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MELODIC MAGIC

PETER
HUTTLINGER
CUTS TO
THE CHASE

BY ANDY ELLIS

Let's face it — you have to be a monster to release a solo-guitar album on Steve Vai's Favored Nations label. When the boss boasts the chops of ten ordinary players, it's not easy to turn his head.

But Peter Huttlinger got Vai's attention — and ultimately a coveted FN recording contract — with a savvy blend of dazzling fretwork, ringing tone, and driving groove. One of the first acoustic players to sign with Vai's guitar-centric outfit, Huttlinger brings more than exceptional physical abilities to the party. On *Naked Pop*, the 2000 National Fingerstyle Champion's sense of melody and orchestration overshadow his formidable technique, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

You're not afraid to tackle complex music—Naked Pop features tunes by Steely Dan, the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, and Sting —yet you never sound like you're struggling to juggle the intertwining parts and themes. What's your secret?

I always start with melody—it's the most important element in a solo-guitar arrangement. For grooves like "Josie" or "Sir Duke," I'll write out the melody and bass line with just chord names above the staff. Initially, I approach the tune as a two-part counterpoint, and then I gradually fill in the harmony. Once the music starts to take shape, I'll go back to the original recording and ask myself, "Okay, what other important things are going on?" That's when I'll pick up on horn licks or string lines.

"Tuck Andress inspired me to explore solo guitar. When I first heard him, I fell out of my chair."

Some solo guitarists overwhelm an arrangement by cramming too much into it. How do you avoid such sonic clutter, yet still impart the flavor of the original song?

It's hard to be objective, because you hear the music in your head. What's going on internally may not actually translate to the rest of the world, so I rely on feedback from musician friends whose opinions I respect. I look for an honest reaction, not just, "Hey, it's cool you can do all that." My goal is a *musical* experience. Right now, I'm arranging Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." I'm only playing that cool bass line, the melody, and the horn parts, yet there are times when I think there's too much going on. But, so far, my committee says it's okay.

You're able to make the melody stand out from the accompaniment, which requires a great deal of picking-hand finger independence. Did you acquire this control by studying classical guitar?

Yes. I started taking classical lessons when I was 14 or 15, and wound up loving it. Before that, I played bluegrass banjo, so, early on, my thumb, index, and middle fingers were really working well. Studying classical guitar got my ring finger going. I'm by no means a classical guitarist, but I appreciate the music, and I still work on pieces.

You have an unusually strong, clear tremolo.

My classical teacher had me learn Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*—the tremolo study piece. I've kept it up over the years.

How did you develop a strong sense of time and groove?

By using a metronome. My banjo teacher made me buy one because my time was atrocious. When I took it home, I was convinced it was broken. I told my teacher, and he smiled and said, "Bring it in next week, and I'll check it out." Of course, he played with it perfectly. That's when I realized I had some work to do.

If you want chops, a metronome is your best friend, but there's a technique to using one. When you work on a scale, arpeggio, or passage, start slowly so you can play it perfectly. Then raise the tempo—no more than a few bpm—and play the part perfectly at the new tempo. The rule is: *Don't exceed* your limit, simply extend it. I push myself to my limit whenever I practice with a metronome, but I always end a session by bringing the tempo back down. It's like working out—warm up, hit it hard, and then cool down.

Describe tracking Naked Pop.

I recorded the 12 tunes at Steve Vai's Los Angeles studio in two-and-a-half days. We spliced an intro or an ending here and there, but for the most part, you're hearing a single pass. Usually the third take is the one I like, but we kept a few first takes, like "Brown Bomber."

Did you record to hard disk or tape?

Tape. Before we started tracking, we did an A/B test. I played, and the engineer recorded me

simultaneously to tape and Pro Tools. When I listened to the playback, I asked them not to tell me which format I was hearing. I closed my eyes and it was like night and day. The tape had more headroom, warmth, and natural compression.

What instruments and gear did you use?

I played my Collings OM-1 cutaway—the second of three that I own—with a spruce top and mahogany body. For "Overjoyed" and the intro and outro on "Eleanor Rigby," I played a borrowed Paul McGill classical equipped with D'Addario hard-tension nylon strings. For most of *Naked Pop*, I used medium gauge Elixirs on my Collings, but after two days, my hands were getting tired, so I went back to my usual mix of medium-and light-gauge strings. The first and second strings are .013 and .017, and the rest are standard acoustic lights—though recently I've been going with a bigger sixth, as well. I use a John Pearse thumbpick and short acrylic overlays on my nails, which I have done at a beauty salon.

What about altered tunings?

I played "Little Martha" in open E, and I used DADGAD for "'Tis So Sweet" and "Fields of Gold."

You have both solo and orchestral versions of "Fields of Gold," "Monaghan Jig," and "Josie." What's the story behind the gorgeous strings?

We used the same guitar track for both versions. I cut my part to a click, and we added the strings, bass, and percussion in Nashville. Don Hart did the string arrangements. It was Steve's idea to include both versions on the album.

Any advice for those who want to pursue solo guitar?

When I perform, I want everyone to recognize a tune by the time they've heard the intro. The ultimate test is to record yourself going through a tune, and then be brutally honest during playback. Are you making the parts? Is the melody distinct from the accompaniment? Des the arrangement groove? It's fun to play fast and furious, but you have to remember who you're playing for. An audience can only take so much chops.