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BY JIMMY LESLIE

"I LIKE TO THROW MYSELF INTO DO OR DIE situations," exclaims Pete Huttlinger. His fearless attitude and fleet fingers have helped him conquer multiple fretted instruments, earn a degree from the Berklee College of Music, win the 2000 National Fingerstyle Championship,

and land gigs with John Denver and LeAnn Rimes. His fifth solo CD, *Fingerpicking Wonder: The Music of Stevie Wonder* [Instar], comprises ten solo performances essentially captured live in Huttlinger's home studio. What at first may appear to be a choice of safe material—and at least potentially an exercise in easy listening—turns out to be a daring adventure in

Huttlinger's hands. Sure, his readings of "My Cherie Amour," and "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" reflect an inherent schmaltz factor, but Huttlinger dazzles on funk juggernauts such as "Superstition" and "Living for the City," tackling multiple parts simultaneously. The album's coup de grâce is "I Wish," on which Huttlinger distills nearly the entire original arrangement into an electrifying solo acoustic guitar presentation.

Did you start out as a banjo player?

I did. That's where the thumbpick comes from, and that's why I started fingerpicking. It naturally carried over to the guitar. Also, my older brother made me take classical guitar lessons by threatening to kick my ass if I didn't, and I took him at his word.

You play everything from country to Brazilian jazz in settings ranging from solo to orchestral. How do you vary your picking approach to suit the situation?

It depends on the instrument, and the style of the song. I use a thumbpick for my solo stuff because I like the balance between it and my fingernails. National's medium thumbpicks sound great, but they loosen up as soon as they get warm, so I Krazy Glue fine sandpaper to the inside for a better grip. I'll go to a flatpick for bluegrass, Celtic, country, or when I'm accompanying a singer. On duo gigs with LeAnn Rimes, I go back and forth. The flatpick delivers a broader dynamic range, and it's great for strumming.

Describe John Denver's guitar playing, and what it was like to play with him.

He was great at accompanying his own voice. He didn't do anything too technically involved, but he worked just the right harmony and counterpoint lines into his arrangements. And his solid rhythm playing allowed the band a lot of leeway to flesh out the songs however we saw fit. I came in playing mostly electric guitar, and branched out to play acoustic, mandolin, and other things. He was okay with whatever I wanted to do, and that kind of freedom for sidemen is unheard of at that level.

How did you choose which Wonder tunes to record for your new CD, and what did you hope to bring to such a well-known batch of songs?

I wanted to try a different approach to the tunes I grew up with and still love. The only one I wasn't already familiar with was "Lately," which I'd learned for LeAnn Rimes. I wound up digging it so much that I decided to cut my own version. For all the acrobatics on the other tracks, "Lately" is my favorite because of the gorgeous, powerful melody and the surprising minor chord progression in the chorus. The songwriting is just outstanding.

How did you decide which tuning to go with on "Living for the City?"

"Living for the City" wasn't sitting well in the original key of F#. It was either too low or too high, and I was trying to find somewhere in the middle. I don't usually use a lot of open tunings, but I tried several in this case before landing in open D [D, A, D, F#, A, D, low to high]. The introduction came alive immediately, and I figured the rest of the tune out from there.

You cover lots of parts—from bass to horns—on "Superstition" and "I Wish." Can you detail how you tackle such involved arrangements?

The melody has to be there, obviously, and if there is a great bass line I want to figure out a way to play it simultaneously, so I'll write out both, and put the chord names above. I start slowly, and work on a meas-

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ure or two at a time. I try to picture the guitar neck, and understand what needs to happen where. When one section is comfortable, and that picture is engrained, I move on. It's a slow process, but once I've got it—I've got it. From there, I decide which other parts are most important, and how I can make them fit. For example, during the "I Wish" intro, I wanted to nail the funky electric guitar part that is often missing from cover versions. Those few bars are the most difficult part of the tune for me physically.

According to the liner notes, you played four different Collings guitars on the recordings. How did you choose between them?

I used a D1A on "I Wish," "Living for the City," and "Superstition," because I wanted the big, bold sound of a dreadnought. I also used heavier strings than normal. I usually use a light Elixir phosphor bronze set on my OMs, and for the dreadnoughts I replace the top two strings with a .013 and a .017. That gives me a little more power, but no added string buzz. For these tunes I used a complete medium set because I tuned the entire guitar down a half-step to match the original recordings, and I hate the sound of floppy strings. On the other tunes, I just lined up three Collings OMs. I'd try a tune on one, and if it didn't hit me just right, I'd try another. My main live guitar is an OM1 cut-away with a Fishman Ellipse Blend pickup system that I run through an AER Compact 60 amp.

What's your recording setup?

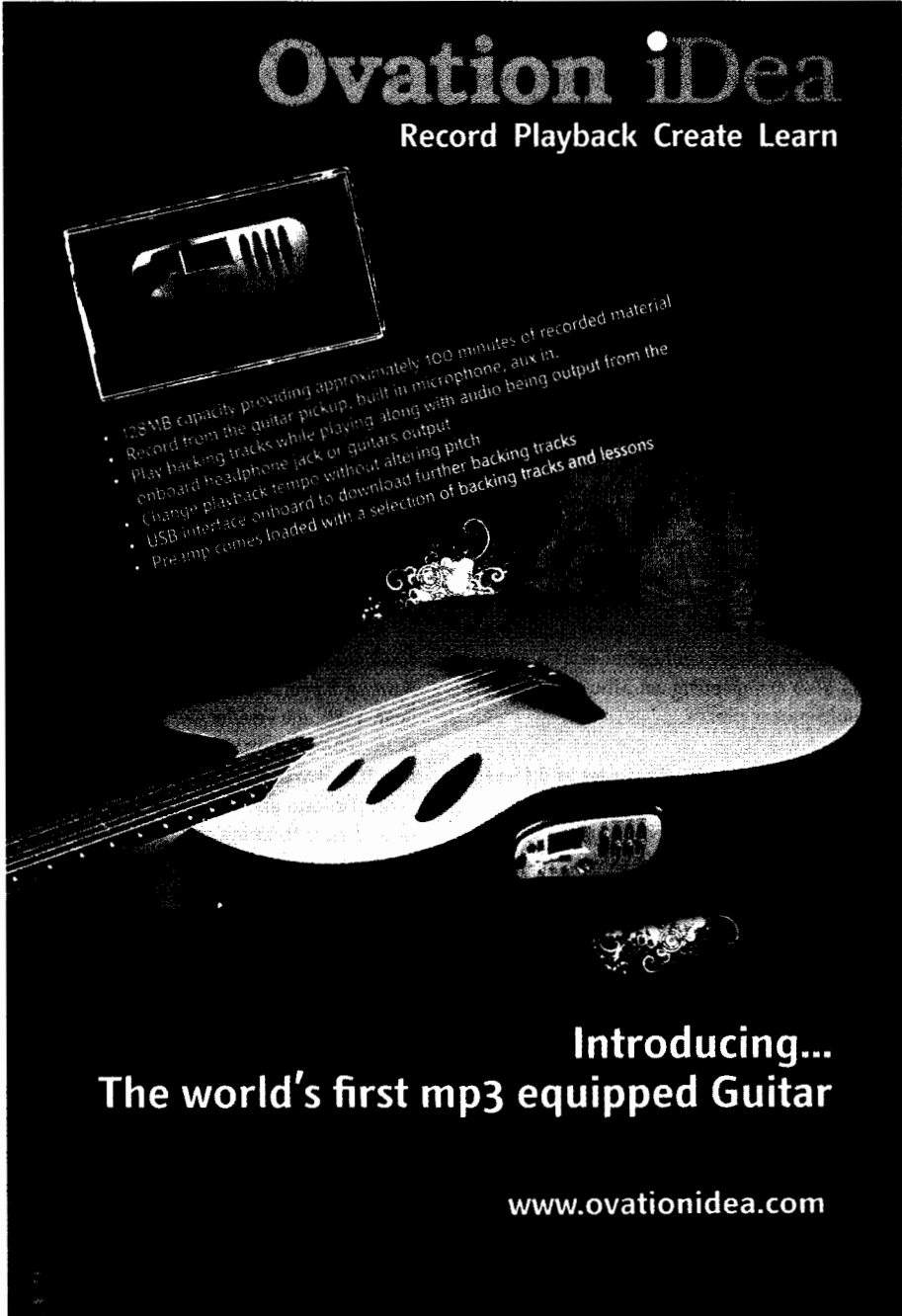
I use DigiDesign's Pro Tools LE via a Digi 002 Rack that I've actually had modified since I cut the CD. Black Lion Audio in Chicago put in better converters and upgraded the word clock synchronization. Now the high end is more open, and there's that transparency you get with higher-grade equipment. They also put in better mic preamps, but I use Vintech outboard mic preamps anyway. I capture the full range of the guitar by using either a pair of Neumann KM 54s or KM 84s. I place one slightly outside my left knee, pointing up towards where the neck and body meet. I place the other one high over my right hand, pointing above the soundhole between it and the bridge. Both mics are around six to eight inches from the guitar.

Other than a couple of obvious overdubs, these sound like live solo performances. How did you capture the best ones?

I used a click on everything except "Lately," which I wanted to feel a little freer. I actually looped the drum intro from the

original "Superstition" recording as a click track for that cut, figuring you can't do any better than Stevie's playing. I'd punch in to fix little mistakes here and there, but I'm not the kind of player who likes to edit takes together because you lose the feel, and it's just not honest. I'm really only good for four or five takes, and if I can't pull a song off within that time—I go practice. ■

"I wanted to try a different approach to the tunes I grew up with and still love."



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