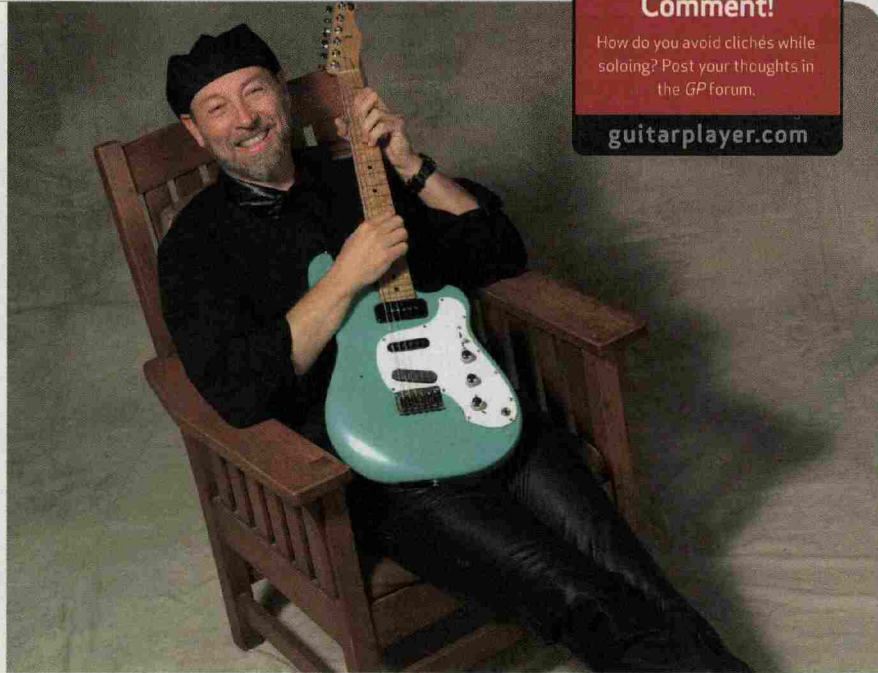


Richard Thompson



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How do you avoid clichés while soloing? Post your thoughts in the GP forum.

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BY ANIL PRASAD

RICHARD THOMPSON IS THE CONSUMMATE musician. His searing, soaring electric guitar work and intricate acoustic hybrid picking is the stuff of legend, and has firmly established him as one of the most versatile players to ever emerge from Britain. His output as a singer-songwriter is no less impressive, with an enormous body of work spanning more than 40 years and 400 songs, encompassing rock, folk-rock, traditional folk, jazz, rockabilly, and soundtrack contributions.

A new comprehensive four-CD box set, *Walking On A Wire: Richard Thompson (1968-2009)* [Shout! Factory], captures highlights from throughout his career, including tunes from his tenure as a founding member of seminal British folk-rock pioneers Fairport Convention, his duo albums with ex-wife Linda Thompson, and 20 of his wide-ranging solo discs.

Another recent release bearing his name is the Lowden F-35C RT Richard Thompson Signature Model guitar. Currently his acoustic of choice, it features Ziricote back and sides with matching Ziricote veneer on the back and front of the headstock, a cedar top, a rosewood bridge, and a five-piece mahogany/rosewood/walnut neck.

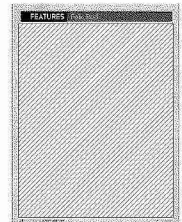
Aspiring mock guitarists can also get a taste

of being in Thompson's shoes via the popular *Rock Band 2* video game. "The Way That It Shows" from 1994's *Mirror Blue* is now available as a downloadable track that lets gamers play the song's riveting solo on the optional hardware guitar controller.

Thompson is currently working on material for an electric band album. He also hopes to mount several performances of his new 30-part song cycle, *Cabaret of Souls*. The ambitious work features five singers, a string orchestra, double bass, guitar, and drums. It focuses on a talent contest in hell, in which the keepers of the underworld are bored and frustrated with humanity. To entertain themselves, they drag souls out of the darkness and have them sing about their former lives.

Is there a song on the box set you'd point to as representing an ideal balance of song and guitar craft?

In general, the performances I like most are the ones in which the guitar is really playing around the structure of a song. A song like "Did She Jump or Was She Pushed?" originally from 1982's *Shoot Out The Lights*, is a good example of the guitar being part of the furniture, but in a way I really like. Ideally, when the singer is singing, the guitar is answering or playing something that fits the rest of the arrangement, along with the bass



and drums. The guitar should provide some interesting musical development from verse to verse. I like to harmonically tease things along so I'm almost evolving the narrative along with the singer. In a way, I'm telling an instrumental story against the vocal story. And when it comes to a solo, I like stepping out a little bit, but not that far, so I'm still in narrative, storytelling mode.

You believe successfully creating a solo with any complexity requires players to do some homework. Elaborate on that idea.

The homework is you have to work out the components of what you're going to play. When you create a solo, you're usually playing bits and pieces of things you already know and the challenge is to reassemble them into something new. You have these clichés that might be your clichés or based on someone else's clichés. They might also be a general part of the guitar playing vocabulary. The other side is when you start to flow as a soloist—sometimes your imagination will rearrange these little pieces into a new structure and build something unpredictable on top of that. In the best case, when your imagination is really taking flight, it's as if the solo is playing you, and you're being taken on a journey. For me, the best feeling in music is when you're truly improvising and don't know where you're going, but you know you're going to arrive at an interesting place. It's really exciting. At the end of it, you think, "Wow, that's amazing. How did I play that?"

What makes Lowden guitars your favorite acoustic instruments?

I have a few Lowdens, but I think my F-35C-RT signature model is exceptionally good. It sounds great because it's loud, punchy, and sweet at the same time. Every note projects really well and has a unique impact. The guitar also has an even balance between bass and treble, and a very even response throughout the fretboard. I use a walnut and cedar Lowden L32C onstage, which is basically the same model. The Lowdens also work well with my pickup configuration. For the L32C, I use a Sunrise magnetic soundhole pickup and a Countryman Isomax condenser mic inside the soundhole.

You've said you're a "rock and roll acoustic guitar player" at heart. How does your Lowden setup enable you to express that?

The Lowdens let you do most things well, rock or otherwise, but I think the pickup configuration contributes to the acoustic-rock sensibility even more than the guitar. The

Sunrise gives you a lot of level. You can really crank those things without getting feedback—which is important because I like to play fairly loudly onstage and have the monitors very loud, as well. I'm not working with polite acoustic-guitar levels.

Describe your acoustic signal path.

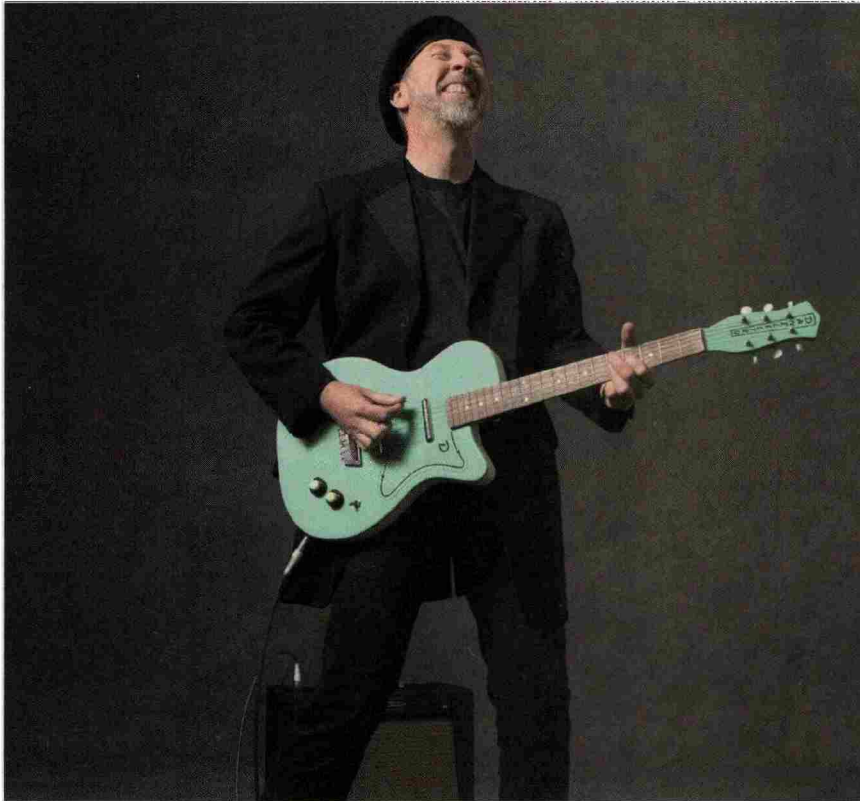
I use a Ridge Farm Industries Gas Cooker preamp that warms up the sound considerably—which is important because the Sunrise pickup can sometimes sound cold and slightly metallic. The internal condenser mic also puts a lot more air around the sound. Next, I've got a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler that I mostly use to create treatments similar to old tape-echo sounds with warm repeats, and I use a Fulltone Deja'Vibe on a few things because I like the way it sounds with acoustic guitar.

Your sunburst '59 Fender Stratocaster with a '55 maple neck, and a custom Ferrington are your favorite electric guitars. Why do you find the Strat universe so appealing?

My '59 Strat doesn't play live very much these days because it's in need of serious work, so I use the Ferrington, which has an extra-wide maple neck, as my main onstage electric instrument. The reason I first got into Strats was because guitar players I admired when I was younger played them. I was a big Buddy Holly fan, and also a fan of Hank Marvin of the Shadows, both of whom were glorious Strat players. I was also into James Burton, and although he played a Telecaster, he put me into that Fender frame of mind. Another reason I like them is because single-coil pickups provide a sound closest to the one I hear in my head. Strats have a slightly edgier and topplier sound, which I find imitates a human voice well, making them more expressive instruments than most other guitars. They also add a kind of weight to each note, making the notes count more. You can point to musicians like Charlie Christian and Louis Armstrong and say with certainty that every note they played was absolutely essential, and I think single-coil pickups help me make each note important.

The Ferrington has separate volume controls for each of its three pickups. What flexibility does that give you?

The individual volume controls let me combine the pickups—a P-90 in the neck, an alnico Strat in the middle, and an old Broadcaster in the bridge—any way I want, which is great because it allows me to create an infinite variety of tones. The sounds are less spiky and in-your-face than those you get



with the volume turned all the way up, which means I can get subtler rhythm tones, and tones that blend in well with other instruments more easily. Setting the guitar up that way was an experiment. We went through a bunch of pickups until we came up with something that sounded really good. Also, the pickups are all glued on, not screwed on, which gives them more sustain. And the guitar has less circuitry in it than most, which makes the tone a little purer than that of other instruments.

What setup do you typically run your electrics through?

For amps, I use a Divided by 13 FTR 37 head and a Divided by 13 2x12 cabinet. As for my pedalboard, it's pretty standard stuff. There's a Divided by 13 Switchazel switcher/booster, a Sweet Sound Mojo Vibe set to vibe mode, a Fulltone Supa-Trem tremolo, a Carl Martin Red Repeat delay, a Barber LTD overdrive, and an Ernie Ball volume pedal. I also like using the Fulltone Deja'Vibe in my electric rig. It provides a real fullness, and it expands the lows and highs of what is mostly a mid-range instrument. It's also nice to have a bit of wobble. I've always liked a bit of wobble on everything I do.

You frequently play in alternate tunings such as C, G, D, G, B, E and DADGAD. What draws you to them?

They give you more notes ringing over your playing, which create a fuller and more orchestral-like range of sounds. Modal tunings such as C, G, D, G, B, E, low-to-high, also extend the possibilities of the guitar by giving you a richer bass sound, and making it almost like having three keys available at once with just a very slight adjustment of your fingers. Any modal tuning offers a slightly elusive quality that blurs the edges of the key you're playing in. They really add a haunting quality to British traditional music, which is often performed unaccompanied. When you first investigate a traditional song, it's not always clear what tuning you should use. Your mind might conjure up a harmony that fits around a naked tune, but it's unclear what the key should be. A modal tuning makes it possible to keep that elusive nature, and retain a pleasing ambiguity. There's nothing worse than a folk song that is locked down into a very European musical tradition focusing on A, D, and E, with all of the harmony filled out. That stifles the song. I like to use open tunings to keep the modal quality and mystery alive. 📖