

Emmett Chapman and The Chapman Stick – Quietly Making a Big Noise with Progressive Musicians

By Jim Reilly

A brief history

The first thing one needs to know about The Chapman Stick and Emmett's contribution to the musical landscape is that the technique predates the instrument. Emmett was a jazz guitar player living and working in Los Angeles in the late 1960s. These were the electric, Jimi Hendrix inspired days of freedom and rock and roll. Emmett was searching for 'that elusive sound in his head.' He had built his own extended-range, nine-string guitar and tried all kinds of different picks, levers and tunings but still wasn't quite there. In an instant, on August 26th, 1969, without really thinking about it, he shifted his guitar from the more traditional horizontal position to almost vertical and started playing hammer-ons with his left hand. In the next instant, his right hand shifted from where one would normally pick the strings, to align at right angles with the strings like his left hand, but approaching the fretboard from the opposite side. He then began doing hammer-ons or tapping with both hands. In that instant Emmett realized that he could play chords with one hand and melody with the other, or chords with both, or counterpoint melody like a piano, but on a guitar, with the immediacy, effects and electricity of someone like a Hendrix.

And that was it. A new technique was born and from that he crafted (and continues to craft) the optimal instrument to realize that technique.

The music

Emmett is first and foremost a musician. If the first key to understanding The Stick is that it was built to explore Emmett's unique two-handed tapping technique, then the next is to realize that Emmett has always developed and refined the instrument through the lens of a musician looking for the least cluttered route to accessing his music.

His first stop with The Stick and his two-handed tapping was Barney Kessel. Kessel had been a friend and mentor to Emmett. The two formed a quartet called Cornucopia. After some initial success, the group failed to gain traction. Next, Emmett joined forces with Tim Buckley during Buckley's incredibly avant-garde 'Stairsailor' phase. Buckley completely divorced himself from his folk music persona and would tear into atonal wailing and completely improvised sonic explorations. It was the perfect blank canvas for Emmett to solidify his new musical ideas.

Between 1969 and 1974, The Stick evolved from the extended range guitar to a much more streamlined, minimalistic instrument, looking pretty much the way the 10-stringed instrument looks today. Emmett also travelled to New York and found success as a solo musician. He was offered recording contracts (which he turned down) and impressed musicians with every performance. Joe Zawinul was one of

the first to see the potential in The Stick and bought one the first five instruments Emmett built. In 1975, after that New York trip, writer Peter Occhiogrosso wrote that along with Zawinul, Gil Evans, Steve Howe, Todd Rundgren, Gabor Szabo, Robby Krieger and John McLaughlin were all interested in Sticks.

Here's the rub

With all that early success, the question now becomes: Why isn't The Stick everywhere? Here's where the greatest advantage and the biggest attraction to the instrument also becomes its biggest challenge. The reason why it works so well creatively is also the reason why The Stick has found its home not in the mainstream music world (although it's courted this world with players like Tony Levin and Nick Beggs) but in the hands of progressive players who, like Emmett, have played either supporting roles or share their music away from the main stages. When Emmett first discovered his technique he was playing in a rock-fusion inspired band with his brother Dan. Emmett showed up with his custom guitar held vertically so that he could play chords, melody and counterpoint lines simultaneously and immediately it was clear that this new voice didn't fit with what the old band was doing.

The Stick's history, especially in the early days is full of stories of mainstream players who picked up the instrument, but could (or wouldn't) find a place for this new voice in their music. Stick player Don Schiff, who has been playing the instrument almost as long as Emmett, tells a story of playing in Los Vegas in the 70s with Ann Margaret's band. Schiff was playing bass and had brought The Stick into the group. The musicians, and Margaret were all impressed and arranged for Schiff to bring his Stick to the front of the stage for a solo. This only happened a couple of times before the management put an end to it saying that it took too much attention away from Ann.

The following theory might help explain. There are three things going on with The Stick. For that matter, this can be stretched out to include pretty much any musician and instrument. You have the instrument itself, the technique employed to play the instrument and the music that the musician creates. When you have someone like Stanley Jordan, who is essentially using Emmett's technique on a standard guitar and playing straight ahead jazz, there's only one new thing (the technique in Jordan's case) that people need to wrap their head around. With Emmett, who's playing a new technique, on a new instrument and playing music that consistently strays outside the lines, it's too much for most to grasp. Which is why Emmett, The Stick and the music Stick players create gravitates very naturally towards those with open minds and progressive ears.

Where do we go from here

The Stick continues to evolve. While in its basic form, The Stick of 2016 looks like Stick of 1974, there have been changes and enhancements in every conceivable aspect of the instrument. The focus however has remained unchanged – to create the sleekest, fastest, easiest to play tool for Emmett's two-handed tapping technique. The latest Stick model is called The Railboard. The Railboard's neck and frets are

cut via a CNC machine from a single piece of aluminum. They're more stable and easier to maintain than any Stick previously. Emmett is exploring many different finishes for the Railboards including a bright bronze colored plasma deposited finish with a brushed texture between the frets. New vacuum deposited Railboard coatings include a subdued chrome like nickel color and a black graphite with diamond dust. Bronze is his current favorite. Sticks can be set up in almost any tuning with 8, 10 or 12 strings in a variety of hardwoods with different pickup modules and even a MIDI pickup option. There's also a hybrid version, co-created with Ned Steinberger, which can be tapped, strummed or plucked, opening up all the different techniques for making music on stringed and fretted musical instruments.

Musicians as well, continue to push boundaries. The big players are still at it. Tony Levin is currently touring again with King Crimson and Nick Beggs' latest solo project, The Mute Gods, should be released by the time this article goes to press. As always, the players on the fringes keep fuelling the creative Stick fire. There are many of those, some of the standouts these days include Per Boysen, Swedish looper who plays the short-scale 12-string Stick Guitar, Mexican group Cabezas de Cera who recently completed a very successful US tour and Abby Clutario with her band Fuseboxx who are becoming big in their native Philippines and beyond. And of course those who have been at the forefront of Stick playing for years, like Greg Howard, Don Schiff, Steve Adelson, Tom Griesgraber, Guillermo Cides and Bob Culbertson continue to play and explore new sonic territory.

At the forefront though, continues to be Emmett. Who, after just celebrating his 79th birthday shows no signs of slowing down. He recently shared the stage at a Stick Night concert in L.A. with Greg Howard, Gene Perry and Cabezs de Cera. Emmett's music and the instrument he created to realize that music continues to push boundaries, challenge audiences and both engage and ultimately inspire exploring musicians to take their music to new, uncharted places.

About the author

Jim Reilly wrote the book, literally, about Emmett Chapman and The Chapman Stick. His biography of Emmett, 'StickMan,' was published in April, 2015 by TwoHanded Press. Jim has played Stick for over 20 years and written for many music publications. 'StickMan' is his second published book. His novella 'The Bass Player' was published in 2013. He currently has begun work on his third, a biography of instrument designer and innovator, Ned Steinberger. Jim can be reached through twohandedpress@gmail.com.