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## Artists

### Featured Artist: Erik Mongrain

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### Tapping Into the Mind of Erik Mongrain

If you were allowed only one word to describe wunderkind guitarist Erik Mongrain, that word would have to be "fearless." A completely self-taught player, who learned almost entirely by ear at the hands of masters ranging from Kurt Cobain to Johann Sebastian Bach and Michael Hedges, the 27 year-old French-speaking Canadian native has unblinkingly accepted virtually every musical challenge his keen ears have come across. Armed with little more than a powerful will to learn and an steadfast belief that it's all possible, Mongrain has traveled the road from simple grunge power chords to complex melodic fingerpicking with virtually nothing to guide him but a handful of CDs and cassettes from which his unquenchable early inspiration was drawn.

It was a YouTube performance of the song "Air Tap" from his 2007 debut CD *Fates* that turned him into an internet sensation and a favorite of guitar cognoscenti everywhere. It's a remarkable performance filled with equal parts technical daring, astonishing rhythm, and lilting melody, one made more incredible still by the fact Mongrain literally taught himself this rare playing style in front of live audiences while busking on the streets. Yet for all the acclaim his several tapped songs have received, Mongrain is a far more multi-dimensional guitarist. Indeed, the majority of the work his nascent career has produced thus far features a surprising range of styles and sounds for a new voice. Equally surprising is Mongrain's refreshingly calm air of wizened self-assurance. It's hardly the stuff of a typical 20-something, but then again Mongrain is hardly your typical musician. Recently, we spoke to him by phone from his home in Montreal about the past, present, and future of one of the guitar world's most promising new players.

#### **You're a self-taught guitarist. What inspired you to pick up the instrument in the first place? How did the process of teaching yourself unfold?**

It's a pretty long story! Before I was 14 years old I wanted to play hockey. It was my life. Of course, there was no way I would have made it to the NHL. I was just way too small. One day after a hockey game I was zapping on TV and I just fell upon a clip of Nirvana, "Heart-Shaped Box". It just spoke to me. I had never really listened to music before that moment but that was the turn-over for my entire life.

#### **So you were not a big music fan prior to that?**

No, not at all. I mean there were some songs on the radio that I kind of enjoyed,

but nothing specific. I never figured that I would actually like music someday in the future but from that point on I started to buy music tapes. There was this company called Columbia Music where you could order tapes for free. No one would ever pay of course! So I ordered all sorts of music from Nirvana to Aerosmith. At some point, I thought: "Well, it would be cool to actually play these Nirvana songs!" I wasn't into Hockey anymore; my life was all about Nirvana, Kurt Cobain and all that stuff. I was about 14 at the time.

I didn't have a guitar but my uncle had a crappy, flashy orange classical guitar. He had just bought himself a new acoustic. It was Christmas and I was playing with it or trying to play with it and he said: "Alright, I'll give it to you." So I received the guitar. From that point, I just started learning on my own from the clips or from the tapes I had. Grunge music at that point was always the same bar chord position, just had to move it along the neck! It was not all that hard to learn how to play Nirvana's music. I just started with the basic chords and tried to learn them correctly. After a couple of months I could play all that stuff already and I kind of felt like I was bored with it. So I just sought for new things.

At that time the young people where I lived used to go to, hmm... I don't know what you call that in English. It's a "maison de jeunesse", a youth house. A place where young people go hang out in a drug-free environment and such. So we're all going there often, and there were 2 guys there who could really play the guitar. There was this guy that could play Metallica and the other would be into Jimi Hendrix. They never wanted to teach me anything. They would just play and say, "Ah, you're not going to be able to do that." So I just sat there and I watched them. When I was going back home, I would try to mimic what I just saw. After a while, I was playing stuff that I was amazed at a few months before that. I could play with them from a certain point. And then that's kind of how I got from the power chord stuff and the basics to the next level which, for me, was classical guitar music.

I found out about Johann Sebastian Bach at that point. I didn't know how to read music but I could read tabs like anyone. The book I had with all of Bach's guitar music was in German and I can't read German so I had no clue whatsoever. I figured it all out from... I don't know what the word is in English, the big G key. I figured out that if that's the G note I'd start from there. I just went with logic and after a few weeks, I could sight-read. After like two or three months I already went through all of the book. It was a very good exercise for right hand and left hand positions, precision but I quickly got bored with it. It was rather repetitive. Good music but it's always the same!

### **Now you're playing acoustic guitar *and* electric at this point?**

After a year with my first guitar I gave it up for an electric. It was a crappy Gibson replica. I sold it fast and I bought an Ibanez electric. From there I sold that one to a friend and bought an Ibanez acoustic blue, which looked like some sort of toy but I loved it! I played with that for a long time and then I bought a Yamaha APX9 12-string. I kind of learned all that classical music when I was around 16-17 on acoustics mainly. I was playing either classical or rhythms. I was always the guy who played rhythms if I played with others. I've never been a shredder and I still have no interest in that. I never heard of Michael Hedges at the time nor did I hear any of that acoustic style.

So I just kept going and some day I just heard this guy in the subway who was playing weird flamenco kind of music with a classical guitar; he was playing with a pick. It was like kind of spaced out music and it was just so amazing. I asked him: "Where's that coming from?" And he said: "I just composed it." That kind of lit a switch in my mind. I started looking for more space, new age acoustic music. I found that CD called "Masters of Acoustic Guitar". It was like a compilation of acoustic masters. There was Don Ross on it and a few others like Laurence Jubert. I started listening to that. Don Ross was my favorite player on the album so I looked for more of his stuff. I found a whole bunch of CDs he came out with. It was around that time that I started playing in the subways. I began to learn the easiest songs Don Ross composed and I was played them in the subway along with classical music.

Then more people would come to me and say, "Oh you should check out this guy,

or this guitar player.” That’s where I heard about Michael Hedges, Preston Reed, all these guys. There was no YouTube at that point. If you wanted a video of these guys, you had to order a VHS and you would get it three months afterwards. I didn’t have any money to buy that so I just went by ear and logic. I would get tabs from the net or stuff like that. I just went by ear and paper really. I had no idea how it was played visually. But then one day I saw this video of Michael Hedges playing live. It was a bootleg from some dude who taped it in Australia or something. It was the first video of him I ever saw and it shocked me deeply.

### **What was shocking about it?**

The way he was moving, the precision. All of it just shocked me in a way. I told myself that there was no way I could ever be that good. It kind of depressed me for a couple of years! It was just too good. I knew his stuff a bit, Michael Hedges, but after that video I really dived into his music so much. I could not compose anything for three, four years. I was about 19-20. If I was trying to compose something it just felt like crap. It didn’t feel like me, like my own colors. And then I just learned everything I could from him, Preston Reed or any guitar player that I liked. I just learned a whole lot of songs and at some point, when I was 23 or 24, it just started coming out. The real kind of “me.”

### **What do you think happened at that point? Was there anything you can point to that triggered that sudden creative release?**

I remember a particular day.. I was with this girl. Well, women, you know, they are always great sources of inspiration. Or love itself. But there was this girl and for some reason she decided to dump me overnight like an old sock that you throw away. I remember that precise moment where I just went to her place. I was just standing on her doorstep, right there, and we just kind of stared at each other for a minute, blankly. Words aren’t a necessity sometimes. Eye contact can be enough.

From that moment, I don’t know, something happened, because I came back home and some new ideas, new colors, new rhythms, new way of putting out my feelings just came out. I made two songs in these short couple of weeks, which I never kept. I never put them out on CD or never will, but these two songs sorta triggered the music you hear on "Fates". I wrote the song "Fates" after that. It was like the root of it all were these two songs somehow. I just kept digging and a whole bunch of songs started coming out. I understood that it was the way I wanted it to happen.

### **How did you discover tapping and did you get into that style?**

Well, the first time ever I found out about tapping was Hedges’s “Aerial Boundaries” and “Afraid to Dance” by Don Ross. In fact the first tapping or double tapping stuff I heard was from Billy McLaughlin. There was a song of his called “Helm’s Place” and another called “South By WinterWest.” He was double-tapping right on the neck. The right hand does the bass lines and the other one does the high lines. I was just amazed how you could play a whole song without even strumming. Just tapping in the right spots!

As for lap tapping, that’s another story. I just saw this guy in the street when I was 20 or so. He was tapping like that on his knees, busking for money. It was great and new, I liked it very much. I asked him: “How do you do that?” (Just like everyone keeps asking me today!) and he just said: “Ohhh...” It was like it was some big secret. He didn’t want to say anything. I even asked him: “What are the effects you’re using?” yet he didn’t want to answer that too. Later on I found out it was a chorus and a reverb. There’s nothing much about that! I bought his CD, brought it home and listened to it a lot and I figured, well, if he can do it, I can do it! Anyone can! It’s just a matter of willpower I guess.

I just started tapping harmonics and tried to slide simple chord rightly on the frets. I learned the basics from what I heard on the CD itself. It was not something I would practice at home all that much. It was a period of my life where I played a lot on the streets so basically it’s a technique I’ve “mastered” mainly in the streets.

### **Is it a little daunting trying to master something like that in front of**

**strangers?**

No. It doesn't matter. Busking in the street is not like people think it is. You're just there. People are just walking by so they just catch a 15-second gap of what you do. I figured, well, if I play like that, I'll probably make more money because I will catch the eyes of the people.

**Did you find that was true? That you made more money tapping vs. finger picking, flatpicking, etc.?**

Usually I did make more money because people would stop and say, "Oooo. What the hell was that?!? What's that guy doing?" After awhile, maybe after a couple of years, I started to get, not bored with it —it's a fun technique- but it's kind of limited. You cannot strum, you cannot do arpeggios nor fingerpicking all that much. It's a different position. There are advantages to it but there are also some inconveniences.

**So you don't consider tapping to really be your primary mode of expression?**

No. I mean I have two songs like that. Well, I have three. But I haven't composed like this in years. As long as it's not the same technique, the same texture, the same rhythm, the same tuning, the same color, the same feeling, I just keep changing the way I approach every song. I do it for me, not to please or to impress anyone. The lap tapping was mainly for the street. It was fun and I composed a bunch of rhythms like "Airtap!" or "PercusienFa" but they were street songs for me. Mainly chords that I put together back then and that were fun to jam on. On a 100% scale, I'd say lap tapping is 5% of what I do.

**That's what I get from listening to the record. Tapping just doesn't seem to be that prevalent on it.**

It's the YouTube phenomenon, I think. We just put videos of a couple of songs that I did, some lap tapping some standard position and it seems people just hooked on lap tapping a lot!

**I wanted to ask about that. Did it trouble you at all that so much of the attention that you receive on YouTube and elsewhere seems to focus on the tapping when that, as you say, is really only 5% of what you do?**

Well, it's not that it troubles me. It affects me in some way, but not badly. It's a good business card! People see that and they go, "Oh, Erik Mongrain. Let's check out what he does." They see the lap tapping and are amazed. Lots of people just buy the CD because of that and it's a good thing heh! Then there's a bunch of them that figure that it's not all I do, or they come to a show and they realize it live. They're just mind-blown by all of it, not just the lap tapping! So yeah, it can be sort of... not annoying, but heavy sometimes. Lap tapping, lap tapping. Play more lap tapping! Like you say, people focus on that a lot, but at the same time it will lure many persons that maybe would not be lured if it was not for that.

I'm not the kind of guy who's going to say, "Oh yeah, yeah! People like lap tapping a lot, so on the next CD I will put more lap tapping songs to make more money!" I'm just not into that type of thinking. If someday I feel like I have inspiration to compose a song within this niche, I will. In the past eight years nothing new came out in that fashion so... You cannot force inspiration!

**Tell us a little bit about that songwriting process. How does a song come into being for you? And once the germ, the essence is there, how does it evolve?**

I'm a slow composer. A really slow composer. I'm not the type of guy who can put out a CD a year. There's just no way. Usually it takes me about two months just to finish a song up to stage one. And then there's stage two and three. Overall it takes me about three or four months to complete a song to recording quality.

The way it happens really differs from song to song. Some songs I hear something like a short ten seconds of melody in my mind, and I say, "That's great. That's cool." I just pick my guitar and I fiddle with the tuning that can work for that idea. I

try to dig what I heard. Sometimes you pick the guitar up and you have nothing in your mind yet it just comes. You start playing right off the bat a theme or a chorus of what will be a song if you keep digging enough. Or sometimes you just go, "Yeah that tuning is pretty cool. I think I can do something with that tuning." Then you start reflecting on some chords. There's hundreds of ways it can happen! It's always very, very different.

**Did you find that when you recorded *Fates* that the act of recording changed your vision of a particular song? Does it impact what comes out?**

I think the act of recording changes the way I see the song. It really is when you hear it on a record after that, you just start hearing stuff that maybe shouldn't be there or you go, "Oh! That's how it sounds for other people!"

**Does the act of recording change the live performance for you at all?**

No. When I go on stage, the way I play "PercusienFa" or "Airtap!" is different because it's a lot of improvisation. A song like "Fates" on the other hand may be played differently now then it was back when I recorded or composed it. There are always details that can change with time, hopefully to improve!

**So there is a certain amount of improvisation in the live performance for you.**

I would say on every song, maybe 5-10%. But you know it really is like the song is set in stone mostly. The album "Fates" is different because they're older songs but on the next CD this year, what you will hear on it is at 95% what you'll hear in the live shows. The 5% comes from the fact that a performance is always affected by how you feel. If you're angry, hungry, if the sound is terrible or if it's very good, if the crowd is lively or not, etc.

**Now you're going to record the follow-up to *Fates* this spring.**

Yeah, it should be in May-June. It should come out in the fall.

**How do you think this record will be different from *Fates*? What we can expect?**

The way I see it... how can I say it? The songs are very...well... I dug a whole lot more for every song. "Fates" was a good album but I did not do as much research in every measure of every song that I did with these newest songs I composed. On my older tunes a chorus could take me two days to create fully and it was done and I was happy with it. With this next CD every part, every bridge, every chorus, every theme, every introduction has been researched deeply and extensively. I've tried many different and new approaches.

I remember that, on the song called "Equilibrium", it took me two weeks just to do a three-second bridge! I dug into it so much! I just try to shot for the best that I can come up with and then I'll say: "Is there anything better than that?" It drives me nuts sometimes but there's always something that rings inside of you much more than these chords that you really like. Just gotta find them! If there's anything to be expected with the next CD it's that, in my opinion, it will be hundreds of times better on all aspects! It will be just much more in your face! I want people to listen to this next album and just cry and laugh and feel very deeply emotions that they even forgot existed. I think it will also be much more... maybe a bit more complex on the technical aspect. I hope everyone will be able to listen to it though, even for the uncle that doesn't listen to music at all or the grandmother that never listens to guitar music! I don't want to be tagged as guitar music though.. Hopefully this album will be one that anyone can grab and say: "That's great!"

**Obviously you're a solo artist. With the exception of some strings on *Fates*, it's all you. I'm wondering if you could ever see yourself in a band situation. Is that something that you'd like to pursue someday or are you pretty much Erik Mongrain, solo artist, and that's how it is for you?**

Yeah. I'm the solo guy. I just cannot do compromises with other musicians.

**Have you tried that at all?**

I did it when I was a teen and playing in some bands. Haven't in over 10 years though. It could be fun to jam with someone sometimes, but as far as creating anything goes, I'm too selfish! It's mine and yes, it could be fun to create with someone else, but I'd rather do collaborations like create my own song and ask a bass player to add a bass track. That would be alright. On this next album, there will be two songs with bass not played by me because, of course, I don't play bass, but there will be two songs with fretless bass tracks added. We might arrange to do some live shows (with the bassist). Overall, bands aren't for me!

**In listening to your record, it's interesting that the music bug bit you through bands like Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Metallica, etc. Those early roots are not obvious in your current work. Has that music and those artists informed your work today in any way? Are there any influences there? Or do you see what you do now as something completely separate from those initial exposures to music?**

I don't think any musician that ever lived can say without a doubt that there are no influences from the early years he listened to music. If someone never heard music in his life, how could he even play music? Everything you've heard at some point in your life that you liked has influenced you somehow. Even if, of course, I'm light years from the Nirvana stuff or any form of it, it had its part somehow in what I play today! Even if it's very tiny, it's there. I can't say exactly what. Of course, Michael Hedges is like 85% of my influence according to what I do nowadays. He's been huge but so has Preston Reed, Don Ross and all these guys. Even Jimi Hendrix had some part to play even if it's just 0.01%. There's always something I think that you could pinpoint and say, "Oh, that's where it comes from!"

**What music are you listening to these days?**

I'm really into Dave Matthews Band. I love their music! I like Sigur Ros, Mogwai, Bjork, Tori Amos. I used to listen to a lot of Radiohead. I can't listen to Hedges anymore. Not because it's not good, on the contrary: It's too good! When I listen to his work I feel terrible! His music makes me feel like he's done it all. He was just such a genius.

**What guitars are you playing these days?**

Oh, I've got a whole bunch. There's this new PRS prototype from Paul Reed Smith. He started making acoustic guitars but not commercially, just prototypes. He sent me a small concert model months ago and it was nice. Wasn't big enough for me though as I like jumbo models. When I met him I asked if he could do a bigger version of it. He made this prototype for me. It's a very nice guitar and it's the one I play mostly these days. I also own a RainSong JM1000, a Guild D55 (which I don't play anymore), a Stonebridge CM22, a Stonebridge 12-string... Forgot the model.

I'm having a new one made right now from a luthier in Michigan. It's a totally custom super jumbo guitar, which should be THE guitar, you know with a big "T," a big "H," and a big "E!" I never had the money before until recently to have a custom-made guitar. It's being made as we speak and I've been waiting for that instrument for nearly ten years. So hopefully it should be what I want exactly. That will be mainly the guitar until I stop playing music, I guess. The PRS is very nice, too. So I might use these for at least ten years.

**What other gear do you use on stage?**

I use AER amps, from Germany. I use the Compact 60. It's a small cube. They're amazing and so natural sounding! I use two of them for monitors. My guitars run through two sets of pick-ups. There's a Sunrise magnetic and an undersaddle piezo pickup with a microphone included in the EQ board. It's a Prefix stereo blender. They don't make them anymore but I can still buy them from my music shop here. All my guitars have that Fishman and Sunrise system installed.

What I do is run the Sunrise magnetic through a bass EQ and I boost the low end. I only use the Sunrise for the low end really. The bass EQ goes through a DTAR Solstice preamp which is a two channel acoustic preamp. The Fishman is the same

thing except it goes straight through the two-channel preamp. I've got two digital reverbs from BOSS which are looped into the DTAR preamp along with a DTAR Equinox parametric EQ. So that's what I use!

### **How did you find out about Elixir® Strings?**

I remember the day. It was back in my busking days. I was 20 or so, I think. I was joining my friend at the coffee shop downtown and he was just singing outside playing his guitar. He said "Man, you gotta try these new strings!" I asked: "What are they?" And he said: "Elixir. And they really are an elixir!" I just tried them and said, "Wow! Finally a manufacturer that understands what the hell strings are all about!!" From that day on I never could play with anything else. There have been a lot of times in my life that I was totally broke, but I still found the money to get them anyway.

At first I played Polywebs but at some point I switched to the Nanowebbs. You gotta like everything about them. They are the only strings that don't break. Every other brand of strings will snap after two hours or sound mute and dead with no brilliance whatsoever after 30 minutes. They just all suck compared to Elixir! Even the ones that try to emulate Elixirs, it doesn't work. I've tried them all just to see how pale of a copy they would be, and none of them does the job. Just Elixir. I still have to change every week because I play a lot and it's not four-chord stuff, but the other sets... I just put them on and play and they're like rusty kind of strings that I've got to change right off. So it's the durability. The sound's brilliance. All of it. They are the only quality strings that's out there, I even tried weird German strings that people said were better, like golden kind of strings. It doesn't do the job either.

### **You're recording your sophomore release this spring. And you're doing a tour of England.**

Yeah, I'm leaving this week.

### **What else does 2008 hold for you?**

Well, I'll be doing a couple of shows on the East Coast in April, May. Maybe six, seven shows. There will be a bunch of shows in Quebec in June and July. After that, we're going to start booking for the West Coast in the States and Canada for just after the release of the album. October, something like that. And we would like to go back to Germany in the fall for November, December. And Japan probably in the beginning of 2009. We are planning all that for the second half of the year.

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