

Stanley Jordan
USA

Interview.
'But think of the music.'
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Lance Bosman

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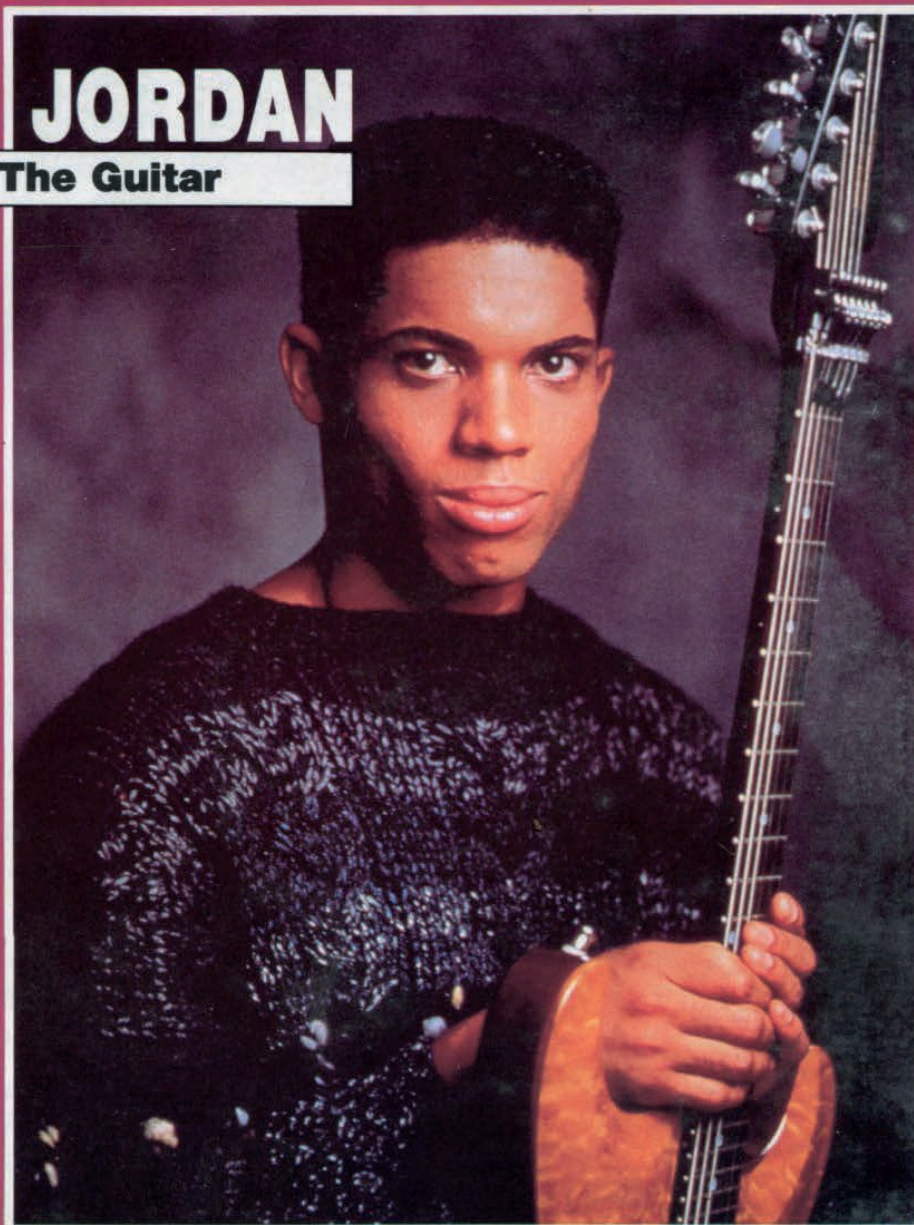
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STANLEY JORDAN

'But think of the music...'

Lance Bosman

The way in which Stanley Jordan weaves chordwork, counterpoint and line should be experienced first by the ear rather than through the eye. Just how his overlapping exchanges are produced may prove tantalising, unseen or unexplained; but at least the mind is freed of technical considerations, to dwell on his tasteful and ranging musicianship.

Taking fingerstyle several steps further has given Jordan access to a melodic and chordal compass of keyboard dimensions. This he secured with a 'touch' or 'tapping' technique, where both hands are applied simultaneously at the fretboard, one for melody, the other for accompaniment. While the right hand taps some strings at higher frets for the melody, the left hand engages other strings at lower frets for supporting parts.

This approach sprang from an urge to release ideas beyond the reach of orthodox means. Independent hand movement has enabled him to liberate the melody and harmony, granting each its own level of activity. Exploiting these with verve and imagination, melody lines are projected in full while an autonomous left hand improvises supporting parts; or the accompaniments may be regulated to monitor his abundance of melodic improvisations. Sensitive to perspective, Jordan often sets his lines at remote tangents, then to superimpose or alternate the melody with broken chords and counterpoint.

Broadening the range of the guitar in this way has raised new challenges, testing his present accomplishment. Inevitably too his innovations have generated commentary and dazzle. But you can tell as you listen that technique is a servant to substance. "The music comes first. The reason I started experimenting with touch playing is that I found I had ideas that couldn't be brought out with conventional techniques. I tried to stretch that so far that it became too difficult. Then I thought that maybe I could find another approach to



Photo by Carol Friedman

play the things I was hearing. I'm aware that because my technique is unusual it attracts interest, but when I'm playing I'm not thinking about technique, just the music."

Besides allowing the melody to coast its own way, independent hand motions offer an open range of background accompaniments. For one setting, a gentle arrangement of *A Child is Born*, the melody enters against a distant ripple of left-hand arpeggiation. Whereas *Fundance*, a Jordan original, has an urgent linear drive of running boogie lines. "It's not just a case of having access to individual levels, it's more a question of how will I relate them? How best can one line support the other? How can I retain the individuality of each? For example, if they fall into parallel octaves, there's nothing wrong with those except that they may dilute the individuality of each part. If I'm concentrating on the fingering and patterns at the fretboard I might not notice those octaves. Then when I hear the tape back I realise that something sounds weak right there. Those are the kind of things I'm conscious of."

Where inadvertent consecutive octaves tend to weaken the thrust and separation of counterpoint, there is little to beat their impact and radiance in broad melodic runs. And just so with these Stanley Jordan launches into Coltrane's *Impressions*. A number also set by Wes Montgomery, raises the question of whether this past master's striking octave technique—sliding two left-hand fingers with muted strings between—has been taken up here?

"There are different ways. Sometimes I use the left hand to play the octaves, like Wes. When I'm playing octaves with one hand then I can obtain more connection, with simultaneous attacks. Other times I play between hands, each playing a line an octave apart. The advantage of this is that I can do different things with each hand. When playing with the band I often

take the melody line in octaves because I like their fullness of sound. Yet within these I can change the dynamics, apply nuances to one hand that I don't to the other. Playing a separate melody with each hand, then each has independence."

Present guitars include a Vigier Arpege, Gibson Les Paul, Travis Bean and a Casio PG 380 which with its 24 frets somehow brings to mind two instruments in one. With a double-octave span we might think that to ease confusion of choice, each hand is allocated its own octave compass. But there is no such convenient demarkation. "Well I do divide the neck into regions but the regions might change from moment to moment. I might pinpoint a certain fret as the partition, with everything below that covered by one hand, and above it by the other, or the division might be based on strings: certain of them for the left hand, the others for the right. The only guideline I consistently use is that my right hand plays the lead parts; so whatever strings and positions that hand needs it takes, leaving the rest of the guitar for the left hand.

"When playing I have one hand coming from under the fretboard the other from over. This means that what I play with my left hand I can easily duplicate with the right. Being able to use the same fingering with either hand is really convenient because, with patterning the same, it's easier on the mind. So as an idea arises I can go for it with either hand without mental adjustment. In fact when I'm playing lines I approach them the way a guitarist would normally do, with the range of the fingerboard. If they take my lead hand, then the accompanying hand will just fill in the cracks."

To keep co-ordination of right and left hand up to the mark must call for regular practice. With three operating forces involved, the right hand, the left and their combined movements, how are exercises approached? "Generally I tend favour my right hand which means that when I practice I need to give special attention to my left to keep everything in balance. So I'll play for sometime with just one hand, then bring the other in. Or sometimes I'll work with octaves, because with octaves you have to do the same thing with both hands, which ensures unified movement.

"When I practice, if anything, I think I need to concentrate a little more on technique; because sometimes I spend so much time thinking about what I want to play that I don't always develop the physical ability to do it. Consequently on stage I sometimes get ideas which, when it comes to playing them, I can't quite carry off."

Born 1959 and from Chicago, Stanley Jordan began his musical life with the piano, the guitar following from age 11. Growing up with blues, rock 'n' roll, he takes as major influences Jimi Hendrix, and blues player, B.B. King. Around that time he attempted his first jazz composition which led to a study of jazz. "I had the good fortune to live near a guitarist Elroy Jones who exposed me to jazz. When I was 17 I went to college and returned to studying classical music but at the same time I sought more light on jazz concepts. I found that jazz theory is harmonically orientated, although the great players, Charlie Parker, had a wonderful sense of melody. But the study of jazz doesn't really deal with melody that much. So I found that with my knowledge of classical

theory and composition I had a wonderful chance of studying melody, which I found historically predated harmony, anyway.

"By then I was really getting back into the blues and popular forms. Since I graduated ten years ago I've been trying to consolidate all these influences. Instead of compartmentalising them, this style here and that there, what I try to do is think of various styles of music like looking into the same room through different windows."

Now 31, and at a time of post-bop and fusion styles, the jazz standard nevertheless endures as essential to Jordan's repertory. Much more than nostalgic representations, evergreens are savoured with sensitivity for their vintage. To these are punchy blues numbers, jazz-rock fusions and ballads of the present and recent past, "Growing up with the later developments I have a stronger connection to songs such as *Eleanor Rigby* than say *Autumn Leaves*. But even the older standards I heard a fairly young age because I followed jazz when a lot of my ideas were still forming. Also then, in the company of an older generation, I was exposed to things that many of my peers didn't get the chance to hear. I mentioned my friend Elroy who taught me a lot of things. Largely through him I got a chance to appreciate a lot of the older music which I grew to love."



Photo by Lance Bosman

Even with separate areas on the guitar to map out melody and accompaniment, freedom of hand is still limited: for the string taking the melody cannot be used at that moment for another part. This matters little, though, for in addition to the new facilities, standard resources can be called on too.

"Six string chords are difficult to tap in block so I strum and pluck them as well. Instead of having to play the whole chord at once, I can stretch it over time. This

is often overlooked by jazz guitarists. But if you break it up, play it in parts, that's where the magic, the personality of that combination of tones comes out. So I study spreading chords. Let's say I have a four-note chord. I might play a series of diads (intervals) with my left hand and pattern them. In the case of G major 7 one of the diads would be G and D; the other would be B and F sharp. I would usually relate these to the top note. So with the top note I play a diad. Also I practice playing any notes but with diads. Although still working melodically with my left hand, I'm thinking with diads, harmonising the melody."

Through the years to and following 1981, when Stanley Jordan majored for a degree in composition at Princeton University, the subject of harmony has been of absorbing interest. Aside from a full grasp of jazz changes, his study has embraced modern chords and theory. Echoed in his arrangements and compositions, novel combinations mingle with routine ones. From him we might hear a 12-bar blues tracing regular cycles but with its harmony infused with dissonance. Some of these more recent components can be identified as progressions in fourths and suchlike, while other arrays elude definition.

"Part of my study is finding unusual ways to apply usual chords; and usual ways to direct unusual chords. In the first instance, for example, should I wish to resolve to a C major 7, then instead of playing G7 I might play F sharp major 7 resolving to C. The reason this works is because these chords link through stepwise passing tones: the notes from F sharp major 7 move by step to C major 7. Progressions that are considered discontinuous harmonically can be most continuous melodically. In this particular case there is a bass leap of F sharp to C, a diminished 5th dissonance. So I might insert F sharp between the G and the C, because the G would sound good falling to the F sharp as a downward half step instead of a jump of a fourth, G to C. So I might go Dm7-G7 then to F sharp major 7 to C major 7. This is an instance of usual chords moving in unusual ways.

"An example of an unusual chord would be A flat, B flat, B and D flat as a resolution into C. I don't know what you'd call it, a kind of A flat minor, perhaps. In this case I would think of A flat minor to D flat to C. But in fact it's just four notes in half-steps into C. Why I'm

saying it's unusual is because you might call that a tetrachord and think of it as a melodic figure. Harmonically, notes which are that close together wouldn't be thought of as a chord; but I'm using it that way and often I'll voice it spread out by octave transposition so that it won't sound like a cluster. Normally you wouldn't have a name for those four notes. If I had to think of one I would adopt a system developed over the last thirty years or so: think of A flat as zero. with the other notes denoted in terms of semitones from zero: A flat, B flat, B, D flat or zero 2,3,5. Then I would say, yes I know that term as well as a major 7th chord. The reason I call it zero, 2,3,5 is because, at least with this system, I can put a name to these notes.

"The first person I know of who used this method is Milton Babbitt, publishing it in the early Sixties. Actually it was something I thought of independently but I haven't developed it as far as him. The basic idea is that when you're measuring intervals, you use the chromatic scale as a ruler instead of the diatonic. The other difference is what you might call the Index Origin: the number you begin counting from is zero instead of one. With the standard system you begin with the number one and count tones; but if you're measuring intervals there is a different emphasis: with the originating note you haven't gone anywhere, so the measurement is still zero.

"I came up with this idea when I was working on parallel harmonies. I realised when I was stacking these intervals that the numbers didn't always make sense. For example, say you have C G C. Well from C to G is a 5th and from G to C is a 4th. I have a 4th on top of a 5th, therefore four plus five equals nine. But it's not, the whole thing is actually C to C, an octave, which is eight because you counted from one. From zero it would work out. And if you started chromatically it would be zero, 7, 12. I've had discussions about this and conclude so far that if you're just counting tones it's easier to start with one; if you're measuring intervals then start with zero."

Indirectly Stanley Jordan's preoccupation with harmony has also taken effect in arrangements, particularly for introductions. Chords extracted from the forthcoming tune filter through his more introspective openings which both set a mood and impress the most familiar songs with a personal stamp. And in some cases too, outlines of arrangements are broadly unified by recalling at a later stage themes already given. Yet their overall sense of spontaneity makes it difficult to imagine that structuring has been worked out beforehand.

"Sometimes it's conscious and sometimes just a question of habit or getting into the mood. It is an old tradition, you find it in a lot of Indian music. I like the feeling of starting with just the harmonic and melodic materials and then come in with the rhythm. When I worked on *Magic Touch* a lot of later ideas refer back to those earlier. Similarly in *Return Expedition* I consciously took some themes from *All the Children* and *Eleanor Rigby* to tie the work together. With so much improvisation in that one it wasn't a case of deciding that at this point I'm going to do this and so on; but before the record was completed I considered the end



Photo by Lance Bosman

product. I thought about particular moments I liked from some of its earlier pieces, and how I could work some of that material in again.

"When you mention composing a suite, there is something of that in *Cornucopia*. It's really in three parts. The first is about ten minutes long. Then there is a clear break where we go into another movement. For the last two minutes or so it's different again. And in the new version on CD we have out now, three different sections are listed. So it is a kind of suite. The only difference is that it wasn't composed but improvised."

Perhaps for the sake of fluidity, a desire to blend, or just a question of style, but the jazz guitar so often falls short of sharp dynamic contrasts. From its earlier role in the sidelines to present-day prominence, the instrument still suffers with dynamic consistency, generally and here too. "Which of our records have you heard... *Standards*, Volume 1. That has a lot of dynamics; in fact I worked on them there. And on the track *Willow Weep for Me* from *Cornucopia* I think there are strong dynamics. With *Flying Home* there are less dynamics, which I admit I'm not really happy about. I played with a lot of expression on that and in the production the compression given to the guitar took out some of what I'd spent so much time working on. But I think that with the band, some of the tracks should have more a feeling of continuity; so then I don't want to vary dynamics too much, because what will happen is that when I come in I'll alter the mix. With solos I have more room. But even then, the tapping technique inherently has less dynamic range.

"This is one reason why I'm sure that I won't always use this technique for life: because there will be things where I'll want more range. I don't just mean dynamics, loudness or vibrato, which I can get by tapping too. Strings played at different levels of intensity clearly offer a variety of different sounds. I can hit the strings really hard by tapping and get an intense sound; but with a pick, which I also use, I get to an even higher level and still have scope at the low end."

By preference or necessity, the tapping technique gives rise to high pitched melody. Held consistently in the limelight and it may penetrate somewhat after a while, resisting the ear's desire for variation. "Well I do often play the melodies in a high register because the accompanying hand is taking the low end and middle register which pushes the melody apart. Right now there's a luthier in Germany who's developing for me a guitar for acoustic tapping. It will be very responsive and also have two more lower strings to grant more bass and overall scope. So partly my emphasis on the treble is due to the limitation of the instrument, and partly a matter of taste, since I like melodies really high, to cut through. I imagine them just as though I'm walking into a room hearing distant high melodies shining through the background din."

Considering fretboard touch technique in a broader light, and other advances in this field present themselves for comparison. They may not seem relevant here, but together all have contributed to the progress of the 20th century guitar. Through various string hammering applications, the sound spectrum of the guitar has since absorbed an assortment of new effects,



Photo by Lance Bosman

such as quarter-tones, abrasive and muted tones, abnormal pizzicato. These and many more acoustic-percussive resources are now part and parcel of the guitarist's tonal palette. Through them the guitar has had its textural and pitch range extended, its capacity for descriptive writing enlarged.

Likewise, will Stanley Jordan's reaches into free-ranging melody and accompaniment through fretboard tapping be taken up by other practitioners, consolidating the ground set by him? By hearsay some have followed these steps. Or ultimately will his innovations be regarded as so unique that later players adopting them will be inevitably branded as imitators to some degree? Then again, these techniques may remain solely the preserve of their champions, fascinating, but not for us, content with the basics.

"That would be good. The reason that we have the basics is that they are time honoured, there for a reason. And novelty for its own sake tires after a while. But there has to be something new, and the new can add without subtracting from the old.

"I know that I can get attention for my method of playing, that it's unusual; and I'm convinced that it's significant and opens a new chapter of the guitar. But I also want to say that not all music can be played with the touch technique. It has its place and it extends the guitar in certain directions; but I don't think that it can replace conventional techniques. And really my goal is to have such a command of different techniques that I can use which I want at any time to express a song or a certain feeling.

"The most important thing is the music, the music I get from extending the guitar's possibilities—which validates the technique. Given much publicity, then people think that technique is all I care about. I would say to any guitarist interested in exploring the touch technique to first consider the music. You should go from song to song and decide which is best for it, touch or conventional technique. The music and your own musical aims will be the guide to figuring out what means you adopt to accomplish it. The possibilities are tremendous, and I feel a certain pride in having taken it pretty far. But the things I've done are just an indication of what's possible. I feel as if I've opened a door yet still only begun something. The things we are going to hear in the next ten to twenty years will go beyond what I've done, and extend the guitar further."