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Article by Troy Van Horn

Kansas City, MO is a city like many others, a city with its own heroes and legends. For every person that identifies the "Paris of the plains" with, say, George Brett, another will link it with Charlie Parker. And indeed there has never been a shortage of musical icons to call KC home. If ever there was a guitar hero in the classic sense of the term associated with the city, then no doubt that person would be Jeff Scheetz. A constant winner of polls and recognition, and a visible (as well as audible) figure on the Kansas City musical landscape for over ten years, Jeff is known in guitar circles throughout the world, appearing on recordings, in print and in concert from Europe to the Orient. Pretty good for an Iowa boy who got a guitar for Christmas.

"When it wouldn’t play itself, I just stuck it in the closet for about three years before I decided to take another try at it," Jeff describes a story familiar to many fledgling guitarists. But some twenty years and a lot of hard work later the rest is ongoing history. A recurring theme in his career is that of do-it-yourself-and-it-will-get-done. One of Scheetz’ first high profile roles was that of a Yamaha guitar clinician, a position arrived at in just such a fashion. "I just sent out a demo that I did to lots of guitar companies and different people I knew. Yamaha called and said they would be interested in seeing how I did a clinic – so I worked up a clinic presentation and they taped a couple of them. It must have been OK because I ended up doing over 300 clinics for them in just about every state. It was very helpful – once you have one foot in the door, it is much easier to get someone to listen to you. I played all the NAMM shows and L.A. Guitar shows, and got to meet all the other players that were doing the guitar thing back then, so that was a lot of fun."

Jeff certainly capitalized on his opportunities making various facets of the music business his business. Like many of the guitar greats he has ventured into the various fields of recording, producing and teaching. "They are all very connected so I think that is why it works. I of course love the writing, recording, and performing side of things. That is a very creative act of expression, and to me the real beauty of music is the creativity it allows. Since I started playing I have wanted to write my own songs and do my own thing – that was always the point of it all for me."

Beggars, Rogues and Thieves is the release from the Jeff Scheetz band, which includes Ted Gardner, Matt Waddill, and Kent Burnham. Those who have followed the arc of Scheetz’ career will see this bluesy opus as a logical step. It has indeed been a continuous process of musical and personal reinvention and growth since the instrumental shred tactics of the Woodpecker Stomp days of Jeff’s first album. "This CD is the first one that truly has a singer that sings like I would if I could! I have always written lots of songs with lyrics – but it is very hard to find the right singer for the job. So therefore I ended up doing lots of instrumental songs because I love those as well. But this CD is more back to rootsy type stuff – I used to play lots of blues and bluesy rock when I started playing and I still listen to more of that type of music than anything else." Jeff admits that he was very concerned with getting authentic sounds on this recording and that this was the most challenging part of the sessions. "We tried to keep it real ‘natural’ and ‘earthy’ sounding. Lots of Strat through a Fender twin – we used a Hammond B-3 organ – things like that. It is sort of a ‘retro’ sounding record I think – that is what we were going for, a bit less production and just better real sounds." Other equipment cited includes the VHT valvulator, H&K Tube Factor, Yamaha/Soldano T-100 head and a 1969 Marshall 4x12 cabinet. Achieving the sought after tones with vintage gear was one factor in producing lots of highlights. "The song ‘You Captivate Me’ came out just like I envisioned it. The solo section in ‘Longest night of my life’ where I play the first half and Ted does the second on organ I love – sounds like ‘goin ta church’ music! And of course ‘Buffalo Jam’ was a lot of fun – Kent just ripped through the drums on that one – all just one take straight through – it has a great vibe."

Mentioning Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimi Hendrix, Warren Haynes and Jimmy Herring ("He is the real deal!") alongside the likes of Steve Vai and Randy Rhoads as influences, it’s easy to see where the emphasis on vibe, atmosphere and total artistry has its roots.

As anyone who has ever tried to teach another person to do something knows, whether it be how to tie a shoe or to apply the Phrygian mode, almost as much can be learned back from the student as is being imparted. Jeff agrees and says he learns also from producing, recording and playing live. "I learn stuff every time I do any of the above! Mostly that I just need to keep practicing and getting better. That is the most frustrating thing about doing all the ‘business’ side of this career – you don’t have as much time to practice as you used to – back when I just played all the time. But I am always aware that I will never learn it all in my lifetime – but that the journey towards that end is a worthy pursuit."

As a veteran instructor and music industry figure, Jeff has had plenty of opportunity to witness the comings and goings of many trends, some for the better, some for the worse. "I have been glad to see some of the 7 string trend go away. Most of the bands that made the 7 string so hot weren’t really doing anything with it that you can’t do with a 6 string de-tuned. So maybe now that it is not such a hot trend some guys will discover some interesting things that you can do with it like a lot of jazz guys have already been doing."

"It would be good to see guitarists pursuing excellence again. Even though ‘shred’ days of the early nineties had some goofy things (spandex – guys prettier that the girls etc etc) the one thing that I say was that students would come in and want to play ‘like so-and-so’ and I would say ‘OK, here is what you have to do,’ and they had a reason to learn scales, concepts of harmony and melody, work on technique through difficult exercises etc. Now it seems like after a couple of months they can already play every song Blink 182 has put out – so they are not pushed to discover anything new. If you dig Blink 182 stuff then that is great – but it shouldn’t stop you from expanding your knowledge. When Yngwie came out and said he was into Bach and Paganini – it sent many young players scampering to listen to that music and see where the source was. Now you just don’t have that drive to ‘discover’."

As a largely self-made man in his chosen world of music, Jeff Scheetz has pertinent views on the process of self promotion and the coexistence of the little and big fish of independent musicians and industry behemoths, respectively. "I have always figured that you can either sit there and wait for someone to come along and ‘make it happen’ for you – which does happen on occasion – or – while you are waiting for that, you can be trying to ‘make it happen’ on your own! So I have always tried to push the process along. And indeed I do see that technology is changing the face of the industry. But I also think that good music will mostly rise to the top, and unfortunately the ‘Big fish’ will always find a way to buy out the ‘little fish’. So I think things will change, but then they will evolve into a new version of the same old thing. We see that already with some of the cool sites that started featuring underground bands and mp3s but once the big guys saw all the money they were making they moved in – now the same bands you hear on corporate radio are the ones you have on all these internet sites. Coincidence? I don’t think so. But…. Here’s the good news – there is still room for sites like this one, and individual band sites that can act like a grassroots organization and spread the word on things that are good to help keep the art alive. Real people, appreciating music for the sake of music. So THAT keeps me excited!!"

Many thanks to Jeff for sharing his views and his infections outlook on guitar, and music in general. This man has a lot to offer and a lot of material to check out. Learn all about every piece of it at www.jeffscheetz.com