Super Chops!

Putting It All Together

CARL VERHEYEN BLENDS CHOPS, HARD WORK, AND INSATIABLE CURIOSITY INTO A SINGULAR CAREER

IF YOU GO TO ALLMUSIC.COM TO LEARN ABOUT CARL Verheyen's guitar work, you'll be blown away. Same with Wikipedia. But here's what you need to keep in mind: Neither of those notoriously exhaustive sites even scratches the surface of what this super-talented guitarist has done in his career. Sure, they'll tell you about his work with Supertramp, his body of session work, his solo releases, and his contributions as a guitar instructor, and it's all awesome. But you won't necessarily learn about his work on every episode of *Cheers*, or his killer Django-isms in the movie *Ratatouille*, or get hip to the fact that he can cover an insane amount of styles, including rock, jazz, country, and blues and bring a fresh, hip sound to all of them. And those sites won't tell you that Verheyen's sound is one that makes use of sweet tones, clever layers, massive chops, and a modernistic, wide-interval approach that is startling and melodic at the same time.

When you add to all that the fact that Verheyen is also an avid student of guitar history, with a huge knowledge of players, guitars, amps, and effects, and that he loves nothing more than geeking out at great length on those subjects, his story just gets cooler. Finally, factor in that he is just a flat-out nice guy and you start to truly grasp what he is bringing to the party. Players as diverse as Robben Ford, Steve Lukather, Brad Paisley, and Laurence Juber have all sung Verheyen's praises, as both a player and a dude.

If you haven't heard (or seen) what he can do, now is the perfect time to educate yourself, because Verheyen not only has a new record out, [Cranktone Entertainment], but he is also offering *GP* readers an exclusive sneak peek at an online documentary that chronicles the making of that record. Watch, listen, learn, and enjoy.

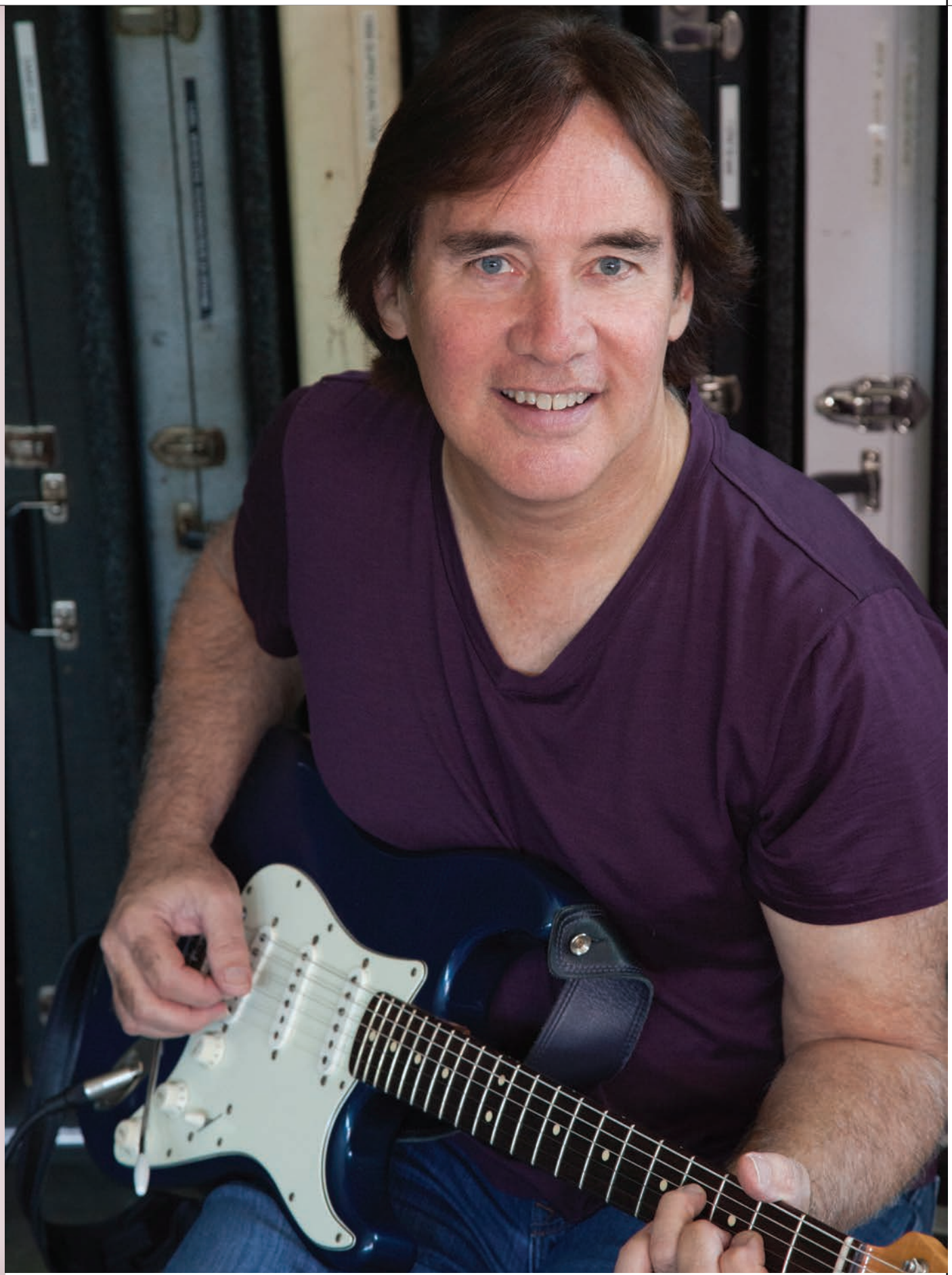
You tracked your new record at Sweetwater Studios. How was the experience of making a record there?

They asked me to put together a band to play in the studio while they conducted a recording workshop. They have these regular classes there teaching people how to run Pro Tools and how to be better engineers. They need a band for it and the band is part

Continues on page 49

BY MATT BLACKETT

PHOTOGRAPH BY CYNTHIA BOULANGER



CARL VERHEYEN

Getting Your Chops Up to Speed with Carl Verheyen

Carl Verheyen knows chops. Listen to his music and it's instantly clear that he possesses them by the metric boatload. But he also knows how to get chops: how to study, practice, and think about guitar to maximize your learning and ultimately, your enjoyment of the instrument. Here are some of his thoughts. Take heed. —MB

BUILDING SINGLE LINE SPEED

I've never been into exercises. I don't believe in practicing anything that can't be used on stage or in the studio. To my way of thinking, exercises are studying to become a musician, whereas practicing your lines is being a musician. Having said that, there are a few things I do after a long flight or a day away from the guitar.

The first one is a right-hand rhythm exercise that incorporates any scale you choose and a metronome. Let's use *F* major, the one that starts on the 3 of the key since there are no stretches or position changes within the pattern [**Ex.1**]. With the metronome set at 100 bpm, play two notes to the beat, or eighth-notes, ascending and descending. Make sure each note is crystal clear with no buzzes or fret noise. This is how you establish *tone* in your hands. Next, do the same with three notes for each beat (triplets). Play that rhythm until it's clear as a bell before moving to four notes to the beat, or sixteenth-notes.

Now comes the exercise part [**Ex.2**]: Start with eighth-notes and shift into triplets halfway up the scale pattern. Then jump to sixteenth-notes on the way back down. I shift between note values randomly, all the while keeping my time perfectly even. It's very important to listen to the sound your hands are making! Do you have the same tone and attack on the bottom three strings as you do on the top? Does your pick angle produce a scratchy sound on the lower strings? This is the time to correct those issues and solidify your groove. The more you do it, the more you realize that a lot of players don't stay in the pocket when they double-time their licks. Don't be one of those guys!

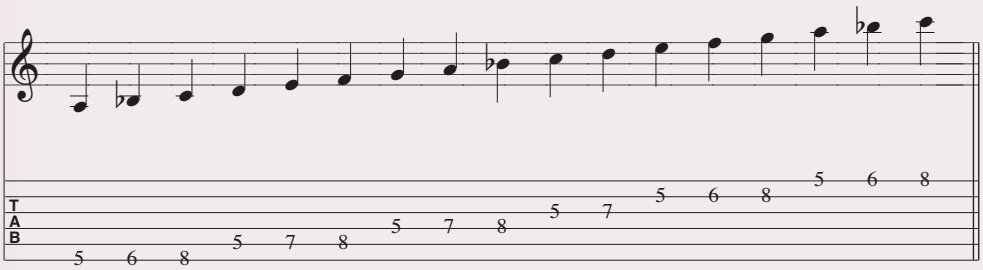
KNOWING THE FRETBOARD COLD

Years ago I got to produce a few tracks for Jose Feliciano. He's an amazing guitarist who has been blind from birth, so he's never seen a guitar.

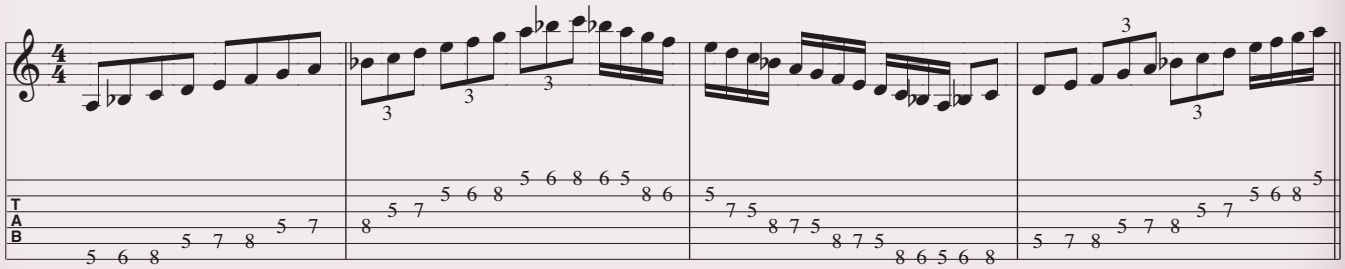
Continues on page 50

Ex. 1

F major



Ex. 2



Continued from page 46

of the draw. I went in there with Stuart Hamm and Chester Thompson and recorded a song. Then they asked me to do it again. And then they said, "Well, why don't we just finish your whole record here?" That was a nice invitation, because I really wanted to work with a new producer, somebody with fresh ears. I recorded my last 12 records in L.A. at places like Sunset Sound, Village Recorders, and Capitol, and they're just the greatest studios in the world. But the records all seemed to have a similar sound. I thought, "Let's try a fresh approach with more of a Nashville guy." The producer at Sweetwater is Mark Hornsby, and he's Nashville-based. So I agreed to do it, but I didn't want to play guitars off the wall at Sweetwater. I wanted my gear out there. So we ended up trucking my gear across the country twice.

You said it was something like 70 guitars and 50 amps. How do you navigate that much gear on a recording? That just seems overwhelming.

To be honest, I probably only brought about 40 guitars at a time, and probably about 20 or 25 amps based on the songs I was going to record. If there was any possible way I could hear, say, a baritone guitar on a particular song, I would throw it in the trunk and ship it out there. Part of my reasoning is this: We've all heard plenty of shredding guitar records and to me, they don't really bear repeated listening. They don't really reveal themselves over many plays. My concept is more about layering and textures. I think that is basically the state of the art for guitar records these days.

Talk me through the process for tracking a song.

I generally start with an acoustic bed, double that, and maybe play it up an inversion or two with a capo. I use a thin pick made by Clayton that records really well. It's .63 millimeters and it feels like it's made out of Teflon. The sparkle and the high-end glistening sound that they give you off the acoustic strings is much better than a Fender Heavy, which is what I use for my electric playing. As far as navigating multiple guitar overdubs, I think the main thing that you have to be concerned with is the danger of the midrange. You have to realize that so much of the music is competing for the midrange. The bass has the woofer and the cymbals and the sibilance on the vocals has the tweeters and a lot of the rest of the stuff—the piano, the organ, and the guitars—seems to be in the mids. You really have to pick your sounds and your textures and your parts. When it comes to electric rhythm guitar, there's something about single-coil pickups that just gives you a wonderful high-end sparkle, so I almost always go for single-coils for rhythm stuff.

There's a great clean sound in the intro of "The Times They Are a-Changin'." Tell me how you crafted that tone.

I used my live rig. I have a signature guitar from LSL called the CV Special. That one has wonderful pickups that are based on a '61 Strat. So I used that, and I went directly into a tube reverb made by Robert Stamps that I've had for 20 years. Out of that I went into a TC Electronic Chorus pedal, then into a Lexicon MPX 100, which is stereo in and stereo out, so the chorusing remains in stereo. And then out of that I went into a Strymon BlueSky Reverb, but I'm not sure that was on because studio reverb is always better. I used two

Continues on page 52

Super Chops!

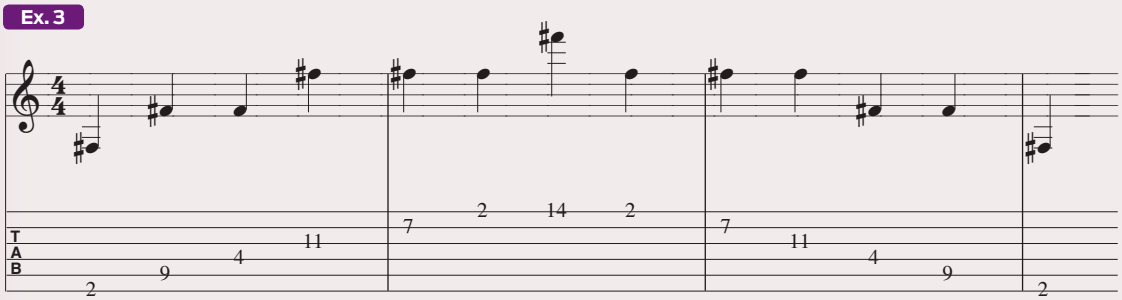
CARL VERHEYEN

Continued from page 48

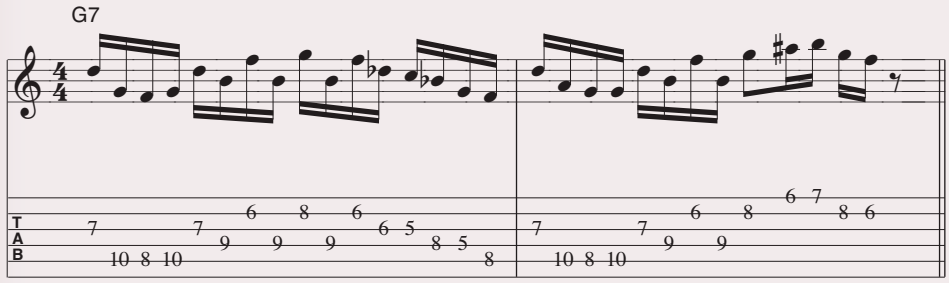
You probably know him for his mega-hit Christmas song, "Feliz Navidad." During some down time in the studio I asked him, "Jose, can you do this?" I then played an F♯ on each string, starting from the 2nd fret on the sixth string to the 9th fret on the fifth string, the 4th fret on the fourth string, the 11th fret on the third string, the 7th fret on the second string, and finally the 2nd fret on the first string and as well as the 14th fret on the 1st string just to show off [Ex. 3]. Then I descended the same way.

When I finished he said, "You mean play an F♯ on each string with two of them on the high string, ascending and

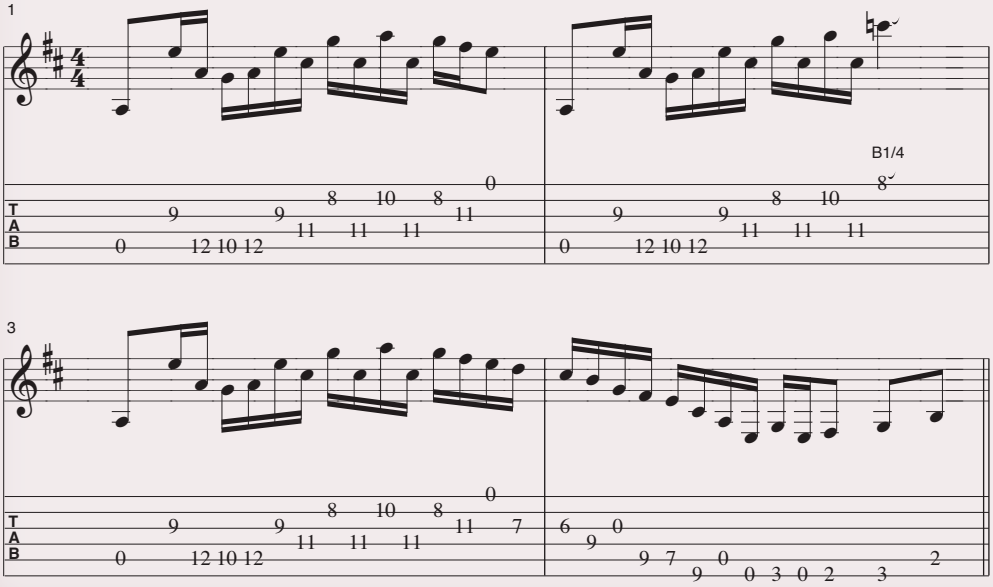
Ex. 3



Ex. 4



Ex. 5



descending?" I thought, "He's got some serious ears!" Then he promptly nailed it faster than I had, and I was *looking* at the neck while doing it! When I got home I made an exercise out of it, picking any note and playing it on all six strings, ascending and descending in order… *blindfolded*! Try it: Don't look while you play a *B♭* on the sixth string, 6th fret. Then play the same note on the fifth string/1st fret, fourth string/8th fret, and so on. Do it with five or six different notes to calibrate your hands when you first pick up the guitar each day. You'll *own* the fretboard and demolish any dark areas!

BENDING AND VIBRATO

One of the most personal things we do on the guitar is bend notes and add vibrato. But it's amazing how few of us have complete *control* over our vibrato. Most guitarists seem to have one speed they shake their strings with, and only occasionally does it relate to tempo and the emotion of the song. I also believe all four fingers should be able to bend a whole-step or a half-step at the very least. Try this:

On your second string, bend a *B♭* up to a *C* from the 11th fret, with whatever finger you choose. Make the bend quick and positive and nail the pitch of the *C*. Don't add any vibrato.

Next, do the exact same bend and let it sit for a few seconds before adding a hint of slow vibrato, like the way Frank Sinatra sings. Make sure it's slow and bluesy.

Now try that bend but with the intent that the vibrato is in motion at the exact moment you reach the *C*. Make it a little faster.

Try it real fast with a "hummingbird" vibrato or a wicked, wide, heavy metal/opera singer vibrato, but make sure it's instant and not an afterthought once you've arrived at the note.

Now do all of that with your other three fingers.

HYBRID PICKING

I took some classical guitar lessons way back in the '80s in an effort to get a nice tone on the nylon-string guitar without using a pick. The teacher had me grow my right-hand nails out, which seemed really awkward to me at the time. But, little by little, I began incorporating those fingers along with my pick when I played the electric, and before long it became a major part of everything I do.

Try [**Ex.4**], a fast, funk bluesy line in *G7*. I use it a half-step up in *A♭* for the bridge of my song "Closing Time Blues" and then harmonize it a third higher using the same technique. By using your pick for every note played on the fourth and fifth strings, and your middle and ring finger for all second- and third-string notes, you'll get much cleaner and faster than any flatpicker alive.

Here's a variation that is just one of the limitless possibilities with this kind of hybrid, cross-string picking [**Ex. 5**]. It's the intro to a song of mine called "The Road Divides." I'm using open strings to cover ground on the radical position changes. You can watch how I do it on Youtube.

CARL VERHEYEN

Continued from page 49

amps that are in my clean rig: a 1976 100-watt Hiwatt head and a '64 Fender Showman head—tons of clean headroom—into two THD 2x12 cabinets. Kind of a wild signal path.

It doesn't sound that chorus-y.

I'm very careful about chorus. You can't have it on all the time. It can get a little whiny on you, especially if you're not in stereo. But I was in stereo at that point.

How did you create guitar sounds for the single-note lines?

I used a 1972 Les Paul that I've had for many, many years. That guitar has real PAFs in it. I took the PAFs out of a 1958 ES-175 and I switched them with the T-Tops that were in the '72 Les Paul. I also did a Strat solo on my LSL, so there's one of each.

That lead break has some of that wide interval playing that you're so good at. A lot of players have a difficult time breaking out of playing scales straight up and straight down. Can you talk about your philosophy on employing wider intervals in your scales?

I believe that, first of all, you have to define what you personally think is melodic. For me, running up and down scales and repeated sequences within scales gives you nothing more than half-steps and whole-steps for the most part. When you get into pentatonic or harmonic minor scales you have a minor third, but to me, things *really* start getting melodic when you break out of those half-steps, whole-steps, and minor thirds. Once you start incorporating larger intervals, to my ears, it becomes more melodic, more singable, and more like a *real* melody.

Fair enough, but how do you get to the point of really *using* those intervals?

Good question. I think about it this way: The best of us are only truly improvising 30 percent of the time. The rest of the time we play, we're stringing together stuff we've worked out—stuff we know. So a long time ago I realized that I need to have some "money in the bank" that I can draw on from a melodic standpoint. That's when I started this concept of keeping a lick book. The wonderful jazz guitarist Joe Diorio was the one who sent me down that path. He said, "Man, you've got to write everything down." From that point forward, anytime I played something I liked, I would write it down. "This sounds good for *A* minor" and then I would expand on it and maybe try an *A* major version and an *A7* version, anything I could do to create lines. And then the next step was to figure out how I could access these lines from the blues, jazz, rock, or country licks that I already have in my vocabulary. How can I come out of this typical blues lick in *A* minor and play a line that incorporates fourths, fifths, sixths, minor sixths, major sevens, or dominant sevens? That was the impetus behind it and I probably filled up 25 lick books over the years of these ideas. [*For an in-depth look into Joe Diorio's intervallic approach, see the lesson on p.60.*]

How did you and Sonny Landreth divvy

up your parts on "Distracted Girl"?

That was interesting. There's so much music being done where you send the track to somebody and they slam their part on it and send it back, and I didn't want to do that. Sonny and I have played some festivals together in the past, and we even did a master class together one time. I sent him the chart and said, "You're welcome to do a solo and some fills around the vocals, but I don't want to send the track to you and have you do it in your home studio. I want to fly you to Sweetwater and we'll work together on it." He was down for that. The most fascinating thing was when he got there, he said, "Do you mind if I play your intro figure up an octave on the slide?" And my mouth just fell open. I said, "You can do that?" When you hear it, you think, "How could he possibly make that happen?" But he did it and it really sounds like a collaboration. Nobody sounds like him, nobody plays like him, and it's a combination of his right and left hands. You can't separate the two. He's got such a unique touch with the slide and the fingers behind the slide on the left hand, and then a completely amazing right-hand technique with his thumbpick and fingers. He's a lovely guy. I really dig him.

What's the low tone in "Intangibles Collide."

I was given a gift of a baritone guitar from Allan Holdsworth many years ago. He called me up and said, "Hey man, could you use this?" It's a late-'80s baritone made by Bill DeLap. I've used it on movie dates and other people's sessions for years and years. I decided to play it through a prototype of the Seymour Duncan Catalina Chorus, into my Hiwatt 100-watt. That Catalina Chorus has this ducking feature on it, and I use it so that the harder I pick, the less chorus I get. When you're picking quieter, you're most likely doing the pretty parts, and that's when the chorus comes in. It's a more musical application of chorusing. There's a clean section that is a pretty melody and then it goes to this gnarly baritone bass line. I thought I used some sort of a pedal, but looking at my notes it seems like I just turned the Hiwatt up. Good god, that must have been loud!

There are other guitar layers in that song.

Yeah, there's actually a James Tyler Variax by Line 6 for the sitar sound. I played it through a '66 Fender Princeton Reverb amp. There are a couple of acoustics strumming—an old Martin and an old Gibson J-50. When the lead tones come in, it's a '61 Strat through a Landgraff LDO pedal into my Dr. Z SRZ-65.

How much gain are you getting from the Dr. Z?

I always set that amplifier up to be semi-crunchy, so you can play a *G* chord and still hear the third in it. Then I use a pedal to go over the top.

Go back to earlier in your career. When you were coming up as a player, what was your practice regimen like?

I played every day from the time I was 11 years old on. Very early on, it was copping solos off the Allman Brothers *Live at the Fillmore*, *Wheels of Fire* by Cream, and Hendrix—all the *Axis: Bold As Love* stuff. I mean, I was constantly learning all that, as we all did. But when I was 18, I got a gig playing and singing with my acoustic guitar in a restaurant in Pasadena. I had a little five-night-a-week thing where I was playing four sets a night singing songs by Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell, and Jackson Browne and all the stuff that was happening back then. One day this guy came in and said, "Man, I like the way you play. Would you like to get together and jam?" I said, "Sure," and he said, "How about tomorrow?" So I went over to his house and he put music in front of me and the first chord was an *Fmaj7*, which, surprisingly enough for an 18 year old, I actually knew. But the second chord was a *Dm7♭5* and I had never seen that before. So I played a *Dm* at the 5th fret. I knew the *A* natural was the 5, so I played an *A♭*. He said, "Yeah, but this is a better voicing," and he showed me a voicing. Then he showed me another voicing, and another voicing, and then another, and it went on until he showed me about 25 places to play this chord that I had never seen or heard of before— *Dm7♭5*. It was such a mind-blowing thing. It was like looking over the wall at this huge plateau that just stretches out forever that you know nothing about, and that was that long, dark highway of jazz.

So around age 19 or 20, I started to learn how to play jazz and how to play over changes, and the way to do that for me was learning songs. I'd go to a club and hear a band play a song like "Alone Together" and I'd say, "What key do you do that in?" And they'd go, "Well, we do it in *D* minor, but you better learn it in *F* too, because that's

COVER STORY

Super Chops!

CARL VERHEYEN

the key singers do it in." So I'd go home and work out a chord solo to it, and try to learn it five different ways. I'd learn the melody all over the guitar, in every register, so I had it down cold. Then I'd make a little chord solo that could be played with bass and drums. Then I'd make a solo-guitar piece out of it, for when your dad says, "Play me something, son." Then I'd learn to play over the changes. That would be the fourth thing I'd do. And then the fifth way would be to try to learn at least the chord changes in an alternate key. I did that with about 150 songs. I really, really worked on that for about five or six years.

Wow. That's a tremendous amount of work. Did you start to realize that your ear and your chops and your ability to assimilate a lot of musical information was just growing by leaps and bounds?

Yeah. I would feel it every week, because there were songs that would reveal new chord voicings and I'd go, "Wow, I can actually use these little chord fragments I'm learning for *Cm* or *B7* or something in this funk groove." I was so into this type of study that I sort of had blinders on until one day in 1980, I was driving in my car and heard this Joe Walsh solo in the Eagles tune "Those Shoes." It's not a big hit, it's just this little *Em* groove, and Joe Walsh takes this solo and I literally had to pull my car over because it was so powerful. I realized right then that the state of rock guitar had come so far since I kind of checked out and got into this jazz kick. And at that point, man, it was like the heavens opened and this light shone down upon me and it said, "You must learn everything that you dig." I realized that I love Chet Atkins, I love nylon-string classical guitar, I love country music, I dig bluegrass, I love the blues, and I love rock and roll. What am I doing devoting my entire life and all my practice time to just playing jazz standards? That was this huge revelation and it was instant. I went home and said, "Put the hollowbody away. Get the Tele out."

By the time you did that, you had the ear and the chops to be able to tackle anything you wanted.

One of the things that I learned is that you need to keep yourself interested. I might think that I'm going to learn how to play this Albert King solo, and I'm going to transcribe it and get it under my hands until it's perfect and I can phrase it exactly like him. But four days into that, I'm tired of Albert King and I want to work on some Albert Lee, or some Alvin Lee. In other words, stay interested, stay enthused, stay in it, and always be excited to pick up the guitar and play.

If a guitarist has an hour to practice, how would you recommend they spend that hour?

Definitely do not compartmentalize. Don't say, "I need 15 minutes of sight reading, 15 minutes of country guitar, 15 minutes of bluegrass." Don't do that. Have a goal. I've always got these performances coming up, and my motto is, "I will not suck." Therefore, I'm looking down the road at my next gig and I'm taking the time to make sure I've got all that stuff ready to roll. But if there is nothing coming up, I might think about the last time I played, and maybe I had an extended solo in *F♯m* and I kind of ran out of ideas. I need some new ideas for *F♯* Dorian. That might start on the 2nd fret *F♯* of the low *E* string and climb up the neck, maybe start with a fifth up to *C♯* and then the fifth above that would be *G♯* and then a half-step above that would be *A* and then maybe go up to an *E*. I'm just kind of visualizing the fingerboard right now and thinking about a lick that goes from the low 2nd fret *F♯* to a high *C♯*, which is the highest note on a Fender guitar. Let's try to find a lick that covers all that real estate and is musical, and then let's try to reverse it going down. Now I have this monster lick in *F♯* minor. Let's write that down and see if we can do it in *G* minor, and *A♭* minor, and even *G7* by changing the minor third to a major third. That's the kind of practice I'm doing. I'm always looking to expand my improvisational vocabulary.

What do you think guitarists get wrong when they're practicing?

One thing they get wrong is if you ever walk through the halls of a music school you hear them shredding with so much gain. But what that's doing is disguising the fact that they've got no real tone in their fingers. You need to practice chops with a totally clean sound before you go to the shred sound. That's something that I try to cover in the lesson that accompanies this interview.

What else goes into having tone in your fingers?

Very few people, particularly when they're starting out, are really listening to the sound their hands are making. They're just happy to be able to fret the notes, in a chord or especially with single-note lines. Here are a

couple other things I really believe in: String gauge has less to do with your tone than your action height. People are always telling you, "I use .011s for my *E* string because I get that big, huge tone." Well, it isn't a big, huge tone if your action is super low. I can get as big a tone as Stevie Ray Vaughan with .009s. It has to do with where I set my action, and I set it high enough where that string has space and time to vibrate and not fret out against other frets.

Despite a ton of success, you ultimately made the decision to move away from session work. Talk about that. How did you arrive at that decision and why?

I realized that another day with headphones on playing on a jingle or somebody's country song or somebody's TV show was a lot less memorable in my life than actually playing in front of an audience where the whole front row is singing along with a song I wrote in my kitchen ten years ago. Studio work in many ways was a major detour in my life, because I really always wanted to play my own music, inspired by people like George Harrison and Roger McGuinn. But the interesting thing about being a musician nowadays is that the rules keep changing and we need to reinvent ourselves—like every six to nine months. My business model involves multiple income streams. You've got the stuff you sell, which are CDs, books, DVDs, and downloadable courses. You've got performance, whether it's an acoustic solo performance or a Carl Verheyen Band performance. You've got workshops, master classes, and clinics, and I can actually do tours of those things. There was a three-year period where I went to Italy four times a year to do various workshop tours, solo guitar tours, or band tours. There's producing. As solo artist, you end up having fans saying, "Man, I really like your sound. Can I get you to produce my record?" So you come at it as a producer/artist where you play on the record and produce it. I've done quite a bit of that, especially lately. And of course there are still sessions to be done, although not quite as frequently.

It's a cool niche you've carved out for yourself.

One gig opens the door to another gig, which opens the door to another. If you keep the level and the quality of your performance as high as possible and have the motto "I will not suck," you're bound to get recommended and you're bound to succeed.