

LAURENCE JUBER'S STRING THEORY

BY MATT BLACKETT

It's pretty amazing when being in a band with a Beatle isn't your biggest claim to fame, but for Laurence Juber, that might just be true. Not that his stint in Wings with Sir Paul McCartney doesn't loom large on his résumé—how could it not? But Juber has also done high-level session work (both before and after Wings), tons of TV dates, movie soundtracks (*The Spy Who Loved Me* anyone?), worked as guitarist and producer for Al Stewart, and won a couple of Grammys. It's his work as a solo fingerstyle acoustic player, however, that will undoubtedly prove to be Juber's greatest accomplishment. From his first solo album, *Standard Time*, in 1982 to this year's *Fingerboard Road*, he has firmly established himself as a world-class guitarist who fearlessly tackles classic songs like "Let It Be" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and has the guts to place his own compositions right next to them. And whether it's a timeless standard or a brand new tune, Juber brings the same attention to detail, the same touch, tone, and nuance that have defined his style. And he does it with a dizzying array of multiple parts going on: Chords, melody, bass, lead fills, and percussive elements all happen simultaneously—woven into an astounding arrangement that seems almost impossible until you see him pull it off live. Then it seems *totally* impossible.

Fingerboard Road not only documents the evolution of Juber's musical and interpretative style, it also marks a big change in his technical journey, as it is the first album where this longtime Martin guitar player has exclusively used Martin guitar strings. After trying the Martin Retro™ Monel strings, Juber worked with Martin to create a custom set to suit his unique musical needs: **Martin Retro™ LJ's Choice**. It's interesting how this state-of-the-art acoustic artist found new inspiration in Monel, an almost-forgotten musical metal of the early 20th century. He spoke about the process, the results, and why he never stops listening to and searching for the sound in his head.

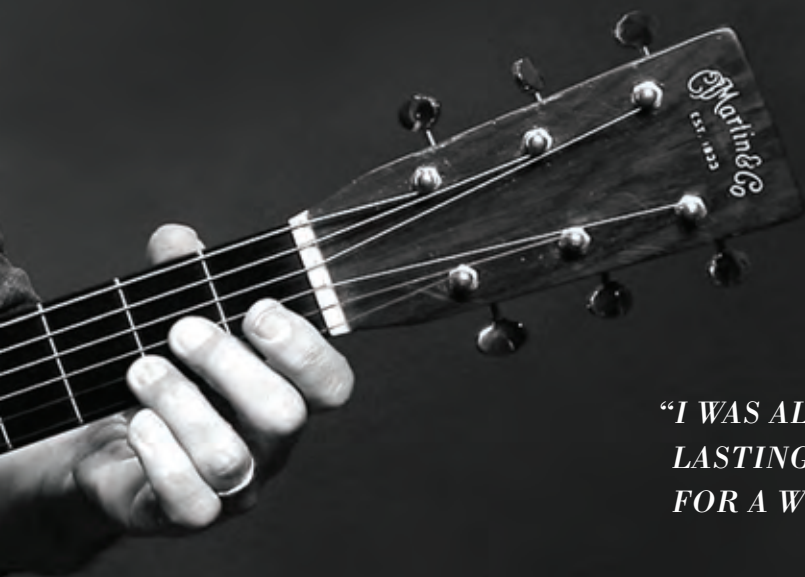




You have your style and sound pretty well-established. Why change your strings at this point in your career? Well, I'm constantly examining things. For example, even though I have my stage rig kind of set, I'll always take some time in the woodshed to double-check it, and if some new piece of gear comes along, I'll give that a go too, just to make sure I'm not missing anything. I'm kind of a relentless experimenter. To be honest, though, I really had no intention of changing guitar strings. Guitar strings are like razor blades. You find something that works for you and you stick with it. I had been given a couple sets of the Martin Retro™ Tony Rice Monel strings, and initially I didn't get it. The gauging was wrong for me. But because I tend to be kind of persistent if I think there may be something to be learned, I started a dialogue with the string department at Martin about getting some gauging that would suit me. As I got familiar with the strings, I started to realize that they were actually occupying a different sonic space. Once I got gauges that I was comfortable with, I found I was really enjoying the sound that I was getting out of these strings.

And that's when you made the switch? My criterion is, if I'm going to use something, I really have to use it. It took well over a year for me to truly commit, but when I did, I said, "Okay, I get it—this is working for me." I was doing some recording with regular phosphor bronze and then with the Monel strings, and I found that I was starting to like the sound better. I was also very happy to find that they were lasting longer. In fact, after they had been on for a while, I liked the tone even more.

You said that these Retro strings occupy a different sonic space. Describe what you mean by that. For me, it's really about the stronger fundamental that I hear with these strings. There's less harmonic activity, so you don't get the same kind of sizzle that you get from a phosphor bronze. When the strings go on, you might find that they're actually a little bright, but they tone down quickly and become really warm with a very robust note. And because of the way that I express myself musically—there's a lot of counterpoint, a lot of inner voices—I felt that having that strong fundamental tone was making a difference.



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How did you settle on the gauges, and what are the advantages for you? My set is .013, .017, .024, .032, .042, .056. They're basically the same gauges I had been using in phosphor bronze. The advantage has to do with the fact that I tune in DADGAD a lot—it's become a second guitaristic home to me—and because the top two strings and the bottom string are tuned down a whole-step, having a slightly fatter string in those gauges gives me a more evenly balanced tension across all the strings. Going to standard tuning, there's a little bit more meat, and you especially notice it on the upper strings, because .013 is a medium gauge, as is a .017.

You'll also play in C, G, D, G, A, D, dropping the low strings even further. Yes. It's really about keeping the integrity of the tone, and the .056 on the bottom does give me a nice, strong low C. That's the same note as the low string on a cello. And having the .042 on the fifth string works fine to drop down to a G. I could go bigger than a .056 on the bottom, but it's nice to be able to go from lowered tunings back to standard tuning and still be able to do string bends and stuff like that.

Your latest record has a fair amount of string bending on it. Yes it does, and I find these strings very articulate and very responsive to that kind of playing. They also seem to hold the tuning very well. They can take a pretty aggressive attack and stay in tune. That's helpful because I find that the older I get, the more sensitive I become to pitch issues.

What other facets of string construction did you talk about? Part of the experimentation was playing with the core of the strings, especially the G string. We made the G string with a .014 core, where ordinarily they would use a .013. But I found that I needed just a little bit more articulation out of it—a cleaner articulation—and that slightly larger core did the job. The ratio between the core and the wrap is important. Some strings have a thinner core and more wrap, and others have a fatter core and less wrap. I seem to prefer a string with a slightly bigger core in general. I'm not really sure about the physics of it, other than the fact that it seems to give me the sound and the feel I'm looking for. Maybe that makes a difference in the bendability of the string, but I can't say for sure. You get to a point where it's hard to quantify exactly, but I do find that the bigger core seems to help.

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It’s inspiring to see how you’re still searching, listening, and refining, and these strings seem to be indicative of that.

I look at these things as incremental shifts. I don’t have the expectation of quantum shifts in my self-expression. I always teach people that you don’t experience a lot of huge improvements. You make subtle improvements, and then one day you realize that you’re at another level. I think these strings did that for me. They liberated something. I found I could express myself a little more succinctly because of that tonality. That’s why I see them as a game-changer. Guitars themselves are almost erotic in their appeal. There’s just something very sexy about them, and there always has been. Strings, on the other hand, are decidedly unsexy. You don’t have the same relationship with them as you do with instruments, and yet they’re the interface. They’re the tactile part of it. The first level is the vibration of the string itself. That’s why this experience has been something of a revelation for me, because it made me realize that there’s another dimension there. And the fact that that dimension harkens back to a previous era sits very comfortably with me. I feel that what they’ve done with these Retro strings is exactly what I look to in my Martin guitars: 180 years of tradition, but brought into the modern era. That, for me, is just a great space in which to make music.



Laurence Juber | *Fingerboard Road*
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