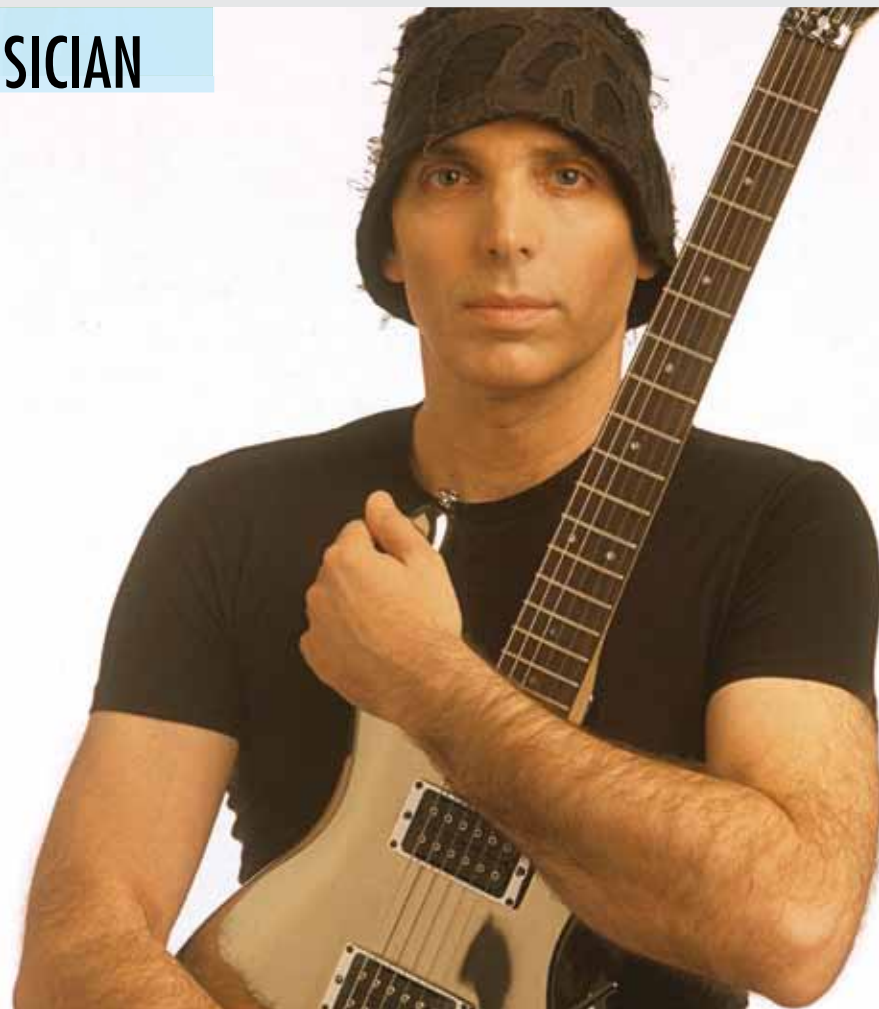


MUSICIAN



Greg Walemann

JOE SATRIANI

Solo or in his supergroup, "Satch" brings the boogie

By Russell Hall

JOE SATRIANI DECIDED TO BECOME A GUITAR PLAYER on Sept. 28, 1970—the day Jimi Hendrix died. He was at high school football practice when he heard the news, and immediately walked up to his coach and made a pronouncement: "Jimi Hendrix just died, and I'm quitting the team to become a guitar player." "I already had lots of drum instruction and thought, 'OK, I know how to go about this: Open the book, learn the stuff—and do it over and over again,'" recalls Satriani. "I was self-taught for many years, though eventually I sought instruction in areas I couldn't figure out for myself."

He figured it out all right. In fact, by his early 20s Satriani was giving guitar lessons to future six-string stars including Metallica's Kirk Hammett, fusion player Charlie Hunter and fellow virtuoso Steve Vai. Since releasing his now-classic sophomore album, 1987's *Surfing With the Alien* (which included his trademark tune, "Satch Boogie"), the New York native has established himself as one of

the most accomplished and versatile guitarists of his generation. He has acted as tour guitarist for Mick Jagger and Deep Purple, done session work for Alice Cooper, the Steve Miller Band and others, and in 1996 founded the popular and long-running multi-act guitar tour G3. In 2008 he formed the supergroup Chickenfoot alongside Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith and Van Halen alumni Sammy Hagar and Michael Anthony.

His new solo album, *Black Swans and Wormhole Wizards*, shifts easily between gritty riff-rock, George Benson-style jazz and deeply emotive mood pieces. "I wasn't looking to do a meticulously over-dubbed, super-production style album," says Satriani, 54. "But I wasn't looking to do a raw album either. What I was looking for was a good balance between the two." He spoke with us at his home in California about the new album, his influences and perhaps the most important lesson he learned from the man who inspired him to pick up the guitar at age 14.

'When people hear some of these songs, they may not recognize that it's me at first'

**When did you write these songs?**

April and May was really the writing period. I ended up with about 50 songs. The idea is to look at that large batch of material and find a trend. Is it going in a classical direction, more toward jazz, or maybe old-style rock 'n' roll? I tend to write each song as if it's its own entity. I don't discriminate. But then once I have a deadline set to go into the studio, the editor in me kicks in. I think, "OK, how can I best put together an album that reflects a natural direction?" The material for this album had a lot of heart and soul, and it went from heavy to light to experimental. A lot of balance.

What does the album title mean?

There have been times when one song told me exactly where I'm going, but it wasn't

'The material for this album went from heavy to light to experimental!'

like that on this album. That's why the title sprang to mind, because there were so many songs that shocked me, direction-wise. That term—"black swans"—came into my head. When people hear some of these songs, they may not recognize that it's me at first. I felt that putting *Black Swans* in the title was a perfect way to warn people.

Were you a guitar prodigy?

Not at all. I played out of tune and out of time, just like every other beginner. I didn't have an amplifier, but I had access to a Wollensak tape recorder—ancient by today's standards. It was large, about the size of a small microwave oven, and weighed about 30 pounds. I discovered that if you plugged into it and pushed record, it acted like an amp. And it could distort as well. I would record myself, play it back and think, "I really suck." It became a way of reviewing my progress. And then I realized I could play along with myself, recording two parts together. That was the beginning of my fascination with recording. I discovered that I could make these two-track recordings with rhythm and solo tracks. That's how

I began to figure out which notes go with which chords.

Who were your influences?

Hendrix reached out and grabbed my heart and my soul. Everything he did was at once pure-sounding and raw. He never sounded like he practiced a day in his life. I can never detect scales, chords or exercises in what he's doing. It's just pure, personal and very natural. It's the same thing with Billy Gibbons and Wes Montgomery. They play straight from the heart, and it's very instinctual. It's never methodical or didactic. When I first heard them I thought, "This is really great." Having been a failed drummer, I knew what it sounded like when you played like a student. I've always tried to avoid that.

Did your time as an instructor help?

Well, it makes you focused. You have to get it together. It strengthens and crystallizes your view of music. Also, on a physical level, it allows you to analyze yourself. Because very often, within the first five minutes of a lesson, you have to figure out what is good and not-so-good about a particular student. You have to see strengths and weaknesses, what needs to be fixed, what can't be fixed. Eventually you apply that same thought process to yourself, and that's good. It helps you to stop spinning your wheels in some area where you don't have talent.

Do you still practice?

Sure, though it's different from how it used to be. I know where all the scales are and where all the chords are, so all that work is behind me. You never forget those things once you learn them. I no longer have to spend that kind of time on practice, but I play every day. Today, I'm going to run through my entire set for the upcoming tour. And I'll do that every day up until I start rehearsing with the band. And then of course we'll rehearse several times a day. You always want to be at your very best before anybody buys a ticket to your show.

What do you recall about the recording of *Surfing With the Alien*?

That was a very traumatic album to make. I was up against a very small budget, which affected our studio time. I was still teaching too, so it was tough to be working and making an album like that. I was blessed that was the album people took note of, because I really liked it—it had a positive vibe to it. I've always thought it's a shame when any artist becomes popular for the wrong reasons. If I had done an album of Christmas jingles and it became a million-seller it might have

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

It's not uncommon for Satriani to use up to 30 guitars when recording an album. For *Black Swans and Wormhole Wizards*, however, he stuck mostly with just three Ibanez electrics. "I mainly used the prototypes for my new Ibanez JS2400," he says. "It's a 24-fret model of my standard guitar, which is a JS1000. I also used a JS1200, which is a candy-apple red guitar with a Sustiniac pickup installed. That's a new setup for me as well."

For amplification, Satriani mostly used the newly designed Marshall JVMs. "They make a JVM410, which is a four-channel amp, and they make a two-channel version of that amp," he says. "I used those extensively in my home studio, where I did a lot of the early tracking, and also at Skywalker Sound studios, where we did the band tracking. I used an old Marshall 6100 on a couple of tracks. For a track here and there we used Wizard amps and bottoms. I also used Two-Rock amps with custom reverbs built to my specifications. Those amps sound beautiful."



in Mueller

As far as effects go, Satriani stuck mainly with his signature line of Vox pedals. "Mostly I used the Big Bad Wah, the Time Machine, the Satchurator, and the Ice 9," he explains. "I also occasionally used a Proctavia, which is a pedal by Voodoo Labs, as well as a Fulltone pedal. I do a lot of stuff direct at my home studio. That way I can either use SansAmp or Guitar Rig, or sometimes we'll just re-amp something once we get into the main studio."

MUSICIAN



Christie Goodwin

On stage in Dublin, Ireland, October 2010

'You want to be at your very best before anybody buys a ticket to your show.'

padding my bank account, but it would also have ruined my life. *(laughs)* I would have had to do those songs forever. Sometimes you get lucky that the album people like is also one you like. *Surfing With the Alien* was a very good representation of how I felt at that very moment. That record was totally the truth.

You once said Hendrix became trapped by public expectations. How did you avoid that?

That's one thing I learned from his death, or from his state of mind at the time he died. I really took that to heart. I told myself I wasn't

going to let people get to me to the point where I have to anesthetize myself or put myself into a stupor in order to get away from things. I promised myself I would never get forced into being a clown on stage. That's tough. This is, after all, the entertainment business, and every season someone new comes along who sticks his tongue out a bit further or rolls on the ground a bit more, or wears something more outrageous. They get attention, and you start thinking maybe you should do something outrageous as well. But you can't do that. It's important to always stay true to yourself.

GIMME SHELTER

Mick Jagger recruited Satriani as guitarist for his 1988 solo tour. The Oct. 30 show at the Stadion Utama Senayan in Jakarta, Indonesia, proved especially harrowing. "We were doing a stadium show in Indonesia and began noticing all this fire and smoke just outside the stadium," Satriani recalls. "It turned out that a bunch of people who were angry that they couldn't buy tickets were overturning cars and burning them. We were literally surrounded by a ring of fire. Mick gathered us backstage and told us we would be fleeing in vans with darkened windows, surrounded by jeeps with mounted machine guns. It was totally insane, speeding through the streets of Jakarta with all this mayhem going on. From the rooftop of our hotel we were able to see the stadium—and the whole thing was engulfed in black smoke. Mick was livid, totally upset that the people he depended upon to set this thing up had screwed up. But we were in Indonesia—what are you going to do?"

RICHARD THOMPSON | SUGARLAND | TRICKY | NATASHA BEDINGFIELD



JOE SATRIANI
Wizard of shred

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Goes nuclear

LIZ PHAIR
Fun time



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