

## MUSICIAN



Rob Sherman

## LEE RITENOUR

The jazz guitar giant plays a musical match game on his latest album

By Jeff Tamarkin

TO COMMEMORATE HIS 50TH ANNIVERSARY AS A musician, Lee Ritenour opened his phone book and invited some fellow guitar-slingers to help him celebrate in the studio. The result, 2010's *6 String Theory*, featured contributions from B.B. King, George Benson, John Scofield, Slash, Keb' Mo' and other aces—but Ritenour felt his work remained unfinished. For his new *Rhythm Sessions*, he paired such notables as vocalist Kurt Elling and keyboardists Chick Corea, George Duke and Dave Grusin with all-star rhythm sections including bassists Stanley Clarke, Nathan East and Christian McBride, and drummers Vinnie Colaiuta, Peter Erskine and Dave Weckl, among others.

He also brought in a number of younger players, including his drummer son Wesley and, for the track "Punta del Soul," the winners of the 2012 International 6 String Theory Competition—a contest that Ritenour launched in the wake of the 2010 album

and recently expanded to include keyboards, bass and drums. "I thought it would be a great opportunity for the award winners to play with well-known and in some cases legendary players," he says. After selecting his collaborators, Ritenour matched each contributor with material—some written by him, the rest covers—with the aim to inspire the best performance.

For Ritenour, facing new challenges is nothing new. Before he cut his 1976 debut solo album, *First Course*, he'd already logged countless hours as the go-to session guitarist in L.A. for a vast variety of artists. His own catalog—more than 40 albums—runs the gamut from smooth to straight-ahead jazz to Brazilian styles. Ritenour, who was also a founding member of the jazz-pop supergroup Fourplay, discusses his new album, mentoring young musicians, and the role cycling plays in his creative process.



**'It gives me a thrill whenever I can help a young musician get to the next level.'**

**Is *Rhythm Sessions* a sequel?**

They're connected in one sense. Because I had been on the road so much in the last year, playing with stellar rhythm sections, I definitely wanted to do a straight-up Lee Ritenour record with my guitar front and center.

**How did you match players and songs?**

I started by picking material from other writers, and then composed quite extensively—I get into a composing mode and then write for weeks, if not months. I usually end up with a small pile of material that I feel confident with. I thought, "If I'm going to do these combinations of rhythm sections, which section would be best for this song?" I wanted to get George Duke, Stanley Clarke and Dave Weckl together, to find something rhythmically moving for Dave to play that would feature Stanley's upright bass and George's minimoog and Rhodes. I needed a very sensitive rhythm for the Nick Drake song, so I picked Dave Grusin, drummer Will Kennedy, and Nathan East

**'The all-around musician today is a one-man band who can do it all!'**

on bass. My son, Wesley, and I are big Brad Mehldau fans, and Brad has been covering a number of Nick Drake tunes over the past several years. Nick had this incredible voice, and "River Man" has such a great lyric. I thought, who could pull this off and put a different spin on it? I kept thinking that Kurt Elling's voice would work great, and he killed it. The hard part was booking all these busy musicians.

**How is cycling involved in your process?**

I'm what I call a cappuccino rider—I ride from one coffee joint to the next. But one of the ways I prepare for an album is by listening to music while riding. It opens up the stimuli. And then eventually I'll start writing and jamming at home, sometimes on an acoustic guitar, sometimes on a drum loop. I'll put some jams together that might be 30-50 minutes long and then get back on the bike and listen to those for a couple of hours. Sometimes there's nothing there, but once in a while—maybe 12 minutes into the jam—there'll be something. I'll go back to my studio and start working on it. This process goes back and forth.

**How did you get into session work?**

By the time I was 12 I knew I wanted to be a pro. What was cool about L.A. back then was the great musicians' numbers were in the phone book. My dad called guitarists Joe Pass and Barney Kessel, and I took lessons with those guys, and later with the great classical guitarist Christopher Parkening. A lot of these guys were centered around the studios. I also had a terrific teacher, Duke Miller, who went on to start the studio guitar program at USC, where I later went. So I was guided into studio work. At 16, I joined a band that was produced by John Phillips from the Mamas and the Papas. The band didn't go anywhere, but he asked me to stick around and record with them. Then when I was 18, the great Hungarian jazz guitarist Gábor Szabó turned me on to Lena Horne, and I worked with her. Then came Peggy Lee and Sérgio Mendes—all before I was 20. I was well prepared—I just drank the guitar all day long. The session floodgates opened when I met Dave Grusin, who was the darling of L.A. composers at that time. I learned producing chops from working with him and Quincy Jones.

**You played on Pink Floyd's *The Wall*.**

I did a number of tracks—mostly acoustic guitar. The producer told me that our names probably wouldn't be on the record because they wanted to make sure it was just Pink Floyd, and I said no problem. But on the CD versions they put all the credits.

**What was your motivation for starting the 6 String Theory Competition?**

I wanted to celebrate the guitar, and while I was making *6 String Theory* I decided, "Wouldn't it be cool to find a brand-new talent to join us?" That was the inspiration for the contest. Yamaha and Berklee College of Music got involved, and the winner that year was a young classical guitarist from Montreal. He landed a four-year scholarship to Berklee and played on a track on the record. Last year the contest expanded, and now there are four scholarships from Berklee worth upwards of \$650,000. I'm really enjoying mentoring. It gives me a thrill whenever I can recommend a young musician for a gig or help them get to the next level. There's still the *American Idol*-type shows out there for the pop singers, but for the real players there's not that exposure.

**Are young musicians versatile today?**

Yes and no. There are some who are incredibly versatile and well prepared to be all-around musicians. Places like the Berklee College of Music, USC and other great

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In the liner notes for the *Rhythm Sessions* CD, Lee Ritenour lists a small arsenal of guitars, amplifiers and effects he used in the making of the album. From vintage axes to state-of-the-art electronics, he likes to keep his studio well stocked—but he has go-to favorites. Not surprisingly, the guitar that bears his name tops the list.

"My Gibson L-5 Lee Ritenour model is a fantastic guitar," he says. "I used to be a Gibson 335 guy, but since recording the *6 String Theory* album, I've had a straight Gibson 59 Les Paul. I also play that on the road these days. I also use a classical hybrid electric Yamaha Silent guitar, unmodified, straight off the shelf, that's relatively inexpensive—\$500 or \$600." For the new album, Ritenour also employed a Ramirez classical guitar and a Roger Sadowsky classical electric. He also played a Roland GR-55 guitar synthesizer on the record.

"For amps, I've been using Boogies straight across," he says. "Mesa Boogie is an interesting company because a lot of heavy-metal guys use their stuff, but they build such amazing amplifiers that are so versatile I can use them from very clean jazz-type tones to blues, all the way up to rockin' away. Those are the two main setups, and I use minimal pedals: Line 6 Live Pod, mostly, for some



ambient color. As leader of the band, with the guitar as the main sound, I don't use too many effects these days, because the guitar tone has to cut through."

MUSICIAN



Mark Verrill/Getty Images

Onstage in Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2009

**‘One of the ways I prepare for an album is by listening to music while [bicycle] riding.’**

schools are preparing musicians extremely well. After four or five years you come out a very versatile musician—not just a good player who can play any kind of music but as an arranger, programmer, orchestrator, sound designer, engineer and businessman, too. The all-around musician today is a one-man band who can do it all.

**What’s your take on today’s music?**

The music is healthy. There are so many talented musicians throughout the world, and it’s because of the internet and globalization. There are great players everywhere, and with the point of a mouse you can hear amazing musicians. But there is a lot of mediocrity out there, too.

**Thoughts on industry changes?**

The deconstruction of the music business has been horrible. But the reconstruction of it has been exciting. It’s harder for younger musicians to get started and earn a living, but people have music in their lives more than ever today. And live music is still strong.

**What’s next?**

I just debuted a symphonic piece, an epic fusion song I wrote in 1978, “The Captain’s Journey.” I hope to record that with a great orchestra. I may start my own guitar-piano-bass-drums quartet one of these days. I still love playing for audiences and playing with great rhythm sections. There’s nothing like playing live to keep your chops fresh and alive.

**STRING KINGS**

Lee Ritenour is recognized for his jazz work, but since the start of his career he’s contributed to countless recordings as a first-call session ace. He’s not alone. Here are some other renowned jazz axemen who can be heard on familiar recordings.

**Larry Carlton** The Crusaders guitarist also played on as many as 500 recordings a year—including classics by Billy Joel, Michael Jackson, Joni Mitchell and Steely Dan.

**Barney Kessel** As a member of L.A.’s iconic Wrecking Crew, he played on classics by the Beach Boys and the Monkees, and on many Phil Spector productions.

**Cornell Dupree** The late, versatile musician easily switched from jazz to R&B, and his riffs funk up hits by Aretha Franklin, Bill Withers and many others.

MACY GRAY | ZIGGY MARLEY | EELS | PUBLIC ENEMY



**ALICIA KEYS**  
Feeding the flame

**AARON NEVILLE**  
Old school

**NEAL SCHON**  
Goes solo

**BEN HARPER**  
Teams up



**+**  
STUDIO SEER  
STAR SHOOT  
VIDEO MATTERS