

Don Schiff June 2, 2002

“Always go for the good.” That comes straight from Don. He said it just after I turned on the mini-disc recorder that I use to record these interviews, just before the questions began to fly. I missed it when he actually said it, too busy making sure levels were showing and the counter was actually moving not inadvertently stuck on pause. But as I listened back, Don’s voice and “Always go for the good” jumped right out. I don’t think I could sum up Don’s musical career, his relationship to first The Stick and now the NS Stick or the sense one’s left with after talking with Don any better.

Don’s Stick career goes back almost to the beginning of The Stick. And it seems he was good right from the start. Emmett wrote in his 1977 article titled “There Are Others,” published in Music America:

“Don Schiff, a regular bass player in Las Vegas, practices for chops, mastering funk rhythms of bass and chord riffs between his hands. His approach is from the standpoint of a supporting bassist who wants to give more complete support. Last lesson I gave him I wasn’t sure who got the lesson.”

Since then Don’s moved to L.A. and expanded his sound beyond a more supportive bass role into a fully self-contained rhythm section. Always embracing new technology, Don was one of the first to pick up the NS Stick, the hybrid bass/guitar/Stick instrument co-designed by Emmett and Ned Steinberger. Watching Don interweave tapping with strums, slaps and pops on his NS Stick is truly a treat. His quest for new technologies is not confined to instruments. Don is currently pioneering a fully self-contained recording/live performance studio-in-a-laptop dubbed ‘The Mac Rack.’

It’s not easy to make a living in the music industry but Don has managed to do so for over 30 years. All the while, finding innovative and exciting ways to incorporate The Stick into his own music and the music of countless others.

I spoke to Don from his home in L.A. on a particularly nice Sunday morning, after we both had the chance to fully caffeinate ourselves.

Jim Reilly: In Emmett’s book *Free Hands*, there’s this picture of a good-looking young man with a cute dog standing behind a pedal board that looks like something from the original *Star Trek* series. Who’s that guy?

Don Schiff: That’s a great picture, I always liked that one. That was in the mid-’70s, at that time I lived in Vegas. I worked for Ann Margaret, Shirley McLeane. At the time I use to tour with them and Raquel Welch. I decided that I needed a pedal board and I went all out. What’s interesting is that what you’re seeing is actually a small portion of it. It fit in this big road case that had a little space for rack gear. It was *huge*—and a lot of fun—but a big pain in the neck to travel around with. It was really heavy but I use to do it.

JR: We'll talk about the Mac Rack later and bring it full circle.

DS: Excellent.

JR: You got your first Stick in '75?

DS: Yea, I think so.

JR: That was pretty much the beginning of The Stick.

DS: Yea, I guess so. It was a really, really low number, within the first hundred Sticks.

Of course I lived in Vegas and Emmett was in California, so I bought it and I took a lesson to learn how to tap it instead of trying to pluck it or blow it like a clarinet. I thought I'd approach it like any instrument and learn where the notes were and play it. So I did that for a while and I was really happy that I was making such nice progress and learning where the notes are because I wanted to learn how to read on it.

Then I got a letter for Emmett saying, "I've redone the tuning." (Note: Emmett raised the entire tuning a whole step.) That just turned my head around. I'd spent all this time learning where the notes were, but I figured I'd just regroup. And I made a mistake when I regrouped. I called the notes the wrong name. Then I figured, forget it, I'm not going to learn how to read on it for awhile. I gave up and just dove in on how to get grooves going and *how* to play.

When I bought my Stick I wasn't able to communicate with Emmett a lot (pre e-mail). So I figured this is what makes sense to me, this is the way I'll approach it. I'll have my right hand doing some chords and little lines to accompany the bass part, to really lock it in and make it solid and groove. Then I would see Emmett, maybe a couple of times a year, and I remember playing for him and him saying, "I didn't really intend it to be played like that. You really showed me something new of a style that I really didn't think of or encompass with it." I was very, very flattered by that but at the same time I thought, "Well, what's the other way?" Then I'd watch him play and I'd go, "Oh, that makes total sense, that's great, that's genius level playing there."

JR: How was The Stick accepted in Vegas back in the mid-'70s?

DS: Back then it was really interesting. Effects pedals were the rage, there was always a new one coming up each week. Synthesizers were being developed at a really fast rate. I can remember being on stage and the keyboard player saying, "I've got this new synth," and he looked like a telephone operator. He had to plug these cables in and he could only play one note at a time, and I thought *that thing* was cool. Then I heard about The Stick and of course it was something new. Everybody really liked it and came to see it, so I use to incorporate it as much as I could.

JR: How much were you able to incorporate it? Were the people hiring you receptive to it?

DS: It was usually a situation where people hadn't really heard of it. So I'd get a call to play bass and I would just show up with The Stick, pull that out first and not really give them an opportunity to decide. I'd kind of force the hand and as long as it didn't get in the way, nobody really cared. Once they saw it, they'd say, "That thing is pretty cool."

I remember, in Vegas, the Raquel Welch show. She really liked it and said, "You know, we ought to feature that thing." She had a tune that she wrote, I think for her daughter, that was the chosen song to bring The Stick out. So I got this huge, 80ft cable and I walked out in front of the band and I got to play it. But then a couple of days later, I was told, "Don't come out in front of the band anymore." It was such an interesting looking instrument, it drew too much attention away from Raquel. I kept playing The Stick but just kept that cable wrapped up around my feet. I couldn't unwind it and walk out anymore.

JR: Any other Las Vegas Stick stories? Please tell me you played Stick with Elvis.

DS: No, I didn't get to. A lot of times whether I got to use it or not was appropriateness and it just wasn't it. A lot of times I'd get crazy calls. Back in the later '70s the hotels didn't want to have large orchestras any more. The acts that would come in didn't require them that much and they would have a lot of self-contained acts that had their own bands. So they had these production shows and they wanted to put them to tape.

Sometimes I would get what I considered to be a stupid call where they would say, "We want to do a session so we can role the tape but we also don't want to pay for a lot of musicians so bring your Stick and you play the bass part and then you play the guitar parts at the same time."

I remember one of the parts was the Johnny B. Goode tune, and I thought, "You've got to be kidding me. How can you play that classic part, tapping it? This is really going to be something." But I dove in, both hands and tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap...

It wasn't even close. But they weren't looking for authenticity, it was like, "Hey we're saving big bucks here getting two for one and now we can replace the orchestra."

Mostly for shows back then when an act would go out they would play hits that were from another era. The Stick was new so it usually didn't require that they have it, so it was a little tough getting it in shows. Mostly the realm of Stick for me was going into recordings. I would take it in the studio and they would always be receptive to something new, where Vegas was about trying to recapture what was.

JR: When did you move to L.A.?

DS: Nineteen seventy-seven was the border year. I still had a house in Las Vegas and I rented a house in L.A. I used to go back and forth. A lot of the tours would take me back to Vegas. But I always wanted to live in L.A., so we moved here. I wanted to pursue the dream. I always wanted to write and record and Vegas definitely at that time didn't have that opportunity. It's still not a recording Mecca now even though it has grown a lot.

What I also noticed about Vegas at the time was that it was kind of like a retirement gig for a lot of really great musicians who didn't want to tour anymore, mostly jazz musicians from the '50s. I remember being on the band, looking around and seeing Red Rodney, who used to play with Coltrane all the time. He was playing trumpet in the band. He said, "I don't want to travel anymore and this is a great gig. You're in town, you get paid great and you just sit here."

I went on another band and there was this incredible jazz tenor player, James Moody. So I got to sit in with some real jazz greats but I thought I didn't want to stay there a longtime and retire. I was 19 or 20 and I thought, "This is my time now to *not* stay here and do this. I'm going to go to L.A., make records and write music. That was my impetus to leave. People wait their whole lives to play in these orchestras and this cushy gig and make the money but I was coming at it from a different end: "It was a great place to start, I'll save my money and then leave."

JR: What about L.A.? What was the Stick community like in L.A. back in '77?

DS: Really small. Really fun. I'd go to Emmett's. Back then Paul Edwards was at Stick Enterprises a lot, he was a really good Stick player. He was in Kittyhawk. They were, along with Emmett, the big event that you'd go see, and Alphonso Johnson and of course Tony Levin.

I don't recall a whole lot of opportunity to go out and play. You'd play the little clubs, but I think everybody at the same time was trying to find a big opportunity like Tony Levin had to go out and play and really showcase The Stick and make it an integral part of something. That's what I was always looking for. People were playing in little clubs but I was always, for myself, just trying to get in a band or look for an opportunity to go, "Oh, I think this will work."

Coming from a bass player I'd always get called for bass but I'd always pull The Stick out and see what I could do with that. I was always looking for the opportunity. But I always used to think, I don't want to be 'that guy.' I felt bad for Pete Best, who was the original drummer in the Beatles and then for whatever reason he wasn't. Every time I'd get a call and I didn't want to join the band, I'd think, "Is this the one that's going to be the gigantic group that I turned down."

There was this producer one day that had this two-bit office somewhere and he said, "You know, you ought to get together with this guy. He's a country guy and it would be funny to have country Stick."

I didn't know how funny or entertaining it would be but I met with him. A really nice guy. He came over to my house, I had a little four-track recorder. I really, really liked him and I thought, "What are you doing playing country music in Los Angeles? This is kind of crazy, shouldn't you be in Nashville?"

His name was Dwight Yoakam. Of course he wasn't all that successful then but I remember when his album came out I went, "Wait, I played on that demo, I remember that song." I remember him saying, "Well do you want to play in the band?" And I thought, "Country Stick...No, it's kind of a hard long road and I wish you the best..." And by gosh, it worked out just fine for him.

JR: Country seems to be the only kind of music that doesn't have much Stick in it yet.

DS: Yup. It keeps coming up funny for me. I've been in more than one country situation where I've played country Stick. More than I'd like to care to try, I always get that chord you can play in your right hand. It's a major chord inversion, three notes and the root is on the top, the third is on the bottom. Of course you start it with the second and you bend it up to the third and it makes the classic country sound. I've played that lick way too many times. But it's the good country Stick lick.

JR: The patented Don Schiff country Stick lick?

DS: Exactly. When in all country situations, play this lick, everyone will smile.

But you just never know where it's going to come from. I had a referral from Stick Enterprises in the late '70s for someone who wanted to take a lesson. So he comes over and tells me a little about himself, that he was in the Vietnam War and that his hands kind of got messed up and he figured that it felt good to play The Stick and that's why he came to the instrument. But as I was teaching him, he used to ask me the questions I never even would think about.

He wanted to learn how to play the blues. So we started with the basic three chords. I showed him and he plays the first chord and I'm waiting for him to change, he stops and says, "How do you know when to change chords?"

And I thought big red flag. Big problem. So I said, "It's a feel thing."

He said, "O.K., great." Then he plays again and he stops and says, "Well what happens if you don't feel anything?" And then I thought, oh no, this is the student from hell, this is going to be the longest day.

I said, "If you don't know when to change and you don't feel it then it becomes a counting thing." And he said, "O.K."

So I said, "Let's count quarter notes." And he said, "Why do you call them quarter notes?..."

Anyway, he turned out to be a good friend and as we were talking, he said, "One day I'd like to be a screenwriter." Low and behold, years later he ended up getting successful and wrote *Home of My Own*, *Courage Under Fire*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Nick of Time*. So as he's getting successful, he calls me up one day and says, "You know I've always enjoyed your music. I know that you've never scored a film before but I've got this T.V. movie of the week that I've got to do and I want you to the music to it." His name is Patrick Sean Duncan.

He was just so kind. He said, "If you run into a problem, just let me know. We can always hire somebody that's done it before, we've got the budget for it. But if you don't think you need the help, you can just do it yourself. Or if you do, tell the notes to this guy and he'll write it down for you." I figured, "I could do this." And I had a blast. It was the first film that I got to score.

It's funny. You can't plan for these things, they just kind of happen. Life unfolds.

JR: As you're saying that, I'm thinking it's just a matter of getting yourself out there.

DS: Yea, it is. The hard part psychologically is wondering if you're in the right place at the right time or are you just spinning your wheels. I get asked a lot, "How do you get out there? What do you do? How do you bring in these contacts?" And I remember thinking there's just no rule book, no ladder to go up, there's no one thing that leads to another.

When I went to Vegas and got very successful there quickly, I thought this was going to be a piece of cake. I'd played for all these people, I've played in these orchestras, I know how to read, I know how to handle myself in all these musical situations, when I move to L.A. I'm going to be a really sought after guy. Then I moved to L.A. and it couldn't have worked against me any harder. It was like, "Oh, you've played in Vegas. You're one of 'those kind of guys.' We don't want you to play on our record. We don't want you in our band." I had to start over. I couldn't even mention that I'd played in Vegas, it was just counted so heavily against me.

So I began to think that there were no stepping stones. You hear of people who are playing in the street and the next thing you know somebody heard them. Then you get really paranoid and think you've got to be everywhere at all times and just wear yourself out. I use to have to limit bands by going, "Do you have a manager? Do you have a budget? Am I getting paid for this? Is there some kind of plan in place?" That pretty much knocked out most bands right there. No matter how good they are you save yourself a lot of time simply by narrowing down the potential of it.

JR: How did the Stick community in L.A. change through the '80s?

DS: When it all started there was Emmett who led the way in the style of the instrument. I've noticed players adapted towards it and I still see that it's all encompassing, where a

Stick player would not necessarily play a bass line or a guitar line, it would be like a piano, full orchestral voicing of an arrangement. That took off a lot. That seemed to be just the way The Stick was heading. For myself, coming from a bass point of view, that didn't really work for me because I immediately wanted to be able to incorporate the instrument into what I was doing and work with it, not have it go off in some other area.

I saw that it started to branch off in the late '70s and early '80s where there seemed to be a couple of factions The Stick seemed to be heading musically. Tony Levin hammering out the bass lines really led the way for The Stick to carry the bottom with that new, great hammered sound.

JR: What's the state of the Stick community these days, from your vantage point?

DS: Back in the '70s there weren't that many Sticks, let alone players, and there were more Stick buyers than there were really Stick players. I would say that back then, you would hear somebody that could play The Stick and you'd go, "Well, o.k., that sounds nice." But it was always very elementary. It was rare that you would go and hear somebody that could actually really play something.

What I've really enjoyed over the years is not only the different styles, but now you hear people play and you go, "That is great. Not only did I not think of playing in that style, but what great technique. I can't even think of how they did that."

Ten-fifteen years ago, I'd hear something and I could even picture where their hands were on The Stick when they played it. Now, it's unbelievable how they get those cross-fingers going to make The Stick sound so beautiful, lush and full.

There's such command on the instrument now that wasn't there before. You would hear somebody play and you'd forgive the stumbles and get the intent of what he wanted to say though it didn't really come out. Now, what great command people have on the instrument. What great command Greg Howard has over it, just diving in on it.

I see The Stick branching out again. Now there's the singer/songwriter/Stick players that accompany themselves. Instead of it being the solo instrument where you accompany your right hand solo.

JR: Who are some of the people doing that?

DS: That's where I wanted to head. I started with that, then I saw Jim Lampi. When I was just in Japan they had these two Stick players play before me and they had this one guy just start singing and I thought, "It's really branching out."

Kevin Keith, what a wonderful voice he has. Every year that I hear him play, I think, "Wow that's coming together great."

Unfortunately, it just seems like I see everybody after the NAMM shows at those Stick get togethers. That's always so neat. Especially when you haven't seen some of these people in a year so. You remember what they did last time and then you see them come up again and go, "Oh my gosh, that is brilliant." Like Greg Howard and Bob Culberston, their styles have developed so great. And Larry Tuttle with Novi, WOW! Watching that happen over the past few years has been just incredible.

Another one I enjoy is Steve Adelson. I remember years ago, he was the first person I ever heard do more in the jazz vein of jazz guitar/jazz bass and I remember thinking, wow, that's great. Now four or five years latter I think it's incredible what he does.

I never get to hear Emmett enough. Every time I go over to Stick Enterprises I hope to catch him practicing off somewhere. But no, he's well buried in a lot of work and a lot of repairs. Every time I do get to hear him it's so refreshing to go, "Ah, that's where it all started."

JR: Let's jump ahead a little bit. We're 20 years in the future. Tell me where the Stick will be then.

DS: I think 20 years from now it won't be so questioned anymore as a novelty instrument. I think there will be a great solo artist like we revere guitar players. I tend to think it will come from the bottom up, that it will be more or less through bass player incorporation. I guess I'm looking at it from my own eyes. You play in bands and you're playing bass, extended bass parts and they lead up into the guitar realm. MIDI is really coming along with The Stick as well too.

I see it taking over all those avenues of being the piano part where it's the full sound, taking up all the keyboard textures and guitar textures and bass parts and leaving room for other instruments to just solo over top. I see it becoming a 'focal band instrument,' where it holds the harmonies, the chords and the bass lines and enables bands to reconfigure their instrumentation. Rather than The Stick being an added on instrument it will become the basis of the whole sound. I hope.

JR: There's no reason why that won't happen.

DS: No, I don't think so either. We'll have our work cut out for us and we will be doing gigs AND getting paid!

JR: There's the universal musician's struggle.

DS: It is.

JR: Let's talk about the NS Stick. Is it a different mindset playing the NS Stick compared to The Stick?

DS: I thought it was going to be but it's only a different mindset in what you can do with it. By being able to pluck it and strum it, it then opens up the idea that I can still tap my bass line but I can arpeggiate a guitar chord at the same time. With The Stick you're doing two things once, you're tapping with both hands. You're also doing two separate things with the NS Stick but you can also incorporate a plucking technique. Instead of both hands tapping one hand is tapping and one hand is plucking or strumming or they're both plucking and strumming. Another uniqueness to the instrument is being able to pluck the bass line. A lot of cool bass lines have holes where you're not playing. In those spaces, you've got time to reach over and grab a chord, play a little comp line in there. It all has that energy of a plucked or strummed sound, it's not all tapped. That's what delights me about the instrument.

So, similar in that you're doing two things at once. Different in that you have different combinations of techniques. But I didn't find one any more difficult than the other, it just involved a little different approach.

JR: And there isn't more or less you can do on one instrument or the other?

DS: I didn't find it that way. I find that if one can't do something the other can. I've always said my ultimate suggestion is that you have both. You can obviously incorporate one into the other so if you do just have one, it's still good.

JR: The time has come, tell me about the Mac Rack.

DS: It started from going out on tour with way too much gear, too heavy, a lot to set up. Doing a lot of recording, I noticed that it all went to hard drive and it was either Pro Tools or Digital Performer. I'd get to go out on tour with a band and they'd want the sound we got on the album. Then it hit me that I could give them exactly that sound if I could take the studio out on the road with me. That was available as soon as Digital Performer came out with a way to put it in a laptop.

So I took a chance, bought the i-Book, bought MOTU (Mark of The Unicorn) 828, put it all together and it sounded incredible. I figured, great, I'm getting the same recording sound when I go to other studios but what is it going to sound like live when I give them the outs to the house? I did a few gigs with that and it sounded phenomenal. So now, I've replaced my PODs that I use to go out with and all my old stomp boxes. Some of the effects you use, the plug-ins, take up a lot of processor speed so you have to get the fastest computer you can get. Hence, you couldn't get Pro Tools in a laptop.

But now, the new thing is the X-server. That's basically a tower in the space of a rack. Nobody has done it yet, none of the companies have said it will work as long as you don't put OS X in and you put OS 9.1 or 9.2. But nobody has done it yet to see if it can be done. I keep going to the music stores to see if anybody has sanctioned it yet. If that X-server works, it will be the equivalent of taking the full blown recording studio on the road.

Say you're going to Japan, as I just did, and doing a concert and you want it to sound amazing. You rent the back line and you're hearing the same thing you'd hear in your studio. I'm taking a monitored version of it out through the Mac Rack and I'm sending a direct line to the house. It sounds amazing.

Speaking of which, the label that sent us out, Think Tank Media, recorded a concert. It will come out as a DVD as well as a CD. I can't wait to see it. It was funny, they had a huge screen behind us while we were playing. So I go to play my solo. Everybody left the stage and I've got the cameras looking at me. I figured I had a lot to do, I can't be looking at the screen, but I just had to glimpse. I looked out of the corner of my eye and went, "Oh my gosh, I'm as large as Godzilla! This is GREAT!!!"