

A Conversation with Steve Kimock

by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 6/2002)

I've done interviews before with friends, but never someone I've known as long and as well as I know Steve Kimock. We lived and played together in The Goodman Brothers in PA and CA for six years and then re-formed a time or two afterward, and did a number of assorted gigs here or there. I don't know how many shows, a lot.

After a long lifetime of being a musician, a ten year stretch at Mesa/Boogie (mostly in sales, which brought me into contact with quite a few good guitar players), and six years in Nashville, it's amazing to be able to say that Steve is still, and has always been, my favorite guitar player.

We met him at the first gig that I'd ever had to cancel cause I was sick, the Queen Victoria near Allentown, PA. Brother Billy and his LA girlfriend Peggy went out to check out who filled in. He told me the next morning, "Man, you shoulda seen it. These young cats, really good, playing Beatles tunes in German and shit. This absolutely amazing guitar player, we couldn't believe it. I told Peggy to go up and say hi to him, and I followed behind. She did her voodoo Louisiana thing, and introduced herself. Without even saying his name, he spouted, as fast as you can say it: 'Wanna see a picture of John McLaughlin playing a gold top Les Paul?' and whipped his wallet out, displaying the photo." The next day he came out to the farm, had some of our mother's cooking, and never left.

I've learned more about the guitar and about music from him than from anyone. (I've played more with my brother Billy, but our learning ran along more parallel lines.) It was as much his approach to the guitar and to music itself as any direct lesson. I went through years of waking up on one coast or the other and listening to Steve's bizarre exercises that he would make up and run for hours before he allowed himself to simply play, which he would then do for the rest of the day. And he's done that for a large part of his life.

Before it's over, he will be a world famous musician, but it's been a long and serpentine road. His fan base is growing rapidly and rabidly. When he was younger, he would amaze audiences by setting them up and then just mowing them down with his incendiary, do it to the death approach to soloing. Not pyrotechnics, no. He'd just fill your head up with so many right notes on the way to his crescendo that it would threaten to pop off. These days, I see him do it a little differently. It's more like a journey that lasts for hours, and goes in waves. K-waves, his fans call them. You can sample clips of the man on our Listen page, but it's really about a show, you have to see a show...

The Steve Kimock Band, it's a scary quartet. Rodney Holmes on the drums is a mindblowing groover. So much energy, so inventive, so into it, supporting and driving simultaneously, seamlessly. The legend of bassist Alphonso Johnson, it's deep. Weather Report, Santana, Chuck Mangione, Wayne Shorter, The Crusaders, shut up. He's one of the greatest bassists in the world. The quartet was complete with the addition of NYC guitarist Mitch Stein, an excellent musical companion to Kimock. He plays some great solos, but is more often in the second guitar role, and he's brilliant at it. Whether the part is scripted or improvised, it's always got the right tone and is the middle of the groove around which the jam is revolving.

Brother Jon and I went down to Tipitina's in New Orleans to catch a Kimock show during Jazzfest recently. The place was jammed, so I was thrilled that major K-people Arielle and Charlie had a spot for me where we could dance in a little fenced off area right up front. I shot a couple of photos but got caught up in the K-waves, thought I was tripping, man. Arielle brought me a couple of shows on disc, I'm listening to one right now, wow. Check out a few clips from those on our listen page. And check out Arielle's website (www.kimocksphere.com), she's got it going on.

At one point in the morning, I remembered I had a flight to Detroit at eleven. I said goodbye to my new friends, and jumped in a cab with a wild Creole cat at the wheel. I said, “It must be after two, isn’t it?” He looked at me like I must be high. “Two? It’s Four Seventeen, man!”

Puremusic: So, one thing I want to talk about is, there’s so much branding going on now around the term “jamband.” I see you being associated with this culture, or movement, but it’s something of a misnomer. Let’s talk about where you think your music is coming from, and what tradition you’re carrying on, so to speak.

Steve Kimock: Yeah, okay. That’s a fair place to start. I don’t know when this jamband thing got started. Maybe it was Phish, you know. This is a hard question to get started on. I’d already been doing basically what I’m doing now for twenty years, or something like that, when somebody came along and said, “Oh, hello, jambands.” I never really thought of it like that. I don’t know what a jamband is. It’s kind of a catch-all phrase. You look at some of the people that they’re talking about that are doing this, and it’s confusing. Karl Denson [Karl Denson’s Tiny Universe], is that a jamband? Is Government Mule a jamband?

PM: Right.

SK: Are they the same thing? You know, one of those bands is clearly a rock band. I mean, as far as I can tell.

PM: For instance, one thing, whenever I refer to or describe you, it always comes up that “he’s a West Coast guitarist,” you know, although that could be ambivalent in jazz circles. I mean, that still means something to me, that, “He’s a West Coast guitar player.”

SK: Yeah. Well, you know, I grew up in Pennsylvania—grew up in Pennsylvania with you. [laughs] But the music that seemed to influence me the most was this stuff that was around in those formative years, my early twenties, when we came to California [in the mid ’70s]. So I’m kind of out of that school, if you want to call it that: [Jerry] Garcia, Carlos Santana, Terry Haggerty, Jerry Miller.

PM: John Cipollina.

SK: John Cipollina, of course. But that’s where it’s coming from, it seems to me. And those were the people that I was eventually playing with in California. You know, one of the very first gigs we played in California was [on a bill] with Merle Saunders with Martin [Fierro, who later played with Steve in Zero] playing the tenor through the Echoplex...with a headdress on, incidentally. [laughter] At the Old Waldorf.

PM: Right.

SK: So yeah, what was happening then, that’s kind of where it comes from. And in the meantime, of course, I was a huge Coltrane fan, a huge Miles Davis fan. I wasn’t all that clued in to the North Indian classical thing, but of course, when I landed my first apartment in California, I was adjacent to the parking lot of the Ali Akbar College [in San Rafael, Marin County], which was a literal wake-up call to me the first morning when I got up there and heard that...

PM: Wow.

SK: Guys in the parking lot would be warming up outside the school. I would think, “Wow, where

am I?" So my background, the stuff that I was exposed to, for real, were the people right there. It was the improvisational rock, and the North Indian classical stuff. And that's what I was listening to hard, and practicing. And practicing hard, you know, in a kind of state where I was influenced.

So that's what the influences were, small band improvisation. That's always what I thought it was that I was trying to do. I didn't see a big difference between what Miles Davis' post-bop stuff was and the Grateful Dead. This is the same kind of stuff; these are different guys. You know, they were working with the same kind of stuff...maybe at opposite ends of the spectrum, but they got to it coming from different places, but they got there. And I don't think that any of those artists or any of those fans would have considered what was going on like a jamband kind of thing. That's not what that is. So I don't know, I think it's just a sort of marketing pigeon-holing.

PM: Yeah. There's a different level of gravity between the idea of players or an audience talking about being a jamband, and a serious musician of your caliber talking about small band improvisation. That's two different takes on a similar idea. Because like we were saying yesterday, you could easily be spoken of, more accurately, as one of the last of the great West Coast psychedelic guitar players. That's more apt than a lot of things one could say.

SK: Yeah, I'd agree with that.

PM: Okay, so we're not all dropping acid, and so it's not psychedelic in that way, but there is something much more open-ended, certainly harmonically, but also sonically, and rhythmically, than might go on in what I think of as a jamband. I'm not dissing anybody's art, I think it's all good stuff in its own way, but this is a much more psychedelic jazz rock without being what they called fusion.

SK: Although, in defense of the fusion thing [laughs], that was just another horrible label that some people got stuck with. I was a huge fan of John McLaughlin's stuff, with Miles' band and with his own band. And there's a lot of people that came out of that Miles Davis band that played great stuff, like Chick Corea.

PM: Right. Especially Chick Corea and John McLaughlin.

SK: So to the extent that that was labeled "fusion," and to the extent that I was influenced by it, I was influenced by fusion. But you don't think of John McLaughlin as being a jamband.

PM: No. You think of him more in terms of small band improvisation.

SK: Yeah, just a great modern jazz player.

PM: Aside from great, to what extent would you describe yourself in the same way? Doesn't a lot of your music speak to a jazz mentality?

SK: Harmonically, yeah. But I wouldn't describe what I do as being jazz any more than, you know...

PM: Any more than it's rock and roll.

SK: Right.

PM: Agreed.

SK: It's...how do I say this? There's just some stuff that you presume for a jazz band thing, you

know. Presuming a seventh chord, eighth note as a basic unit note, two five as a basic harmonic kind of move; a certain tone, a certain kind of phraseology. And I don't do that.

PM: You don't ascribe to that.

SK: I don't play standards. A triad is just as good as a seventh chord. One, four, five is every bit as good as two, five, one. And you won't find that in a regular jazz context. I don't think there are jazz guitarists saying that Steve Kimock is a jazz guitar player.

PM: Right.

SK: And they're probably right. No, they're certainly right. On the other hand, the improvisational spirit of the thing is probably more of the same material a jazz guitar player today might be running into just learning the vocabulary. But playing the heads to all the Charlie Parker tunes and stuff like that, that's not what I do. By the same token, the bluegrass thing or the blues thing is not what I do. Any time that the thing has gotten so formalized that you have to use these elements of style, you have to be acknowledging these influences if you're working with these resources, these people or these sounds...where's the individuality in that? Where's the person in that, to have to just go do all that? As a result, I don't play specifically in those styles.

PM: Yeah. There's a big and growing crowd of people that's becoming aware of you and coming to see you all over the country. I wonder what they'd say it is about you that they're coming to see, that they're coming to experience. It's something about that improvisational spirit that...how did you describe it before, about these four people coming together...the collision theory, and bringing what they have that day. That's why they're coming to see you, right?

SK: I guess so. The people that are coming to the show are bringing whatever good energy they have, or the troubles of the week they're looking to lose, or whatever. It's a vehicle to shed that stuff. That's a different aspect. There's a social aspect, obviously, to gigging. At a certain level, you know, you're going to bring some people together. And this is different from my angle as a player. As a musician, it's kind of hard to get an overview. It's a different kind of listening. Inevitably, I'm having a different experience than the people in the audience.

PM: Certainly.

SK: My hands are really full. [laughs] I'm busy. It's all the same wheel, I'm just on a different part of it. I'm in a different part of the loop.

PM: Whereas an entertainer, per se, might say, "Oh, no, I'm right where they are. I'm having and promoting that same good time." But a musician, to varying degrees, is having a related but separate experience.

SK: The people are there for a kind of a fellowship. It's community. They're getting together for some of their own reasons, and the music supports that to an extent. A lot of the people are there for their own reasons. I don't even pretend to know what they are.

I don't know how many times I'd talked to somebody recently back from a Grateful Dead concert. "Man, I went to Ohio," they'd say. "Well, how was it?" They'd say, "Every other car in Ohio had a nitrous tank." And many were there for a different reason. They weren't really there for the music. Luckily for us, a lot of people that come to the shows, do come for the music, and for the experience of the evening's unfolding. How the people on stage are interacting with each other, and how the music takes shape. And when it's good, it's amazing.

PM: Right. I'm certainly looking forward to the show tonight.

SK: But I wouldn't pretend to know why the people come. I think it's got more to do with people. I mean, I think getting together for a gig probably serves the same kind of social functions that church served for other people at different times.

PM: I think a musician and bandleader is uniquely revealed when he talks about his associates. Let's put a little bit on tape about each of the guys in the current quartet, known as SKB. What about [drummer] Rodney Holmes?

SK: I couldn't begin to do Rodney justice talking about him. We go back so far. You may have attended that concert at the old Keystone Corner in San Francisco with Max Roach and Elvin Jones. Did you go to that one?

PM: I wasn't at that show, no.

SK: You didn't go to that? Okay. Well, I was as far away from the stage as I am from you, which is about three feet. That was the last time I heard drums that good. And I told that to Rodney, too.

PM: Wow.

SK: He's as good as anybody, good as anybody ever was, about as good as you could be.

PM: No kidding.

SK: So it's a real pleasure to work with him musically. And he's a great guy.

PM: Yeah, you said a "sweetness of disposition."

SK: Yes.

PM: Oh, I think you even called him a monk.

SK: I did call him a monk. He's that kind of guy. When he's doing his thing, man, he doesn't have any distractions. He's all there, and it's good.

PM: Is he a single guy or a married guy with kids, or...?

SK: He's pretty single.

PM: And so the other half of the rhythm section is a very famous bass player, Alphonso Johnson.

SK: Again, these are early concerts, but I remember going to see Weather Report in Northampton, at that little theater—the one where we played with AC/DC. Remember when we opened up for AC/DC? [laughter]

PM: Yeah.

SK: Anyway, I remember seeing Alphonso then. I've been seeing Alphonso for a long time. And of course, I was a huge Weather Report fan, you know. So I heard him there. And he and Rodney also did the Wayne Shorter gig together. So they've done some playing. Both have done the Santana gig at different times, Rodney recently. And Alphonso is a great person, as well as a great musician. I'll be playing along, and just kind of off in my own little world, and then go, "Hey, wait a minute,"

and there'll be some groove, man, that is just so Weather Report, you know. The stuff that he plays on the bass is so good. He has a real command of the melodically simple and compelling and rhythmically interesting grooves and so on and so on, a great melody player, great soloist.

PM: And does he solo widely in SKB?

SK: There are nights where I'll just feel like carving him out some more space, you know, and I do. And he always takes great advantage of it. Yeah, I kind of wish he was soloing more.

PM: Maybe tonight.

SK: Yeah, definitely tonight.

PM: And so, Mitch Stein. What's his story?

SK: I met Mitch through Rodney. Mitch and Rodney had a trio in New York called the Hermanators. And I was looking for another guitarist. I'd been working with keyboard players for a while. And I thought, well, this is so much guitar stuff that why not just let it be some guitar stuff, let's find another guitar player. And I heard the Hermanators tape. At first I thought, "I do not need another lead guitar player. That's not what I need." And then every time I got in the car, I put the Hermanators on. I just really liked it. I just really liked Mitch's playing. He's totally different than anybody. And I just love his stuff. He's great to work with. He's always coming up with the coolest shit.

PM: He's a New York guy.

SK: Very New York guy.

PM: Does he come out of some New York jazz school, or...

SK: It would seem so. Not having gone to any New York jazz schools myself, I wouldn't exactly know. But he's got a lot of experience. He's played with lots of folks. A great player.

PM: I've always known you to be a relentless practicer. Is that still true?

SK: Well, nowhere near what it was when we were younger and working less. When there's nothing going on, I'm a relentless practicer. And any minute that I get, you know, I'll sit with my instrument, because I enjoy that. I'm so busy these days that there's not a lot of time to practice. And then when I do start working on things, a lot of times, the stuff that I'm working on, I don't find immediate application for, it's just kind of too far out.

PM: Too theoretical.

SK: Yeah, because it takes a while to bring it in. I mean, stuff that, you know, that I was working on ten years ago, and working hard on, now that's the stuff that just sort of comes out. So it's internal. It takes a long time to internalize some of that stuff. I don't know if that's true of everybody, but it's certainly true for me.

PM: Well, yeah. It's no wonder. When you're a relentless practicer and have the time, you're frequently working on these musical constructs, concepts, or ideas. Are there any such constructs or concepts you're working with lately, or is life just too busy for that kind of thinking?

SK: Well, there's more odd time signature stuff these days, that I enjoy playing. I mean, being a self-taught player, and playing basically in rock and blues bands as a kid, where everything is in 4/4, you sort of get to a point where you're not really conscious of the time, you know, you're sort of just in it.

PM: Yeah.

SK: And that's cool. Now there's more stuff in 5, and some stuff in 11, and stuff will happen in 9 or 7, or whatever. And you just need to be conscious of the time more. And it feels good for me to play like that. So there's more of that. Harmonically there's more stuff that I'm working on that's...I'm working more with harmony that's not based on the diatonic scale, and that's not based on thirds. So I'm working with harmonies from synthetic scales, and harmonic major and minor scales and fourths and stuff like that, just bigger chords, chords that would take a while to get to if you were trying to stack them up from thirds, and then you wouldn't be able to name them, and stuff like that, so just working in some other tonalities.

Melodically, you know...melody is melody, and you'll have influences on that. This will be more bluesy, this will be more South Indian, or this will be a little more jazz, or whatever. But melody is melody, pretty much.

PM: Are there any other guitar players, or any other improvisers of any kind that are turning you on out there presently?

SK: There are so many good guitar players, man, I wouldn't even know where to start.

PM: But anybody that personally really turns you on?

SK: I've done some shows with and played with Derek Trucks occasionally, the bottleneck player. And boy, he's a great slide player, just great. I always have had, you know, a fondness for the non-pedal steel guitar and bottleneck guitar sounds.

PM: Right.

SK: Of course, I'm a huge Billy Goodman fan.

PM: Oh, yeah, one of our favorite bottleneck players.

SK: One of my favorite bottleneck players. And there's that whole Sacred Steel thing, that sort of popped up recently.

PM: What is that? I know the term, but I'm not sure what it refers to.

SK: Oh, there were some churches in Florida that were using the steel for the service instead of the organ. Imitating the voice, the gospel stuff on the steel. Some great players there.

PM: Right. I saw that down at Folk Alliance, right. That was interesting.

SK: If you haven't checked that out, you got to hear that. That's happening right now. It's great, great stuff. Sacred Steel. I think how it first showed up is as a compilation of steel guitarists in the church. Robert Randolph now is playing pedal steel and plays in that style. He's got a band. He's out there working. He's real good. You know, I kind of like the steel players.

PM: So maybe this question is hard, but I'm one of the many people who think you should be very

well known. What are some of the steps to make that possible, and are any of them in process?

SK: Yeah, that's a hard question. I don't know. I mean, it's probably as much my own responsibility, or fault, as anybody else's. I mean, I started out as a kid, a young teen, deciding that, "Oh, I really want to do this. I want to play the guitar. I just want to be a good guitar player. I just want to, you know, figure out some way to play the guitar. That's what I want to do." And so that's what I did. I never said, "Oh, I want to get rich playing guitar." I never thought I wanted to get famous playing the guitar. I just wanted to play the guitar. So I think at every juncture, so far, where I've had a choice between just doing some more playing, or just trying to make some more money from it, trying to do something to pump myself up in terms of visibility in the public, I just sort of went back in my room and played. So I guess it's my own damn fault, as they say.

PM: Hmm, yeah. And like all great artists, it's really up to other people in the chain to make one more visible. And that considered, I wonder, well, what does it take to make Steve as famous as he really should be? So it's certainly dependent on future records, for one thing.

SK: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the key to the thing would be making a great record, which I have failed to do so far. I've made some interesting records.

PM: Yeah.

SK: And I've played on some interesting records. And I certainly have fun in the studio. But I've not yet had the opportunity, and don't feel like I'm going to have the opportunity any time in the near future, to organize the time or the investment to put something like that together. It's difficult. And I'm working. You know, I work real hard, but I basically work from gig to gig, month to month. So it's not like I can say, "Okay. I can set aside three months to do this." There are mouths to feed.

PM: Yeah. But I wonder. You know, you've already got a great band that's worked together for a pretty good long time now, and there's a bunch of good tunes. What would happen if you took that unit, locked out a Nashville studio, or somewhere, for a week, pretty affordably, and just went at it? Didn't go at it like you had a \$100,000 budget or a \$50,000 budget, just locked out a studio for a week. I mean, would you not come up with something pretty good?

SK: Yeah. Actually, I have plans to really try and start that, like on a one or two song at a time basis. There's some stuff that I'm just desperate to get onto tape in a professional way. People tape all the shows. People put every show on tape. And you listen to the tapes, and some of the tapes are good. But it's just a microphone at the front of the stage or something like that. How do you...?

PM: Right. All the instruments need to be miked separately in a real controlled environment, and good renditions go down.

SK: Yeah.

PM: But I mean, all that would happen in the course of a week, you know, if you had good mics, and a nice room, and a good engineer. I'm going to pause here. Let's go up to the room.

[Steve's playing the baritone ukulele.]

SK: It's got a cool sound.

PM: Lovely.

SK: Okay. So where were we before? Oh, we were talking about what we have to do to like get a record made.

PM: Yeah. And we were talking about locking out a studio, a Nashville studio or something, for a week, and just having all these amps miked separately. And would that not be sufficient to capture a record?

SK: Yeah. It certainly would. I mean, it's one part of the puzzle. You have to figure out a way to distribute it. And you've got to promote it, and you've got to have the band go out and tour behind it. And you need to get all the media stuff working for you, and everything like that. So if it were just a question of getting into the studio to make it happen...

PM: Or just making a record.

SK: Just making a record, I think that's probably the easy part.

PM: It is the easy part.

SK: Yeah, the easy part of making a record is making a record. The hard part is getting a lot of people to buy it. But in the current music business, the state that it's in, I don't know that you can sell an awful lot of records of the kind of record that I would most likely make. I think it would just be too specific, you know, for...that's not the right word. Not specific enough, in a marketing sense, is probably the problem. I mean, as you said when we started, my stuff has sort of gotten lumped into this jamband thing.

PM: Right.

SK: Something tells me that there's a lot of people that are into that jamband scene that might not go, "Oh, that's it." I get the impression that people don't think you've got a legitimate jamband unless the guys are all, you know, twenty-something, and living in a station wagon. You know what I mean?

PM: Yeah.

SK: Like, "Oh, that's not a jamband. Look, they've got actual players." [laughs] And stuff like that. Is that weird?

PM: Well, it's no weirder than the situation that really exists. But I think, on the other hand, a lot of the jamband audience, what they're really looking for is, "Hey, is somebody going to improvise, and like really blow my mind?" It's like that's what jam means in its highest sense, is like, "Wow, somebody's like going to play something like really free, and just get out there and, you know, blow it out their ass? Wow! I want to see that go down!" And you know, there aren't that many in the jamband crowd, whoever that is, that are going to do that. But SKB is certainly going to do that. They'll present a tune, you know, it'll have a head, and then it's completely up for grabs at that point. It's just like, "Well, okay, you're up. What do you got?"

SK: Off to the races.

PM: The upside of the jamband label is, if it brings new ears to what you're doing, then so be it. Otherwise, how do the young hipsters looking for cool new music find new bands? There's not really names for what a lot of them do, you know, for what Galactic does or Steve Kimock does, or...

SK: Okay. Now, that's a simple question. You know, how you find new bands that you like is you support live music.

PM: Yeah.

SK: You take your twenty bucks, and you get your ass out of the house, and you go down to the club, and you plunk your money down, and you check it out. And that's how you do it. There really isn't another way to know what you're going to like. Because, ultimately, good music is the feeling that you get when you're experiencing good music, which is going to be different things for you at different times in your life. It's going to be different things for different people. I mean, that's the experience that I want to have. That's the experience that I'm trying to sell, if I'm trying to sell them anything, is that if you resonate with this, if this makes you feel like good music makes you feel, then, there you go.

If not, don't stop looking [laughs], please. You know, take your twenty bucks somewhere else, and go and have that experience of good music, because it's happening out there, lots more. It seems like there's more people playing now, playing more what they want to play, than any other time. I don't think that the scene, the musicians that are playing out on the road today, or the people that are going to support them, and the top level of the music industry could be any further apart.

PM: Right.

SK: So you're probably not going to get that authentic experience of really having some good music without going independent; you know, browsing through the new releases at Warehouse, or something.

PM: Yeah. As narrow as the charts have become, the off-the-chart offerings have become a lot wider. I agree, yeah, there's a large number of great acts on the road.

SK: I mean, for crying out loud, if you just like hearing some good music and seeing somebody play really well, you know, go see Mr. Dave. Go see Dave Lindley. [laughs] If you want to hear some good guitar playing, you know? Hopefully, he's doing well.

PM: Do you listen to any ethnic or world music these days?

SK: Well, I still listen to a lot of Indian music, North and South, some classical, and some of the more popular stuff. There's some European/African popular music that happens in Europe that I think is really good. And I've always been a big fan of the High Life stuff, the African stuff, especially the funky stuff from the sixties. I love the guitars. I love that old guitar sound they had. And other styles, like Brazilian music.

PM: Yeah.

SK: There's Cuban music. There's all these styles that get represented in American music somehow. It seems like there's great music on every continent, and on every island, and we get a little bit of it. There's a great Hawaiian tradition, certainly. Its influence is right here with my ukulele and my steel guitar and stuff like that. That figures into it.

PM: You seem to have hit a new level of...let's call it nomadic stability, since you got married to Jennifer. Do you agree?

SK: That's a nice way to put it. We travel a lot. And it's not something that I used to do a lot. So it's really, really fun for me. She grew up traveling, having family in the States and family in

Europe. And so she doesn't think anything of just hopping up at the drop of the hat and zipping off somewhere, you know. And so it's fun. We travel so much now with the band that I think that's good for me. Because I was living...you know how I dealt with my stuff for years, I sort of locked myself in a room. So I was locked in a room for forty years. Now I travel [laughs], thank God.

PM: We've talked about ways that the next album might get cut, and there are two SKB live records out now. I don't think we covered exactly the kind of record that if you had your druthers, you'd like to make.

SK: Oh, gee, another giant question. Because it's...I don't want to make one record. I'd like to make a record without playing guitar [laughs], you know?

PM: Really?

SK: Sure. I'd like to make a record just playing steel and ukelele and autoharp or something, and making some sounds and doing some stuff. And I'd like to do a record just... Okay, one of my favorite records of all time was that Crosby, Stills & Nash *Deja Vu* thing, you know, great songs, great songwriting, great guitar sounds. There's good guitar on that record. I'd like to make a record like that, kind of like the folk, folk rock, kind of song.

I'd also like to do more records of just improvisational kind of forms. There's a basic shape to improvised music, where there's this little gathering of energy, and it sort of ramps up to some sort of climax, and it ramps down quite a bit more quickly. But there's a general shape to it, you know.

PM: Sure.

SK: And part of my continued push in the small band improvisation thing was to create different forms for improvisation than just that same sort of organic ramp up, climax, falling off kind of shape, which seems to characterize most of it. I'd like to do a record that has some other kinds of improvisational forms. So there's a bunch of records that I'd like to make. There's not just one that, you know, would represent what I think I might be able to offer.

PM: I know you like to talk technically, and there's a lot of people that will look in on the interview that want to hear about the technical side of your gig. Why don't we talk a minute about your guitars de jour, and how you're setting them up. So let's get into what you're playing these days.

SK: Well, I still like playing lots of different guitars. I always wondered if I would get to a point where I just sort of liked one and stayed with it. And there are nights where I'll play a lot of the show on one guitar, but it's rare. I still like having some basic construction philosophy differences between the guitars.

I like to have a long scale guitar with heavy strings with weak pickups, right? So I own a white Stratocaster, so I've got a punchy, kind of clear sound. Set of .012's, little lipstick tube pickups stuck way down in the pick guard—not a lot of output, but able to receive a lot of right-hand velocity. I can just whack away at it and it sounds cool.

But then one might need a long scale guitar with light strings and Humbuckers, so I have two Stratocasters. I have one with the old Fender Humbuckers on it, like these—you know, the Thinline Tellies, right, with the maple neck, strung with .011's, so I can kind of push that around a little bit—a totally different instrument. A totally different balance and resistances, totally different output, treats the amp differently. A totally different thing, but a Stratocaster, but not the regular Stratocaster pickups.

And then the same thing with the Gibson, with the shorter scale. I have a guitar with the weaker pickups with the flat wounds on it, and one with the Humbuckers and the light strings. So I just like having some kind of variety of guitars to play.

The Explorer that I used to play when we were playing together, I still have. I still play that all the time. I have two of them. I only bring one on the road. The last time I did a gig in town, I sat in with Bill Kreutzman's band and played the other Explorer, so that was fun.

PM: The other Explorer, what color is it? Is that also brown?

SK: It's also brown, yes. Mahogany.

PM: Is it also a Charles LoBue guitar?

SK: It's also a LoBue. Two of the four LoBues are in my possession.

PM: Wow!

SK: One of the other ones, some fan bought, and brought to a gig years ago. I think he bought it from Rick Derringer, the Corina one, the one that was on the cover of Guitar Player magazine. Number four, I've heard rumors that Gibson had it in Nashville.

PM: Oh, I could certainly look into that for you. I have friends who work there.

SK: Yeah, say, "You ever hear of that LoBue Explorer?" See if they know where it is. It's still, you know, just a charmed guitar, always has been. So, a couple of Stratocasters. I have two instruments, one that I bring on the road, and one that doesn't go on the road very much, made by my friend Tom Cerletti, who is an apprentice of Ribbecke, a great, great archtop builder. And he built me a beautiful archtop guitar, electric, and a beautiful solid body, one that has all the mother of pearl. The fingerboard is all pearl and abalone. It's beautiful.

PM: Where does Cerletti make his guitars?

SK: Healdsburg. [Northern CA] He's a local. And that guitar's got a lot of attitude. All these guitars that I kept have enough attitude that I have to go to them, because I'm not trying to get the guitar to work for me. I kind of go to it and ask, "What will you allow me?" [laughs] And then kind of go with that.

And I have that Cripes. He's the guy that was making guitars for Jerry Garcia towards the end of his career.

PM: And what's that like? What kind of guitar is that?

SK: That's totally different than the rest of them. It's a Stratocaster scale length. I've got three of those Harmonic Design Z-90s in it, great pickups. It's got a loop in it between the pickups and the output, so I can insert stuff between the pickups and the volume control, like a Mutron Octave Divider, stuff that likes to see a constant level. It just sees the pickup level, and then the guitar's volume becomes a post effect master, basically. But that's a neck-through guitar, birds-eye teak. It's fancy, kind of heavy, not my normal thing. My normal thing is not laminated. I like, oh, one nice big piece of ash, that's fine, one nice piece of mahogany, that's fine. But I've got lots of guitars. I play some bottleneck on the old Supro Ozark. I bring that to every gig. I've got a couple of Fender Stringmaster double-six steels, that I'll bring and play some steel on. I bring the Vega.

PM: Still playing the Vega?

SK: Pretty much everywhere I go, it's sitting right there.

PM: God, what a great old guitar that is.

SK: The Vega is kind of charmed. You have to play it really, really hard to get anything to come out, but then it just sounds so nice. The guitar for me is so personal, you know, it's hard to know much about the guitar or the player, other than that's a very personal choice that they like that instrument. You know, it doesn't really tell you a whole lot about the instrument or the guy.

PM: Do you talk about all the amp stuff? Is that fair game, or is that more proprietary?

SK: Well, you and I have both done the art—you know, done our time, done our penance on the musical instrument manufacturing thing, from a bunch of different angles. In case anybody that's checking this out doesn't know, Frank and I both worked at Mesa/Boogie for a long time. We put in some hours and days and months and years in that stuff. There's a tiny amount of proprietary stuff, you know. People will come to me and ask me at gigs sometimes, "So, what's happening?" I just tell them, you know, "Sorry, top secret. Top secret stuff." That's just because I don't feel like talking.

PM: Yeah, it's your mother's fuzz box.

SK: Right, exactly. But the amp thing is really...it's pretty simple. I have an old 50-watt Dumble that I like, that I've been playing through for I don't know how many years now. It's just broken in so nice. I just love playing through it.

PM: Does he [Alex Dumble] still make amplifiers?

SK: I bet he does. He's kind of an enigma. Everybody's making Dumble type clone amps these days. Or trying.

PM: I wonder how they even make any clones. I mean, didn't he always used to goop all the parts inside so that you couldn't even tell what it was made of?

SK: Oh, you can tell. You can tell what's in there. And a lot of the Dumbles were different. I have two Dumbles. I have a 100-watt and a 50-watt—totally different amplifiers. The 100-watt normally is a spare. I use it on some bigger gigs. I got the 100-watt hoping to get a bigger 50-watt, but it's not like that at all. And I've just come to realize that I just like 50-watt amplifiers, two output tubes, fine.

PM: Right.

SK: That sounds good. Four somehow just waters it down. You don't really get...you get less of everything and it's louder [laughs], you know. See, I don't want that. I've been working for many years with Bill Krinard on just trying to figure out how to make a guitar amp sound good. Bill Krinard is one half of a thing called K & M Analog Designs, and they make amplifiers called Two Rock Amps.

PM: Two Rock, like the place.

SK: Two Rock, yeah, out there by the Coast Guard station [west of Petaluma, CA]. People probably think it means something else. But, no, Two Rock is an actual location. It's a little place in the hills

where these two rocks stick out, and it's a farmhouse. Bill was doing some repairs years ago, had a little shop next to Zone Music in Cotati.

PM: That's where I met him...

SK: And he would go, "Here, listen to this." You know, he'd have some old Selmer amp or something, or some old Fender, or some miscellaneous this, or he had converted some Heathkit into something, or whatever it was. And we would just start listening to amps and listening to tubes, and after a while, man, we'd find something that was really cool, I'd say, "Okay, you just hold on there." I'd go get my old 50-watt Dumble, and listen to the 50-watt Dumble, and sure enough, man, the Dumble was just a more special amp, just in every way, just sort of more balanced.

PM: Alex Dumble, a bit of a genius, a very, as you say, enigmatic fellow.

SK: Yeah. And the more we tried to figure how to get stuff to sound good, the weirder it became. I'm a big fan of everybody who's doing that—and that's another unfortunate tag, the boutique amp thing. There's lots of guys making amps right now, too.

PM: Sure.

SK: Lots of guys making guitars. But lots of guys making amps, and lots of guys making really good amplifiers. And my hat is off to them. You know, I mean, we both know how hard it is to make an amp at all, and there are guys out there that are doing a really good job. It's important that they keep doing it. I follow a lot of the internet chat about a lot of the amp stuff. It interests me to see what people are thinking, and how guys that are coming up in it are perceived, how the public perceives these things, you know. I think there's maybe a handful of people, of all the guys that play guitar, that even have a clue why the amps sound the way they do. It's not like voodoo, it's not magic, but it's not what you think. It is not what you think. [Here Steve did go into some proprietary thinking and discoveries at great length that were very interesting but which I'm not at liberty to disclose.]

So I use the 50-watt Dumble. I use the Octave Two Rock, which is a great sounding amplifier, and for some reason is louder in class A. You know, it's 60-watt amp switchable A/B to class A. It's louder in class A than my Dumble. [laughs] It doesn't make any sense. I have the old Mesa Baron power amp that I use in bigger rooms to add another 2x12 to fill things out. I love working with the musical instrument manufacturing thing. You know, again, just to noodle around, trying to figure out why stuff sounds good, or works better.

PM: Yeah. There's always been a scientific aspect to your personality that's satisfied by that investigation.

SK: I'm attracted to it. I don't have the time to really pursue it, although someday I'll get around to building an amplifier. I certainly know enough about what not to do at this point that I could build something that would probably work, if I didn't electrocute myself in the process or burn the house down. The speaker thing is really out of control these days, man. Maybe you've read my little speaker blurb on the website.

PM: I haven't yet, actually, but wanted to.

SK: Oh, okay. Well, you can refer to that. Remember those Altec speakers I used to use out on the farm? When we moved to California—when our whole band moved to California ten million years ago—I took those Altec speakers with me.

PM: 417-8Hs, or whatever they were?

SK: Yeah, they were just like the Santana yahoo speakers. I actually think I might have had two different ones. But I had two Altec speakers. Then I took them to John at A Brown Sound in 1975 to have them reconed, because I was going to play bass through them, remember?

PM: [laughs]

SK: Make them for bass, take the metal domes off and recone them? God, those speakers sounded so good. Everything I took to the guy sounded good. And eventually, we got into a little going-around trying to get the speaker thing to sound right, and he wound up with a product, out of all that hustling and running around, just making these Tone Tubby speakers, he calls them now.

PM: Tone Tubby?

SK: Tone Tubbies, that are sort of a knock-off of the Vox Blue Bulldog, different cones and different...his own parts, and been using the Weber baskets and magnets. But now he's getting some new cones made. He's got these hemp cones.

PM: Hemp cones?

SK: Hemp. Very different, very cool. The hemp cone thing is very cool. There will be some development around the hemp cone speaker and amp lines that will make a lot of sense for me, shortly, I think. It has real, real great potential. They seem to have a much smaller kind of on-axis danger zone. These hemp cones, man, they just have great fundamental. And you can just put them right in your face and listen, and they sound really good. So I think they're going to wind up having applications with lower-power amplifiers, where you can really set them up there and listen to them, and get all the benefit of the good low-powered amp sounds, and monitor the thing to get that sound. I'm excited about the speaker things that are happening. And again, lots of good amp things. And you know that I've checked it out.

PM: Some things never change. When you speak about technical things, you do so with great passion and interest.

SK: I love it so much.

PM: It's a never-ending search for tone.

SK: I'm not searching for a tone, I'm just having fun recognizing the trade-offs, you know. It's like, "I want it to be a little more like this." And then, "What have I got to give up to get it there?" See, it's just trade-offs.

PM: Right.

SK: I'm not searching for "a sound." It's not any particular sound. I'm just trying to get a little pile of stuff together that I can get big, clean head room, nice clean sounds, which is a different thing than you think it is, and then get some great distortion sounds without having it being tied to any particular volume, you know, so I wind up running single amps dry on a pair of speakers, and then running two big amps in stereo, and 4x12's, and little single-ended class A amps in front of stereo amps, and little classic power amps in the loops of bigger amps. Messing with the formula—how much gain the amplifier is having for how much volume you use, playing with various kinds of power scaling factors, without getting into specific output stage designs, just using the usual stuff. It works, pretty much, in the size rooms that we're playing. Between a couple

hundred people and a couple thousand people, you know, I seem to be able to get away with it. Past that, it's a little difficult.

PM: Yeah, then you're at the mercy of other elements.

SK: Yeah, and stuff just sort of gets squashed washing back from the house. The stage is always intruded upon by a giant PA.

PM: Yeah. Then you're at the mercy of the house sound system.

SK: It works in reasonable venues. I can get a good, decent enough clean sound, loud enough that I can play sensitively, and it sounds okay. And in small rooms, I can fix stuff so that I can still get a big, fat, punchy transformer, you know, meltdown kind of sound without it being too loud, so just that pile of stuff allows me to do that. And that's kind of what I'm going for, just to have a range of stuff to work with, and then have a little—you know, some range of instruments to work with, to play off that. So if I want a clean, single-coil kind of sensitively played sound, I pick up the guitar, and I go back, and I'll plug something in and unplug something else, I'm there. And then if I want it to sound like it's blowing up, I'll get a different guitar, go back and plug something in.

PM: Before we wind this up, I just want to make sure we said everything about where you feel the music is coming from. We talked about being perhaps the last of the great San Francisco psychedelic guitar players, rather than being dubbed a jamband. Is there anything else about what you're trying to do as a musician that we may not have covered to your satisfaction? You know, if you think about "what it is I'm trying to do," did we say all that we need to say about that?

SK: No, not really. Not really, but it's kind of difficult to talk about. We spoke earlier about the audience, the community and social aspect, and the fellowship part of it. Getting people together in a group and then they're using the music. We're basically playing their party. You know, they're not coming to our recital, we're playing at their party. There's that aspect of it.

The way the world is, man, the way the world has turned out to be, a very strange world, there's not a lot of reality in our culture. It's kind of bankrupt, you know, we're really not clued in to what's really going on. I don't know how else to say this. But our institutions—the schools, the churches, the government—it's not in their best interests for us to know the difference between right and wrong. I mean, I'm a good Roman Catholic boy, as you yourself were probably raised a good Roman Catholic boy.

PM: I was indeed.

SK: You see what that means these days.

PM: Yeah, they got a problem.

SK: They got a big problem. But it's just kind of like that everywhere. It's just so not real. There are things that happen to people, man, when they listen to music—and I'm not going to get too into it for the purposes of this interview, we'll do it another time, probably. But the key thing about music is that it happens in time, right? And when you're playing with time like that, with people, and it's happening in time, and you get to some kind of a flow state with the whole thing, where for just an instant in the night [snaps his fingers], the thing opens up, and people simultaneously are aware that they're having this experience, that they're just really being in the moment, they're being in the now. They're not experiencing the frustration of having grown up in this incredible duality of not knowing the difference between right and wrong, and not knowing the difference between food and poison, or war and peace, or having a job or being a slave or anything like that. They're not living in

their minds, they're just in the moment, for real. Maybe right before they run their snow board into a tree or something like that, they get it, you know, but they don't get it often. And it happens a lot with music, and I think that's what attracts people to it. And ultimately, getting into that moment, getting into that flow state, is where I'm coming from, that's where I want the thing to go. I want it to go to a place where you're so engaged that you disengage from your mind, basically, and it's all there all at once. Everything all at once, finally, instead of, "I'm standing here and my feet hurt, with this girl, and she's dancing with that guy." You know what I mean?

PM: Yeah.

SK: Ultimately, that's the hook in the music thing, the experience of it in a group with live performers and an actual audience. Having that kind of vibe, that kind of energy going around, is how we get to those states. That kind of energy will flow right into a now, where people simultaneously are in the now. That is some powerful shit. That's reality. That's real, as close as you're going to get to some real reality. That's real, not the rest of this illusion and duality. So yeah, it's to get out of your mind.

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