



Reed plays a long-neck, custom-made Ovation

Percussion pioneer

With so many up and coming converts to the percussive acoustic style of playing, Guitarist catches up with one of the style's trailblazers: Preston Reed *Words Steve Harvey*

It seems comparatively commonplace these days, but the technique of accompanying two-handed acoustic playing with percussive thumps and slaps was truly radical when Preston Reed began developing the style. In June of last year, Reed was at number eight on iTunes' Essential Legends Of Guitar listing – putting him above Messrs Vai, Satriani and Van Halen – while mesmerising crowds at Glastonbury festival. Now it's time to speak to Guitarist...

What are your first recollections of playing guitar?

"It started in the early sixties. My two older sisters were listening to The Beatles and The Rolling Stones and I was sponging that up. One day I came home from school, I was about eight at the time, and my father was showing my sister some chords on the guitar. I asked my father if he would teach me too. As soon as I picked the guitar up I was creating my own stuff."

Did you have any formal training?

"Once my parents saw I was playing a lot, they arranged lessons with a classical guitar teacher. Right from the off it was 'don't do this' and 'don't do that'. It just really quashed my enthusiasm and so after about six months I stopped playing – I wasn't wired for that way of learning."

What made you pick it up again?

"It was hearing a lot of the great music that was out at the time. I remember the first Hot Tuna record – Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady – it sounded fantastic. Later that year a friend and I went to a Hot Tuna concert and I just loved it. I went straight home and took my guitar out of the closet and started playing again. From there I was listening to John Fahey and Leo Kottke who really got me into fingerpicking. I was learning and playing some of their stuff, but really I was learning about how they approached things. That really gave me a foundation of techniques with which to write music."

What was behind the migration from fingerpicking to the more percussive stuff?

"By 1987 I had made five albums of fingerpicking compositions. I was feeling really great about them but at the same time

thinking that there was more that can be done with an acoustic guitar than simply hearing the strings. I was feeling that there was so much percussive potential to the acoustic guitar. So as a goof, I decided to see what would happen if I tried to play drums and guitar at the same time. I knew I wouldn't be able to do it playing the guitar conventionally because the left hand is locked in to chording and the right hand is locked into driving the picking element. So I started playing drums on the guitar and worked on figuring out how to play notes while keeping the rhythm going. From then on I started performing compositions that were written that way."

Was being a capable fingerstyle player good grounding for the more percussive styles?

"Absolutely. The fingerstyle players that I learned from – John Fahey, Leo Kottke and Jorma Kaukonen – are basically Delta blues-influenced fingerpickers and that style involves the alternating thumb technique with syncopated fingers. It was then a logical step to reassign those two voices; one to each hand. My left hand would do the steady, cyclical beat and my right hand would be doing something that syncopates with it. It turns the guitar into a larger entity."

Do you employ set methods or processes when writing music?

"Firstly, I try to find a good groove, something that is very strong and motivating. Whether it be 4/4, 3/4, 6/8 – it doesn't matter, but it's got to be something solid. Then I'll usually look for a harmonic progression that I like. I'd say that I'm a harmony orientated composer and so I will always want to find interesting places for the tune to go harmonically. That feels more important to me than melody, in fact, I don't worry about the melody until everything else is there."

Do the ideas in your head push your technique or does your technique push your songwriting?

"It's a combination of both but it begins with what's in my head, not with the technique. Once you've got a good technique, yes, it does help you develop your ideas, but the techniques were born from searching for a compositional voice. It's important, though, not to get stuck in the techniques."

What guitars do you take on stage with you?

"Some time ago I used to take along eight, but that got to be tiresome, so I now take just five. They are the Ovation long-neck acoustic, which is a custom-made guitar, the Yamaha AE2000 large-box jazz guitar, a Yamaha solidbody baritone electric, which I put gigantic strings on (0.075 gauge). I've also got my new Amistar resophonic and a Washburn 12-string dreadnought cutaway."

Have your percussive 'whacks' and 'thumps' ever killed off any guitars?

"I know I sometimes refer to my violence towards guitars, but that's said with my tongue very firmly planted in my cheek. I think I've loosened a brace on the Ovation once in 12 years. It may look like my guitars are taking a beating, but if you're going for the best sound, you're not going to be hitting the guitar very hard."

What type of pickup system do you have fitted?

"I have a standard bridge piezo and then a Seymour Duncan SA-2 soundboard transducer. The sensor is glued to the top about an inch behind the bridge on the treble side. That's the optimum place to pick up all of the percussive things that are happening."

...and amps?

"I've used a bunch of amps in the past. At the moment I'm using a Swiss-made Schertler Unico amp. They're better than the AER amps. The Schertler has a warmer sound."

Which guitar players do you listen to?

"I'll let you into a secret; I don't actually listen to very many guitar players. That way I can approach things from a fresh perspective. Listening to guitar music can get you into a very narrow tunnel of thinking only in terms of the guitar and what can be done on one. I don't want to hear someone who is a brilliant technician; it just does nothing for me."

What does the future hold for you?

"In the early part of this year I hope to be releasing a new album. I'm still working on getting the word out about what I'm doing and so I'm going to try and ride the wave, hopefully the wave will get bigger and there'll be more good things to come." 🎸