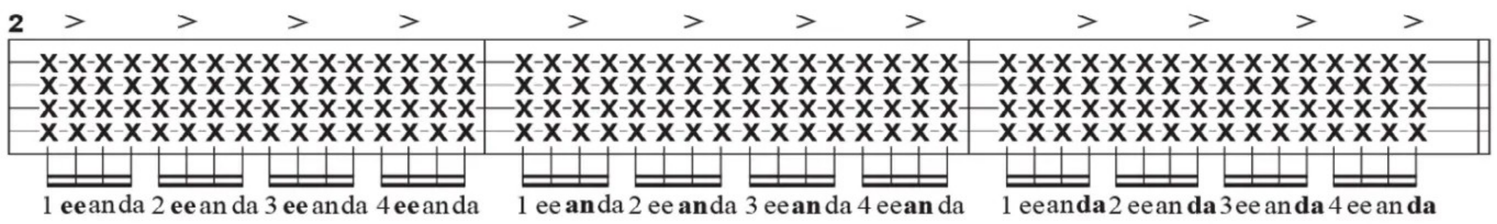


FIG. 9

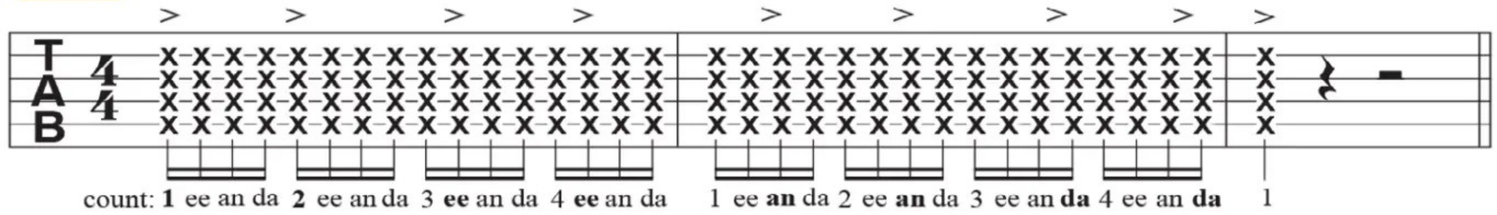


FIG. 10

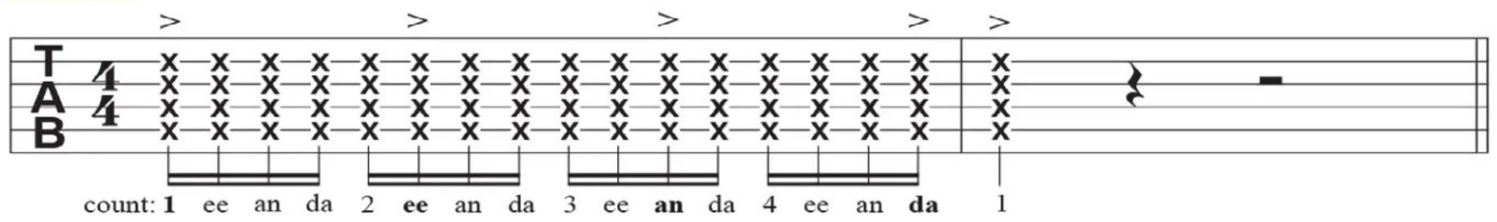
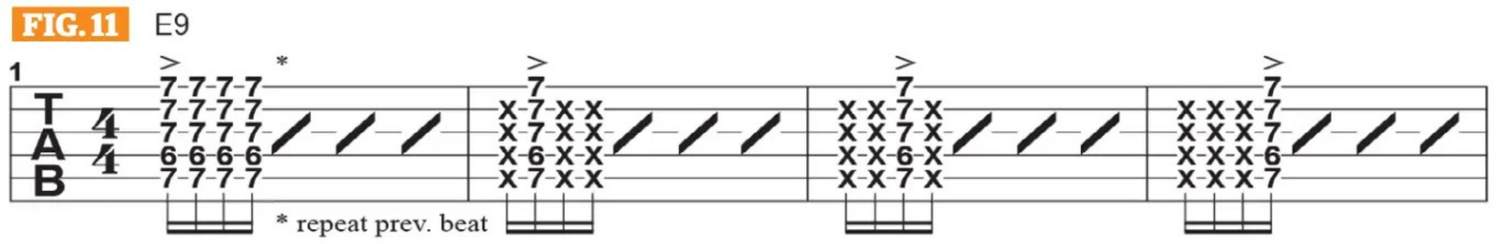


FIG. 11 E9



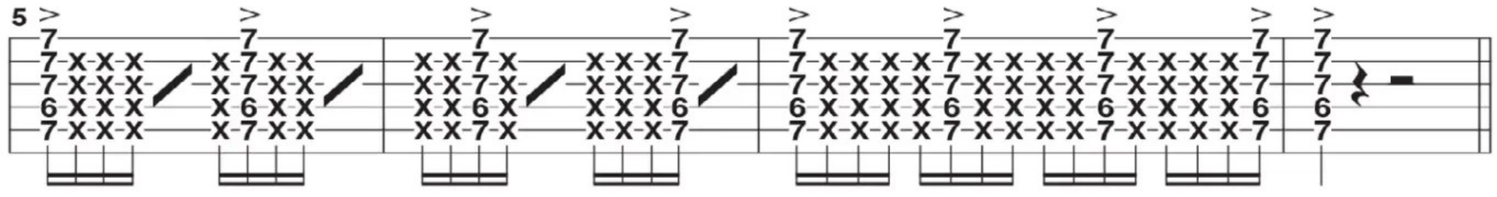
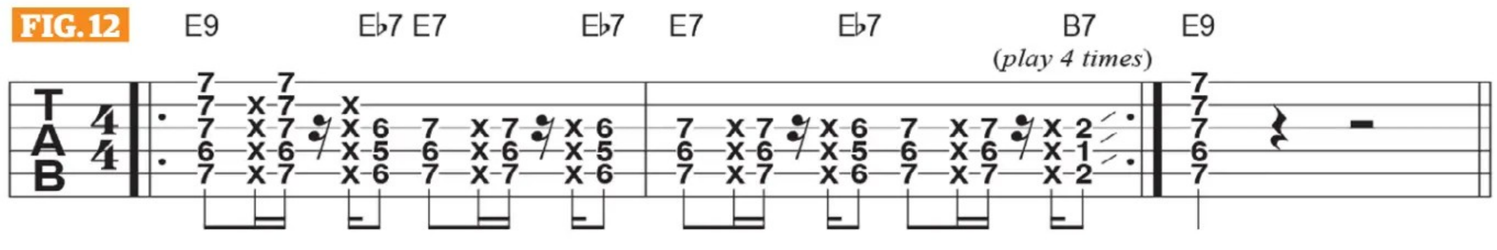
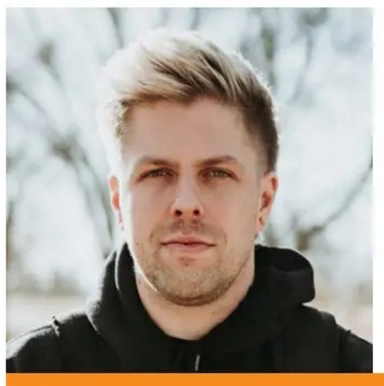


FIG. 12



Funk, rock and jazz pro Cory Wong has made a massive dent in the guitar scene since emerging in 2010. Along the way, he's released a slew of high-quality albums, either solo or with the Fearless Flyers. For more info, check out corywongmusic.com.

TAICHI NISHIMAKI



THE DEEP END

BY MIKE STRINGER

Speed Skips

Downpicking fast string-skips in "Jaded"

HELLO EVERYONE, AND welcome to my new *Guitar World* instructional column. In this series of lessons, I will be sharing and demonstrating some of my approaches to playing seven-string guitar and the various ways I use the instrument to craft the riffs that I write for my band, Spiritbox.

I'd like to kick things off with a look at some of the technical and musical elements I employ in our song "Jaded," which we recorded for our 2023 EP, *The Fear of Fear*.

Essential to playing "Jaded" correctly is the tuning I use, which is drop-F♯ (low to high): F♯, C♯, F♯, B, E, G♯, C♯. This is drop-A tuning (A, E, A, D, G, B, E), down one and one half steps, or a minor 3rd. When transposing a tuning like this, some players prefer to think of the notes "normally," meaning as if their guitar were in drop-A, with the understanding that everything sounds in a lower key. Others acknowledge the absolute, concert-key pitches. I myself just visualize the shapes on the fretboard and play by ear without thinking about the note names.

As shown in **FIGURE 1**, I perform the intro riff that begins at 0:22 on my guitar's bottom four strings, using mostly downstrokes — the only exceptions being the pairs of 16th notes, which I pick down-up. As you can see, there's a lot of string-skipping between the 7th string and either the 5th or 4th string. Doing so requires both precision and stamina with the pick hand, and it will take time to build up the accuracy that the riff demands.

I begin high up on the neck, at the 15th fret, and proceed to jump back and forth between high and low notes, with some very wide intervals, which I think creates an interesting, angular melodic contour that "pops" nicely.

Notice that I briefly apply palm-muting (P.M.) to the 16th notes on the open 7th-string, which makes them sound tight and percussive. Also notice, in bars 1, 3, 5 and 7, the long finger slides on the 5th string, from the 8th fret to the 14th, which is another important articulation element of the riff. So, in addition to all the string-skips, there are a lot of quick position shifts, especially with the octave jumps in bar 9, which make the riff challenging to perform cleanly and consistently.

FIGURE 2 illustrates the song's pre-chorus riff (0:59), which is very similar to the intro. There are slight differences between the first ending (bars 7 and 8) and the second ending (bars 9 and 10). Both times, I play strummed octaves on the 7th and 5th strings, again with some sliding and shifting, but notice that I change the order of the notes in the final bar, adding a slight twist to cap off the riff.

When playing both figures, strive for accuracy and economy of movement with the pick hand while also delivering the desired intense, aggressive feel. As with anything, practice it slowly at first, to establish the muscle, visual and auditory memory, then gradually increase the tempo to match that of the recording. GW

Seven-string guitar in drop-A tuning, down one and one half steps (low to high, F♯, C♯, F♯, B, E, G♯, C♯).
All music sounds in the key of F♯ minor, a minor 3rd (one and one half steps) lower than written.

FIG. 1

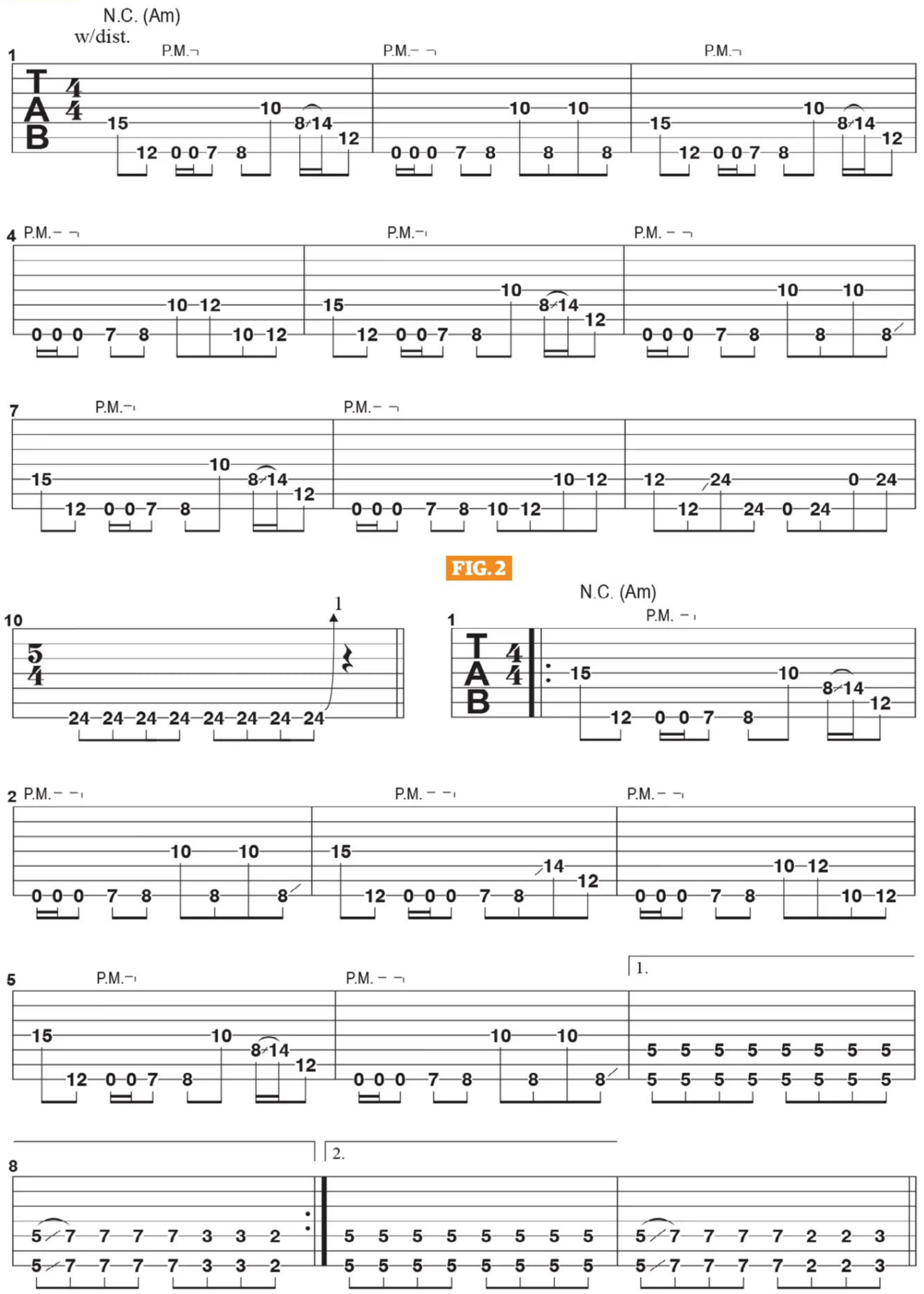


FIG. 2

KATJA OGRIN/REDFERNS

Syncopated Bending

Nailing the rhythmic string bends in "Holy Roller"

A KEY ELEMENT in many of the riffs I write is *rhythmic string bending*. A good example of this can be found in the main riff to "Holy Roller," which I recorded with Spiritbox for our 2021 album, *Eternal Blue*. As was the case last month with "Jaded," I perform this song on a seven-string guitar tuned to drop-F♯ (low to high: F♯, C♯, F♯, B, E, G♯, C♯), which is drop-A tuning transposed down a minor 3rd, or one and one half steps, so everything sounds a minor 3rd lower.

FIGURE 1 illustrates the main riff to "Holy Roller," which I play during the intro and outro. The first six bars are performed entirely on the 7th string and feature repeating pull-down bends and releases. I begin in bar 1 with two unbent eighth notes at the 12th and 9th frets, followed in beats 2 and 3 by two quick ¾-step bends and releases at the 13th fret, phrased in a 16th-note rhythm. The bar ends with a return to the unbent notes.

Syncopation (emphasizing the upbeats, or "weak" parts of the beat) comes into play in bar 2, where, on beat 3, I bend the 9th-fret note up a half step and hold the bend into beat 4. Bar 2's final note is tied (held over) to beat 1 of bar 3, which creates more syncopation, then bent up a half step. Bars 3 and 4 mostly replicate bars 1 and 2, but bar 4 ends with a pair of palm-muted eighth notes on an open A5 chord.

Bars 5 and 6 essentially restate bars 1 and 2, after which I play a big F♯sus2 barre chord across all seven strings, which I shift up and down the neck in a syncopated dotted-eighth rhythm, holding each chord for one and one half beats, which, when done in succession like this, creates a jarring effect. The riff ends with another pair of palm-muted open A5 chords, followed by high natural harmonics (N.H.) chords on the top three strings, strummed as 16th notes with alternate (down-up) strumming. To sound the harmonics, lightly rest your fret-hand pinkie across the top three strings at the "3.2" location indicated, which is a little ways past the 3rd fret. As is the case with many of the riffs I write, without the added bends, this riff would sound a little stale and boring. When performing the 13th-fret bends here, strive to consistently raise the pitch 3/4 of a step, which is midway between a half step (equal to one fret) and a whole step (equal to two frets).



Getty

FIGURE 2 shows the song's breakdown verse riff, built from a two-note F/A chord played on the bottom two strings and strummed in a syncopated rhythm with palm-muting (P.M.). I use all downstrokes here, except for the pairs of 16th notes, which are strummed down-up. The syncopation is created by accentuating certain eighth-note upbeats (the "and" counts) and holding the chord into the following downbeat. To properly feel the phrasing, play through the figure while tapping your foot squarely on each beat. Start out slowly then gradually ramp up the tempo to that of the recording.

In bar 8, I play "3.2" natural harmonics again, this time across the top six strings. I strum the harmonics with upstrokes on each eighth-note upbeat. The key to getting the desired sharp pick attack here is to get a little bit of the flesh of your thumb into the strum. Doing so will also help bring out the harmonics. GW

Seven-string guitar in drop-A tuning, down one and one half steps (low to high, F♯, C♯, F♯, B, E, G♯, C♯).
All notes and chords sound a minor 3rd (one and one half steps) lower than written.

FIG. 1

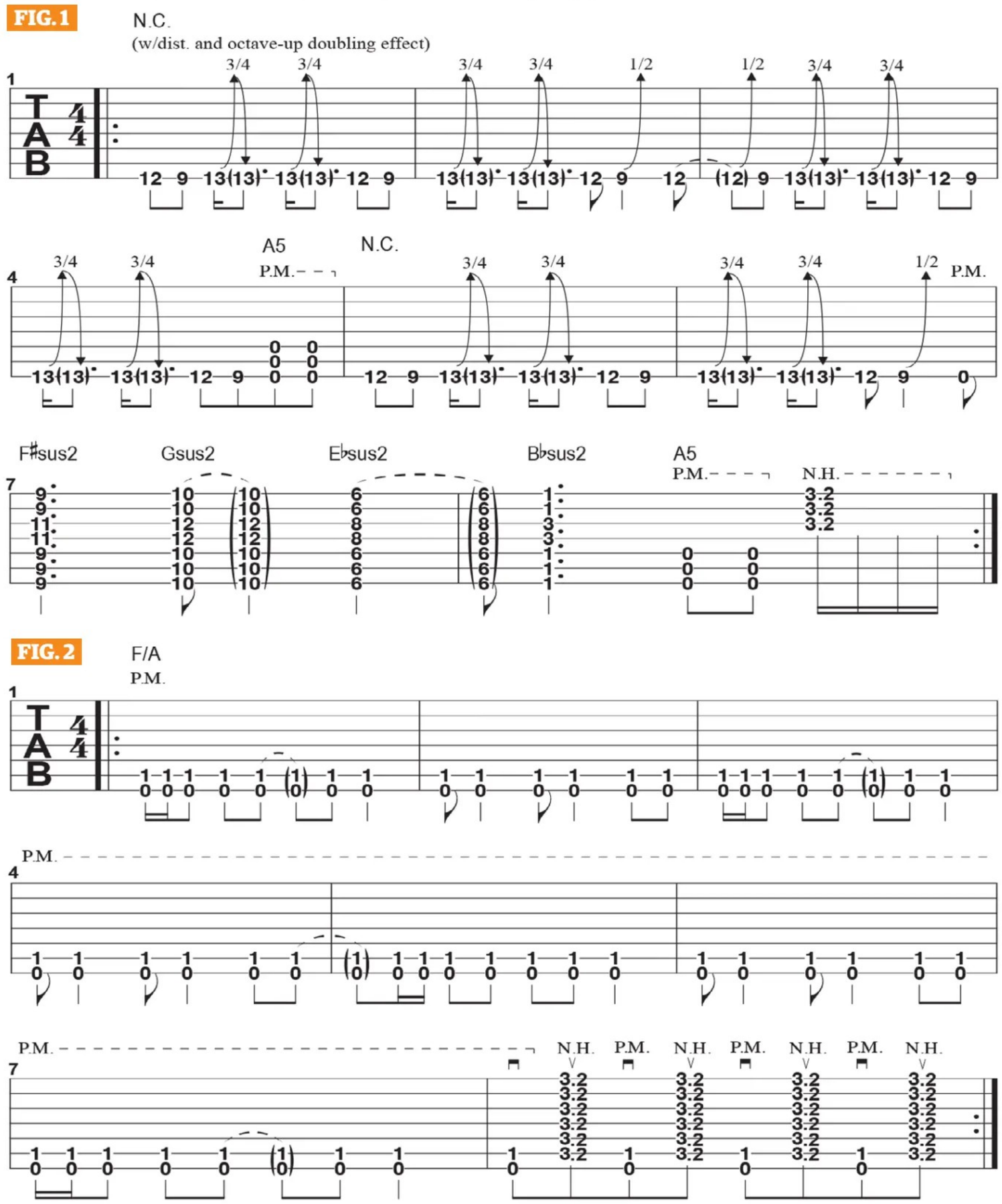
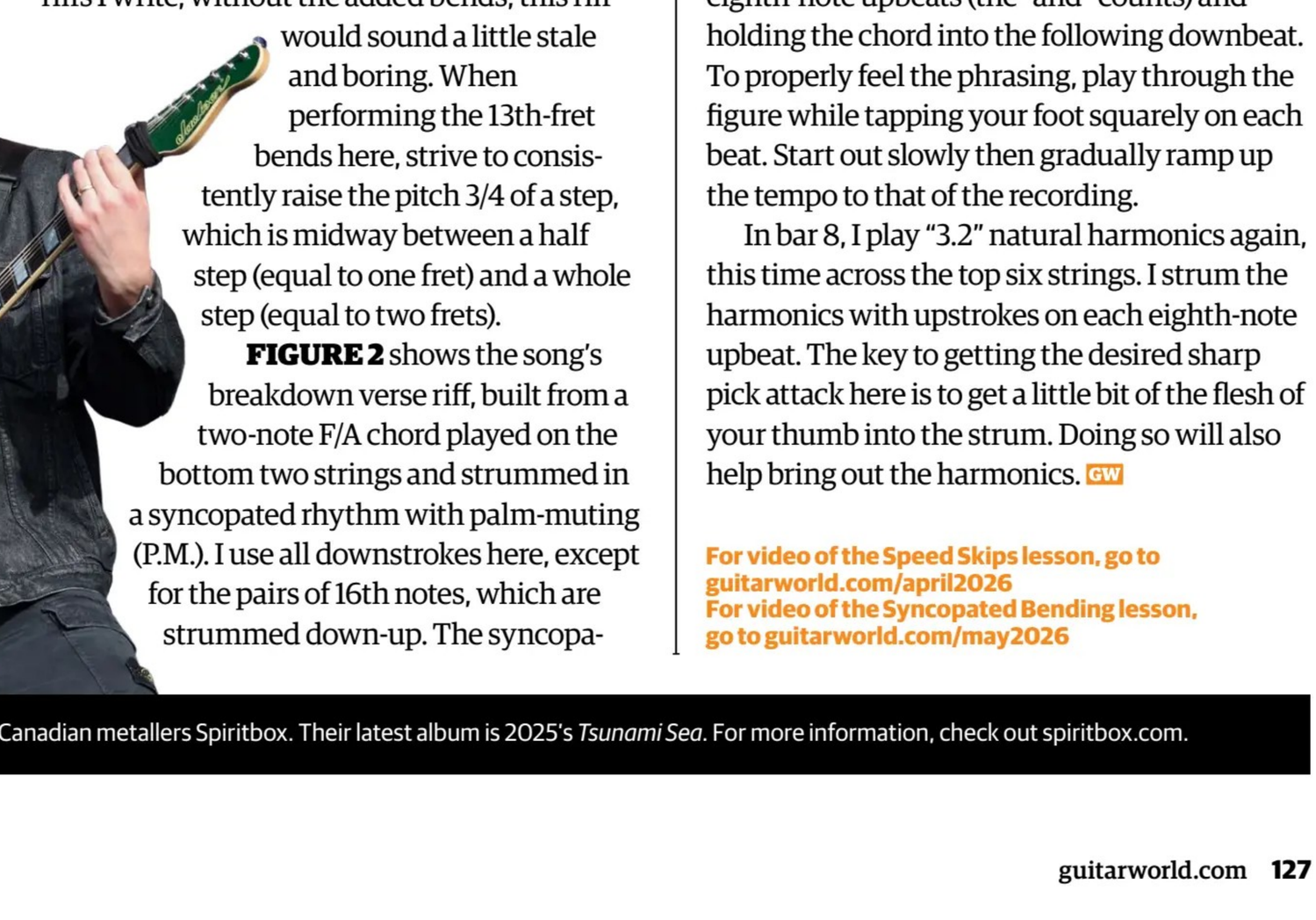


FIG. 2



For video of the Speed Skips lesson, go to guitarworld.com/april2026
For video of the Syncopated Bending lesson, go to guitarworld.com/may2026

KYLE JOINSON

Mike Stringer is the guitarist for Grammy-winning Canadian metallers Spiritbox. Their latest album is 2025's *Tsunami Sea*. For more information, check out spiritbox.com.



BLUES EXPANSIONS

BY COREY CONGILIO

Hybrid Thinking

Ways to use pick-and-fingers technique

HELLO, AND WELCOME to my new column for *Guitar World*! Over the course of these lessons, I will be sharing many of the techniques and approaches I use for creating effective melodies and rhythm guitar parts for both recording sessions and live performances. I'd like to kick things off with a look at some of the ways in which I incorporate the technique of hybrid picking into my playing. As you may know, hybrid picking combines flatpicking with fingerpicking and can be used to create and perform otherwise impossible sounds and techniques.

Hybrid picking is a big part of country guitar playing, and I've studied a lot of country players, but I'm primarily a blues-rock/Americana player, along with R&B and jazz. I've developed an approach to hybrid picking that I think you will be able to apply fairly quickly to what you're already comfortable with.

A good place to start is with chords, as demonstrated in **FIGURE 1**. For each chord — Dm, A and C — the low root note is flatpicked with a downstroke while the higher three notes are picked upward with the bare middle and ring fingers and pinkie. This produces a piano-like simultaneous note attack and a different sound than a strum, which is an arpeggiation, no matter how quickly you perform it.

For single-note playing, a great way to practice hybrid picking is to play a simple A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G) and alternate between the pick and a finger repeatedly. In **FIGURE 2**, all of the notes that fall on the downbeats are flatpicked and all the notes on the upbeats are picked with the middle finger. My goal here is to achieve a smooth, uniform note attack, so that there's almost no identifiable difference heard between the sound of the flatpicked and fingerpicked notes.

In **FIGURE 3**, I demonstrate how I can get some speed with hybrid picking. Alternating between the pick and a finger in this way can be at least as fast as straight flatpicking, if not faster, and also easier to do.

My incorporation of hybrid picking started when I was about 15 years old. I'd been emulating Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan with licks like **FIGURE 4**, using only a pick. I then switched to using fingerpicking on the top two strings, with my middle and ring fingers, respectively, as shown in **FIGURE 5**.

I find hybrid picking especially useful for faster tempos, such as the country/rock-type riff shown in **FIGURE 6**.

As I play the solo line in **FIGURE 7**, I articulate the notes on the lower strings with the pick and the notes on the higher strings with my available fingers.

Hybrid picking also works very well with double-stops (two-note chords), especially if I want the sound to be very pinpoint and accurate. In **FIGURE 8**, I fingerpick the double-stops on the B and G strings and flatpick the single notes on the D string. In **FIGURE 9**, I move more freely between flatpicking and fingerpicking, which I think yields an expressive sound.

This is a great way to get started with hybrid picking; move from scales into more inventive lines, and you will discover many great sounds that this technique will facilitate. GW

All examples are performed w/hybrid picking (pick and fingers technique).

m= middle finger; a = ring finger.

FIG. 1 Dm A C

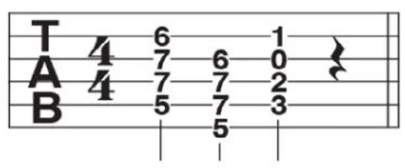


FIG. 2

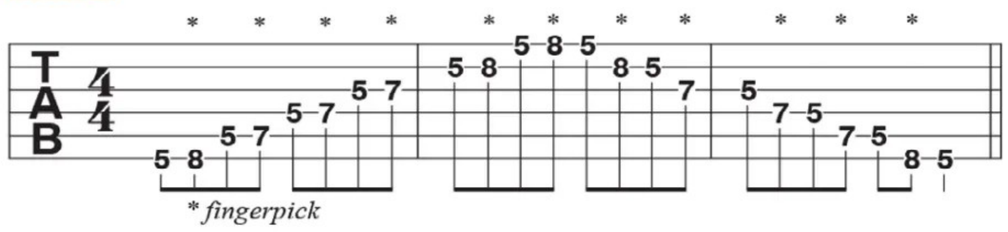


FIG. 3

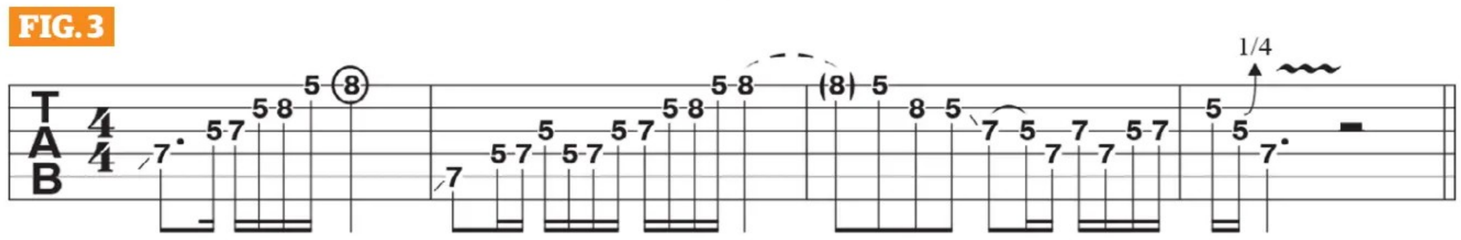


FIG. 4 (A7)

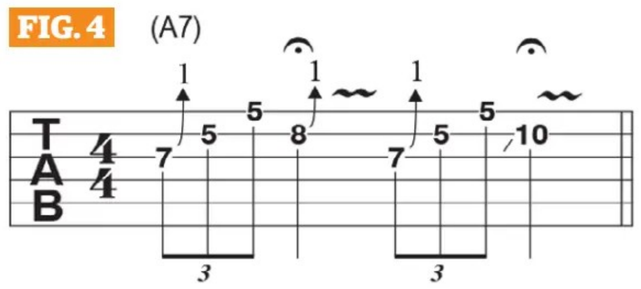


FIG. 5

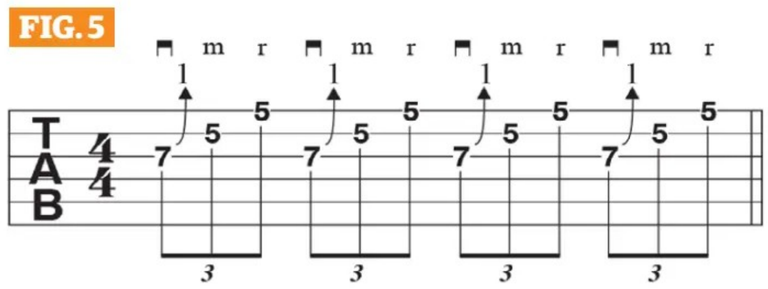


FIG. 6 A5 A6 A5 A6 A5 A6 A5

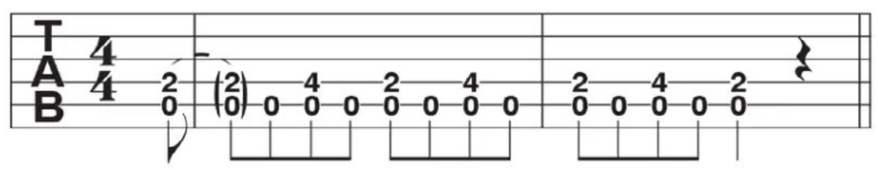
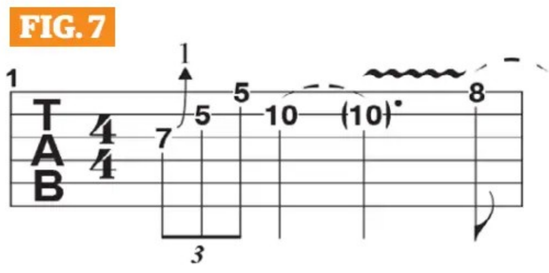


FIG. 7



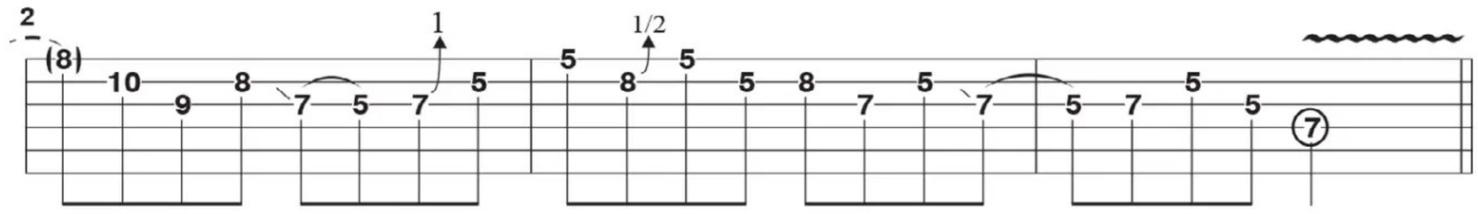


FIG. 8

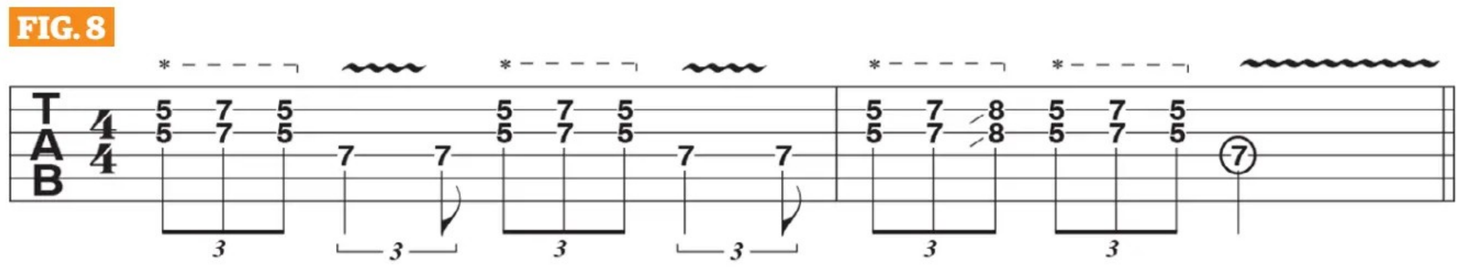
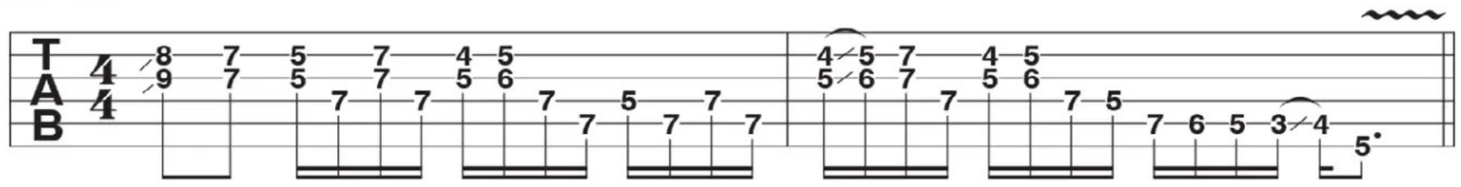


FIG. 9



JAMIE GLASGOW

Dominant Strategies

Using dominant 7 arpeggios in a guitar solo

A GREAT WAY to break away from the typical blues soloing sound of pentatonic scales is to incorporate dominant 7 arpeggios into your improvised lines. As the name implies, a dominant 7 arpeggio is sounded by playing the notes of a dominant 7 chord, such as G7, C7 or D7, individually and in succession.

Let's use the key of G as our point of reference: in **FIGURE 1**, a G7 chord is shown in 3rd position, followed by a G minor pentatonic scale (G, B♭, C, D, F) played in the same position. What I often like to do, in order to create more interesting solo lines, is combine the notes of the minor pentatonic scale with those of a dominant 7 arpeggio, which, as you'll notice, share three notes – the root, 5th and minor, of "flat" 7th.

FIGURE 2 illustrates a G7 arpeggio, built from the notes G, B, D and F. The first three notes give us a G major triad, and F is the minor, or "flatted," 7th, which provides the dominant 7 sound. **FIGURE 3** shows the same notes played in a descending manner on the lower strings.

Articulation devices like finger slides and string bends offer great ways to incorporate the dominant 7 pitches into phrases. For example, **FIGURE 4** begins with a series of slides into the notes G, B, D and F, all from a half step below, after which I finish the phrase with more typical blues lines based on the G blues scale (G, B♭, C, D♭, D, F).

A great way to practice improvising with dominant 7 arpeggios is to loop a rhythm part then solo over it. **FIGURE 5** shows a simple shuffle-based rhythm part that sits on a G7 chord. **FIGURE 6** sounds the notes of a G7 arpeggio played over the loop, first ascending then descending. To some people, this is more of a "jazzy" sound; the reason for this is, as is often the case in jazz, the chord tones are emphasized when playing arpeggios. The inclusion of B, the major 3rd, in addition to F, the minor, or "flatted," 7th, builds a strong connection to the harmony of the G7 chord.

"A great way to practice improvising with dominant 7 arpeggios is to loop a rhythm part then solo over it"

FIG. 1 G7 G minor pentatonic scale

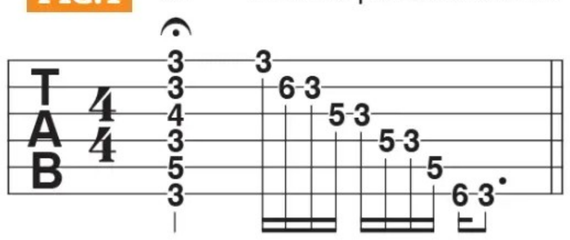


FIG. 2 G7 arpeggio

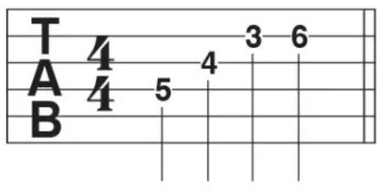


FIG. 3 G7 arpeggio

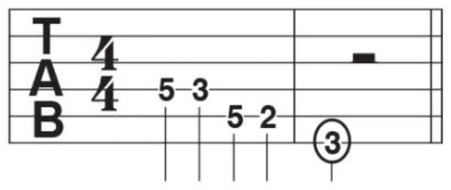


FIG. 4 (G7)

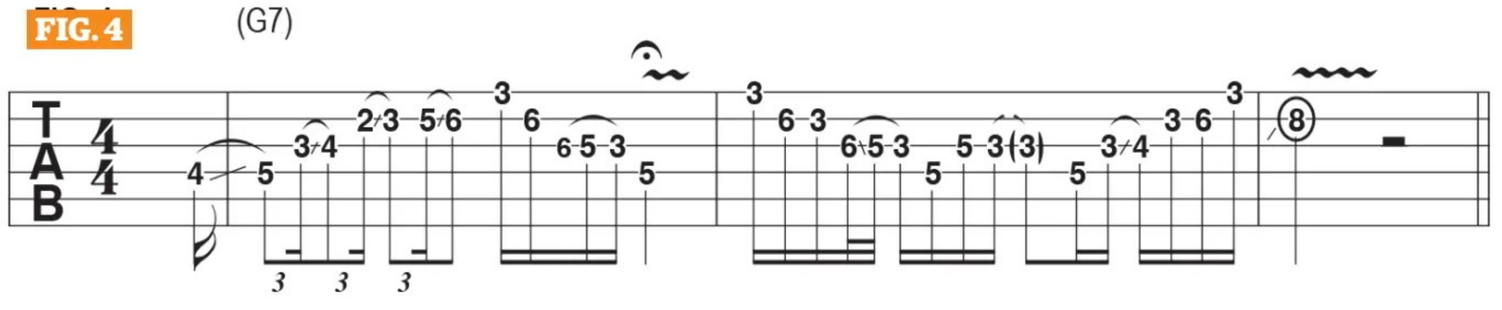


FIG. 5 G13-9



FIG. 6 (G7)

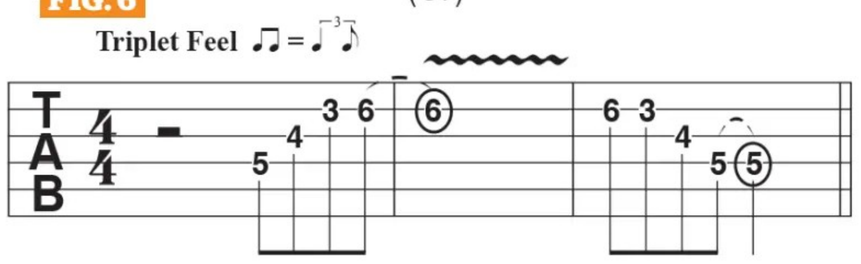


FIG. 7 (G7)

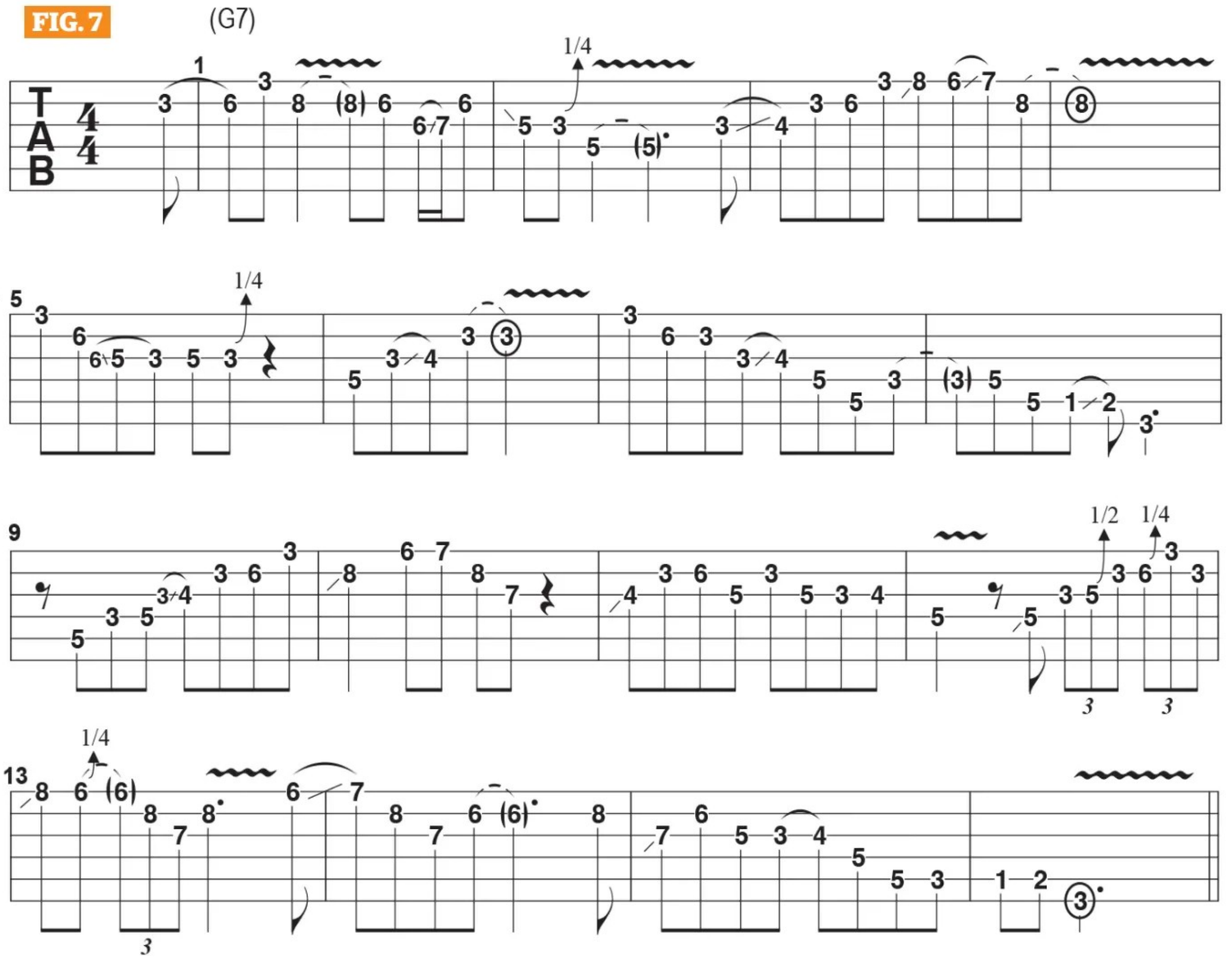


FIGURE 7 offers a longer example of how to combine phrases built from the G minor pentatonic and G blues scales with G7 arpeggio shapes. Bars 1 and 2 emphasize the G blues scale, followed in bars 3 and 4 with emphasis on the major 3rd, B, which brings in the dominant 7 arpeggio sound.

In bars 5-8, I move back and forth between straight G minor pentatonic and blues scale phrases and the inclusion of the major 3rd, B, in order to bring the arpeggio sound back to the forefront. Throughout the remainder of the example, I move freely between the two approaches, striving for musicality in the way the different elements work together.

As you work with this dualistic approach, think of it as an ongoing hand-off between scales and arpeggios. Use your ears to discern the differences in the musical effects created and to inform your note choices. GW

For video of the Hybrid Thinking lesson, go to guitarworld.com/may2026
For video of the Dominant Strategies lesson, go to guitarworld.com/may2026

JAMIE GLASGOW

Corey Congilio is recognized as a top-tier touring guitarist, session musician and educator, creating content for his lesson website, workingclassguitar.com. Find out more at coreycongilio.com.











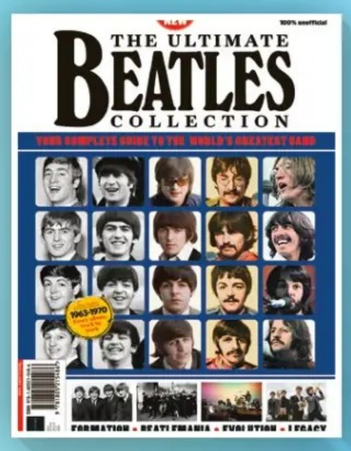




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