

A photograph of Erik Mongrain, a bald man with a goatee, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a necklace. He is sitting and playing an acoustic guitar. The guitar is a Guild D55, which is an open-tuned acoustic guitar. He is looking down at the guitar. The background is dark. The name "Erik Mongrain" is written in large, red, serif font across the middle of the image.

Erik Mongrain

BY BARRY CLEVELAND

ERIK MONGRAIN'S "AIRTAP" VIDEO ON YOUTUBE HAS BEEN VIEWED nearly four million times in the two years that it has been posted. The video features the now 28-year-old Canadian guitarist with a Guild D55 in his lap, picking, stroking, slapping, tapping, pinching, and plucking the open-tuned acoustic from above with both hands, as a fusillade of notes, drones, harmonics, and percussive sounds pour forth with improvisational abandon. The popularity of "AirTap" and other videos showcasing Mongrain's unusual approach has brought him worldwide recognition—but at a cost. Like an actor who has been typecast after playing an iconic character, Mongrain struggles against being labeled "the lap-tapping guy," which is understandable given that he performs all but two songs in his repertoire with his guitar suspended from his shoulder in the conventional manner.

But whether employing lap or strap, Mongrain's technical approaches and musical aesthetic place him squarely alongside Don Ross, Preston Reed, Andy McKee, Kaki King, and other alumni of the post-Michael Hedges school of both-hands-on-deck virtuosity. Like his stylistic compatriots, Mongrain elicits sounds from every inch of his instrument using all conceivable means—but unlike most of them, his initial passion was fueled by '90s-era grunge and metal rather than the previous decade's new acoustic movement, as indirectly evidenced in the intensity of his playing.

On his sophomore release, *Equilibrium* [Prophase], Mongrain expands the concepts he developed on his debut album, combining his diverse techniques more subtly and expressively, and pairing with bassist Michael Manring (who worked extensively with Hedges) and synthesist Bill Plummer on several tracks. Mongrain has also produced four instructional videos for iVideosongs, and provided music for *Everest: A Climb For Peace* and other films.

Have you studied music formally?

I took some basic music courses in high school, but I didn't learn anything. Everything I know I've learned on my own from listening to recordings, and from watching better players and trying to mimic what they were doing. Style-wise, I learned a lot by watching and listening to Michael Hedges. I also played a lot of Bach and other classical music for a while, and that affected my technique, as well.

What led you to develop your lap-tapping technique, and are you still using it?

I began lap-tapping about ten years ago. I was walking the streets in Montreal when I saw a guy doing it, and I decided to try it out, mostly because I was busking at the time and I thought it would be a good way to stop more people and make more money. But I haven't composed any lap-tapping pieces in years, and I only play maybe one song that way in a full live show. I'm focusing on all the other techniques right now, though I may decide to revisit playing that way in the future if I need those sorts of sounds and textures.

Since you were playing that way originally, do you find that people have that expectation?

I've never played that way exclusively. It just happened that the song that everyone liked on YouTube was played that way. There are only two lap-tapping songs on my first album, and none on my new one, though I can understand how people mistakenly got that impression after the video had been seen so many times.

Do you ever use thumbpicks or fingerpicks?

No, I can't stand them. Thumbpicks in particular just get in the way. Also, my thumb is fairly stiff, and won't bend at the same angle that many guitarists' thumbs do, so I tend to do more thumping and popping with it than regular picking, like a bassist might. I do use acrylic nails—but only on the thumb and index finger, because the nails on the other fingers never break.

So, you use both the flesh and the nail of your thumb?

I'd say its half flesh and half nail for most of the songs. But it's all nail when I'm doing straight fingerpicking on songs like "The Silent Fool" or "Interpretation," and I use mostly flesh on songs like "Equilibrium," where I'm thumping and popping, because the right-hand movement is fairly steady and there's no room to get the nail in correctly.

Is it fair to say that you don't use your pinky very much?

That's right. I've never felt like I've needed to use it, and when I do it is mostly for show. If I want to do a trill or tremolo on one string I just use my thumb, index, middle, or ring fingers. I'd like to learn some flamenco techniques, though, so my pinky might come more into play at some point. I'm interested in the way that they strum and do the percussive parts at the same time.

Describe your primary guitars.

Two years ago, I met a luthier from Michigan named John Kingslight. I had him build a guitar exactly to my specs, and that's what I've been playing exclusively for the past eight months. It has an Adirondack spruce top, Brazilian rosewood back and sides, and a custom-made pickup system that combines a Sunrise magnetic pickup with a Fishman gooseneck microphone. I played a Rainsong JM1000 for a long time, and used it to compose a lot of my

songs. I also have a PRS acoustic prototype that Paul Reed Smith built for me, a Guild D55, and 6- and 12-strings made by a Czech company called Stonebridge. I might use the 12-string at some point, but otherwise all of those other guitars have been retired.

What is it about the Kingslight that makes it your favorite?

When I saw one of his guitars at a trade show, it had a great two-piece mahogany neck that was just too easy to play. I asked

for that neck profile, but on a super-jumbo body, so he just modeled the body on the Rainsong. The bridge height also had to be just right, because I could never get the action on my other guitars low enough. This one is so easy to play that I don't have to use my strength anymore. I also had custom yin/yang inlays placed on the fretboard, and there is a beautiful Celtic-style rosette.

You appear to favor non-cutaway acoustics.
I prefer to have the additional volume

that you get from a non-cutaway as a trade-off for easier access. I don't shred or solo much high on the fretboard, and if I do there are other ways to get there by reaching over the body, so it isn't a sacrifice. Non-cutaways are also prettier in my opinion.

What strings do you use?

Elixir Mediums.

How about amplifiers and effects?

I used to carry an AER Compact Mobile 60-watt amp, but now I just use D-Tar Solstice and Equinox preamps and Boss RV-5 Digital Reverb and GEB-7 Bass Equalizer pedals. I run the magnetic Sunrise pickup through the EQ to add 50Hz to the lows for a punchier sound. All of my gear fits in a small suitcase.

How do you deal with using so many different tunings when performing live?

I do all of my shows with only one guitar, and the trick is to find the right retuning pace for the set, so that the changes from one tuning to the next don't involve too many moves. I tried to use more than one guitar, but it didn't work out because I prefer to focus on a single instrument that I have an emotional relationship with.

You plan your set list around tuning changes?

Yes. The faster you can retune, while simultaneously speaking to the audience, the better. I mostly use *A* and *E* tunings during my first set, and *B*, *C*, and *F#* tunings for the second. I make the songs sound different by changing the tonal colors and rhythms.

You dislike electronic tuners. Why?

In my opinion, any open tuning needs to be very slightly out of tune to be in tune *musically*, and electronic tuners obviously lack human intelligence and can't understand that. I use an A-440 tuning fork to establish the fundamental pitch, and then I tune at the fourth string, 7th fret, and do the rest by ear.

What aspect of Michael Hedges' playing influenced you the most?

He didn't specialize in any particular style. He would fingerpick, strum, tap, hammer-on—whatever he thought was right for the song. Hedges taught me that *not* having an approach is the best approach of all. 🎸

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Guitar World Acoustic July 2007

EVERYBODY'S TALKIN'



ERIK MONGRAIN

YOUTUBE VIDEOS of 27-year-old Montreal guitarist Erik Mongrain, who plays with his acoustic in his lap, two-hand tapping his way through his instrumentals "AirTap!" and "Percusienfa" have made him an overnight sensation among guitarists and non-guitarists alike. But Mongrain is no one-trick pony. "I don't specialize in any particular technique or tuning," he says. "I want to taste everything I can."

Mongrain puts his money where his mouth is on his debut album, *Fates* (Prophase Music). He recorded most of the album with his guitar in the standard position, showcasing not only his virtuosic tapping but also a fingerpicking style that incorporates funky bass lines and explosive harmonics, and even some feisty flatpicking.

"I can get different textures, different rhythms, different colors," says Mongrain, who uses numerous tunings, many of his own devising. "I even mix techniques within the same song—I'll tap the introduction, fingerpick the verse and then strum the chorus with a flatpick."

Mongrain first became interested in music when, at 14, he saw Nirvana play "Heart-Shaped Box" on television. After learning "every Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Metallica and Jimi Hendrix song I could," he moved on, first to classical guitar and then steel-string acoustic. A compilation CD introduced him to contemporary fingerstyle masters Don Ross, Laurence Juber and others, but his real epiphany came when he heard the playing of Michael Hedges.

"I was busking on the street when somebody told me I had to check him out," says Mongrain. "I got a copy of *Oracle*, and within ten seconds of hearing it I was in love." —Scott Nygaard

GUITARS

RainSong JM1000; Guild D55 (for lap tapping)

ELECTRONICS

Sunrise magnetic pickup; Fishman Prefix Stereo Blender; D-Tar Solstice preamp; AER acoustic amp