

the ToneQuest

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone Report™
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INSIDE
Straight Talk from
a Guitarist's
Guitarist...
Stephen Bruton

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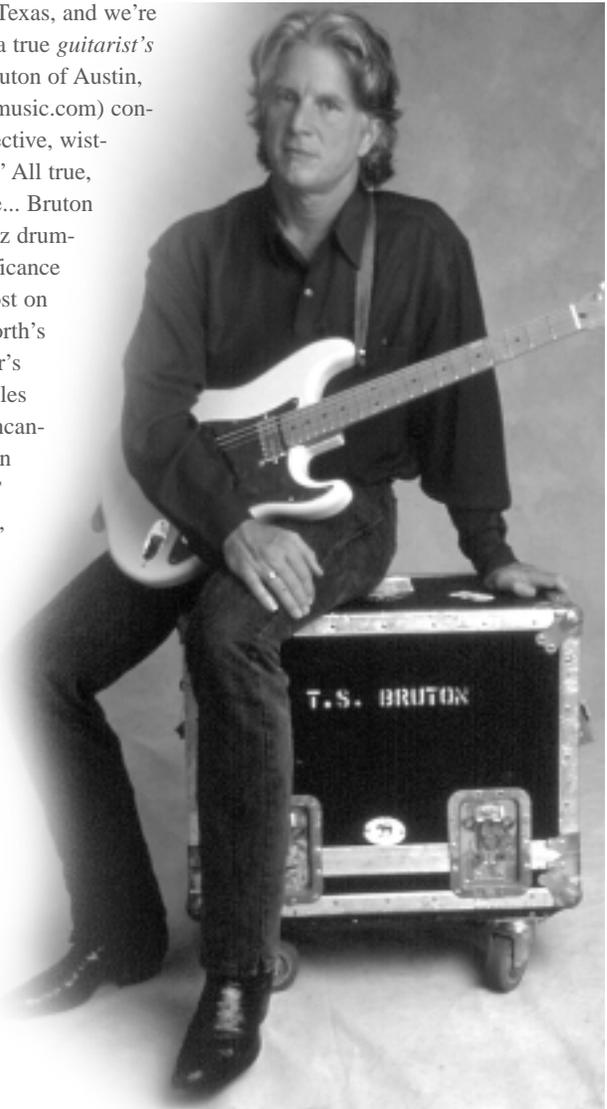
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Welcome to the Third Anniversary Issue of TQR. We'd like to begin this month's trip by sending our sincere thanks and appreciation to each and every one of you for granting us the privilege of guiding and inspiring you in your ongoing love affair with the guitar. It's you who make our monthly Quest for Tone possible, and that's a fact we never forget.

Well, Amigos, we're *still* in Texas, and we're kickin' off this issue with a true *guitarist's guitarist* – Mr. Stephen Bruton of Austin, Texas. The All Music Guide (www.allmusic.com) concisely describes Bruton's tone as "reflective, wistful, bittersweet, rollicking and earnest." All true, but there's much more to consider here... Bruton grew up in Fort Worth, the son of a jazz drummer and record store owner. The significance of these simple twists of fate are not lost on Mr. Bruton. During the 1960s, Fort Worth's Jacksboro Highway was a guitar player's paradise – a melting pot of musical styles and dicey nightlife that produced an uncanny number of top notch, A-team session players and touring pros like Bruton, T Bone Burnett, Bill Ham, Mike O'Neill, James Pennebaker, Buddy Whittington, Bob Wills, King Curtis, Cornell Dupree, and Delbert McClinton. Yep, Stephen Bruton is indeed a guitarist's guitarist – a journeyman player who described his first solo recording with the classic imagery that characterizes his songs... "The distance from stage right to the center may only be a few feet, but traveling those five feet can take a long time. Some people take all their lives just considering them." Prior to making his first solo recording in 1993, Bruton worked as a sideman, session player, and songwriter, first with Kris Kristofferson, followed by



Delbert McClinton and Glen Clark, and then back to Kristofferson after Delbert's record deal temporarily went south. In the past 25 years or so, Bruton has played with artists as varied as Rita Coolidge, Bob Dylan, Lowell George, Patty Loveless, Geoff Muldaur, James McMurtry, Sonny Landreth, Bonnie Raitt, Booker T. Jones, Don Was, T Bone Burnett, B.W. Stevenson, Carly Simon, Todd Sharp, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore, among others. Bruton's list of song-writing credits includes recordings by Marcia Ball, Bonnie Raitt, Alejandro Escovedo, Patty Loveless, and the *Highwaymen* (Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Johnny Cash). And under *Turner Stephen Bruton* you'll



Bonnie Raitt from Willie's critically acclaimed 1993 release, *Across the Borderline*.

find another credit for "Getting Over You," Willie Nelson's duet with

Stephen Bruton has forged his own unique sound and style, and he effortlessly crosses the lines separating country, rock, folk, blues and jazz. In Fort Worth, those lines simply didn't exist, and in Bruton's world, they never will. Ask any working guitarist who's been around awhile, and they're bound to smile in admiration and respect when they hear Stephen Bruton's name. He's that good, and it's time you discovered that the secret on Mr. Bruton has been out for years.

We first met at an Atlanta show, just before Stephen headed west to begin opening for *Little Feat*. He is a very confident and engaging musician, which is to say, he knows where he's going, he's paid attention to the signs along the road that brought him here, and his influences are as varied as his past. It would be difficult to categorize this man, and why should we? Life is conveniently over-categorized as it is, and a player as slippery smooth and creative as Bruton deserves his freedom. He's earned it. If you're lookin' for insights from a real pro with all the moves, you've come to the right place. When Stephen Bruton looks straight into your eyes though his words and music, you know you're hearing the truth, and we could use a whole lot more of that in this world. Enjoy...

TQR: How and when did you first become hooked on the guitar?

I was raised in a musical family. My mother didn't play at home, although she was a piano player in college, but my dad was a lifelong jazz drummer – primarily bebop, big band.

He could play his ass off, and he was hanging around guys like Leon Breeden, who later started the North Texas State Jazz Band and Jazz School in Denton, Texas. There were a lot of amazing musicians historically in north Texas – Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, T Bone Walker, Ornette



Coleman, King Curtis, Cornell Dupree, Delbert McClinton, Betty Buckley, James Pennebaker, Dean Parks... they all came out of there, and it's always been a hotbed of music. Growin' up in the '50s, you had everything from straight ahead blues to west-

ern swing, to very far out jazz, classical international competitions, even Broadway shows... I think it was unlike any other place on the planet, because there were always so many great players around. The country players were playing jazz, jazz players were playing blues, the blues players were all over the place... T Bone Burnett and I were laughing about the place seeming so unhip at the time, because we both grew up there together. But in hindsight, Ft. Worth had the most amazing players. We would hear that there was this great band playing down the street, and the next thing you know, we'd be hiding under a pool table because we were under age, watching King Curtis and Cornell Dupree. There was just a lot of great music, and there weren't any barriers or boundaries back then. For example, when I was older, I was playing backup guitar for fiddle players who would have fiddle contests with waltz players, hoe-down players, and jazz players. They'd have these cuttin' contests, you know? When I was through playin' there, I'd do the other side of town and get to witness or play in great blues bands. The thing is, the racial tension was not there, and there were no boundaries with the music. It was no big deal. On the radio you had everything from Patty Page to Jimmy Reed, *The Four Tops*, *The Everly Brothers*, and *The Beatles*...

TQR: All on the same station...

On the same station. They were kind of the golden days, when broadcasting was truly broad.

TQR: What inspired you to pickup the guitar?

My dad played concerts at the university, and there was a guy named Charlie Pearson who was playing guitar. That did it. I knew what the guitar was and it was an instrument that I liked. I thought it was cool. My dad started a record store in

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1957, and there were a bunch of kids from the local high school there playing folk music, rehearsing for a talent show. One of the guys played an acoustic guitar and that swept right through me. I thought, "This is it. I dig it!" Being raised in a record store, I could hear everything. My dad was from the Duke Ellington school of music. That is, there are only two kinds of music – good music and bad music. If I was listening to something he'd say, "That's good, but you might want to check this out." If I was listening to some watered down blues he'd slide some Howlin' Wolf at me. As a result, you wound up becoming sort of an FM musicologist while working at a record store.

TQR: What kind of music were you initially playing on the guitar?

I grew up during the great folk scare, which was a great way to learn, because you learned all kinds of flat picking styles and finger picking styles... Mississippi John Hurt, Lightning Hopkins, *The Kingston Trio*. Some cool stuff, man. Still is cool. And it wasn't an electric. I was groovin' around on acoustic stuff that you could play anywhere – in your room – and no one would come in and tell you to turn it down.

TQR: What was your first guitar?

I had a little Gibson LGO mahogany model. My father knew it was important to get a good instrument from the start, and I thought that was the prettiest sound I had ever heard in my life.

TQR: And they still sound good, especially in front of a mike.

Absolutely. Mahogany guitars normally record better than the others.

TQR: How did your guitars evolve from there?



I traded my LGO for a '50s Epiphone Texan. It was all beat up, but it had my name on it, so I traded my LGO for it plus \$15. I still have it. It's not an unfamiliar story – kid gets a guitar, his hobby becomes a passion, and his passion becomes his lifelong work.

TQR: What kinds of gigs did you play early on?

Well, I was *playin'*. I had little folk groups, a bluegrass band... I loved Chuck Berry, so I had a Chuck Berry repertoire and I'd get hired to play Chuck Berry, but I didn't have an electric guitar. They would bring an electric and an amp and put it on me and just say "go." *Wow, this guy's really good – he can play Chuck Berry, but he doesn't have an electric guitar.* I was really attracted to all forms of music, and growing up in a record store, it was around me all of the time.

TQR: Were you self-taught?

I took guitar lessons for about 6 months until my guitar teacher was drafted, and then my father said, "Well, if you're serious, you'll pursue this on your own." I had a good ear, so I did. A few years later, a friend of mine who is an incredible guitar player from Ft. Worth named Bill Ham was taking classical guitar lessons, and I noticed that he seemed to be *unstuck* with his playing, so I started taking classical lessons and learning to read. Now when I'm out in L.A., if I practice, I go take lessons from my friend Ted Greene. Those of us who take lessons from Ted refer to ourselves as Tedheads (laughs). The whole idea is having somebody who knows a whole lot more than you helping you out. I don't know... some people like staying where they are, but I like kind of knowing more than I need to know. It's like operating from above the maze, mentally.

TQR: This is all crystallizing into clues that reveal your early influences, which seem to have become a hybrid blend of styles.

I dug everything from Doc Watson to Mississippi John Hurt, to Earl Scruggs and Bill Keith on banjo, *The Coasters*, *The Five Royales* – the seminal R&B bands. And Chuck Berry... now, he actually played boogie woogie piano on the guitar. Then here come *The Beatles*... I also remember putting on the *Modern Jazz Quartet* before going to school and getting into a real heavy jazz vibe. Louie Armstrong... I loved Louie Armstrong, and Spike Jones, too. Spike Jones knocked me out. He was a huge influence.

TQR: Did you get into the early jazz players of the time, like Barney Kessel?

I really liked Howard Roberts, and I really dug Hank Garland. I think I shied away from jazz because I didn't want to get too serious. I always wanted to keep it this cool hobby. Other people – friends of mine from Ft. Worth like Dean Parks, who has been an A-team guitar player in L.A. for 30 years – those guys went on to North Texas and got serious, but I didn't want to be a schooled musician. I was having too much fun. Now, I wish I had taken it more seriously and had at least delved into theory somewhat. You know how it is –

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hindsight is always 20/20, but you're never too old to go after uncharted territory. Also, I didn't want to make my living playing standards. Little did I know that they're called standards because that's the book (laughs). But I wasn't, and I'm not a jazz player. I like being able to play off of chords and out of chords, but I never went at it academically.

TQR: How did your career progress? At what point did you make the leap from being a semi-serious hobbyist to making a living playing the guitar?

I went to Texas Christian University while the Viet Nam War was going on, and if I'd stopped, I was going to Viet Nam, you know? I earned a degree in journalism, and while that was going on, I was playing gigs all the time – everything from dinner theaters to blues joints in Ft. Worth, and playing with Delbert McClinton here and there. Playing any gig that came along. *Any* gig. When I got my sheepskin and it was time to enter the real world, I found out that my back was keeping me out of active service. A friend of mine was working with *The Band* in Woodstock, New York, and I just wanted to go see how far the guitar thing would take me, so I moved up there and quickly discovered that I had better start woodshedding, 'cause I was a 4th rate guitar player in a town full of truly great players. I got involved in the local scene, and the guys in *The Band* were all there and wound up befriending me, one by one. There were great players like Jim Rooney, Bill Keith and Jim Colegrove, Geoff and Maria Muldaur, Amos Garrett, Richard Bell... The guys in Janis Joplin's



band were up there trying to figure out what their next move was after she passed away. We were all young bucks playin' in pretty innocent times. Then I went into New York to see this guy I had met in Ft. Worth named Kris Kristofferson. Four months later I got a call, he asked me if I wanted to come play, and I said, "Hell, that's *all* I want to do." So I ran off and joined the circus not knowing what would happen. You never do.

TQR: But you gotta show up.

After a few years I left and went with Delbert McClinton and Glen Clark back in Ft. Worth, then their record deal sank, and all of a sudden I was thinkin', "Well, that was interesting. Now I'm back in Ft. Worth doing the same things I swore I'd never do." Then I moved to L.A. and wound up working

again with Kristofferson. He always wanted you to be available for his thing, but at the same time, he wanted you to pursue your own thing, too, so I did a lot of sessions in L.A.

TQR: Were your influences continuing to develop throughout the entire Woodstock period, from Kristofferson, Delbert, and on to L.A.?

To tell you the truth, David, I don't think your influences ever stop. One of the things you have to do as you mature as a musician is to expand your influences and listen to more and more music. As you get better on your instrument, you become more sophisticated, but I don't think it's about becoming a snob. I'm probably more open to music now than I was 20 years ago. There are aspects of all kinds of music today that are attractive. I can sit and listen to Frankie Lee Sims hit one chord out of tune for 20 minutes and think, "That's genius." Or listen to Scofield's new recording and go, "Man, that's fantastic." But I can appreciate them both for their merits – one being primitive, and the other very sophisticated.

TQR: It's all good.

It's all good. You're never gonna be as good as you want to be, and you're never as bad thought you were. You keep climbin.' I don't think becoming sophisticated means that you become a snob. Now, there is a lot of shit that goes on... grunge rock went straight past me, although out of it came some great players. But at one point it was like, "Man, I don't hear a tone, I don't hear musicianship, I don't hear lyrics, I don't hear *nuthin*.' You have to listen a little deeper or wait a little longer, and you'll see that there are some really good players. You can make your blanket decisions, but it's all gonna make a liar out of you sooner or later. Music goes into lulls, and now there seem to be a lot of really good players out there. Everybody talks about how bad music is, but you know what? You just have to look a little harder, because the broadcasting end of it has become so narrow. You're gonna get your mind blown if you keep your ears open.

TQR: Let's go back to your gear for awhile. You must have gone through periods where you latched on to a certain sound or a style – maybe even a *look*. The Stratocaster ought to be added to the Texas state flag, if you ask me.

Yeah, well, growin' up in Ft. Worth, when you're playin' joints down there you're expected to be able to play Hank Williams and country music, western swing, straight ahead blues, Jimmy Reed... You were expected to play lots of different styles and have a pretty good grasp of your instrument. As far as gear goes, I always dug Gibsons, 'cause if you had a Gibson, you had arrived. And as far as amps, there was

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always nothing but Fender amps. A great guitar player and friend of mine named Mike O'Neill swapped me a Gibson SG with a Telecaster pickup and a humbucker in it, but that didn't suit me 'cause the neck moved around too much. Then you start goin' through *all* the instruments. I played a Telecaster for a long time until it got stolen, then I did the whole thing where I played everything from Alembics to archtops and 345's, Les Pauls... I was making money and trying lots of different things. I always played Fender amps... I'll tell you the truth, man – I bought a lot of Fender amps because they had wheels on them. I have a bad back, and when someone would ask me to try a Marshall stack I'd say, "What? Are you kidding?"

TQR: What model of Fender amp did you prefer?

I like Vibrolux Reverbs. I just think they are the most efficient Fender amp, because you can get a really good clean tone and a great overdriven sound, and you can play it in clubs and in sessions. I've played a lot of Twins because they're powerful and everything, but they have a real generic, one-dimensional sound for my taste. But that's cool, too. Then pedals came along, and the first time I heard a phase shifter I thought that was it. But eventually you wean yourself off of all that stuff. You get a few assorted pedals that work for you over the years.

TQR: Did you ever settle on one guitar?



I wound up getting another Telecaster, which I played for a long time, but when I started playing with Bonnie, she wanted me to play a Stratocaster. I really like Strats, but I'm not all that comfortable with them. Because Fenders have such a super high and wide sonic spectrum, they just seemed a little thin, and it was kind of hurtin' my ears. I always dug that humbucker sound, and I have a 335 that I really like, and I got into PRS guitars in the late '80s.

TQR: Did you buy one?

No, I did an album for someone and they gave me this guitar.

TQR: Which model was it?

A Custom 24. I still have it, and it's really nice.

TQR: Have you pretty much latched on to your McCarty now?



Yes, but I like playing different instruments. In the studio, I still play Teles and Strats for certain sounds. Every guitar has a different trademark sound and a different use. About the same time, I started producing some records, and your learning curve goes up on what works, because all of a sudden you're working on the other side of the glass. When you're a session player, sometimes you think, "Why did that producer do that? I wouldn't have gone that way." Ten years later you think, "Oh, I get it. Of course I know why he did that." What happens is you begin to pick and choose guitars not because one is your favorite, but because of what's needed sonically for the song – what fits. So you wind up learning how to use all of these instruments that you've learned to play over the years.

TQR: As you described your influences, so it goes with guitars.

For me personally, what I play through on and off the road and in the studio is a Dumble amp, and if I'm in Texas, I get to play my old 335. I also like to play PRS guitars, and I have a Bastardcaster that I put some weird pickups in. I have a little pedalboard with all of the basic stuff – nothing too exotic.

TQR: How did you wind up playing a Dumble?



I was playing with Christine McVie from Fleetwood Mac, and her guitarist and co-writer was Todd Sharp, who plays with Delbert now. He was telling me about these great amps, and Alexander Dumble came to a rehearsal with one. I met him then, and I thought they were really

good, but it was an expensive proposition, and I had my scene down on the other side of the stage. Fast forward about 8 years. I was in Westwood Music and there was this Dumble

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amp. I plugged into it, then I plugged in another guitar, and another, and the next day I came in with my guitar. The amp was expensive, but what a *great* sound. I called Alexander and I said, "Look, we gotta talk, because I have to get one of these amps. I've just played every guitar through it I can possibly think of, and it beats everything else in the store." Now, I'm speaking just for my own ears... you still can't beat a Tele through a Vibrolux, but it can't do what a Dumble does in terms of scope. A Vibrolux can't turn into an Overdrive Special. So anyway, I went out and saw Alexander, and luckily, he had a bunch of amps there that he was working on, we got along very well, and I was lucky enough to get an amp. Then I got a couple more. They're really great amps – indestructible... He has become one of my best friends.

TQR: And you got in a little early in the game.

Well, I got in before eBay destroyed everything. You can't get a deal on anything anymore. I mean, everybody wants to get as much as they can for something they're selling, but there are also a lot of us that don't do that. We keep placing instruments and amps with other players, and not for top dollar, with the hope that we might get it back at some point if they ever have to sell it. I don't go to guitar shows. I don't like that whole scene. There are a lot of people that buy rare things and just put 'em on the wall, and that pisses me off. These instruments and amps are supposed to be *played*, and played by people who can afford them. It's ridiculous – people paying six figures for a freaking guitar that's just a bunch of wires and wood. Frankly, I don't think there's a Telecaster or Stratocaster made that's worth more than about \$500. Greed is the number one of the Seven Deadlies, you know? And no one is immune to it – I'm not, you're not – but this eBay thing has destroyed anybody gettin' a deal. Yeah, I was able to get the Dumbles when they weren't so expensive...

TQR: How many do you have?

I have three that I use.

TQR: What's so special about them? You know, at \$12,000 for a used Dumble, most people will never be able to play one.

They are all completely different. Alexander builds a very superior amp, and each one is completely hand built for each individual player. I was able to go out there during the final stages, and he wants to see how you play, where your hands are, how you voice chords, and each amp is tuned to you. I've heard amps that he's built for someone else and they weren't voiced correctly for me, but certain people like certain things. He's just one of those guys that has a genius vibe. He can put components together that other people wouldn't even consider. I'm not a tech head, but he can put state-of-the-art compo-



nents next to a Radio Shack part and the result is magic. Some people would say you can't do that. It's wrong. Well, he just did it.

TQR: Sometimes wrong is right.

Exactly. It's like the Friday afternoon Fender amp, you know? They had to have their quota met every day, and maybe an amp went out the door with a different transformer or some other parts were changed. Some of them were super amps and some of them were not so good.

TQR: Your playing style is so lush and rich – a real earful – and the Dumble complements that, no doubt about it.

When I finally got into the Dumble, it gave me a voice that I had never really had before. I got into Class A amps and tried different things... I still love playing my little Vibrolux, and I have little Valco amps that sound great to me that that I use occasionally in the studio, but for me, the Dumble is my voice.

TQR: But consider how long it took you to find that voice... there is a message there.



Well, it's all a journey, you know... What do they say? God invented time so everything wouldn't happen all

at once. You gotta go through all of this stuff to find out what works for you. I've heard a lot of Dumble copies, and that's all they are. They are knockoffs. You can't copy one, and I wish those guys that are making Dumble copies would at least admit that this is their humble attempt at imitation, whether it's amps or speaker cabinets. You can't copy one. He didn't make the same amp twice. He has unbelievably

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good ears and he fine tunes stuff, but he can ballpark them, too. I'd trust him to build me an amp and just send it to me. But you know, there are a lot of great amps today. Those Carr amps are pretty remarkable.

TQR: You're on the road now opening for *Little Feat*. Are you using the same rig that I saw you with here in Atlanta?

Yeah, with a different Dumble.

TQR: But still a 100W 1x12 with an EV speaker?

Yeah. It's a pretty nice sound for just a single 12.

TQR: But you aren't turning the Dumble up to high volumes. The club you played here was more of a "30W" venue.

There is a thing where you have to turn certain amps up to a level to get the good tone goin.' You'll find it. Smaller amps need to be pushed, but with the Dumble, anything above '3' and it's smokin.'

TQR: Has your pedal board remained the same? I know you just got an Analogman Compressor.

Yeah, it's the same other than that.

TQR: Your pedals look as if they have been with you for a very long time. That's a journeyman's pedal board, and I felt as if I was taking a peek into a craftsman's toolbox.



so I wouldn't have to be constantly running to go get this or

I was out in L.A. doing sessions and producing some albums back in Austin, and I needed something like a session board

that, so I did. It has what I normally use – compression, delay, tremolo, Univibe, wah wah, volume pedal, chorus... One thing I have is a TC chorus with that thing Bill Webb does down at Austin Vintage Guitar. It's a very interesting mod on the flanger setting where you're able to get a real Leslie sound. There is an on/off switch and kind of a speed setting so you can hear the Leslie effect ramp up. It sounds fantastic, and I'm able to get a very good phony Leslie sound. When you're doing a 3-piece, you need all of these little cool little things.

TQR: But you don't get tangled up in it.

No, you use it where it's gonna make the most impact. You don't just leave it on (laughs). More and more, I'd like to downsize from what I've got. It's all about what you got in you and what's coming from your hands.

TQR: It's a pretty economical rig, though. You've got a Boss digital delay, a DejaVibe...

I've been using that delay solely for a reverb effect, because I've been using the Line 6, which I really like.

TQR: They're great. You'd have to haul a whole other load of boxes with you to match up with what that unit has to offer.

It's an amazing pedal. It's very true sounding.

TQR: What's this boost your using?

Ah, my favorite pedal. It's a TC boost and distortion pedal. I'd never even used the distortion for like 10 years, and I finally turned it on and it sounds really good.

TQR: Looks like a really old unit that has seen some miles.

Yeah, and I used it mostly just for boost. There are two cool things about that pedal. Number one, you can set the boost and color the tone with the tone control, but it does not color your sound going straight in. It's totally transparent.

TQR: That's what we all want.

The other thing is, and this is really cool... it has an XLR out, so I can use it as an acoustic pedal and send that signal straight to the board for a nice boost on the acoustic.

TQR: They aren't made any more.

No, and the old ones cost a lot of money, but someone should start making them again, because they are very, very func-

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tional. It's like when people started making UniVibes again, you know? When the old ones started going for \$600, it was time to reinvent one. Guitar players are not wealthy people. There's a handful that are, but I consider myself a workin' man, and you have to get this stuff when you can. Five hundred for a pedal is too much.

TQR: Like I said, your board is a workingman's tool. I like it.

The combinations add up to a pretty sophisticated thing, but it doesn't take up a lot of real estate.

TQR: Is your wah an old Vox?

No, it's a Dunlap Cry Baby. I like to use it on sessions for rhythm parts – little stabs, or real slowly with chords, way down in the mix. I love those little things where you're listening and you think, "What the hell is that?" It doesn't draw attention to itself – it just adds without detracting from what you're listening to, like *the song* (laughs).

TQR: The goldtop PRS McCarty you're playing now is stock?



And I've got a black one. John Ingram at PRS has been real good to me and he sent me some new pickups – I think they're number seven – and I gotta say that they woke that guitar

right up. Another one I'm playing is the Jackson Sweet Tone. That's a really fine instrument. I've seen them with Filtertrons, and my friend Mark Goldenburg has one with P90's.

TQR: I just saw him with Jackson Browne on the Tom Petty tour. Wow, what a player!

The guy's unbelievable. We play together when I'm out in L.A. and we get all out in the ether.

TQR: So much power and taste...

Yeah, and the thing I really like about him is that he doesn't play any guitar clichés. He never starts out with some riff... you know... like the rest of us (laughs). He's *unstuck*, and

really brilliant. He's also a Tedhead.

TQR: He produced your latest CD...

Yeah, we have a little bit of a mutual admiration society thing goin' on, although we're two different breeds... What can I say? He's just unstuck. He doesn't play clichés, and he's very, very fresh.

TQR: And you recorded *Spirit World* at Mark's studio didn't you?



Yeah, and I'm really glad I did. When it came time to do the record I realized that I was gettin' much more-bang for the buck doing it

in one place rather than doing it in Texas and overdubs and mixing in L.A. In L.A. the phone wasn't ringing like it would have been in Texas, and we were able to just move in and stay there until it was done rather than having to move stuff in and out because of a session coming in the next day.

TQR: I loved *Spirit World*, and a lot of our friends who have heard it feel the same. Great playing, great songs, and it's produced very well.

I appreciate that. Mark is real good at accentuating the positive. Left to my own decisions, I don't have the objectivity, and I'd let myself off the hook.

TQR: It's hard for you to be the one to say, "That's good enough."

Yeah. Mark would say, "Ahhh, that's good, but you're out of tune." "No I'm not!" "Yeah, you are..." Time for another track. It's good to have an objective opinion – especially from someone you can relate to.



TQR: I'm looking at your Stratocaster, and it looks like you've got a Teisco on the neck and a *what* on the bridge?

A Ricky.

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TQR: An old lapsteel pickup. That's basically your slide guitar, right?

One of them. It's got a huge Warmouth neck on it.

TQR: I think those big-ass necks can make a guitar sound so much better.

I completely concur. It adds a lot to tone, but it's all about what your personal preference is. I had a 345 that, for me, was completely unusable, but it was exactly what they guy I traded with wanted, and his 335 was perfect for me. We both got what we wanted. I judge electric guitars sometimes by whether I can feel the notes resonating in my left hand. When that happens, you know that it's transferring down the neck and not being stopped somewhere.

TQR: Do you like to play them unplugged when you first pick a guitar up?

Absolutely. It gives you a little lead-in. You can tell if a guitar agrees with you when you first pick it up.

TQR: I'm gonna guess that you play a Collings acoustic.

No, I don't, but I *would*. I have several Bourgeois guitars and they're all great, and Collings are magnificent. I've been out to the factory in Austin and he makes fabulous instruments. They're similar to the Bourgeois guitars in that they are both excellent new instruments. The Schoenburg's are also great contemporary guitars.

TQR: Do you prefer the OM body style over a dreadnought?



Yeah, I think it's more even all the way around. Engineers more often look up and say, "We didn't have to do any EQ'ing with that guitar." On stage, they're very well balanced and you don't have to worry about the bass suddenly darkening the sound. It's just real even. And once again, it has mahogany back and sides... I'm sorry, but a D18 in the studio beats a D28 all day long.

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TQR: What kind of acoustic pickups do you use?

Ah... now we're stepping in quicksand. I've never been satisfied with any acoustic pickup, and there are only a couple to me that work. I think nearly every acoustic guitar pickup has the same problem, which is, they start sounding flabby on the E and B strings. A wound E and B string might help... The Amulet pickup has been the best for me. They are expensive, but they have a great sound across the entire fingerboard and up and down the guitar. Baggs makes a good pickup... There are a couple of tricks I learned from playing acoustic guitar gigs... You need to have your monitor up about twice as loud as you normally would, so that you don't bear down with your right hand so hard that the B and E strings start boinking.

TQR: The plink...

Yeah. If you're gonna get an acoustic guitar and play in a band, you should get one of those Rick Turner Renaissance guitars, because they sound brilliant and they will never feedback. I used one on *Spirit World*. It looks like a solidbody guitar, but it's chambered, and it has a very good piezo pickup. It has a tone control that rolls the bass off without losing the highs, or rolls the highs off without losing the bass (laughs). I'm not sure which, but what happens is you get a really nice acoustic sound without any feedback or that boinky sound. It's really great, and Rick Turner makes a superior instrument, I believe. But there's nothing that replaces a good acoustic guitar with a microphone in front of it. Maybe it's time we revert back to that, folks, because we've all spent a fortune going the other way. I played an acoustic show up in Ann Arbor not too long ago, and I played with a really nice old Martin and just a microphone. There it is... didn't cost a dime. It was great and I loved it.

TQR: Of all the people you've played with, I'm most envious that you had the opportunity to play with Lowell George.

I just came off the road with *Little Feat*...

TQR: Yeah, and Lowell put so much in my mind... He really knew how to get a song across, both with a guitar and his voice, and you have the same talent. So many performers don't succeed in selling the song to the extent that you're feeling the emotions of the songwriter right down to your boots.

I appreciate you saying that, and after working with so many great singers and songwriters, I think it's most important to be sure you're telling the truth. That's why so many people can identify with singers like Kristofferson or Dylan. They're telling the truth. I can't sing like Malford Milligan or any of

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my favorite singers, but if I can tell the truth, then I think I can get my point across. I'm not a singer's singer, and there are damn few that are. You got to be truthful to yourself.

TQR: Why do you think that some really special bands never gain the altitude that they should? I'm thinking of bands like *Storyville*, and the *Arc Angels*, for instance. Both of them produced some exceptional, timeless music, but the balloon came down pretty quick. The individual efforts that followed from the various members of those bands haven't seemed to equal the groups' accomplishments.



A great band is a product of the sum of the parts. Some bands just sound like four guys, because they aren't giving up the ego. Ego can be a good thing, but

when you're in a band, you gotta play without ego. You gotta play for the song.

TQR: Isn't there a whole lot of magic to it as well that we really can't hope to understand?

Well, *hell yeah*. Why do you think we got into this? How can a certain series of chords somehow bring everybody to tears without any words at all? It's *absolutely* magic.

TQR: And that's what gets into your blood. It's why you play.

Yeah, that's how *my* molecules got altered – still are. (Whispering) I tried to get out and it keeps pulling me back.

TQR: Are you happy with the way *Spirit World* turned out? Enjoying playing the new songs?

Yeah, I'm very happy with it. It's a blessed situation to do what you truly love to do for a living. I've never taken it for granted, and hopefully, I never will. It's all a gift. **TO**

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James Pennebaker

R E V E A L S

the *Funky Side* of FORT WORTH, TEXAS...



Musically speaking, Fort Worth, Texas is a pretty good place to come from, and Texas in general has always been a melting pot of musical styles. I'm not sure exactly why that is, but I'm glad for it. I suppose it's partly because there haven't always been all

the labels that society makes us put on things today. Everything was wide open at one time. Texas meant wide-open spaces, and people migrated there from everywhere. When I was coming up, if you were going to play music in Fort Worth, you'd better be able to cover your stylistic bases. The audiences demanded it, and the musical soil was so rich that you couldn't help but absorb a little bit of all of it. That went for the audiences as well as the musicians.

The pioneers of western swing like *The Lightcrust Doughboys*, *Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies*, *Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys* all called Fort Worth home, as did Black Ace, Cornell Dupree, King Curtis, Ornette Coleman, Delbert McClinton, Glen Clark, Bruce Channel, Ray Sharpe, Johnny Carol, T. Bone Burnett, Bloodrock, Dean



Parks, Stephen Bruton, and Townes Van Zandt. These veterans of soul, jazz, blues, folk, rock-a-billy and rock music and most of their sidemen all came out of Fort Worth. It was either their birthplace, or they spent their formative years working there.

Nashville has *The Grand Ole Opry*, Shreveport, Louisiana had *The Louisiana Hayride*, and Fort Worth had *The Cowtown Jamboree*, originating from the downtown Texas Hotel (where JFK spent his last night on earth). Broadcast live on the radio, it was later moved to Panther Hall on the city's East Side, where Bob Wills once held court along with all of the big names in country, western swing and rock-a-billy. The old Jacksboro Highway was a legendary (and dangerous) place where you could hear blues, jazz, rock & roll, country, big band and western swing on any given night of the week. The Highway was where the upper crust college kids would go slummin' alongside gangsters and prostitutes. I've heard Delbert tell fascinating stories about the old Jacksboro Highway, or Texas 199, as it's more formally known. His bands *The Straight Jackets* and later, *The Ron-Dels* would serve as the backup band for the likes of

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