

MUSICIAN



STEVE VAI

The legendary shredder crosses boundaries to deliver the unexpected

By Russell Hall

STEVE VAI IS MULLING OVER HIS PROCESS TO GET SONGS ready for the stage. "I don't write my songs and then record them," he muses. "I build them as I record, which means I have to learn them after they're finished. My first reaction when I'm getting ready for rehearsals is anxiety and fear. It's like, 'Do I really have to learn all this stuff?' But that only lasts a second."

Hard to imagine anxiety and fear are part of the monster guitarist's vocabulary. Even at age 12—when he began studying under fellow six-string maestro Joe Satriani—Vai seemed destined for virtuosity. Following a two-year apprenticeship in Frank Zappa's band, Vai self-released his first album in 1984. Tenures with David Lee Roth and Whitesnake, as well as dazzling contributions to Public Image Ltd.'s acclaimed album, *Album*, solidified his reputation as a shredder—and a master of tone, color and nuance. "Even when I was learning Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix riffs, I understood

that wasn't what I wanted to play," says Vai. "I knew I needed to come up with my own voice on the instrument." That voice has always been expressed on his records—ambitious projects that push the boundaries for guitar technique and explode conventional notions of guitar-based music.

Vai's new record, the loosely conceptual *The Story of Light*, expands that sonic palette. Sessions were completed at his two studios—L.A.'s Mothership Studio and his new backyard facility, the Harmony Hut. Surprises include "No More Amsterdam," a beautiful ballad written and sung with Aimee Mann, and a stormy rendition of the Blind Willie Johnson classic "John the Revelator," which offers Vai trading fire-and-brimstone vocals with Beverly McClellan, a finalist on TV's *The Voice*. "I wanted ebb and flow, tension and release," he explains. Vai spoke with us about the new album, finding his style and why the seventh track on his records is always special.



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Was making the album a long process?

It took about a year and a half. There were some distractions—I did one of those Experience Hendrix tours, plus I have a couple of companies that I run. But I pretty much worked straight through. At a certain point you sort of click into gear. Everything around you goes away and you become really focused. You have to enter that frame of mind to keep the inspiration going.

Did you enjoy wearing many hats?

I've always been the engineer, producer, mixer and editor. The only things I didn't do were the artwork and mastering. It's very time-consuming, but I've always wanted to keep the vision pure. I don't want any dilution in the music. But I think I'm going to change things up with the next album. I really enjoyed the collaboration with Aimee Mann. I think next time I'll get together with various people and hand over the producing and engineering reins to someone else.

'I'm always looking for ways to expand my musical vocabulary.'

How did the duet with Mann happen?

I've known Aimee since college. We went to school together and actually lived in the same building. My wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, was in a band with her. I've always felt there was something special in her songwriting. She's like a poet and there's something beautifully vulnerable about her voice. I was having trouble with the lyrics for that song, and my wife suggested I call Aimee. She listened to the track and really liked it. It turned out really nice.

Does having a concept in mind help?

It does. Pulling various threads into a story affects the melodies. If you make an emotional investment in a character, what comes out is a reflection of what you're feeling. Suppose I create a character who's miserable and whose life has been filled with greed. But she has an epiphany, and sees the damage she's caused to people in her life. That's the character I was thinking about when I wrote "Weeping China Doll." The result is a melody that has a heavy sorrow but also a beautiful redeeming quality.

Why is the seventh track always important in your records?

I've always found that to be the sweet spot for instrumental ballads. For this album I chose "Mullach a' tSi" an old Irish folk song. I'm always looking for ways to expand my musical vocabulary. One way is to listen to something outside your radar—like a traditional Celtic player or a Bulgarian pipe player. You pick up different musical sensibilities, different phrasing and articulation and dynamics, and a different sense of rhythm and harmony. If you try to emulate the idiosyncrasies of that music, you find yourself playing things you otherwise would never play.

What first attracted you to guitar?

It was love at first sight. I remember first seeing a guitar as a little boy, and everything around it disappeared. It looked exciting. When I saw someone playing it, there was something über cool about that. It looked like it fit the person's body well. I always wanted a guitar but I was also afraid of it. It was a bit intimidating. I felt people who played guitar were really cool, and I wasn't. When I got one at 12, it became my own little secret. No one knew except me and my guitar teacher, Joe Satriani.

How would your style be different had you not studied with Joe?

Everything would have been different. His lessons were the air I breathed. I soaked up everything—vibrato, how he played chords and bent notes. Every time he put his fingers on the guitar, music came out even if it was just an exercise. Joe was always the best. He was my mentor and I knew I wanted to be as proficient as Joe—but in my own way.

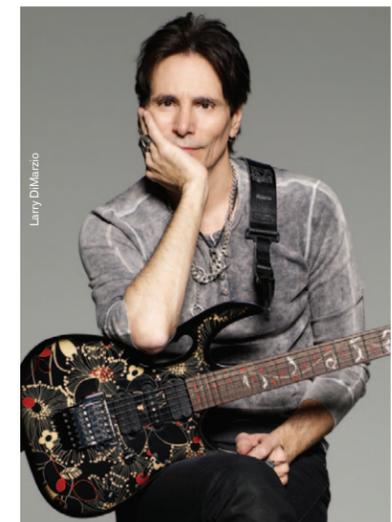
How did you meet Frank Zappa?

I sent him some scores by Edgard Varèse, which I knew he was looking for. I also sent a tape of my band and a transcription of one of his pieces of music called "The Black Page." I wanted to prove to him I was a musician, that I understood music. I transcribed music for him for a year and a half, and then moved to California when I was 20, auditioned and became part of his band. Those years with Frank were like music college. I learned a bit of everything—how to take care of yourself on tour, how to retain all your intellectual property and how to protect yourself from some of the more unsavory parts of the record business. Most important, he instilled the idea that you must make music that's important to you.

For most of *The Story of Light*, Steve Vai used his Ibanez JEM7V (dubbed "Evo") and his JEM77FP ("Flo"), which is equipped with a Fernandes Sustainer. "It was about 60 percent Evo and 20 percent Flo," he says. "I also used an Ibanez Strat on 'Gravity Storm,' and an Eric Johnson Strat on 'Creamsicle Sunset.'" He also used an Ibanez Universe seven-string—a model he helped design—on a couple of songs.

For amplification, Vai relied mostly on the Carvin Legacy series, including a model he helped develop. "Probably 80 percent was done using a Legacy," he explains. "I also mixed in a variety of Marshalls, and a Fender Bandmaster on 'Creamsicle.' I have various other Fenders—a Professional, a Twin and a couple of Deluxes—and used those here and there." He also employed two vintage Acoustic amps "to add an overshine to some things."

For acoustic work, Vai turned to his Ibanez Euphoria, his signature model. He occasionally played a Taylor 12-string. "I also played a dobro, a choral sitar, a mandolin here and there—as well as an oud and a saz, which are Turkish instruments," he adds.



Vai employs fewer effects than most would guess, claiming he gets what he needs from an Ibanez Jemini Distortion pedal and a Fractal Axe-Fx. "The Axe-Fx is quite amazing," he says. "It's like rocket science to program it, but it's extremely versatile."

Vai typically uses Ernie Ball strings, 9 to 42s. When tuning down a whole step, such as "Gravity Storm" and "John the Revelator" from the new record, he turns to heavier gauges. Vai prefers Ernie Ball's newly developed Cobalt strings. "They're the first strings I've tried that truly feel different from others," he says.

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Gretchen BertWendImage

Onstage in Amsterdam, 2012

'I knew I needed to come up with my own voice on the instrument.'

What's better, solo artist or sideman?

Each has rewarding aspects. When I was with those bands in the '80s—David Lee Roth, Whitesnake and Zappa—I didn't have the pressure of being a bandleader. I showed up, did my gig, and it was great. Still, I knew it was fleeting because there was a type of music I was hearing in my head that I really wanted to create. And that's where the great advantage of having your own band comes in—you can make the music you want. For me, having my own band is not a democracy, it's a dictatorship. I use that term loosely. You have to keep the band excited, too. Of course, there are economic responsibilities as well.

Do you think your legacy will be as a player or a composer?

It doesn't matter to me, frankly. I try to move in the moment and do what's most compelling and natural. If I'm eager to get my point across on guitar, I do that. If I want to compose, I do that. The way an artist is perceived is in the hands of the people doing the perceiving. And that's all over the place. I would guess most listen to me because they like the way I play guitar. But there are others who like it when I compose things and work with orchestras. There are people who like when I sing. And there are people who don't like those things. It's a smorgasbord—and everyone is welcome at the table.

ART OF SHREDDING

Steve Vai epitomizes the notion of the guitar shredder, a concept that took hold in the '80s. Today he's philosophical about that period. "The trend was to play the crap out of your instrument," he says, "and I enjoyed doing it. I wasn't competing or trying to prove I was faster than anybody else. But I did want to be extremely proficient. And then the grunge movement happened. It was as if the grim reaper had come along and hacked the head off shredders. But that didn't change the way Joe Satriani, Eric Johnson or I played. Changes in trends weren't going to stop us. Now there's a trend in shred-guitar playing that dwarfs what we were doing back then. To me, it sometimes sounds less like music and more like fascinating ways to impress oneself. But there are those who feel that way about how I play. That's fine, and to a degree it's true. But it's certainly not everything."

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BRANFORD MARSALIS
Sax talk

JOSS STONE
Soul mate

STEVE VAI
No limits

ALANIS MORISSETTE
Digs deep, bares all



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STARS ON FILM
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