

Harry Manx

BY BARRY CLEVELAND

ORIGINALLY FROM THE ISLE OF MAN, HARRY

Manx relocated to Canada as a child and, while still in his teens, had a life-changing brush with the blues. "I saw Buddy Guy and Junior Wells in 1970, and it knocked me over," he says. "I'd seen some rock and roll, but I'd never seen anything like *that*. The clothes, the attitude, the music, all made a big impression." Manx's connection with the blues intensified a few years later when

he got a job at Toronto's historic El Mocambo Tavern, a gig that exposed him to scores of legendary bluesmen and women.

Manx headed to India in the late '70s, inspired by Ravi Shankar's sitar playing and the Beatles' storied sojourn a decade earlier. He found the Indian subcontinent so alluring that he spent the better part of a dozen years there, including five in Jaipur studying Indian music with Shankar's foremost disciple, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt (who shared a Grammy with Ry Cooder in 1994 for *A Meeting by the River*). Bhatt is the principal exponent of the 20-string Mohan veena, a modified archtop guitar that he plays with a slide bar—an instrument Manx has made a centerpiece of his signature blend of American roots music and Indian tonalities.

In addition to the Mohan veena, Manx plays acoustic guitar, lap-steel, banjo, resonator, and cigar-box guitar—though typically lap style with a slider. Manx spent much of his early career busking as a one-man-band, and his live shows are still often solo or duo performances in which he simultaneously handles bass, rhythm, and even melodies—while



singing—so accordingly most of his instruments have been modified to extend their low end.

Despite his predilection for stylistic hybrids and unusual sonorities, however, Manx is all about the *song*. Whether performing originals or an arrangement of a Hendrix or Springsteen tune, all of the musical elements serve to support his smoky, soulful vocals, and transport the listener to the quasi-hypnotic state his fans refer to as the “Harry Zone.”

Manx has recorded eight albums—including two with fellow Canadian multi-instrumental maestro Kevin Breit, whose quirky virtuosity provides the perfect counterpoint to Manx’s own—and done sessions for artists as diverse as Hari Prasad Charusia and Richie Havens (Manx plays slide and Mohan veena on Havens’ new album, *Nobody Left to Crown*). His latest release, *Harry Manx & Friends Live at the Glenn Gould Studio* [Dog My Cat], features an amalgam of Indian and

Western musicians, and includes stellar electric guitar performances by Breit.

Manx’s next studio album, *Bread and Buddha*, will be a departure from the past. “I feel like my songwriting has moved ahead, and I’m also putting a lot of time and energy into the production,” he enthuses. “Usually I knock a record off in a matter of days, but I’m having strings, organ, bass, and lots of wonderful voices on this one—all of which should serve to make it unique.”

Describe the Mohan veena.

It’s a marriage between the guitar and the sitar. It’s strung exactly like a sitar, with three strings on top tuned *D-A-D* that you slide on, and another five set slightly lower that are strummed with the thumb to provide the harmonic context of the raga or scale. Underneath the seven top strings are 12 sympathetic strings that resonate by themselves like on a sitar. If you have long fingernails, you can also reach through the top strings and strum them to create flourishes.

You retune the top four strings depending on the piece?

Yes, and I tend to keep them in either major or minor tuning, just for the sake of being able to play Westernized songs. When I’m playing Indian music, however, I sometimes include what are called the King note and the Prince note in the open strings, which are the two main notes in a raga.

How about the sympathetic strings?

They are also tuned to match the raga or scale. Generally I tune them to something like 1, 7, 1, 2, 3, 4, 4, 5, 5, 6, 7, 8—but I’ll adjust that if I’m going to play a different scale.

How’s it played?

I play with my fingers because I like that sound, though it has slowed me down. For example, I can’t play nearly as quickly as Vishwa, who uses two fingers and a thumb-pick and plays fast runs like a Western bass player. Another Indian slide guitarist, Debashish Bhattacharya, plays with his thumb and first finger, alternating them very rapidly.

Describe your other instruments.

I have a Taylor 710 with a Sunrise pickup that I play in my lap. I also have a National resonator that I use on a few tunes, but I love the bottom end of the dreadnought as my regular slide guitar. My banjo is a modified Gold Tone with a contact pickup. I string it with heavy strings, tune it down low to open C, and boost the low end to make it sound big and fat. I’ve also got a cigar box

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guitar made by Johnny Lowe in Memphis. I souped it up quite a bit and now it's playable and almost stays in tune. It has three guitar strings tuned *F#*, *C#*, *F#*, and a lower bass string tuned *F#*, because that's the proper tension for it.

How do you tune your other guitars?

I pretty much work in open *D*, either major or minor [*D*, *A*, *D*, *F#* or *F*, *A*, *D*, low to high]. But I don't always start it in *D*. The banjo is a whole-step lower, and the one guitar that I play by holding it normally, a small Taylor, starts at *C#*.

What slides or bars do you prefer?

I used to play the Mohan veena with an axle from a Honda motor scooter, which is what Vishwa used. But since then I've switched to a Dunlop Lap Dawg, which is heavy enough to get a good sound, but light enough to move quickly.

What sort of strings do you use?

Elixirs. On the Mohan veena I use a .016, an .018, and something like a .035 on the three top sliding strings, and the five other top strings are .009s. The 12 sympathetic strings are likely .006- or .007-gauge. I have



a roll of string that I bought in India that is about half a kilometer long or something, so I probably still have another 40 years worth on there. All of my other guitars are strung with .016-.056 sets.

You have an audiophile amplification system.

I play straight into either Presonus or Universal Audio preamps, which are routed to a Midas Venice mixer. The Mohan veena and the banjo are run through a 30-band graphic EQ just to bring out some of the more subtle tones. I also carry my own monitor system, which includes a dbx DriveRack PA to smooth out the monitor sound.

Do you use any effects?

We use a little reverb. I don't use other effects because I'm also playing the bass, and I want it to be really punchy and clear. I'm looking into splitting the sound so that I can have effects on the guitar and still get the clear bass.

Name a point of contact between American roots music and Indian music.

A big part of it is bending notes. Indian music has something called the meend, which is how you approach a note—whether



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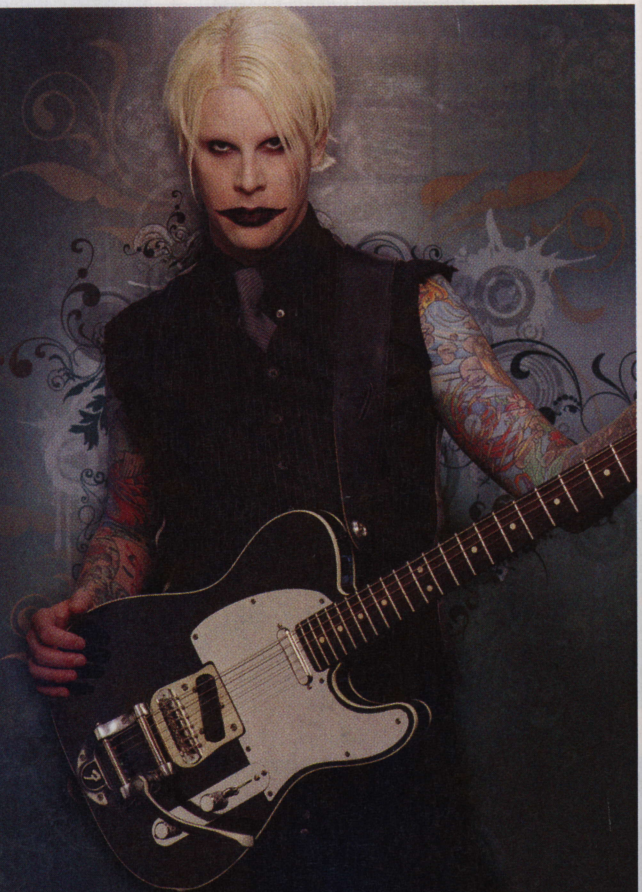


PHOTO: ROBB LAWRENCE

you approach it from above or below, or whether you go to another note first. And if you listen to, say, B.B. King, he has an amazing meend. As soon as he plays one note, you go, "Ah, there's B.B. King." So, how you approach and phrase the notes is critical in both traditions.

How has that concept influenced your own playing?


Western steel players tend to go horizontally left or right, but I see the Indian style as playing in a circular fashion. For instance, you would slide up to a note, and the moment you reach it, you're on your way back down—there's no stopping. That's really the basis of Indian slide guitar. Also, if you want to go from note A to note B when ascending a scale, you will often go from A to C first, then come down to B. Both of these concepts lend a kind of *roundness* to Indian music, and they are done purposely to imitate the vocal style, which is what they are trying to do with slide guitar in India.

How are microtones used?

That aspect of Indian music is a very

advanced part of the meend. When you travel between notes with the slide you also cover the notes in the middle, and you can do it in such a way that they are sounded and given some space. You don't usually stop on them, but it's a way to give the tone an edge, like in blues, when you bend the note just a little bit.

When incorporating Indian musical modalities into your songs, how closely do you adhere to the traditional rules?

Each raga has a definite sequence to the notes that you need to play if you're going to fulfill the requirements of that raga, and I do try to play the notes in the proper sequence, which gives a different feel than just grabbing any note in the scale that you want. For instance, when I play "Crazy Love" on the Mohan veena, I play in the raga called Bihag, which is heavy on the major 7th. You can begin by sliding up to the root, but you have to stop on the major 7th, which brings out the vibe of the raga. That said, sometimes I am reckless, and I do break the rules. I love that expression, "Truth is whatever works." 

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