



TOM GUERRA

Rock and Roll Swagger

After 15 years and four albums with Connecticut trio Mambo Sons, Tom Guerra just released his first solo album, *All of the Above*. The CD is a collection of hook-laden rock and roll songs that pay homage to everyone from the Beatles to the Byrds, and from Led Zeppelin to Mott the Hoople. It's classic solidbody swagger, blissfully recorded with piles of vintage Gibsons and Fenders, stompboxes, and tube amps.

You're an old-school rock 'n' roller, which isn't that common anymore. Who are some of your influences, players and bands?

From a purely musical perspective, I've always enjoyed guitarists that play for the song, be it George Harrison, Mike Campbell, or Keith Richards. Of course, as a kid growing up in the '70s, I had my guitar heroes like Hendrix, Page, Gallagher, Clapton and Beck. All these folks have common roots, leading back through Chuck Berry to the blues. That's my wheelhouse too.

"All of the Above" covers a lot of ground, from '60s jangle-pop to '70s glam rock. How did you make it all hang together?

I think the sonics are the glue that binds it together. I've always been drawn to sounds, going back to when I was kid trying to figure out how Jimmy Page and Eddie Kramer got those great sounds on the early Led Zeppelin records. As I was writing the songs, I had specific tones in mind and just went for it.

You were also inspired by lesser-known British players like Paul Kossoff and Ariel Bender. What's their appeal for you?

I loved Kossoff's economy of notes, tone and of course, wrist vibrato. In some ways, he was the true "Slowhand." Ariel Bender (AKA, Luther Grosvenor), was a firebrand guitarist in Spooky Tooth and later with Mott the Hoople. I think Mott Live is one of the all-time great rock and roll albums, largely because of Bender's frenetic playing, always on the verge of total chaos.

You asked Mott keyboardist Morgan Fisher to play on *All of the Above*. How did that come about?

I met Morgan several years ago in London and, while I was recording this album, asked him if he'd be interested in playing on it. He was very enthusiastic and incredibly creative! You can hear his piano chops on "Frankenstein Boots."

That's one of the best "heavy" tracks on the album. It reminds me of when Joe Perry aped Jeff Beck on Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion." Was that a Strat?

It's probably me aping Joe Perry aping Jeff Beck [laughs]. Yes, that's a Stratocaster. Although I typically block the bridge on my Strats, I have a couple set up with the floating trem, including my 1969 sunburst. I ran that straight into a 50-watt Marshall smallbox and 4x12 cabinet for this track.

One thing that helps the guitar stand out on the CD is the use of lighter overdrive tones. Even blues players today are lading on the crunch, but you dialed it back. Was that intentional?

While I used a heavy sawtooth distortion on "Refrigerator Blues," most of these songs called for a more natural crunch than high-gain overdrive. For my playing style at least, a little overdrive goes a long way in retaining a guitar's natural character and dynamics. You get a fatter dimension.

There are a lot of guitar "textures" on there—crunchy electric riffs, clean chords, slide, Dobro licks, often all on the same song. Again, this isn't too common anymore. More like a Jimmy Page approach during the Zeppelin era.

Page's genius was his use of the studio as a musical instrument, as people have noted before. While this is pretty straightforward rock, I tried to use different guitar parts to make things interesting for those with a short attention span like me! [laughs]

Did you use different vintage amps to get different tones?

Sure did, usually running the guitar straight into the amp and miking it up. Besides the Marshall 50-watter (what year?), I used a '63 Gibson Discoverer, a '66 Vibrolux Reverb, and a Marshall PA20. For new amps, I used a Colby dtb-50 for both clean and dirty tones. It's a great amp!

What were the go-to guitars on the record?

Many old Strats, including a '58, '60, '63, '69 and '70. I also used a 12-string Strat, my beat '66 Tele, a 1955 Les Paul TV Special, and an '80s Gibson dot-reissue ES-335, a gift from our former label owner.

How about pedals?

I used my trusty old Ibanez TS-9 for many leads, with just enough hair dialed in to make notes bloom while retaining the dynamics. I also used a Fulltone OCD for the heavy guitar parts in "Refrigerator Blues," an old

Vox wah for “Down on the Turnpike” and an Analog Man ARDX20 delay for the slapback stuff.

Rick Derringer played on one of your earlier records. What was it like to play with one of your heroes?

It was great; he was very encouraging and played his heart out. We spent a lot of time talking about production techniques and guitar tones. To me, Rick is someone that just keeps getting better with age.

You're also a collector and have a pretty amazing horde. What are some interesting pieces you've acquired over the years.

I'm a big P-90 fan, and have a couple of '50s Les Paul TV Specials that are great guitars; a '63 ES-330 with a factory Bigsby; a '64 Epiphone Coronet; and a great '64 SG Special that sounds huge. I've always been a Strat guy, and my oldest is an early 1958 that I got in Lake Charles, LA from the original owner, someone who only played cowboy chords. I've been lucky enough to get several pre-CBS Strats including a '59, a '60, and a couple of great '63's. I have some old Teles that I like playing, including the '66 that appears a lot on this record. For more recent gear, I have a Gibson Les Paul R9 in tobacco-sunburst that roars!

What's your all-time favorite vintage guitar in the collection?

At the moment, I'm really digging the 1970 Strat, which is a little beat. But like most old maple-necked Strats, it has that perfect Fender “spank.”
 – Pete Prown



(Ed. Note: Mr. Guerra is a VG contributor.)