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Gretchen Menn: Music Is My Passion

By [Alissa Ordabai](#) on 02/19/2013 in [Interviews](#)

At the time when most players look into the past to either to mock their predecessors or to exploit their legacy, Gretchen Menn arrives on the rock guitar scene as a remarkable anomaly. Old masters from J.S. Bach to Jimmy Page may have given her plenty of fuel to run on, but she plays off the heritage to invent her own identity. She's different from anyone else, yet with a classically elegant air about her. After turning heads on the tribute band circuit playing Led Zeppelin and AC/DC covers, Menn is now making an upper-league-qualifier bid with her debut solo album *Hale Souls* – not as another poster girl for equal opportunity in the male-dominated world of instrumental guitar, but as a bona fide contender who knows her purpose.

The bounce and versatility of Menn's first album shows that she has no delusions about the business she's in. She knows that the competition is fierce, winners are the ever-diminishing minority, and the stories of also-rans are seldom told. Standout "Valentino's Victory Lap" from *Hale Souls* sums up the ensuing take-no-prisoners approach with swaggering aplomb. Shimmering arpeggios, blazing harmonic detours, shifting time signatures, and unexpected reincarnations of foregoing themes are just some of the ammunition she detonates on this cut. Repeated listening brings even more cheer, but Menn instantly comes through as a believer in either doing things all-out or not doing them at all.

As the record unfolds, you also

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find another, just as convincing side to Menn's character that fuses contemporary guitar with her knowledge of the baroque. Never mannered or imitative, on her more introspective acoustic cuts she goes for the essence of the genre that preaches dialogue not only between two melodies, but also within the composer's inner self. Airy, beautifully textured soundscapes such as "Is It Not Strange" are steeped in mathematical baroque sensibility, yet the goal remains exploration as opposed to simply following the rules.

But Menn's survey of the past doesn't end with the baroque. You can hear Jimmy Page's phrasing, Eric Johnson's languid sweetness, and Steve Morse's jazz-inspired adventurousness in her style.

At times it seems that the most vivid colours of rock guitar have been put through her own prism to create a new picture. But far from profiteering, instead she gives historical depth to her material, just the way it was always done by great players before her.

Daughter of Don Menn, who for many years was the editor of *Guitar Player* magazine, Gretchen began studying music with classical guitar lessons. From the baroque comes her knack for clarity, while rock has shaped the more visceral side of her musical character. And it perhaps wouldn't be too far-fetched to suppose that the reason why Menn prefers meaning over bombastic chops has something to do with the fact that her father is a writer. After all, writing, as was once observed by a poet, teaches a lesson in laconism and harmony.

Menn's inventive, yet crystal-clear approach to composition and the clean sharpness of her delivery come as a refreshing breather on the young guitar scene. With focus on writing, she rejects ostentatious production and chops for chops' sake – despite her technique being very dapper and diverse. Curiously, the fact that she started on the guitar rather late – at the age of 19 – may also have had something to do with her sense of perspective and having bypassed self-obsession or the adolescent need for self-assertion.

But when you speak to Gretchen Menn, another thing also becomes transparent – her responsibility to herself and to her craft as opposed to designing something to sell. Even when it comes to videos – that classic vehicle for adding an extra market value to music – she chooses style over sensationalism. And style reflects character: Menn refuses to bait the indifferent or to shout about non-conformity. As she tells me over the transatlantic telephone line connecting her home in California with England, "I've never expected music to make me any money. If it does – fantastic, but it's my passion. What more do I need to ask of it?"



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Do you think enough time has passed since the release of your debut album for you to take an objective look at it?

That's a really good question. Since I don't know how it's going to be in five years, or two years even – it being my first album, I don't really know what the general kind of process is in terms of getting objective. But I do feel like I have a specifically more objective view than I did when I was in mixing. That's when you are really zoomed in.

Technique-wise, what would you say is the most challenging aspect of this record?

Hmm. That's a really good question. It's funny because a lot of the things that are the most challenging initially are the things you tend to devote a lot of your practice time trying to master. And so ultimately the things that are the most challenging will tend to be the things that become the most solid. But I know the things that tend to be the most evident if I've neglected them, even for a short period of time, are probably the things that involve precise alternate-picked lines that have large string skips. Those are probably the ones that need the most maintenance.

Were all parts on Hale Souls worked out in advance, or are there examples of improvisation?

Most of it was quite composed. Of course, I love improvisation. There is something really beautiful about it. And, actually, sometimes the line between composition and improvisation can get kind of blurred, inasmuch as I've always viewed composition as selective improvisation, and improvisation as spontaneous composition. So you might be in a studio having worked out a piece that you know how it's gonna go, and then you have an idea, and you tell the engineer, "Wait. Hang on a second. Let me kind of figure this out." And then maybe you'll play it three or four times, especially if it's something that might be more technically challenging than the first take allows you to feel fluent. And so on one hand it's not exactly composition, because it did happen kind of organically, and on the other hand it isn't pure improvisation in a way it would be if somebody said, "Okay, ready. We hit record and now just play whatever comes into your mind at that very exact moment." But I would say that as far as *Hale Souls* is concerned, it was very composed – a lot of the pieces, things like "Fading" or certainly "Is It Not Strange." That one has so much counterpoint and so many different lines going on, there was no room whatsoever for improvisation. Things like "Déjà Vu" and "Oleo Strut" had a little bit more spontaneity.

How do you compose guitar instrumentals? Do you hear the complete harmonic and melodic structures in your mind right away, or do they develop as you go along?

You know, it's kind of funny. Being, in my mind, a much newer composer, so far the thing that's kind of fun about being where I am is I don't really have any rules at this point. And I don't really have any tendencies – I don't think – at this point. Some things took a long time to write and involved a lot of different conceptions of a piece, and it would sound one way for one bit, and then sections would change. And other things were a lot quicker. So a piece like, say, "Walking Shadow," the violin piece for solo violin, that happened really fast. It was really organic. Sometimes you can get into this flow where things are happening kind of simultaneously. It isn't like you hear something entirely – like I didn't hear the entire piece in my head – but I felt as I was writing it, it was just kind of coming out, almost the way you would with a sentence. When we go to say a sentence, it isn't like we think the entire sentence first, and then say what we've preconceived. It's almost like we know what we intend to say, and it just sort of comes out, and some of them come out sounding nicer than others.



But I've had things where I've sat down to give myself an exercise where I said, "Okay, I'm going to try to write something that has these qualities, or these characteristics." And then it'll just kind of happen, and something that went from being an exercise turned into a piece of music – for instance, the piece "Fading." I'm very new to the technique of tapping. And somebody had shown me some sort of exercise that involved something that had to do with tapping. And then I kind of thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be interesting to have harmonies kind of melt one into the next where one of my hands is outlining one arpeggio, and the other one is outlining notes that are complimentary to that arpeggio. But then if I move one of my hands, the entire harmony changes, yet three or four of the notes stay the same." That allows these harmonic fades one into another. So that whole concept ended up becoming a piece. Other things, I'll dream a melody or just out of nowhere a rhythm would hit me, or something like that. Unlike somebody, say, like Jason Becker, who said he, apparently, dreamed the entire piece of "End of the Beginning."

And Marty Friedman said to him, "Don't you forget it," and he forgot! [Laughter.]

I know, I can't even imagine that! But maybe that's because I'm a newer composer. I don't know! [Laughter.] So involved!

Is your choice of what technique to use at any given moment spontaneous, or is it something that you plan ahead?

Technique, meaning tapping or picking or...?

Or volume knob, yes.

Usually they become something where maybe in the moment you just felt them, and then you end up sticking with them. So, say, on "Déjà Vu," when I came up with just the chord progression to begin with, I had this kind of feel for what emotionally the piece of music was seeming to call for. The volume swells – it was just no question. It just seemed that that's what the piece wanted. Some things are more spontaneous, but I think what ended up happening is that anything that happened spontaneously with *Hale Souls* happened in the pre-production phase. And then when it came the time to actually record everything, I've made my decision and settled on things. But sometimes there are still little moments here and there that sort of happened magically in the moment.

Do you compose on the guitar or – perhaps – some other instrument, or without it?

I do all, actually. I either compose at the guitar, away from any instrument, or I have a computer notation program that I use. So I either compose at the guitar, or on paper notating, or with my computer program that notates. Or sometimes I'll just hear something in my head, and if I'm trying to remember it, I'll either notate it on paper – if I have paper – or if I have nothing handy, I'll just use the voice record function of my phone and sing it to myself so that I'll remember it for later.

On the "Oleo Strut" video you are seen actually notating music on paper. Is that something that you use both for composing and refining your music?

I do it more for composing because I feel that once I can remember the basic idea, then everything else will come back to me. Actually, in "Oleo Strut" the music that we had in the video, that is the actual hand-written music for "Oleo Strut." And it wasn't necessarily in clean score form, like "here is measure one going all the way to the end." That piece was composed mostly on the guitar, and then I would write out the more complex sections so that I could remember them. So yeah, sometimes the scoring things out comes first, and sometimes I'll write things down in notation form so that I don't forget them, especially if it's a more involved melody or harmony or lick or something like that.

When you work on writing music, do you need a place of solitude?

Not at all, oddly enough. It's nice, it's wonderful if you do have that, but I've come up with things where I am literally warming up for a show. I'll have my headphone amp on, and there is total chaos

around me. Actually, I remember one thing that I wrote, it was down in a club in San Diego. And I was supposed to be running through the set with the band I was playing with, and I just came up with something and ended up writing a hefty chunk of something that later went to become a piece with the band I was playing with. And it was in the middle of pre-gig chaos. There are certain phases of the writing process where it's definitely helpful to have solitude, and it's never a problem to have solitude, but it feels that I'll often be writing stuff in the middle of chaos.

Does your own music ever surprise you? Do you ever listen to a playback and go, "Oh, I didn't know there was this aspect to my character?"

Yeah! That's a good question. Absolutely. It's funny because I'm not really a dark person at all. I certainly have a great appreciation for the sick and twisted, but I'm not a particularly brooding person by my inherent wiring. And every now and then I'll hear something that I wrote, I'm like, "Man, I didn't know I was so dark or so angry!" [Laughter.] So yeah, sometimes. Something like "Scrap Metal," you think, "Wow, I didn't really know this was part of me, but I guess it is."

Could you walk us through how one of your songs evolved – from first conception to final release?

Absolutely. If there's one that you have in mind, I'd be happy to see if I can reconstruct it.

I was wondering if "Valentino's Victory Lap" would be a good example. Or any other track.

Okay, sure. That one happened rather quickly, actually. I came up with the introduction of it just really fast, like I just sat down and just played it. I actually didn't intentionally write it in odd meter. It was what it was, and later I went back and had to analyse it when I was going to have other people play it with me. So I came up with the introduction of it, those arpeggios, and all of them, actually. The whole way it moved around and everything, I just sat down and wrote it probably in just a few minutes. And then the rest of it also felt really organic. It was probably a week or so before it sounded like something that you would recognize as "Valentino's Victory Lap," or maybe a few days.

And then that piece was interesting because it seems like I'm always writing things that challenge me technically. There is something rather hilarious about not being able to play your own music. And on the other hand I also think, "Well, you know, I guess that's a good thing. I don't want my technical limitations to limit me creatively." Nor do I ever want my music to be driven by technique. At least for me the technique I strive to get is only for musical fluency. I have no interest in writing music simply for technical impressiveness, but I certainly also don't want to be limited by my inability to play something. So some of the stuff that I wrote for "Valentino's Victory Lap," and especially getting some of those single-note-per-string alternate picked arpeggios, getting them clean, took a lot of shedding for me. I wrote the piece quite quickly, and then had to practice it a lot – like a lot a lot – to be able to even really show other people how I wanted it to be played. And to this day there are still passages where if I don't run them fairly regularly, I can definitely feel it.

So once I got it in a form that kind of seemed right, I did pre-production with it where I actually sat down with a click. I did this at the home studio of my dear friend and colleague Jude Gold. He played in an acoustic duo with me called Lapdance Armageddon, and he plays the second guitar on "Fast Crowd." He helped me engineer it where we just got a click track, and I played all the rhythm guitar parts, and then the lead guitar parts, and then that was what I then turned and gave it to Stu Hamm who played bass on it and John Mader who played drums, so that they could kind of hear how the piece went. And I also gave them charts with the piece transcribed.

But one step that I left out is that initially when I did the pre-production, it was too long, like way too long – it was almost close to seven minutes. So there is always the kind of painful editing process of taking out sections that you feel like, "No, that's *that* section!" but that needs to be done simply for concision's sake. So once we got that under six minutes, we got it as short as I felt would still make musical sense. Some pieces are just longer than others, and that's just the way it is.

Then I gave it to Stu and John, and then we went into the studio and recorded bass and drums

together. Part of the reason that I wanted to use Stu and John is that not only do I just totally admire both of them as musicians – they are both just world-class, amazing, legendary players that I'm just beyond honored to have them be part of it – but also because John and Stu tour together. So it wasn't just one legend meeting another legend for my album, it was a bass player and a drummer who had locked in together over the years of working together. And when you are an independent artist and you are playing with great people, but also know that you don't necessarily have the time to rehearse a band, it's a real luxury to know that the bass and the drums are going to be absolutely fantastic. And then all you have to do is come in and try to lock in with the rhythm section you know is a machine.

So we got Stu's and John's parts together, and then I came in and laid down guitars. And that piece was actually the first one we released from the album – we released it as a single. And I early on I recognized the benefit of doing some sort of video. Zepparella, my Zeppelin tribute band, had done a video of "When the Levee Breaks," just really because clubs were asking for it, people were asking for it, and so we did it. And I think it really helped us in a lot of ways in terms of people being able to actually see what we were and what we were about. So once the single was done of "Valentino's Victory Lap," I talked to a friend who knew somebody who was a film guy. He sometimes did fun projects, and I thought, "Well, it would be good to do just something visual because nobody knows who I am," and just to have something out there that is an extension of the art."

"I've always viewed composition as selective improvisation, and improvisation as spontaneous composition."

So I connected with this guy, his name is Eric Shamlin – just a brilliant, brilliant guy with the visual medium. He was interested, and so we sat down to do a video. I really only gave him three parameters. I said, "It would be great if somewhere in it there could be some nod to what this song is about," which was a tribute not just to Valentino Rossi, the MotoGP rider, but sort of a spirit that he has. I don't follow



MotoGP, but every now and then – whether it's Valentino Rossi or Secretariat or Eddie Van Halen, whoever – you see somebody who has this combination of this almost childlike joy and exuberance combining with just vicious technique at what they do. And it's so inspiring. It's wonderful to see somebody who is so capable still being so joyful.

And so that's why I dedicated it to Valentino Rossi. And so it made kind of sense to me that somewhere in the video there could be a motorcycle, but I didn't want to constrain Eric, the director. And my other two parameters, as I said, "At some point I have to be playing guitar in it – I don't want



not to be playing guitar. That's sort of the point." And the final one was, "I'm fine with doing stuff that's interesting or edgy or artistic, but I don't want to look in any way skanky or slutty [laughter] – or naked [laughter] – or anything like that. So then he let his imagination run wild, and I showed up for my video shoot and had no idea, actually, what a big production it was going to be. But it was a ton of fun, and then we released a video shortly after the single was released. So that was, I guess, the genesis from sitting down on the sofa and coming up with arpeggiated stuff in 10/8 to a video with metal wings and screws coming out of my back. [Laughter.]

It's an enigmatic image. Fascinating, enigmatic stuff. Really unexpected as well how this story evolves from a motorcycle to this woman growing wings. Incredible.

[Laughter.] That was Eric's conception, and part of it was that I think the "victory lap" to him evoked the idea of the Winged Victory that meets you right at the top of the stairs as you go into the Louvre in Paris. And it happens that that's one of my favorite statues. I've always loved it. I've always felt this wonderful magic mystery around it. And so when he in his storyboarding started wanting to use imagery of the Winged Victory, I was all for it.

Are there things on the album that you wish you've done differently?

That's a great question, and I have thought about that. On one hand I would say no, but with a major follow-up to that. The only reason I would say no is because I did everything that I did with the best knowledge that I had at the time. And so any lessons I've learned I'm really happy to have learned. I wouldn't want to have accidentally just got something perfect, and then in my second album do something that I should have learned on the first album. But I will say, moving to my next album – something I'm excited to do – is to actually have more time to rehearse the material with the actual people.

On *Hale Souls*, with the exception of "Fast Crowd" – and that's because Jude and I had played it before, we both knew it, we performed it together – but with the exception of that, all of the other things were done without really much rehearsal as a band. So it is nice to be able to take material and actually play it with the people. Even if you are going to go into the studio and still, "Here's the day we are going to record drums. Okay, now we're going to do drums and bass," or whatever. For the next one I am excited to do more stuff that has more of a live feel, and also where I've actually gotten to play more with the musicians whom I am recording with.

What was your main guitar for the sessions?

I have three Music Man Silhouettes – one Silhouette and two Silhouette Specials. My first Silhouette ever, my first guitar ever, was the one in the video for "Valentino's Victory Lap." And then I have one that looks very similar to that. It's actually not in my videos; it's a Silhouette Special. And then the one that I've been playing, my main guitar now, is the one that's a Silhouette Special with a whammy bar. It's white with a black pickguard; it's all single-coil pickups. My other two have the stock DiMarzio single coils in the neck and in the middle position, and then a Fast Track 2 in the bridge position. And my primary Music Man, the white one, I kept it with all the stock single-coils. I love all three of them for different reasons. But those are my main guitars. "Valentino's Victory Lap" has double rhythm guitar tracks. One of them I recorded on a Les Paul, but everything else is my Music Man Silhouettes.

Were there any other guitars that played a role on the record?

Yeah. Santa Cruz Guitar Company – I have a custom OM model, and that was the steel-string guitar that's the main one on "Fast Crowd." It's also one of the guitars of the guitar quartet. It sort of plays what would be the cello role in "Is It Not Strange," and then it's in other pieces, like "Déjà Vu" in a few spots. Then I have a classical guitar. It's a Kenny Hill "Ruck" model, and it's this wonderful classical guitar. It has two tracks on "Is It Not Strange" for the guitar quartet. And then it's all over "Déjà Vu" and "Fading." Any of the nylon string parts are on that one. So not too many guitars. Really three primary guitars for the album.



But what is your all-time favorite guitar?

My Music Man Silhouettes. Those are my first guitars, and it just always feels like home. It's kind of funny when your first guitar also happens to be a truly fantastic guitar. You know, for the longest time any time somebody would hand me their guitar to try out, I was never really that impressed. And now I can appreciate different guitars for their idiosyncrasies, but my Silhouettes are my babies.

When you are looking for a new or a used guitar? How do you test them out?

Hmm. It's an interesting question only because all of my guitars have just kind of found me. I don't know that I've ever really gone shopping for a guitar, come to think of it. [Laughter.] Actually, I hadn't really thought about that. But my first Music Man just sort of came to me through Ernie Ball when he was still alive. He and Sterling just decided to give me a guitar when I was first starting to play, and it was just because I've known the family. So they gave it to me. And early on, because of that, I vowed that I would always be loyal to Music Man. And if I ever made anything out of myself, I would be at their disposal.

And, fortunately, I legitimately love the guitar so much that any of the other guitars I've got sort of... Okay, no, no, no. I do remember one – my Gibson SG, which I got when I was playing in an AC/DC tribute band. It took me a long time to find an SG that I liked. And I ended up playing a bunch of SGs

all over. Everywhere we would even go on tour, I'd be trying to find SGs that I liked. And none of them felt quite right. I'd find whatever – dead frets or something like that, which, of course, you can fix and everything. But when you are just pulling something off a wall, you kind of want it to work. And since I don't really work on my guitars very much – I mean, I can do really basic stuff – but you don't want to just go and buy guitar that you know has problems right off the bat.

So the one that I actually ended up getting was one that a friend of mine who worked at a store in Redwood City called Gelb... He called me and said, "Hey, I think I've got a really good one for you." So I came in, and it was a custom shop Historic '61 reissue, so it actually says "Les Paul." The SG, the first year they had it, they called it still a "Les Paul," and then they ended up needing to rename it. I think Frank Zappa said it beautifully: "If you pick up a guitar and it says, 'Take me, I'm yours,' that's the guitar for you." If I pick up a guitar and it makes me want to play it – I know that sounds kind of silly – but some guitars you feel like just work for you right away. You can't wait to pick it up.

And, actually, one guitar that I tried out recently, a Sadowsky, it's a nylon-string electric. Any time I pick up a guitar and it makes me play differently from how I would normally play, then it has a purpose as a creative tool. That to me is a very compelling reason to consider in a new instrument. But inasmuch I'm not much of a collector, and inasmuch that pretty much of all my other guitars have just sort of found me some way or another – meaning that it wasn't like I was out shopping for a guitar – I think what I just look for is something that feels good. That can be a kind of nebulous way to look at things. But if you pick up a guitar and it feels good in your hands and it makes you want to play it, then that's the guitar for you. And, of course, basic craftsmanship.

Is there any equipment that you are especially excited about these days? Not necessarily a guitar, but maybe amps or effects?

Yeah, all my guitars. I just told you about them, and I love all of them. I've really been loving my Engl amp – it's an Engl Special Edition 670 with EL 34s. It's an absolutely monstrous amp. I think it may literally weigh about as much as I do, which is always fun when you're loading gear, but it sounds so good that I keep lugging it around. It's got four channels, and all four of the channels sound really good. I tend mostly to use the first three because the fourth channel is for super, super heavy gain that is more than I actually use. But what I love about that amp is that it has this wonderful articulation to it. It really tracks well. So when you are playing, say, faster passages, you still get the clarity of notes, even at high gain settings. So it almost has the level of articulation as if you are playing through a clean amp, but you still get the distortion of an overdriven amp. Plus the clean channel sounds beautiful, and it's really straightforward to operate. You don't have to have a degree in electrical engineering to figure out how to make it sound good. It tends just to sound good.

So I love my Engl amp. And then only recently have I gotten much into pedals – I think that's typical of people who start out with classical guitar. You know, you don't really think that much about effects. And recently I've been getting pedals from this wonderful company called Providence, and they make this wonderful delay. The first thing I got from them was the Chrono Delay. It has a very accurate tap tempo function. I can't imagine using a delay that doesn't have a tap tempo. But it also has a knob where you can set the types of repeats. So you can have the repeats be quarter notes or dotted quarter notes or eighth notes or dotted eighth notes or eighth notes triplets. It's just very easy to use and it sounds great. Then they also have the Anadime Chorus – it's just beautiful sounding – plus a number of overdrive pedals. But in general I still like guitars to sound like guitars for the most part. I don't really have the patience or the desire to spend a huge amount of time investing in effects. I'd rather spend my time working on writing or playing. But I definitely like effects for some of the nuance that they can bring to the sound. But I'm no Adrian Belew.

Tell us a bit about your background. While you were growing up, your father was the editor of Guitar Player magazine. Did he have any influence on your decision to become a professional musician?

You know, it's so funny. Everybody assumes – totally understandably – that I got into guitar through my dad or because of my dad. Oddly enough – although, of course, my dad has been completely supportive since day one – he always said that it was his goal when he became a parent to help my

sister and I figure out what it was we wanted in life, and then help us to get the skills to get whatever that was. He didn't really have a preconceived notion of anything that we should or shouldn't do. Same with my mom. And some of my earliest musical experiences, some of the things that I know really got me very turned on to music was that my mom used to take me and my sister to the ballet and the opera and to the musicals – gosh, like almost every week during the summer at least when we were kids. So we had a lot of musical exposure early on.

And it wasn't until, I guess, elementary school where we really started playing instruments. We had a piano at the house and had the requisite piano lessons. And then pretty much any instrument that struck our fancy for any amount of time, my parents would just rent from the local music store. So maybe one month I was like, "I wanna play trumpet!" or whatever. They would let me kind of bang around on instruments. And then it was around mid high school that I really got fascinated with guitar. And I remember hearing this song on the radio that was just transcendently beautiful. It was like the coolest thing I remember ever hearing, and asking my dad, "Who is that?" And he kind of thought about it for a second, and he was like, "God, it really sounds like Eric Johnson." He was like, "But Eric Johnson doesn't get radio play, he's too..." And he meant that almost as a compliment. Sometimes really great artistic stuff doesn't necessarily get recognized by mainstream media. So, of course, the radio station didn't announce who it was, and it was just this fleeting moment of this beautiful piece of music, and I had no idea who it was.

Well, then a few weeks later Joe Satriani was playing a show, and my dad and Jas Obrecht went to the show and brought me with them. And Eric Johnson opened. Out comes "Cliffs of Dover," and I'm like, "This is it! This is the piece! Oh my God!" And I remember watching him play and hearing this piece, it is – as you know – just so joyful, so transcendently beautiful, that I had a moment of thinking like, "My God, he must be the happiest person in the world if he wrote something like that." And then I thought, "Oh, wait a minute. Maybe he is the happiest person in the world because he can play guitar like that." And so I had a thought of like, "God, I should just play guitar. Like, I wonder if playing guitar is the secret to the kind of joy that a song like that shows."

And so initially I picked up the guitar a few times in high school, and, of course, my dad thought it was delightful. But there was certainly never pressure on me. I think I've had like a lesson or two in high school, and then in high school you get easily bogged down with SATs and planning for college. So it wasn't until college that I actually started playing with any degree of regularity. And at that point my dad thought it was totally great, and he was always really honest with me about the difficulty of the business. He thought from an artistic standpoint it was fantastic, and always kind of made me aware of it that it's not necessarily something you just get into and expect that you are just going to sell tons of records and make lots of money. He never discouraged it and certainly gave me plenty of encouragement and pointed me in some good directions early on. You know, like, "Okay, if you like Eric Johnson, then we're gonna get you Jeff Beck's *Blow by Blow*. If you like Joe Satriani and Steve Vai, you're gonna go see Steve Morse with me tonight." So definitely I got some great records to listen to early on.

Did your father encourage you to have a back-up plan?

I think both of my parents wanted me to have something that I would be able to live doing. I don't ever remember them actually sitting me down and saying, "You have to have a backup plan." But I think part of it was that my love of music really became so strong while I was already in college, and I was doing well in school and everything, so I don't really think either of my parents were ever worried that I wouldn't make decent decisions. My mom was the one who was a little bit more encouraging of having a backup plan just because I think she just didn't want to see me get my heart broken. And I think it's actually a good idea. I intentionally wanted to have other things that I could do or was able to do because I've never expected music to make me any money. If it does, fantastic. But it's my passion. What more do I need to ask of it?



You initially started with classical guitar, is that right?

Yeah, that's correct.

Did you have any clear musical goal or a musical ambition when you were just starting out?

I think, actually, quite early on. It happened all at once, really. I knew very early on that that's what I wanted to do. So maybe it was at an Eric Johnson show that I fell in love with the guitar, but I remember very distinctly watching the Dixie Dregs a couple of years later, and it was just this wonderful show. I remember watching them and then it hit me all of a sudden, like, "Wait a minute, this is all of their jobs!" Like, "That's their work! That's their job." And thinking how unbelievably cool that was. And my whole life my mom always thought I was gonna be a lawyer, which I don't really

know if that's a compliment. [Laughter.] But I had never really figured out what I wanted to do. I mean, not that you really need to know what you're gonna do with your life when you're 18 or 19 years old, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do.

And at that moment I remember thinking, "Oh, this is what I want to do!" And so, really early on when I started playing classical guitar, I had it in my mind that I wanted to be a guitar player. And yet I was kind of concerned that I was starting late. So many people, when you read about your heroes and everybody starts when they are ten or younger, you just think, "Oh my gosh, I'm 19. I'll never get to where I wanna be." And that's where I have to thank my first guitar teacher, Phillip de Fremery, my classical guitar teacher. He taught me from day one like I was going to be a professional. And he told me from day one that I was absolutely not starting too late.

What do you think rock guitar players can learn from studying classical music?

That is a great question. I think some of the things that I most appreciate... well, from a technical standpoint, finger independence and a different type of dexterity. If you study a Bach piece, you realize that the guitar doesn't just have to play chords or melody, that you really *can* play two melodies at once. That's what counterpoint is. So the knowledge that something is possible – not just possible, but it is inherent in certainly most baroque and other music that is a part of the classical guitar repertoire. So just developing an ear for some of what the instrument's possibilities are is great, along with the technical aspect of finger independence and that the pinky is not the parenthetical-like extra finger, but actually one that you use as much as you use everybody else.

And also I would say the exposure to the types of music in the repertoire. I think for me it all comes back to the music and the composition. If you are not playing something that's worth listening to, it doesn't matter how impressive it is – at least to me. So I can be blown away and very much impressed by somebody's technique, but it doesn't mean that I want to listen to the album. It doesn't mean that the music moves me, even if the technique impresses me. And so I would say that from being exposed to some of the compositions in classical music, that naturally enhances your compositional vocabulary and an ability to get your mind around things like counterpoint or harmonies, different types of harmonic progressions that can add different emotional ramifications.

It's very easy for guitar players to get boxed into certain types of chord shapes. You listen to rock music a lot where a piano is inherent in the music, and so many times it leads to these really interesting harmonic progressions just because of the way that the piano tends to be laid out. Not that these things are totally possible on guitar, but the guitar doesn't lend itself to voice leading the way the piano does. So yeah, classical guitar is a wonderful foundation, especially because I love the music so much. I still do.

Yngwie Malmsteen has said that the classical element in his music was "imbedded in his brain and soul" – that's how he put it. Do you feel the same way?

Let me put it this way: I don't feel like I've ever written anything specifically to try to emulate anything. Like I never sat down and said, "I'm gonna write something in this style," or, "I'm going to try to write something that sounds classical, or something that sounds baroque." So I would guess if it's part of what you've been exposed to, it's part of your vocabulary. So I would tend to agree.

Classical musicians are known for being able to read and interpret anything, but they seldom improvise. How did you teach yourself to improvise?

It's a very good point and it's a wonderful challenge because you are absolutely right – improvisation isn't something that is really part of what you learn learning Bach pieces. And also having played early on in tribute bands where consistency is venerated over spontaneity, you play the solos like they sound on the album. At least that's generally what the goal is when you are playing somebody else's music. For me that's been an on-going thing and, actually, something over the last year that I've decided really to explore more of.

So in terms of learning to improvise, I'm still learning, very much still learning. And I try different things. Sometimes I'll just – you know, in a quiet place where I know nobody is going to listen to me – just totally freeplay, just trying anything, playing anything. Which could be a lot of fun. Other times I'm just learning new scales, new arpeggios, new ways of looking at the neck, and playing those over chord progressions. But it's interesting because learning to improvise – at least as far as I can see – is a totally different approach from, say, what you take on classical guitar.

On classical guitar you might feel like, "Okay, these four measures are problematic, so for the next two hours I am going to work on these four measures over, and over, and over again." Whereas with improvisation, the whole point of it is not to be playing the same things over and over again, but to be approaching things differently. So the process for me is a lot more nebulous. It definitely has involved listening to other people. It can be very helpful to record yourself and start to hear times where you know that you are actually tapping into something, and times where you felt like your fingers are just kind of moving. So for me the goal definitely has been to try to make music feel more fluent – in a spontaneous context.

Tell us about Zepparella, the Led Zeppelin tribute band you play in. How did you get involved in this project?

The drummer, Clementine, she was the one who started the band. And I met her in my first real band. The first real band I played in was the band called AC/DShe, and it's an AC/DC tribute band. And it was when I was just out of college, having played classical guitar for about three years. And I knew I wanted to play rock music. And so I came up in my mind with this list of what I wanted. And I thought, "Okay, I want to play rock music, I want to play lead guitar, and I want to do something where I have to have some degree of stage presence." Because I don't want to be somebody who is naturally going to be staring at my shoes during a show. That's no fun to watch. And so when this opportunity came up to put on a schoolboy outfit and duckwalk around the stage playing AC/DC, I thought, "Okay, that definitely fits the bill. That would be great education for me."

So it was great education for me, but then what end up happening was we got some great opportunities that at least Clementine, the drummer, and I really wanted to do. We were offered a tour opening for Reverend Horton Heat, for like two or three weeks. And Clementine and I were just so thrilled and really wanted to go, but the other girls in the band had... For a variety of reasons, it just didn't happen. And I remember Clementine and I driving to a gig and she was so frustrated, and she just said, "God, I just... I'll just start looking for a Led Zeppelin tribute band or something where I can learn John Bonham stuff and have the accountability of playing it live, and then we could have done this tour, or at least we could have offered this as a plan B for this tour."

And I thought, "Well, count me in if you need a guitar player, because I've always loved AC/DC, but Led Zeppelin was almost even more near and dear to me." And I recognized the opportunity to learn techniques that I wouldn't have learned in AC/DC – like playing slide guitar or beating the crap out of a Les Paul with a violin bow – that I just wasn't gonna get necessarily playing AC/DC. So she went ahead with it. Next thing I knew, she sent me a set list and said we had our first gig booked. So I just spent hours for the next few weeks learning the Zeppelin material the best I could, and then we started playing shows. And it's been tremendously educational.

What goes through your mind when you are on stage performing this grandiose, flamboyant music?

[Laughter.] You know, I often think that my inner 15-year-old would be so gratified. Like, if I can go back in time, and tell my 15-year-old self that this is what I was gonna be doing later on, I think I would have approved. So there is something really fun about living up certain adolescent fantasies, something that you like to be doing. [Laughter.] And there is also something really wonderful about getting to play some of the first music that made you set out on the trajectory you are currently on. Because even though it was, say, maybe "Cliffs of Dover" and Eric Johnson that made me say, "Hey, I have to pick up a guitar," probably what made me go to the Eric Johnson and Joe Satriani show to begin with was that I'd started listening to Led Zeppelin and AC/DC, and got into this really guitar-oriented music. And that was right around the time that that wasn't what was going on on the radio

at all. I mean, that was the music of my parents' generation. So in a lot of ways Led Zeppelin was kind of a doorway into the kind of music that's still influencing me on a longer path.



Gretchen Menn performing with Zepparella. (Photo by Mark Manion)

Does playing Jimmy Page's parts onstage involve changing into a different persona – artistically or psychologically?

We actually decided deliberately when we were going to do this band – both Clementine and I have such a very genuine connection with the music. And tribute bands are something that's very easy for people to have a lot of mixed feelings about. And on one hand you don't want to be capitalizing on your heroes – that's not the point. For us the point was to kind of honor the music and to use it as education. And it's one thing to do AC/DC. Their band is so inherently tongue-in-cheek, and they clearly have good senses of humour about themselves. And so there is something that doesn't feel strange about getting into an Angus outfit because Angus is wearing an outfit himself.

On the other hand, to step into the shoes of musicians in a band that in the realm of rock are almost holy. They have a mystique around them, and the last thing we ever wanted was to turn it into something that felt cheesy. And then, of course, I'm sure plenty of people will argue that tribute bands are inherently that, but we all make our own decisions around what speaks to us musically. And so for us it was more of just, "We connect with this music, let's not..." You know, "I'm not gonna move like Jimmy, I'm not gonna dress like Jimmy, I'm not gonna imitate Jimmy. What I'm gonna do is I'm gonna learn the solos, and I'm gonna learn the songs, and I'm gonna try to do them the best I possibly can. And anything else is going to be genuine. Like, I love the music." So we intentionally don't try to do anything imitative beyond just delivering the music the way that we want to hear it.

Most people are unaware of the sacrifices one has to make to become a well-known guitarist. Along the way have you encountered issues you hadn't expected?

I make choices that I wouldn't have thought I would have to make, and every now and then I do feel like a stick in the mud. I tend to be a lot more protective of my hands than I realized I was going to have to be. For a while I was really into rock climbing. I love rock climbing. I lived up in Tahoe and for a couple of years, and I did it quite a bit. And then you realize there is only so many things you can ask of your hands. So I ended up giving up rock climbing because I was either gonna have to make sacrifices on guitar, or sacrifice rock climbing. And guitar always comes first. So certain things like that when it comes to just the sheer physicality of making choices that always prioritize the health of your hands and other necessary implements to playing guitar.

And I think to a certain degree there is a lot of solitary time that you spend. Which for me is fine. I am plenty social, but I also like time by myself. So the idea of sitting alone for four hours to play guitar sounds great to me. But I think that would be something people wouldn't necessarily expect right from the get-go. I think they think, "Okay, you play guitar, you practice a little bit, you get in a band, and it's party time." But there is quite a bit of not only just initial investment, but maintenance. So it means a lot of time alone, but I don't mind that.

What's involved in maintaining your level of skill? Does that involve everyday practice?

Every day, absolutely. The funny thing nowadays is I feel like I'm fighting for practice. When you're an independent artist, the business of music can definitely interfere quite a bit with the actual creation of it. And that's where it can get difficult. Because on one hand it is important not just for an independent artist, but kind of any artist at this point there is a level of expectation of a certain amount of reachability and also – at least in my mind – a certain level of appreciation you have. So if it means that you have to spend a certain amount of time responding to questions from people, being on Facebook or something like that, to me that's part of being grateful that people are interested in your music. On the other hand, there definitely have been days where you realize, "Well, this was a lot more time than I thought this was gonna be, and it should have been more time on my guitar." So there is always a fight for time.

Fortunately, I am not somebody who ever has been or ever will be... I have no desire to practice eight hours a day. For me my magic number is about four hours a day. And that's about how long I can maintain a level of focus that actually still feels productive, and also maintain a level of life outside the guitar that I think is actually really imperative if you are trying to make music that connects with people. I think locking yourself in a cave and never seeing another person doesn't always tend to lead to music that really is accessible. When I say "accessible" I don't mean that as a euphemism for trying to indulge people in a way that's artistically questionable. I mean that if the idea of music is to express something, you have to have something worth expressing. And part of that involves interacting with other humans and having a life outside the guitars. It's not supposed to be like, "Oh, this piece of music is expressing my feelings around sweep picking." Nobody cares about that. [Laughter.]

So I aim for – I don't always get – I am for about four hours a day. I consider two hours a bare minimum. And then within that amount of time I try to divide it up between... well, whatever is most pressing. I can easily spend four hours a day working on writing. I could spend four hours a day working on preparing for a gig. So a lot of it depends on where my focus has to be – if it's in preparation for a gig or a recording session, or writing new material. But my general routine involves a little bit of everything: a little bit of writing, a little bit of pure technique, a little bit of improvisation, a little bit of working on something totally new. And if I could get in four hours a day every day, I'd be very happy, but unfortunately it doesn't always happen that way.

So what are you working on at the moment?

At the moment I've been actually doing quite a bit of writing. I'm working on my next album and very excited about that. So a lot of my music time has been devoted to writing. And I'm also working on some new techniques, trying to constantly push my technical abilities as well. It involves a bit of maintenance and also not just maintenance, but I don't see myself as, "Okay, here I am, that's all I need to know." I feel like I'm a musical infant and a constant student of the instrument, so I always like to learn new things.

When do you see the new album coming out?

The goal is next year, 2013. Quite a bit of it is written, and it seems the more I write, the quicker things come together. So the goal is to have in out in 2013.

Is it following the direction that was set out on your debut album or are you taking a detour?

I think there is definitely going to be a real evolution. I don't think it's necessarily going to be anything that will shock people. It's like my next album isn't going to be a jazz album, and it's not going to be a new age album. It's certainly still within the realm of the aesthetic that I've put forth in my first album. But there's going to be a focus, and I think I've grown a lot in the last year, particularly in my writing. So I'm very excited about it. It will still have elements of things that are in *Hale Souls*, but it's gonna be even more focused and more unified.

I have my last question here, and it may sound a bit goofy. But here it goes, "If you could be given an answer to any question in the universe, what would you ask?"

[Laughter.] There are only so many questions you really could ask, right? And in thinking about that, I don't know that I would want to know... I think there is a lot of knowledge that you could have where it would be kind of a mixed blessing, if a blessing at all. I wouldn't want to necessarily know anything that would alienate me or isolate me from the experience that everybody else is having. So on one hand a very obvious question would be, "What's the meaning of life," or, "What's the meaning of the universe." I don't know that having that knowledge would do anything other than... What is it, we would all become like Cassandra? I don't know that I want knowledge that would be isolating. What I would love to know would be, "What would it be that I wouldn't otherwise find or seek out on my own that would be maybe most important for my happiness, or my enlightenment, or my enrichment?"

That's a profound answer.

[Laughter.] That's a difficult question!



Gretchen Menn with trio band members Thomas Perry and Angeline Saris. (Photo by Diana Cordero)

It is a goofy question, fundamentally. [Laughter.] Is there anything else we haven't touched upon that you would like to cover or to mention?

No, not necessarily. I guess I should mention that my solo project – my trio that's currently playing – has two musicians in it with whom I am very happy to be working. One of them is Angeline Saris – she was the guest artist on "Scrap Metal." But she's become my full-time live bass player, and she's just wonderful, I love working with her. And she's up for anything. She's very adventurous and a lot of fun, and just an amazing bass player. And then my drummer, Thomas Perry – he not only plays drums, but also bass and guitar and everything else. So the two of them together are just a great combination, and I'm very excited to have both of them on my upcoming album. So they will be my

background.

Did you get a chance to play any shows together?

We did, yes. We have played a few, and more and more are coming up. There's always this a kind of rotating focus that you have to have with writing. Right now that I'm getting really going on the writing for the next album, and it's easy to correct some of the material from the previous album. For me, at least, the stuff that I write is high maintenance enough that I can't just leave it for two months and then come back and play "Oleo Strut" perfectly. I'd have to review it to keep everything under my fingers. So we are playing shows, but I'm hoping within the next couple of months we can get to work on getting into the studio and start pre-production for the next record.

Are there any plans to play outside of the United States?

Absolutely, I'd love to get out, as soon as we can make it work. We'd just really love to get over to the UK and Europe.

That would be exciting.

So exciting. I'll do it the second we can work it out.

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