

INSTRUMENTAL INQUISITION!

Instrumentals are hugely popular with guitar fans so Jason Sidwell asks top guitarists for their approaches. This month: with his new album released, The Sleeper Wakes, UK jazzer Ant Law talks all things instrumental.

GT: What is it about instrumentals that appeals to you?

AL: In my early teens I started listening to lots of rock music, and gradually the instrumental sections became my favourite bits. The very special thing about the guitar is that it is capable of 'harmony' in a way that 'single-line' instruments aren't. We are also able to be expressive with the articulation of notes. Sure, a pianist can probably play denser chords, but we can bend, slide, stroke softly with a fingertip, pluck really hard and so on. And while a trumpet or sax can wail and squeal they can't play four-note chords.

GT: What can an instrumental provide that a vocal song can't?

AL: The absence of words leaves things wide open for the listener to imagine things. A number of tunes trigger vivid film-like scenes for me. Songs with lyrics tell a story. With instrumentals you can make up your own!

GT: Are there any tendencies you aim to embrace or avoid?

AL: I try to keep melody present at all times, compositionally and improvisationally. I also try not to decorate things unnecessarily - I hear many players saying very little but the ornaments are 'maxed out'. The floral colouring is quite interesting from a guitaristic point of view, but no amount of decoration can make up for a clearly stated music idea.

GT: Is a typical song structure - intro, verse, chorus, etc, always relevant for an instrumental?

AL: In my opinion certainly not! Unusual structures can be really rewarding. I don't know why but Satriani's Searching comes to mind - it's basically just a groove all the way but then there's this one harmonic section that comes in a few times - the weight that it carries is huge, particularly the second time. I try to be as creative with structure as I am with melody and chords or any other musical aspect.

GT: How useful is studying a vocalist's approach when playing an instrumental?

AL: I haven't done this in any great detail so I don't know. However, singing melodies away from the instrument can be a great way of finding things that you might not normally play - if you get distracted and start widdling, which we are probably all guilty of.

GT: How do you start writing one; is there a typical approach?

AL: My best tunes often emerge as harmony and melody together, so getting comfortable with the 'chord melody' approach has been really helpful. Not necessarily in a 'jazz' style - but just being able to play a chord to support a melody. I try to develop ideas clearly; repetition can be great as it can allow you to start

be a great way of achieving it.

Sometimes a more 'settled' energy can be great throughout an entire tune. Or even something frenetic throughout, like some Meshuggah songs. Contrast is important.

GT: What type of guitar tone do you prefer for instrumentals?

AL: I like variety. Sometimes I want a really compressed, dirty sound like Kurt Rosenwinkel (like on Chords, from The Remedy). Sometimes I'll want a fat thuddy dark jazz sound like Pat Martino or Adam Rogers. Other times a brighter sound might be nice, like Peter Bernstein. My favourite tone these days seems to be the really fat jazz sound, blended with a pencil condenser mic on the body of the guitar (even when the guitar is a solidbody). The mic captures the

Ellington's Sound Of Love for example. I tend to use A₂ and E₂ a fair bit, which is the equivalent of A and E in standard tuning.

GT: Do you find Minor or Major keys better to write in?

AL: On my last four albums two thirds of the tunes are Major (or at least they start Majorish) and one third are Minor, so perhaps I prefer Major... Lots of aesthetic comes from the borderline in between though. Blues is frequently about straddling the two.

GT: Any favourite modes?

AL: Twenty years ago it would have been Lydian. Ten years ago Lydian Dominant. Recently, I was exploring the modes of Harmonic Major - some of these are nicely weird. For example there's the very bright sixth mode, which you could

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at the same point but then go somewhere different.

GT: What do you aim for when your performance is centre stage?

AL: I try not to be afraid of allowing other instruments to shine, which can really help sustain interest in an instrumental. And sustaining the interest of listeners is key. I try to keep a few things in mind - having some composed stuff that is interesting (but not too hard to play well) and then a solo form that is fun to play but not too complicated.

GT: Many guitar solos start low and slow then finish high and fast. Is this useful for instrumentals too?

AL: I think that can be a great blueprint, sure. Any composer should think about these things and experiment with what works best for the song. Sometimes it might even be the opposite. If it's excitement you are going for, then that dynamic density 'ramp up' can

sparkly acoustic attack which really opens things out, particularly if you like quite a dark electric sound. For the electric part of the sound I use my 335/175 with the tone knob rolled right down. These go into my '68 reissue Twin and my Polytone (15-inch speaker), with Royer 121s or Neumann U87s on each amp. That guarantees a pretty big warm sound. You can dial in as much colour as you want in the middle to high-mid frequencies on the amps.

GT: Any favourite keys or tempos?

AL: I do like my open strings and try to use them as often as possible. I tune (low to high) E₂-A₂-D₂-G₂-B-E. I enjoy milking that G₂-B pair (or should I say F# & B?) which opens up the key of B quite nicely. For a while I played seven-string and the D₃ string was right in the middle of the guitar. There are some nice tunes in D, like Debussy's Clair De Lune or Charles Mingus's Duke

call Lydian #5 #9. If I had to pick a Melodic Minor one right now it would be Mixolydian,6 I think - I would play this without knowing it, before I studied it. I find myself using the Half-Whole Diminished scale a lot, as it permutes so tidily all over the guitar neck.

GT: Modulations into new keys?

AL: I do love a giant step! And a slightly smaller step too, up or down a Minor 3rd. Modulation is a big part of my musical exploration and there is so much of it in my favourite music I couldn't really pin it down more than that. I do have a favourite modulation of all time though - Ron Thal does something clever in Gray on The Hermit album. It REALLY reflects the lyrical themes in that song. Sting has got some great ones like in If I Ever Lose My Faith In You. I even like that moment in the Craig David Shape Of My Heart revamp, Rise

And Fall, even though I'm not sure exactly what the key change is.

GT: Do you view the backing band differently than on a vocal song?

AL: Perhaps I should, but I don't think that I do. In fact, I might not even think of them as a 'backing band' at all, if that makes sense. For me, every instrument is a musical ingredient, and every musician a story teller. Sure there are instances where the music should support a vocal melody or lyric, but equally the reverse can be true.

GT: What are your thoughts on harmonising melodies?

AL: When I was a youngster we would sing along with music in the car and inevitably stack a few 3rds up. But through engaging with music that incorporates more harmony you realise you can do anything you like. You can sing (or play) whatever line you like beneath or above a melody provided it sounds strong, or has direction. This can be a fun way of finding less obvious harmonisations. Jacob Collier does this lots I think (check out his IHarmU series), although his instincts are VERY finely honed.

GT: What three instrumentals have inspired you?

AL: Windowpane - Ben Monder. This is an example of very quiet virtuosity. The rapid fingerpicking creates a gorgeous bubbly texture, like rain drops on a windowpane. It starts with a glorious bright Dmaj6 chord, but develops into some extremely dark terrain, with colours like Badd9/D and C#add9/D. Tender Surrender - Steve Vai. I really don't know where to start with this one, but the dynamic range is amazing, and the variety of tones (and how much control Steve exercises over them). It's nice to hear Steve going for it over a more jazzy chord progression - the soft octaves sound like Wes Montgomery a bit. Then it goes full Notey McNoteface - maximum tremolo arm chops etc, etc, etc. All Blues - Pat Martino from Live At Yoshi's. Awesome soulful jazzy blues with a wicked cadenza at the end. Huge fat guitar sound. Plenty of tasty Altered Dominant lines. This whole album is great - part of my route into jazz, and possibly a route for others too.

Ant's new album The Sleeper Wakes is out now on Bandcamp. Go to antlaw.bandcamp.com



Ant with his exquisite Ibanez AF2000 guitar