



Handwritten Notes

With a dramatically unorthodox playing style that simulates guitar, bass and percussion, native New Yorker Preston Reed is one of the true innovators on the circuit.

Acoustic talks to the man with the pioneering spirit...

“I’ve always loved playing solo acoustic guitar,” he begins. “I started off learning fingerpicking from listening to records by Hot Tuna with Jorma Kaukonen – a great delta blues-style fingerpicker – and then John Fahey, who’s a fantastic, simple and yet fascinating fingerpicker, and Leo Kottke. But I always wanted to write my own compositions, so whenever I learned something I would start composing with it, and in around 1987 my tendency to compose outstripped the techniques that I was using. I believed there was a way that I could create more satisfying and exciting music, and I needed to rethink how the guitar was played. I’d been toying with the idea of how I’d make use of all the opportunities for percussive sounds that an acoustic guitar has on it. It wasn’t possible for me to do that playing conventionally, so I started doing a drumbeat on the guitar and then started to create a groove and then figured out how I could place guitar notes in the spaces between drumbeats. I came

up with some very interesting stuff right away. That led to one composition after another in my show, which was composed of mostly fingerpicking stuff. I would play one of these new tunes and the audiences would react very strongly to it, and it just grew.”

Preston’s style is heavily rhythmic. He drums on the body of his guitar and plays the strings with both hands over the top of the neck, assaulting the fretboard like a piano. The style he developed is largely comprised of hammer-ons and pull-offs, and is certainly not – as is often described – ‘tapping’.

“I detest the word ‘tapping,’” he groans. “I absolutely hate it. ‘Tapping’ sounds so wimpy, and a lot of the stuff I do requires a lot of strength. I’m often hammering on three or four strings at the same time, sliding them back and forth, pulling them all off, creating a whole wall of sound that way – and the word ‘tapping’ does not accurately describe those actions! People want to pigeonhole things.”

It’s clear that Preston’s love for the guitar

grew from its ability to produce the range of sounds that expressed his feelings, rather than an admiration for the instrument itself. As such, it’s simply a toolbox for channelling his music.

“Yeah, and different guitars offer you different tools,” he adds. “Different guitars have different personalities and can cause you to write different kinds of music, but you’re always going to end up in a place where you need to compose, and the guitar is not going to do the composing for you. You’ve got to do that yourself.”

True to his word, Preston does his own composing. In fact he’s written almost every track on his solo albums since *Blue Vertigo* (1990), and seems to draw inspiration from a variety of sources.

“There’s a lot of ways a tune gets written,” he explains. “A lot of what I’ve come up with has happened from noodling around, or from a mistake that I’ve pursued, or something I didn’t mean to do that suddenly took me in a new direction and I ended up with a tune. Sometimes I’ll be lying in bed and I’ll hear something, and I’ll go and find it on the guitar. Sometimes the guitar gives me an idea, but most of the time it’s me applying my ideas to it. I’ve always got music happening in my head, whether I’ve got a guitar in my hands or not. Sometimes I’ll be in the mood to hear a certain kind of music and I’ll pick up the guitar and go to those chords and work that area of my emotions.”

“I look for a wide and balanced spectrum of different kinds of uptempo and moody and bluesy and aggressive and classical and whatever,” he continues, “and by the time any of my records are finished you’ve had a balanced programme. It could be a record of what I was feeling at the time; the emotions and the ideas are relevant right now.”

Having made his name as a meticulous composer, Preston’s latest album, *Spirit*, was written, arranged and recorded almost spontaneously. He arrived at the Dublin studio with little more than skeletons, completing and recording all 13 tracks in just 11 days, with much of the arranging done on the spot between takes. His trademark ‘over the top’ playing style was rested in favour of an orthodox fingerpicking style on his Yamaha jazz guitar, and although the guitar and amp were miked, Preston maintains that he’s still an acoustic guitarist.

“Everything I do comes out of the acoustic and when I moved into electric I used everything that I learned on acoustic,” he insists. “Acoustic to me means making use of everything on the guitar, not just the strings, but all of the percussive sounds which are available. It also means making full use of textures. You can hear and you can create so many more textures on an acoustic than you can on an electric. There’s a certain way that the ear perceives acoustic music, and when you write music using those tools you get a certain result that sounds intimate and that sounds real and can be very stunning and very beautiful.”

Graham Hazelwood



Reed On...

The Ovation Long Neck Adamas

"I don't work with Ovation anymore, but when I did the president at the time was a guitar player and a fan and he wanted me to see this custom guitar that he'd had them make for him," Preston recalls. "It was a Long Neck Adamas, the line of Ovations that have a carbon graphite top. I tried it and I instantly liked it. I'm 6'5" and I've got long arms, and I liked the extra length of the neck, with the room that it gave me to move around, and the bigger, deeper sound that the guitar had. That's the guitar that you hear on my album Ladies Night. Then I had one made similarly but with alterations. One of them was a Seymour Duncan pickup system that used a second pickup to pick up my drum sounds, and a counterweight in the back so that the neck wouldn't slip down when I'm playing. I'm reaching over the top of the neck so the guitar has a counterweight in it. The Adamas model at the time had a rough ribbing on the edges which was not working for me because my arms were moving around so much it was sandpapering them off, so when they made mine I asked them to remove that ribbing. So my guitar had a smooth top and now they make all their Adamas models that way. I asked them not to cut holes in the top so I could use that area for playing on. You'll see on my guitar that although it has the pattern, it's solid. They were never actually cut. They look like Swiss cheese holes. They're painted on and I use that as a percussion pad. Oh yes, the guitar was made from materials that they don't actually make their guitars from! The back of the guitar was made by some custom place in Ohio. It's actually made of fibreglass, because they knew that I was going to want a bigger sound. As a result it's a fantastic guitar. It's probably about the same in terms of weight, but I like weight. Weight adds stability. I attract a lot of bass players to my MySpace page, and I think it's because bass players hear a lot of what they like in my music. I like a big sound with a big bottom end, so those are the kind of guitars that I look for. I would never be concerned about how it looked, but I love how it sounds."

New Music



The Groanbox Boys

Fences Come Down

Available from:

www.groanboxboys.com

Recorded in a red barn in an Annapolis, Maryland farm, this album is full of hillbilly, hobo blues and banjo frenzy. More than that, though, are to be enjoyed Michael Ward-Bergeman's accordion and vocals, blended with Cory Seznec's harmonica, guitar and vocals. Also resurrected are period instruments, such as the freedom boot and shackles, employed as advocates to the 1930s' and 1940s' wandering freedom songs. Lively, entertaining, intriguing, at times melancholy, and at other times vibrant, there is an enjoyable ride to be had here on this train through 'Boxcar And A Bottle Of Wine' and 'Drink The Magic Potion'.

Russell Welton



The Levellers

Letters From The Underground

Available from:

www.amazon.co.uk from 11th August

The Levellers have been making the travelling and festival communities jump around since 1988, and *Letters From The Underground* is their twelfth studio album. Unfortunately, the ideas aren't flowing thick and fast; it's the same irresistible fast-paced, fiddle-driven, polemic-laden stuff it's always been, but not quite as catchy. There are no classics to match 'One Way' or 'What A Beautiful Day', but the album is unlikely to disappoint hardcore fans, with plenty of political vitriol on board. Those new to the Levellers might be better starting out with *Levelling The Land or Zeitgeist*.

Sam Wise



Clannad

Beginnings - The Best Of The Early Years

Available from:

www.amazon.com

Make no mistake. This deluxe two-CD collection is not just another repackaging of their famous hits from 'Harry's Game' to *Robin of Sherwood*. Rather, it is a special compilation, from the early 70s onwards, of their roots-based Irish folk that was the grounding for their deserved fame. Perhaps most familiar to us all is the youngest member of this Donegal family group, Enya, who went on to enjoy great recognition. Within are 32 tracks of pre-RCA recordings compiled with Clannad's assistance; it's a real insight into the core musicality that is rich in its tapestry and arrangements, the value of which can now be appreciated anew by another generation of listeners and existing fans alike.

Russell Welton



Roland Chadwick

Freedom Dreamer

Available from:

www.guitarcds.net

Roland Chadwick is a transplanted Australian with a background in classical guitar and chamber music, and plaudits from the likes of John Renbourn and Tommy Emmanuel. On that basis, I was hoping for something rather special but was disappointed. What we actually get here is a collection that sounds like the rejected tracks from an 80s Peter Gabriel album and a couple of efforts that wouldn't get on John Martyn's least inspired platter. Chadwick can certainly play and sing, but he has nothing new to say here and neither is there a hook or melody to hang on to

Sam Wise



Martin Taylor

Double Standards

Available from:

www.amazon.com

There is nothing two-faced or hypocritical about this bluesy, jazzy album. Martin delivers the most sumptuous Vanden guitar tones and rich atmospheric ambience from the start. Understated and inherently chilled, 'Triste' oozes charisma and charm characteristic of Martin's golden touch. Conjuring wanton nostalgia and light-hearted upbeat quintessential cool, it's equally as laid-back and soothing as an aural massage, by the pool, on holiday. There are even progressions loosely reminiscent of Nat King Cole and the tastefully injected bebop lines keeping your ears pinned back. There is a fantastic version of 'Someone To Watch Over Me'.

Throughout, Martin breezes from track to track with the apparent consummate ease that he is typically known for. When you realise that most of these tracks are improvised 'on the fly', in the studio and that Martin was also determining his own accompaniments for the second guitar parts (which he also plays impromptu), it is testimony indeed to the mental gymnastics and forward thinking approach adopted with the recording of each mutually dependent take. This is a benchmark album which should be obtained for reference, if not for the love of jazz itself.

Russell Welton