

# Don Alder

Interviewed by Andy Hughes, photography by Kent Kallberg

We all love music. It's true to say that it's our passion, but it's nice to do something away from music - it keeps us fresh and motivated when we come back to our beloved guitars.

**D**on Alder's time away from music was used somewhat differently from the norm. He spent the time with his lifelong friend Rick Hansen, raising money for people with disabilities, after a truck crash in which they were both injured left Rick in a wheelchair. After visiting 34 countries and raising 26 million dollars, Don returned to his guitar playing, becoming what Yamaha Guitars called '...the forefront of the new fingerstyle performance.'

Backstage at the Montreal Jazz Festival, Don offers his opinion on what Yamaha are talking about. 'Well, I think that for a long time people were playing in the Chet Atkins style, that boom-chugga boom-chugga beat, and very fine stuff it is too. Then came some newer players who were using a more percussive style: they were doing pull-offs and chop rhythms and some percussion coming in, getting some new rhythms going. What I do is I play traditional style, but I use those extended techniques, so I may be playing

a very simple song but I will add some harmonics to the simple melody to musically spice it up a little. I always use the technique to enhance the composition, never putting in the technique for its own sake.'

We are talking backstage after Don's performance as part of the Montreal Jazz Festival; as one of Canada's most famous exports, Don is a welcome guest. For part of his performance this evening Don used a brand-new guitar, which has to be a brave move in front of a paying audience!

Don smiles as he recalls the experience. 'It was made for me by a guy called Bryan Galloup. I have an endorsement with Yamaha Guitars, but they are very good - they are happy for me to play other models as long as they don't directly compete with Yamaha. Did it sound good? That's great, because obviously I never know how something sounds out in the auditorium. The action was great; it did sound a little bit brittle to me through my stage monitor, but I will need to record it and listen back to get a true idea of how it is sounding. It's always a bit nerve-wracking playing a brand-new guitar untried at a concert: you wonder if everything will hold up until the end! It's really stupid - Bryan worked really hard to get the

strap knob fitted in time for the show, and I forgot to bring a spare strap with me, so I played seated!’

But, as stated, Don got through the performance with his new guitar unscathed and sounding fine. That may not seem like such a remarkable scenario, but when you watch Don play with his seriously physical attacking style, the notion of some peripheral damage does not seem so remote. So what can suffer under Don’s delicate but simultaneously relentless playing technique? ‘Strings go...guitars go!’ advises Don with a soft chuckle. ‘But I have learnt to live with those things; they go hand in hand with the style that I play. Some people criticise me and say that I make too much noise, and that I am heavy on the volume and light on the technique, but I don’t pay a lot of attention to those observations. If I go to a classical concert, then I want to see perfect technique, and that works for an audience who appreciate that, and who listen and watch in silence. The kind of gigs I was doing when I started out were coffee houses and bars, lots of people talking and clinking glasses, so I depended on getting some attention, so that noise was what got noticed, not the technique. You may have noticed that my right thumb is not as mobile as it should be; that’s a legacy from playing basketball. When you are dumping the ball in the hoop you catch your thumb constantly, so I had a virtually constant sprain in my thumb, and that means it doesn’t flex as much as it should. My picking and strumming simultaneously is the direct result of that.’

## CAREER ADVICE

Don advises that ‘less is more’ when you want to make an impression... ‘When I was young, my mom bought me a Simpson Series electric guitar. I learnt ‘Satisfaction’ on it and never really progressed much past that. I did start to play acoustic and played some electric as well. Then a band showed up at Williams Lake to make a record, and they didn’t have a guitar player so I auditioned for the gig. All the other guys were really showboating, showing what they could do, and I just turned my amp down and went along quietly, and the producer liked that approach much better, so I got studio work, and then learnt my own style, and here we are.’



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Apart from the hardware, the most immediate and obvious casualties of Don’s playing are his fingernails, and he has a tale to tell about the dangers of acrylic nails. ‘I have had real problems in the past. I was on tour in Germany and I had glued on some of those half nails that you can use, and they didn’t feel right – I was getting some pain when I was playing. When I took them off, the top half of my nail on each finger came away with the acrylic nail, right down to the nail bed. It took me about eight months to regrow my nails properly. I still don’t have strong nails even now, but I have found that you can buy the glue that magazines use to attach their cover-mount CDs with – that stuff that peels off quite easily. That works really well. I have to avoid nail glue now: it turns out I am allergic to it, and if I even breathe in the fumes I get a skin rash. While my nails were out of commission, I was scheduled to record a

DVD and I had to use metal fingerpicks, so the shop window for my playing has me using these clunky metal fingerpicks, which seems really strange.’

How does the writing process work? ‘Sometimes an idea comes quite easily, and I can work through that from start to finish with no problems. Other times I get a germ of an idea, and I know something is there that is worth pursuing, but I just can’t get to it. What I do then is sit down in front of the TV with my guitar and let my hands just strum along some familiar patterns without thinking about what I am playing, and then I stop and make my hands go into something unorthodox that feels strange, and that mechanism almost forces me into the area I am trying to get to. It’s a process I don’t really understand, but any musician will use whatever works to get to where they want to be.’

As you might expect from a musician as meticulous but spontaneous as Don Alder, he plans his musical arrangements in advance but doesn’t stick to them. ‘I always go off from them!’ Don confirms, laughing. ‘I have discovered that people appreciate the energy that you put into a performance. I think there may be the odd geek out there examining everything in minute detail, but the majority of people in an audience are on your side. If you connect with them and energise them, that will carry you through any problems you might get into...and I do, believe me!’

**Andy Hughes**

## DON’S GEAR

### WHAT’S IN YOUR GIG BAG?

#### GUITAR

Depending on the cost of travel involved, I have a minimum of two guitars, usually a hand-built Yamaha LLX36C and a Mustapick Baritone. Where I can, I bring a Greenfield G4 Don Alder Signature model and a Galloup Borealis or a Spillers Harp Guitar.

#### STRINGS

I am a Dean Markley endorsee, and I used the Alchemy Gold Phosphor series, using 12–54, 13–56, and I have access to some 60 and 66s when needed.

#### PICKUPS

I am a Seymour Duncan/D-TAR endorsee. I like to use a three-source pickup which includes backup, and I have two outputs on each guitar which feed a small mixer. I use the Wavelength saddle pickup from D-TAR. It’s an 18-volt system with killer sound. To add warmth to the bottom-end sound I use a Mag Mic pickup, which is a magnetic soundhole pickup with a small mic built in. The Yamaha has a dual source built in, so the Mag Mic fattens the bottom end and acts as a backup. Yamaha have some very cool developments in the works, which I’d love to chat about, but it’s all top secret, of course!

#### MICS

As well as the mics I have mentioned, I usually use a Neumann U87 around the body area, and a pencil condenser at around the 12th fret. We blend everything from the pickups and pan the 80% left and right and put the pickup sound in the middle of the mix.

#### AMPLIFICATION

I’ve tried many of the portable acoustic amps and have concluded that I am just too aggressive for them! They all seem to break, or have some built-in compression that kicks in. I prefer to use stage monitors with 15” speakers whenever possible.

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**ACOUSTIC.**  
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### David Gray

Although no one – least of all the man himself – expected it, David Gray is now the UK's most successful acoustic singer-songwriter. He reveals the secret of his success

### Turin Brakes

Britain's finest acoustic duo Turin Brakes are celebrating a decade in business this year. Joel McIver asks them how they did it.

### Don Alder

After a lengthy break from playing, to raise money for charity, Don Alder has come back stronger than ever.

### Steve James

Latter-day Texas troubadour and slide guitar wizard Steve James goes down South with Julian Piper.

### Sam Lakeman

Married to Cara Dillon, and with an unfairly musical family, Sam Lakeman talks about keeping it in the family.

### UK Luthier - Richard Osborne

Russell Welton visits Lewes, home of American founding-father Thomas Paine, and also luthier Richard Osborne

### UK Luthier - Ken Powell SF Mandola

High-tension strings like a mandolin, but covering the same tonal range as a guitar; is Powell's octave mandola the best of both worlds?

### Joe Bonamassa

Talks all Acoustic!