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Don Alder

Canadian Fingerstyle Master

Don Alder is a noted fingerstylist from Vancouver, British Columbia. Though this is not a household name, Alder has been a mainstay of the acoustic universe for quite awhile – a few years ago he even won the prestigious International Fingerpicking Championship in Winfield, Kansas. The guitarist is a multi-faceted player, able to blend soulful, melodic passages with fast runs, banjo rolls, and percussive bongo hits on the body. Let's check in with this acoustic ace and grab a few tips.

People generally associate the percussive-acoustic style with Michael Hedges, but I gather you were doing it earlier.

In 1979, I was doing a scaled-down version of my present percussive style. That said, there's no question that players were messing with percussive styles from the day the acoustic guitar was born. Still, Hedges was one of the first to put that acoustic style on the map. His compositions were amazing and remain a benchmark for acoustic players. Speaking of Hedges, I was very fortunate to have the amazing Michael Manring play bass on my latest CD, *Not a Planet*. He and Hedges created pure music magic together on those great albums they recorded together in the 1980s and '90s.

Who were your influences?

Gordon Lightfoot, Bruce Cockburn, Joni Mitchell, and Jimi Hendrix. Wishbone Ash is still my all-time fave band. I discovered the better-known fingerstyle players in the late '80s, which is when I got serious about it. There's something very personal about writing and playing acoustic guitar music.

How did your style evolve?

I'm self taught, and found my techniques just through natural progression and experimentation. For example, there's a common technique where you thumb-slap the strings while fingerpicking, which provides a nice rhythmic thud. I liked that but felt it was missing something so I started using the lower flesh below the thumb to hit on the soundboard. This created a fuller kick drum sound. The combination of the two really gives push to a song.

What tunings do you use mostly?

DADFCE, DADGBD, DADGAD, BADGAD, and standard tuning.

What is your favorite guitar?

I'm in a dreadnought phase, and my fave guitar for live performance is a Yamaha LLX36C. It's hand-built and the best bang for the buck. Yamaha's Chris Seldon gave me a loaner some time ago – I tried to hate it, but just couldn't. That led to an endorsement deal with Yamaha and now I do clinics for their L-series acoustic. My first endorsement was a Michael Greenfield Signature G4 Don Alder model. It's a crazy guitar with a Novax fanned-fret system. [Fingerstyle sensation] Andy McKee currently uses one. And luthier Bryan Galloup will be building me a specialized long-scale guitar or baritone in the near future.

Playing live with acoustics can be challenging. Do you have a preferred pickup system or mic'ing technique?

I got my experience playing in loud bars so my setup has been adapted for that. I like playing loud and want the monitors to be cranked, which creates obvious issues for an acoustic guitar. I use the system that came with the Yamaha, which is an LR Baggs Dual Source System

(mic and saddle pickup), along with a Yamaha onboard preamp. I then add a Seymour Duncan Mag Mic and wire it to a second output, and go to a small mixer for blending. The saddle is for bite and attack, the magnetic pickup for lows and warmth, and the mic is only for percussion – I'll dial that one really low if I'm not doing anything percussive. I can also just plug into DI boxes and get a pretty fat sound, but have to rely a bit more on the sound engineer for blending. My custom guitars use the D-TAR Wavelength transducer and Mag Mic combo. If one fails, the other acts as a backup.

Do you use compression or other effects live or in the studio?

Live, I only use a bit of reverb when available. I don't use compression and need to learn more about how to make it work for me, instead of against me. I used to mess around with looping and echos in the early days, but I gave it up when I saw Phil Keaggy do amazing looping stuff 10 years ago. In the studio, it's much the same – just light reverb, though the engineer may sneak in some light compression.

What kind of fingerpicks and strings do you use?

I use Fred Kelly thumpicks and their new fingerpicks. I have a lot of issues with my nails, so these help during nail problems. I'm an endorser for the Dean Markley Alchemy Series, (.012-.054 and .013-.056). On tour, I change strings every other show, while at home maybe once a month.

What's the best thing an acoustic player can do to take care of their guitar in various conditions?

I'm the wrong guy for that question (laughs)! Seriously, I'd say get a guitar that takes a licking and keeps on ticking, like my Yamaha LLX36C. A good case from TKL or Calton will also help.

What is the mistake you see most often from fledgling fingerpickers?

The most common mistake I see is the use of techniques for the sake of the technique and not for the sake of the composition. At the end of the day, it's all about writing a great song. Then you can dress it up if needed. The new generation of players such as Andy McKee and Antoine Dufour are great examples of this. A tip would be: "Be yourself." People like honesty in performances, especially for this genre of music.

Tell us about playing harp guitars?

I also love playing harp guitar, though it's a hard beast to tame as you have to learn to mute the six sub-bass strings, which always want to ring. I have some great harp guitar mentors and friends that keep pushing me on the instrument like Stephen Bennett, John Doan, and Greg Miner. I own a custom-built Jeffrey Yong, and a Spillers. But I just got a Dyer Style 5 that sounds great – and so vintage.

– Pete Prown VG