

MUSICIAN



ERIC JOHNSON

To shred or not to shred? For this guitar hero, that is the question

By Russell Hall

ERIC JOHNSON MIGHT BE THE WORLD'S MOST RELUCTANT guitar hero. In the 1980s, as his star was first rising, the Austin native earned a reputation as a white-hot shredder. But from the start, Johnson has emphasized that technique is just part of a larger musical landscape. "If you play a show where you shred for two hours, you'll see a lot of the crowd zone out and want to go home," he says. "And who can blame them? We've had more than 50 years of electric guitar playing. Playing faster, more furiously, or with a more metallic tone isn't enough to keep people interested. People will be listening to Jimi Hendrix a hundred years from now not because he was flashy, but because he wrote great songs, great melodies and his rhythm playing was great."

Johnson's albums have always reflected that holistic musical philosophy, even as listeners are continually dazzled by his six-string gymnastics. His 1986 major-label debut, *Tones*, earned Johnson his first Grammy nomination. Four additional Grammy nods have since

come his way, including Best Rock Instrumental Performance, a win for his signature song, 1990's "Cliffs of Dover." Johnson has shared the stage with iconic peers Steve Vai and Joe Satriani, and performed at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival. On last year's multi-act Experience Hendrix tour he played the same white Stratocaster that Hendrix used at Woodstock. Most recently he teamed with fellow guitar giants Andy McKee and Peppino D'Agostino for the all-acoustic Guitar Masters tour.

His latest album, *Up Close*, finds the 56-year-old Johnson unleashing a dizzying array of styles. Produced by Johnson and Richard Mullen, the disc strikes a deft balance between soulful spontaneity and technical wizardry. Among its 15 tracks are the hard-rocking, fleet-fingered instrumental "Fatdaddy"; a slow-burn blues rendition of the Electric Flag's "Texas"; and a stately ballad, "Your Book." Johnson spoke with us about creative vision, musical philosophy and his ambivalence about the art of shredding.

What was your goal for this album?

To find new ways of doing things. We're all the sum of our history. After a while, we start to create certain patterns in what we do. I wanted to break some of that repetition. If you keep to the same format, the vibe stays the same, even though the music might change. If you want to grow, you have to break down walls and find ways to work that are different from the past.

How did you do that?

I grew up listening to classical music, to players whose performance level was very high. The desire to play at that level was instilled in me. The question then becomes, how do you achieve that—by constantly redoing something? Or do you achieve it by being so proficient that you're able to pull off something great at any given moment? Classical musicians don't make music the way rock artists do, where there's lots of overdubbing. They're so well rehearsed, their performance level is so high, they just go in

what I'd learned on piano. I took lessons from Wayne Wood—who was *the* guy in Austin—for a few months and learned some theory. But as far as learning songs, learning music, that came either from watching friends play or from picking out parts on albums.

What artists did you like then?

When I was really young, it was the Ventures. Then as I started to play in bands, I started listening to the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds. This was 1966 and 1967. And then Hendrix came along. His lead playing was phenomenal, but that was just part of a larger picture. I remember reading articles where Hendrix would say, "Guitar players need to learn how to play rhythm guitar." He was a big proponent of rhythm playing and composition. He exemplified what it meant to be a complete guitar player.

What's your writing process like?

I've yet to find a standard way to write. I've learned it's better to be open to different approaches. That doesn't mean you don't need to have your sound together and your playing together, and have pretty good clarity about what you want to do before you go into the studio. At least that gives you a strong, clear springboard from which to work. There have been instances in the studio where something has come to me out of nowhere, but that's rare.

How do you relate to producers?

I'm becoming more open to getting feedback from other people. Even if you're able to produce yourself well, it behooves you to get other opinions. No matter how good you are at orchestrating, arranging or seeing the big picture, it's extremely difficult to have a 360-degree view. As I get older, I'm finding I get a bit exhausted trying to take that wide view. If I can get positive criticism in the studio, that's great.

What's your recording setup?

I use the Nuendo system, which is a digital platform. To me, the top end sounds more open and sweet using Nuendo than Pro Tools. That could change from year to year, as both systems come out with new and better versions. I do use analog gear to process things, and to mix through.

What are your thoughts on shredding?

I'm probably the wrong guy to ask—I'm sometimes hypocritical. I might do a show, shred a 15-minute solo, and then listen to the tape and think, "What am I doing? That was good for about two minutes!" That

'If you want to grow, you have to break down walls and find different ways to work.'

and nail it—capturing a real performance. On this album I tried to strike a balance between those two ways of doing things.

Does that involve practice?

Absolutely. Practice is key. But a lot of the music I love—folk, blues, rock and pop—is wonderful when it's rough and off-the-cuff. That's one polarity, and that's predominantly my type of music. But then there's the other polarity that involves a higher level of performance. It's not fair to say there's no place in pop music for that type of excellence. Stevie Wonder's vocals are a good example: He gets great performances in single takes. It all comes down to how listenable the music is. That's what counts, first and foremost.

How did you learn to play?

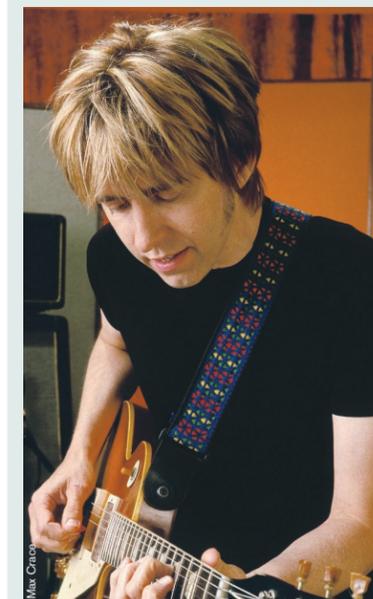
I started playing piano when I was 5. When I got a guitar, I sat at the piano with the guitar in my lap and taught myself the notes using

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In recent years Johnson has cut down on the variety of guitars he plays. His electric arsenal includes a '57 Fender Stratocaster, a Gibson ES-335 and a Gibson SG, but his main instrument is the Eric Johnson Signature Stratocaster he helped develop in 2005. "I worked on the design with Fender's Michael Frank-Braun," Johnson recalls. "We studied my '57 Strat, and the '54 Strats as well, to determine which aspects of those instruments I wanted to use."

Johnson's main acoustic is his Martin Signature MC-40, which he's been playing on the Guitar Masters tour. He records occasionally with a 1981 Martin as well. For acoustic amplification, he uses two Fishman acoustic amps. In addition, his Martin Signature acoustic is fitted with a Fishman pickup under the saddle. "I blend that with some K & K transducers placed around the bridge," Johnson notes.

Johnson uses no effects for his acoustic performances. "It's straight into the amp, just a bit of reverb," he explains. In electric shows, he uses a TC Stereo Chorus for a clean tone



and a Fuzz Face or Tube Driver pedal plugged into a Marshall amp. For years Johnson used standard Fender tremolos, but recently he's become a fan of Super-Vee locking tremolos. "There's too big a jump between the tone of a Floyd Rose and the tone of a stock Fender tremolo," he says. "The Super-Vee has more of a stock Fender tonality, which I like, but it also stays in tune like the Floyd Rose."



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On stage at the Tempe Music Festival, Tempe, Ariz., 2006

sort of playing is OK if it's done within the context of a song, but I fell in love with the guitar because I heard Brian Jones play a cool fuzz-tone lick on "Satisfaction," and because I heard Hendrix do the same thing on "May This Be Love." What turned me on were things like Eric Clapton's tone on [Cream's] "Sleepy Time Time." If I had been 10 years old during the '80s instead of in the '60s, I'm not sure I would ever have picked up an electric guitar.

How was it playing Hendrix's Strat?

Halfway through the performance, I wanted to run out the back door of the venue with it! I definitely felt a certain vibe as I was playing it. Everything has its own frequency. I once read a story about a guitar player who didn't like the sound of his instrument. Rather than changing pickups or configuration,

he decided to just *will* it into sounding different as he practiced. And after months and months of playing, that guitar did in fact sound totally different. I believe that story. I think an artist leaves some of himself in what he's touched—and there are a lot of Hendrix's vibes in that guitar.

What's next?

I've been working on an acoustic album, and have three songs cut so far. People have been asking me to do this for a long time. It's pretty much just me playing the songs solo, live in the studio. I want to get it finished this year, though I've got to balance that with touring. I also have a bunch of new electric guitar-based songs that I want to record. I would also love to write music for an orchestra. That's a direction I would like to go as an electric player.

REACTION IN ACTION

While on tour several years ago, Johnson and his band members came down with a terrible case of strep throat. Seeking medical attention at a small-town hospital, they were given antibiotics. The medication cleared the infection, but created an unexpected side effect. "We became terribly depressed," Johnson recalls with a rueful chuckle. "I don't know, maybe the medication was old and expired. It took us a while to figure that we were having some sort of bizarre reaction. We began asking ourselves things like, 'What's the point of living?' 'Why am I so despondent?' 'I don't care about anything anymore.' I'm sure the shows were horrible, because we were totally indifferent to how we performed. We were indifferent to *everything*. Finally we got suspicious of the medication. As soon as we stopped taking it, we all felt much better."

IRON AND WINE | ADELE | DURAN DURAN | ERIC JOHNSON



GREGG ALLMAN
Blues power

DECEMBERISTS
Barn burners

BRIGHT EYES
Keyed up

STING
Exploring his history,
with strings attached



+
ZEP'S MASTERPIECE
IN THE STUDIO
PEDAL PUSH