

Foreword

by Steve Howe

When I was thinking about how to compose this foreword, I felt that the important thing about it was that it shouldn't just start off in the middle of it all. I imagined that it could open with the words of Charlie Christian, "Everything has to start somewhere," because, although he possibly wasn't the first guitarist to plug a guitar in, he was the first to plug one in and actually come up with something that everybody could relate to. To me, he played very much in the rock vein, bringing out this new texture in the guitar, and I think that was really the start of it. All the guitarists in this book are rock guitarists, and they all got off on a vein, a style, and a sound that originally started off with Charlie Christian.

The electric guitar was the first of this century's instruments, and people caught on to the sound because it was actually new, so it was more challenging to try and do new things with it, instead of just reflecting what had gone before. What came out was a new breed of guitarist, who had the enthusiasm of the musician, but the actual knowledge of the non-musician, so it was very compatible with a very young sort of music—like rock—where everyone naively started playing things which they must look back on now and realize how ghastly some of it was!

But I've been thinking about this 'American' and 'English' rock guitar thing, because it really is quite fascinating, though the differences are the most difficult thing to talk about. I think that we're, in many ways, passing American music back to America, because the biggest influences on English guitarists have actually been American guitarists. Originally, it was the Bill Haleys and all who got us off on the guitar, and in my early days, it wasn't like I could turn to any English guitarists. People like Ike Isaacs were good—I used to listen to them—but then you had the pop guitarists like the Shadows, who were pretty English in their approach, but were pretty Mickey Mouse and still had that American slant.

With the Beatles and Harrison, English music came up to American standards for English people. All of a sudden, we'd formulated our own group. There were a few others like the Big Three and earlier things, but when the Beatles got their thing together we suddenly had our own Phil Spector and all. We had a group who could really perform good music and produce it well.

In that mid-Sixties period, when the English groups started going to America, everybody thought it was so great, but I don't think anyone in America realized how great and how important it was for English musicians.

Even though the first influences were American, I think that many of the better English bands who've come up over the years felt that their ties were closer with Europe, and when they went to America, they got all this appreciation which was really encouraging. America's opened out English rock. It was receptive to what we were doing, and encouraged this 'difference' by actually wanting to hear more of it.

My wife Jan and I laughed, because we thought that what I should say is, "Well, the difference is that we're just nearer to Spain," so that end of the guitar, the gentle end, comes through. America's a very young country, but England's very old, and this word 'old' goes very deep. Americans can only look back so far. It only goes back to the time of slavery, and American music is much more rhythmic, with more 'body' through your African and American Indian sort of build up. That suits the American flavor, so American rock tends to be 'body' music.

On the other hand, the basis of English music is, to me, the lute songs which set a standard for something called a 'folk song.' It's more melancholy, and it's got an intellectual thing about it. I don't like to use the parallel that 'mind' music is coming from England—I'm not trying to say that—but there's a certain warmth in our music. There are exceptions, but most English guitarists have a certain gentleness and sensitivity in their music, and I think the Americans feel a great deal of urgency, so they play a bit harder.

In America, you have quite a few guitar front-men, but English guitarists tend to take a back seat. They want the music without getting too far out front about it and, for some reason, there's always been this idea about not overdoing it. If there is an 'English' level of guitar playing, which Beck, myself, and the others are supposed to be the spearheads of, then there's an American equivalent—though it's possibly become a bit more stereotyped than we have. Americans tend to get into this slight overkill thing in their music, and many American guitarists tend to overdo it by English standards.

Technically, there shouldn't be any differences, but there are. In America, I see a tendency to mix rock with musical knowledge, which I don't think happens in England very much. Very few English guitarists are actually schooled on the guitar, but in America, it's a bigger thing to learn music and learn how to do it right.

In my experience, I get these personal moments where I think, 'Oh, I'm really playing myself now. I'm not using any cliches.' But at one time, it was more of a conscious thing. My own paranoia made me try to avoid being like everybody else. That's what I didn't want in my life in any respect. I didn't want to be 'normal' and do things the 'right' way, so I had to find something else to get off on. That's a human instinct, not to become part of the crowd, and depending on how far you want to take it and discipline yourself, it makes you want to reach some destiny point where you're defining your own work.

It seems odd that the ball's still in our court, if it is at the moment; but from what I've been told, American guitarists are looking to English guitarists, even though we're not really conscious of it. I'm still trying to comprehend it, because America still has its James Burtons. They're still there, and it seems pointless not to say that Americans like James, Chet, and Les did more to raise the standards here than anyone else. We still haven't stopped learning from the Americans how to record records, and that's a bit of an own-up. We're still taking from the Americans, believe me, and we're still absorbing the sounds that they put out. It may not be so dominant anymore, but it does exist, and we still have a great love for what the Americans do. There might be a whole other side of music that England's been getting into, but you probably have your own idea of what the differences are, just because you've bought the book.

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