

A Conversation with Leo Kottke

by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 11/2002)

An elegantly quirky goldmine of a record crossed my desk recently. The personnel caught my eye, since it was the legendary acoustic guitar slinger Leo Kottke paired with the prodigious bassist from Phish, Mike Gordon. I figured it would be at least interesting, but it sailed far and high beyond my measured expectations. *Clone* is a disc of mutual admiration and musical fraternity that translates as a funky and lyrical experience.

Musically speaking, it is a compositional gem, and showcases quite a few beautiful works, most composed for the occasion. But even beyond that, it demonstrates an iconoclastic duet of acoustic guitar and bass that bears special mention. The last time I heard a guitar and bass relationship that I found this interesting and exciting was the classic debut recording of Hot Tuna, where the symbiosis of Kaukonen and Cassady blew the minds of fingerpickers everywhere. *Clone* has a spirit of lighthearted camaraderie, but the musicianship runs deep. There is subtly virtuosic playing throughout.

One would hardly expect less from Leo Kottke, he's been at the forefront of acoustic guitar stylists since he first appeared on the scene around 1970. I remember learning "The Fisherman" and some other pieces off that Takoma record with the armadillo on the cover, *6 and 12 String Guitar*, where the quote about his voice resembling geese farts on a muggy day first appeared. Wonder if he ever regretted saying that. I guess not, he seems like a very self-effacing and straight talking character. In fact, I can't remember the last time I enjoyed a phone interview as much. (On his website, you'll also find that he expounds at entertaining length about politics, culture, and modern life, we got a kick out of all that.)

In the 30 years he's been recording, Leo has cut or appeared on more than that number of records. His own number an impressive 25. That's a lot of great guitar music. And I daresay this latest project with Mike Gordon will attract legions of new fans, as the duo will play a dozen shows supporting this release (dates are posted at leokottke.com). If you've heard of him forever, but haven't heard him lately, please be sure to sample some clips on the Listen page.

PUREMUSIC: That's a great funky record you just did with Mike Gordon.

LEO KOTTKE: Oh, good. Yeah, we like it a lot. We had a ball making that thing.

PM: You know, that's really obvious.

LK: Great.

PM: You can see it in the pictures, you can really hear it in the playing. Were many of the pieces written specifically for that duo project?

LK: Yeah. Let's see, there was one cover tune, "I Am a Lonesome Fugitive"—

PM: An unbelievable cover, too, and well done.

LK: Oh, thanks. It's funny, there was no intention of doing any kind of a cover. We were sitting

in the studio, waiting for Paul [Paul duGré, the co-producer and engineer], and I just started noodling around on that thing. And Mike said, “What’s that?” I said, “Oh, it’s some Merle Haggard deal.” And he said, “We ought to do that.” And I said, “Really?” [laughs]

But other than that and a tune called “Strange” that—again, it’s another one that Mike really liked, so we did it, a tune that I originally wrote for a solo record a long time ago—everything else was either done together or actually generated together.

PM: Who was the cat who wrote “From Pizza Towers to Defeat”?

LK: Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot about that. Yeah, that is the great Frizz Fuller, once known as Frisbee Boom Boom Fuller.

PM: [laughs]

LK: The guy who I’m aware of having recorded several of Frizz’s tunes is David Lindley.

PM: I thought it must have been the same guy.

LK: You probably know his masterpiece, “Tiki Torches at Twilight”

PM: Exactly.

LK: As a matter of fact, Lindley helped me get “Pizza Towers” together, because Frizz had a habit of kind of leaving things out of the tunes that he would write. You’d sort of have to intuit the Frizz mind to wrap some of them up. But yeah, I’ve known that tune for—God, I met Frizz in probably ’71, through another guy named Chris Darrow, and I’ve always wanted to do that tune but never found the right way to get around it. Mike turned out to be it.

PM: Frizz, he’s kind of a mystery man. What kind of a guy is he? What does he do? Is he a musician all the time?

LK: Well, he died not too long ago.

PM: Oh, I didn’t know that.

LK: Yeah, he died maybe three years ago, something like that. And Frizz kind of drifted into and out of his own reality. I only met him once. It was in James Dean’s old house, and he was kind of this silence by the fireplace, and liked that Tacoma record [*Six and Twelve String Guitar*], and didn’t say much. And then we would write to each other, but I never saw him again.

There are tapes floating around of Frizz live. They’re hard to find. He had a voice that was—you really had to prepare yourself to listen to Frizz. And he had the most amazing way with lyrics. It

was astounding. He's hard to interpret. To make him fit is difficult, I'm not sure why. Lindley is the guy who can really do it the best. Otherwise you have to hear Frizz do that stuff. He was a piano player, and probably my age, maybe a little older. And I have a lot of his songs, a lot of his lyrics that he sent me over the years. I mean, there are more tunes, more Frizz tunes that are right up there with "Tiki Torches."

PM: Wow.

LK: "Pizza Towers" was the first place that Frizz ever worked. It was a pizza parlor somewhere in L.A., and he was the piano player. He didn't work a lot, because he was pretty drifty, but that was one of them. And that guy in the lyrics, Enrico, was the janitor at Pizza Towers. It was a true story. He actually did try to rob a train, because he was good at stealing menudo. [laughs]

PM: [laughs] But there are no CDs, as such, of Frizz?

LK: No, no.

PM: Yeah, it's all underground.

LK: Yeah.

PM: How did the title piece come together? How did Mike bring it to you as a tune, and how did you make up your part?

LK: I think it was in Minneapolis, and just fooling around, seeing what we could do. He just started telling me the story of his clone, a guy who would appear on stage with him. And he showed me a picture of this guy—they really were like twins. The guy has a younger brother the same age as Mike's younger brother, the same name. And he just started telling me that there was this clone, and that he traveled with Phish for a little while, and he and Mike would kind of switch places and terrify the crowd. But he said after a while the clone started to bother him because people were getting as interested in the clone as they were in Mike.

PM: [laughs]

LK: And then he suspected his girlfriend of spending more time with the clone than with him. And we started just running around with that and finding some lyrics. And it really didn't actually get done until about an hour before we recorded it.

PM: Well, it's just so unusual the way the two parts go together. I mean, would the guitar part, for instance, would it hang together without the bass part that's there?

LK: Yeah.

PM: Cool.

LK: But like all of that stuff on the record, without Mike, you really miss something. And the same is true in the other direction, I would suppose.

PM: I would think so.

LK: Part of that is that with Mike's tunes, frequently there would be a bass line and a vocal melody, and that would be it. So I would find a way in there. It really is a duet. A couple of those tunes—all of "June," for example, was written together, note by note and so forth. We just kind of shared the brain.

PM: Was that up in Minneapolis or in California?

LK: "June" we got in Burlington in—no, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Yeah, we got most of "June" in Burlington. And we did some stuff in Minneapolis. But most of it was generated out in L.A.

PM: So a good bit of hanging out and playing went into this project.

LK: Oh, yeah. Really, for me, I mean, I don't know how Mike would put it, but for me it was really just making a friend. We just got along, and had a lot of the same ideas about how a guitar and a bass could work together. And in a lot of ways, what we do is kind of against the law, because I leave no room. My playing is very busy, and I hog all the room, because I'm a solo guy. And so I'm stepping all over the twos and fours and the roots and everything. But Mike is very happy going outside of the ordinary bass domain.

PM: Oh, yeah, he's counter punching all the way.

LK: Yeah. And he's more like a horn, which is something that I've always hoped to find in a bass player. It's very hard to ask a musician to step outside of—obviously, outside of who they are, but especially outside of the kind of prescribed spectrum for their instrument.

PM: Right. Forget everything you've learned so far and let's jam.

LK: Yeah. And Mike was very happy with that. We're both very busy players, so it could have been just awful, but it works. And if I really think about it, it is kind of puzzling that it works, but it works great.

PM: And not only does it work, but it's really, really fun. And really musical.

LK: Yeah.

PM: As a longtime fan, one of the things that excites me about this new collaboration is it will probably generate, inevitably, a whole new family of fans.

LK: I think that may happen. We'll see. Kind of as a warmup, and sort of so we don't just dive in all at once, we're playing a club before we start the concerts. It's in Massachusetts somewhere. And the club has already asked if I would do a show by myself the night before, because all of the tickets sold out on the Phish website.

PM: No doubt.

LK: And they're getting calls from people who want to see me and can't get tickets.

PM: Right. The old die-hard fans got boxed out because they don't anything about the Phish website.

[laughter]

LK: Yeah. So to some degree, I'll definitely be exposed to some new ears. I've always had a few Phish fans and jam fans out there, but there will be more of them now, at least I hope.

PM: Definitely. It's going to be crazy now. It couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

LK: Oh, thanks.

PM: Do you have any problems anymore with the tendonitis of the 80s, and is your hand position and technique more classical now?

LK: Yeah, yeah. Hand position happens automatically, and automatically it's correct if you don't use any crutches in position, or picks, or things like that.

PM: Are you using a thumb pick?

LK: No thumb pick. And almost no nail. Probably 80% of the attack is just the fingertip, and there's just enough nail to kind of back up the fingertip. So it's more like pulling the string with a hammer than picking it with a surface or something.

PM: So all the country blues influences that were there, you don't pick like that anymore?

PM: Well, actually, I pick more like those guys than when I had finger picks and all of that, because a lot of those guys couldn't maintain, for example, a fingernail for two seconds, given their day jobs. And they used a lot of fingertip, and a lot of what turns out to be really good hand position. You know, like John Hurt, for example.

PM: Yeah, sure. That's how I came up, too, John Hurt. So he had what Segovia might call pretty good hand position?

LK: Yeah, he would. Segovia'd be upset that there's no nail, because Segovia was very—now, I'm getting this third hand—but Segovia really preferred to hear the nail alone, which is the way John Williams plays, and possibly also Julian Bream. And they make it work. Their idea is that it's not good to hear that little bit of friction when you hear the fingertip. They want to hear the note as unadorned as possible. I like that friction. And I remember as a kid really liking to hear that in John Hurt's playing, because it's just more color to my ear. But for Segovia and the more strict classical interpretation of right-hand technique, it's kind of...

PM: It's unseemly.

LK: Or just un-pretty.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, jeez, I had no idea. Live and learn. It seems like the nail alone, I mean, that's kind of the closest thing I can imagine to a plectrum.

LK: Yeah.

PM: I'd much rather hear the flesh whacking on the strings.

LK: Yeah, I would too. But when you get to hear somebody really do it right, then you see what they're talking about. John Williams, I was—oh, this was just one of those wonderful days. I was at Paco Piñon's. He has a little house on a mountain top outside of Cordoba. And John Williams and I and Paco were up there, and another friend of John's from London. There are these two sort of little houses. And one of them is just a big open space next to a pool that was empty.

And I had the nerve to tell John how much I thought he should be writing more, because I really liked what he'd written. And he said, "Oh, I can't write." Which a lot of those really developed, really virtuosic players say, I think because they know so well what the geniuses have written. And I said, "No, no, no." And so I asked him to play this tune of his called "El Tuno," which is an orange of some kind, it turns out. I thought it meant "the tune."

PM: Yeah, right.

LK: And he said, "Oh, yeah, I might remember that." And he played this thing. And oh, God, it killed me. It was just this beautiful, beautiful thing, and so much satisfaction in the sound. So he can do it. He can really make it work. It doesn't sound nail-y, or any of that other stuff that kind of makes your skin crawl.

PM: Right. For you, are the Olson six-string and Taylor twelve still the main axes in play?

LK: Well, actually right now I'm playing the Taylor twelve and a carbon fiber guitar made by RainSong.

PM: Oh, I played one of those once. What's your take on that? Well, obviously, you like it.

LK: Yeah. I haven't had it in the studio to really hear it back, but other people have played it for me. And it has advantages, so many advantages before you consider how it sounds, that it's almost—I have to be careful that I'm not sort of accepting the sound because of all the other advantages. It's feather light. And you cannot hurt it. It's carbon fiber, and very hard to do anything to it. So the case weighs practically nothing as well.

PM: And you don't have to get a Colton case or something.

LK: Yeah, that's right. It's just hardly there. And it never changes. I was unaware, until this guitar, how much I'm adapting every night to the changes in the wood. It's certainly subtle, but I was unaware of how pervasive that subtle shift is. I'm surprised every time I pick this guitar up, because it's exactly what it was the day before. And that it's surprising is surprising. But you realize, "Wow, this is nice. I don't have to make any shifts. I don't have to get used to it tonight. It's just what it always is." So those are its advantages. The sound is good. And as a pickup platform, it's excellent.

PM: And how are you picking it up?

LK: I've been using the Sunrise for a long time. That's just the way to go, I think.

PM: Me too. That's just the one.

LK: Yeah.

PM: And you don't use any mike with it, just the Sunrise alone?

LK: Just the Sunrise. I've tried all of the internal, external blend approaches, and I just come back to this.

PM: You know, I never put one in, because I knew everybody was using all these mikes with the Sunrise. I heard it, and picked it up nice with the Pendulum and the Daedalus cabinet or whatever, and I said, "Hey, you don't need a mike in there. This thing sounds great."

LK: Yeah, yeah. And there is something, too, about the psychology—the psycho acoustic principals, whatever those are, because once you put that pickup through the stacks, in a way, you're really doing what you ought to do with a room anyhow. The microphone gives you the guitar *as* a room, so you're asking, I think, for trouble. You got cancellation, and it's sort of

redundant. And there's something about how you can magnify a pickup signal, by putting it up in the stacks. And it will magnify. But a microphone, the more you magnify it, the shiftier it gets. You have to be very, very careful with it. I guess the accurate word is "amplify." It's harder to amplify a microphone signal.

PM: And a pickup will behave well in so many situations. You can just plug it into a guitar amplifier, at worst, and it behaves pretty well.

LK: Yeah, yeah. As a matter of fact, Mike and I are each using a little amp behind us, rather than monitors, so that we hear each other's signal. And that really wouldn't work for me if I were using any other kind of pickup.

PM: Are you using one of those little Crates, or what amp are you plugging it into?

LK: I just used what Mike had around his place that's easy to get. It's just in the rider, so the promoters are providing a Fender Deluxe. It's a one-twelve speaker. It's a little bright, so I just turn the treble all the way off, and it does the job. It doesn't sound quite right to me until the house is up, and then the house fills out that amp sound behind me.

PM: Yeah. I always thought little Fenders sounded great with the treble all the way off. [laughs]

LK: Yeah, I'm with you.

PM: So it's a cliché question, but people still like to know: what are you listening to, and what are you reading?

LK: Well, reading, let's see. At the moment I'm reading a Paul Auster book called *Timbuktu*. It isn't quite ringing my bell. I just read *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow. It's really good. I've read a lot of his stuff, but I missed that one. I don't know how I've missed it all these years. I guess I thought, "Well, man, it was one of his first books. It's probably not too hot compared to *Herzog* and some of the others." But it's fantastic. It's different. He's much more wordy. Actually, wordy is the wrong word. He really indulges himself in the language a lot more, and he does it beautifully. It's not as spare as he can be.

PM: And he came to be.

LK: Yeah, yeah. And it's a pretty long book, and a lot of his stuff now is pretty lean. I just read somewhere that he likes short now.

PM: Do you make much time to listen?

LK: I don't. Musically, I am still hooked and just hypnotized by the sound of the guitar itself. I mean, a guitar sounds good if you drop it on the floor.

PM: [laughs]

LK: And that seems to be what I have to do. As far as what recorded music I listen to, these days I keep going back to Bill Evans a lot.

PM: Wow. Not every guitar player will tell you that.

LK: Yeah—although there's a pretty good stretch of them, at least there used to be. Lenny Breau, for example, he was a big Bill Evans freak. And a lot of his harmonies come from trying to approximate some Bill Evans.

But yeah, Bill Evans, and specifically, for me, his last record, *You Must Believe in Spring*. Probably his most depressed as well, but it's just great.

PM: Any chosen religious or spiritual inclinations operating in your life?

LK: Well, not religious. People in crowds, I think, kind of head south. I like people one at a time.

PM: Yes.

LK: Which may be a little odd, considering I play for crowds. But there, well, it's a different thing.

But spiritually—I think that's what the guitar is for me. Especially after this much time, it's clearly what I'm supposed to be doing. I think it'd be dangerous for me to say one day, "Well, I think I'm going to have a vacation for a year." That's really looking for trouble—even saying it sounds scary to me. Playing music, it's good for you. And over time it makes you kind of grow up a little bit.

The guy that I always like to mention is Dizzy Gillespie, because he writes about that in his autobiography. He talks about what music is socially, and what you owe to other players, and what you owe to yourself if you're going to be doing it.

And then I met him in Italy one year. It was in Milan. It was real early in the morning, about 9:00 a.m. There was a band having a few drinks in the bar, and I thought, "Oh, I wonder who's here." I thought one of them might've been Bernard Purdie, but I haven't seen that many pictures of Purdie. And when I got out on the street, there was Dizzy Gillespie down about half a block, loading the drums into a station wagon.

PM: [laughs] Loading Purdie's drums!

LK: Yeah. And I'm not positive if it was Purdie, but whoever the drummer was that day, Dizzy was the roadie. Like, true to his school. And I just thought, "Wow..." But I didn't want to bother him, so I waved, and I said, "Hi Dizzy," and went back to sticking my guitars in my car. And he walked up and started talking to me. It was just fantastic. Dizzy Gillespie...

I asked him a couple things about his book. And he basically said that you've got to kind of shape up or you won't be able to play, and then you'll really lose something. I don't think you're as aware of that, or as respectful of it, if music is anything other than a spiritual experience. And you

have to learn how to take your cat nap. We talked for a long time, I bet it was about 20 minutes, and a lot of it was about sleep.

PM: [laughs]

LK: Anyway, that's how guitar is for me. And boy, I couldn't ask for more. It's a privilege to play, and on top of that, they pay you for it. So it's pretty hard to beat.

PM: And it's a privilege to listen. It's also a privilege to speak with you today, you've been very kind with your time.

LK: Well, as I guess you've been told before, you're a departure from the usual kind of interview experience. I appreciate that a lot.

PM: My pleasure, Leo. And I look forward to many more great albums. Thank you so much.

LK: Thank you.