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## In Search Of The Uncommon Chord

By Barry Cleveland | April, 2008

### Allan Holdsworth Continues to Blow Minds and Preconceptions ... and He's Still Better Than You.

Allan Holdsworth's Prime Directive has always been to avoid sounding like anyone else, and he has ensured compliance by making it impossible for anyone else to sound like him. His liquid legato lines, spellbinding speed, incomprehensible intervallic leaps, confounding chord clusters, and mercurial melodies are legendary—and all but the most intrepid (foolish?) guitarists have abandoned whatever hope they may have once harbored of fathoming his trip.

That's important. Particularly in these days of rock retreats, blues redux, and homogeneous jazz, when we really *need* musicians like Holdsworth to remind us what's possible with unwavering dedication to one's art. And in case you haven't kept up with the Yorkshire Terror, and imagine that he's passed his prime or gone to seed—don't worry. Holdsworth's playing is more mature, majestic, and mind-blowing than ever. And that's why he's on the cover.

For the benefit of younger readers, and those who could use a refresher, we'll begin with a recap of the highlights of the guitarist's illustrious career. Holdsworth's first commercially released album was 1969's *Igginbottom's Wrench*, a mildly psychedelic jazzy-pop outing on which his tones owe more to Joe Pass than Jimi Hendrix. The intriguing chord voicings, dissonant double-tracked arpeggios, rapid note flurries, and remarkable extended solos likely raised more than a few eyebrows.

Several years later, former Colosseum drummer Jon Hiseman recruited Holdsworth for his Cream-clone project, Tempest, and an album of the same name was released in early 1973. At that point, Holdsworth had shelved his jazz tones for full-on Clapton crunch, including "White Room"-like wah riffs and even bluesy bends. Juxtaposed with the Claptonisms, however, are startling bursts of fully formed Holdsworth melodic logic, suggesting that the two approaches coexisted, rather than being different aspects of a single style. Holdsworth's successor in Tempest was the late Peter "Ollie" Halsall, whom Holdsworth credits with deepening his interest in vibrato bar technique—soon to become an essential part of his aesthetic—and the two shared the stage briefly during the transition.

Holdsworth played and/or recorded with several other significant artists during the early '70s, most notably Ian Carr's Nucleus, but his first real break came when he landed a gig with seminal jazz-rockers Soft Machine in late 1973. His concept now fully formulated, Holdsworth infused *Bundles*, and Soft Machine's live sets, with his singular magic—word of which soon reached the legendary jazz drummer and composer, the late Tony Williams.

Williams brought Holdsworth to Sweden to record with bassist Jack Bruce and keyboardist Webster Lewis, but things didn't pan out. When Williams landed a major label deal a short while later, however, Holdsworth crossed the Big Pond to play on Williams' classic *Believe It*, and later on *Million Dollar Legs*, as well as touring throughout 1975 and 1976. Williams provided Holdsworth with a degree of creative freedom he hadn't experienced previously, but the band's financial problems eventually led the guitarist to return to England.

About that time, Holdsworth fan George Benson persuaded CTI Records to record the young guitarist, but Holdsworth wasn't happy with the results. Despite the heavy-hitting lineup of drummer Narada Michael Walden, bassist Alphonso Johnson, and keyboardist Alan Pasqua, *Velvet Darkness* was mostly a collection of rehearsals rather than a proper studio album, and Holdsworth continues to despise it to this day.

Back in England, Holdsworth continued working associations with a wide variety of artists, and contributed to some of the finest avant-garde and jazz-rock albums of the late '70s. He was a principal composer on *Gazeuse* by Pierre Moerlen's Gong, shared guitar duties with Daryl Stuermer on violinist Jean-Luc Ponty's *Enigmatic Ocean*, and helped make drummer Bill Bruford's *Feels Good to Me* one of the most forward-thinking fusion albums of the time.

In late 1977, Holdsworth and Bruford briefly teamed with bassist/vocalist John Wetton and violinist/keyboardist Eddie Jobson to form the progressive rock "supergroup" U.K. Although Holdsworth lamented the band's somewhat regimented approach to composition and performance, its eponymous album and successful tours resulted in vast exposure, and his solo on "In the Dead of Night," as Bruford so eloquently observed, "remains one of the most perfectly formed, intelligently paced, and brilliantly executed two minutes of liquid guitar bliss you are ever likely to hear."

Upon exiting U.K. in 1979, Holdsworth and Bruford resumed working together for a few months, performing live (Bruford's *BBC: Rock Goes to College* provides a taste, and showcases the guitarist's improvisational prowess), and recording Bruford's *One of a Kind*.

Holdsworth left to do his own thing in late 1979, forming a band with drummer/keyboardist Gary Husband. The group changed members and names several times before solidifying as I.O.U. in late 1981, eventually releasing its self-titled debut in 1982. That same year, Holdsworth relocated to Southern California, where he formed an American version of I.O.U. that included bassist Jeff Berlin and drummer Chad Wackerman, and famously brought down the house while jamming with Eddie Van Halen at the Roxy Theater. EVH then helped Holdsworth ink a deal with Warner Brothers, and after a prolonged struggle over creative control, the now-classic *Road Games* was released in 1983.

Holdsworth's concept continued to expand on 1985's *Metal Fatigue*, but a compositional quantum leap took place that same



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year when he discovered the SynthAxe MIDI guitar controller. Combined with a breath controller, the SynthAxe allowed him to shape sound as a woodwind player might, while simultaneously providing access to the nearly limitless timbral universe of synthesis. Throughout the '80s and '90s, Holdsworth transcended the presumed limitations of guitar synthesis in the same way he had done with guitar, endowing albums such as *Atavachron*, *Sand*, *Secrets*, and *Wardenclyffe Tower* with a virtual orchestra of synthesized sounds in addition to his ever-evolving guitar pyrotechnics. On the latter album he also masterfully exploited the extended ranges offered by baritone and piccolo guitars.

After exploring a somewhat more subtle sound on *The Sixteen Men of Tain* in 1999, and producing the synthetic mock movie suite *Flat Tire: Music For a Non-Existent Movie* in 2001, Holdsworth embarked on a partial hiatus for five years, releasing two live albums and the double-disc retrospective, *Against the Clock*, in the interim.

Holdsworth reemerged in 2006, energized by a fresh creative current, and he has never sounded better. He toured extensively last year, playing a string of Tony Williams tribute shows with fellow New Lifetime alumnus Alan Pasqua (partially captured on the *Allan Holdsworth and Alan Pasqua Filmed Live at Yoshi's* DVD), and alongside his longtime collaborators Chad Wackerman and bassist Jimmy Haslip. This year, he's already toured Japan, and will be heading to the Midwest and both coasts in the coming months. Holdsworth is also completing two new albums, the first, *Snakes & Ladders*, scheduled for release on Favored Nations by year's end.

Holdsworth's impact on his fellow guitarists cannot be overstated, as becomes obvious when reading the quotes presented here. When trying to comprehend his uncanny abilities, Adrian Belew ponders his "extra-long fingers," while David Lindley and John Frusciante speculate that he must have "an additional joint," or "unusual bones, muscles, and nerves."

The Master himself, of course, tends to dislike all but his most recent playing, if that. But rather than indicating an unwholesome hyper-criticism, as is commonly assumed, perhaps that's only natural. After all, when ascending a steep creative curve at high velocity, even the most impressive objects quickly appear small when looking back.

**At what point did you decide to dedicate your life to music, and have things turned out at all like you'd imagined they might?**

No, things have turned out nothing like I'd imagined. And I often think about that whenever we go to music schools, because I'm sure almost everyone who goes to a music school is there because they've already decided that that's what they want to do. But for me it was the absolute opposite. My father was a wonderful piano player who had a great record collection, including all the classic jazz records, and I just loved listening to music. I had no interest in learning an instrument until I was about 15, when I started thinking that maybe I'd like to get a clarinet or a saxophone. But in those days they were pretty expensive, so instead my dad gave me a guitar he had bought from my uncle. Then he bought me a couple of chord books and as soon as he saw that I was making a little progress, he started trying to help me, and that's when I developed an interest. And he had records by all these great guitar players lying around, like Jimmy Rainey, Joe Pass, Barney Kessel, and Charlie Christian, who became my first major influence.

**Tell us about your two upcoming recordings.**

I'd started a project with Gary Husband and Jimmy Johnson about five years ago that was supposed to be released on Gnarly Geezer before the label folded. I've got all the recordings from that session, along with additional tracks recorded with drummer Joel Taylor and bassist Ernest Tibbs a couple of years later, and the first album will feature a mixture of those four musicians. One interesting thing about the project is that one of the songs was recorded by both groups, and the versions turned out so differently that I want to include them both just to show how the musicians can radically change the music. I don't tell anyone what to play specifically. I just show them the compositions, and their interpretations are completely up to them. I think that's why some of the guys like to play with me. The second album will mostly be with Jimmy Johnson and Chad Wackerman, and I'll release it myself, possibly also this year.

**Will there also be reissues of your previous albums?**

Yes. Three or four years ago I regained the rights to my back catalog, including some titles that had been released on a French label for a number of years. I decided in the middle of last year that I was going to try to take charge of my life, so now I'm trying to run my own show for the first time at age 62. We'll see how that goes [*laughs*].

**Will there be any SynthAxe on the new records?**

It's mostly guitar, but there are a couple of SynthAxe things, just because I like to take advantage of the instrument while it is still running. Every time I turn it on I wonder if it's going to start up.

**You have explored a lot of different timbres and approaches to phrasing with the SynthAxe. Has some of that orchestral sensibility found its way into your guitar playing?**

Yeah, the SynthAxe made me think a whole lot differently about the guitar, and at one point I was considering not playing guitar at all. I initially wanted to play a wind instrument, and when I used a breath controller with the Synth-Axe, it allowed me a certain amount of expression that I was unable to get from the guitar, particularly the ability to make notes loud and then soft and then loud again, and to change the sound of the note after it had been struck. On the guitar you can shape notes a little bit, but not as much. When the SynthAxe company went out of business, however, I decided that I'd better go back to the guitar.

**People frequently comment on the saxophone-like aspects of your playing, which are fairly obvious, but they tend to miss the other instruments that are also reflected, such as oboe, flute, and various other orchestral instruments.**

I would agree with that. I've always loved the oboe, the soprano saxophone, and of course the violin and any sort of stringed thing. And I've tried to get some of their qualities out of the guitar.

**Are you still playing violin?**

No. I quit when I got the SynthAxe, because I could get that sound without having to focus on more than one instrument. Actually, I wish that I'd been given the violin when I was really young, because I got close to it very quickly, though I only played it for a few years.

**Your sound changes over time. Do you see that as a linear evolution toward an ideal, or more of a non-linear response to changing aesthetics?**

It's something that I want the guitar to do that I haven't been able to make it do yet. I can never fine-tune it enough. An example of that would be when we decided to use an acoustic bass on *The Sixteen Men of Tain*. I struggled to find a way to

put more of a rock sound into a traditional jazz trio setting, where a lot of the music is kind of soft, while at the same time making the electric guitar sound less gnarly. So yeah, I'm trying to get the guitar to take orders from me, instead of the other way around, though usually I'm the one getting beat up.

**Is that an obtainable goal, or just an ideal that you strive toward?**

I think it's just an ideal. I resigned myself to a few things a long, long time ago. For example, I knew that no matter how long I was fortunate enough to stay alive, I would never know anything about music. And once I realized that, I didn't worry about it ever again. And even though I constantly keep learning new things, I'm okay with the fact that I'll never know anything.

**You mean in the sense that it's an infinite process?**

Yes.

**Which guitars are you currently playing?**

I played the Carvins for the past 15 years, though for the past two years I've been drifting back to the DeLap headless guitars, because there's just something about the way that they feel. But, I kind of wish that I hadn't; I picked up the headless and thought, "Oh no, what have I done?"

**What strings do you use?**

I use custom LaBella Electric sets, usually .009s or .010s on the headed guitars and .008s or .009s on the headless ones.

**You only use one type of effects box live, but you use a lot of them.**

I designed a box for Yamaha called the UD Stomp, which I really liked, but they discontinued it. Then they came up with the Magicstomp, but I couldn't use it until I discovered the programmer, which allowed me to recreate all of the sounds that I was getting from the UD Stomp. I use four, or sometimes six Magicstomps on stage, and they are all programmed to do completely different things. I use three to process the clean sound and three for the dirty sound, and I keep them on a table because I just don't like stuff on the floor.

**Are there any stompboxes that you like to use when recording?**

I have the MXR Custom Audio Electronics Boost/Overdrive pedal designed by Bob Bradshaw, which I like very much and use quite a bit in the studio. And I also have a couple of old T.C. Electronic pedals, including the Booster + Line Driver Distortion, which has a little EQ on it. I only use the clean boost side of those pedals, though, mostly to compensate for the low output of my pickups. I like pickups with low magnetism because the strings aren't affected by the pickups so much. A lot of people don't realize how much that affects the sound.

**How does it affect the sound?**

The best example would be a Stratocaster. I got my first one when I was playing with Tony Williams, and I couldn't intonate the thing. On the low E I'd get this wobble. But it was just the pickups sucking on the string, because when I put a couple of PAF humbuckers on it the problem went away completely. Then I realized that the older Gibsons that I liked the sound of so much had really weak pickups. So, sometimes I'll use a booster pedal to bring up the gain and push the front end of an amp a little harder.

**You've always disliked distortion pedals.**

Yeah. Except for special effects, I always try to get the sound out of the amp, because the dynamics disappear when you use a distortion box. Most distortion channels on amps kind of flat-line in terms of dynamics anyway, if they're distorted enough, and using a pedal makes things even flatter. I like to keep at least a little bit of headroom in there.

**On *Tempest*, you alternate between very original-sounding phrasing and note choices and Clapton-like playing. Were you going through an EC phase, or merely accommodating the bandleader?**

I always liked Eric Clapton, especially in the early days. But in *Tempest*, Jon Hiseman, who is a wonderful musician and a really great guy, wanted that band to be a power-trio kind of thing, so I felt obliged to do what I was told to some extent. But I'd disobey orders and do what I wanted once in a while. He also used to point his finger at me and say, "Too many notes," but all you'd have to do is wind forward 20 years to see about too many notes!

**Some of the playing on *Tempest* is almost bluesy, but that's something you've otherwise avoided throughout your career.**

The blues didn't really interest me that much. Also, when I first started listening to people like B.B King, trying to pick up some blues licks, my dad would come in and say, "That's not the blues, man, this is the blues." And then he'd start playing more like a jazz blues. So at that point I made a really conscious effort not to play anything that sounded even remotely like a blues lick. I love to hear other people playing them, but I try to find something else to play that will fulfill maybe a similar thing, but not be that exactly.

**You also avoid every "guitar god" staple that's come along in the past 35 years, including extreme string bending, sweep-picking, vibrato dive-bombing, and even palm muting. Is that just because those techniques are so widely used?**

A lot of it is that. For example, back in the SG days, and particularly after I started playing a Strat, I got into the whammy bar thing a lot more, and I started doing those slurs and scoops and flicking the bar and all that. Then, all the sudden I heard a lot of the rock and heavy metal guys doing it in really extreme ways, like the vibrato from hell. It was like an opera singer. Like, "Oh man, there's a note in the middle of that somewhere." And then when the dive-bombing and all that stuff came along, I just took the vibrato arm off the guitar and played without one for years, because I realized that it was only one little tool. I just said, "Man, you've got to figure out a way to play some interesting notes rather than relying on a whammy bar to make noises for you. I use it now again, but in a very limited way. And just when I need it, not because it's there.

**Describe the ways in which you use finger vibrato.**

The vibrato that I use mostly came from playing the violin, and is akin to the vibrato that classical players use, stretching and shortening the string by moving your finger backwards and forward, as opposed to across the fret. It's a totally different sound, because if you roll the finger back on a violin the note is going to go flat, and if you roll it forward it goes sharp, which doesn't happen when you are just bending the string from side to side. I've found that I can get some incredible variances in pitch with that stretching/shorting.



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**Do you still play chords by striking the notes simultaneously using the fleshy part of all four fingers?**  
Yes, unless I need to do what I call "scrubbing," or running the pick across the strings so it is sequential rather than one event. But when playing chords I like to hear all of the notes at the same time, unless the composition calls for something else.

**Have you ever experimented with fingerpicking?**

No, I've never developed any kind of skill with that. It's funny, now that you mention it, I don't think I ever thought about doing that. I hear chords moving like they would on a piano rather than something where you go from one string to another, like on a banjo, where basically you arpeggiate everything.

**What's going on internally when you are improvising?**

Usually the beginning of a solo is easy, because I've got an unlimited selection of different things that I can play for the first note. But once I've made that choice, then it goes to an unconscious place, and I'm not really thinking about it at all. I'm hearing this note, and then I hear the harmony, and sometimes I see the chords. It's like looking at a Rolodex or an abacus. I can recognize distances between intervals. Then it's just a matter of navigating from one place to another and squeezing in lines in interesting ways. All this stuff is just happening in real time, like instant composition.

That's why I've always been against playing "licks." Some people have boxes of little things that they just string together, and I don't see how that can be considered improvising, because the only time you're going to be improvising is when you make a decision to go from one lick to another. So, I always try to go in as many different directions as possible. Of course, we can all get trapped, and when that happens to me, then I don't feel so good about playing. But sometimes I get loose of all the chains, and it seems like almost anything is possible.

**Has your approach to practicing changed over the years?**

No, it's exactly the same. I basically have three modes. One is where I just pick up the guitar and noodle around, almost completely brain dead. In the second mode I'm just studying. I choose something that I want to practice—a particular scale or odd fingering or whatever—and I play that and nothing else. And in the third mode I try to incorporate some of those things that I've practiced in the second mode into my improvisations. But that's something that I don't usually do live, because I've found that whatever I'm practicing in the second mode takes about two years to unconsciously show up in my live improvisation, and by that time it's become so much a part of what I'm doing that I don't even think about it. Because I think improvising should be just that, an unconscious release of all the things that you've learned—but without pushing.

That said, I do wind up trying to force things on occasion, if something's wrong or the sound is bad, and I find myself going back to my tool box to see if I can stretch something out. Then I feel really depressed, and usually have a bad gig, but I have to keep going. On a good night, however, ideas just keep coming. So I just try to get one or two of those nights a year, and I'm happy with that [laughs].

**Do you play along with anything while practicing, or just play the guitar by itself?**

Both. Quite often I'll play chord sequences into the SynthAxe's sequencer and play over them at different speeds.

**Are there any guitarists that have caught your attention lately?**

I really love James Muller, the guy who plays with Chad Wackerman sometimes. He's a great guitar player. Also a guy named Tim Miller that I met in Boston. There are lots of them, and I feel bad not mentioning them all, but that would fill the whole book.

**Since wealth and fame aren't your prime motivating factors, what is it that inspires you to get out of bed every day and keep making music?**

It would have to be the music itself. There's something in the music that's been there as long as I can remember. I can recall listening to the records my dad gave me when I was really young, and when I would play some Debussy I'd start crying, and I'd ask myself, "What's going on?" And then I'd play something else and it would make me feel really happy. So right from the start, there was just something about music. I probably feel about music like some people do about religion. That's the thing for me.

## Supplemental Editorial Begins:

**All of your guitars have the wider neck at the top and the flattened-out fretboard, right?**

Yeah, they're usually 11/16ths at the nut to 2 1/4 at the bottom of the neck, pretty much like the Charvel necks that Grover Jackson made for me back in the '80s, which is not standard at all on a Strat, because Strat necks are really narrow at the top, and the string spacing is really wide, so my problem with Strats was first of all I didn't like the radius. And then the second thing is that the necks are so narrow at the top, compared to wherever the string spacing is at the bottom, that I would roll the strings off of it on each side of the fretboard. So I just decided to ask Grover, originally, if he'd make a nice wide at the nut neck. But then make it as wide as a Gibson Les Paul at the end of the fretboard. And of course then you look at a Gibson, and the spacing's down on the bridge end of the fretboard, but the neck is wider. So it seemed completely illogical to me that the Fender neck is really not quite right somehow. It's just personal taste, that's all. So I've had all my guitars made with pretty much those dimensions. And with just about as big a frets as you can get, and then a pretty flat radius: 20 to 25.

**Are there any things from that early period before you really got into your full-blown solo career—when you were kind of a hired gun—anything you look back on fondly and think, "Damn, that was pretty good"?**

Not usually [laughs]. Sometimes, if I ever have the courage to listen to anything, which I don't usually have, there are some times ... a friend of mine actually played me some of that first Gong record, and some of the stuff on that I actually liked. I can't think of exactly what it was, but there were moments that went by and I went, "Oh, I wonder what happened to that?" You could hear something that I was thinking about, but then somehow, some way, I must have deviated and went slightly left or right of whatever that was. And I kind of liked some of the sounds on that record. And, of course, with Tony Williams, that was mostly because of Tony and Allen, and just recently I've had the opportunity to play with Alan Pasqua again, which has been a really, really wonderful thing for me, because he's such an amazing musician.

**Is jazz inextricably linked to improvisation, and if not, should it be?**

A lot of that question, to me, is like what my father instilled in me. He said that he felt that in his opinion, the word "jazz" was basically a music that was designed for people to improvise in, like a world that people improvised in—regardless of a sort of stylistic thing. Be it be-bop traditional jazz, or avant garde—whatever it is—if there's a space in it for improvising, then he considered that jazz. Now a lot of people don't. For a lot of people it's got to be a fixed style. For example, some people my say to me, "Your music isn't jazz." And then I'll go, "Well, almost everything that we do is ... all the chord sequences are chord sequences just like they are in traditional music, like in be-bop, only we play over maybe different kinds of chords. So in my father's eyes my music would be jazz, but to a lot of others it wouldn't be. But to me, if the music is improvised, it's some form of jazz. If each piece of music is written as a vehicle for improvisation ... It's just like the word "fusion" became a nasty word, because when somebody says the word to me I cringe, because I know that I'm going to hate it. But the word is fine. It's a very fine word to describe what's happening. The trouble is it got completely linked to a specific kind of thing. A really complicated head, super fast, and then off they go. So even though the word was good, the association ruined it. And jazz may be like that. Most people go immediately to be-bop. Which is fine. But sometimes people are hearing that kind of music and not improvising as much as people playing other kinds of music. You hear Indian musicians improvising like crazy. Of course, you can't really call that jazz, but in my dad's eyes it would be considered a form of jazz. And that's basically what jazz means to me, regardless of any kind of stylistic attachment.

**Particularly these days, when people think of Kenny G. as jazz.**

Smooth jazz. Those guys need to grow a beard, man. There's a five-o'clock shadow on that stuff.

**At this point in history what is the difference between rock and jazz? People argue about whether you are a rock player playing jazz, or a jazz player with a rock tone, etc.**

Some bands are purely rock bands, and I'd say that 99% of people who really like that music wouldn't like my music. On the other hand, you'd never find their music in the Jazz section of a record store. But I wouldn't see anything wrong with putting something like what I play in the Jazz section, because it has elements of that. Unfortunately, for me, at least in the past, I fell through all the holes. So you could never find my records. I could go to stores that were supposed to have them and never find them. They'd say that it was in the Rock section, and in other stores it would be in the Jazz section, or in neither, which is the most common case. And they cross over, bringing us back to "fusion," but some fusion and Muzak seem like the same thing. They're linked in my brain. It's like a fast version of music that you'd hear in an elevator.

One of the things that is particularly interesting about the guitar is that the instrument has probably got one of the widest ranges of any instrument. The difference between somebody who plays, say, clarinet or saxophone—it could be rhythm & blues, or soul, or jazz, but they are more linked. But with electric guitar you can have somebody like Keith Richards and then Frank Gambale then Joe Pass or Jimmy Rainey or Eddie Van Halen. It's all great. But there are all these different styles and tones and shapes. They're all really different. Some people play clean and some with a gnarly distorted tone—there's a huge timbral range. Someone discovered the volume control; that's all it was.

**Is it possible to do anything truly new with guitar within existing idioms such as rock, blues, and jazz?**

I think so. I hope so. I'm not speaking about anything I could do, but sure, I don't think anything has got a limit on it, even some of the music that I've been writing recently ... we still aren't playing it ... they're on the drawing board, let's say. They're quite different than things I've done before. And some of the musicians I work with will have recordings of unknown guys that are unbelievable. And some of it is not like anything that I've heard before, so I would say yeah, absolutely.

**Without making a value judgment of good or bad, do you have any thoughts on the origin of your hypercritical view of your own playing?**

Part of it is where I'm from, I think. A lot of English people are maybe like that, more so than American people. But I don't know exactly. Many English musicians that I know are always apologizing for everything. I don't know. Or maybe it's because I didn't set out to be a musician, it just kind of happened. I loved music, then I ended up with an instrument that wasn't exactly the instrument that I wanted to play, but then I fell in love with it later, but then I still had no goals or aspirations whatsoever to be a musician. I had the opportunity to play in different bands when I was younger, and I thought, "Nah, I don't want to do that, I've got a day job," and I just carried on with it, and then all the sudden I got this offer from a guy named Glen South, who had a small band with a brass section, and he had gigs at some night clubs that were run by a company called Mecca—they're still there in England—and they used to have them in every city pretty much, and it was a full-time job, and I took it. And while I was doing that job I realized for the first time that I was a professional musician. But right while I was playing in that band, that's when I thought about trying to become a musician as a way of making a living. It was really just a hobby that took off. The foremost thing was not for me to do something so I could make money at it, and maybe that's why I never really learned how to read very well or anything, because then I might end up in the studio world, perhaps, and I'm not sure that I would enjoy that, either. That would be like a job then. I always wanted music to be not a job. So I just feel incredibly fortunate that I ended up surviving doing something that I really love. Involved in a world that I really love. So maybe part of it is that I never really feel that I'm a real musician. Maybe there's some subconscious thing going on in my head ... I don't really know what it is, it just that people ask me about things, like, "What do you think about that DVD that you guys did?" And I respond that I haven't seen it. And I probably won't, because I'm afraid that if I see it I'll just put the guitar down, and I don't want to feel like I'll just put the guitar down, and that's why I really hate going back and listening to live stuff. I know I'm going to probably hate it, sometimes to the point where I don't want to play.

**So it's not like a parent or old uncle Henry put the notion in your head?**

I don't think so, although, like I said, sometimes the English can be over-apologetic about stuff that perhaps other people wouldn't apologize for. Like a really great guitar player over here (US) might not be entirely happy with a show, they probably wouldn't say anything—but for some reason I have this thing that always makes me say what I feel. It's like some kind of Terrets thing. I can't not say that I sucked. It's funny.

**Can you imagine yourself ever playing through a laptop, using software to get your tones, at least when touring?**

I thought about it for convenience sake, especially nowadays, because the traveling and customs hassles at airports are a nightmare. It's nothing like what it used to be. So, from that point of view, it's crossed my mind, but then I'm not sure that I'd want to give up ... but maybe I wouldn't be giving up anything at all ... but I never did move in the computer direction. I don't even have a computer recording setup at all. Pretty much everything I've got is analog, except for two Alesis high-resolution hard disc recorders, which I really like the sound of. It's like the same as it was 20 years ago, except instead of having a Studer 24-track, I've just got two 24-track digital recorders. And every time I've tried to do things with a computer, it's like something doesn't happen, so I've never been really enthused about that. And I know that there are lots of things that you can do in terms of editing, and I'm afraid that if I did that, the next record I'd do would take me ... they'd be shoving me in a pine box while I was still working on it. I don't have that, and I'm okay with that, and H&K have been really gracious in helping us out with gear when we travel, so I don't have to carry that stuff with me, unless we're doing a local tour, when I take my own gear. But usually I just take a couple cases of accessories and cables, and they provide us with the backline wherever we go. And I don't know that I'd trust a computer that much with everything that I had. You get all

these great sounds and stuff and then something happens to your computer. I have mixed feelings about it. But one of the funniest things is that Bill Hine (?) who was my head guy Enigma, he always used to see me as a guy who was always pushing the techno thing using the old Atari computers back in the '80s and the SynthAxe. He was amazed that I didn't go any further than that. It just kind of stopped. Because at that time, most of the guitar players would pick up the SA and try to play guitar on it. They'd pick it up and start trying to play blues licks on it, and I'd say, "Oh, that's not what this is for. You can go out and buy a \$500 Strat, why do you want to spend \$10,000 on a machine and then try to make it sound like a Strat?" Because I used to do clinics and guys would come up and ask if it could that.

## Allan Holdsworth's Peers Sound Off

We ran excerpts from the following quotes in our April 2008 cover story on Allan Holdsworth. Here, they are presented in full.

"I put Holdsworth up there with Paganini and Liszt. Terrifying." —*David Lindley*

"Allan has the touch. Maybe it's those extra- long fingers of his. No one can listen to him without being affected by his tone and fluidity. A superb player who is a joy to hear."  
—*Adrian Belew*

"Holdsworth is so damned good that I can't cop anything. I can't understand what he's doing. I've got to do this [*does two-hand tapping*], whereas he'll do it with one hand." —*Eddie Van Halen*

"Allan really changed guitar playing. The legato techniques and 'sheets-of-sound' approach influenced not only jazz guitarists, but also a whole generation of metal players. And aside from all the technical stuff, he's a master jazz guitarist. Check out his version of 'How Deep Is the Ocean.'" —*John Scofield*

"Allan's beautiful and unique chord voicings have always had an impact on me. His approach to guitar is one of a kind. He pushes the limits of the boundaries of electric guitar, and his lead phrasing would make Charlie Parker smile. His playing is essential listening for any guitarist, of any style, so they can see that the only limits we have are the ones we put on ourselves." —*Eric Johnson*

"Allan wanted to sound like John Coltrane. Problem was he's playing guitar, not saxophone, so he had to figure out a way to get a similar 'sheets of sound' equivalent on guitar. The scales and intervals he chose were also all unusual, and he didn't become just one of the great scalar improvisers overnight. He worked like a dog on Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. Then, when he'd run out of notes he'd reach for the whammy bar and send shivers down your spine."  
—*Bill Bruford*

"Allan plays legato parts like a violinist. His right hand might as well be a bow, because his left hand is like Paganini's. You can call his playing whatever you want to, but it will still fry your brain if you try to figure it out. John McLaughlin, Michael Stern, John Scofield—all of us just scratch our heads and go, 'Damn!'" —*Carlos Santana*

"I have always considered Allan Holdsworth in a league of his own. In my obnoxious must-analyze-everything teenage years I remember walking out from a concert with the man, very frustrated. I simply didn't get how he was able to pull it off in such a smooth, delicate way. The stuff his fingers were doing didn't have anything to do with what was coming out of the speakers (at least not to my tiny intellect). Nowadays, I simply let the playing happily floor me. I believe he is from another planet." —*Mattias IA Eklundh*

"As Frank Zappa said, 'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,' so just listen to Allan Holdsworth and experience the pure beauty of his unique musical language, which goes beyond all clichés. He is a true master, and remains unsurpassed." —*Alex Machacek*

"I've known Allan and his music for 30 years now, and after all this time he still amazes me. His concept is still advancing with his playing, and his technical prowess, which is phenomenal, is in complete harmony with his musical direction—and this is a very advanced direction. I recall a show I saw him at in London about 14 years ago. After the concert I said to him, 'If I knew what you were doing, I'd steal everything, but I don't know what you are doing!' Allan laughed." —*John McLaughlin*

"When I listen to a guitar player I listen for different things. The first is just the level of stimulation I get as a lover of the instrument and the way it sounds to my ears and soul. I first take it in emotionally. The intention of the player, their dynamics and articulation etc, are usually the things that make up the piece's emotional impact. But there is a side of me that enjoys analyzing the performance on different levels too. My ears can identify tone colors, shapes, chord structures, fingerings etc. I can immediately see in my mind's eye what virtually every guitarist I have ever heard is doing and how they are doing it on the instrument, even though much of the time it falls outside of my own ability to stylize. Besides being emotionally swept away by Allan's use of melodic color, most of the time I am utterly stunned and confused as to how he is playing what I am hearing. His chops and inner ear completely defy my own inner musical eye and reasoning and I'm left in a blissful state of humility and surrender." —*Steve Vai*

I owe quite a lot to Allan as he recommended me for the guitar post in *Soft Machine* in 1975, when he left to join Tony Williams. They didn't know me but he left them my number and I got the gig—the first big one of my career, which led directly on to others (e.g., *Stephane Grappelli*). So things really got going for me because of that. Following Allan was one of the toughest things I ever had to do, as any guitar player can imagine. The set was based around the monumental solos that he had been doing, so I had to try to fill those shoes! He has been ahead of the game for over 30 years and is the preeminent guitar soloist of our generation (if not any). When I first heard him in about 1973, I was amazed by the ambition and direction of his playing. I was edging along a similar path myself but he was far ahead, and so was a source of inspiration and aspiration. Since then he has developed and refined the ingredients that were already there with outstanding single-mindedness, dedication and concentration. His playing now is completely controlled and mature and his mastery of the elements that he is interested in—harmony, line and tone—is unique and puts him in the very top league of the greatest soloists in guitar history. That's why guitarists should care!!! —*John Etheridge*

I discovered Allan "by accident" when I was 12. A friend of mine asked me to swap my *Slade Alive* album for his *Tempest*

record, which was Allan's first recording on a big label with a rock band. I fell in love immediately with his unique phrasing, tone, vibrato, etc. After that I became an avid fan and many years later when I finally met him and he accepted to play on my solo album, I felt exactly the same chill going down my spine that I had felt many moons before when I first got my hands on that Tempest record. If you're any type of musician you have a duty to listen, understand and let your mind be blown away by Allan Holdsworth's work because his music isn't just about guitar playing, it's so much more. It would be like saying that Coltrane's music is about sax playing or that Monk was just about the piano. Listening to Allan will inevitably help develop anyone's musicianship. —*Alex Masi*

"Only the elite musician wishes not to imitate. Originality and finding your own voice are the only beacons that the elite musician follows. Allan is one of these musicians." —*Jeff Berlin*

"His guitar playing is totally original and that in itself is rare. But even more rare is that his playing also seems to be impossible to emulate. When I was a teenager I used to learn the beginnings of many of his solos but they would usually venture into what was for me impenetrable territory, often just a quarter of the way in. One can imitate his pull-off, bar, and vibrato technique, as sometimes players do, but the s\*\*\* where it sounds like he's blowing air into his guitar and playing super fast in the way that a great saxophonist would, I haven't heard any other guitarists be able to imitate. You can hear his influence on EVH, but Eddie doesn't go into that dissonant territory and the blowing air effect is not there when he's playing fast. As a kid I was amazed that Holdsworth wasn't using his right index finger on the neck, but now I realize the angle and the muscles in action for right hand tapping would never create that sound as for whatever biological/scientific reason there is a certain lack of true force in right-hand tapping. At its best, two-hand tapping has a beautiful fluidity but it doesn't have a quality of sound you'd call strength, while his fast playing certainly does. I believe it is only with his very unusual muscle and nerve setup in his left hand and arm that such a sound is possible on the instrument. He sounds like he's blowing into it hard when he's playing super fast.

To my taste, guitar doesn't lend itself to playing fast as well as other instruments. I think the possibilities of approaches to doing it are limited in comparison to instruments like the piano, the saxophone, or the drum machine. Something about the guitars physicality in correspondence to our muscles and hand angles just doesn't seem to offer the potential for expression at lightning speeds that those other instruments do. To me, he is one of the few people who totally overcomes those limitations and is totally expressive whilst playing fast and makes it sound natural, relaxed, and effortless—and, at the same time, exciting and intense. It always sounds like there's a musical/emotional idea there and it never sounds like he's playing scales or exercises, which almost all flashy guys of the last 25 years generally seem to be doing a big percentage of the time, though I'm no expert.

My favorite stuff of him is that first I.O.U. album and *Road Games*. Those are just beautiful records and he seems to be hitting a peak around that time—so inventive and unprecedented. I've heard that his first in *Tempest* is interesting in that his tone sounds like Clapton. I want to hear that. The UK record is awesome as is the stuff with The New Tony Williams Lifetime. Those were staples for listening to and playing along with when I was 15 and 16. And they always sound great when I'm in one of those phases and come back to them. Oh, and the two Bruford albums are extraordinary. I used to love learning from that stuff. Fun to try things that are impossible!" —*John Frusciante*

"Hearing Allan's guitar playing for the first time was a cathartic experience for me. His guitar sang, it pushed musical boundaries, and it rocked.

His brilliant approach to harmony is completely original, beautiful and spellbinding. His technique and improvisational skills make him a true guitar god, the jaw dropping kind, and the kind that influences many a player in all styles of music. On the issue of legato playing, he is the king, and anyone interested in going down that path has to hear what Allan has accomplished.

To witness him playing with Tony Williams' band, a Gibson SG around his neck, Small Stone Phaser and Marshall stack in tow, at the intimate club My Father's Place in Roslyn, NY, was something I'll never forget. He ripped a hole in the guitarist's-space-time-continuum that night! And we've never been the same." —*Joe Satriani*

"I remember hearing Allan Holdsworth in the 1970s on a Tempest record. He was playing alongside another amazing (and long since deceased) pull-off king named Ollie Halsall. What an embarrassment of riches! Then I heard him on some of Bill Bruford's stuff. At that time Allan was just playing an SG into a Marshall. Later, he mined that sound to perfection with Tony Williams' New Lifetime on the *Believe It* album and others. While I am perhaps not directly influenced by the man myself, his prodigious technique and soaring, melodic fluidity were inspiring and daunting, to say the least. That tone! The amazing accuracy of his pull-offs! That limpid wang bar! In a way he, like other giants such as Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, or [fill in name here] spawned generations of imitators who, threaten to make one forget how great the original Master is. Don't succumb to this! Allan Holdsworth's playing can be heard in everyone from the loudest Metal exponents to the most intricate fusioners, but none of them can touch the man himself." —*Nels Cline*

I played a lot with Allan not only when he was in Soft Machine, but also in various jazz contexts with his own groups and those of pianists Pat Smythe and Gordon Beck, and more recently with Softworks. To say that he is an original one-off is, of course, stating the obvious—but his approach is so individual that it demands an equally special type of playing with him. His lines arch seamlessly over everything and don't obviously invite you in, and it can seem that the rhythmic dovetailing and interaction that you get with some other musicians isn't on the cards. (I read an interview with Tony Williams later where he said that whatever he played, it didn't make a dent in Allan's playing). He is, however, of course listening and very aware of you, but it's expressed in his own way. My reaction is to adopt a parallel but related way of playing, and I've always found it an absolute joy.

I know he often seems to feel uncomfortable in other people's groups and would like to be judged on his playing in his own bands but in the case of the recordings with Soft Machine (in particular "Bundles" and "Hazard Profile" on the Bundles album and "Madame Vintage" on the SoftWorks album) his playing is astounding.

The only problem with Allan is that he can be so self-critical that it becomes destructive. His perfectionism has him reject quite wonderful takes—especially live ones—out of hand. There's a lot of great music on the cutting floor; but that's Allan. —*John Marshall*

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