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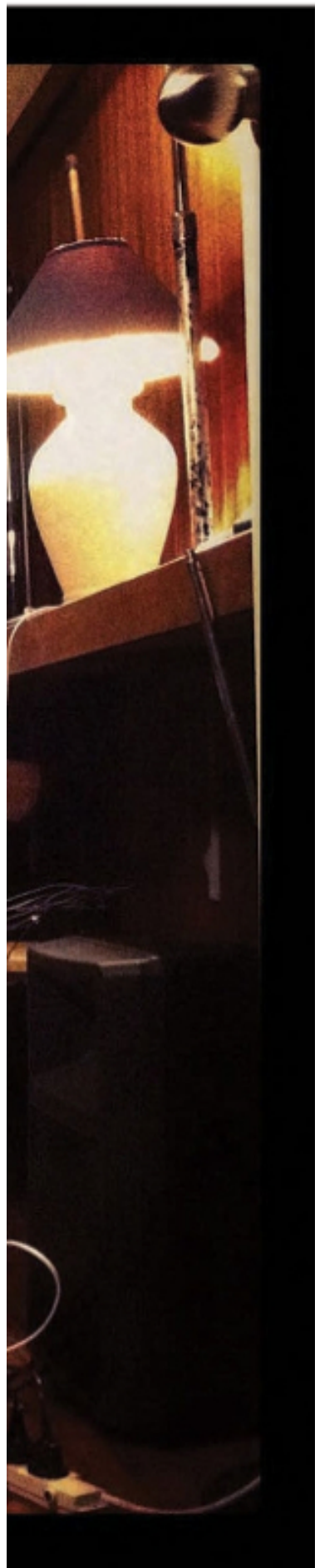
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Features





Solo Groove Machine

ADAM MILLER'S POLYPHONIC FINGERSTYLE PROWESS

BY TEJA GERKEN

THE TERM "DANCEABLE" ISN'T ONE THAT'S OFTEN USED WHEN DESCRIBING music made by a solo acoustic guitarist, but it sure comes to mind when listening to 34-year-old Australian fingerstylist Adam Miller. Not only does he own the groove, he takes polyphonic playing—with independent bass lines, melody, harmony, and even improvised solos—to incredible heights, inviting comparisons to players such as Tuck Andress and Charlie Hunter. But while Andress and Hunter are for the most part electric players, Miller's most visible work is on a 6-string flat-top, with the result being a highly original voice.

Miller discovered the acoustic guitar by way of a cassette of fellow Australian picker Tommy Emmanuel when he was 12. Having already started to play electric guitar in bands at the time, Miller wore that tape out, eventually building his own repertoire of Emmanuel tunes. His first break came a few years later, when he was able to score a gig opening for his role model, a connection that would lead to several stints of touring together.

Miller released his first CD, *After One Day*, in 2001, and has since followed up with four more albums, the latest being 2012's *Delayed*. But, although he chose the solo acoustic format for all of his CDs, and it is how you're most likely to hear him perform at any of his gigs in the U.S., it really is only one of the contexts he is comfortable in. For starters, in addition to playing a Jeff Traugott Model 00 cutaway acoustic, Miller owns and plays a Traugott 7-string electric that formerly belonged to Hunter, which he frequently uses on sideman gigs. He also continues to play standard 6-string electrics, and has been a clinician for the Premier Builder's Guild, demonstrating B3 guitars and Two-Rock amps. Many of Miller's hometown gigs include a trio in which he plays both acoustic and electric guitars, and he's released the download-only live album *Underground* at noisetrade.com/adammiller. Miller also plays in a vocal/guitar duo with his wife, Holly. Besides performing, Miller keeps busy teaching guitar at the University of Newcastle's Conservatorium of Music.

How would you describe the guitar scene in Australia?

It is small, but of really high caliber, starting with Tommy Emmanuel having been a mainstream artist here for so long. He's a household name, and not just amongst guitar players, so that was always the point to reach. He set the bar pretty high.

And he helped launch your own career. How did that come about?

When I was 19, Tommy came to play in my hometown, so I contacted his management and asked whether I could open the show, and they said yes. It was pretty terrifying, because that was actually my first solo show. It went well, however, and from there we toured together a bit, with me opening more shows for him over the next few years. It was definitely a shaping experience. I don't think I really wanted to play solo guitar before that, but it kind of threw me into the deep end. Up until that point, all I had been playing were Tommy Emmanuel pieces and arrangements, so it really forced me to create

Features

ADAM MILLER

something unique for myself. I didn't want to just play his songs before he came on and played them better [laughs].

What is it about the acoustic guitar that appeals to you?

When I played the electric guitar, I was always trying to sound like someone else—but when I played acoustic, I found it easier to play in ways that sounded like me. I stopped thinking about pedals and effects and amps, and I just got out what I put in, particularly with the solo stuff, where I'm playing bass lines. The flat-top guitar just does that so well, especially on my Jeff Traugott acoustic, with the fanned frets, and the strength of the bottom end.

What are the specs on that guitar?

It's a 00-size, which is a pretty small body, so I can get around on it easily. The case is also smaller, which helps when traveling. As a result of the fanned frets, the high E is 25 inches long, and the low E is 27 inches. The back and sides are made from Indian

rosewood, and it has a spruce top.

How did you get into this really evolved type of bass line/melody playing?

It was a consequence of two things. I was playing funk and jazz in bands, and Tommy Emmanuel and Chet Atkins material when I played solo, because that was pretty much all that I'd been exposed to. The first sort of groove-style playing and improvising while playing a bass line that I saw was John Mayer performing "Neon" live on a DVD. Then, someone said, "That sort of sounds like Charlie Hunter," so I got into all of Charlie's albums. I soaked everything up from there, and he was really the guy that made me realize that it was even possible to play a bass line and improvise over it at the same time.

What's the most important thing to focus on when learning to play fingerstyle guitar with a great groove?

Timing. Whether you are playing with a metronome, or playing with other people, you

need to be really aware of where your timing sits. And I think especially for the way I play, it's having an understanding of the subdivisions of the bar, like how one beat interacts with the other beat. The funny thing about a lot of my stuff is that while it sounds like I'm playing two or three parts at a time, it's really only the parts between each other, and how they work together that creates the overall feeling of the groove, in the same way that a drummer's hi-hat and snare create a particular feel.

Is it a challenge to go from playing all the parts yourself when you're solo to playing more sparse arrangements within the context of a band?

Most of the time, especially through the melodies, I tend to still play the bass lines, at least the bass line that I've written for the songs. One thing I've started doing recently is having the bass players create their own lines around what I'm playing, rather than following what I do, and we get this big sound that's really nice.

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Features

ADAM MILLER

What's the story behind *Underground*, the live recording with your trio?

That was a one-off night of just getting a couple of amazing musicians together. There was no rehearsal, and I basically just had some charts written up, and a few beatbox drum parts to start things off.

When do you play your Charlie Hunter-

style 7-string electric?

I play it for live sideman work. Mostly pop, soul, and R&B sort of things. What's kind of cool about it, and this comes back to the whole approach, is that with the bass and the guitar taken care of, you deliver such a strong groove, and it really suits those styles of music. You end up with very simple guitar

parts that don't go over the top. Often it ends up being just a drummer and me backing up a singer-songwriter who plays keyboard or guitar. It's fun, because it takes the pressure off me and allows me to focus on the groove and the feeling of the music.

What electric guitars do you play?

I have a b3 Water, a D'Angelico EXL-1, and a Telecaster-style guitar that I built from Warmoth parts. When I'm at home, they go through an original Two-Rock Jet head with a 1x12 cabinet. I don't really use a lot of pedals anymore, except for sometimes a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler, which I'm using for some Bill Frisell-inspired atmospheric things.

The thing is, I'm really starting to blur the lines between my acoustic and my electric setups. I'm using .012 sets with a wound G on my electrics, and at the same time, I've started using a Seymour Duncan MagMic pickup in my Traugott, which I sometimes play through the Two-Rock. This doesn't sound as acoustic as when I run through my D-Tar Solstice and into a PA... but it's a very cool sound.

With *Delayed* having been out for a while now, what are you working on?

I've got two projects in the works. One will be a duo album with my wife, Holly. The idea is to do it the way we play live, with just vocal and guitar. I'm really hoping to introduce the 7-string, because it's such a great instrument for accompaniment. Holly's vocals just sit really nicely in the middle of the bass and the guitar parts. My own new album will be called *Shifting Units*. The title piece is a tune with different movements and time signatures, and there will be recurring themes throughout the album. It will continue with the groove idea, and also explore new ways of playing some of the tunes I've already been playing live, like "Wrong Note Blues," and "Blow Your Horn." It will be a combination of acoustic and electric guitar, and it will most likely feature a band on at least some of the songs. I'm also planning on spending a lot more time touring in the U.S. in 2014. 🎸

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- > Miller discusses arranging

for solo fingerstyle guitar.

- > See Miller play "Blow Your Horn."



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