

LAWSON ROLLINS

BY MATT BLACKETT

IF YOU'RE ONE OF THE 4.3 MILLION viewers who have watched Lawson Rollins' "The Fire Cadenza" video, you already know that he possesses ungodly classical chops, with dazzling speed, uncanny accuracy, and a beautifully delicate touch. You also probably know that although trained as a classical guitarist, Lawson incorporates jazz, Brazilian, Latin, and world music influences into his complex musical stew, making for an intriguing listen. If this comes as news to you, you should take a deep breath before you click on the video. Or you can spin Rollins' latest release, *Elevation* [Infinita], and hear all those ingredients, plus Iranian and Nepalese flavors, as well as future-shred electric elements courtesy of Buckethead.

You obviously have great classical technique, but your phrasing and your sense of the groove seem to draw on a lot of styles outside the classical tradition.

Definitely. I started as a classical guitarist but I quickly branched off. I got turned on to Brazilian rhythms, samba, and bossa nova in the late '80s when I discovered recordings by Stan Getz and João Gilberto and the music of Jobim. Prior to my solo career, I was in a duo called Young & Rollins. We were backed by a Latin percussion section with congas, timbales, and bongos,

and we featured a lot of salsa rhythms—cha-cha, the Afro-Cuban rumba style. All this has led me far, far outside the classical guitar genre.

What instrument did you rely on for these recordings, and how did you record it?

I used my custom Pedro Maldonado guitar. He's a guitar maker in Malaga, Spain. He made a wonderful custom instrument for me that gives me a lot of access to the high frets. It has a deep cutaway and a nice rounded heel so I can do arpeggios up at the 17th fret or higher. It has rosewood back and sides, a cedar top, and a slightly narrower neck than a 52mm classical guitar. This is more like 50mm, which helps with the lead guitar playing. It actually makes it harder if you want to play a piece by Bach or something, but for really fast playing, a narrower neck is essential. I recorded in Santa Barbara with Dom Camardella, who's a veteran engineer and producer with a real knack for recording nylon-string. He used a vintage Neumann U87 and an older AKG mic. He runs those through vintage Neve preamps, and that really sweetens up the tone quite a bit. We tracked into Pro Tools HD. He also has an amazing Neve mixing board that's kind of a hybrid analog/digital board, which provides the warmth of the analog sound.



Artists

LAWSON ROLLINS

The tremolo lines in the title track and in "Santa Barbara Song" are really intricate and feature very precise string skipping. Are you playing all that fingerstyle?

Yeah. I don't even know how to use a pick. It's all fingerpicked. Same with the sweep arpeggios—it's all done with my index and middle finger. A lot of people think I'm using my ring finger, but it's strictly what they call in the classical jargon *i-m*—index, middle—*i-m, i-m*, over and over again.

It's hard to believe the sweeps are just index and middle finger.

In my video for "The Fire Cadenza," you can see very clearly how it's done. Actually the sweep is very interesting. Going up the sweep, I'm picking *i-m, i-m*. When I come back down I'm simply dragging my index finger. On my website there's tablature I did for that and a description—a little exercise showing how it works.

Is there any advice that you have for guitarists who want to develop that kind of technique, besides start slow and play with a metronome?

The old adage—start slow and use a metronome—definitely helps. Beyond platitudinal things like that, I'd say you definitely want to listen for the evenness of the downward sweep with the index finger and make sure that you're getting equal volume up and down. I think recording yourself is essential. Listen back to how you actually sound, and just keep striving for evenness. There's really no secret to it. If you start slow, hopefully the evenness of the notes will stay consistent the faster you get.

There's a little cadenza that occurs about three minutes into "Persian Nights" that's pretty wild, with open strings and pull-offs. Can you describe what's going on there?

It's kind of a Joe Satriani move. I'm reaching over and barring at the 7th fret with my right hand, and I'm doing hammer-ons and pull-offs with my left. It's sort of a joke, really. I just did that for fun. It would be hard to do that live because on the acoustic your volume plummets when you try something like that. With an electric, you can do that and not lose

a tremendous amount of volume. But if you're close miked in a studio, you can do it on acoustic and it sounds pretty good. There are only so many things you can do on the nylon-string in terms of tricks. Working with Buckethead, he's got this whole arsenal of things. It's an enviable situation from my perspective. I try to come up with a few little techniques that I can pull out of the hat from time to time.

Electric—and especially rock—guitarists, will often get labeled gratuitous or self-indulgent if they go off like that in a tune. Those kinds of criticisms are less common for a classical player. Can you talk about that dichotomy?

That's an excellent point and it's something that has always fascinated me. When you're in the classical genre, you're basically expected to have technique. I was at a San Francisco Symphony concert not long ago watching Joshua Bell play a violin concerto by Max Bruch. It's thought of as really romantic and almost sappy—not a virtuoso violin concerto. Yet, he's up there shredding up a storm on that piece. Even the

Musicians Institute
Alumnus 1985

PAUL
GILBERT

800.255.PLAY
TEXT MUSIC TO 64444
WWW.MI.EDU



MUSICIANS INSTITUTE
COLLEGE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC



For more information about our graduation rates, the median debt of students who completed the program and other important information, please visit our website at mi.edu.

Artists

LAWSON ROLLINS

most non-virtuoso-oriented piece for violin is going to have some sort of technical demands on the player. In rock it's a whole other mentality. Your average rock sound is not really dependent upon technical proficiency. So when people do exert some virtuosity in rock, I think it can almost offend some people who may not be accustomed to hearing that. It's like an affront. I remember reading an interview with Steve Vai and he was asked about virtuosity and why he practices and performs at that level. He said it's part of his vocabulary, being able to play something fast when you want to. I don't view playing fast as anything other than a part of my vocabulary as a player.

No one really talks about this aspect, but it must be fun and exhilarating to execute those demanding, dazzling passages.

It is great fun. I thoroughly enjoy it. I would not do it if I didn't enjoy it. That's another key answer to your question: If you enjoy playing that way, you're going to play that way. Of course, if you're a classical violinist, you have no choice. And playing fast is almost a necessity to get across certain emotions on the acoustic guitar. It's a curious paradox, really. I've heard feedback from women who say, "Wow, that's so passionate," when I play really fast stuff. But play a woman an Yngwie Malmsteen tune and she's going to tell you to turn it off.

You cover a ton of stylistic ground on this record and yet the album still sounds very cohesive. Some artists

try to do that and wind up sounding scattered or random. How do you avoid that?

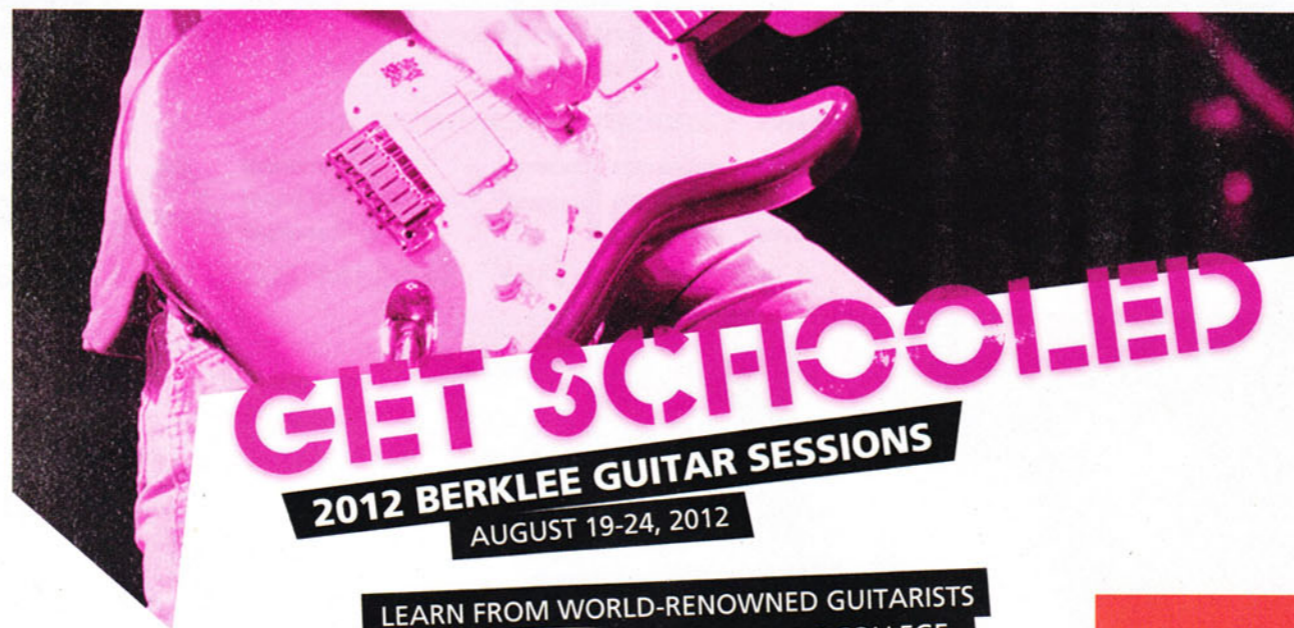
I've never really worried about it. The songs begin with me sitting in a room with my guitar and coming up with some chords and some melodies and recording that. I try to make sure they have credibility as just guitar pieces before bringing them to the other musicians and mixing in all these various influences. That origin, with the nylon-string guitar and with my sound and voice coming through, seems to create a consistency from song to song. My demos used to be with just a click track, but a couple of years ago I got some of these modern gizmos—beat libraries. But sometimes I do worry about getting too enamored with the beat libraries. I think that can lead you astray somewhat. Having just the minimal amount of tools in the composing phase can really be an asset sometimes. It forces you to make sure your melodies are strong and you're making music that people actually want to listen to. ■

MORE ONLINE



- The jaw-dropping video for "The Fire Cadenza."
- Get music, tablature, and more at Rollins' official site.
- Hear a live jam of "Persian Night" off *Elevation*.

Get these links and more at guitarplayer.com/february2012



GET SCHOOLED

2012 BERKLEE GUITAR SESSIONS
AUGUST 19-24, 2012

LEARN FROM WORLD-RENOWNED GUITARISTS
AT A WORLD-RENOWNED MUSIC COLLEGE.

APPLY NOW AT
berklee.edu/summer/guitarplayer

Berklee
college of
music

SUMMER PROGRAMS