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Ana Popovic

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“You’re messing with the wrong woman,” warns blueswoman Ana Popovic on the opening cut of her new concert DVD, *An Evening at Trasimeno Lake* [Ana Popovic Music]. It’s a warning any player should heed before even considering stepping into a cutting contest with her, because the lady can flat out *rip*.

Her Strat-driven blues variations range from high octane SRV-style throwdowns to electric slide-and-wah excursions to Ronnie Earl-inspired jazziness and acoustic Delta stomps. Somehow the Serbian-born singer, songwriter, and guitarist manages to bring considerable authenticity while delivering an array of American roots music—a gift uncommon in this generation regardless of origin.

“I grew up listening to lots of American blues because that’s what my dad listened to and played on his guitar,” says Popovic, who grew up in Belgrade under communist rule and has lived in Amsterdam for the past ten years. She’s been featured on a star-studded Hendrix tribute—2001’s *Blue Haze*—released three studio CDs, and one live CD. “*Still Making History* [2007] is more of a guitar record, whereas, I wanted to emphasize songwriting on *Blind for Love* [2009],” explains Popovic. “The new DVD is the best representation of what I do, however, because it captures the energy my band and I have onstage, and we are very energetic.” Popovic is also included in an upcoming film along with Slash, B.B. King, and Les Paul dedicated to all things guitar called *Loud and Louder*.

No stranger to the airport customs line, Popovic has toured many countries with such renowned

blues artists as Walter Trout and the late Solomon Burke. She was in the blues hotbed of Indonesia when she spoke to GP.

How is the blues scene in Bali?

It's cool, but it's just getting going. The Jakarta Blues Festival sent an oddly specific request that all bands play pure blues on the first day, and rock blues on the second. But when we got there the music going down was far from pure blues. There was a bunch of Far-Eastern-style heavy metal guitar shredding, which was hilarious to us. We played a lot of straight blues, anyway. It turned out to be a nice change of pace, and, I think, somewhat educational for them. They dug it.



What is the equipment situation like over there?

We're actually in a pretty weird situation today. They are still preparing the stage. They couldn't do it yesterday because everything you do here has to be blessed by the gods first, and that can only happen at specific times. They blessed the stage this morning, so we should be good to go.

What was it like to learn guitar in Serbia, and then in Holland?

My father helped me in the beginning, and soon thereafter I went to a rock guitar school under the tutelage of a famous Serbian guitar player whose stage name is the Wheel. In the beginning, his school basically taught rock riffs and rock history with a focus on bands such as ZZ Top and Led Zeppelin. When I was 16 or 17, he asked me to participate in his jazz program. As soon as I finished my graphic design degree in Serbia, I headed to Holland to study jazz in earnest.

I studied for two years at Utrecht Conservatory, but I left because I felt some of the basic elements—such as where the music *comes* from—lost out to scales and theory. I couldn't put together a decent band because the students couldn't play a basic Memphis soul groove. They were so busy trying to please the teachers there that they would lose themselves in the process. I didn't want that to happen to me, so I enrolled in the Jazz, Pop, and World department at the Conservatory of Rotterdam. The teachers there supported me and encouraged me to tour. I never completed my studies because I became too busy touring all over the world.

Did you always gravitate towards the Stratocaster?

Always. However, I ran into some resistance from my jazz teachers, so I compromised by playing a Telecaster for a while. But I couldn't really change. I wasn't there to change—I was there to learn. I like jazzy blues players such as T-Bone Walker, and Robben Ford. Ronnie Earl was really on the edge of jazz, and he's the person who actually inspired me to study it. But I didn't want to steal his or anyone else's licks. I wanted to understand jazz chord changes and how to play through them in my own way. I like playing jazz because it is more flexible than blues. If you change the chords or the tones too much when playing blues, it's not blues

anymore. You can do your own thing with phrasing, however, and that's where I try to be as original as possible.

You conjure a broad variety of tones. How do you approximate a jazz box tone on a Strat, and how to you change it up for your blues and rock tones?

First of all, I play a '64 Strat that responds to every nuance of my playing in a way new ones just don't. Actually, I almost returned it because it was a little wild and hard to handle at first. I had to tame it! But it was worth the work because it feels *alive*. It captures my various moods and energies onstage the way no other instrument I've ever had can touch. By using various pickups in conjunction with tweaking the controls and mixing up my attack, I'm able to get something like ten distinctly different tones. For jazzy stuff, I use the middle pickup to get the cleanest sound, and roll down the Tone knob. And I'll often palm my pick and use my fingers. "Doubt Everyone But Me" is a good example of my jazz playing.

Another big tonal factor is that I use a Mesa Boogie Mark IV amp. You don't see a lot of Boogies at blues venues, but I like the Mark IV's versatility. For jazzy songs, I'll use the clean channel, which basically sounds like a Fender Super Reverb. I play all my dirty rhythms using the second channel because it sounds like a Fender with a bit of a boost. I use it in conjunction with two original issue Tube Screemers. I kick one in for solos, and I'll add the other one if I want an extra boost that approximates a humbucker. The sound I'm going for is sort of like a big violin. I don't use open tunings when I play slide, so I need the biggest, widest tone I can achieve for maximum sustain. I don't use the third channel because I get all the gain I need from the Tube Screemers.

"How'd You Learn to Shake Like That" is a great slide showcase. How'd you learn to play side like that?

I started by playing along with Elmore James and Bukka White records, but I didn't know anyone in Serbia who could teach me about open tunings, so playing slide in standard became part of my style. Learning to mute the strings I didn't want to hear was probably the most difficult part.

Once it became clear that slide was becoming a big part of my playing, I looked into the wizards. I studied Duane Allman and Ry Cooder. I was amazed by Sonny Landreth's phrasing and his use of different tunings and advanced chords on songs such as "Native Stepson," "Congo Square," and "Speak of the Devil." And Roy Rodgers is a roots player with a very specific advanced technique. He plays fast! Learning to play his solos in standard tuning is a challenge I recommend.

Why do you choose to put the slide on your third finger?

That way I have more power than having it on my 4th finger, especially when using the thick brass slides that I use when playing acoustic. Having it on my third finger also lets me play chords when needed, because I don't have a rhythm guitarist in my band.

What kind of wah you use?

I use the Vox Union Jack Wah. It's unfortunate that Vox discontinued that model. It's great for blues because the effect can be soft enough to approximate talking, but it can be edgy as well. It's just very musical.

How do you approach writing and performing an old-fashioned acoustic blues tune such as "Steal Me Away?"

I recorded it as a Delta blues stomp, but we get really funky with it live. It's about relationships. You can't get permission to start a relationship with somebody who is already in one, but you might give yourself a license to steal. Although my music is roots-based, I like to keep the lyrics relevant to me in my time. I don't want to sing about life in the cotton fields. I never lived in the cotton fields. But I did grow up under Slobodan Milosevic's nationalist regime, and I wrote a lot of heavy lyrics about what that was like on *Still Making History*. The feeling was similar, and it made me want to sing and play my blues with freedom—and plenty of *edge*.



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