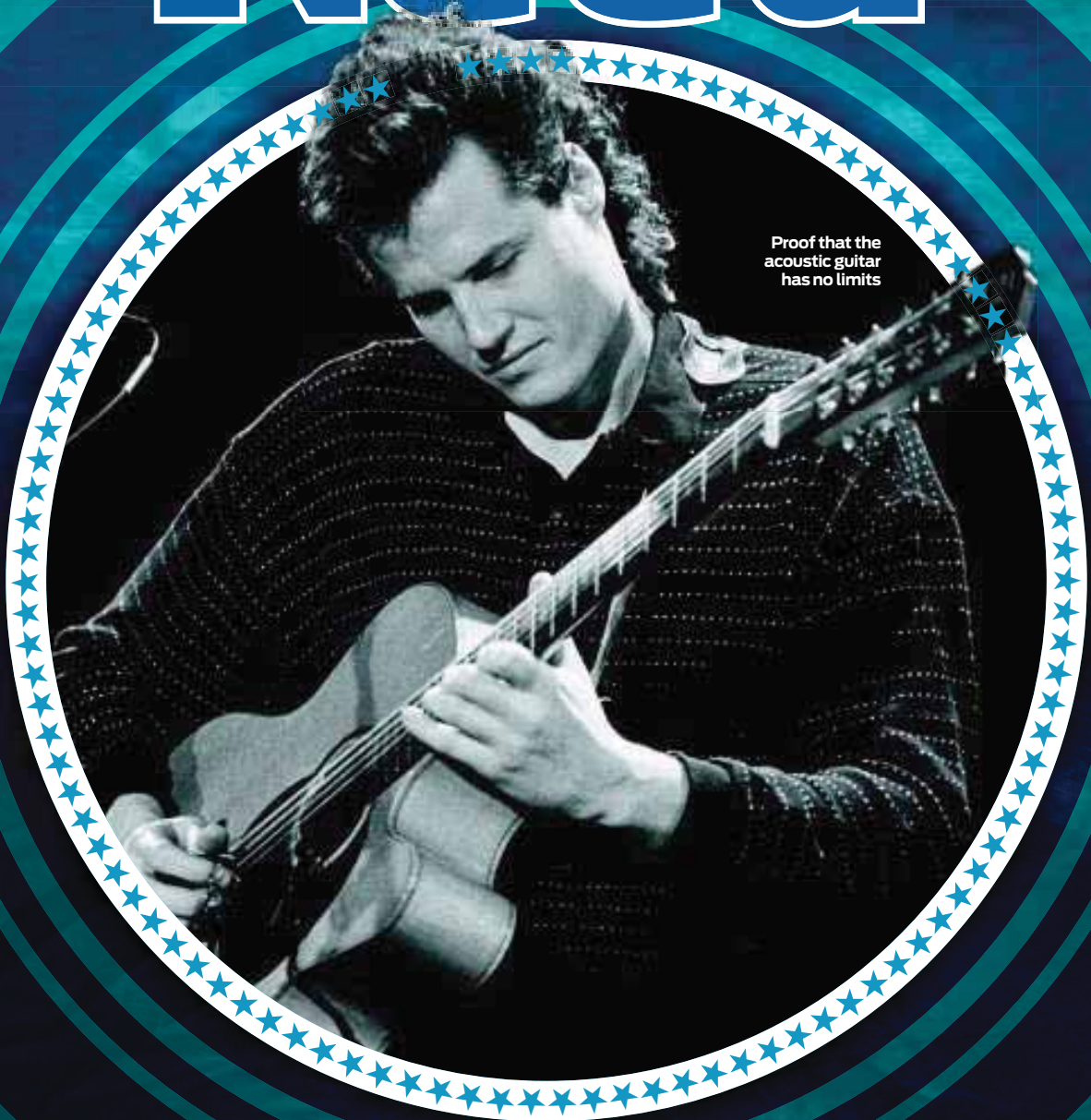


Preston Reed



Proof that the
acoustic guitar
has no limits

Question: when is an acoustic guitar not an acoustic guitar? **Answer:** when it's in the hands of New York visionary Preston Reed. TG meets the man who is changing the face of YOUR instrument...

INTERVIEW HENRY YATES

The clip we're watching of Preston Reed on YouTube is impossible. It can't be done. There has to be a logical explanation. A backing track? A roadie hidden in the wings with a drum machine? The sale of his soul to the devil? Something must rationalise how one middle-aged man with 10 human fingers can make his acoustic sound like the sum of a bluegrass convention and a drum-off between rainforest tribes. But then, how do you explain the phenomenon that is Preston Reed?

For many years, Reed was a 'normal' guitarist. Growing up in the suburbs of 60s New York, he picked with his right hand, fretted with his left, idolised mainstream heroes like Brian Jones of The Rolling Stones and learned the themes to TV shows like *Peter Gunn*. He took (and ditched) classical guitar lessons, jacked in the instrument altogether, then started again at 15 after witnessing the bluesy fretwork of Hot Tuna's Jorma Kaukonen. He released his debut in 1979, and spent the first part of his career as a standard, albeit spectacular, acoustic fingerpicker. A modest fanbase quietly applauded.

THEN ONE DAY it happened: Reed reversed the roles of his hands, blurred the lines between lead and rhythm, fused a percussive element into his playing – and pissed on the chips of conventional wisdom in the process. You might just call it the most significant guitar moment of the last two decades...

"I can remember the specific day," the 53 year old tells TG. "I remember where I was sitting in my Minneapolis apartment. It was 1988 and I'd reached a plateau with my playing. I knew I was a strong fingerpicker and composer, but I felt limited by having just one way of composing on the guitar. It had started to feel like the guitar was telling me what to do. I wanted to be running the show."

This was not just a light bulb going off in a vacuum. "I'd been inspired by seeing Stanley Jordan, Michael Hedges, Eddie Van Halen and Jeff Healey," he recalls, "They were all doing interesting stuff on the neck. My influences were Leo Kottke and John Fahey, so I had a bluesy style that already had two voices – I had my right hand playing alternating bass notes and my fingers syncopating," Reed continues, "which brought me to an experiment. How can I play guitar and drums at the same time? I wanted to be a rock band. So instead of having my thumb doing the cycling rhythm, I assigned that role to my left hand, and that freed up the guitar into this percussive platform."

CREATIVELY AND COMMERCIALY, he started slowly. "The first person I showed was my girlfriend and she thought it was cool," Reed tells TG. "I wrote an initial tune, which I started performing alongside the fingerpicking stuff I was already doing. I just kept progressing. Each new composition I wrote in that vein, I would learn something else and incorporate it into the next one."

Put enough monkeys in a room with enough acoustic guitars and eventually one of them will stumble across the chords to *American Idiot*. It's harder to imagine how a Preston Reed song is brought into the world. As an example, where the hell would he start with rootsy crowd favourite, *Ladies Night*?

"The main thing is that it originates with the groove," he says. "With a tune like *Ladies Night*,



Preston's revolutionary technique has to be seen to be believed

"A GUITAR IS THE FACILITATOR OF THE MUSIC INSIDE - IT'S A PLATFORM. ANY TIME SOMEONE CAN THINK UP NEW MUSIC, THE GUITAR WILL BE THERE"

PRESTON REED

it's almost like you start moving your body and as the groove forms, you start adding notes and strings. It sounds strange and mystical, but in any rock 'n' roll, before you hear the screaming guitar, the first thing that's happening is the rhythm. Everyone says my style is amazing, but it's not so amazing if you approach it with the groove. The results sound amazing because you're hearing the music first and the guitar second."

BUT THAT'S EXACTLY the problem, we tell him. Isn't it stressful trying to play rhythm and lead – in reverse – while keeping a bongo beat ticking over? "I suppose it's like spinning plates," he laughs, "but I can't think of it that way or I'd never be able to do it. I've heard people say that doing this must take both sides of my brain, and if that's the case then I think I must have good wiring. It's basically as fun as hell. The first criteria is that you get a groove going and it feels comfortable so you don't have to think about it. Then you start solving guitaristic problems."

How about those bewildering open tunings? "Actually, the last record I made was all standard tuning," Reed points out. "I love standard tuning, because I'm unlimited harmonically. But when I'm not in standard tuning, one that I did invent as far as I'm concerned is CGDGGD. What I like about that one is that it's really a G powerchord with a C on the bottom, so it's really powerful."

Reed is great on the phone and fantastic on YouTube, but neither can touch the slack-jawed amazement of standing in a venue and letting him expand your mind. For this man, there are no limits. "Has guitar technique gone as far as it can?" he muses. "Absolutely not. That would be a sorry state. A guitar is the facilitator of the music inside – it's a platform. Any time someone can think up new music, the guitar will be there to facilitate it. I'm certainly not expecting to reach an end to my explorations. Every day, I'm improving, exploring and learning. That will never stop." **TE**

Preston is touring the UK and Ireland from 18 September to 13 December. See www.prestonreed.com for more info on this phenomenal player.



ONE OF A KIND

His Ovation is as unique as the man himself...

"I'm very flattered that so many players have seen me then bought an Ovation guitar, but I'm always hearing, 'Why doesn't mine sound like yours?' Well, it doesn't because mine has different materials and is made to my own custom spec. Most Ovations are made of lycrachord, but mine is fibreglass, which is harder and more resonant. It's got a counterweight to keep the neck up in the air and a pickup system that I asked to be made for me. You won't find this guitar in a shop!"