

MUSICIAN

JEN HAWLEY

BY NICK CHARLES

To survive as a full-time musician these days you need to be versatile, studied and pro-active. Jen Hawley is a classic example. She's a fine player across many styles and has a great new partnership with Alex Burns, so far producing a wonderful EP. We chatted about influences and the road ahead.

The jazz influence and study seems to be the backbone of your playing. Tell me about that journey and perhaps some other less obvious influences.

I started playing guitar when I was 16, studied classical and played in rock bands in Sydney in my early years. The jazz journey began in the late '90s. I fell in love with the music of Django and found the finest player of that style in Melbourne to teach me, Martin Elepans (Hot Café, Blue Drag). It was the beginning of a great musical relationship. I was Martin's rhythm guitarist from 1999 to 2010 in The Great Chefs Of Europe. In 2000 I decided to fill in the gaps in my jazz playing and develop my improvisational skills and studied with the great Bruce Clarke. I tend to listen to what I want to play, so on my playlist at the moment is Django, Charlie Christian and Kenny Burrell. Other players I listen to are Barney Kessel, Luiz Bonfá, Charlie Byrd, through to blues and rock players like Santana, Jimmy Page and Robben Ford.

I've seen you playing the Maccaferri style guitar and the Gibson 345. What's the story behind these and maybe some other little treasures in your cupboard?

I keep my guitar collection down to what I can play, so I have four guitars at the moment. The Gibson 345 is a 1969 model and will be with me forever, though I do have my eye on a Fender Strat. Currently I'm playing through a Trace Elliot Velocette valve combo. I like to use a small amp and drive it. Pedals, I use my favourite '90s Digitech RP5 or sometimes an Ibanez Tube-screamer and a Boss Octaver. On solo gigs I use a Roland RC50 loop station. My acoustics are the Saga Gitane DJ320 and a Maton Mini Diesel Special. My classical guitar (my very first guitar) is a K Yairi Y440.



How would you describe your playing and its function with Alex Burns? Did you have to modify your regular approach?

Alex and I focus on early blues and early jazz and the crossroads where those meet. With Alex I take a 'comping' style approach and play fills while he holds down the rhythm and sings. When he solos, I switch to that role. I try to be true when I play the blues and not put too many notes in. With the jazz tunes, I'm looking for melodic lines and tension and release in my playing. When Alex is playing Memphis style blues, I step back and add rhythmic drive without getting in the way. I like to keep my solos improvised and will usually focus on a theme just before I start soloing.

You manage to survive well in the fairly tough music scene now. What are some of the other things you do and how important is versatility for a full-time professional?

It is a pretty tough scene to make a living in. To be a full-time muso I diversify like you wouldn't believe! I lead my own bands and sing in French, Spanish and Portu-

guese. I've spent a lot of time developing relationships with agents for corporate music gigs, weddings and all kinds of events. I'm part of a community of musicians in Melbourne and we mix and match to suit the client, from Gypsy to Jewish to jazz to covers. My husband is a clown and has taught me a few tricks. We do children's shows, stilt walking and run circus workshops at festivals. Across all of this, I'm usually working three to four gigs a week all year round.

What's coming up in the New Year?

Alex and I have decided to do gigs with bass (Kane Borlase) and drums (Les Oldman) whenever we can, and doing local gigs as much as possible. We're starting to write together and hopefully this will create some radio airplay and put us on the festival circuit. On a personal front, I plan to work on a recording of my originals and interpretations of jazz and Latin standards that are part of my repertoire. I'm also planning new collaborations, like looking into the classical side of Django. He and Stephane Grappelli did a lot of recordings playing Manouche-influenced classical works and I love the freshness of the sound as it's not played to death like some of the Hotclub numbers. So this is the year to come out of the corporate closet and work on what interests me as a guitarist, rather than making a living and being driven by the next gig.

Tell me about the EP you've just released and are there plans to go in to the studio for more tracks?

We've got a four-track EP out at the moment, which we sell at gigs and use as a promotional tool. I find when you first start recording with someone new it can take a few tracks to work out recording styles and material, so this is a taster. When we get back in the studio a little later this year, we'll continue down this vein and then see if it all sits together. We might find we have a whole CD of new material. Or we could release three of these four tracks and then do a Best Of at the end... or is this cheating?!

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