

# Guitarist

JULY / AUGUST 1992

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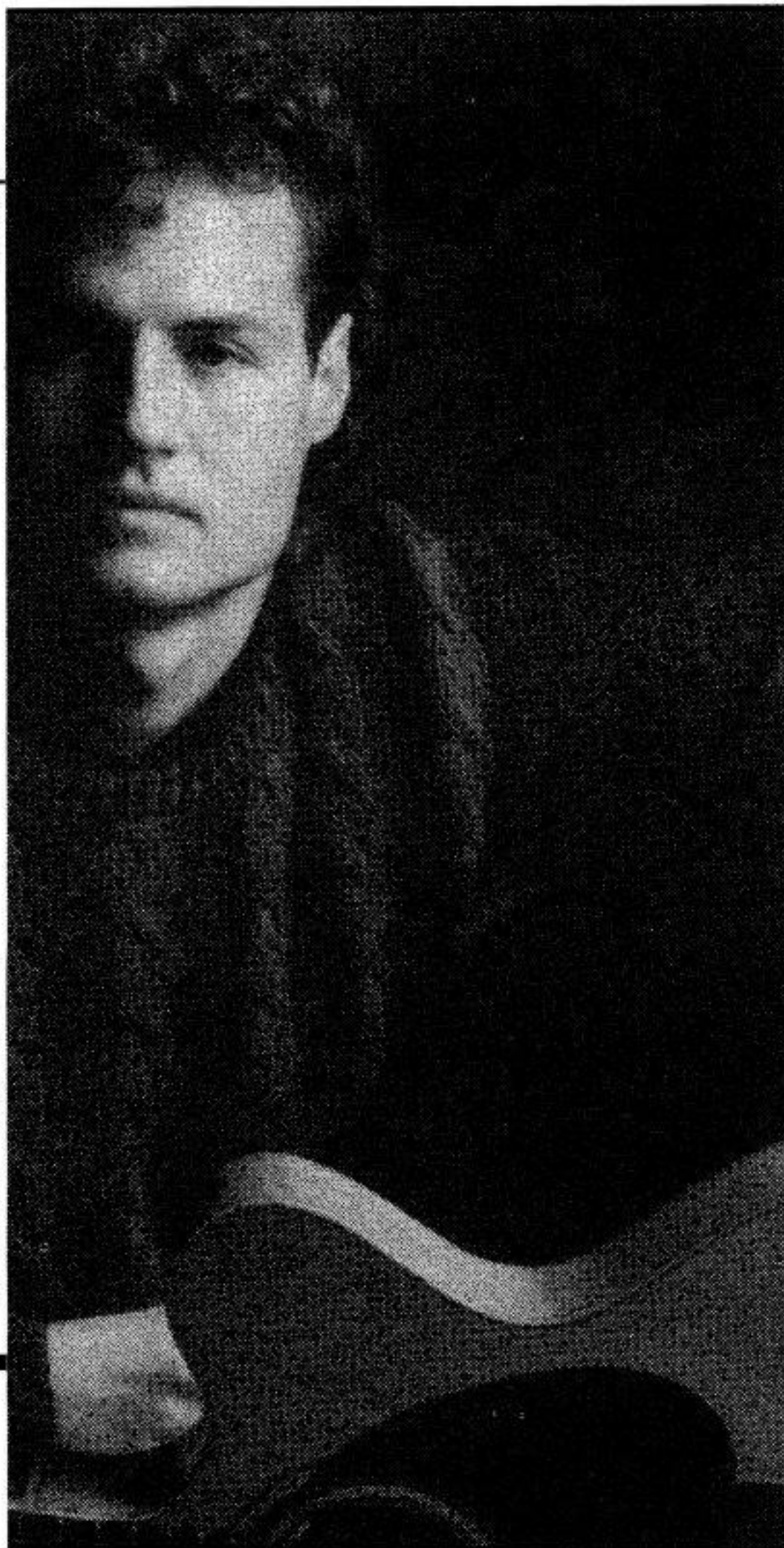
VOL. 8 NO. 3

## BORDERTOWN INTRIGUE

w i t h

## PRESTON REED

SEE PAGE 3.



**INSIDE:** The **MINNESOTA MANDOLIN ORCHESTRA** will perform at the July **Minnesota Guitar Society Forum**, July 19, 2 p.m., MacPhail Center for the Arts (1128 LaSalle Ave., Mpls.). Admission is free. See article written by Jack El-Hai—pg. 2—for more on the burgeoning mandolin orchestral movement ... **PETER RYKHUS** belts out those low-down, dog-faced blues—pg. 7. Steve Howard on **ROB SOLBERG**, lead guitarist with ZAYNE GREY—pg. 5 and **Guide Tone Improvisation** with **KEVIN DALEY**—pg. 10.

# Mandolin orchestras are springing up everywhere

By Jack El-Hai

**I**N 1990, I HEARD for the first time a genuinely good mandolin orchestra. It was the Louisville Mandolin Orchestra, an ensemble organized just a few years earlier by a bluegrass mandolinist who wanted to join others in playing the wealth of mandolin-orchestra music from the early decades of this century. With first mandolin, second mandolin, mandola, mandocello, guitar and even mandobass sections, along with piano, the Louisville group produced a big, plucked-string sound.

And fortunately, its members had stretched their repertoire beyond the pieces and arrangements—some great, some wretched—that American music publishers churned out by the tens of thousands between 1890 and 1925, when the mandolin rivaled the parlor piano as this country's most popular recreational instrument. The Louisville Orchestra has tapped the great quantity of contemporary European plectral ensemble music and has commissioned several works of its own.

I returned from Louisville wanting to start a mandolin orchestra in Minnesota. It wasn't too hard to do, because I met many other mandolinists and guitarists who wanted the same thing. So the Minnesota Mandolin Orchestra held its first meeting in the spring of 1991. Since then, we've multiplied in size, found a music director, settled on a repertoire, and played on the radio, at corporate events, at community and bluegrass festivals, at a Civil War era ball, and at many other places not quite as colorful.

Just as important for me, however, is that I've caught a few strands of the thread of American mandolin orchestra history. During the instrument's peak years, mandolin orchestras were launched in hundreds of U.S. communities, and few colleges and universities were without one. As these groups dwindled in number to perhaps 15 or 20 by the mid-1980s, many of their players pushed far beyond the boundaries of senior citizenship. The entire tradition of mandolin-orchestra playing was threatened with extinction.

A turnaround came a few years later, and today about 25 mandolin orchestras are active, the best being in Louisville, Providence, Baltimore, Portland (Oregon), New York, Los Angeles and Berkeley. I believe an influx of bluegrass players in-

terested in expanding their horizons is largely responsible for this revival, although the efforts of the Classical Mandolin Society of America and the popularity of such groups as the Modern Mandolin Quartet should get some credit.

Minnesota, like virtually every other state, has a mandolin orchestra tradition. At the turn of the century, at least three orchestras were active in the Twin Cities. One, the Columbine Mandolin Orchestra, was a St. Paul youth ensemble, and its organizational records are preserved in the manuscripts collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. Its by-laws contain admonitions against spitting, fighting and insulting girls during rehearsals.

Two other groups were presumably less rowdy. Frederick T. Swanson, a Red Wing native and ragtime composer, started the Twin Cities Mandolin Club in St. Paul in the 1890s, and the group thrived for several years. In Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota Mandolin Club frequently toured the state at the turn of the century, often performing in tandem with the university's glee club. Many other groups probably also formed.

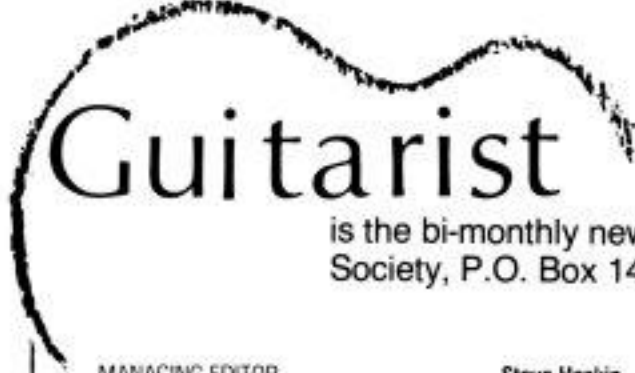
These groups came together with the encouragement of the Gibson instrument company of Kalamazoo, Mich., which derived much of its profits from 1900 to 1930 from its line of flatbacked mandolins, mandolas, mandocellos and mandobass. (The mandobass, which has not

been commercially manufactured in the U.S. for more than 60 years, is a four-stringed, upright fretted bass, tuned in fifths and played with a pick.)

During this time, mandolin orchestras played a quaint pastiche of compositions ranging from Sousa marches and popular song and dance arrangements to ambitious, but rarely successful, transcriptions of such classical works as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and overtures from grand opera. Many of today's poorer mandolin orchestras still adhere to this basic repertoire, perhaps because the music is familiar and continues to be easily available through libraries and garage sales. (True—the Minnesota Mandolin Orchestra has played many pieces whose parts we found at Twin Cities garage sales!)

Fortunately, the mandolin orchestra is no longer an ensemble threatened with extinction. Mike Marshall, a bluegrass mandolinist and member of the Modern Mandolin Quartet, keeps saying, "The mandolin is the instrument of the '90s!" Maybe he's right. The Minnesota Mandolin Orchestra is doing its part to keep things alive by playing a wide range of music, including classical, big band jazz, bluegrass, ethnic and popular. Later this year, we'll give perhaps the North American premiere of an 18th century mandolin concerto by Guiseppe Giuliano.

**Any player of mandolin, mandola, mandocello, guitar, mandobass or string bass who wants to join us can call me at 931-9853.—Jack El-Hai**



## Guitarist

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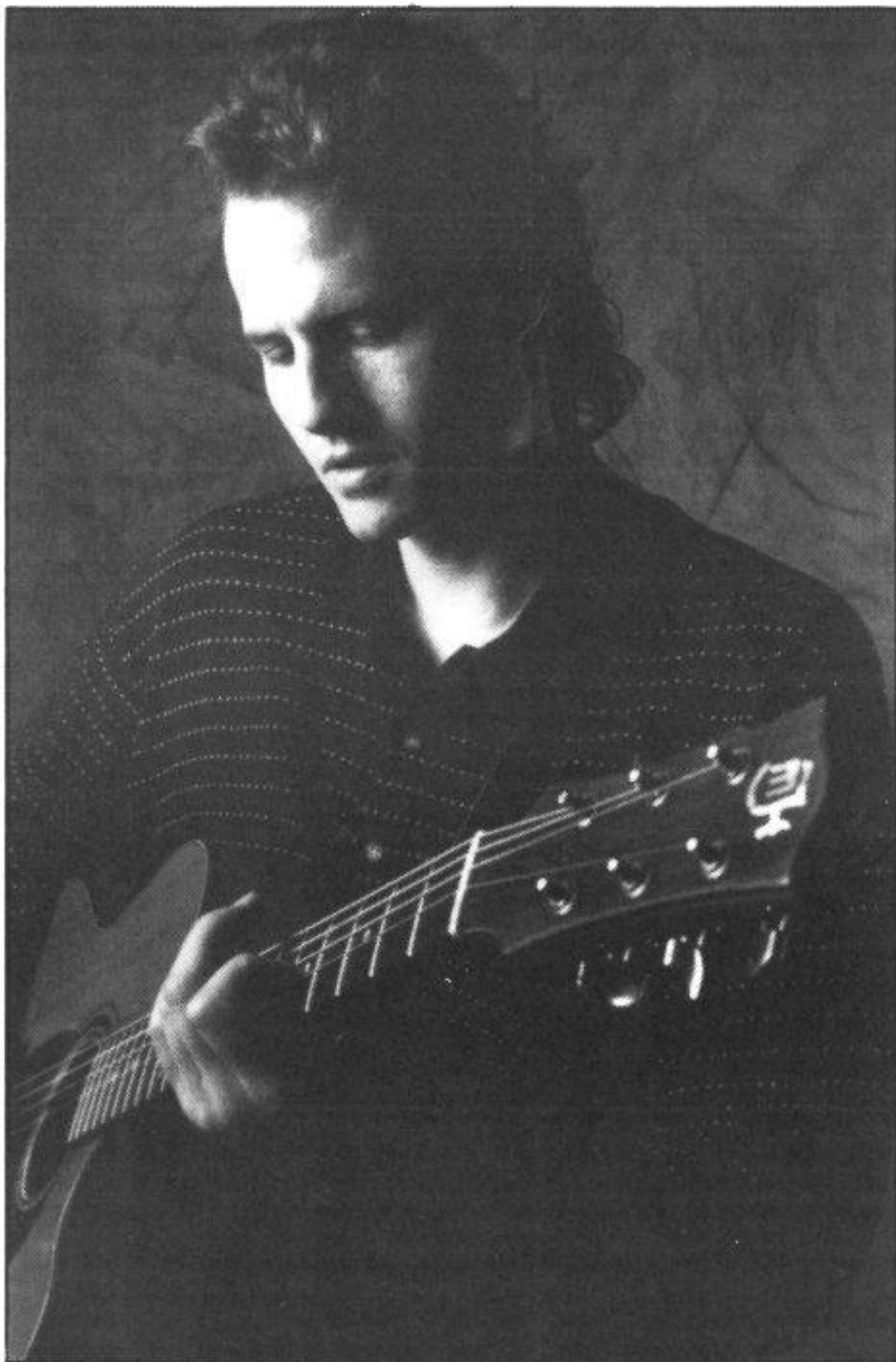
## A Song is a Bordertown

### Preston Reed & the solo acoustic guitar

By Tim Dzubay

*MUSIC IS A PHENOMENON* akin to religion. To many it is more influential and meaningful than the often nebulous concept of the god we are taught to believe in. This strange force, a simple arrangement of the same airwaves that comprise white noise, is worshipped every day in thousands of customs and rituals. Humans wake to music and eat their breakfasts with sounds drifting in the background. Many cannot fall asleep without some colorful and soothing tune caressing their ears. We listen in our cars, boats and airplanes. We indulge while jogging and walking, while working in the house and while fighting personal problems. Music pervades nearly every aspect of human thought, word and action, and is so important that many spend their entire lives actualizing the gilded dream of sharing their music with the world. Truly gifted musicians give us a commodity that is priceless: beyond the mere tickling of the eardrums with sweet noise is the opportunity to commune with an intimate and personal transcendent.

Specifically, there is something about an acoustic guitar that seems to touch human emotion with an economy very few instruments approach. It conveys a sense of familiarity and comfort like that of an old friend. We confide in its brash and soothing tones. We find sanctuary in the halls of its brittle strings and mahogany structure. But there seems to be more to the acoustic guitar experience than this. All tired phrases aside, it tells a lot about the musician, perhaps more than mere words can describe. In the hands of a masterful musician and composer, the guitar produces a synesthesia of sight and sound that brings us closer to our own experience while introducing us to the foreign territory of the person behind the music.



“A SONG IS A BORDERTOWN,” explains Preston Reed, a Northeastern-born guitarist who has made Minnesota his home for the past six or seven years. “It’s on the edge. Borders are the only place where interesting things happen.” The title of his future release—*Bordertown*—implies much about his character, persona and music. His records bear the foreboding “Capital Nashville Master’s Series” label, but his simple house and tall somewhat lanky frame suggest none of the trappings of an arrogant virtuoso. Quite the opposite, Preston’s manner is friendly and inviting. I met Reed a few weeks ago at his house to discuss the mystery of his music.

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**REED, from 3**

"It's really no mystery," he explained to me. He searched for some words while staring out his front window at the sunny street beyond. A smile grew on his lips. "It's like fishing. You occasionally get something you like. The point is that you have to cast out your line a lot. You're guaranteed to eventually get something that way." He records ideas on a tape, develops the interesting riffs and discards the rest. "It doesn't matter if you come back later and don't like a piece. The important thing is that it's on tape if you do want to use it."

Reed sat on one hand and held his mug of coffee with the other. I asked some technical questions about his music and his instruments, which he answered blithely. I knew there was something missing in his explanation, though. There was something deeper to his music that we weren't discussing. It wasn't until the relationship between instrument and musician was raised that I discovered what it was.

Reed said very little about the strange marriage between him and his Michael Jacobson Hardy acoustic and, on his most recent album, a custom guitar made by local luthier James Olson. His deep-set, daydreamish eyes do not reflect the electricity of such songs as "Driving School," and "Time Will Tell." There is a personality behind the calm Preston Reed that is only discernible when a guitar is present to remove the veil. The liner notes in *Blue Vertigo* sum it up this way:

*"The music comes from a single source. This makes it a clean, ef-*

*fective presenter of ideas. Because a guitar is touched by human hands without intermediate steps, it conveys a tactile familiarity and warmth. You are hearing a single pair of hands do something they've been doing for a long time. You get to know that person very well." (Preston Reed)*

The writing process, as he explained to me earlier, is merely mechanical. It is the trial and error "creating of a vamp and then finding a compatible thing to add over and interact with that," he said. Usually the musical ideas come first and the task of titles is afterthought. Sometimes, however, he discovers or experiences something that must be put to music. I asked him about a song from *Blue Vertigo* titled "Franzl's Saw, Parts 1 and 2."

"There was this restaurant called 'Franzl's' that my high school friends and I used to drink beer at. The owner was this German war veteran that used to tell stories while he was getting blasted with us. Sometimes he'd play the saw when it was late and it was just us around." The song is an imitation of the sound of the saw and a representation of "the mood of those nights," says Preston.

*Bordertowns* resulted from a dinner with friends from Texas. He wanted to develop something musical based on the idea of borders. "The metaphor of borders is what I'm doing. It's where I've been and where I want to be as a musician. I want to interact. I want to cross over and have different things that you wouldn't expect to interact."

Expression without words is a difficult and unique task. Solo acoustic artists are breaking into the mainstream of music, though it has been a long and painstaking process. What they offer is more of a challenge to listeners than the often vacuous selections heard on the radio today. The solo artist demands attention and thought. Our microwave, instant culture has trained most musicians and fans to gloss over and swallow most music as if the radio were a box of chocolate raisins. Artists like Reed allow interpretation and interaction with careful listening. His music dissolves the borders between music and listener, and between musician and instrument.

It would be easy to lump Reed into a convenient category and forget his music, but he has been blessed with a rare talent that separates him from other artists: he has the ability to transcend the medium of his expression. What is received by the listener is not just music, but a piece of his soul. ■

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## Rob Solberg's clean living and heavy leads

By Steven E. Howard



**R**OB SOLBERG and his mates in Zayne Grey are shopping around a tape featuring some tasty melodic rock they hope will attract the interest of a label. Armed with a full measure of confidence in their talent and original material, they won't compromise by playing covers. Integral to their sound is Solberg's fiery, rave-up guitar-slinging. He demonstrates his ideas with whistle-clean execution.

Zayne Grey's music shows a preference for more thoughtful lyrics, for which Solberg's playing is extremely well suited. Solberg displays an intelligence in his approach to music and to his lifestyle—uncommon in the local rock scene and in a person of relative youth—he's 23 years old.

"At the moment, I'm trying to lose myself in the music more, so to speak, when playing live," says Solberg. "And that's something I'm getting close to. I have actually accomplished it several times, where we'll videotape something and play it back, and I don't quite remember playing the music that I did." Solberg is also pursuing his songwriting skills so that the music and lyrics will complement each other well.

A fall 1991 graduate of Music Tech, Solberg endeavors to make full use of the training he received there. He has worked hard to integrate certain techniques into his soloing. "Every time I get into a jamming situation, I find that what I'm comfortable with in improvising has expanded," he says. However, he does not try to write out his solos. "What I'll do is wing it in the studio. I'll have landmarks in my

solos. Maybe I'll come up with a lick that catches my ear as one chord changes to another. If the solo is really good in the studio, I might try to go back and learn it off the tape. I'll try to play it live if it's something I like."

Solberg grew up listening to Kiss and Ace Frehley. "Whatever Frehley plays comes from the heart," says Solberg. That's why Frehley is at the root of everything Solberg plays. "I'm also influenced by Jimmy Page and Larry Carlton. What I like about Carlton is he's jazz-oriented in note choice and blues-oriented in emotional impact. And that's what I'm trying to do in a rock idiom for myself. I love pickin' notes that stick out: the important ones. Carlton's guitar is connected to everything inside of him. When he uses that volume-pedal, you know, it's as if someone is talking or singing: it's a voice. That's what I'm aiming for in my music.

"I've got this bootleg tape of Led Zep-  
 pelin in one of their last shows," Solberg continues, "and Page is hackin' up a storm. Sometimes his pick misses the strings. That "Heart-breaker" solo is probably the most popular one in rock. There's crap all over but you can tell he's going for it, so it doesn't really matter. It's so direct. I like the fact that they caught that moment on tape. Zeppelin was a multi-dimensional band. That's what I would like us to be. I appreciated the

**SOLBERG to page 6**



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**SOLBERG**, from 5

fact that in the studio he was a 'guitar army' and then, onstage, he played whatever part was his favorite."

Solberg named his main guitar "Goldberry." A custom-made instrument, Goldberry features an American Stratocaster body, Squire neck, Graphneck nut, string trees, and saddles with a stock tremolo bridge. "I'm not really a whammy-bar guy. I've got a Digitech 256 Signal Processor for chorus on the clean notes and delay on the solos, for the subtle sounds. I don't do a lot of wacky stuff."

Besides Goldberry, Solberg has two Carvin guitars, one V220 and an Ultra-V. He doesn't play those guitars much anymore because of a dislike for the Carvin pick-ups. "My main guitar has EMG's in it," says Solberg. "I like that sound better. It's more of a transparent sound. So you hear the guitar and you hear the amp. And you don't necessarily hear the noisy pickup. I also have some acoustic guitars, too. A Fender and a Kramer Ferrington, which is one of those thin-bodied ones."

As part of an ongoing effort to assimilate the massive Music Tech musical foundation, Solberg has the jazz fake book he reads through almost every day. He also has a full-time factory job and hates it. "I wish I had more time to study music. It was nice attending Music Tech six hours a day. It was a luxury to devote that much time to thinking about music and playing the guitar. Every day I notice the

theory work seepin' in, and I think 'Yeah, I can apply that here.' "

Going out to see bands in bars once or twice a week is important to Solberg, who likes to see what's happening on the scene and to absorb fresh musical ideas. "I prefer not to see so many rock bands. I like Men Who Eat Out. They're the house band Sunday nights at the Whiskey Junction. John Della-Selva is one of my favorite players. I like Billy Franze, who's also in Dr. Mambo's Combo.

It's been said Zayne Grey's brand of rock is more on the intelligent side. Says Solberg, "Yeah, it's not like chasing girls around or a partying kind of thing. It's not what we do in our life, so it's not reflected in our music. More of an introspective, lyrical kind of message. Some songs we write about show situations we all can appreciate. Other songs are more specific about things we've been through."

The name originated from one of Solberg's friends, who had a cat named Zane Grey, which means "grey clown" in Italian. Later on, he discovered the author named Zane Grey, and changed the spelling to Zayne Grey.

Zayne Grey is Christopher Lakey (drummer), Debbie Djano (lead vocalist), Jim Lusk (bassist), and lead guitarist Solberg. The band coalesced after some members met while attending Music Tech. Lusk is originally from St. Cloud and the rest from the Twin Cities area.

It's difficult to put a label on the type of music the group plays. "We have an

extremely melodic style, lots of vocal harmonies and things like that," says Solberg. "It's got the edge of heavy rock. The particular songs in our 'shopping tape' are more commercial-oriented and show that end of our writing style. We do have some left-of-center type of stuff, too, to satisfy ourselves as musicians.

"We are now doing only one-hour, showcase gigs. We don't want to learn covers. The one or two covers we do are just for fun and an excuse to improvise. We lean towards 1970's stuff, which is where our roots are. Our singer grew up on Heart, I grew up on Kiss and Zeppelin."

Solberg expects the audience will actually be able to understand the lyrics, which is not always the case with some new or old rock groups. The vocals were mixed loud to achieve a clarity in the words. "We also did that because we wanted more of a pop-oriented mix. We wanted to get across the positive angle in our lyrics. We send messages of hope, but not necessarily a bright, sunshiny day kind of thing. We have real personal lyrics about things that have happened to us, or people that we

**SOLBERG to page 8**

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## Belting out the Blues with Peter Rykhus

By Cathy Nixon

BELTING OUT THE BLUES at the New Riverside Cafe's First Annual Tribute to Robert Johnson last May, Peter Rykhus projected the life of a blues player as rich as the song he sang. His body danced easily to the driving blues rhythm skillfully released through his fingers onto the National Steel guitar and slide. Hanging around his neck, a harmonica stood ready to accompany the guitar with its lazy, tinny voice. The audience rocked with the beat and nodded approvingly.

After years of living in and around the music, Peter Rykhus has come to the comfortable realization that he is a blues musician. Though it might seem unlikely for a western Minnesota farm boy to play the Delta blues, Rykhus's gradual progress to that point has been a natural expression of his life style.

His first memories of music are the polka bands that played at local gatherings around the farm. As a teenager, he heard all sorts of music on the radio.

He and his brother acquired an old Harmony guitar, which sat around the house for a year before they figured out how to tune it. Rykhus loved to hear the blues, but it would be a while yet before he played them.

Rykhus's first performance experiences were as a sometime street musician in Europe after he finished his tour there with the army.

After a year of roaming, he returned

to work on the farm in Minnesota.

Not particularly drawn

to the hard-working farm

life, Rykhus

went to college in Wilmar to

play the guitar, read and

study a little acting. He also began

to work in a small music store. At this time, he knew a few folk songs

and some chords, but didn't consider himself much of a player. To play the blues was inconceivable:

how could you bend strings, use a slide and do all those things at the same time? Just the same, Rykhus

gave guitar lessons at the store.

Eventually, he wound up in St. Cloud, where he shyly began to approach other musicians. His eagerness to sit in was met with equal indifference. Rykhus

laughingly recalls that he originally wanted to play the harmonica and accompany a guitarist. Unfortunately, he

couldn't find a guitarist to play with, so he had to take up the guitar himself. Playing the guitar and the harmonica didn't make things much better, so he was forced to find his own gigs.

Rykhus's first band, formed with his brother and a man named Ned Windnagle, made a combination electric/acoustic sound. Fired from

their first gig at the Ground Round in St. Cloud, they moved on to the college Coffee House Apocalypse and the classier Grand Mandolin date bar to the grimier Corner Bar. Rykhus's repertoire now included some Kottke, Prine, Koerner, Ray and Glover,

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**SOLBERG, from 6**

know, for the most part."

Zayne Grey has a nine-song, self-produced album on the market. A lot of the lead guitar playing was thought out beforehand, which is not Solberg's usual style. "It's done in the interests of saving money in the studio," Solberg explains. "The end result of that process is sometimes good ideas, but lackluster execution. When I listen to a guitar player I listen more for fire than technique. That's what I work for in my playing, as well. Overall, it's a process of repeated attempts to get something I like."

Solberg prides himself on having maintained a completely drug-free ex-

istence, a rarity in the rock scene. Also, he says, "If I had to narrow it down to the one person that's had the greatest influence on my playing, or for that matter, my life, it would have to be Jesus."

Solberg's aspirations are not unlike most musicians in the area: to be able to support himself playing the music he loves. "I'd like to do that whole 'rock 'n' roll star scene'," he says, "and I think our band has enough talent to do it. I'm willing to work at it. We have a good songwriting team going in the band. We have the chops to execute songs well. We've played at Ryan's several times, opening for bigger local

bands that have a draw."

So as Rob Solberg is out and about these days, selling tapes and soliciting interest from record labels and management companies, he also continues conjuring up soaring guitar solos in his mind. One has the feeling Solberg possesses the fortitude necessary to make his dream for Zayne Grey to become a multi-dimensional rock band a reality. Who knows, perhaps his work will someday be as envied as the music of Larry Carlton or Ace Frehley. Regardless of the outcome, you can bet his clear-headed vision for Zayne Grey and those razor-clean guitar lines have more than a little to do with all that clean livin'.



INQUIRIES: Zayne Grey, 1327 - 10th St. NW, #102, New Brighton, MN 55112, 612-639-8968.

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**RYKHUS**, from 7

and some Chicago blues. Still rough on technique, he had mastered open tuning, and was grabbing the audience with his heart.

During this time and up until a couple of years ago, there were long periods when Rykhus returned to the farm. Then music became a part of the party after a long work week. Those days, Rykhus would kick back with a shot of bourbon and a cigar after finishing a sixty-hour week of hard labor and find himself beginning to understand where the Delta blues players were coming from. Western Minnesota was not so different from Mississippi after all.

It was during one of these periods on the farm that Rykhus was finally able to figure out what Robert Johnson was playing. One day he sat staring into a corner of the solarium as Johnson's *Crossroads* album played over and over. Listening, but not really paying attention, Rykhus could almost see Johnson sitting across from him playing each song. Rykhus never had a problem playing any of the songs again.

Rykhus followed a girlfriend who sang like Bessie Smith to Minneapolis about ten years ago. He met her when she challenged his Broonzy rendition of "Ain't Nobody's Business." He told her to come up and sing it herself if she didn't like it, which she did. Rykhus began to visit the Cities from time to time, settling into the West Bank, soaking up through osmosis the music of Willie Murphy, Bonnie Raitt, Koerner, Ray and Glover, Leo Kottke and others. He started playing weekly at the New Riverside Cafe. Hosting a weekly blues night there, he found the tables had turned on him, and he was in the awkward position of dealing with eager new musicians who always wanted to sit in.

Before he began playing at the Riv, Rykhus spent a few years driving a truck. This grew out of an incident at the Artist's Quarter in Minneapolis while he and his band, the Blues Assassins, were playing a gig. Rykhus was playing a Sonny House song called "Death Letter," when a shotgun blast ripped through the bar, shattering glass and grazing a few of the regulars. He looked up to see his entire audience huddled under little round bar tables. Thinking the gunman disliked his playing, he considered taking cover under the piano when the place began to swarm with police. One officer came by and or-

dered Rykhus to keep playing. After he started to play again, another officer shouted at him, "Stop playing!" Rykhus stopped. His enthusiasm for performing dampened, he decided to drive a truck for a while. He also decided never to give a band a name like the Blues Assassins again.

After playing a few years at the New Riverside Cafe, Rykhus went to Mexico and travelled throughout the Southwest. He began spending winters in a stone cabin outside of Tucson, listening to coyotes howl and wandering through the desert. Occasionally, he would stop in at the Chicago Guitar Store in Tucson, where invariably he would be approached by a young Mexican American who would want Rykhus to teach him the blues. After struggling through a few lessons, Rykhus always asked the young man to show him what he knew. The young man would always say, "Nothing really, only something my grandfather taught me." Each time, Rykhus was blown away by the great Mexican music the young man would play with ease.

Rykhus believes that his journeys to the

Southwest really helped to strengthen his character. He believes the combination of immersion and withdrawal from his music improved his playing and made his performing more relaxed. Now he accepts himself as a musician, and has fun with the music he presents while doing his best at a gig.

Rykhus has not been so active at managing himself lately, but he still plays regularly at the Loring Bar in Minneapolis, the Viking Bar on the West Bank, and in the University of Minnesota coffeehouses. Last fall, he wrote and performed the score for the play *Bus Stop* at Theatre in the Round. Rykhus's band, the Mudpuppies, is a loosely formed association of bass, washboard, rubboard, spoon, saw, fiddle and piano players. The new band may be changing its name this summer. ■



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## Guide Tone Improvisation

By Kevin Daley

WHEN IMPROVISING single note lines, it can be effective to emphasize the 3rds and 7ths of chords, especially at the point of a chord change. These notes are often referred to as guide tones because they help define the sound of chords and progressions in general. In the following example I've chosen the 3rd of each chord as the guide tone.



In the next example, I retain the guide tone line from above, while creating a line that serves as a connection from one guide tone to another. The original guide tones still occur on beat 1 of each bar. I've also avoided the B note in the D min. 7 bar, as well as the E note in the G7 bar. These notes, although not wrong sounding, tend to lessen the definition of the chord progression, if introduced prematurely.



The following guide tone line uses a combination of 3rds and 7ths:



Guide tones with connective live:



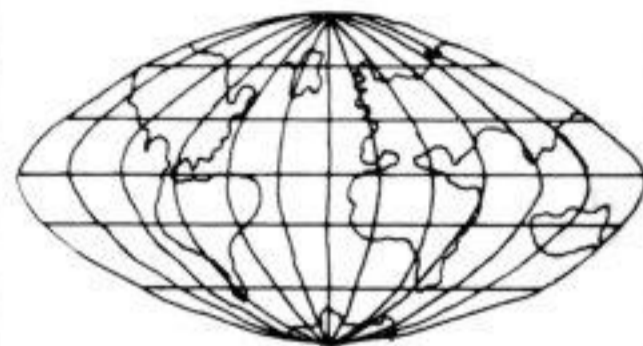
Try applying these techniques to a variety of your favorite songs. I think you'll find that your improvising becomes more cohesive, both to you and your audience. I've discovered that when only accompanied by a bass, this technique is especially effective.

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On March 29, 1987, the board of directors of the Minnesota Guitar Society met and drew upon the following mission statement for the 1987-1988 season: "Our mission is: 1) to promote the guitar, in all its stylistic and cultural diversity, through our newsletter and through our sponsorship of public forums, concerts and workshops. 2) to commission new music and to aid in its promotion, publication and recording. 3) to serve as an educational and social link between amateur and professional guitarists and the community. 4) to promote and help create opportunities for Minnesota guitarists and players of related instruments."

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