

Steve Vai

Guitar Secrets

Steve Vai's extraordinary career began in his teens, when his musical transcriptions and guitar playing impressed maestro Frank Zappa enough to snatch him out of college for a place in his band. Since the FZ years, Vai has contributed his talents to Alcatraz, Public Image, David Lee Roth, Whitesnake and others. Plus, he's made a cameo appearance in the movie *Crossroads*. Most importantly though, he's released four amazing albums of his own: *Flexible* (1984), *Passion and Warfare* (1990), *Sex and Religion* (1993) and a new mini album, *Alien Love Secrets*, which is hot off the press and burning with some of Vai's best playing yet. Steve spoke from his home in California about all things alien and familiar.

Why did you decide on a mini album?

"I'd gotten off the *Sex and Religion* tour and I started to get some material together and a concept for an LP. Then I started writing some music with Ozzy Osbourne, and it took three months or so to do that. Then I got back to work and recorded about 27 tracks for an LP. It turned out about a handful of the songs were very straight ahead, guitar-in-your-face instrumental pieces. The concept of the LP at the time was to put together a record that was half vocals and half instrumental — I was going to attempt to sing myself. The material's going to be very heavy, a little more orchestrated and arranged, sort of like *Passion and Warfare*, maybe not as eclectic. I was looking at sitting in the studio for months and months doing it, like one of those epic records. I decided it'd be nicer to do this EP first, get this guitar thing out there, 'cause I'm a real guitar lover. I love the clashing of the strings."

Can we expect this to lead to another album soon?

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I'm working on another album now. Hopefully it'll be out before the end of the year."

What happened to the *Sex and Religion* band and tour?

"Well, it was pretty much a one-shot deal. The band I put together for the record, there was no way I could get those guys to tour — it would've cost me my firstborn! So I ended up putting a different band together — the only original band member from the album was the singer, Devin. We had a very good band, and we toured America and Europe and did very well. But after that, everybody goes their way and I go out and do different things. I don't really have a 'band', I have musicians I hire. I would love to have a band with people who are really interested with the wave-length I'm on and who can contribute pretty unconditionally, but these people are just not in my life right now."

Apparently 'Down Deep in the Pain' had a pretty radical video, although we never saw it in New Zealand.

"It was pretty radical, all right! It had women giving birth, nuns whipping themselves, all those silly things that make a video so exciting."

Last time we talked you mentioned a *Passion and Warfare* novel and possible video. Has anything come of that?

"I've got about three quarters of the novel complete, and I did a script for a film that had different videos for each song. I had the option of either doing that or producing this band called Bad 4 Good I had high hopes for. I decided to produce the band. But I'm working on a film for *Alien Love Secrets*. It's basically a very simple video where kids who like guitar playing and like what I do can just me playing the guitar."

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Were you playing virtually everything on the EP?

"Just about. There's four songs where I have a drummer — Dean Castronova — he's a fabulous drummer. Then there's one song where Tommy Mars, the keyboard player, plays organ, and that's 'Tender Surrender'. Other than that, I'm doing all the drum programming, all the bass guitar and any sporadic keyboards or sampling."

Are the Gem and Universe the only guitars you used?

"As a matter of fact I used the Universe, the seven string, on 'Ya-Yo Gakk', and I used the Gem with the Evolution pick-ups on everything else. I used two different Gems; one I used for the really low tuning stuff like 'Bad Horsie'. I used a Stratocaster on 'The Boy From Seattle', 'cause that song is sort of a Hendrix tribute. I wanted to be true to the era so I used a Strat, but there's a lot of different amplifiers on it. I'm using a direct, it's got a little bit of a Marshall, a little bit of a Bagner amplifier, a Sans amp that's going through a speaker simulator, and then I have two room mic's up in the room the amplifier's in. All these are blended together to get the sound that's on there."

It sounds related to 'Sisters' (*Passion and Warfare*).

"Oh, very much so. It's a style of playing I really enjoy. I'm going to try and incorporate songs like that on all my records, 'cause I like the idea of sitting with a clean-sounding guitar and playing the song from beginning to end."

The track 'Bad Horsie' must have been a lot of fun to make.

"Yeah, I was shaking for two days from all that heavy vibrato."

Hearing your wild whammy stuff in the past, I've often wondered where you were hiding the horse!

"It was in the amplifier the whole time! That song has a funny sort of scenario that I put together in my head to get the idea of the song. Besides the main riff coming from *Crossroads*, where I play Jack Butler, the devil's guitar player, the guitar sort of imitates a train, and there's this silly story I came up with about a young Indian brave riding his favourite horse through the fields of America. The settlers are coming and laying train tracks, and the Indian has this dream that he and his horse are running from this train that's chasing them. They don't know where they're going, because there's all this high grass, and wherever they go the train still follows them. So, they get very upset and they turn into this iron stallion and iron chief and start chasing the train. The sounds they're making are the song."

Are all those whinnies and snorts done solely on guitar?

"Well, the snorts aren't, they're real snorts from a horse. They're processed, they're tuned down quite a bit, they're tweaked, they're truncated, they're stereo delayed, all sorts of weird stuff to give the snorty value they have."

'Juice' sounds like 'The Attitude Boogie' almost!

"Yeah, I was reluctant to work on that song because it's very reminiscent of standard type guitar instrumental boogies but I really like it. I had it in the pocket. I listened to it and felt there'd be other people out there who'd like to hear it. There's nothing ground-breaking about it, it's just a fun boogie."

You do a heavenly solo in 'Die to Live'.

"That track goes really deep with me. I really like it. After I recorded it I sat and listened to it for about a whole day. It sounds pretentious, but I like it. A lot of my songs start out with a riff I may lay down on tape anytime, whether I'm backstage warming up for a concert, or whatever. The riff for 'Die to Live' was just something I'd thrown onto a tape in about 10 seconds and then dug out about three years later. You know, if there's a high point in a musician's career, besides making it, or having a record deal, or becoming financially stable, whatever, it's being able to sit down, pick up your instrument, get really close with it and play

a piece of music that really flows and really affects you as you're playing. That's why artists are so tortured, because it's such a joy to do that and sometimes it's a task too. Every now and then, when that happens, it's what it's all about really, for an artist. That song is a testament to my honour to be a true artist."

Julian Angel (Steve's son) is in fine voice on 'Ya-Yo Gakk'.

"That was a riot! He would sing this song 'Ya-Yo Gakk' all the time, and I would always be taping him. I carry a tape player or a DAT player wherever I go, and I always record silly things so I can make wild samples. I had hours of this 'Ya-Yo Gakk' singing, so I took it, drew it into the computer, tweaked it and cut it up. It was tough 'cause I had to get it all in the right time and the right pitch. Then I made the vocal track and built the track around it. But I think from now on I'm going to tell people: 'Yeah, he came into the studio and just nailed it.'"

Is he about five now?

"Yeah, him and his brother [Fire] have a birthday on the same day, March 1. They're going to be six and three."

Is 'Kill the Guy With the Ball' your impression of violent sports madness?

"There's a game kids play in America called Guy With the Ball. You get a ball and you gotta run away from everybody, and if they catch you they beat the shit out of you. So as, soon as they get near you, you have to throw the ball to somebody else. So you kill the guy with the ball — very American. So that song sounds like the game. You can picture kids running with the ball. At the ending I took a real left turn; I just decided to follow my ears and write this weird melody down, and then orchestrate it with these really thick, lush chords."

'Tender Surrender' is a beautiful piece, in the style of 'Call it Sleep' (*Flexible*).

"Yeah, very much so. I just wanted to do something where the guitar gets to display its dynamic qualities. One of the things I like when I hear a guitar solo song like that is to be taken on a little ride of sorts — to be taken along then brought up, then brought down easy and then brought back up, let down and maybe slammed around a little bit. I get that from that song. It has an ebb and flow to it."

What on earth are you doing to your strings at the end?

"It's a very violent whammy bar tactic. You don't play anything, you just grab the whammy bar. If you ever saw me do it you'd die laughing — it's very angry looking."

Did you win a Grammy for 'Sofa' last year (a track from the Zappa's *Universe* tribute album)?

"Yeah, that was quite the honour."

Obviously you must really miss Frank.

"I think I speak for most of his really sincere fans when I say that as time goes by we miss him more."

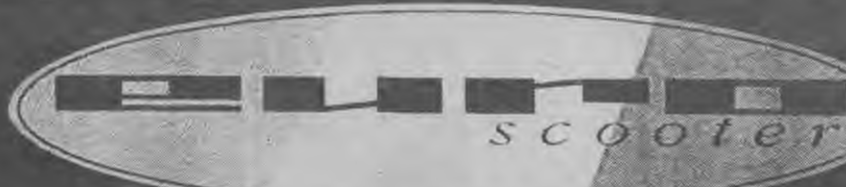
There's certainly a lot less good music and humour left in the world without him.

"Yeah, there's never going to be anything like that. The way he'd conduct his bands, put them together, and the music they played and everything, you just don't get that any more. Nobody has the ambition or the balls to put together something like he did. That's something I miss very much about Frank."

Those years in the 80s with him must have been quite an experience.


"They were exhilarating, they were frightening... when I joined Frank's band I was 19 years old. I'd never been on tour. I had no idea how to handle myself or what to expect. The first two weeks into the tour I turned yellow! Literally! Drinking the water in Mexico. It was fun and it was scary. The first tour was absolutely murder for me. It wasn't anything Frank was doing — it was just from the beginning of the tour I stayed out all night, played around with sex objects — it was like a kid in a candy store. I wasn't looking after myself and I nearly collapsed. I'm surprised Frank kept me in the band that first year. But it got easier. By the time we came to Europe, on the third tour I did with him, it was a beautiful experience."

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