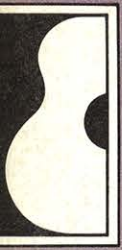


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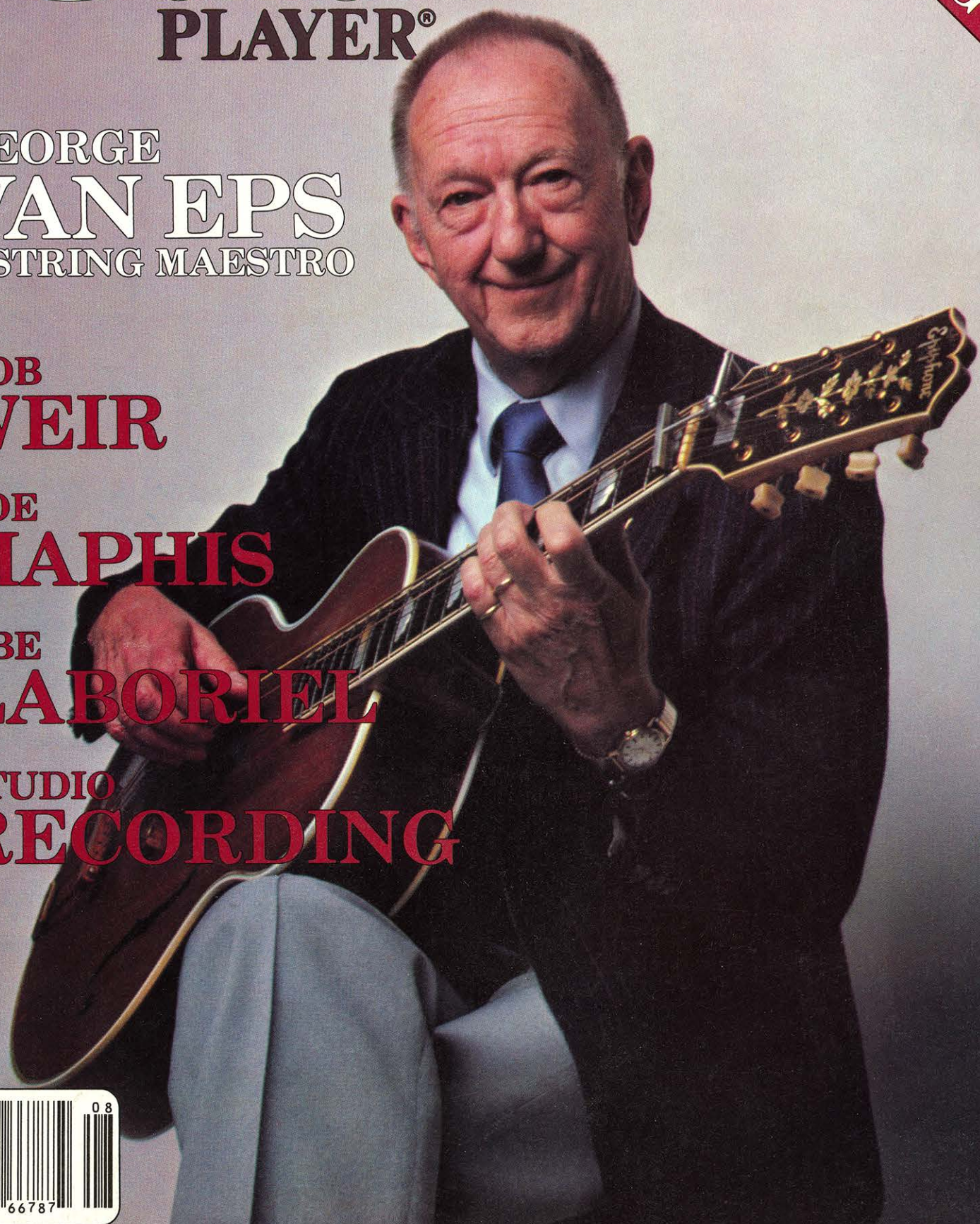
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Harmonically Speaking, The Greatest Ever

—Barry Galbraith

By Ted Greene

MANY HIGHLY respected guitarists are known for their ability to double on other instruments such as the bouzouki, the balalaika, and even the seductive standup bass ukulele. But George Van Eps must be a union rep's nightmare. Picture this scene: You're in a club listening to some very attractive music. A friend wanders in, sits down at your table, and whispers, "Hey, good group. Who are they?" You point to the stage and his mouth drops open: There's only one person up there—a very special person: George Van Eps, the master solo 7-string guitarist, weaving subtle melodies, counter melodies, chords, and bass lines all at the same time. And he does so with the utmost in refinement and

taste. There is no category in the union book for George. Ask him what he plays, and he'll tell you: *lap piano*.

More than 40 years ago, George Van Eps significantly extended the playing range of the guitar by adding a seventh string, tuning it to a low *A*, one octave below the fifth string. Because of his radical approach to the instrument, it is likely that his work has earned him a place in musical history such that it will long be studied by a diverse assortment of musicians including bass players, arrangers, and composers.

And then there is his impact on guitarists, that class of fellow creatures who have benefitted the most from Van Eps' work. In a fast-food, instant world where one may vir-

PHOTO BY NEIL ZLOZOWER

tually become an overnight star and then fall back into obscurity almost as quickly, the esteem in which the more knowledgeable and respected players have held George has endured, indeed even grown. He has been a guitar hero for more than 40 years.

Tributes from many of the world's leading guitarists are voluminous. A sampling: Tony Mottola [*GP*, Nov. '77], himself a top recording artist for 40 years, says, "George is the master of them all. He influenced me so much with his chordal harmonic concepts—of course he influenced everybody." Barry Galbraith [*GP*, July '76], a giant among jazz guitarists, has "wished that the younger players knew more about Van Eps. There's nobody like him. Harmonically speaking, he's the greatest ever for guitar." Bebop jazz star Remo Palmier [*GP*, Aug. '78] comments, "If you mentioned George Van Eps to any of the jazz greats like Jimmy Raney or Tal Farlow, they'd bow to the waist." And Barney Kessel thoughtfully reflects, "George is a master. George on guitar and Art Tatum on piano were light-years ahead of almost everyone else harmonically. Van Eps is simply a genius, a superb guitarist with exquisite taste."

Of course, younger players have also honored George. Earl Klugh considers George to be one of his major influences and favorite players. The late bluesman Michael Bloomfield found that "unlike most jazz guitarists, George plays real romantically and emotionally, with a lot of heart. There's a great deal of soul in his music." And these quotes are just the tip of the laudatory iceberg; many guitarists pay even stronger tribute to George in the ways that they play. You can easily hear George in the unaccompanied styles of Joe Pass, Jimmy Wyble, Johnny Smith, and Howard Roberts, among others. Suffice to say that very few guitarists in history have carved a comparable niche.

George Van Eps was born in Plainfield, New Jersey on August 7, 1913, into a highly creative, rather remarkable family. There had been five earlier generations of both professional watchmakers and musicians, and George's was no different. Besides pursuing music, he and his three older brothers—pianist Bobby, trumpeter Freddy, and tenor saxophonist John—also learned watchmaking from their grandfather (it is no accident that George often deals with the guitar in terms of what he calls "harmonic mechanisms"). George's father Fred was considered the premier classical 5-string banjoist of his day, and his mother Louise was a fine classical and ragtime pianist. George started on banjo at age ten, was playing professionally within a year (he joined Plainfield's musicians' union when he was 11), and switched to guitar when he was 13. He quickly progressed, and started gigging with his brothers and soon after with the legendary banjoist Harry Reser.

From 1929 to 1931 he was a member of vocalist Smith Ballew's group, which included the famous Dorsey brothers. It was the first of many respected dance bands with

whom George would be associated. A two-year stint in Freddy Martin's ensemble between 1931 and 1933 further tempered the young guitarist. His first big-time break came in 1934, when he joined clarinetist/bandleader Benny Goodman's orchestra. Although he was with Goodman only for a year, it started George's professional momentum. In 1936 he became a member of English singer Ray Noble's orchestra, which had been hand-picked by one of the day's top bandleaders, Glenn Miller. Van Eps' tenure with Noble lasted on and off until 1941. He moved from New York to Hollywood in 1938, and lived there for two years, appearing on radio shows and on record dates. (It was during this period that he wrote his first method book, *The George Van Eps Guitar Method*). When World War II broke out, he returned to Plainfield to help in his father's recording equipment factory, but returned to Hollywood in 1943 to resume musical work. In 1944 George worked in radio with Ray Noble once again, but also appeared on record with the Paul Weston Orchestra.

Around the time of his late-'30s hiatus from the East Coast, George became fascinated with the possibility of a 7-string guitar. Having long dreamed about extending the low-end range of the instrument so that he could play his own bass lines, George approached the Epiphone company, and they agreed to build a 7-string for him. It was delivered in 1938, and George never looked back at the 6-string guitar.

Through the years, he became one of the most sought-after studio sidemen, doing literally thousands of radio, TV, film, and record dates both as a staff guitarist and as a freelancer (he was in the staff orchestras of New York's CBS and NBC affiliates, as well as those of WOV and WNEW and later Los Angeles' NBC station). His credits include work with Burns & Allen, Edgar Bergen, Jack Benny, and almost four dozen other radio shows and serials, plus he's recorded and appeared on TV and radio in orchestras with about 50 different artists, including Paul Whiteman, Red Norvo, Jack Teagarden, Frank Sinatra, Paul Weston, and Ozzie Nelson. George was also in a 1955 movie entitled *Pete Kelly's Blues*, and played on the soundtracks of *The Big Broadcast Of 1935*, *The Big Broadcast Of 1936*, *Damsel In Distress*, *The Red Nichols Story*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Picnic*, *Rafferty And The Gold Dust Twins*, and *The Black Forest*. He also spent two years at Republic Pictures providing guitar parts for Roy Rogers and Gene Autry soundtracks, and many Vitaphone "shorts" also included his talents.

At various times, he appeared on daily TV shows with Jo Stafford, Johnny Mercer, and Peggy Lee, was featured on the *Tonight Show*, and programs featuring Danny Thomas, Ronald Reagan, and Ray Bolger. For his diligent work, George has received top honors in *Downbeat* and *Playboy* jazz polls. Since 1968, he has been a member of *Guitar Player's* Advisory Board, and he has been featured three times previously in the maga-

zine: December 1967, March '70, and November '74.

Throughout his busy years as a top-notch studio guitarist, he continually experimented with new harmonic ideas on his beloved 7-string friend—ideas which had never before been heard on guitar. He wrote down his findings and continued to do so for 41 years. Not one to be scared by long-term projects, in 1976 George began to assemble all of this information into book form. Five-and-a-half years later, he is still writing. The first of three volumes, *Harmonic Mechanisms For Guitar, Vol. 1* [Mel Bay Publications, Pacific, MO 63069] has already been published; the second is completed, and the third is well under way. Naturally, these books deal with the multi-line style of guitar playing for which George is famous. They are intended to teach the mental and fingering disciplines necessary for the creation of sounds where moving voices are the order of the day, and where independence of thought blossoms into simultaneous melodies which engage in artistic dialogue. Anyone who studies George's fingering system must stand in awe of the thousands of hours of tedious work this man went through in order to piece all this material together.

Of course, during his long career George has recorded quite a few albums that showcase his solo guitar style, but sadly almost all of these are out of print. Because he produced such revolutionary sounds on the instrument, it was only natural that many musicians would want to study with him, so there have been quite a number of Van Eps students through the years, some of the more notable being Tony Rizzi, Jimmy Wyble, Bobby Gibbons, and Allan Hanlon. But above all, George is a *player*, and he longs to get back to performing as soon as his writing chores are finished.

George Van Eps' playing can be described in many ways, but for those who've never heard him, the following synopsis may

Ted Greene is a guitar teacher, accomplished musician, chord specialist, and author of four books on chord and single-note usage entitled Chord Chemistry, Jazz Guitar Single Note Soloing (volumes one and two), and Modern Chord Progressions [all are available from Dale Zdenek Pub., Box 3245, Westlake Village, CA 91361]. He also recorded an album, Solo Guitar [Professional Music Products (14731 E. Franklin Ave., Tustin, CA 92680), A-5010], and wrote an article called Chord Voicings, which appeared in the June 1980 issue of Guitar Player. Born on September 26, 1946, in Hollywood, Ted has been playing guitar for about 25 years, of which the last 17 have been devoted to teaching. He has spent the past ten years exploring advanced chord usage, and besides teaching at his Woodland Hills, California studio, he also gives seminars and demonstrations. He studied briefly with George Van Eps, whose style left a lasting impression on his own approach.

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give you some idea of why the sounds he makes have enthralled so many of his fellow guitarists for so many years. The cuts "Lover" and "The Blue Room" from his last album *Soliloquy* [Capitol, ST-267] illustrate virtually all the hallmarks of his style: (1) delaying the entrance of notes in the chords so as to create an almost conversational texture on fabric—sometimes bass notes speak first, sometimes the melody, and sometimes the whole chord; (2) attractive rhythmic conception, communicating a feeling of joy and general well-being; (3) tremendous right-hand agility, especially when executing rapid-fire arpeggios; (4) exciting reharmonizations and surprise chords—sometimes just adding a few welcome additions to a basic progression, sometimes creating an entirely new chord progression for the song; (5) clearly audible moving inner voices, often resulting in chromatic or semi-chromatic lines; (6) striking interludes with subtle variations on the main theme of the piece; (7) a feeling of continuity due to brilliant fills, which often employ the chromatic line but often in the soprano voice; (8) the use of sustained bass tones together with two or three floating lines on top; (9) the opposite—sustained soprano tones with two or three lines moving about underneath; (10) a general improvisational feeling or quality; (11) intriguing tags and endings; and of course (12) that deep, rich seventh string, helping to create the full pianistic sound that George loves.

This music could only be conceived of and played by one with a highly disciplined and creative mind, a pair of hands trained to produce sounds beyond those previously thought possible for the instrument, and an attitude that does not accept other people's limitations but instead takes the view that George has developed towards the 7-string guitar: "Let's see what else is hiding in there."

George's intelligence is highly evident when he speaks, manifesting in a wide array of inflections, pauses and wonderful emphases on certain words in a manner that the printed page cannot capture. And yet his wisdom, his wit, and his warmth still come shining through in the following interview.

So here is George Van Eps, who, in addition to everything else, personally designed and built a string damper (still widely acclaimed by jazz guitarists, even though not commercially available) to help eliminate feedback, a height-adjustable bridge for changing the action height on string basses, and from memory of his own design of some 50 years ago, recently built an engine that runs on compressed air. Perhaps most startling of all, he designed and built the only known one-tenth inch to the foot-scale working live steam locomotive because he happened to be in a hobby store and overheard some people say that it couldn't be done. He didn't know them, and he never saw them again. But he spent eight-and-a-half years of his spare time to prove to himself that it was possible. George has never made good

friends with the impossible; and it's not crazy about him either—he keeps diminishing its ranks.

* * * *

YOUR PLAYING has a tremendous identity to it—one can hear just a few notes and know that it's you. How do you describe your style?

Lap piano. I'm just trying to play lap piano.

Why were you originally attracted to the guitar?



The beautifully inlaid peghead of George's Epiphone is fitted with a feedback-reducing string damper of Van Eps' own design.

As a very young fellow I was in the habit of building crystal radios, and one day I happened to get the cat's whisker (tuning wire) in the right place and I picked up WEA in New York. There was a live broadcast from the Pennsylvania Hotel of the Roger Kahn Big Band featuring the wonderful Eddie Lang on guitar. When I heard him, I said, "That's it—that's what I want!" But I couldn't afford a guitar then—it wasn't until a year-and-a-half later, while playing banjo in a little group with my brothers, that I was able to scrape up the money. So I took the train and subway into New York, where I then bought my first guitar, a Martin flat-top. And that was the end of the banjo for me, because I liked the singing quality, the sustain of the guitar, more. The banjo didn't ring long enough: You couldn't hold notes while others were moving around. Well, actually, you *could*, but the whole thing would have to go like a scared rabbit.

Who were some of your other early influences?

Well, quite a few people figure that my dad must have been a strong influence on me,

but my parents were divorced when I was five, and my brothers and I lived with my mom; we hardly ever saw him until we were older. However, my mom was a wonderful classical and ragtime jazz pianist, and I'm sure that some of her playing rubbed off on me. And what with all my brothers practicing from morning till night, there was nothing but good music in the house. I was especially affected by my brother Robert's piano playing. He'd make these marvelous harmonic sounds with all the inner voices going, and that's when I decided that this was how I wanted to make the guitar sound—with counterpoint and something besides block harmony. So I would work on finger-style guitar, trying to do what he was doing. Skipping ahead quite a few years, I was working on a difficult pedalling effect, trying to sustain certain notes while others were in motion, and I must have worked on it eight hours a day for six weeks. Near the end of this period—still before I had achieved what I was after—my wife came in, leaned over to me, and said with her fine sense of humor, "You know, they invented the piano." But getting back to my influences, in 1928 my dad took me into New York to Segovia's first concert at Town Hall. And I heard the great master play—boy, what an impact! Eddie Lang was already my hero, but now I heard the real potential of the instrument: the full orchestra on guitar.

Why didn't you go the classical guitar route?

Well, I did spend eight years with the classical repertoire at the same time as I was studying the modern stuff. And I made a bunch of records using the gut-string guitar backing Fred Astaire's vocals.

Was this soundtrack material?

Yes. We did an all-Gershwin album along with the Ray Noble Orchestra, featuring some of the tunes from the movie *A Damsel In Distress* like "A Foggy Day" and "Nice Work If You Can Get It."

Did you choose guitar over piano because of its sound quality?

Yes, I loved the sound and also I didn't want to compete with my brother Bob—I *couldn't* compete with him; he was too good, even then. So I stuck to my instrument and tried to make the best of it, while trying to imitate his approach to harmony, counterpoint, pedalling, etc.

Did you have any other early influences?

I listened to everybody, but mainly piano players. You know, Gershwin was my dad's accompanist for a while. He hadn't written "Rhapsody In Blue" yet, but he would play things like that. And he'd bounce me on his knee—I was just a little boy still—and he'd keep time to everything.

How did you go about learning the guitar at first?

At first I tried to sound like my idol, Eddie Lang, and I copied his wonderful style of rhythm guitar, using a pick.

Did you have to invent or discover much of the material you were working on in those

early years?

I was a stubborn kid, and I refused to read, because I had a pretty good ear, and I could figure out songs and things—although I later found that I sometimes got things wrong. And I was just fascinated with contrapuntal sounds. I wanted lines to move, I wanted things to happen, and I wanted to treat every note in each chord—every voice—as if it were a melody. But not disjointed. Each melody had to make sense as much as possible, with the bass line being the most important. You know, a good bass line suggests many, many things.

So, you often build the bass first?

I did then, although now I think of everything simultaneously. But I can't play my style fast; jackrabbit tempos are not my dish because I would have to dilute everything so much that it wouldn't be what I'm hearing. I would rather play it slowly and retain the voice movements that I love. And there's another element here: In harmony with moving lines, if the progressions are played too fast, the ear can't assimilate them. I learned this very early in life, when I made an arrangement for a band and wrote all the progressions in eighth-notes at a medium tempo. It went by so fast, you couldn't tell what was going on. My brother Bob told me to cut the time values in half. So I rewrote everything as quarter notes, and suddenly the music appeared.

Were you doing any mental practice away from the guitar?

Oh, sure. All the time. I would invent voicings; you know, visualizing different notations and then seeing them on the fingerboard.

How do you go about arranging a song for solo guitar? Are there certain methods or strategies that you keep coming back to?

I'll just play the tune very basically—over and over if I don't know it—until I become familiar with it. Then I rearrange it, but I try to preserve the melody and the entire picture that the piece gave me. And of course, I change some of the voicings and the harmonic structure.

What determines your choices of reharmonizations or new structures?

Well, you know, there are millions of harmonic switchtracks [alternatives], and you can use all of them. One of the things I like to do—and I am a firm believer in it—is play everything in every key. And the different keys suggest different possibilities.

Does a key like, say, B suggest in itself certain moods or colors to you?

Yes, B has a very brilliant sound to me—a light color. But C_b is a dark brown. It's quite different from B. [Ed. Note: Although the notes C_b and B are enharmonic equivalents (occupying the same position on the fretboard), within a broader musical context they imply different melodic directions and different harmonic inflections.]

What differentiates C_b from B for you—is it the mental process involved in one versus the other?

Sure, it's the mental process. You see, a sheet of music manuscript is a very cold thing. It doesn't really speak to most of us. But it can in subtle ways. For instance, if I write a piece of music in the key of E_b, and it happens to be on the jovial, bright, or light-hearted side, and I have to choose between writing a note as either a B \sharp or C_b, it's going to be B \sharp . On the other hand, if the piece is more serious or somber, then I'll write it as C_b. I think it adds something, since you can't hear the paper.

When you reharmonize a piece, do you



think in terms of chord progressions, or only in terms of lines? Do the chord progressions result as a product of the various lines?

Changing the voice-leading of any line changes the progression. The harmonic counterpoint changes the harmony for you. I think primarily of the motion of the lines. There is a bass line, a cello line, a French horn line, and so forth. It's sort of like orchestrating and distributing the notes between the different instruments. For me, it's a whole bunch of themes, and they're going to have to shake hands and be friends—but without losing their own identities.

What does one do to get to the stage where they can mentally orchestrate like this?

The only thing I know of is to just do it, and do it, and do it. And try to hear the colors; listen to the sounds of the different instruments of the orchestra, and the lines that they weave.

Are you able to hear all these melodies, at least in part, because on a subliminal level there is a substructure of various progressions with which you have become familiar over the years?

Yes. You know, I don't like to listen to

my records, but sometimes I'll be at a friend's house, and they'll put one on, and I'll hear myself and think, "Why did you do it that way?" I hear different lines today than I did then; I hear the voice-leading slightly differently now than I used to.

But are they based on the same progressions?

Yes, in a rudimentary way. But by changing them just slightly, you change the harmonic picture a lot.

Even if the result is the same chord progression per se, such as C to Am?

Yes. And sometimes ornery voicings result momentarily from the motion of the lines. Of course, you don't linger on them, and in this way they are perfectly usable.

Then the forefront of your attention isn't occupied anymore with chord names as such, even when you see lines coming together, coalescing into recognizable chord shapes?

Let me put it this way: The chord names are in my subconscious, and I'm aware of them. But I'm more conscious of them as collections of lines that swim. They're going some place. If the lines are swimming, let them go where they want, because they are free entities. And if they wind up in utter disaster, don't give up; sort of give them swimming lessons—let them go. If I start to think that this is *this* chord, and that is *that* chord, and when this note changes while that line moves against these sustained notes it becomes *this* chord, it's too academic. It's no longer music in my mind; I'm making a calculator out of it. I want to listen to those tones, to the overall effect. At least for me, if I don't listen to the overall effect, I won't be able to guide those lines that want to go someplace. And even after having said all this, in another sense, what I'm really thinking about—the bottom line of this—is *intervals*. That's the way my mind works. And they don't have to have any names. They are just this far apart or that far apart.

Pictorial intervals? Audible intervals?

I'm conscious of the relationship of each note to every other; it's actually an air gap.

And why do you prefer to think of them in this manner?

It's not that I *prefer* it; I just automatically do it this way. That's how I hear them—as intervals. And you've got to let them talk. As each one moves around, it changes the chemistry of what's going on, and one may trigger the other. It's just like people getting together telling stories. The story that the first fellow just told will trigger something in the other's mind. Now he tells a story that's related to the first one, but a little different, and so on. It's ping-pong; they're all banging against each other, trying to remain friends, and trying to be egoists, too. But I try to keep them all happy.

Have you reached the point where you just see whatever lines you think of all over the guitar neck?

Yes.

And that's the result of studying the types of exercises you have in your new books, or

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from playing so many songs?

Oh, yes—the result of taking all the different voice leadings like the super and sub series of the little triads I described in my book. [Ed. Note: *Van Eps' book*, Harmonic Mechanisms For Guitar, defines the super and sub series as follows: "When any one of the voices in a triad is raised to the next step of its scale, it is in super position. When a voice is lowered by one step of the scale it is in sub position."] By the way, there is a very important aspect of this whole thing that I've never really expressed in any detail before, except to a few students; that is, we think we are limited by what we know we can produce, but our thinking should go past this. The mind wants to go back into the safe area, but I keep kicking it out. You have to push yourself, stretch, work harder, overcome the laziness, and not take the easy way out. It may hurt, but it won't hurt for long. This opens up new areas of harmonic adventure. As you become more proficient, your ideas naturally expand. It's a wonderful process.

With chords having more than one name—such as Am6, F#m7b5, D9, etc.—are there any principles that influence your choice of which names are appropriate at certain times?

Once again, the overall effect is more important to me than calling out notes or being conscious of what something actually is. Combine any two notes and they're going to produce a certain musical flavor, a certain taste, a certain chemistry all their own. If you add another voice, this will create a new flavor.

You were once quoted—or possibly misquoted—as saying that you played in all 12 keys at once. Maybe you could let us mortals in on your secret.

What I meant was, because of having practiced all my life in all 12 keys, and therefore not favoring any, I'm somewhat conscious of the 12 keys all the time. And since any note belongs to all keys, you can, for instance, be in one key at the beginning of a phrase, change to another key in the middle, and come out of it in still another. You can do anything you want, and go any place as long as it's done with taste.

But do you also play in more than one key at a time?

Oh, yeah. I like to play passages where one or more voices are in one key, and another voice or voices are in a different one—for instance, tenth intervals in the key of G with a melody line in the key of Eb.

But nobody on this planet with ten fingers is playing in all 12 keys at one time—are they?

No. You might as well take a two-by-four and put it on the 88 keys of the piano at the same time [laughs].

Are many of your arrangements spontaneous, or do you find particular sounds that you love and wish to use repeatedly because of the certain joy that you know they will bring?

I think we all fall in love with certain

sounds. Good, bad, or indifferent, I can't get away from the way I think. I won't purposely play a phrase or progression exactly the same way twice, but there are notational combinations that tickle my mental funnybone. It's impossible to get away from that. And on some days when we're not feeling well, and still have to deliver in order to make a living, these old friends—these harmonic devices—provide a storehouse from which to draw.

How do you feel about those in the so-called avant-garde who say that tonal music is dead or exhausted.

We haven't even begun to scratch the surface of the surface yet. But I think there are those who are more interested in sound effects than music. A sharp noise [pause], a chalk squeak on the blackboard [pause], a shotgun [pause], potatoes falling down the cellar steps—these are sound effects. But I can't agree with tone being dead, because if that day arrives, that's the end of music. Music is all tone; it has to be.

What about atonal music—could it be the bridge between tonal music and sound effects?

I've heard some atonal music that was pleasing—full of surprises and rather interesting. But I know I couldn't stand to listen to it for 24 hours a day. Long before the 24-hour period was over, I would long to hear a simple progression where the voices were friendly, and were having a little love affair with each other, not abstractly trying to blow your mind.

Because the raised 11th is part of the natural overtone series, some theorists feel that the lydian scale—which contains this note—rather than the commonly accepted major scale, should be the center of our tonal system. How do you feel about this?

Nothing should be used all the time. The raised 11th is already a wonderful part of our tonal system. Every interval, every notation, is a bona fide member of the musical family. I had one fellow ask me recently, "Are you into 4ths yet?" I asked him what he meant, and he replied, "Well, you know, the coming thing is 4ths." I said, "The coming thing? I didn't know they ever left; I must be behind the times [laughs]."

And so we've somewhat arbitrarily chosen the major scale as the center of our tonal system?

Well, my concept is that the major scale is not the center of our system. The chromatic scale is the mother scale. All of our scales are borne of the chromatic scale. It is the most important: It contains everything.

Why did you decide to extend the low end of the instrument, to add the seventh string?

I wanted to get down where my brother was playing; I wanted a little more range. But I didn't want to change the wonderful Spanish guitar tuning. You know, it evolved—it wasn't thought out by one person. Every morning I do a bow to the east and thank God for whoever's mind decided to put the third in the tuning. [Ed. Note: All adjacent

strings on a guitar are tuned a perfect fourth apart except the G and B strings, which are tuned a major third apart.]

Did you ever experiment with extending the top-end range?

Oh, yes. I spent a year doing all kinds of experiments, but the extra top string sounded too thin for me whenever I would tune it to a place where it would be worth the difficulties required to learn a new string, to fully incorporate it.

Just as a sidelight, Lenny Breau is now playing a nylon-string guitar with an added high seventh string tuned to A.

That's beautiful. You know with his cascading harmonics, he's way up in the piccolo register. That's great for him and his style of playing.

Why did you decide to tune the low seventh string to an A rather than, say, a low B, which would have kept more symmetry between all of the bottom strings?

Because it provided what I wanted: The instrument is still chromatically playable, and it doesn't add a new note to the tuning. I just added another A, and it's not a stranger. Any chord whose root is normally on the fifth string can now have it on the seventh.

Carl Kress used to tune his guitars in unusual and rich ways. Was this an influence on you?

No. You see, Carl's tuning was in fifths with the top string lowered an octave—a kind of tenor banjo tuning. He wanted to be able to play what he called "lush" chords.

Your guitar is actually tuned a whole-step lower than actual pitch, making your lowest note a G rather than an A. Is this done to further increase the low-end range?

No, it's done because I love the feel of nylon strings, and the steel strings feel too hard to me. The tension is too great when they're tuned up to pitch. So I use a medium gauge, a fat enough gauge so that it has some "bones" in it—not the slinky sound. Yet by tuning down, the strings have a softer feel under the fingers.

Why do you prefer a low action?

A high action defeats its purpose, which is supposedly to give a better sound, because the strings won't intonate correctly. Segovia doesn't use a high action—we discussed it once at a party in New York.

On your Mellow Guitar album, you got a wonderful tone quality that sounds almost out-of-phase—far different from the standard jazz tone.

I used one pickup out a little ways from the bridge. I had to make that pickup. Lowell Frank, who was an engineer for Columbia at that time, wanted to try an experiment. So we took the guitar right from the pickup into the board. He set a microphone fairly close to the guitar and picked up the acoustic sound, and then he mixed the two sounds together.

In another vein, many musicians seem to have an anti-business, anti-capitalism attitude. As one who has seen the inner workings of the music business for so many years, do



ED MCGILL

George with his Van Eps 7-string hollowbody electric produced from 1967 until the late '70s by Gretsch. The production model featured a three-piece maple neck with a 25½" scale, an ebony fingerboard, multiple-ply maple sides and top (with a single cutaway), two Filtertron pickups, and gold-plated hardware. It was fitted with a Floating Sound Unit, a buckle-like device that was suspended in the strings (just ahead of the bridge) and attached to a tuning fork inside the body; it was intended to increase sustain.

you feel this is a valid position?

No. I can understand their feelings, but I don't think it's sensible. I think they can moderate their feelings a little bit, because almost nothing is all good or all bad. And I think if they would give a little bit on this point—try to develop some understanding—it would help them. It would also help everybody else; they're not helping anybody by being deadly against business. Plus, it's not a realistic evaluation of the situation, because we players need the hard-nosed, cigar-smoking businessmen. Somebody has to sell the product and take care of the bills. And they need us, too. Of course, they shouldn't dictate taste and try to force us into playing and promoting things that are against everything we believe in musically.

So, if a company is willing to give you a contract, they should have enough faith in you as an artist or they shouldn't be signing you up in the first place?

Yes. Of course, they should have some voice in the matter—after all, they are paying the bills. But there should be an understanding on this point at the outset. Both parties

should have leeway. You know, sometimes a hard-nosed businessman has a better sense of what a crowd is going to expect. And it isn't going to kill even the purest of the pure, dyed-in-the-wool artist to throw in one little thing here or there that might have public appeal. It might help the public to like your other material better. Before you can pull a fish out, you've got to hook him.

Is there any chance of some of your out-of-print albums being re-released?

Yes. Columbia may reissue *Mellow Guitar*, and Capitol says they are also going to release at least a couple of my albums. We tried to get the masters back, but we couldn't. When they originally came out, the timing was bad. I get more mail about them now than I did then. They would sell better now.

The significance of triads is not often fully understood by guitarists, and your book, *Harmonic Mechanisms*, deals almost exclusively with ideas derived from them. Why?

Music is made up of triads. And when you compound them—when you play, say, an F# triad against a "C tenth" [C to E, an

octave and a third apart]—now it's a mighty triad; it's taken on a completely different face. It doesn't really lose its identity, and yet it does. Every triad can be something else; every four-note chord can be something else.

How do you recommend people approach your book?

One lifetime is not long enough to be a musician, so you have to sweet-tooth it. Just take a section that fascinates you, and later perhaps work in another section. If it doesn't fascinate you, why, just dump it and go to something else, because it's all related. The whole purpose of all the material is to teach the concepts. One doesn't have to go through everything in every possible variation. The concepts are not difficult, so once they're understood, you can pick up the ball and run with it in any direction you want.

That should be very encouraging to people who don't have much time to spend on it.

Sure. I don't believe you start on page one and milk it for every potential, and then the same on page two, and so on. You don't want to do that.

It must have been quite a challenge putting together 40 years' worth of material.

Yes, but my daughter Kay's help has been a very important factor in getting the books out. Besides being a good sight-reader, Kay understands my thought processes, so she can analyze the material she proofreads, and this ability is golden to me.

After many years as a fine pick player, why did you switch over to fingerstyle full-time?

Well, my first love was always fingerstyle. Back in the days before amplification, if you were playing a small room, and it was very quiet at the beginning of an evening, you could play something fingerstyle. But as soon as people had one drink, that went out the window. You'd have to get out the pick. In fact, one time I had a special guitar case made that held a trumpet. And when it got too noisy, I'd pull it out. Of course, I couldn't play good, but I played loud. When amplification came in, I switched more and more to fingerstyle.

What do you feel are the advantages to fingerstyle guitar?

Well, it's as if you've got five picks, so you can play the notes of a chord simultaneously. And one of the most important things: You can make a line stand out by the way you attack it. All the great classical players do it.

There's astonishing totality and long-range planning in your fingering system. It seems that in a sense it's the essence of your book. True?

Yes. The fingerings are the physical mechanisms that open the door, releasing the mind to become more inventive. What used to be dark areas will not be dark anymore. Of course, the hands are only the mechanisms that express an idea into something that is audible. The computer "upstairs" has to invent it and transform it in a millionth of a second into two things: The overall harmonic picture and the mechanical chemistry

GEORGE VAN EPS

it takes to produce it. But if you start with the wrong mechanism, you're suddenly out of fingers, and maybe you wanted a particular voice to keep climbing or dropping. If you're just working something out, then you can stop and start over again. But if you're playing for money, if the red light is on, you've had it.

What was the inspiration or purpose behind the first book you wrote in 1938?

Without mentioning names, someone told me that an ex-student of mine was writing a book on the material I had taught him. And he was already two or three months into it. So my wife, Jo, and I worked day and night. We went to Epiphone, and they loaned us some writers and hired some more copyists. We got the thing out in seven weeks. None of us figured it would do well, but we were just trying to beat this fellow to the punch. After all, I had to figure that stuff out, and I was not about to lose it.

Michael Bloomfield once said your music was romantic, and had heart and soul. Do you strive for anything akin to these qualities in your playing?

No, I just want it to sound a certain way. But there are a few exceptions. I have written some love themes and lullabies aimed at a certain mood.

When you try to create a feeling, do you draw on stored-away moods or colors?

Maybe in a way, but the notes just come out.

George, do you consider what you play to be jazz?

Barney [Kessel] says no. But I can't type it. I don't know what I play. Maybe one foot is in the classical field, and one is in the jazz field—it's both of them.

How did you manage to avoid the self-destruction of drugs and alcohol that commonly plagues jazz musicians?

I didn't like what I saw in the people who were using drugs, smoking grass. There were definite character changes. And many times, these took the form of certain types of self-delusions. For instance, I knew a fine tenor sax player, and one night as an experiment we recorded him while he was pretty stoned. The next day we played the tape back for him, and after hearing it his first words were, "Who was that bum?" We told him, "That was you last night." He couldn't believe it. He was sure his playing had been wonderful the night before. And I was trying to make my brain more efficient—not more dull.

What thrills you in music or about music?

Anything that's good. It doesn't matter what instrument, as long as it's well played.

When you listen to music, do you analyze it as it goes, or do you shut off that part of your mind and let the feelings take you where they will?

Even though I don't think in terms of numbers while I'm playing, when I'm listening I do. I analyze everything I hear. Sometimes I wish I didn't do this. It's tiring. You know, occasionally I'd like to sit back and be

bathed in the sounds, the colors that are flowing around me.

You can't shut this off, though?

No, I haven't been able to, and in all honesty I'm afraid to try, because I've worked a long time to nurture it and to amplify it. And I guess I don't want to lose it. If I worked at it, I'm sure I could, you know—mind over matter. You can almost



A Selected Van Eps Discography

Solo albums: *Soliloquy*, Capitol, ST-267; *Mellow Guitar*, Columbia, CL 929; *George Van Eps' Seven-String Guitar*, Capitol, ST 2783; *My Guitar*, Capitol, ST 2533; *Solo Mood*, Columbia, CL 879; *Mood For Twelve*, CL 693; *The Guitar Of George Van Eps*, Jump [Box 382, Hermosa Beach, CA 92054], FP1-A; *George Van Eps' Blue Guitar*, Phillips, 429-278-BE. **With others:** *The Eddie Miller, George Van Eps, Stan Wrightsman Trio*, Jump, J12-6; various artists, *Fun On The Frets*, Yazoo [245 Waverly Pl., New York, NY 10014], 1061.

erase anything you want if you work hard enough at it.

Are you going to be playing in the future?

If you'll pardon the vernacular, my real bag is playing. And I'm really looking forward to getting back to it. Definitely. And there are record companies that want albums—also some concert tours.

Many respected players consider you to be the greatest guitarist in your field. Did you ever hope to reach this stature?

No, and I don't think I've attained it.

You're bucking the opinion of a lot of good people.

Well, everybody's entitled to their own opinion—even me.

But you weren't driven as a child or young man with this desire?

No. I just wanted to play some things that satisfied me. A friend of the family, Professor Ralph Wylie, once said to me, "Strive to please yourself; at least you know you're pleasing someone. And in that process, be honest." I've tried to follow that.

How would you like to be remembered 100 years from now?

Well, this may sound trite, but I'd like to be remembered as a person who had the courage of his convictions. I've never been terribly impressed with my own playing, but there are two things that I'm proud of. One, my family—my wife, my daughter, and my grandson. And two, the locomotive I built because they said it couldn't be done. This is where the stubborn side shows itself. And it's an ego trip. I had to prove something to myself.

Are there any subjects you would like to address?

Recently, I've met many young people who really want to know what makes the guitar tick, and I think this is just wonderful. I think we're in for a real treat in the coming years.

Do you have any advice for them?

Taste can't be taught, but it can be influenced. So, listen to all kinds of good music. And when you find the idiom that fascinates you the most, listen to every good professional who plays in that way. There's a great rub-off effect, and this is very important. And approach your instrument and your craft with love and respect. I say that because the respect bounces back; there's feedback. You treat it well and it will treat you well. No matter what the job at hand is, it should be done with as much integrity and sincerity as possible.

To what do you attribute your success?

I've been lucky. And I'm a stubborn Dutchman. We were all stubborn kids—the whole damn family was stubborn. All the back generations were stubborn, too. Whatever we undertook was never done halfheartedly. I wrote something down recently that I think, in a way, is the Van Eps credo. It goes like this: "A target in life must be very thoughtfully and very carefully chosen, and then pursued with every ounce of human effort." And right or wrong we liked what we were doing. Now here's the luck part: It's just lucky that someone else did, too. And for that I'm grateful. ■