RETURN OF THE SIX-STRING BEAST

Hot on the heels of last year’s *Guitarmania* comes *Guitarmania 2: Return of the Six-String Beast*. In the spirit of things here at *Canadian Musician* magazine we have endeavoured to bring to you, the gentle reader, musings, reflections, insights and advice from some of the guitar community’s pre-eminent practitioners. Variety was a theme this year — guitarists from all levels of success and various musical genres are presented for your reading pleasure.

It’s not often that so many viewpoints on the world’s most popular instrument can be expressed in one forum, so get ready for a treat! Education was another important theme as well; the passing on of musical traditions has often been referred to as a process of a “laying on of hands”, a gradual transfer of knowledge that comes from years of continual exposure to players who have developed their craft and their personal musical vision. Each of the players presented in *Guitarmania 2*, at some point, decided to follow his or her own ‘drummer” after years of watching, learning, and of course, listening. Another thing that these players share is their common admiration of Jimi Hendrix’s iconoclasm and enduring influence.

So throw away your pick, toss the slide and let these players inspire both the head and the heart. The rest is up to us.

**Nuno Bettencourt**

Nuno Bettencourt is the resident guitarist in Boston’s Extreme. Their latest album, *Waiting For the Punchline* features powerful funk rock riffing, in-your-face production, and (of course) incendiary guitar playing. We spoke hours before a recent gig in Toronto.

**Gear**

“I’m just using a Fender Vibravibe and a couple of ADA pre-amps. I’ve always been using the ADA stuff and I just recently added the Vibravibe. I think it brings a bit of a cleaner edge to it. I also think that Phase 90s and Phase 100s by Mxr are pretty cool. I’m still working with Washburn guitars. Lately, I’ve been playing a double neck for a small portion of the set.”

**Beginnings**

“It was more of a family thing, you know? A couple of my brothers were great guitar players, so pretty much just being around them got me exposed to it. Just being able to play songs that you like was a trip for me. When I first started, it was mostly acoustic. I grew up on a lot of Beatles stuff, and early Bread, and even early Bee Gees — you know, a lot of strumming-songwriting stuff. I got into the funkier stuff through the love of percussion and drums. I’m a drummer as well, but only on weekends! Mike Deleo also influenced me in the more percussive playing. Listening to him was like listening to a percussionist playing the guitar.

“Then I started to get into more of the heavy stuff; early Aerosmith, early Van Halen. At the time, I started to get together with some friends. We’d learn four songs and played those same four songs for about a year! I also got into a lot of progressive stuff, listening to Yes, Kansas and Uriah with Holdsworth. The left hand and right hand techniques came together as a result of a love of both styles.

“I’ve always been attracted to the funkier stuff, I’ve always looked to Aerosmith and Zeppelin as sort of rock/funk bands at times. Most of the rock bands I dug had a funkier vibe to them, even Van Halen. Talking about funniness, Pat Travers is probably at the top of
The list, I'd say. I really liked the Go For What You Know album. The energy and the carefree ness of it was great. That record had an aggressiveness and rebellious attack to it for me.

**Hendrix**

"The Hendrix influence was more of a 'second generation' thing for me. I discovered Hendrix through Van Halen and Steve Ray Vaughan. As a kid, he really affected me from a song, more than a guitar, point of view. If I was seven or eight when he came out, he would have completely blown my mind, that's for sure. It would have been shocking.

**Woodshedding**

"I was basically getting more of a feel for the songs. Between fifteen and twenty I was practicing constantly — just obsessed with the instrument, you know? Good six- or eight-hour days... some days even longer. But it was never really a routine. It was more just learning other people's stuff — you only become your own player, if you ever become your own player, gradually. It's something that you don't notice, you just start doing."

"As the band became more successful, there was less practice. It wasn't so much because of the time factor, but just the lack of wanting to practice. Whenever I tend to pick up the guitar wanting to practice, I tend to take a left turn and start writing songs. Songwriting just dominates the desire to practice. I have a four-track or an eight-track that I usually bring on the road."

**Songwriting**

"Up until the last record, we had a backlog of songs that we were sort of dipping into here and there, but we've pretty much used them up. There's a lot of new stuff."

"I never sit down to write. It always just comes out when it comes out, so it always works. I'll sit down, pull a little bit, and if something comes out that's worth being a song, it's worth it. I've never sat down and played something I thought was a little crappy and just kept playing with it."

**Studio**

"Everything, at some point, starts spontaneously. When you hear something you like, you just tend to keep doing it. Sometimes it works out in one or two takes, or sometimes I'll do five or six takes and listen to each take and do a comp and get the best sections together. It's not really that important to me whether it's one take or a thousand — if it's on record for the rest of your life, you might as well make it enjoyable to the listener.

"I've been recording some stuff for a record that I'll be putting out this time next year. It'll be the funnest thing from an instrumental record. It's just a bunch of songs that I did for myself over the years or tried with Extreme that just didn't work out."

**Live Playing**

"Just do it, it's really just a state of mind. The first time I played an arena stage, I just freaked out because I couldn't believe how distant the band was, and how distant they sounded. It's all about knowing how to manipulate monitoring to recreate the band being close to you. From night to night, the sound can change pretty drastically. Basically, it's about getting louder! Even in some of the smaller places it's ridiculously loud — the ring in my ears after a show, or even the next day is pretty amazing. The Fenders have to be on ten in order to get the distortion."

**The Freddie Mercury Tribute**

"It was overwhelming from every aspect — from the people that were there, to being able to give something back to a band that you grew up on, to the emotional side. Brian May (guitarist for Queen) knew that we just loved every record. Initially, we weren't going to do any of our own stuff. I got into a little bit of an argument with Brian — he was disappointed that we weren't planning on doing any of our own stuff. But at the last minute, we went into 'More Than Words' spontaneously. The camera crew flipped out, because it wasn't even in the schedule."

**The Most Important Thing**

"I think that too often, guitar players don't pay as much attention to what else is going on. The biggest asset I had was to ask why? whenever I heard something I liked — why does this particular guitar riff sound good? What's happening with the rhythm section, or the song? Or, what's going on beyond? You get a better understanding, musically, of what's happening. I think it helps your playing a lot. It's wrong to focus too much on the technical side of guitar playing. If you think too much, you're already in trouble. Playthings 'cause you enjoy them, knowing that they sound good. It's all about moods, you know? Make up your own rules as you go along and do what you want, that's what I did."

**Alex Lifeson**

What Canadian rock guitar player hasn't been influenced by Alex Lifeson? From the bars and high schools of Toronto to the arenas of the world, both he and his bandmates in Rush have been an inspiration to musicians all over the world. Currently working on a solo album while the rest of the band takes a well-deserved break, Alex reflects on his career from his home studio in Richmond Hill.

**Gear**

"I've been using Paul Reed Smith Artist for about three or four years. Beautiful instruments, beautifully made. I have a whole array of guitars: a Les Paul, my original 355, another 355, a reissue '62 Strat and a reissue Tele. Arrows are Marshall Anniversary series with 4x12s loaded with Celestions. A couple of the heads I had modified at Paul Reed Smith to make them warmer in the lower-mids.

"As far as effects go, we haven't been on the road for almost a year, so I have to refresh myself. I have a couple of T.C. Electronic 2250 delays and a T.C. Electronic 1210 spatial expander which I use for chorus. I have a Digitech GSP 2101 tube preamp with effects that I don't have a chance to try out live. In the studio it's been very effective, it's got some really great sounds in it and they're quite warm. I run them through Palmer speaker simulators, so going right to the desk they're sounding quite good. I've got a Digitech TSP 24 multi-effects unit that I use for reverb and tape delays, and a Digitech PPH 55, which is a harmonizer. I have my old old CryBaby wah wah pedal that I've had for 24 years — it's got to be one of the originals. In the early days, I had to save up for that pedal! When we recorded the first album in 1973, there wasn't that much around. I used the CryBaby and a Maestro Phase Shifter.

"I have a Bradshaw switching system that I've had for seven or eight years now. The workmanship is spectacular; it's never gone down over the years."

**The Sound**

"I've always heard sounds in my head, although I was never very sure about how to achieve them. The whole sound of Pink Floyd in the early '70s — I wanted to get those sounds and have that kind of impact. Steve Young was very important. I had a lot of interesting tones. Being in a three-piece, there's a lot of pressure on a guitarist to make interesting sounds. In the past few years, there's been a move towards plugging straight into the amp and recording, and I'm getting off on that whole thing — Alice In Chains, Stone Temple Pilots, the impact and impression of a wall of sound. Most of the stuff I've been doing in my studio is like that."

**Keeping Busy**

"I'm starting to work on my own solo project. We finished the last tour in May, and Geddy and his wife had a baby a week after — talk about timing! He really wants to be home for a bit and spend time with his new daughter, which we all understand and gratefully accept.

"We've been so busy over the years, that you come home after a tour or recording and kick back and veg out. But after a lengthy summer of just hanging around, I thought that I had to do something. I have a recording studio at home. DR Bél, a guitarist who works with Tom Cochrane and a lot of other local people, is helping out. We met at the first Kumbaya and played together, and really got along quite well and thought that we'd get together. We had fun on Guitar World's Guitars That Rule The World compilation CD, and just continued writing. I've been doing it since the end of October; I get up in the morning, grab a coffee and go down and I'm there till about 7:00 p.m., when I come out all bleary-eyed and shaded! But I'm really enjoying it a lot, and it's..."
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cycle accident, so we fell out of the pattern of lessons, although I tried to practice as much as I could. This all ended when we started playing bars alot.

When we started touring, our schedule was pretty heavy, so we’d do soundcheck if we were lucky enough to get it and then I’d sit in the dressing room and play until we went on. I did that for years. I became a little more regimented later on, where I would set aside at least 45 minutes before the show to warm up, and did that for years. Over the past few years, I’ve cut that back a bit. It’s become more of a dream that I’ve set on the backburner, that one day I would start taking classical lessons again and try to pick it up. I enjoy playing it. I like the discipline of it, but I’m not a really disciplined person; so I have to get a good hard kick in the pants to get me going with that.

**The Most Important Thing**

“It’s great to find out the background of other players — what motivates them, what other interests they have. Whenever I meet another guitarist, I like to get to know them as a person just to find out where their playing comes from. Eric Johnson was a great example. He and I played in a couple of tours ago and we got to know each other. We’re apart, our birthdays are very close, and there are certain similarities to our character. When I listen to him play, there’s structure and intricacy — he’s very fluid and accurate, which is a tough combination. When I met him, I found him to be a gentile soul with a really good heart. He had a connection in his heart and soul that allowed him to play the way he plays; when I listen to him play I get a very clear picture of him as a person, and that’s a great thing to convey.

This last year has been a very reflective time for me. When I look back on my career, I think that I have reflected my personality and the way I am as a person.”

**Mike Keneally**

Talk about being the man for the job! Mike spent his formative years in San Diego learning the entire Frank Zappa. Little did he know that in a few short years, he would be playing guitar and keyboards for the man himself. With the release of *One Size Fits All* in 1980 and *Bong That Dust Speck* in 1994, Mike has established himself as a cutting edge writer and instrumentalist. He is currently working with Dweezil and Ahmet Zappa’s band, Z, as well as his own project, Beer For Dolphins.

**Gear**

“My main guitar is a Fender Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster. Others include a Telecaster ’55 reissue, a Heartfield Talon, a Fernandes Sustainer, a Duotone, a Stephens LJ which came out of the Fender Custom Shop, a couple of Heartfield’s and a Washburn acoustic/electric that’s on loan from Dweezil. Onstage, the amp setup is a Rivera 2x12.100 watt combo and a Fender Blues Deluxe, which I run simultaneously. I use SansAmps a lot in the studio; that was done entirely with SansAmps. On *Bong That Dust Speck* I used them in tandem with amplifiers.

“Effects are built-headly not state-of-the-art. I’ve got this pedal board that is a modular Korg thing. It’s got four tiny spaces that you can plug various effects into — I’ve got a flanger, chorus, EQ and compressor in there. I also use a CryBaby Wah Wah and a volume pedal.”

The music as a fan, Frank could name any of his songs and I’d be able to play it for him. I developed myself in kind of a peculiar way, but happened to end up in a job situation where it was very appropriate (laughs).

**Songwriting**

“One way I like to compose is by improving something onto a piece of tape, and then orchestrating that initial improvisation. There is no formula, it is completely arbitrary and subject to my whim. There are endless combinations of chords and melodies and things that I can do at this point, and it’s just a question of what am I going to do? Is it going to be major or minor? Is it going to be some pverse; wide harmony or something really tight? Is it going to be three notes a half tone apart from one another? It’s just a series of choices for the hundreds of notes in that song.

I rarely write out charts. Writing music on a piece of paper is torture for me, but I won’t deny it if someone really needs it. I’ll do the demo at home and then make tapes and give them to the drummer and the bass player and they take it home and learn it. We rehearse it in the garage as a three-piece and work out changes until it starts to flow smoothly. Then we go into the studio with the goal of getting a good bass and drum performance. Then I take that and start recording all the guitars and keyboards on top of it. There’s a lot of freedom at this stage, because if I have an idea, I can do it myself.

“Occasionally I will compose on a piece of paper; other times it will be something that is just built up on tape. We just put down a basic track of rhythm guitar and then orchestra and overdub over that. We can play in unison, use counter-rhythms, or do arhythmic effects.”

**Woodshedding**

“Since I didn’t develop the ability to sight-read, I had to develop an ear in order to survive. You just have to listen to records and figure out what’s going on the records. So you’d figure it out yourself and don’t settle for something that sounds pretty close. CDs allow you to hear just a couple of notes and press pause. Even the weirdest, most insane, fast, illogical-sounding melodies can be listened to a couple of notes at a time and be figured out. It just takes diligence, time and a lot of patience. You have to go about it. I found I was dissatisfied if I felt I was doing a half-assed job of something. I would set tasks for myself when I was learning these songs off records. My sense of satisfaction was only achieved when I learned that piece of music. Through setting these goals, I got better and better, always attempting to get better, and that’s something that just doesn’t go away. I guess I was fortunate that when I was young, my idea of fun was learning how to play ‘The Black Page’ on guitar.”

**Vibrato**

“What I like about vibrato is how many million ways you can shake a note. When I hear someone doing that wide modern rock vibrato consistently, it leaves me cold. It works if you do it sparingly. My development here is very independent; I guess I’d feel like a dope if I was doing research into vibrato. It’s like learning to talk, and I feel that it’s something that I really have to work out on my own.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 56