

FEATURE



GG Universally Speaking JJ

Words: Matt Parker Photography: Dilly Curtis

AS A TRUSTED COLLABORATOR OF JEFF BUCKLEY AND CAPTAIN BEEFHEART, **GARY LUCAS** IS KNOWN AS ONE OF GUITAR MUSIC'S TRUE INNOVATORS. HIS INSPIRATION, HOWEVER, COMES FROM HUMANITY'S COMMON GROUND

Gary Lucas is a fascinating guitar player. The journeyman musician has deep associations with Jeff Buckley (having penned the otherworldly instrumentals that became *Grace* and *Mojo Pin*) and Captain Beefheart (who he managed and played with) but he has never rested on those laurels. Instead, he has continually striven to understand what it is about these six strings of shifting pitches that makes the guitar – in particular, blues guitar – such a fine communicator. Across an astonishingly varied career he has explored Chinese pop,

Hungarian folk and created scores for multiple films, not to mention some 30-plus albums. His playing – a characteristic blend of audacious blues slides, avant-garde textures and rich, melodic psychedelia – is the sound of a guitarist who has learned to speak many languages, but who still knows his own voice. He is a master craftsman and when he talks about the innate, universal connection of blues music, it is with a sense of enlightenment, as if amid the wrangled strings on some far-off stage he has opened a portal to something celestial. "Where words fail, music speaks", said Hans Christian Andersen. By that token, Lucas is a skillful linguist. **C**

SAY MORE WITH LESS

Why Gary is not one for GAS...

"I'm a vintage guitar guy. I don't have a lot of guitars. I'm not a collector, per se, but I take my Strat and my J-45 with me all over the world. I've lived with them and it's hard to contemplate removing them from my show. I do like to explore [musically], but there's a part of me that feels like I do have enough of an unusual guitar vocabulary as is, that I've built up over the years, that I don't need to further expand it in the quest for, let's say, an exotic guitar sound. I'm not even that picky on amplifiers. I used to do a lot with pedals and stereo guitar, but nowadays it's like, 'Do people really care?' I like it, I can hear, but I'm not sure it's really communicating to the punters. A good pedal can do a lot as far as the sonics, but if you don't really have an expressive technique in your hands then I don't think all the pedals in world are going to make a big difference."

USE PENTATONIC SCALES AS A VOICE

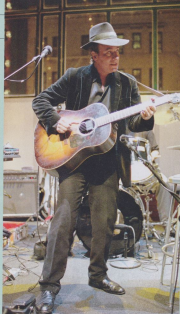
Pentatonic does not mean penitentiary

"Five notes would seem to limit you, but if you hear a blues master – somebody in electric blues like Hubert Sumlin, or Buddy Guy, or Hendrix – it's what they do with those five notes because they're adding microtonal slurs, either by sliding or bending those notes. In terms of your attack, you can make what would seem a limited amount of options in that scale, suddenly expand into a scale that might have 20 or 30 'notes' in it and they're all going to be played differently. If you're careful, you're not going to be just parroting these repeated stock phrases. But listen to a blues master and it's as if they're saying something. People think the pentatonic scale is just a technical thing and it's nothing, right, and they can dismiss it, but that's a mistake. To pare down to the essence and find a way to take this essential blues scale and make it new is what elevates the best players to something really worthy of respect."

YOU'RE ALWAYS LEARNING

There's almost always a better way

"Often one thinks you know the genre backwards and forwards and then you



AN OLD PAIR

The two instruments Gary takes with him everywhere

1966 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"I have a 1966 Strat with all the original pickups and parts and my love of these guitars goes back to the age of 13, when I received a Strat from my father for my bar mitzvah. I fell in love with it, although I didn't know how to get a great tone out of it then and I eventually traded it, much to my horror years later.

Once I figured out how to adapt it a bit – for instance, with the five position switch customisation, where you could get these 'between pickup' sounds, that beautiful Stratocaster tone – I really grew to love it."

GIBSON 1942 J-45

"As I grew up, over the years, any time that I got to play somebody's Gibson acoustic I found them to be the greatest blues-y-sounding acoustic guitars that you could play. They really had something great about them.

Lucky for me, I was sold a 1942 J-45. In the headstock of this particular guitar is written, 'Only a Gibson is good enough'.

I got it for the unbelievably low price of \$1,000 in 1989. The guy who sold it to me said it was a 1946, but it turned out he was wrong it was recently revalued and it's a 1942. It's a real beauty and the tone is just phenomenal."

hear somebody's approach and then suddenly there are infinite possibilities that open up. Like, for years, I've been a really big Rolling Stones fan and my favourite riff always was *The Last Time*. For years, I learned it in the first position. Then five or 10 years ago, clips started to emerge on YouTube of Brian Jones playing live and suddenly everybody was like, 'We've been playing it all wrong!' He's like doing it up on the fourth string and the third string on the 7th fret and there's these pull-offs and it's like, 'That's how he got that sound!' Nobody conceived of this but Brian Jones. It all goes back to the most simple things, but depending on how you voice it and attack it, phrase it, you really can achieve miracles and change it around from a limited selection of notes."

BLUES DOES NOT RESPECT BORDERS

The human experience is universal

"This blues feeling is something that is shared in all cultures. It's a spiritual music: the essential emotions. I can't think of a culture that doesn't have this unconscious vibrato and wailing and sliding in and out of pitches as the central focus of expression vocally and instrumentally. That's the dots that are connected for me in the culture. That shows there is a common ground of humanity, you know? Somebody can hear this music and it might be completely foreign to their culture but they can recognise aspects of it as being similar to their experience. I think it's a good way to bridge lapses of communication and a way of finding common ground. You can use it as a fulcrum to bring people together, which is why music is the greatest communicator. It never respects any artificial boundaries. People who were in a very badly subjugated state, like the Czech Republic or Russia, and they would get these recordings of jazz and blues and they fell in love with that. Those people were really able to grasp the passion, because they were living under the heavy yoke of this oppressive bureaucracy."

AIMING HIGHER

Live is where you really connect

"I'm trying to reach out... I want to reach beyond my limitations and really play something to astonish people, but



"DEPENDING ON HOW YOU VOICE IT, ATTACK IT, PHRASE IT, YOU CAN ACHIEVE MIRACLES"

if you put too much attention on why you're doing something, it inhibits the flow of the ideas, I find. So the best thing is to really go into it with a very relaxed and open feeling where you're not tensed up and then this energy - I just feel it sometimes - just goes down right through you and I'm unconscious of what I'm doing but somehow it's just directed into my fingertips and they just go where they will. I don't have to do too much conscious thought to push the notes around. I think that's also a result of playing for as long as I have. I think live is really where it's at. Often I come up with stuff and I'm surprised with it. I don't know what it means. And those are really great moments, I'm not falling back on any stock clichés, because God knows it's easy to...

TRUST YOUR PARTNERS

A true collaboration takes respect

"I definitely go into it with a respect. Often these collaborations came about because somebody said, 'This might be a good person for you to work with!' Or I knew the work, I'd hear the person's work and I've said, 'Yeah, we can do something here,' because there's a resonance here that I can recognise and I can feel a common ground here. So some of it is intuitive, but it's also to just respect the collaborator, to let them do their thing is a very important thing to me. I have to dictate to anybody. I've done it, in my band, but pretty much I operate that in a more democratic process. Beethoven was one of the biggest dictators in music, in a nice way, but he was very controlling. It had to be exactly as he heard it. Often, I've tried to go the other way - and I got fantastic results with a guy like Jeff [Buckley]. I never told him anything. The only instruction I gave Jeff was on the demo for Mojo Pin where I remember telling him, 'More Robert Plant!' Because he was doing a thing with his voice that sounded to me very Led Zeppelin. But I just trusted he knew what he was doing."

IN PERFECT HARMONY

Jeff and Gary "showing a collaborator is like opening a window and letting in fresh air"



"JEFF STARTED SINGING... I HEARD MAGIC, I STARTED TO GET CHILLS"

GOOD WORK EXCEEDS ITS CREATORS

The product can be bigger than you both.

"I do really believe that collaborations are often much greater than the sum of your individual parts.

"I wrote this to Jeff Buckley in a letter. I just said to him, 'I think you'll agree, that these songs that we did really are pretty monumental and I don't think that either of us on our own would have been able to achieve such a level if we'd

done it without each other'. I know that I had some of the music of Grace that I had written before I met Jeff and I'd also tried to come up with some ideas of my own, for what might go over the lyric and the melody, it was one of the sections of the ascending verse part, and actually I think that they sucked, you know?"

"Do you know, if I hadn't have run into Jeff, this wouldn't have worked so well. Having a collaborator is like opening a window and letting in fresh air. Really, I'm all for it."

SOMETIMES YOU HEAR MAGIC

How Grace was born

"Most of the music [with Jeff] I composed as instrumentals and then I sent him cassettes. He was, at that point, living in LA with his mom and he called me and said, 'Oh, it's beautiful, let me work on it.' He came to New York a few weeks later and said, 'OK, you know that piece you called *Rise Up To Be*?' Because I gave a little title as a place marker, so I knew what we would be talking about and also to really encourage him, you know, 'Rise up to be!' I was trying to encourage myself [too]. So he said to me, 'OK, now it's called Grace.'"

"Then he picked out these lyrics from a book he carried around, his journal, and he had a lot of poetry in there and little drawings and ideas. And I have that tape. Then, in the studio recording, I go down there and I spend all afternoon doing takes of *Mojo Pin* and Grace. Then Jeff came down and he goes out into this dark studio, I'm sitting in the booth and he starts singing in this unearthly voice... It was beyond what I'd ever dreamed. The tape made on my couch, he was singing in a low voice without a lot of expression, but here I heard magic and I started to get chills. It was like, 'Where the fuck did that come from?' I walked out of there thinking, 'I have the atomic bomb in my pocket.'"

REACHING OUT

Communication should be bi-directional

"For me, when it's working, music is the most fun I could possibly have and the most thrilling way to express my feelings about all sorts of things - either instrumentally, or in the songs I write. It's the best way to communicate. I guess it just was my destiny to fall into it. Had I taken time to branch out, maybe I would have done other stuff, but it just sort of came together and it felt right."

"I think my music is very... it's different, but it's not meant to be an attitude of indifference to an audience. I'm trying to reach out half-way there, no matter what I do, I like people to respond. It's important to me. That impulse that can touch people in music and not alienate them. Though I guess I've done that, too. A little pain is good for you once in a while, though!"