



# Q&A with STANLEY JORDAN

by Marc Klein

**W**hen was the last time you saw a street performer who was well on his way to becoming a major jazz guitarist? Back in the 80's, people who randomly caught Stanley Jordan and his now legendary two-handed hammering style (he named the "touch technique") had no idea he'd soon get his big break on Blue Note Records. Jordan was one of the first street artists with his own pressed vinyl as well, and today this forward-thinking musician is bringing jazz into the cyber age, uploading web-exclusive tracks from his latest album *State Of Nature* and inking a deal with a new label, Mack Avenue. The CD is a concept album, if you will; call it the *What's Going On* of the jazz set, as Jordan puts us in touch with both our environment and our mind.

**Music Connection:** How long did it take to develop your famous "touch technique"?

**Stanley Jordan:** When I was 11 I learned how to tune my guitar, and I always found it weird that you do one string differently from the others, and I ended up tuning it in 4th's.

My first electric guitar was a Contessa, and I showed so much seriousness on the acoustic that my parents were willing to get me another guitar only a few months after I'd started. I played conventionally for about five to six years on that guitar and then I started to experiment with different techniques in order to get more of a pianistic sound. That's what led me to develop the touch technique that I have now.

I did a lot of work on the Contessa to figure out how to make the technique work, like getting the frets filed down so that you can get the strings close to the neck. Then about a year or two later, I got the Travis Bean, and that was the first high-quality guitar I didn't need to do any filing on, because that guitar was so accurate you could just pull it down from the shelf and immediately start the touch technique. I stopped playing the Travis Bean every day mostly because I became concerned about the possible health risk from the aluminum from the neck getting absorbed into the body.

**MC:** What's your perfect guitar?

**Jordan:** I've had some that were close, but none of them have been perfect yet. I've actually spoken with Mr. Vigier about this, because we're planning on coming up with a signature model that would take all the things that I love about the

Vigier, but then reincorporate all the things that I loved about the Travis Bean. For one thing, I would shape the neck a little differently so it wasn't so wide and I could get my left hand to get all around the neck.

I'd also consider slightly shortening the scaling. That would be tricky, since part of why I love the guitar so much is that with the longer scaling the strings have more tension. More tension means a fuller sound; so if I shorten it, it would be easier to play, but it may compromise the fullness of sound. In the end the only thing that you can really do is have different instruments. You can have the one that is the most optimum over all, but you'll still need specialized instruments.

**MC:** When did you decide to become a professional musician?

**Jordan:** I always knew that I wanted to compose music and perform, even though I thought of myself as a composer first and a performer second. I remember we had a recital when I was 10 where I played a piece that I composed, and it was long and had all these development sections, and there was this look in people's eyes that went beyond just, "you did well." I could see something in their eyes, a sense that people had experienced something magical, or that they enjoyed it so much that they were going to take it with them, and that's something. I didn't really know about music at that point — that it can affect people like that. At that moment I considered myself a live performer.

**MC:** How did you go about getting signed?

**Jordan:** I had this whole strategy and it was kind of guerrilla marketing: I decided to do as much independently as possible, so I could be attractive to a major label, and then I'd be in a position to make a good record deal.

My strategy worked really well. In fact, in those days, people were only beginning to make their own records — this was the early 80's — and I put out my vinyl record on my own label. Once I had a record, I could actually show up places with a guitar and an amp and sell records. I could make at least as much money that way as I could in a café or a club where I had to work with someone else's agenda.

**MC:** Would you consider your move another part of the whole indie revolution that was starting in the 80's?

**Jordan:** Absolutely. As a matter of fact, a beautiful landmark was this book, *How to Make and Sell Your Own Recording*, by Dianne Rappaport. It was sort of the bible of the indie revolution. Twenty years later when they came out with an anniversary edition of the book, she asked me to write the liner notes or forward, and that gave me a chance to thank her for helping me. Even after being signed to a major label, I still refer to her book. I found that it's best to be as independent as possible, even if you have a major label helping you, you should be looking to promote in areas that they haven't got to yet.

**MC:** What did your experience as a street performer add to the equation?

**Jordan:** I recommend it as a great learning experience and it's a great way to discover your audience. You don't know who your audience is until you get out there. I also think it's a good thing for artists to take control of their own music. While I think the industry is good and useful, it's good not to have to depend on the industry, because you don't necessarily know what will be your best vehicle. If you can go out and kind of figure that out on your own, it saves people from having to guess.

**MC:** What was the idea behind the marketing of your first Blue Note album, *Magic Touch*?

**Jordan:** When I first signed with Blue Note it was actually a really good time, because it was right before they split the *Billboard* jazz charts



into two charts; so my first record on Blue Note, *Magic Touch*, was number one on the jazz charts; it wasn't contemporary jazz versus traditional or whatever they call it. There was a lot more crossover, because you had this station called WBR that had recently gone off the air, but they still had this lingering idea that jazz was a spectrum from the popular to the avant garde.

When I did *Magic Touch* the marketing of the record focused on my technique. That allowed me to play different styles. With the attention on my technique I was forced to play a bunch of different styles in order to display the possibilities of the technique. But for the very next album, *Standards, Vol 1.*, I focused on the repertoire as opposed to the playing style.

**MC: Were you concerned with getting pigeon-holed by the "touch technique"?**

**Jordan:** I wanted people to hear my music with the right ears, and my music is not technique centered. I didn't want people to go, "Oh that's the guy with the technique," when in the mean time there was so much more that I offered.

So even while it was me that stressed the technique, I immediately wanted to show other things. But I do think that the technique is always there to be looked at. It's significant for me, it's how a lot of people know me, and I'm always happy to share it with other guitarists. The bad news is that you can't pigeon-hole me; the good news is that you don't have to. [laughs]

**MC: What's your take on the so-called evolution of the record industry?**

**Jordan:** I think the main problem is that through the years one side effect of the industry has become the devaluing of music. It became a soundtrack to a music video, and then they stopped even showing the videos, so it became just a vehicle to sell products or a lifestyle thing.

You know Frank Zappa was really ahead of his time, because he saw how they market music based on lifestyle and not on the music, whereas art for art's sake has become devalued. This is one of the reasons why people are scrambling in this market, because people simply don't value the music the way they used to.

I think it's still good to work with a label these days; it helps, but it doesn't have to be a label that controls everything in-house. For example, the label I'm working with now, Mack Avenue. They don't have a big staff, so I get the A&R treatment of a small label. Also, my new album *State Of Nature* is getting distributed by Ryko, so that's like having the power of a big label.

I know it's a tough time, but I still believe in retail, and I'm sad that it's not as easy to sell CDs as it used to be. But I think the bookstores today are providing a good environment for people to buy music.

**MC: How are you and your label addressing the role of the internet in selling your music?**

**Jordan:** When I started talking to the president of my label, he asked if I had any ideas about how we could stay on the cutting edge of technology, instead of being threatened by it. I thought that was very encouraging.

I ended up telling them that I think the CD is obsolete in the sense that it can't hold enough music. I told them that I was going to make more than a CDs worth of music and they agreed to make the other songs available online, which is great because it completes the picture and introduces elements that aren't on the CD.

I'm excited about the possibilities of the online thing, because it makes economic sense. In today's world there are so many products out there, that in a supply-and-demand sense the songs are worth less. The way to get around it is to put out more songs, and the internet is playing a major part in that. My fans will now get an album-plus, without the hassle of buying a second CD.

**MC: Did you feel too much pressure to "save" jazz music in the 80's?**

**Jordan:** I think the label situation put pressure on me, but I felt I was up to the pressure. You know, it's not always an easy thing, because the built-in truth to the industry is that you have the corporate world and the art world, and while the two can meet and do some wonderful things together we shouldn't forget that they are still two different worlds. When the two are in agreement things will go great, but when they're not in agreement there will inevitably be problems.

To me, I want to resolve things on the side of the art, so what I'm going to do is to figure out a way to take advantage of the corporate structure. That's why if I'm going into a project that I know has limited marketing potential, I don't need to go with a big company.

**MC: Can you tell us about your interest in music therapy and sound healing?**

**Jordan:** I had some experiences when I was young that showed me that music had healing powers. So when I became an adult I met a music therapist who told me about the profession and told me about some of the national conferences. After I'd gone to an international conference I became totally hooked and began to study it more formally.

They're using sound in a type of hyperthermia technique, because they use sound to affect the heat. One of the benefits of sound is that you can pinpoint it very precisely; you can select not just the frequency in sound, but also the location in space. It's very targeted. From what I've read you can do that more easily with sound than you can do with radiation.

On a more personal level, music can affect your health and your state of mind. Here's a great idea: take a bunch of songs that you like and place them in order of slowest tempo to fastest tempo and make it so the tempos change really gradually. Then do it again, going from fastest to slowest.

I have to warn you of one thing: if you do the fast to slow, don't do it while you're driving the car or operating heavy machinery, because it could very easily put you to sleep. And if you do the slow to fast it not only gives you a pep or a boost, but it is also a wonderful emotional boost; you just feel so good. The main key is that the changes have to be very gradual and very consistent so that even if you're not conscious of the changes, your body knows.

**MC: You've gone from performing for one audience to another audience as a professor. Is this your way of giving back, as they say?**

**Jordan:** It's not totally altruistic, because I get a lot of rewards from it too. The only people who study with me are people who are totally enthusiastic. I get so many good vibes from them and I love to help them, I love to see what they can come up with, and I love to see their improvement.

One of the main questions I ask before they come to my workshop is "What is your hardest problem in music?" And they tell me and I try to solve it, and it's fun because it always works. I've always enjoyed teachers, because my parents who were both teachers inspired me. One of my favorite lines in that Earth Wind & Fire song "Devotion" is, "Praise the teacher who brings true love to many." I loved that line, because here was someone who was talking about the act of teaching in a spiritual context and showing how the teacher is a spiritual person in the sense that they are helping to make the society strong.

I think it's important that we're sharing the knowledge and spreading what we know, and I would love to inspire people to get back into the learning and teaching process.

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# QUICK FACTS

about

## Stanley Jordan

- Likes to play six-note and eight-note scales. "Even though I'm in 4/4 time. I know that if I'm triplets, 3+3 = 6, so it rhythmically makes sense."
- Guitar setup is important when applying Jordan's "touch technique"; try lower action and lighter strings, though he warns that "things that make your guitar easier to play always make the guitar sound worse"
- Years ago wanted to try the Chapman Stick, but was asked to leave their NAMM booth, "probably because I didn't mention him when I was on the *Tonight Show*"
- Received a B.A. from Princeton in 1981 and is working on his Masters degree in Music Therapy.
- Currently lives in Sedona, AZ, where he owns Sedona Books & Music
- Taught his daughter, singer Julia Jordan, to play guitar. She's got her own music out at <http://www.myspace.com/juliajordanmusic>.
- His debut for Blue Note was not only No. 1 on the *Billboard* jazz charts, but also made No. 32 on the R&B/Hip-Hop Albums charts.