

Guitar Player



PETER PARCEK

BY BARRY CLEVELAND

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARGARET LAMBERT

BOSTON-BASED PETER PARCEK WAS A VIETNAM-ERA DRAFT DODGER WHO FLED TO LONDON when he was 17. Though his parents were both in the service, the young conscientious objector's mother arranged refuge for him across the Pond—right at the height of the British blues boom. Parcek was singing and playing harmonica at the time, but he had many opportunities to see Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Peter Green, and other greats up close, and Green in particular inspired him to take up the guitar. "Peter Green was a foundational artist to me because of his ability to play, sing, and lead a band with an authenticity that wasn't borrowed," says Parcek. "Some folks kind of take on other's personas, but he connected with something really deep and presented it."

Parcek was forced to return to the U.S. after being busted for playing in a club without a permit, but fortunately problems with his feet resulted in his receiving a 4-F military deferment. "At that point

I more or less locked myself in a room and really learned to play guitar," he says. "I was also fortunate enough to see and even meet great American blues artists such as Albert Collins, Freddie King,

James Cotton, Skip James, and Buddy Guy during that time." (Guy told him he was "as bad as Eric Clapton.") More recently, he has immersed himself in the music of Django Reinhardt.

Traces of all those players and more are detectable in Parcek's deeply informed playing—but the *killer* tones, idiosyncratic phrasing, deft slide work, and truly psychotropic effects showcased on his latest album, *The Mathematics of Love* [Redstar], bear witness to the guitarist's *own* inner authenticity.

Is it fair to say that you have an encyclopedic knowledge of the blues?

I've studied a huge range of blues performers, from way back to current players such as Joe Bonamassa, who I think is just incredible. The first things I tried to play were by Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, because those were the first two records I got. The Wolf record—which mostly featured Willie Johnson, but probably also some Hubert Sumlin—made the hairs on my arms stand up. And Muddy's "Still a Fool" made me cry. Then later came B.B. King with the beauty and precision of his vibrato, T-Bone, Clapton, Buchanan, on and on. Peter Green was particularly inspiring in that he transcended all ethnic and other boundaries and proved that if you feel it in your soul you can *do* it.

Didn't you actually get to play with Hubert Sumlin?

Yes. My friend David Herwaldt had a blues show on WGBH in Boston and he introduced us. Hubert asked me to jam with him on some acoustic guitars that were there in the studio, and that's when I realized that he has an extra digit on every one of his fingers. They were *much* bigger than mine, and his vibrato on an acoustic was like mine on an electric! We got on well and I played a gig with him a day or so later.

More recently you've been getting deeply into Django Reinhardt. In what ways has that affected your playing?

Trying to learn some of Django's songs has improved my musicianship tremendously. The music is beautiful, but also very virtuosic in a way that is quite daunting and humbling, particularly considering that I am self-taught. I've gone to the Gypsy jazz festival in Samois-Sur-Seine a couple of times, and taken some lessons from a teacher in France. There's an emotion in the music that parallels that of the blues, in that it is very deep, with a melancholy aspect, particularly in some of the ballads. There's also string-bending and vibrato.

Have you gotten into the complex picking patterns?

Yes, some of that, as well as the voicings. There are some great materials available now, such as the Stochelo Rosenberg video set. Just to be able to see him play up close—it is truly jaw-dropping stuff. The main point for me is that music is an infinite search. I want to constantly keep pushing the limits of what I'm capable of. Django's music has really inspired me in that way.

There's some inspired music and playing on *The Mathematics of Love*.

Thanks. I had a lot of help making that record. Besides all the fantastic musicians, including Jimmy Ryan and Al Kooper, I worked with a great production team. Ted Drozdowski, the producer, is also a really good slide player, and the engineer, Ducky Carlisle, plays guitar too. They helped me go from more traditional stuff to music that was pretty far out. I made a record in 2000 [*Evolution*], but it was too carefully executed and clean. I wanted this one to have more rawness, like you get at a live show.

How did you get the really fat and nasty rhythm tone on the opening tune, Peter Green's "Showbiz Blues"?

Other than the vocal and the bass

in the solo sections, that track is just [drummer] Steve Scully and myself playing live, so we knew it had to be *huge*, with a lot of low end. Ducky suggested a combination of two amps, so we used a Supro Thunderbolt to get that filthy and sort of floppy bass, and a brown Fender Deluxe for a tighter and more singing sound. The guitar was my single-pickup '50s Harmony Stratotone, which has amazing tone. The action is too high for regular playing, but as a slide guitar it is unstoppable. It sounds good plugged into almost anything, but in that case we wound both amps up to their limits to get what you might call cinematic filth.

There's some great layering on the title track. Describe what's going on.

On that song I wanted something haunting and ambient in terms of the guitar voicings. I used a National Tri-cone reissue for the more linear parts, layered with a Fender 50th Anniversary Stratocaster played through a Fender Vibro-King miked from a distance and a Fender '63 Vibroverb reissue miked up close. That Strat has a really good whammy bar, which I used judiciously while playing chords with lots of open strings to get a more spacious sound. I got the idea for the big fuzz bass sound from listening to a Neville Brothers record produced by Daniel Lanois. We added that filth to the bass and included lots of room sound on the drums to contrast with the winsome voice of the National and the haunting quality of the Strat chords.

How did you create the ambient sound collage on "Tears Like Diamonds"?

That was done with a Danelectro U2 reissue in an open tuning, addressed with different implements, often behind the nut. We recorded individual tracks

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using things like screwdrivers, a blender, and a nail. We just layered a bunch of sounds together and accentuated the ones that seemed to work best harmonically, then used that collage at various points in the song.

Did you use any other recording techniques not commonly employed on blues records?

We used an Eventide Harmonizer to emphasize the lows at the end of "Rollin' With

Zah," which created a very cool texture. And on "Busted" we used a number of reversed sounds. The backwards guitar parts were played in real time through Ted's DigiTech XP200 Modulator, but we also sampled Al Kooper's organ and reversed and delayed it to create huge psychedelic washes of sound.

You have more than 20 guitars and lots of amps. Are any of them staples that you gig with regularly?

I'm a hopeless Fender Telecaster and Stratocaster guy. By that I mean that I want pretty much every one that I see. And I want a Jazzmaster now. That doesn't mean I don't love Les Pauls, Hamers, and other guitars, I do—but I'm just drawn to the 25½" scale length. There are harmonics that come off it, for example, that don't seem to be quite as present with shorter scale lengths. And the Fender bodies are comfortable.

I just got an LSL T-Bone that I'm really enjoying, but my staples are an Anderson Hollow T, a Fender Custom Shop Tele Jr., and the 50th Anniversary Strat. As for amps, if I'm in a Deluxe mood I'll typically choose either my Collins Peter Parcek Signature Tweed Tone 8 or my Tungston Crema Wheat, but I also love my Top Hat Club Royale, my Dr. Z Carmen Ghia, and my Swart Atomic Space Tone.

What strings and picks do you prefer?

I mostly use Ernie Ball, D'Addario, or GHS .009 sets.

I have a bunch of different picks that I bring to sessions, because for certain things you want a really soft voice and for others you want different textures. But since I've been trying to learn Django's music, I've had to get some Gypsy picks, which are very different, and when I play my own gigs I tend to use them. I have several thicknesses of Wegen picks, most of which are much thicker than conventional picks, but I've ordered some 1.8mm Wegen Big City models, because if you play electric using a lot of overdrive with the thick ones, there tends to be some harmonic content—sort of a "ping"—and you don't always want that.

How about slides?

I have some really exotic slides, but right now I'm just using heavy glass Dunlops. I really like the texture of glass, and how it works for vibrato. I'm just trying to channel Robert Nighthawk and Fred McDowell. That's the stuff that really, really nails me.

Anything else?

Yes. I'm truly self-taught, and back when I was just starting out, *Guitar Player* is what helped me. There was a column by Jerry Hahn, which I found quite helpful—to the point where I cut them all out and kept them. That's where I learned about scale forms and positions, and lots of other important things, so I have a lot to thank the magazine for. I very much believe in *Guitar Player*, and what it does for all of us who are trying to play. 🎸