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Mark Wood is probably the world's first heavy metal violinist.

This should be of great interest to rock guitar players, not only because the violin is the guitar's soul-sister, but also because Wood's uncanny approach to hard rock violin incorporates some very axe-like tones, such as heavy distortion and feedback. On his Guitar Recordings debut, *Voodoo Violince*, this Julliard-trained metal innovator also mixes mock two-handed licks, speed picking, and whammy bar dives with his own blazing improvisations, many of which may cause musicians to wonder if they're not hearing the guitar player who finally perfected Jimmy Page's "Dazed and Confused" bowing technique (Mark can also play power chords on any of his fretted electric violins, like the 6- and 9-string double-neck he used for most of the album). Technique aside, Mark's most singular achievement on *Voodoo Violince* is the fact that even though there is absolutely no guitar playing on it, he has still managed to create one of the most devilishly exciting guitar records of the year.

MARK WOOD



Mark Beachum

By Pete Prown

In addition to his solo career, Wood is also an Emmy-nominated soundtrack composer for films and television, who is currently scoring material for the 1992 Olympic Games. (He's also the only violinist ever featured in Mike Varney's "Spotlight" column.) *GUJAR* caught up with Mark in his New York "practice" studio—a small room filled with wall-to-wall synths, computers, sequencers, amps, mixers, TV monitors, and multi-track recording gear—where the composer/instrumentalist detailed his unique style, violin in hand, as well as his arduous transition from classical prodigy to metal innovator, making clear that it is all a part of a bold, and at times intimidating, musical vision he's had since childhood.

"My background is all musical," he begins. "My father is an artist and my mother is a pianist, and my brothers are musicians, too. My mother wanted to have her sons play violin, viola and cello and form a classical string quartet, and that's pretty much what happened. We used to practice all over the house, in any tiny room we could find, even the bathroom. But then the first Beatles record came out, and the sound of rock 'n' roll felt so comfortable to me that I was completely entranced. So, after practicing Beethoven with my brothers, I would go to my room and crank up some Beatles or Allman Brothers, and be taken

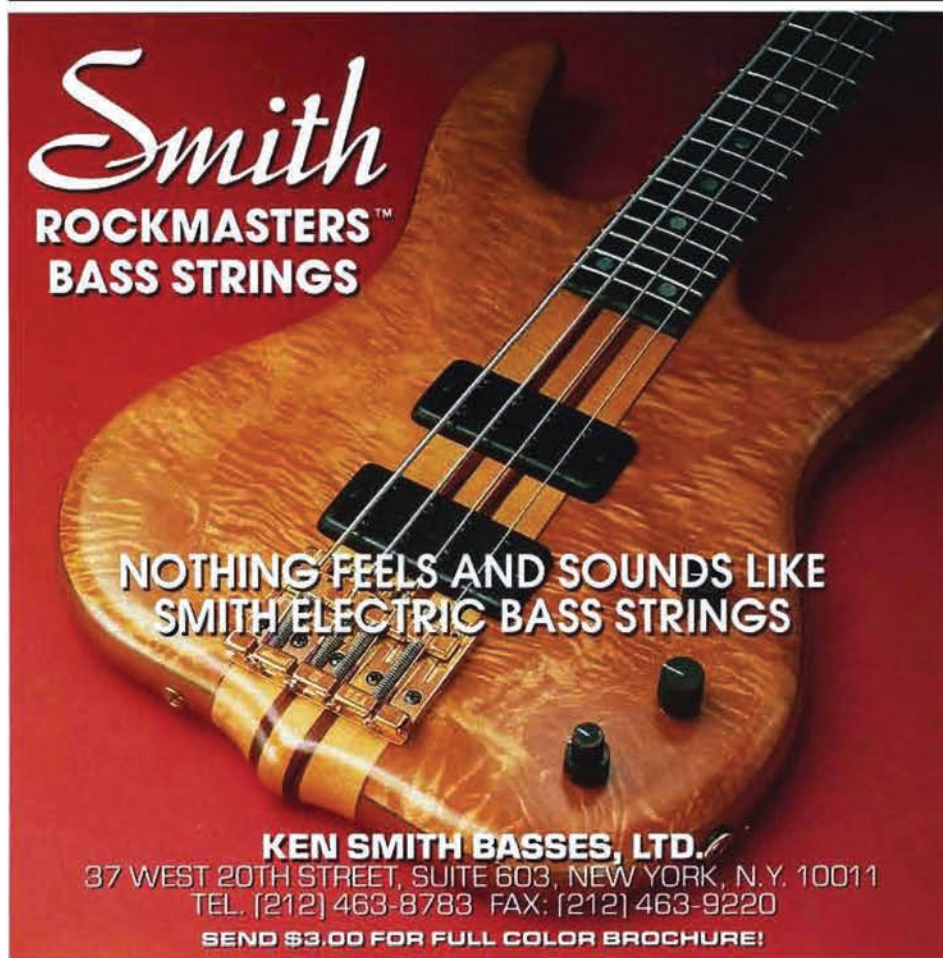
away. The key thing was that rock 'n' roll was such a mystery to me. I could whip off the most complicated classical passage on my viola, but then I'd listen to *Abbey Road* and not be able to understand what was going on. It was incredibly frustrating, but exciting, too.

"Since playing rock seemed unattainable to me, I went through all the classical competitions in high school and big auditions for Juilliard, which I thought would then provide me with an ideal education in jazz, rock, classical, and avant-garde music, but that wasn't the case. My teacher there, who was like the principal violist of the New York Philharmonic, looked at me with my long hair and said, 'I don't want to hear about rock. Just play that Schubert sonata for the 30th time!' So, after lots of tears, and wanting to kill this guy, I decided to leave. I mean, Juilliard is one of the greatest music schools in the world, but staying there for four years would have put my vision of a new music on hold for too long, so I left after just one, even though I was in good standing there. This was before I had even begun learning rock styles, or how to improvise or anything. At the time, if someone said to me, 'Let's jam in A,' I'd be completely lost. So I began unlearning the rigid classical ideas in my head and learning how to loosen. Now, I appreciate all the

classical training and what it adds to my music, but back then it was like homework.

"The first thing I did after leaving school was to paint my violin blue, just to be rebellious. Then I began copping guitar licks and figuring out how to bend a note, which is unheard of in classical violin technique. I had to learn how to convey a feeling, an attitude, which is what rock's all about. I mean, Keith Richards can't play a scale quickly, but he is a virtuoso in *feel*. It took me five or six years to break down some of the stiffness classical players have, but I eventually did it. At the time, I was also giving lessons and living in my parent's woodshop, where they had all these big saws and machines for making furniture. So, I began building violins, trying to create a new instrument for a new technical, musical and visual approach. I took off the traditional classical chin rest and came up with a support that allows the violin to stand up by itself on my chest, freeing me to move, sing, talk, and so on. I also added a sixth string that made it possible to play chords and then later, frets, which help me to know where I am. But I should make it clear that my instruments are still tuned in fifths, not fourths like a guitar. Though they sound like guitars at times, they are definitely still violins."

Even though Mark is a champion of this new violin approach, musically he is still indebted to a slew of great guitarists, some of whose solos he began learning note-for-note after his escape from Juilliard. "I love Allan Holdsworth, and it was a great pleasure copping his licks," he says. "I like Steve Morse, too, but I hate fusion. The Dregs had a whip-it-out-type rock sound that was cool, but I liked Morse more than the band. I adore Steve Vai and have stolen a few of his licks, but since they're derived from the same non-blues material that I use—like Indian music and Frank Zappa tunes—I already know a lot of that stuff. And Adrian Belew's playing on the King Crimson albums killed me—it was just so radical and demonic. But Eddie Van Halen blew me away the most, even more than Jimi Hendrix. He had the blues feel, but also a great technique—he was my guy for guitar! 'Eruption' is filled with all sorts of classical references, like the famous Kreutzer exercise, and I was thinking when I first did it, 'How dare he take my thing!' But mostly, he showed me a way to go after the wild rock thing while also keeping the classical side intact. I copied his guitar licks day and night onto the violin, even 'Eruption.' You can hear the Van Halen influence in all the tapping and tremolo-like effects I do. Actually, all the bending and whammy stuff is done with the bow, and sliding my fingers up and



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down the neck; I didn't need to go out and get a tremolo unit or anything. Same with the feedback and harmonics—that's mostly just bowing closer to the bridge, which is called *ponticello* in violin terms.

"I get a lot of questions about my violin's sonic similarities to electric guitar, and that's a tricky question. [Fusion synthesist] Jan Hammer used to get the same crap, but I don't know why he tried to emulate the guitar so much, since he's such a great keyboardist. I think the answer is that the guitar is trying to imitate the voice of a blues singer, and that's where I'm at. I listen to Aretha Franklin a lot, and the way she uses vibrato, sustain and tone is very influential to me. In fact, I often transfer her vocal melodies to violin to use in my solos. But I think the main reason people hear the guitar in my playing is because I use distortion. If I played you my licks on an acoustic violin, you'd never think guitar, but with the distortion on there's an immediate connection. If you had a distorted bassoon playing blues licks, you'd think it was a guitar. Guitarists just got to the fuzz box before we did. Still, distortion is imperative to my playing. Originally, I used it to get my violin as nasty, horrifying and ugly as I could make it. Jerry Goodman of the Mahavishnu Orchestra messed around

a little with fuzz, and Jean-Luc Ponty used a phase-shifter, but, tonally, I wanted to get down into the sewer of rock 'n' roll, where all the cool people hang out. With a lot of fuzz on an electric violin, you can get into deep growling and feedback inflections that just aren't as wild-sounding on an acoustic. And one advantage a distorted violin has over the guitar is that I don't have to have loud volume to create silky feedback tones. With a bow, you can get them right off, and also, since it's tuned in fifths, power chords are a breeze." (To prove this point, Mark straps on his violin and nonchalantly hammers out Ritchie Blackmore's "Smoke On the Water").

Mark Wood's generous vocabulary of classic guitar licks is quite evident on *Voodoo Vioince*, since it's dotted with musical references to Led Zeppelin, Yes, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, U.K., Steve Morse, and even a borrowed bellows from Johnny Winter. For example, astute listeners will hear "Kashmir" in the title cut, a Mahavishnu-meets-Led Zep riff in "Sledgehammer Hop," Eric Clapton's "Sunshine of Your Love" hook in "Road Work," and a theme from the Yes instrumental, "Cinema," pervading Wood's own "Kobiashi Mahru." While less adventurous rockers merely play covers of their favorite songs, this metal violinist prefers to take subtle elements

of his personal favorites and put them into a brand new context. Even his fired-up medley of Sly and the Family Stone's "I Want to Take You Higher"/"Stand" is less of a traditional cover than a complete musical overhaul.

"Believe it or not, the basics for my album are funk and dance music," continues Mark. "The sound is metal, but the basic groove is one that you can dance to if you wanted. You could say that it's more Keith Richards than Yngwie Malmsteen, though there's still lots of flash on there. But one main thing I wanted to do on the album was transpose some famous guitar riffs onto violin. When I was writing 'Voodoo Vioince,' there was this skull-crushing beat that reminded me of 'Kashmir,' which I loved because I'm a Zeppelin fanatic, so I took elements of the Zep riff and turned them into a wild violin riff with a string section behind me. On the original version, Zeppelin took Indian and Middle Eastern grooves and converted them into a rock epic, so I just took Page's heavy guitar riff and twisted it into a violin part. I also love Indian music, and John McLaughlin's Shakti is one of my favorite bands—L. Shankar, their violinist, is like a god to me. We stuck the Clapton lick from 'Sunshine of Your Love' onto the end of 'Road Work,' and I used the *pizzicato* technique, where I pluck the violin's strings with my fingers instead of bow them. And there's the 'Meeting of the Spirits'/'Black Dog' riff that shows my love for the Mahavishnu Orchestra, a band whose early albums blew me away as much as the Beatles did. I put all these references on the album to show people what bands I like and how they're still part of my music today. It's the same way classical composers have borrowed folk melodies to put into their symphonies for hundreds of years.

"On my next album, I'd like to do a cover of a Zeppelin song and duplicate Jimmy Page licks on the violin, which I think a lot of guitarists would get into. I think guitar players who learn my licks note-for-note will gain a new perspective on soloing, especially since I can play a four octave lick on just one fret. I do a lot of dueling with guitarists in clubs, and they get off on the fact that my playing is so fast, but also bluesy. I'd like to make guitarists and guitar fans understand that other instruments besides the guitar can burn and be sexy. Then again, Niccolò Paganini was getting this reaction 200 years ago, long before rock guitar was invented. In fact, he used to go up on stage, blaze like Yngwie Malmsteen, and people would think he was the devil. To me, that's what rock 'n' roll's all about!"

Right behind Mark's possessed violin

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OUTSIDE CORNER

work on *Voodoo Violence* is a hot rhythm section featuring top fusion bassist Gerald Veasley and smokin' ace drummer Dave Lewitt. "I've known Dave all my life, and after I left Juilliard, we did a lot of jamming together in a Billy Cobham/Jerry Goodman-type vein," recalls Mark. "We did a lot of pre-production for the album right here in my studio, but didn't know any good bass players to get. So I went to see Joe Zawinul in concert and heard Gerald Veasley, who was just laying down these endless monster grooves and I knew that this was the guy for the record. So I gave him my tape and he loved it, and we got together and started the album after only three rehearsals. Our producer, John Stix, also deserves a lot of credit for the way the album turned out. John heard all the wacky, eclectic ideas I had, and he forced me to go in one direction, which really made for a unified, focused record. If I had done it by myself, I would have thrown in a little classical, a little jazz, a little rock, and it would have been a mess. But John knew I liked AC/DC and Zeppelin, so he pushed me to forget about being a big-headed 'artist,' and just make a hot, groin-level metal album."

Mark's handcrafted violins range from a Flying-V-styled 10-string, to his "Spacolin," which has fluorescent wires outlining the contours of a traditional violin, to the aforementioned double-neck (he also uses Crate amps and usually just a smidge of delay). Yet, of all his creations, none elicit more response than "The Violint," a creature of clearly demonic origin. "That's my hand-held violin and it was my main live instrument for years," says Mark. "It has a violin fingerboard on top, but the body is in the form of a human arm and hand with a knife-blade stuck through it, which I painted blood red. You can tell that Gene Simmons of Kiss was a big influence on me, as far as showmanship and rock theater goes. People can get really frightened by that violin and when I'd go to a music store and play, people would crowd around me instantly, not knowing what the hell was going on. Actually, one of the greatest moments in my musical transition from classical to rock took place when I was playing my Violint at a store and this girl came up to me who was very upset. She reached out and handed me a card that read, 'Jesus Saves,' and said to me, 'You *really* need this.' I guess she thought I was the devil or something! You know, just like Paganini. I was delighted, because it was like she handed me a certificate saying that I was now an official rock 'n' roll musician."