

ADRIAN LEGG

Bio

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England's *Guitar* magazine observes how Adrian Legg is "impossible to categorize as a player." True indeed. And that's largely because he defies easy categorization as a person.

Renowned and awarded for his unique amalgamation of acoustic and electric guitar and how he blends diverse musical styles and inspirations into a distinctive sound all his own, Legg has been hailed as "one of the wizards" of the guitar (*Philadelphia Enquirer*), "an adventurer" (*Newsday*) and "a genius" (*Los Angeles Reader*). In addition to his distinguished career as a live performer, recording artist and composer, he is an innovator in guitar design and amplification technology, an instructor, photographer, writer and author, witty and engaging between song onstage raconteur, and an at large commentator for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," among other gifts, pursuits and interests. Hence it's no wonder that *What's Up* magazine hails London-born Legg as "the greatest British import since Newcastle Brown Ale."

The best way to come to understand the fullness of Adrian Legg's talent is, in the end, to simply listen. And there's no better place to begin to know his work or hear it again yet anew than his 10th U.S. album release, *Slow Guitar*, on which he revisits 13 of his songs that are cherished by his fans and followers. "The ones that get requested the most are the slow ones," he explains. "Now and again people ask for the fast ones. But the ones they related to were the slow ones, and that was wonderful. To make something that is musically meaningful to somebody else is really quite special.

"And eventually I thought, well, I should put them all together and re-record them, because I think about them differently now," says Legg. "What happens is that you come out with a new tune and you play it to people, and after you've played it to a lot of different people, if they like it, it has another kind of dimension to it. It has all those people in it as well. It's not just you in it anymore; it's something that's shared. It's quite stronger than it was."

With nine studio tracks and four live recordings, *Slow Guitar* finds Legg at his best and most touching. A listen to five numbers from his first U.S. album release, *Guitars & Other Cathedrals* — "A Waltz For Derroll," "Tracy's Big Moment," "Karen," "The Irish Girl" and "Midwest Sunday" — vividly demonstrates how Legg's compositions have continued to live, breathe, grow and deepen over the last two decades, as also does his third (and now live) recording of the resonant "Nail Talk." And even though the tempos on the album may all be slow, Legg reveals a spectrum of moods and modes within that realm: the graceful languidness of "Mrs. Crow's Blue Waltz," the gently rolling classicism of "Anu," the mysterious air within "L'Amour Manque," the cascading notes of "Mrs. Jack's Last Stand," the folk music echoes of "A Waltz for Leah," the orchestral resonance of "Emneth" and the picturesque "Pieta." Yes, it may be *Slow Guitar*. But the music on the album is thrilling, engaging, emotionally compelling and evocative.

"I'm a collision between European classicism and the American guitar," is how Legg encapsulates his music. "I make up tunes and play them on the guitar. On a good day people give me money for it. That's it: the beginning and end there, and all that's in between." Well, yes, but then again not quite all.

In doing so, he has won numerous awards and accolades. The readers of the U.K.'s *Guitarist* magazine voted him Acoustic Guitarist of the Decade (1984-94), and in *Guitar Player's* readers' poll he was named Best Acoustic Fingerstylist for four years running (1993-96). Music critics reach for the thesaurus to try to describe him. "A guitarist of astonishing virtuosity, his imagination and melodic invention seem unbounded," raves *Q* magazine. "To say that Legg plays a good guitar is like saying Menuhin saws a fine fiddle," notes *Music Week*. "This man is ridiculously talented." Guitar icon Joe Satriani calls him as "simply the best acoustic guitar player I've ever heard."

If anything among many things, Legg personifies the notion that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Born in 1948 in a Salvation Army hospital in the London neighborhood of Hackney, his family background melds entrepreneurial urban East End immigrant Huguenot and Jewish roots with East Anglian farming stock. Music was an integral part of his home life growing up: His father was a pianist and organist who led a church choir and an amateur choral society, and his mother a singer who also played piano.

Naturally, young Adrian became a choirboy and was tutored in piano and violin before finally settling in as an oboist in both his school and local youth orchestras. But the music that captured his imagination was the sound of such electric guitar-led instrumental groups as The Ventures and The Shadows beaming in from Radio Luxembourg that he listened to while buried under his bedcovers. With the concentration at home on classical and “proper” music, and rock and pop guitar considered less than respectful, he nonetheless cobbled together his own jury-rigged guitars — “or rather odd stringed instruments that at least could execute an acceptable twang,” as he recalls them — using scraps from his school woodworking class, fret wire, and junk metal bits retrieved from the local bus depot.

While away at boarding school in his teen years, Legg finally obtained his first guitar (that he describes as “a dog”) from a mail order catalog and started teaching himself to play from a Shadows songbook. After leaving school he worked various odd and menial jobs in London and then Liverpool, where he was invited to play electric guitar in a working country band.

The experience was pivotal in his development as a player, largely through hearing various instrumental techniques second and third hand and adapting them to his own approach. “I learned guitar by stealing licks from local players, getting them wrong, and having the results stolen by other players who then got them wrong again,” he explains. “Consequently, through our failures, we each developed a distinct and recognizable musical character.” The sounds of the pedal steel guitar and banjo also stoked his ambitions for what might be played on the six strings of a guitar.

Following another stint in an Irish show band based in Dublin, Legg moved back to London and continued to gig in bands that played clubs and pubs and toured around and outside Britain. When one bandleader asked him to play acoustic guitar chords up against a microphone, he became fascinated with the notion of blending the tonality of an acoustic with the amplified power of the electric guitar.

Thus began an electro-acoustic quest that continues today to find the holy guitar grail that melds tone, technique and technology to allow him to create, perform and record the music his imagination envisions, eventually incorporating synthesizers and computerized MIDI programming to augment and enrich his one-man musicality. “I wanted something that had the harmonic content roughly like an acoustic, and that had the flexibility in terms of stringing and volume levels, whatever you wanted to do, of an electric,” he explains.

Starting to gig as a solo artist in the mid 1970s, Legg won a *Guitar* magazine solo acoustic competition in both the composition and performance categories, and began writing articles for that magazine and other guitar publications (and later *Guitar Player* in America), plus authored his first of a number of books, *The All Round Gigster*. He released his first of five albums in Britain in 1976. Soon after he began working for Rose Morris & Company’s musical instrument and equipment store on London’s legendary Denmark Street music business strip doing guitar repairs, quality control and manufacturer contact. That led to collaborations and consultations with numerous guitar makers and amplifier and pickup manufacturers and technicians over the years as well as guitar clinics and product demonstrations at musical instrument and equipment shows in Britain, Europe and later America and Japan. His compositions began being used by English radio and TV programs, and London’s Ballet Rambert also choreographed one of his songs as a dance piece.

With his 1990 American recording debut on *Guitars & Other Cathedrals*, Legg found even greater

success across the pond as a regularly touring solo act, headlining and sharing bills with fellow guitarists Richard Thompson, David Lindley, Eric Johnson (whose 2005 album *Bloom* Legg plays on) and Joe Satriani (on both his own shows and as part of his G3 Tour package with Johnson and Steve Vai, whose Favored Nations record label released two Legg albums). *Guitar Player* named his records *Guitar for Mortals* and *Mrs. Crowe's Blue Waltz* as Best Acoustic Album (1992 & '93) and *Wine, Women & Waltz* as Best Overall Guitar Album (1994) in its annual readers' polls. He has three instructional videos on the U.S. market (*Beyond Acoustic Guitar, Fingerpicking & Open Tunings* and *How To Cheat At Guitar*) as well as two books (*Customizing Your Electric Guitar* and a collection of his compositions in tablature and standard notation, *Pickin' and Squintin'*). In addition to his commentaries for "All Things Considered," the popular public radio news show regularly uses a number of his varied guitar interpretations of its theme music.

Throughout his career, he has earned the highest praise from the media. "Legg is, above all, a guitarist of great power, invention and versatility," observes the *St. Petersburg Times*. "Through fast-fingered picking, spontaneously layering parts and occasional ringing harmonics, he sounds like an orchestra." *Guitar Player* heralds how he "combines a sublime melodic sense with a mighty right-hand groove, creating pretty music with rhythmically aggressive undercurrents," while *Acoustic Guitar* notes that "the guitar is the most versatile instrument in the world, and nobody demonstrates this better than Adrian Legg." But the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* likely summed up his impact on listeners best when it exclaimed, "Mr. Legg's compositions, with their narrative melodies and nakedly emotive tones, offer an antidote to the guitar-hero syndrome."

For Legg, the fulcrum and essence of his creativity is in live performance. "Playing live is the whole point," he stresses. "Everyone makes a journey, an effort; we all come together — me, the audience, the people who run the venue — to share this wonderful, universal, human emotional interaction. This is where music lives.

"Before we had all this mechanical stuff that's what we did," Legg notes. "We got together and did it ourselves, or somebody came and did it for us. Everybody is involved in some kind of effort for that to happen. So everybody contributes to the musical event, and everybody is engaged in it. It has a huge social value which I think is very important."

Described by *Audio* magazine as a "kind of cross between Robert Fripp and Garrison Keillor," Legg is a genuine entertainer who excels at not only painting pictures if not frescoes and telling stories with music but also wittily regaling his audiences with tales from his life and travels and his cogent and often oblique yet thought provoking observations on a spectrum of topics. It's all part of his dedication to making his performances a full-blooded emotional experience. "If you haven't shared a laugh with someone," he insists, "you certainly can't share a tragedy."

So it's no wonder that popular BBC radio personality Andy Kershaw says of Legg, "Quite simply, there is no one else like him," citing his "dazzling technique and equally large dollops of spirit, humor, passion, eclecticism and spontaneity." For his part, Legg appreciates all the praise, but views his mission as far more basic, and more than anything else an expression of his soul and humanity. "I don't see what I do as particularly eclectic; I see it as perfectly normal. In terms of the music that has gone before me, I simply reflect my forebears like every other musician." The results of that approach, however, are simply irresistible and unforgettable.