

A Conversation with Willy Porter
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 3/2004)

It's a truly rare animal, even in the guitar age, that marries ferocious guitar chops and singer songwriterdom. Milwaukee's humble son Willy Porter is perhaps best known as a downtuned six string wonder, but as a singer and a writer, and as a showman, he merits equal regard.

His song "Angry Words," recorded with his band in the mid-90s, broke the artist on AAA radio and opened the door to his unpredictable and rarely paralleled career of recent years. Willy is one of the very few solo artists who goes out on tour with rock bands and opens the show. That is a tough spot, and one had better throw down like a sonofabitch if one doesn't want to get killed by the throng of people who paid thirty bucks or more to see somebody like Paul Simon, Tori Amos, Jeff Beck, Jethro Tull, or any of the other legendary acts for whom the artist has opened.

When I caught Willy at the Ryman Auditorium not so long ago, opening for Jeff Beck, I'd already seen him blow folkie minds at a festival in Jersey and at Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas, so I knew what to expect, to some extent. That night I was in almost my favorite spot, three rows back in the center of the balcony. Surveying the crowd, I saw quite a few razor sharp guitar players, as one would expect at a Beck show. Within polite earshot, there were three session guys I knew and we exchanged greetings. None were familiar with the opener, and I said he was a badass guitar player, which always raises an eyebrow in Nashville.

Willy had been super good the previous two times I'd seen him, but he really came out with guns blazing that night at the Ryman. Not obviously—because that wouldn't necessarily get over, you could easily be dismissed as "flashy," which doesn't ring the bell. He was substantial and musical, made up a song on the spot with three suggested topics from the audience, sang deep songs beautifully, and played the beejesus out of his guitar the whole way through.

And they, we, were on our feet at the end. Then one by one those session guys in my section turned around and shook their heads the way that means the dude was mighty. He came back very humbly for an encore, and everybody was pumped for Beck. The perfect opener.

My recent phone conversation with Willy was like talking to an old friend, and that seldom happens in interviews. He's a hard working guy who seems very okay with himself and his spot in the mix. He's a family man and a very spiritual person, but in a down home, freewheeling kind of way. And that's the thing about original music. If it's true, then the music really does sound like the person is. And that's how Willy's music is. His new CD, *High Wire Live*, was put together and produced by the near revered Ben Wisch (Marc Cohn, David Wilcox, Patty Larkin) from shows all over the world in the last year or two, without studio gimmickry of any kind. It's outstanding.

We feel sure that after you hear some clips and join us for this conversation, you'll want to make Willy Porter and his music a part of your life (if you haven't already).

Willy Porter: Hello, is Frank there?

Puremusic: This is he.

WP: Hey, Frank. It's Willy Porter.

PM: Willy, how you doing?

WP: Good. I'm sorry, I was in the studio, and I didn't—my phone doesn't reach down here, and I should have let you know that.

PM: No sweat. What are you working on today?

WP: I'm just rehearsing. I'm going to England to do a tour with Martin Barre. [legendary guitarist for Jethro Tull]

PM: Oh, wow. Do you have him in the studio with you?

WP: Well, no, we've exchanged all this music through the mail, just sending work CDs and stuff to each other. And we're doing a tour of England in February.

PM: Are going to tour as a duo?

WP: Well, we're doing a whole bunch of duet songs, but it's actually—Martin is opening for his band Jethro Tull on the tour, and I'm the featured guest. So it's "Martin Barre and Friends," and what that basically means is everyone in Jethro Tull except for Ian Anderson—

[laughter]

WP: —and then me. So it's really a pretty cool band. And we're doing a mix of Martin's tunes and my tunes.

PM: Wow. Although I was never a dyed-in-the-wool Tull guy—

WP: Sure.

PM: —I've always liked him because he was a real Beefheart guy. [That's Captain Beefheart to the uninitiated, one of the greatest DaDa rockers in history, a pure genius, now a celebrated painter and retired from playing music, one is, sadly, led to believe.]

WP: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's evident in his playing, too. I've been digging into Martin's playing, and I'm hearing so many different genres of music in what he does. There are obviously the Celtic influences and the British Isles, but a lot of Spain, too.

PM: Really?

WP: Yeah. His latest record is called *Stage Left*, and it's a beautiful album of guitar music.

PM: What label does that come out on?

WP: Fuel 2000 is the name of the label.

PM: And what kind of a dude is he, if I may ask?

WP: Man, he's just righteous. You know what I mean? He's all about playing guitar, and he's a regular guy. If you were sitting in a room and you were the only other person there, he would definitely talk to you. I mean, he's the most anti-rock star I think I've ever met.

PM: Right. It's good for your health, they say.

[laughter]

WP: Yeah, exactly, man. But when I listen to his playing, I say to myself, "Okay, now I get where Steve Morse [the phenomenal guitarist from the Dixie Dregs] was coming from."

PM: Oh.

WP: Because there's a whole bunch with this kind of phrasing on those Dregs records. But anyway, digging into Martin's music has just been great for my own chops, because I'm getting to get out of my own little sandbox and play in somebody else's for a while.

PM: You're doing something else, because you're his guest, you're playing along in some other way.

WP: Yes. Well, I'm playing a lot of rhythm and harmony lines and stuff on his stuff, both electric and acoustic, and then he and I are doing a bunch of my songs, too. When it's all said and done, we've got about 25 tunes that we've worked up through the mail, and then we'll get together for about five days of rehearsal and put a show together.

PM: That's beautiful. When you play electric with him, what ax will you use?

WP: I'll use a Strat, a Deluxe and—

PM: Tried and true. [Just to clarify the shop talk, that's a Fender Stratocaster guitar, and a Fender Deluxe amplifier.] And host of pedals or straight in? [Guitarists use all manner of foot pedals to alter the sound in a myriad ways. A reaction to this tendency is to plug straight in to the amplifier.]

WP: Straight in. In order to not have to carry so much gear, I'll probably use a Rocktron Voodoo Valve.

PM: A Voodoo Valve.

WP: Yeah, which is basically a guitar preamp that has stereo outputs. And I can use that in a pedal, and then I'm just programming all the sounds into it. It's got a tube on board. It's not the same as having a Marshall Plexi, but I can show up. And I've got all the sounds programmed into it. And then I just use that with two Fender Deluxes, and a stereo configuration, and it's good to go.

PM: So you're no stranger to a Marshall Plexi, then? [It's a classic vintage British amplifier, the sound of Hendrix, early Clapton, and a pantheon of others. The remark is intended to make a distinction between folkies and rockers, just getting a bead on the artist.]

WP: Well, I have a deep love and affection for that, but it's not really how I've made my living. I'm an acoustic guy, really my stock and trade, and more of a songwriter guy. But this has really been great, letting me dig into the guitar on a different level. And I've always been a rock 'n' roller at heart, but just electric guitar never spoke to me. Now it's really taken on a different dimension. It's great.

PM: But is one to assume, though, that in your youth you had your band days?

WP: Oh, yeah, man.

PM: Because, I mean, even though you're a quintessential acoustic guy, I can hear the rocker in your playing.

WP: Exactly. Sure, man, I was 18 when the Police were hitting really hard. So we were all dreaming of being in a band like that.

PM: Absolutely. So when you moved from your band days and started beating the hell out of the acoustic, who were the early influences? Were you into the country blues guys?

WP: I didn't get into them much until more recently, actually.

PM: I see.

WP: I got into some Doc Watson, to begin with.

PM: All right.

WP: Yeah, I was trying to learn how to be a flat picker. And that was an uphill climb for me, and I bailed on it pretty soon. Then I got into more of the Bruce Cockburn school.

PM: What a great player.

WP: Oh, man! And such a great writer. He plays for the song in such an enlightened way.

PM: Right.

WP: And I didn't know until a lot later how much he'd studied and everything.

PM: Oh, I didn't know that either.

WP: Yeah, he's one of those guitar players that reads.

PM: Oh, really?

WP: Yeah, I've heard about those types.

PM: Oh, I don't even know any of those.

[laughter]

WP: Right. So I got into Cockburn, and then obviously Kottke.

PM: Sure. [see our Leo Kottke interview]

WP: And then, when I was in college, I came across Michael Hedges. And that was the one thing that... I wanted to see if I could expand things with open tunings and stuff, but then, when I saw him, he was already way out of the boat.

PM: Yeah, I mean, he didn't push the envelope, he just snipped it—

WP: He *was* the envelope.

PM: He snipped the side off the envelope and just flew out the end.

WP: Yeah, exactly, man. So once I saw that, I thought, "You know, the only limitation is your imagination. Just do what you want to do and don't think about it." I got that from him. And even though he was such an educated player and composer and everything, you never got the school side of what he'd done.

PM: No, you never heard the conservatory in his playing.

WP: No, man, never.

PM: You heard the guy with war paint on his face and the pigtails, the wild eyes.

WP: Yeah, the blue warrior supreme.

PM: It was such a tragic end. [Michael Hedges was killed in a car crash in 1997. He was 43.]

WP: Yeah, that's a heartbreaker that just goes on breaking.

PM: What about his buddy, Pierre Bensusan [see our review], do you like his playing too?

WP: Yeah, I'm big into him. I've got a few of his records around. And I have to say, I think he's one of those guitar players who could probably do it all. You could throw him in a jazz band and he would just smoke like Charlie Christian, you know?

PM: Yeah, he's frightening.

WP: And then you could put him in a solo finger-style context, and he's just ripping, and then put some loops in there...he's a freak of nature.

PM: He truly is.

I've seen you in concert three times.

WP: All right.

PM: I saw you at unlikely and far-flung joints like the Apple Farm Festival in Jersey.

WP: Oh, right on!

PM: And I saw you at Kerrville one time. [see our story about a first visit to the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas] And I saw you at the Ryman, in my town.

WP: Oh, cool, with Jeff Beck.

PM: That Jeff Beck show is called legendary in your press kit, and I was there and I'm damned if it wasn't.

WP: Well, I don't know if it was or not.

PM: Oh, it was, my man.

WP: I'm not the guy who writes that stuff. But thank you.

[laughter]

PM: I mean, it was a couple of thousand guitar geeks there to see Jeff Beck—

WP: I love the dude.

PM: —on their feet screaming bloody murder about this cat they'd never heard of. Well, I had, but most of them hadn't.

WP: Yeah, that was a pretty flattering gig to get to do, playing with him. That was probably the coolest thing I've ever done, easily.

PM: You put them right on their keisters that night.

WP: Well, even aside from the show, though, getting to ask Jeff Beck how he's getting his tone and just to hang out with the guy. He's another one of those guys who's just—he doesn't have anything to prove, so he doesn't come off as all insecure and uptight about anything. And that was just so cool.

PM: They say unless he's touring he doesn't even touch his guitar, he works on cars and stuff.

WP: I know, man, that's what's so cool about it.

PM: [laughs] That's funny.

WP: When he picks up the guitar, man, never, *ever* did I hear him run a scale or do anything like that. He picks it up and he's playing some totally outside kind of a country rockabilly thing for a minute, and then this or that, but it's always music. It's always a song. He and Martin Barre are cut from the same mold that way. Martin doesn't sit there and play scales, either. He's always playing a song.

PM: When you play solo—do you mind talking about gear? Is any of that information proprietary or secret or anything?

WP: No, man.

PM: When I saw you at the Ryman, it seemed like there must be—was there a Hex pickup in play, with different effects applied to different sets of strings or anything crazy like that?

WP: No. I was using some frequency specific compression.

PM: Oh...

WP: Yeah, I was using the Brooks Siren 901 Dynamic EQ. [When I searched this item, up came gear lists for bands like Sonic Youth, Candlebox, Rage Against the Machine...] And the compressor in question is called the DPR-901 II. They call it a dynamic equalizer. It's got four bands, specific bands that you can use as compression. When I'm playing solo, the range of tunings and then the capos present different problems: if the sound engineer were to set the EQ one way, it's not going to work throughout the show. So what I do is—if I hit the top of the guitar I get a kick drum vibe, and I can just grab that frequency very specifically and compress it a little bit without compressing the high end. I can thump but then the high end still rings true.

PM: Wow.

WP: Then if I put a capo on later, up at like the seventh fret, and I'm in standard tuning, well then it's like a study in 4K, like 4,000 cycles is going to rip your face off.

PM: [laughs]

WP: Well, when that jumps out of the guitar, I can grab that band as well, without cutting the low end concurrently. So it's an incredibly flexible device. And I learned about these things by touring with Tori Amos.

PM: Really?

WP: Yeah, because her engineers were using them on her voice all the time.

PM: Come on!

WP: If you listen to her live, man, I mean, she is going from a whisper to a scream to a whisper, she has such incredible range in her voice. And to capture that without having to ride the [volume] fader all night, they were using these compressors to great affect. And I thought, "That's what I need to use on my guitar."

PM: What a cool idea.

WP: Yeah. And it has really opened up the guitar for me. It's made it much easier for me to show up in a context like playing with Jeff Beck, and give two lines to the house engineer and say, "Mix it warm, but generally flat, and don't worry, I won't ever clip your rig." [Meaning, "I won't be so careless as to attack my guitar in any way that will distort the sound or potentially damage your speakers."]

PM: Right.

WP: And they say, "Okay," and you do the sound check, and you're done in ten minutes. So I've had really great results with that. I'm using that in conjunction with the Pendulum preamp. [Greg Gualtieri's Jersey company making a range of fantastic musical products, check it out at pendulumaudio.com]

PM: Yeah, I'm a Pendulum guy. They're beautiful.

WP: Yeah, they are. They're wonderful pieces. And they're rugged as well, so that's been good.

PM: And other effects?

WP: That's it, man. No effects, just reverb. And I travel with an engineer.

PM: Wow. House reverb, or you bring your own?

WP: No, usually I use the house. I trust the engineer to have sorted the room and figured out what kind of decay times and things are going to work and—

PM: Because I could swear that night at the Ryman that, well, certain sets of strings seemed to have different delay times on them, but I guess I was just hearing compression or something, I don't know what.

WP: Yeah, compression, and maybe just the reflections of the beautiful Ryman.

PM: God, what a room.

WP: Yeah, there are a lot of ghosts floating around in there. I have to say I was sweating bullets before that one, because I'm up in the dressing room, and there are pictures up there of Elvis, and Johnny Cash and June Carter, and all these luminaries are on the walls. And so that place really put the fear of God into me.

PM: Yeah, my brother manages Travis Tritt, and Travis—

WP: Oh, cool.

PM: —never chokes. He one of those guys that never, ever chokes.

WP: Yeah.

PM: And he said the only time he ever gets nervous is when he has to sing the Star Spangled Banner or he's playing the Ryman.

[laughter]

WP: I would think being a country singer and playing Nashville would be wicked hard, man.

PM: Yeah.

WP: Just George Jones at the Ryman, end of story.

PM: I thought that night at the Ryman you did a great job with that very scary enterprise of making up a song on the spot from topics you solicit from the audience.

WP: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: [laughs] That takes cajones.

WP: Well, thanks.

PM: I would never do that.

WP: Yeah, it was fun that night. Sometimes it works okay, and other nights you wish you'd never asked.

PM: Yeah, right.

WP: But it's all right.

PM: Do you do that much anymore?

WP: Not so much, no. It's a little bit of kitsch, and it was fun for a minute.

PM: Is it a thing you picked up from folk world?

WP: Yeah, that, and I used to work with this improv comedy troupe. And I would try to improvise all kinds of different sounds and stuff with a pedal array. And they would get subject matter from the audience and then go off on a riff—a comedy riff—as a troupe. And I thought that'd be a great way to construct a tune: ask the audience for suggestions and then improvise a song. And now I've seen *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and they've taken that and used it to great effect as well.

PM: Listening to the new live album today, I found your song “Angry Words” inspiring.

WP: Thanks.

PM: Helped me get off the dime and make a call I'd been stewing on too long.

[laughter]

WP: Yeah. That one's been around a while. I think I wrote that ten years ago, man. It was on the *Dog Eared Dream* record.

PM: That song came out of your pop moment, right?

WP: Yeah.

PM: Can we talk about that? I don't know too much about that period.

WP: Sure, yeah. Well, that was kind of an interesting time. I was just kicking around, and I was getting ready to make my second record. And I was into rock 'n' roll, and I was writing a lot with my band at that time, which was a really killer band.

PM: A Milwaukee combo.

WP: Yeah. And so those were the songs of the moment. And it wasn't so much a conscious effort to try to get over, or to get onto the radio or do anything like that; it was just the tunes that I had at that time. So it was kind of an unconscious effort there.

PM: But it worked out as a good Triple-A song, right?

WP: Yeah, it did. That was great. I'm glad it got out there.

PM: How do you do now in that Triple-A domain? Do you get good play out there?

WP: I get a fair amount, but I haven't made a record that is really chasing the mark as much. And there are a lot more people competing for the same limited space since that format became well-traveled. Also the major labels treated it as somewhat of a dumping ground for stuff they couldn't figure out where to place.

PM: Right.

WP: And as that happened more and more, the pressure became greater. And I hate to say it, but I'm sure a fair amount of money changed hands.

PM: Yeah, well, that's just the way of the world.

[laughter]

WP: It is, yeah. And so I haven't really hung my hat on it, per se, or tried to.

PM: But in that space and time, you made the jump to warp speed by somehow creating a niche for yourself that enabled you to open up for big acts on major tours around the world.

WP: I'm very, very fortunate and blessed in that regard.

PM: I mean, I can't think of really but one or two other solo artists who have created that particular niche of "I open for bands."

WP: People seem to see it in one of two ways: either it's "Well, always the bridesmaid, never the bride" or it's "That rocks. You did this and this and this and this." And I feel a little bit of both. I still am driven by music and I'm driven to be successful in a way, but I've never wanted to write the song that makes me uncomfortable—

PM: [laughs]

WP: —which is, I think, kind of what you have to do to get over today.

PM: You mean write the stupid song?

WP: Yeah, or just writing the tune that sort of plays to the middle, or to the lowest common denominator of people's perception. I'm not frustrated that it hasn't happened. In fact, I'm really happy.

PM: I like "Unconditional." It's really good to hear that song on the new record.

WP: Well, thank you, man. Thank you very much.

PM: It's a beautiful song. Now, did you write that at Kerrville?

WP: I did.

PM: Because I noticed a couple of familiar names on there, Billy Jonas and Brian Cutean. I don't know the other Brian credited—who is Brian Mir?

WP: Brian Mir was the bass player in my band at the time, and he contributed that little tag musical climb at the end. But I went down to Kerrville, and I had the choruses, and I really had the song about 90% there. And I played it for Brian Cutean. The last verse was just too

bitter. It was like this big turnaround. It wasn't as cool and seeking as the lyric is now. Anyway, I play it for Brian and he goes, "Man, those first two verses, those are cool. I would reverse them in order." And then he says, "And I would probably—you want to rewrite that third verse?" And I was like, "Amen, brother."

PM: [laughs] Yeah, because he's a real positive guy, to understate the case.

WP: Yes, he is. And so he and Billy—well, Billy was right there, kind of lording over the two of us saying, "Okay, good, good. No."

[laughter]

PM: That's funny, and sounds like Billy Jonas.

WP: Yeah. Those guys are two of my best friends. So I think the end result is—it's one of those things where one guy can come up with the idea, but to realize the depth of the idea it takes some outside perspective. And there are so few people who can do that on their own, consistently, and have songs that sounds like you're taking a universal construct and talking about it in those little colloquial terms, taking something universal and breaking it down to a something very easily understood. And those guys are brilliant at that.

PM: And in the world of entertainment, what a genius Billy Jonas is.

WP: Oh, there's no question, man. Yeah, he's just—

PM: Talk about a real original.

WP: Isn't he great?

PM: Yeah, he's really something. You ever do shows together?

WP: We did. When he was in The Billys, we did a bunch of stuff together. Since then I think he's dug in really deep to his kids shows, which are unbelievably phenomenal experiences. And I think that's the wind in his sails right now.

PM: Ah, good for him.

WP: Yeah.

PM: So, speaking of kids, how's the family?

WP: Everybody's great.

PM: Two kids, right?

WP: Two kids, yeah, eight months and three and a half years. So we're just... [laughs] We're learning how it's done. It's great, though.

PM: How did you and your wife meet? What's her name?

WP: Her name is Catherine. We met at an environmental benefit that she was a sponsor of, at the University of Wisconsin. When she was going to school there and I was living in Madison, she was one of the organizers of this benefit, and that's where I met her.

PM: And you were playing?

WP: Yeah.

PM: Wow, it's just beautiful how people meet, it's totally unpredictable.

WP: It is, man.

PM: Our readers always like to know: what are you reading these days?

WP: Let's see. I'm just digging into *Breach of Faith* [by Theodore H. White], about the end of the Nixon administration. And I recently read Pete Goss's book *Close to the Wind*, all about his experiences in the Vendee Globe yacht race, the single-handed round-the-world sailing adventure, including his rescue of a fellow sailor in distress. During that race, he rescued a French sailor in some unbelievable condition.

PM: Wow.

WP: I also just read Sting's memoir, *Broken Music*.

PM: Was that good?

WP: I thought it was great. The guy is a real wordsmith, a real master of the language. It was great.

PM: And what do you find yourself listening to at the moment?

WP: Well, only Martin Barre's music.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, yeah, that's right.

WP: I'm totally into Neil Finn, too. His last record, *One Nil*, it's fantastic.

PM: That's not the one that he cut in Nashville with Jay Joyce, right? That's after that, I think.

WP: I think it's the one after that. This was the one with Wendy and Lisa on it.

PM: Oh, really?

WP: Sheryl Crow visits on it. Yeah, it's wonderful. He's got some songs on there that—his mother passed, and a couple of the tunes on there, they're just haunting. That guy, he's had a remarkable career. I think he's a great artist.

PM: Your songs have a very unabashed spiritual slant.

WP: Uh-huh.

PM: Do you have any special orientation in that regard?

WP: Oh, I guess I consider myself to be a Christian, kind of struggling along, but I also

have a strong affinity for the Buddha and for the goddess, and some sort of Pagan ideas as well.

PM: [laughs] Atta boy, you're my kind of guy.

[laughter]

WP: So I'm a seeker. I don't have any answers, but I'm searching.

PM: Yeah, and all those avenues have something good.

WP: Don't they, though.

PM: I mean, if you're a seeker, there's a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Because otherwise, if you're in the door closing business, all you're going to get is what's behind door number one. That's my take on it, anyhow.

WP: Exactly. So we sort of settled on Unitarianism, because it seems to celebrate everybody's idea and what's good about it.

PM: Are there any books in that domain that have meant a lot to you in your life?

WP: *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell. That particular book was a big eye-opener for me. And I still read the Bible a fair amount when I can.

PM: Any comments or thoughts on where this crazy music business seems to be headed?

WP: All I can say is that in the end I think the consumers are going to win. And as this thing fragments, when it gets blown apart by the greater availability of music, the artists who want to tour and the artists who are actively seeking to get their music out there are the ones who will survive. And hopefully the days of selling twenty million records are gone—because we don't really need that. I don't think as a culture we need it, and I don't think as human beings we need to suffer through hearing that. In a way, I feel bad for the artist who has that happen, because sure you get all the money and all the booby prizes, but then you have to live with the fact of facing your own deflation. Whereas if you have modest needs, you just keep on soldiering, and everybody wins.

PM: Yeah, I hear that.

WP: Dar Williams says, "Make a living, not a killing." And I think that holds true for those who have the mind to do it. Now is a great time in which to create your own music and sell your own music. I mean, you can have your own studio in your house, it doesn't cost that much. And there are no production costs. If you want to get in the car and tour around, then you can do it. I think that side of it is great.

PM: Absolutely.

WP: I hate to see the majors fall apart, but I think until they figure out how to make it interesting to buy a record again, versus downloading the music, it's their problem to solve.

PM: Yeah, until they quit making \$300,000 records and learn how to make them for forty grand, it's like—

WP: Amen!

PM: Are there things, musical or otherwise, that you haven't attempted yet that you might like to try?

WP: Yeah, man, I want to study music.

PM: Really?

WP: Yeah. I just really want to learn a lot more. I would love to play some jazz. I'd love to have a more global understanding of theory and what makes a great song great in terms of its construction.

PM: How would you do it? Get a mentor, go to school, read a book?

WP: A little bit of each, I think. I started studying with this great guitar player named Greg Koch. He lives in town, he's one of my neighbors. And he's just breathtaking, man. I mean, he's like the main Fender clinician internationally now. And what this guy can do... But he's also real down-to-earth. And we sit and pick a little, and he just says, "Here's this harmonic thing, let's throw it over these changes." And it's great. He sort of demystifies things. Whereas I used to think it was poison to the creative process to know too much, now I want to learn as much as I can.

PM: When somebody's there to demystify, now, that's valuable.

WP: So that's my quest, to remain a student. And in every walk, try to expand that.

PM: Yeah. You mentioned Fender, are they your guitar company du jour, or do you have several axe companies?

WP: I've just been working with them of late. And we've built a couple guitars together, a Valencia that I'm playing, which is this acoustic ax that's just amazing.

PM: The Valencia.

WP: Yeah. Fender owns Guild now, so I've been working with the folks at Guild a lot.

PM: You're playing a baritone, by the sounds of it, right?

WP: No, that's a standard, that's a regular ax.

PM: I mean, there was a note—I heard a G-sharp. How low do you have it tuned?

WP: It's medium gauged strings, and then on the low E-string it's down to, say, F-sharp on a couple tunes—

PM: Damn! Down to F-sharp.

WP: Yeah, it's pretty flappy down there, but—

[laughter]

WP: It's a good surfboard, man.

PM: I like the way you make it sound. I can't believe that it's not a baritone guitar.

WP: Well, I have a baritone, but I just haven't really figured out how to drive that car. I'm not so solid on that technique: you gotta use a lot of right hand string muting and stuff.

PM: Why is that?

WP: Partly because to chord with it, at least with the one that I have, it just becomes too much sub information, so there's not enough note articulation and too much of a spike in certain frequency ranges. It's almost like trying to chord on a bass.

PM: Right.

WP: You can do little diatonic things, but you can't really get beyond that. And so I'm just kind of trying to figure that thing out. It's such a cool ax. You know who makes great use of it is Keller Williams.

PM: Oh, really?

WP: Yeah. Have you heard him?

PM: I've seen him recently, in the square here at Vanderbilt one night. He was doing his looping thing, and so I went down and checked it out. That's crazy, man. [Looping is a technique where certain gear is required. "On the fly," you record one part, play it back and play and record a second part along with it, and so on, up to four or five parts, usually.]

WP: Yeah, he's pretty nuts, isn't he?

[laughter]

PM: I mean, his playing didn't exactly blow me away, but his showmanship was off the scale.

WP: To be honest with you, I haven't seen him live except for one thing that we did. We played 3rd & Lindsley for WRLT one time. [WRLT is the AAA Nashville station.] And he was playing a baritone, and I thought, "Man, he's getting a killer sound." It was a heavy Kottke kind of a thing going on. But it was just great control.

PM: You ever get into the whole looping trip?

WP: Yeah, I actually have quite a bit. I used to be into it a few years back, and recently I've just started again. I'm a big Laurie Anderson fan. So for me it's got to be outside of just the stuff where I'm playing the rhythm part and now I'm going to solo. Lately I've been doing stuff where I have different character voices and stuff within a song—

PM: [laughs]

WP: —or within, like, a sketch, and then they come back. So I'm sampling my voice and doing other stuff like that with it. And it's been cool. I'm just scratching the surface of it, but it's a lot of fun. And that's why I consciously have *not* gone and seen Keller Williams! Because I know if I go and see him, I'll be like, "Oh, now I know what I can do."

PM: [laughs]

WP: There are some things you've got to avoid, as a player, to maintain your own thing.

[laughter]

PM: I saw Joe Pisapia, a great guitar player, the other night, playing a Robert Johnson guitar from the twenties with a piece of shit pickup on it called The Woodpicker, so that the whole thing was basically microphonic. And he had one of those little Green Line 6 pedals that does the few loops.

WP: Yeah!

PM: And he would, like, bang his elbow on the thing and get one thing going, then he'd smack the back of it, and so that by the time he was fifteen seconds into the song, he turned on all of the three loops and basically he had this track that was going "Tuk koko ka tum kuku ku kung kunk kunk," and then he played along with that.

WP: [laughs]

PM: I said, "Ah, now, that's a cool use of that little loop thing."

WP: Yeah, man. That's basically a lot of what I was doing, too, but probably not that well.

[laughter]

WP: But because of the compression and stuff that I'm using, all the drum sounds are there.

PM: Right.

WP: The kick drum thing is really easy to do with your palm, and you can do like a snare head. And it's all Hedges, come on. Without Mike, none of us would be doing any of this shit. Hedges is like Hendrix, in my opinion.

PM: It's very big of you to say that, as great as you've become and are continuing to become. But, yeah, I agree. I mean, Hedges blazed the trail—

WP: He did.

PM: —much the way that Hendrix did. It's like he burned a path through the woods just so well, you can walk it down. That's going to be burned for eternity.

WP: [laughs]

PM: That's not going to grow back.

WP: No way, man.

PM: [laughs]

WP: Isn't it beautiful?

PM: It's unbelievable.

WP: It's funny when you see that person come along. When I saw Hedges the first time, I saw him sound check in 1983, and I went, "Here he is." I knew right then. I thought, "This is the guy."

PM: Wow.

WP: And I was just *freakin'*. I'd never seen him before, and I was on this concert committee in school, and I'd been asked by to drive him around that day. So I drove him to the gig, and I didn't know who he was. And then I watched the sound check and I was like, "Hey, man, can I get you anything?"

PM: [laughs]

WP: It just totally changed the universe for me. And I knew that any guitar player who saw him would never be the same. You just can't think of the instrument the same way. And I think Hendrix was that way. Who else is like that?

PM: I don't think anybody else.

WP: No, I don't either.

PM: I mean, it's only Hendrix.

WP: It's a struggle to find someone else, isn't it. Maybe Clapton?

PM: It's only Hendrix. I mean, people have been chasing him down all these years since, and nobody has done what he's done. And nobody can touch who he was, what he did. Even the guys like Robin Trower or Stevie Ray Vaughn, who literally could play all his stuff note for note, it's just like, "Yes, but it's not the same."

WP: Yeah, it's funny, there was a weird *je ne sais quoi*—a special spiritual element, or whatever you want to call it, that just isn't there.

PM: It's more than their hands. It's literally their consciousness, it's who they were.

WP: Well said. I agree.

PM: Willy, I certainly appreciate your time today. And what a very nice cat you are.

WP: Ah, Frank, thank you so much. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

PM: And I really look forward to seeing you again here in town or on the road. Maybe we'll run into each other at Kerrville or somewhere.

WP: That'll be great, man. Take good care of yourself, all right?

PM: Love your music, love what you're doing, and wish you all the best.

WP: Ah, man, peace to you.

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