



SCREEN GEMS

LAWSON ROLLINS EXPANDS HIS ARSENAL AND HORIZONS WITH *DARK MATTER: MUSIC FOR FILM*

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOS BY ASHLEY BATZ

AMONG GUITARISTS, Lawson Rollins has carved out a place of his own with his impeccable nylon-string shredding. *GP* celebrated him for it in our August 2017 acoustic special issue, where we ranked him among 50 “Transcendent Acoustic Guitarists.” Since then, however, Rollins has decided to try his hand at steel-string acoustic and — *gasp!* — electric guitar. The results can be heard on *Dark Matter: Music for Film* (Infinita), his new, sprawling 25-track release, which also features ambient violin by Grammy winner Mads Tolling.

“I was inspired by Eric Clapton’s work on the *Rush* soundtrack and Ry Cooder’s work on various soundtracks,” Rollins explains. “But, generally, only a couple of their cuts have the dark, moody, atmospheric quality I like. I decided to make an entire album that way.”

While the songs on *Dark Matter* weren’t composed for actual movie scenes, the album does have a motion-picture connection. Prior to making it, Rollins was enlisted to score music for a still-in-the-works thriller. Finding his nylon-string guitar lacked the appropriate edge, he bought an electric and began experimenting on a steel-string Gibson acoustic he’d won in the

USA Songwriting Competition for “Shifting Seasons,” from his 2012 release, *Full Circle*. On *Dark Matter*, he puts both instruments to use on a lush and atmospheric soundscape that evokes cinematic visions.

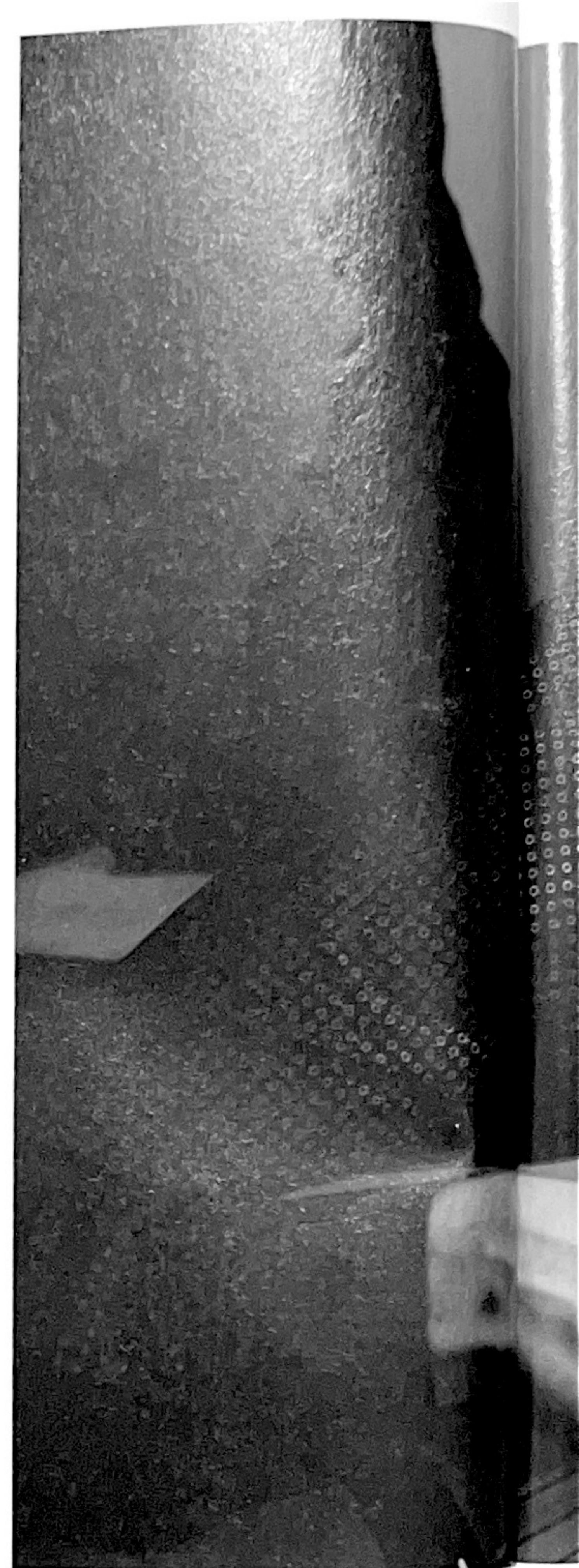
None of this is to suggest that Rollins has stopped releasing tunes in his signature modern world-music style. At the outset of 2018, he chronicled a decade’s worth of success on contemporary jazz radio via *Airwaves: The Greatest Hits*. The album contained the new composition “World of Wonder,” featuring contemporary-jazz stalwarts 3rd Force, which went on to become his biggest radio triumph. Last fall, Rollins released “And If You Will Come to Me,” a single collaboration with Israeli singer Idan Raichel that delivered the kind of blistering acoustic solo that has inspired millions of guitar players to check out his ninja-like picado technique in his massively popular online videos. The guitarist took some time from his busy schedule to chat with *GP* about music, martial arts and the making of *Dark Matter: Music for Film*.

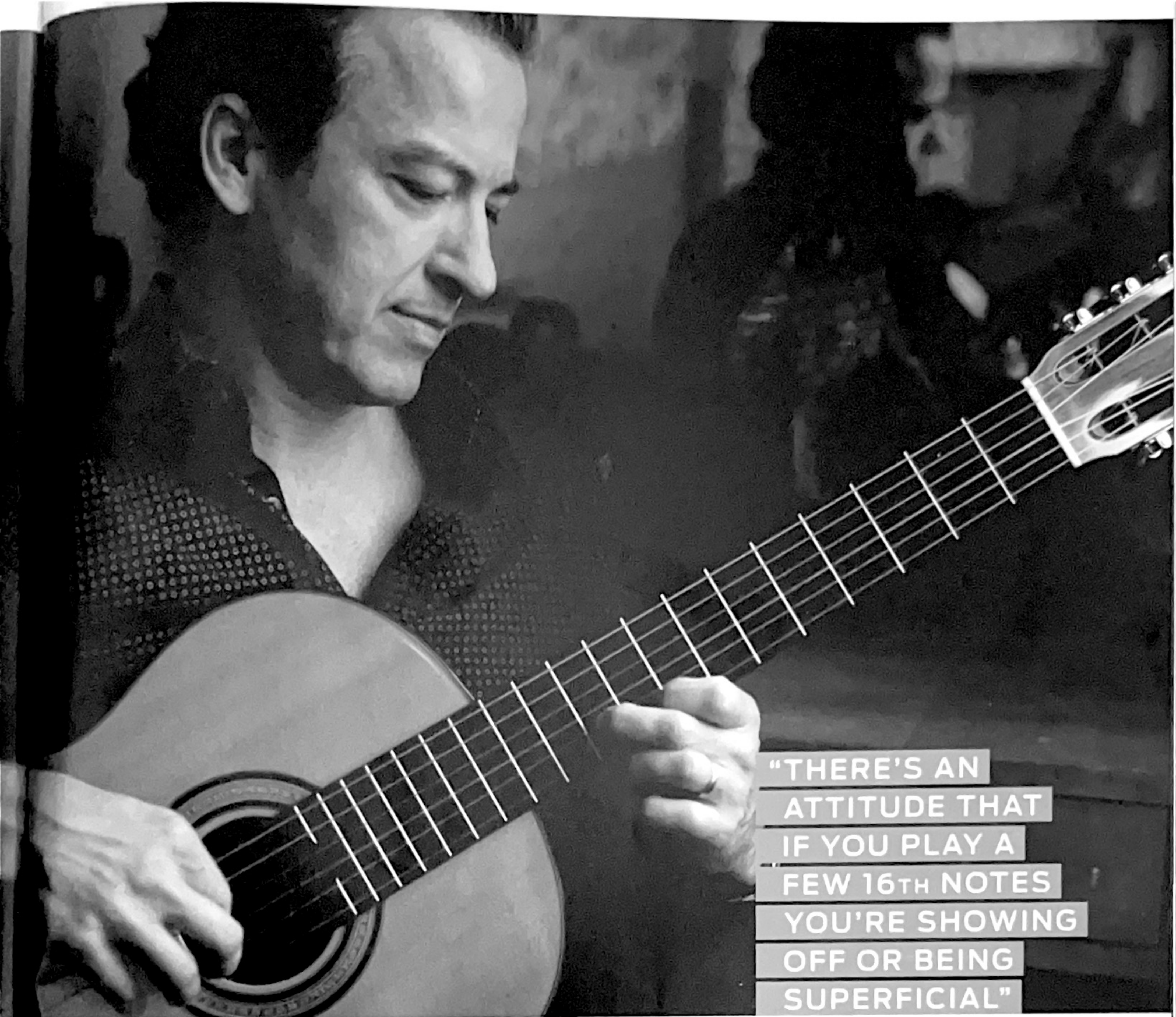
You’re a man of constant action. What’s the big story in your world right now?
I’ve been lucky to avoid any major injuries, but this morning I cracked my thumbnail right across the middle while

doing some martial arts training. It’s extremely painful at the moment, but it will grow out in a couple of weeks, no problem. The incident actually makes me feel so grateful that I haven’t had any major injuries during 30 years of playing. It could all be taken away in an instant. One wrong move and you can lose a finger.

Can you draw any parallels between martial arts training and playing guitar?

The energy flow is similar. My sensei is also a student of guitar, so he appreciates the energies that I have to focus into my hands. We do a lot of work with arm flexibility and strength, which is probably why I don’t have





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tendinitis, even though I still practice guitar quite a bit every day and a lot of what I do is very technical. I study a particular form of karate called Shaolin Kempo. It’s an offensive approach combining lots of different strike techniques into moves with names such as “The Eight Hands of the Leopard.” I’m trying to apply that to my guitar playing. Instead of focusing on one technique or another, such as arpeggios or scales, I’m working on seamlessly blending them together.

It’s interesting how you incorporate shred on contemporary jazz radio hits. You can’t get away with shredding on the electric like you can on the

nylon-string, just by the nature of the instrument. Electric shred is much more overt. And there’s an attitude that if you play a few 16th notes on the guitar, you’re showing off or being superficial. I’ve never understood it. Having technical ability is just an expansion of your vocabulary. My songs might have 20 seconds of shredding mixed in with four minutes of melodies and harmonies people find enjoyable. My success on the radio proves that. I’m definitely not the darling of contemporary jazz by any means, but I usually have one or two songs per album that work in the genre. Notice that I didn’t call my compilation “Best Of.” I called it *Airwaves: The Greatest Hits* because those songs were

actually on major radio charts, like the *Billboard* Top 30.

How did you pull off composing a bonus track that actually became your biggest radio hit?

The goal was to create a new song that would complement everything else on the compilation. I came up with the simple, infectious motif for “World of Wonder,” and 3rd Force brought in the groove that’s so characteristic of funk-based contemporary jazz. I inserted the breakdown in the middle, which has a little more of a samba feel and Brazilian sound that I’ve cultivated for my entire career. I snuck in a bit of shred, so I got to satisfy my world-music



FRETS

appetite within the context of a contemporary jazz sound

Can you share some insights about "And If You Will Come to Me"?

Idan Raichel is a huge star in Israel and quite a big name on the world stage as well. He endeavors to fuse cross-cultural sounds much as I do. "And If You Will Come to Me" is basically his song. I simply rearranged it and added my nylon-string. It was a great chance to blend in my more Western harmonic sensibility while dovetailing off of his vocal in call-and-response fashion. Of course, I threw in the "big guitar solo," where I pretty much utilize all of my techniques. But again, it's done stealthily enough that it probably blows right past the casual listener.

What guitar do you play on that track?

It was made by Lester DeVoe, who works in the little town of Nipomo near Santa Barbara, California. When I stopped by, Lester had two guitars designated for Paco de Lucia, who passed away shortly afterward. Lester said, "You can play one of them if you want." I did, and then replied, "Make me one just like that." Seven months later I got my traditional Flamenco Blanca, and then he made a custom cutaway version of his Flamenco Negra, which is the one I'm using on "And If You Will Come to Me." It's truly one of a kind, as I don't think Lester ever intends to make another one. He's a traditional flamenco guitar builder and didn't enjoy making a cutaway, but it gives me tremendous access. I can do full scales and arpeggios up around the 15th fret. Unlike most cutaway classical guitars that have a triangular pointed piece at the neck heel that's tough to wrap your thumb around, mine has a nicely rounded heel that facilitates a little more reach as I move high up to the 19th fret. I've mostly played the cutaway since 2012, but I'll use the more traditional guitar for rhythm and melodies because it does have a lot more volume and resonance.

What's the guitar story on *Dark Matter*?

It was a conscious effort to get away



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from the normal tool of my trade and delve into some different sounds for these pieces that are more like atmospheric musical expressions than actual songs. I wanted something with a little more darkness and edge, so I mainly played a steel-string Gibson J-35 acoustic and a Les Paul Custom.

Playing either of those has got to be a complete departure for a lifelong nylon-string fingerstylist.

Yeah, and I never got around to learning how to play with a pick. I only play using my natural fingernails, so I have to play in a different way on the steel-string, otherwise my nails would get ripped off. It's essentially the same with the electric. They just wouldn't hold up, so I'm not able to do any of my advanced fingerstyle techniques. It was refreshing to dial that back and play in a more naïve, childlike manner focused on pure

expression, using minimal notes for melodies, and no solos. That played into creating a more Spartan, atmospheric mood. The first track, "Innocence," is a good example featuring the steel-string.

It's surprising to hear you play slide on "Out of the Past" and "Forbidden."

That was an interesting challenge. I bought a glass slide and attempted to achieve the sound I heard in my head, but I couldn't make the adjustment, so I wound up using a stainless-steel dinner knife from the kitchen. Somehow that produced the right tone, but it was a battle, and I feel it brought out a bit more emotion in the playing.

What's the toughest part of conquering a Les Paul for a nylon fingerstylist?

Muting! I truly had no idea of what a challenge it is to dampen strings from ringing out, even when using a clean



tone, much less if there's overdrive or effects piled on top for a track like "Never Forget." It's chaos! Palm muting is totally opposite to the instincts of playing a nylon-string acoustic, where you actually want all the strings to be as free to resonate as much as possible, to get the most out of that instrument.

Being forced out of my comfort zone working on unfamiliar instruments made me dig a little deeper. It sounds like there's some soul searching going on, which was definitely what I wanted and the reason why I chose the title *Dark Matter*. They say that 85 percent of the universe is made up of this dark matter we can't see or measure directly in a concrete way. But yet it's there acting like glue, holding everything together. My musical analogy is that taking away the nylon-string put me in a different world from the samba, rumba and other world-music styles to which I've become



so accustomed. I was forced to pare back my technique and see what was left, which is like the elusive and enigmatic dark matter behind the music I've been making on the nylon-string for years.

Will you return to the nylon-string world for your next project?

Yes, in fact I've already got several tracks recorded, but I'm incorporating what I've learned by making *Dark Matter* as well,

so it's a combination of nylon-string shred and world influences mixed in with synthesizer atmospheric and steel-string and electric guitar textures. Getting into film music freed me up to delve into those things, and now I feel much more confident about introducing them into my "regular" albums. It's also good to know that if I lose my thumbnail in a martial arts mishap, I can still squeak a few notes out on a Les Paul. ■

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