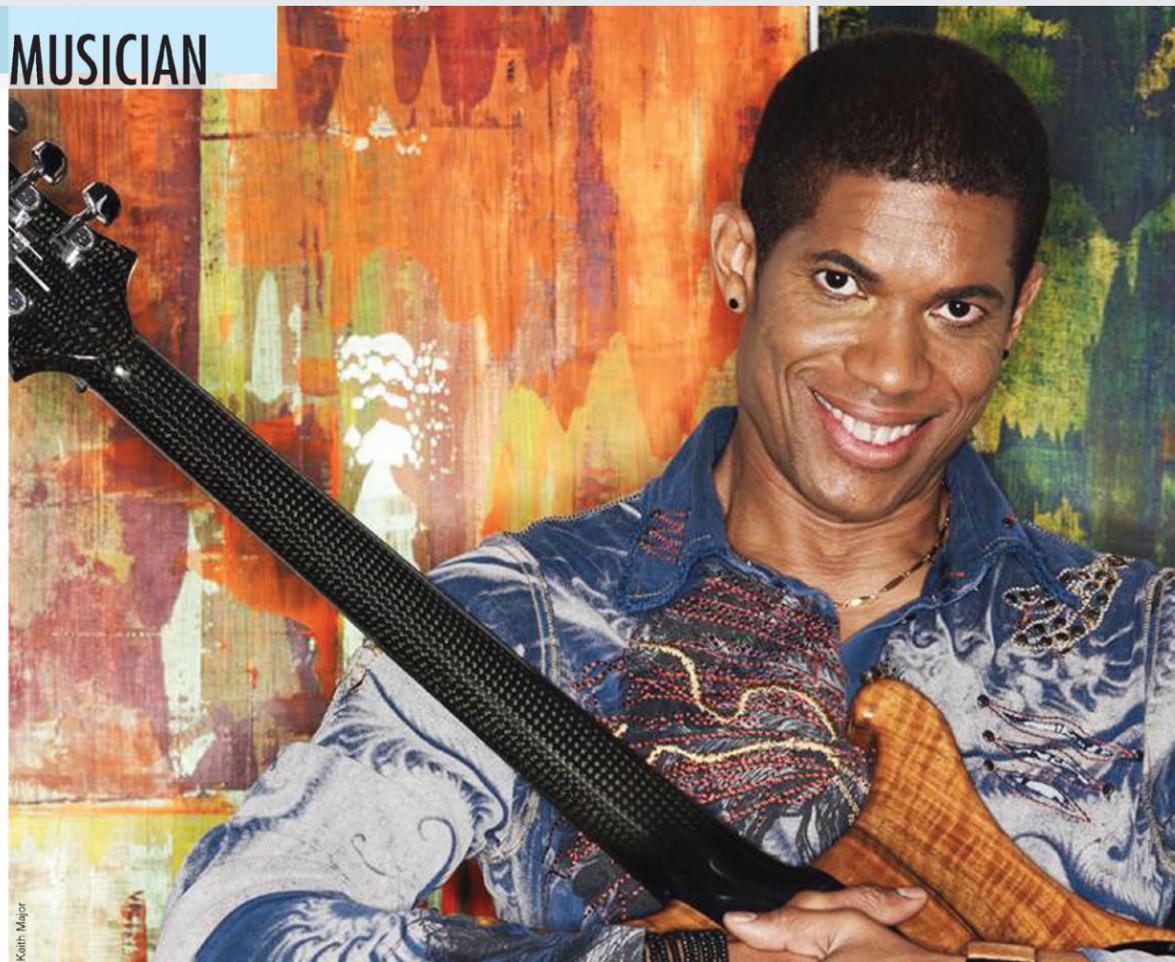


MUSICIAN



STANLEY JORDAN

Still reinventing the sound of jazz, with the aid of some talented friends

By Jeff Tamarkin

"TO ME, I'M JUST PLAYING GUITAR," SAYS STANLEY JORDAN. "Then somebody points out the technique and I remember, 'Yeah, it's weird.'" Most musicians would be loath to describe their own performance method as "weird." But Jordan, who first astonished the jazz world more than a quarter-century ago, is well aware that his trademark approach is unconventional. His two-handed touch style, tapping the strings as if playing piano, allows Jordan to play melody, chordal harmonies and a bassline at once—or even to play two different guitars, or guitar and piano, simultaneously.

"When I released my first album on Blue Note, *Magic Touch*, in 1985, I made a conscious decision to focus on the technique from a marketing standpoint," the Chicago native recalls. "There's a fragility and an honesty to it that's engaging. I don't think anyone can dispute that it brings new possibilities, and that's why I got into it. But by now I'm so beyond thinking about the novelty aspect."

As he should be: Jordan is indisputably one of the most impressive guitarists in jazz, a point reaffirmed on his latest album, *Friends*. It's the follow-up to 2008's *State of Nature*, which marked his return to recording (and to the piano, which he learned as a child) after a lengthy hiatus during which he studied music therapy. For *Friends*, Jordan tapped world-class musicians including fellow guitarists Charlie Hunter, Mike Stern, Russell Malone and Bucky Pizzarelli; saxophonists Kenny Garrett and Ronnie Laws; trumpeter Nicholas Payton; violinist Regina Carter; bassists Charnett Moffett and Christian McBride; and drummer Kenwood Dennard.

This talented crew took on a set featuring original songs and interpretations of material associated with everyone from Béla Bartók and Claude Debussy to John Coltrane to Katy Perry. "When I think about the album, I think about the sessions," says Jordan. He spoke to us from his home in Sedona, Ariz.



'I understand why people focus on the technique—but for me, it's all about the music.'

How did *Friends* come about?

In a way the album created itself—all I had to do was pick the people and give them leeway to decide what we were going to do creatively. I wish I could take more credit than that. When I made my dream-team list, those on it were almost exactly who I got. Every song is special and every artist was chosen for a special reason. Most of them I know and had played with, while others I knew from their music.

Why make a collaborative record?

When I did *State of Nature* it was kind of a return, so I wanted to do something where I was more the focus. *State of Nature* was a concept album about the natural world, and I wanted total control over what that would be. I feel the album accomplished that, so now it was, "I'm back, what do I want to do?" I'd wanted to do a collaboration project for a long time and decided the time was right.

'If you're going to make an album, it should be a unified work of art.'

How did you choose the covers?

A lot of it came from the selection of people on the album. From the beginning I wanted to do [Coltrane's] "Giant Steps" with Mike Stern. The reason I picked that song was because Mike and I jammed on it in a hotel somewhere on the road and I thought, "This guy is amazing!" It's a difficult song and he glides through it with ease. For Bucky Pizzarelli, I suggested [Charlie Christian and Benny Goodman's] "Seven Come Eleven" and he loved that idea. He chose [Neal Hefti's] "Li'l Darlin'."

What's your philosophy about recording an album?

Aristotle said that a work of art should have unity. If you're going to make an album, it's a unified work of art. I want something people can listen to from beginning to end. Also, I was brought up on all the great rock concept albums, so I like the idea that an album can be about something and make a statement. I go in with a concept. While things might change, I find if I keep that concept in mind I can make all those little decisions along the way.

How did you learn to play guitar and piano at the same time?

Pianists already split their brains between hands. If I want to play two rhythms at once, and I think about the two rhythms separately that might be more difficult. Basically, there are three possibilities: left hand, right hand or both. So there's some sequence of those three possibilities. Once I'm playing the two rhythms, I can think about it differently and then notice that it's two different rhythms. It comes down to doing it in slow motion—you can do almost anything if you slow it down enough. Right now I'm working on a three-part fugue from Bach's *The Musical Offering*. The only way I can play it is if I sing a part and play the other two. So I'll sing the low parts, play the middle part on guitar and the high part on piano. That way I'll get the best tonal blend and be able to do all three parts while still doing it as a solo piece. When I play guitar and piano simultaneously, it's like a super instrument: The guitar and piano become one instrument with a broad range of tonal possibilities.

How have you applied your digital music education to your records?

It's the main aspect of my music that has been underrepresented. I've never felt compelled to prove what I know. I'm a harmony junkie—my basic vocabulary has over a thousand scales that can be played in all 12 keys. Maybe at some point I'll do something where I feature that, but I find that most of the time it ends up clouding the music. There has to be a musical reason. The best example of it is "Asteroids" on the *Cornucopia* album [1990]—before *State of Nature* it was the only song I'd ever recorded that had no guitar. When I go to a dance club I'm amazed at all these wonderful electronic instruments, and so often they're used in such a pedestrian way. It's monotonous, like I'm being brainwashed. You've got the compelling rhythm, but harmonically there's so much more you can do.

How did you learn your signature touch technique?

I had a definite goal in mind. I wasn't playing piano at the time, because my family had gone through tough times economically and we had to sell it. That's when I took up the guitar. I played conventional picking and fingerstyles for six years, but I had all of this piano-istic stuff in my head. I love counterpoint, the variety of textures and the complex voicings pianos can do. I wanted a way to bring some of the piano texture to the expressiveness of the guitar. I finally figured out that if I did hammer-ons and pull-offs

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Stanley Jordan's signature touch technique works better with some instruments than others. Most guitars require adjustments or modification—and that's why his main guitar is a Vigier Arpege. "The Vigier was one of the first instruments I could pick up immediately and use this technique without any modification," Jordan says. "A common problem with a lot of guitars is that the high notes are lacking in body and have a harsh sound, or the low notes are so loud that they overshadow the high notes. Sometimes you have both problems at once, but usually it's one or the other. The Vigier doesn't have that problem—the range is so even. In fact, we've had the idea of creating a signature model for years, but I haven't really felt that compelled to do it because the Vigier is so amazing. Of all the electric guitars I've ever played, this one sounds like an acoustic. You can hear the air around the strings."

On *Friends*, Jordan can also be heard playing an Ibanez LR10 (named after jazz guitar legend Lee Ritenour). While he uses



it mostly for his trademark two-handed touch playing, "I prefer to play it conventionally, with a pick," he says. "I tend to use it on ballads." Jordan uses Matchless amps when he wants a more distorted rock sound and Roland amps, particularly the JC-120, for clarity—but says that for general purposes the Mesa Boogie is his go-to amp because of its versatility.

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Onstage at the Berks Jazz Fest, Reading, Penn., 2005

Andrew Lefkowitz/RedHorns

'I'd wanted to do a collaboration project for a long time and decided the time was right.'

it wasn't so difficult. I love that beautiful, delicate, sparkling, crystal-clear sound.

What are some of the challenges?

It's not very forgiving. It's like violin, in that you're very sensitive to little things like the height of the strings and the temperature. If it's not adjusted right, my fingers hurt. It feels like I'm banging my fingers on metal. I can be having a bad day, and it occurs to me that my strings are just a couple thousandths of an inch too high.

Was it hard to master?

I've spent so much time convincing myself that it's easy, but I've learned through the years that it's really not. If it were easier, more people would be doing it. But it's

opened up a world of possibilities to me, and I'd like others to experience that. I'm planning on putting together an educational website with interactive online courses.

Does it ever overshadow the music?

It's all in the ear of the beholder. It was something to get people's attention, but I also wanted to have a little more stylistic variety than your average recording artist. I've been told, "It can't be done, you can only play one style of music, the industry isn't ready for a multistylist." So I decided to focus on a technique that gave me more leeway to explore different styles. I can understand why people focus on the technique—but for me, it's all about the music.

MUSICAL HEALING

Stanley Jordan's passion for guitar is matched by his passion for the art of music therapy. He's a spokesperson for the American Music Therapy Association, and is working toward a master's degree in the discipline at Arizona State University. "Music can help people on a lot of levels," he says. "You can work with kids who have developmental delays or anger issues or any kind of emotional issue, or it can be adults with psychiatric problems, neurological damage such as a stroke or brain trauma. By participating in and making music you can kick-start the brain and activate plasticity, where functions can migrate from one region of the brain to another." Jordan says he has personally witnessed the healing power of music. "The stories are amazing," he says. "Music can help us not only to release our emotions but to understand them. By improvising a person is open to what's going on inside him. Playing is a physical task, and the social dimension can also help with rehabilitation."

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