

WHO'S IN THE GP 2012 HALL OF FAME?

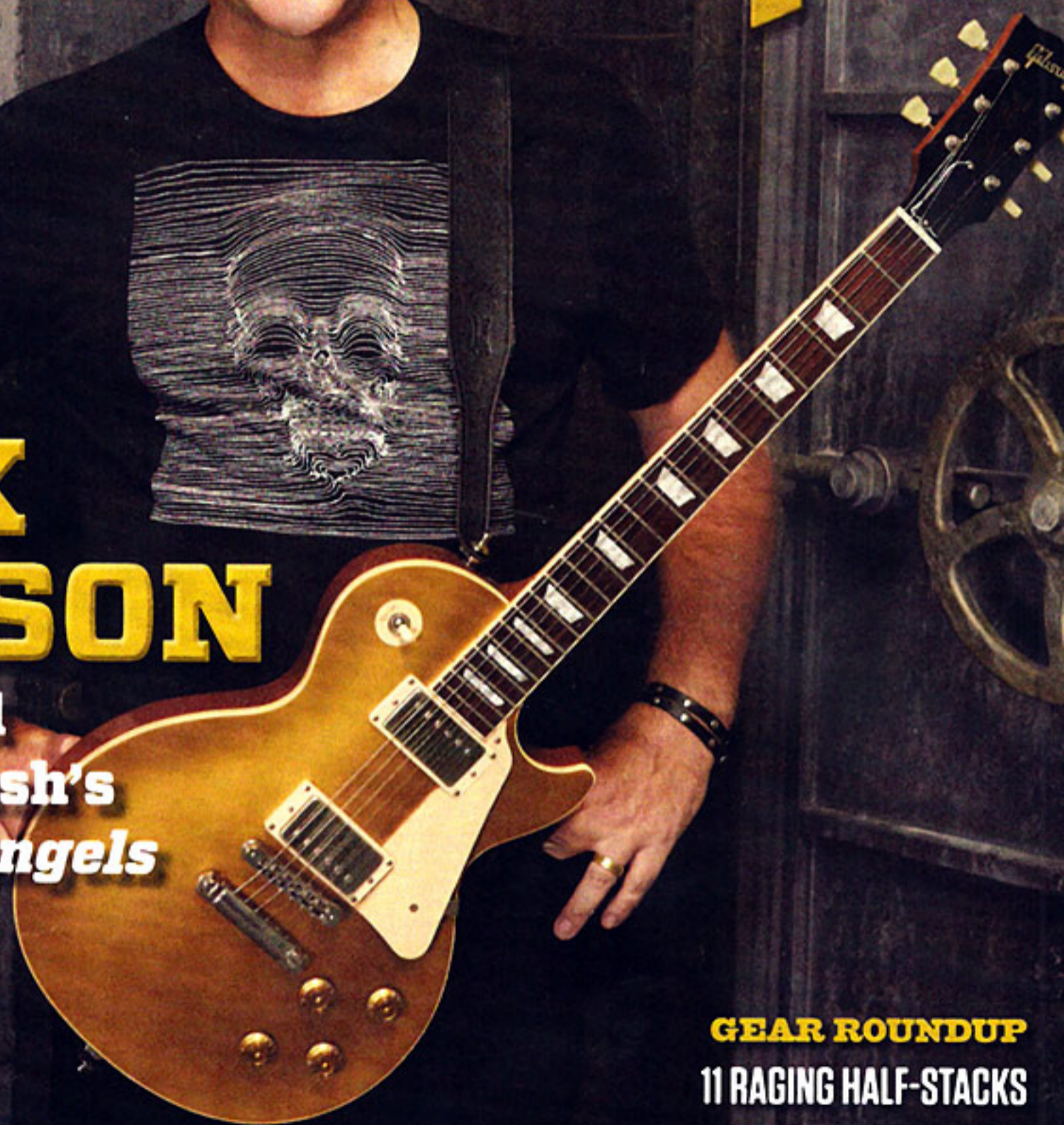
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Cover photo by Richard Sibbald

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Don Alder

BY JIMMY LESLIE

"THAT WAS TRANSCENDENTAL, beautiful ... you just took everybody to school," said legendary rocker George Lynch after seeing Canadian guitarist Don Alder's winning solo-acoustic performance at *GP's* Guitar Superstar 2010. Alder's histrionic freehand plucking coupled with an appealingly direct delivery and an Olympian drive also earned him the International Fingerstyle Guitar crown in 2007 at the Walnut Valley Festival, and first place at the U.K.'s Guitar Idol III competition in 2011.

Alder's visceral approach is visually striking, and if his aggressive attack evokes Jimi Hendrix more than Doc Watson it's because Alder was originally a rocker. He

DON ALDER

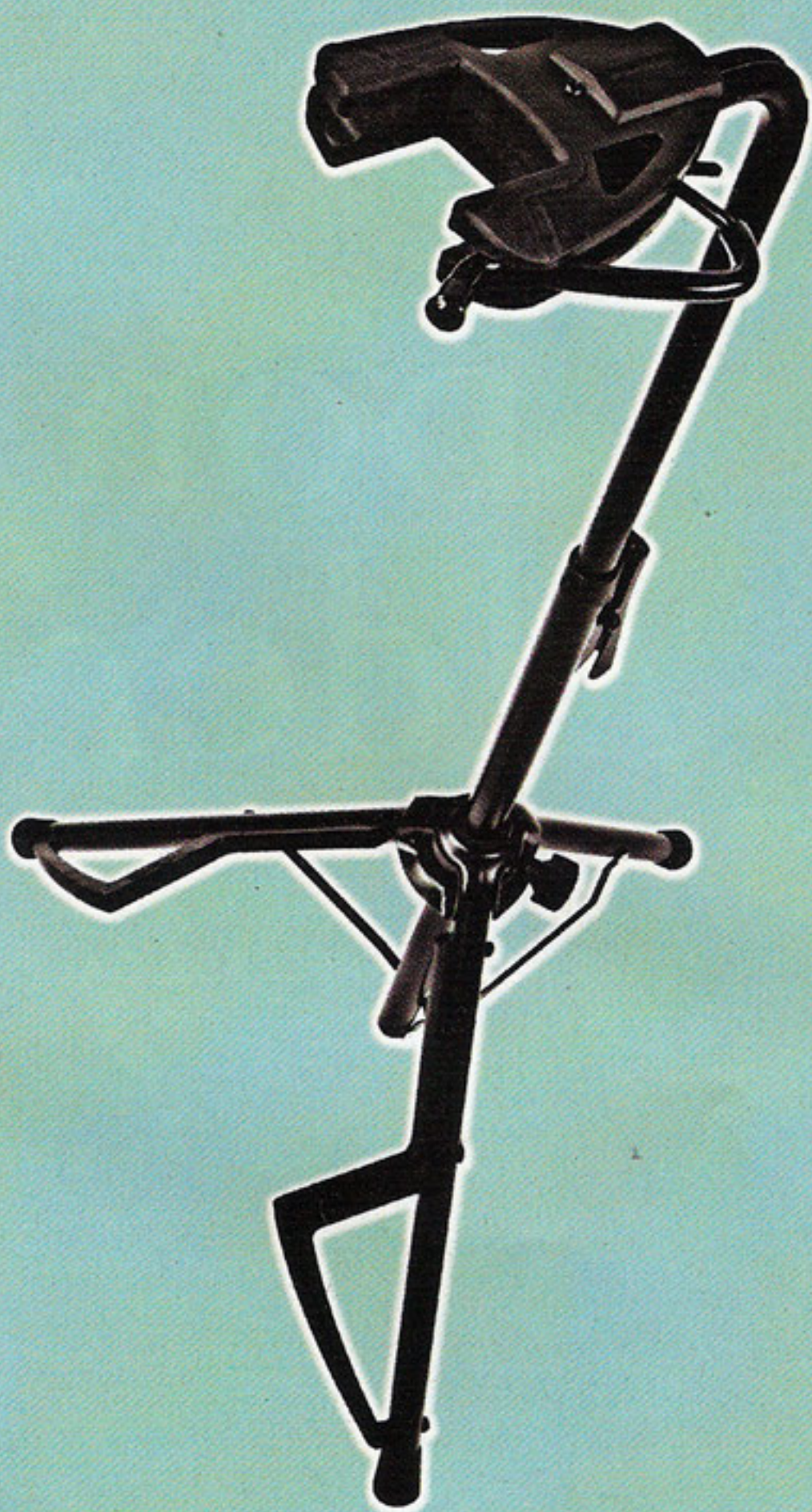
MORE ONLINE



- Watch Alder's winning performance of "The Rogue" at GP's Guitar Superstar 2010.
 - Dig Alder playing "Sayonara ..." on a Duane Noble Harp Guitar.
 - See Alder speak and perform at Sam Sullivan's February 2012 Public Salon.
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eventually found his own voice on acoustic and stuck to it, but he's no one-trick pony. His most recent CD, *Not a Planet* [Indpt], is a mellow, composition-oriented affair that earned him a nomination for Instrumental Solo Artist of the Year at the Canadian Folk Awards in 2009.

"My earlier CDs were raw solo efforts created for guitar geeks," explains Alder, "but to reach the public, I created songs for listening and cruising that could potentially work as movie soundscapes."

Alder is actually portrayed in the movie *Heart of a Dragon* (released last year in the U.S.A.), and he plays guitar on the soundtrack. It's about a car accident Alder was in with friend Rick Hansen that left Hansen handicapped. Alder put his music career on hold from 1985 to 1987 to help Hansen go around the world in a wheelchair on his *Man in Motion* Tour, which had a profound and lasting effect on Alder's life.

Do you feel that the electric rock guitar god has become so played out that there is now an advantage to being an acoustic virtuoso?

No, but I do think acoustic music is gaining in popularity. At the end of the day it's about creating your own magic regardless of whether the guitar is acoustic or electric.

What are your thoughts on the current contest craze from *American Idol* to *The Apprentice*?

Everything has its place, including contests. I think a *Guitar Idol* television show would provide great exposure for the art of guitar. Sadly, the general public seems more interested in playing the *Guitar Hero* video game.

How do you choose what you're going to play for a guitar contest, and how do you prepare?

I choose whatever I'm playing well on that particular day. It's a gut feeling. My preparation is dysfunctional. I'm always writing, so practice only comes through the writing process. I'm always making unwise last-second gear decisions, and I seem to have bad luck with gear, which ends up causing anxiety. I panic, thinking that I should've practiced and that everyone else is better than me.

What's the key to winning over the judges?

I wish I knew. I've made mistakes and had to deal with technical problems in all of the contests I've entered, and I do that well. No matter what I'm playing, I own it. Perhaps that—along with decent guitar skills and good compositions—serves me well. In addition, I don't seek perfection when I

perform. My pursuit is an honest delivery with good energy.

Can you provide some harmonic, rhythmic, and technical insights on the Superstar-winning tune "The Rogue"?

I wrote it to demonstrate that an acoustic guitar could rock out in standard tuning in the key of E, with no tapping or gimmicks. Rhythmically, I wanted melodic bass lines and implied percussion to create a wall of sound. I also wanted to shred with the right hand using all five digits for picking. The initial game plan was to incorporate tapping and percussion, but that's so overdone these days.

Why did you choose that tune for Guitar Superstar, and what did you hope to show the judges?

I chose it because the song is very physical, with a lot of dynamic movement. I was hoping the judges would see good composition with tons of purposeful notes and chord voicings. The song uses all the chords in the key of E along with some melodic clichés, which probably provided a reference point for the judges. I also hoped they'd see the entertainment value and what a joy it is for me to perform.

Can you delve into some specifics about your unique right-hand technique?

My right-hand technique is a bit unorthodox for a fingerstyle player. I have a very aggressive rock approach, so instead of gently plucking the strings, I pull them. I don't anchor my little finger, so I can swing my wrist when I strum. That allows me to upstroke and downstroke with all my digits. I also do a lot of frailing. While these techniques allow for very fast picking, the tone does suffer a bit. The sound can be harsh, but I'm able to fatten it up and create the illusion of a band with percussive hits on the soundboard when my palm is swinging away from the strings.

What guitar did you play for your Superstar-winning performance, and what are you using now?

For the GP contest I used a hand-built Yamaha LLX36C that I still have, although I'm currently playing a Yamaha A Series, which is a really great low-cost guitar. I used a Yamaha A3R for Guitar Idol U.K. It's a great little guitar, however it sustained serious damage upon arriving in the U.K., so I used duct tape to hold it together.

What's the nature of the material you are currently working on?

I have enough material for a few CDs. The next one may be solo, or it may include

some surprise guests.

What would you like to share with aspiring guitarists?

I learned many valuable things on Rick's Man In Motion tour: primarily that it's not usually the most talented or gifted that wins—it's the most determined. Break all the rules if you're going the artist route.

Believe in what you do and own it fiercely. Find your own voice. Concentrate on writing good songs foremost, and then add your gimmicks. Gimmicks are entertaining, but good songs sell CDs. Lastly, passion is paramount. Without it, consider guitar playing a hobby. I'm a small town kid who dreamt of being in *Guitar Player*, and passion got me here. ■

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