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Scott Henderson

School's In Session

By Johnny DeMarco & Tiffany Schirz



Is it jazz? Rock? Blues? No – it's the one and only Scott Henderson, famous for his bold and boundary-shattering compositional approach and his unique, transcendent guitar voice. Scott's soaring improvised melodies and advanced phrasing bloom over complex harmonic structures, separating him from the rest of the guitar pack. Scott has drawn from his blues and jazz roots while maintaining an unmistakable rock edge, to fuse a style all his own.

Homegrown out of South Miami, Scott's musical foundation rests on classic blues and rock guitarists from the likes of Albert Lee, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Jimi Hendrix to guitarists like Allen Holdsworth and John Scofield, as well as jazz greats Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

After finishing school at Florida Atlantic University, Scott moved to Los Angeles, and has since performed and recorded with modern day greats like Chick Corea's Electric Band, violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, bassist Jeff Berlin, and onto a four-year stay in the Joe Zawinul (Weather Report) Syndicate group.

Scott later co-formed Tribal Tech with bassist Gary Willis, creating nine critically acclaimed albums. In 1991, he was named by Guitar World as the #1 Jazz Guitarist, and in 1992, he was named #1 Jazz Guitarist in Guitar Player's annual readers' poll. Scott later broke out with his first solo blues effort, Dog Party, and now enjoys a stint as a longtime faculty member of the renowned Musicians Institute located in Hollywood, California.

Recently, BOSS was able to get together and talk guitar shop with the down-to-earth Scott Henderson.

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Some say you're a blues/jazz guitarist with roots in blues and rock. I'd say you're the total guitarist. Did you always strive to have your own voice, or did this just happen for you?

That's a hard question. I think most guys just transcribe and learn from many, many different players, and after playing for so many years, it just sort of happens – you just become who you are. My thing has really been to just try to stretch out and listen to as many different players as I can, so as not to be too much like one, though a lot of people hear Jeff Beck influence in my playing, and jazz people hear Scofield's influence in my playing. Still, when I play, I know it sounds like me.

Who was the first guitarist to inspire you?

Jimmy Page. I remember being at home and listening, and back then, they were playing tunes like, "Whole Lot of Love" on AM radio – even with the middle part [*both laugh*] – which really influenced me a lot, and when I heard his solo on that tune, I was, like, "That's it for me!" I knew that's what I wanted to do.

Out of all the wonderful groups and musicians you've played with, do you feel you've accomplished your direction in music, or are you always on a continuous musical journey?

Definitely continuous. I never know what I'm going to do from one minute to the next, actually, because I'm not trying to write in any particular style when I sit down to write music. I'm kind of a record company's worst nightmare, that way, because they don't know whether to put me in the Blues section, or the Rock section, or the Jazz section. I like a lot of different styles of music, and I want to be able to just create whatever I want to create when I do it. So yeah, I'm definitely kind of a work in progress, that's for sure. I'm hoping that I haven't peaked, yet [*laughs*].

Can you tell us a little bit about your latest release, "Scott Henderson Live?"

We recorded that at La Ve Lee (in Studio City, CA). I'm not a big fan of that record – it's not my best playing, not my worst – it's just sort of a night that happens and I'm trying to live with it [*laughs*].

When you play around the world, do you find that you receive an even greater gratification from fans, especially in South America, Japan, the Middle East, the Far East, Europe, and everywhere you go – is music accepted differently in these areas of the world compared to America?

Scott: Yeah, way differently, actually. America's got some cultural difficulties [*both laugh*]. Jazz, and some other types of eclectic music are just not popular here, unfortunately. It's different just about everywhere else in the world. Almost everywhere else, jazz music and more progressive, eclectic types of music are listened to so much more widely. Even in places like McDonald's, you'll hear Coltrane, or Charlie Parker.

Let's talk a little about your equipment. What guitars do you use today, and why do you choose these guitars?

I use John Suhr guitars, because I think he's making the best vintage Strats – of course they're brand new – but they sound vintage. They're light, the pickups are the best, the quality of the work is the best, and they're easy to play. It's basically like having a vintage Strat that's easy to play. John has nailed the Fender vintage pickup big time – that's why I play them.

I know you've been using Roland and BOSS gear for years. Tell us which Roland and BOSS pieces you've used in the past.

I've used almost every BOSS pedal ever made at one point. The main piece of gear that remains consistent is the **SE-70**, because that's the most powerful multi-effects processor that you can get for it's size, and I found it does even more than a lot of the one-space rack stuff. I use the delays, and they work fine for me – I have a cool delay set that kind of emulates reverb.

A few months back, I gave you this pedal, the new BOSS FV-500L Volume Pedal. What do you think of it?

I used the FV-300 for 15 or 20 years, and it's a great pedal. The [FV-500L](#) is even better than the 300 – it's a big improvement. One of the things that I noticed was that it sounds better – the tone sounds fuller. The other thing is that the adjustment, the feel of the pedal is way more accurate.

Do you adjust it yourself?

Yeah, and the throw knob is really nice, though I don't really use it that much, because I usually have it on full off and on. Also, it's super durable; I'd say it's the best volume pedal I ever tried!

Last week, you told me you bought a new RC-2 Loop Station by BOSS. What do you think of it? You've got a unique thing going in how you use it, right?

Oh, that thing is killer. The main reason that I need a looper is because I need to go out in the PA and check my tone, because, a lot of times, we're working with engineers that we don't know. So I like to use the loop pedal to just play and sample my sound like it's gonna be,

and then go out and help sound check on the floor and tell the guy what I like and what I don't.

That's really interesting, because most people wouldn't think to use the RC-2 like that.

The [RC-2](#) is really helpful at sound check – I can hear the whole band play while I'm out at the sound board, and I can hear myself playing, and the fact that you can actually play for such a long time is amazing. I can't believe there's all that memory in that little pedal!

Yeah, you've got sixteen minutes! Have you messed with the drum patterns at all?

Oh, yeah, sure, I totally use them. I've already got five or six standards in there that I can just play to, and two of the grooves that I play in the concert.

How does the modern equipment perhaps affect how people can learn – for instance with the RC-2?

I remember when I was really young and first learning the guitar, my biggest tool was my Panasonic cassette recorder, where I would record myself playing chords and then jam over it. Nowadays, that is so low tech compared to what's out now: you can just press a pedal, play some chords and have a bunch of stuff stored inside it where you can immediately play over different stuff. It's so nice, so user friendly...and you can even sample stuff and slow it down to learn solos and stuff like that.

Do you have any words of wisdom for young, aspiring guitar players?



If I had any words of wisdom, I would just say that transcription is really the key to everything. I mean, some guys think, “Ok, I’ve gotta go to music school, and I’ve gotta spend a lot of money to do this, or to do that, or to learn that.” Music school really is just about communicating to other people what to call this, or what to call that. It’s never gonna substitute for doing the work of just sitting down and learning stuff from your records. That’s how ninety percent of the great musicians today have learned how to play – by listening to other players, copying them at first, but discovering your own voice later. You copy from a lot of different people and keep your range as wide as possible – that’s really the key to getting better, faster. The more input there is, the more output there is.

I remember, in an interview, Steve Morris saying that it takes a couple of months to really work something into his playing where it feels like it becomes a piece of his vocabulary.

Oh, yeah, because anything you learn is just like another word. If you have to stop and think how to pronounce it, you’re not going to speak it in an eloquent way. You have to learn it so that you know it so well that you forget it, and it comes just like we talk – we don’t think about the words we say, we just think about the ideas we’re trying to convey.

It’s the same thing with music. You learn the language and you learn it as well as you can so you can forget about it and just speak, but it does take time. And usually, unfortunately, by the time something is learned well enough so that it shows up naturally in your playing, you’re already sick of it and working on something else [*both laugh*].

That’s the continuous journey, right?

That’s the continuous thing. We all have to remember that it’s different for the person that’s listening to us than it is for us. Your mission should be to just grow and get more vocabulary, and still be happy with what you’ve got.

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More info on Scott Henderson can be found at www.scotthenderson.net.