



Artist Interview: Steve Herberman, 7-String Guitarist

by [Stephen Rekas](#)

Personal/Biographical

Who or what events inspired you to play the guitar? Was music a part of your household when growing up?

My parents encouraged my sister and me to take piano lessons at an early age and they have always supported music although they didn't play instruments themselves. It was at a friend's house where I held my first full-sized guitar when I was 10 years old. It was a dreadnought and I was fascinated with it. Not long after that my parents returned from a trip to Hawaii with a ukulele because they knew I was interested in the guitar and I suppose they wanted to see if I would stick with it before investing too much. I never put it down! The first thing I figured out by ear was "Day Tripper" by the Beatles. I went on to pick out anything I could sing. This prompted them to bring me to the music store and get a nylon-string guitar and shortly thereafter my first electric guitar which was a Gibson Marauder. Remember that model with the red and green pickups?

So how old were you when you began to play?

I was probably 11 years old when I got that uke and started guitar lessons a few months later.

Do you feel that your starting age is a critical factor in playing your current style?

I'm glad I started early because the style I'm playing now took a long time to form. It was lots of hard work, but very enjoyable.

What styles interested you when you first began to play? How do those preferences influence your current music?

I started with rock and stayed with that until I saw Miles Davis on Saturday Night Live on television one night. That turned my head around and I started buying Miles and Monk albums the next day. My school friends thought I'd gone crazy! I was only about 15 and this is still where I feel most comfortable musically. I don't play much rock anymore; in fact, every time I go back to my distortion pedal it only lasts about a day! I prefer a clean guitar sound in my own playing.

When did the 7-string guitar come into the picture? How do you tune that 7th string- B or A?

I started on the 7 string about 13 years ago and have always tuned it low A. I've experimented with the high A instead of the low one a little bit but I never liked the

tone and the string kept breaking from being tuned up that high. I play on the low A string with my trio or in a bass/guitar duo usually on single-note lines and sometimes for comping, especially on Brazilian tunes. In other duet formats with a singer, horn or another guitarist I use the low A string a great deal more.

Aside from the obvious advantages of the extended range and being your own bassman, what are the other benefits of playing the 7-string guitar?

Solo guitar, which I love playing every chance I get, shows off the capabilities of the instrument the best. My concept comes from George Van Eps' multi-line approach to harmony, which I literally improvise when playing solo. Although this is my basic concept, I throw all kinds of other influences in there.

Who are the luthiers who built your instruments?

My first custom 7-string was made by Carl Barney. I still have that guitar but have stopped playing it since I got my [Bill] Comins 7-string. The Comins is the best 7-string guitar I've played. This guitar has a 16-inch lower bout so it's a bit more comfortable to play, and it has built-in pickups- which I like. The Comins still has a great acoustic sound yet maybe a little more electric sounding than the Barney- and no feedback which I really like! I also have an Eastman prototype 7-string that I helped them design. I like the guitar a great deal but gravitate to the Comins because it is smaller, has the built-in pickups and doesn't feed back. All three of these archtops sound great but I tend to play one guitar into the ground!

What are the key areas a student jazz guitarist should pursue? In your role as a teacher, what areas do you emphasize with your students?

Fundamentals are what I try to stress. Knowing all of the adjacent string triads, arpeggios in position, at least four chord forms for each chord type, all scales in five positions, pick and fingerstyle technique, and theory. All jazz students should be concerned with how the music is structured and should go back and study the entire jazz legacy beginning with Armstrong or earlier. They'd be smart to learn to sing the melodies first and then figure out a way to play them on the guitar. I also emphasize chord- melody playing in my teaching. Once students can play their own simple block chord melodies, I have them scale it back to play only bass notes on beats 1 and 3 with the melody. This gets them ready to begin thinking about how they will deal with the notes in between or the inner lines. They also learn basic principles of independence by doing this.

Repertoire is also a real concern as well as lots of transcribing.

What is the best way to enhance one's chord palette? Is there a method you would recommend for learning to apply chord substitutions in a personalized way?

First off, one needs to know the spellings of all the chords they'll be using in other words the names of the notes in the basic chord. Then the extensions should be learned so if you want an Ab7b9#11 you can use the D natural and A-natural as your extensions. Knowing enharmonic spellings helps too, like B double-flat = A natural, the former being more correct for a b9 of Ab7, only more cluttered for notation purposes. Often I establish the 3rd and 7th first and put them on the bottom of my chord voicing. Then I add the tensions above either as a moving line or sustained or

percussive notes. I think of the 3rd and 7th as being the chord nucleus and I add the upper tensions when I want them. This really steers the guitarist away from thinking in terms of chord grids or boxes all of the time.

My next suggestion addresses chord substitutions in an interesting way. I like to think of the notes in each chord as a separate voice or instrument. Try viewing a four-note chord as a string quartet where each string on your guitar is a different instrument or John, Paul, George and Ringo- whatever imagery works best for you.

In a musical phrase you have a starting chord and an ending chord. Suppose the ending chord has all four notes on the same four strings as the starting chord. This helps you see the motion more clearly. Try as many different ways as possible to move the four voices around to get from point A to point B. Stagger the voices so they don't all move at the same rate but strive to get from the beginning chord to your ending chord with stepwise motion in each voice. You may have recognizable chord forms as your bookends, but the real magic lies in between. Take note of the special moments that occur when certain voices sound together and jot them down if you can after the phrase is complete. Motion is the name of the game so you want to try getting this to a steady tempo. That way, the dissonances will be briefer instead of holding them for longer periods. Sometimes you'll be hard-pressed to give the chords in between your bookends a proper name, but this doesn't really matter! This is a beautiful way to discover chord substitutions and gets you thinking in a more horizontal fashion.

Did any Mel Bay books figure into your development as a guitarist?

There are four Mel Bay books by [George Van Eps](#) that greatly influenced the way I play the instrument and think about music in general. About fifteen years ago I decided that I was going to study the Van Eps methods. I started with the slim volume that Van Eps put out in the late 30's called the George Van Eps Method if I remember correctly. It was originally published by Plymouth Music but I believe it went to Mel Bay more recently. After working my way through the book I felt ready to move on to the thicker Harmonic Mechanisms 3-volume set that must've come out in the early 80's. It took me nearly five years but I went through every page in all 12 keys. I had the discipline and time back then! Even though I had read a Van Eps interview done by Ted Greene in an old Guitar Player magazine where he advised readers to skip around the book, I stubbornly went page by page. I didn't want to miss anything! I was also listening to his LPs which were very hard to track down.

This material made me realize the benefits of the 7-string guitar. Shortly after I got my first electric 7-string, probably in 1993, I went to take a lesson with Ted Greene in California while I was vacationing there. Ted was very encouraging and enthusiastic about my playing. He wanted Van Eps to hear me play. He hadn't been in touch with George for a little while so he called a mutual friend of George's, John Pisano on my behalf to try arrange a lesson with George. I thought I was dreaming! Not only was I playing for Ted Greene but I was about to play for the father of the 7-string guitar and the jazz guitar in general.

Unfortunately George was out of town so I never got to meet him. A few years later a friend of mine, a former Van Eps student, called George to try to arrange a lesson for me. Van Eps told my friend that I needed to be in California for at least a month to take weekly lessons. He wasn't teaching anymore and if he were to take on a student he wanted to do it the right way. Given my schedule at the time I wasn't

able to do it. I would love to have met him and it is definitely a shame that it never worked out. I did write to him to express the extent of my admiration for him.

Have you ever had to weather a creative dry spell in your playing or composition? If so, how did you overcome it?

Many times. When my playing feels stale I compose and when my composing is stale I concentrate on playing tunes and working out concepts. I'm a very concept-oriented player so when I feel uncreative I delve into something like improvising single notes while mixing in open strings in order to build unusual chord voicings. I don't stay in a rut for long as I'm always trying to work on these concepts or writing tunes.

How has your family affected your music?

Meeting my wife ten years ago and more recently having a child has made me a happier person and as a result- a more confident musician. I listen better than I used to for starters. There is nothing like parenthood for setting your priorities straight. You are no longer "it". Being a father has helped me become more giving and less self-indulgent, which ultimately helps in playing music with a group before an audience.

Apart from music, what are your interests?

Well I already named them all! Family, friends, teaching and music are all there is to me. If there were more time in the day than I'd definitely add some more interests.

Technique

Please describe your practice routine.

It varies from month to month. I usually go for what seems to need the most attention at the time. I always begin each session by playing only single notes fingerstyle to warm up. Then I get into smaller chords, usually 2-line improvisation- and build from there. The three chordal approaches I practice most often are the Van Eps-based concepts for solo guitar, Lenny Breau's 2 and 3-note comping underneath a melodic line for playing with a bassist, and rootless voicings practiced over a tune's progression in a multi-line fashion- again to be played with a bassist. I emphasize sustaining certain notes while other ones move around.

I also like to play completely freestyle improvisation. I get great ideas for future concepts to work on from doing this. I try to sight read whenever I can to keep it sharp.

Any particular teaching/learning techniques, such as maintaining a log of practice time?

I recommend the Alexander Technique to all of my students. It helps an individual better understand how to perform movements with the least amount of interference. It also helps you improve their sitting posture while playing or performing any other activity.

Teaching is the best way to learn something, so I encourage my students to teach and introduce new material in their own teaching in order to gain a deeper understanding themselves. Then I always encourage students to compose, especially the ones that have already put in a lot of time practicing the fundamentals.

What is your opinion of tab vs. notation?

I stress the importance of learning notation. As long as a serious student can read well and notate properly, then TAB could be a quick way to understand where on the neck to play something. I'm not opposed to TAB if it can get a beginning student inspired enough to later learn how to read and notate, sooner rather than later!

What do you do to keep your repertoire sounding fresh?

I try out different arrangements that may include time signature changes and altering the harmony. Often I'll change the tempo. When I get bored of my repertoire I either sit down to write a new tune or think about what type of tune I want to write and go about my daily affairs. If I'm lucky, something will rise to the surface naturally while I'm singing. I get ideas for tunes while driving a car, walking outside, etc.

What are the key elements of your style?

My roots are in straight-ahead jazz and from that base I expand into other styles using harmonies that I find attractive. I primarily use fingerstyle technique coupled with the aforementioned multi-line concepts and piano-style comping beneath a melody. I strive for rhythmic and harmonic variety and making a melody sing.

Gear

What are your preferred guitars, strings, pickup, amp, and mike? Do you have any product endorsements? Is there anything on your wish list as far as equipment?

My favorite guitar is a Concert model 7-string by Philadelphia luthier Bill Comins built to my specifications. I'm a Comins endorser. I have used D'Addario chromes strings for years, but I am not an endorser. The pickup in the Comins is a Kent Armstrong built-in pickup which I like a great deal. My favorite amps are the Clarus 1R with a Raezer's Edge NY8 speaker cabinet and an AER Compact 60. I would like to try a Rivera Jazz Suprema and also an Acoustic Image cabinet both on the recommendation of my friend Larry Camp.

Current

What directions are you pursuing in your original music in terms of composition or performance?

When I play solo I like to improvise arrangements on standard tunes and very seldom play an original. This may change over time. Lately I've been writing original music for a seven-piece group at Towson University where I teach. It's a great group comprised of the Towson jazz faculty. I've been taking those arrangements and trying to play all the parts on my guitar. It's been a great challenge. I have also written specifically for the guitar trio format which in many ways is a lot easier, as I

can customize the arrangements for my style of playing. I've also been working with the combination of sax, bass and guitar a lot recently. As the group has no drummer, it has focused me on developing a more rhythmic comping approach.

Do you have any upcoming performance dates, travels, ongoing teaching gigs, or workshops?

Most of my gigs are in the MD/DC/VA areas. Aside from my Towson University position I'm on the faculty of the Levine School and have my own home teaching studio. I teach a biweekly jazz guitar workshop in Takoma Park that I'm having a lot of fun with.

What is your advice to students who are considering becoming career guitarists?

Play as much as possible with as many players you can. It would be ideal to get together with a bass player at least once a week. Sit in at jam sessions. Learn as much of the repertoire as you can and be sure to memorize it. Have respect for the tradition and do your homework; you are your greatest teacher! Make sure your style of playing is honest in that you play what you really enjoy deep inside yourself. Maintain musical friendships and don't burn any bridges along the way. Concentrate on getting your playing up to a decent level before marketing yourself too much and finally, always strive for professionalism.

Thanks for an informative and heartfelt interview, Steve.

My pleasure, Stephen.