



JOHNNY HILAND
Big BOSS Man
By Johnny DeMarco

Johnny Hiland is one of the fastest rising guitar stars in the world. Signed to Steve Vai's Favored Nations label, Johnny can rip and shred with the best, possessing lightning chops that are equally precise as they are blindingly fast. At the same time, he can play a slow blues or mournful country ballad with enough soul to bring a tear to your eye. "I think Johnny is the most versatile guitar player I've ever heard," said country-guitar great Ricky Skaggs. "From Bill Monroe to Eddie Van Halen, he can play it all."

Roland and BOSS recently had the privilege to sit down with virtuoso guitar picker Johnny Hiland in Hollywood, CA, after his amazing guitar clinic at a local retailer. All who witnessed the event were speechless.

Here are some of the highlights of our conversation.

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Welcome to Hollywood, Johnny.

It's a real pleasure being here, I'll tell you!

During the clinic, you told the story of your childhood, and how you got into the guitar. Can you retell it for the Roland and BOSS audience?

Oh, yeah. I basically grew up in a little town called Woodland, Maine. I was born with an eye condition called Nystagmus, which is a real funky disease, and not many eye doctors out there know how to deal with it. There's no laser surgery or anything like that, so, it was very hard for me as a kid to be able to open up a guitar magazine and read, or learn from tablature, or to watch Hot Licks videos, or anything like that. I really couldn't see when they were doing. A lot of guitar players, when they teach, they don't slow anything down enough for you to really grasp onto it. So since I've been in guitar instruction myself, that's been a goal of mine — to take everything I play and slow it down for people to really grasp onto it.

Maybe that's why you developed your ear so well.

Well, y'know, I learned by playing the CDs. I mean, there are so many wonderful guitar players that have inspired me through the years, one, namely, being Danny Gatton. Danny was like a box of chocolates — he can be in any different flavor. But bluegrass was my first love, and I was a big Tony Rice fan. I was playing a flat top — that's all I had, and at age ten, my mom and dad sent me to see Ricky Skaggs at the auditorium in Bangor, Maine. That's what changed my

life. I was just totally floored by Ricky, and that's when I told my parents, "I want to put the flat top down and go to the electric." And, of course, they were thinking, "Oh, God, here come the effects and amplifiers, and whatnot." And I said, "Well, I could have been a drummer y'know!" [*Laughs.*] But Ricky was really the main reason I turned to electric guitar, and I must tell you, for all the folks listening out there, the first pedals I really got turned on to were BOSS pedals. Moving to Nashville in '96, I had a little BOSS treble box, a TU-series tuner, the CS-3 Compressor, the BD-2 Blues Driver, and a DD- 3 Delay.

I actually found an old CS-2 compressor, and I found the old three-knob red analog delay Boss had [DM-2] and, of course, the Blues Driver. But, then, I got turned on to the DS-1, and I've just been turned onto the new Mega Distortion [MD-2].

You're not only a virtuoso bluegrass/country chicken picker, but you like all kinds of guitar players and different styles. How do you take bits and pieces of everything you know and come up with your own style?

Well, y'know , it's funny you asked that, because I was talking about my influences. People ask, "Who's your favorite guitar player?" That's a hard question to answer, because for me, it's like this. Blues: Steve Ray Vaughn, Albert King, Albert Collins, Danny Gatton, Roy Buchanan. Rock: Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Paul Gilbert, Allan Holdsworth, Tom Morello, Mark Tremonti, just so many people. The list goes on and on. But in the country field, man, that's where my heart was when I was growing up: Jimmy Bryan, Albert Labrum, Mason, Ricky Skaggs, Steve Wariner, Vince Gill, Brad Paisley, y'know, there's just a plethora of guitar players.

And then, of course, there's jazz: I love George Benson, Wes Montgomery, and of course Jimmy Bryant fits into that category. I really got turned onto Chet [Atkins]. Chet was not just a country player, but he also had some really pretty jazz runs that he'd play.

But for me, boiling the styles was all about trying to become an individual player. I was trying to have an individual sound and technique, my own voice, and a way for people to recognize my playing. I didn't want to become one of the players where someone would say, "Man, he sounds so much like Danny Gatton," or "He sounds so much like Steve Vai." I wanted it to just be Johnny.

I love bending strings, I love doing country-steel guitar bands, and I sit with old Merle Haggard records, and old Buck Owens records, and hear that old steel guitar. I just dig that country stuff. Y'know, even the first time I ever played in front of Vai, Tony McAlpine was sitting on the couch, and they were laughing. All I was doing was playing Chet style stuff y'know, but it's a happy style of playing, and that's what I really loved about it. People may call it a hillbilly style of playing, but they realize, once they try it, it's quite difficult. You have no effects to hide

behind, or anything like that. Maybe a little slap or maybe a little compression or spring reverb, but the main thing is, it's a happy style, and so I thought it would be really cool if I could mix some arpeggio sweeps and some finger tapping.

But, really, for me, blending the styles, came pretty naturally. I devised this high/low/high/low pattern where I would construct solos from just starting in a lower register and working high. I've described it as being like a pool player setting up his next shot. And that's really how I approach a solo — I'm like a pool player. I might send a couple of balls in the corner pockets, but the cue ball is gonna circle around and set up for the next shot. That's where I wanted to be as a player; I wanted to play comfortably so I could enjoy my audience, have communication with my bandmates on stage, but that high/low/high pattern enabled me to start adding other licks, y'know, from different genres, and that was the most important thing.

Tell us a little about your latest record.

Well, actually, man, this record came out in August of 2004, and man, I'm so proud of this record. I'll never forget the day my manager, Mac Wilson, came to me outside my studio door one day, and said, "Man, I let Steve Vai hear it." And when Steve came back and offered me a shot to start sending him material, I was so blown away with that. What a blessing to be asked by one of your heroes of all time to take part in his label, and to have him help you write songs, or to put your songs together and make a great record. And, so, this record means a lot to me, because it's the first one out of the barrel. I was so excited because we had sat in with the G Three tour, with Joe Satriani, Steve, and Yngwie Malmsteen, which was so awesome because I've always been a fan of all three of those guys.

You talked earlier about some of your BOSS pedals. Tell us about your other Roland and BOSS gear.

I just recently got turned onto the Micro-CUBE. There needs to be a law against how much fun you can have in hotel rooms with the Micro-CUBE! Man, that little amp is cool as sh*t! [*Laughs.*] I tell you, there's been so many little pocket amps, and y'know, you've always gotta hook up some kinda pedal rig up to it, or hook something to get your effects, or to at least get a tone you're happy with, but not the Micro-CUBE. You have all your delays, your phases, choruses, reverbs. It's been so much fun! I've had a lot of people go, "Darn, man, the tone on that tape is a killer, what are you using?" "They think I'm using some big rig or something, and I tell 'em it's a Roland Micro-CUBE, and they say, "You've gotta be kidding me!" And it has so many voices, man. I mean, you can play jazz, it's got a heavy metal tone in it — you can even get a Danny Gatton rockabilly tone.

Looking at your pedalboard, we saw a couple other BOSS pedals in there, including a DD-20 delay.

Yeah, the Giga Delay. I'll tell you what. With that delay unit, the analog delay sounds very analog, and the tape delay feature is just a killer, because you can get that little echo slap, and I just really dig that. I've used the DD-3 and DD-5 in the past, but the Giga Delay just offers so much more. I love the tap tempo feature, having the preset modes....

I'm also using the DD-20 to take a tape or an analog delay or even a digital sound and work it around another delay. In a studio, that sounds killer, man. You can run separate lines so that you can pan your delays — have one delay in the center, and pan the other two out. The DD-20 offers so many different delays, and you have so many capabilities with it.

You mentioned the rotary pedal, earlier. Have you checked out the BOSS RT-20 yet?

Yeah. It was funny, 'cause we were at the NAMM show, and you know how NAMM is: There are 900 people coming up to you wanting to talk. And, so I got to hear it a little bit through some headphones, but I knew I wanted to buy one of those. I heard the big swirl, and I was like, "Wow!"

And, of course, I'm a huge fan of the TU-2. I mean, the tuner in that is amazing. I'm a big fan of the TU-8 and TU-12, too, but the TU-2 being in a pedal form is just awesome?

We love having you play BOSS and Roland, Johnny.

Thanks, man. You guys make such wonderful stuff, and I'm real excited to get my studio running. So, for all you drummers out there, look out, 'cause Johnny's gonna be getting some V- drums!

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Visit Johnny online at www.johnnyhiland.com.