

Greg Howard May 14, 2002

I first met Greg Howard in October 1996 during the first Vancouver Stick Seminar. Many things stand out about that weekend, not the least of which being the clutch on my car going out as I tried desperately to get to the performance on time. I made it, barely, walked through the door and onto the stage. But one of the strongest memories came mid-afternoon on the second day.

I had no idea who Greg Howard was. I don't think most of the folks at the seminar did either. I had never heard him play. Through the course of the weekend, it was clear he had his chops together but he hadn't had the chance to really show us what he could do. Then, while talking about different expressive techniques, Greg started playing Charmed Life. He played the intro without dynamics or the finger-slides, then he played it as it is meant to be played. He got through the introduction and didn't stop. Spurred on by the rapt attention from 17 slack jawed Stick players, Greg played Charmed Life.

I had never heard solo Stick before. Charmed Life is still my favorite solo Stick tune.

It's almost a disservice to call Greg a Stick player. He's a Stick player, one of the finest, but he's much more than that. Greg is a writer, arranger, producer, educator and author. And he does all this, including releasing his music on his own Espresso Records label, from his home base in Charlottesville Virginia. Foremost, he is a musician. Regardless of the fact that Greg plays The Chapman Stick, Greg is simply a great musician.

Whether performing alone, working with the Greg Howard Band or with a drummer he met for the first time the night of the gig, or leading a seminar for that matter, Greg brings a sense of searching and spontaneity that make each endeavor remarkable.

I may have downplayed the significance of The Stick in terms of Greg's musicianship, but make no mistake about it, we are all better Stick players simply because of what Greg Howard has brought to the Stick community and what happens when a Stick is lucky enough to end up in Greg's hands.

I caught up with Greg just after the third Stick seminar in Vancouver and just before his band came over from Holland for an all too short Eastern US tour.

Jim Reilly: So tell me, how does a guy from Charlottesville Virginia get hooked up with a bunch of musicians from Holland?

Greg Howard: I met the bass player, Jan Van Olsen, back in 1998. He's also a Stick player. He came out to LA to meet Emmett and Yuta and they introduced him to me. We got talking about how there hadn't been a Stick seminar in Europe, they wanted to have an event that was a Stick specific event. I asked Jan if he wanted to set it up and he said, "Sure."

Part of it was a concert and I really wanted to play with some local musicians. So I asked him if he could hook me up with a drummer and a sax player. He said he knew “just the guys.” And he did!

We had one rehearsal before the concert. I asked Jan to play with us on a couple of tunes and I liked the sound of the quartet so much that I got really excited about it. I made sure we videotaped the concert and I started working on the record almost immediately after that.

That was in June. I went back to Holland in September then back again in November and finished recording in '99. I went back again in the spring of 2000, did another concert and decided to bring them over to the States to do a little tour on the East Coast. Even though the record wasn't released, I thought it would be a good thing to do so I brought them over in September of 2000 and we did a few shows on the East Coast. That went great, so I brought them out to LA in January and we did a few California shows. This will be their third trip to the US.

JR: How did your playing change in that particular group situation?

GH: Working with Jan playing bass made it very easy for me to let go of the bass line and focus on doing some chordal and textural things with my left hand. And also because of the sax player, I was able to focus on doing complimentary chordal things in the right hand. It really gave me an opportunity to explore aspects of the instrument I hadn't been able to do before.

JR: You've been a solo player for such a long time. Has there been other band projects to that extreme?

GH: When I mad Sol, I did a few shows with some of the guys from that group but in that case I was still the bass player as well. This was really the first time where I had a band that I didn't have to hold down the bass part all the time, even though I do play a lot of the bass lines and we double a lot of the bass lines. Sometimes Jan will play a counter line that is higher than the bass line, like a cello voicing on the fretless.

JR: How long have you been playing Stick?

GH: Seventeen years last month.

JR: And what got you started?

GH: I really wanted a more expressive instrument. I had been a keyboard player for years. I had been playing Fender Rhodes, synthesizers, organs. While I loved the sounds that they made I was always kind of frustrated by the lack of inter-activity. I had seen Tony Levin playing Stick and then I read about it a bunch and it really seemed like it was a good solution for me. Just kind of on a whim I tried one out in a music store when I

was in the market for a keyboard and it really exceeded my expectations. I made the decision to get it then and there.

JR: Instantly there was that connection?

GH: Yea. It really felt right. I had been playing things like The Doors where I was playing bass lines with my left hand, so I was really already set mentally to play The Stick. It really fit the kind of keyboard mentality very nicely.

JR: That was in '85. How long did it take you to become a 'Stickist'?

GH: My standard response to that is: I started playing out about three months after I got it, jamming with friends, things like that. I think they probably would have preferred I waited a little longer. I started arranging pieces that I knew on keyboard for it and started composing on it almost right away. That was really the key to learning it.

I formed a trio with guitar and drums about six months after I got the instrument and already had a body of five or six original tunes. We did covers as well and I sang.

JR: Any of those tunes survive?

GH: No, without the singing they didn't really work. I was playing mostly accompanying lines in the right hand and bass parts. I was the rhythm section. I did a lot of right hand keyboard playing and did the bass in my left hand. Kind of like what Tony (Levin) was doing in the Three of a Perfect Pair era.

JR: When was your first recording?

GH: The first recording that I actually released was Sticks and Stones, which I re-released last year as a duet with Tim Reynolds.

JR: Why did you re-release it?

GH: Cause I really liked the music. I had always wanted to have it out there but it kind of faded as a popular medium for music. It was a little over an hours worth of stuff but it held up surprisingly well in terms of the quality of the recording and I just love the music on it. I really felt like it was a good thing to do. Plus I was going to be going out on the road with Tim to do some shows and I thought it would be a good thing to have.

JR: Tim Reynolds is a Charlottesville musician as well?

GH: He was. He lives in New Mexico now. At that time he was live here.

JR: Charlottesville seems to be a hotbed of culture.

GH: At that time it certainly was. There was a lot of music going on and a lot of different groups. A lot of fusiony jam kind of groups. Tim had a band called TR 3 that was really good. I was their soundman. That's how I originally met up with Tim.

JR: So after that would have been Stick Figures?

GH: That would have been in the spring of '87. In September of '87 we put out a cassette of a live radio broadcast we did. That was called Brand New Age and we called ourselves Sticks and Stones.

JR: When did Stick Figures come out? That was your first solo Stick release wasn't it?

GH: Actually I put out a solo Stick tape in December of '87 called Whispers. Five or six of the tunes got re-recorded for Stick Figures.

JR: Any of those still floating around?

GH: The ones that weren't on Stick Figures?

JR: Yea.

GH: No, I haven't played any of the other ones in a long time. I guess I kind of outgrew the tunes. But some of those tunes, like Big Meadows, Sunday, Softly She Walks and Blue Ridge are on Whispers.

JR: Each disc is really different. Each has a real different feel or flavor to it. Is that intentional?

GH: Yea, I really don't want to release the same record over and over again. Some of my favorite musicians I see falling into that trap, if you like. If you're going to make a new record it really should say something new.

Stick Figures came out in early '93. It came out on cassette first in '92 and then in early '93 it came out on CD.

JR: And was Espresso Records around then.

GH: Espresso Records was started in 1987 with the first Sticks and Stones tape.

JR: How has that worked, being your own record company?

GH: Well you pretty much sink everything you make from each project into the next project. Eventually you build up enough of a catalogue that you can sustain it. Stick Figures is still one of my best selling records. A lot of people buy that one. It's making as much as any other.

JR: It still stands up, to my ears anyway. It's still a really strong musical statement.

GH: I think they all have something to offer.

JR: Any favorites?

GH: I really like the Lift CD. It holds up well. I like it because it's not a "Stick Record." It's really about the band and the sound of playing together. The other extreme of course is Water on the Moon, which is a "Stick Record." It's all about me and The Stick, just a spontaneous thing.

JR: Tell me how the connection with Dave Matthews came about.

GH: Dave worked as a bartender at Millers and we had a common friend, a guy named Ross Hoffman who was really crazy about Dave's music. He decided to really try to push Dave into being more serious about his music. Ross brought Dave to my home studio and we recorded his first demo there. It was a four-song demo and it actually has Stick on a couple of tunes. I put some Stick, some saxophone and a little bit of sampled percussion on it. I even sang backing tracks on one of the tunes.

He formed his own band shortly after that and really wanted it to have electric bass as the bottom end of the band. I probably could have become the keyboardist in that band but I really didn't want to be a keyboard player, I wanted to focus on The Stick. By that point, which was 1990, I had really got the bug to get more serious about Stick.

JR: How did the recording on Before These Crowded Streets come about?

GH: Their first record was an independent record they did in '92 called Remember Two Things. I had recorded a demo version of one of Dave's tunes, called Minarets, that he really liked. I actually went into the studio and recorded on several tunes on that album but they ended up only using that one. And really you can't even hear The Stick on it. It was primarily synthesizer parts I had done on the demo that they wanted to recreate. Even though I got credited for Stick, you can't hear it very well.

The only real performance on a recording of theirs is _____ from Before These Crowded Streets. That was really nice because it opened the door for me to go out and perform with them.

JR: And The Stick is pretty prominent in there.

GH: Yea, if you know what it sounds like. If you don't it just like it's part of the whole thing. The parts are really interweaving. They don't play that tune anymore though. They tried to play it a couple of times without me and just kind of gave up doing it their shows.

JR: How many Sticks have you owned over the years?

GH: I think I've had five. I started out with an ironwood, #695. Then I got a new polycarbonate in 1989, that was #2757. Then I got a new rosewood one in early '95.

JR: That was still a 10-string?

GH: Still a 10-string. I got a Grand in '98 but I didn't really get into it that much. It was still very similar to the 10-string in terms of its tone. I set it up with heavy gauge strings and standard tuning.

JR: It didn't have The Block yet then did it?

GH: The Block wasn't available for the Grand. I just didn't get into it that much so I sold it back to Stick Enterprises.

Then about a year ago, I got another Grand with The Block in the Matched Reciprocal tuning. It was so different, it had the Rails too. It is such a different instrument than my rosewood one that I really feel like I get the best of both worlds playing those two instruments.

JR: You've made a strong connection with Stick Enterprises. How did that come about?

GH: I met Emmett and Yuta in '91 but we had been corresponding a lot prior to that. I used to send my tapes to Emmett and he would always write very thoughtful, encouraging letters to me about each one. Finally in '93, they wanted to sell Stick Figures and Shapes after that. I started going to the NAMM show in '95 to demo the instruments. And our friendship just grew.

JR: You've spent some time at Stick Enterprises, take me through a typical day there.

GH: I don't really know that much about what it's like now, it might be different from when I was there but they're late risers. They're late risers because they stay up really, really late. I've never seen two people work as hard as Yuta and Emmett. They work out of their house. They have people coming into their house to work, so they don't really have that much of a private life because there are always people around. The phone is ringing off the hook, Emmett's in his office running the business, working on instruments, doing everything. And he still finds time to innovate, he's never satisfied.

JR: Let's talk about the first Stick Book. Volume II is coming out. What was the impetus behind putting those together?

GH: I hadn't really been teaching that much. I wanted to develop a notation system to teach what I had been teaching. Emmett and I collaborated on this idea of Staff Tab. It took us a few months to work the bugs out and one day I was looking at Free Hands. There's this picture in Free Hands of note heads on the strings and that gave me the idea

to put the staff and the tablature together and use finger symbols because I wanted to really accurately have a way to convey the exercises and the music I wanted to teach people.

Emmett and Yuta were very encouraging about having another book. Free Hands is a great book but it's more of a users guide rather than a step by step method for the instrument. I felt like it would be really beneficial to people. Since I was playing in a slightly different tuning (Baritone Melody). I thought that would be beneficial too because it was turning into a pretty popular tuning.

I found out at one point, at least that Emmett thought, I was the first person using that tuning. Before he had the Baritone tuning I had already shifted things down to that range. I did that about three months after I got my Stick.

I just really wanted something that I could use to teach people more formally how to play. It was a long project. It took about two years from the time we started it to the time it was actually finished.

JR: Where does Volume II pick up from?

GH: Volume II is a really different book than Volume I. Volume I covered a lot of different basses in a general manner. Volume I gives you the basics of the method. Volume II is really about training your fingers. Anybody whose been to any of my seminars knows it's really about getting your fingers moving. My feeling about playing the instrument is that you have to have the physical vocabulary down in order to let the mental process of making music not be inhibited by your hands.

I looked at the things in my own playing that I thought could be conveyed to other people clearly and concisely. I learned a lot about my playing. I learned a lot about what I didn't know about my playing writing this book too. It was very inspirational to me.

JR: Does it combine with the first book or is it a separate entity on its own?

GH: I think if you hadn't worked through the first book and you area beginning player you would probably have a hard time doing these exercises. They're really designed to be a volume two. I'm working on it in several tunings at one time, so it will be available in more than just Baritone Melody. There'll be a couple of versions for 10 strings, a couple versions for Grand Sticks.

The main thing is to make sure that the core of the exercise doesn't get lost with the transposing. Especially if your deal with certain exercises that are design for specific regions of the fingerboard. My goal is to have one specialty chapter in each book to deal specifically with that tuning, the peculiarities, advantages of each tuning, which I think will be a lot of fun.

JR: We just finished up a seminar. What are your thoughts on the seminars these days?

GH: I think that the people who are coming are more serious about learning how to play. When we first started they were very social. Back in 1996, the Internet hadn't grabbed nearly as many people as it has now. A lot of people felt isolated and really wanted to get together with other Stick players.

I remember at that first seminar in California Larry Tuttle came as a student just so he could come. I had never met Larry before. That was an amazing thing. People came from all over because this was the first time there had been a weekend seminar. There had been other courses but they had been longer.

People have had their instruments longer too. It's getting to the point now where people have had instruments in their hands for many years.

JR: Where are the seminars heading?

GH: One of the things we talked about at the seminar was really trying to focus on advanced technique in a dedicated seminar for intermediate players. A lot of people have gone through the course that I've done and are ready for the next step. I think that there's going to be more frequent seminars but with smaller core groups of students really concentrating on specific aspects.

JR: What's next for Greg Howard?

GH: I really want to record some of these cover tunes I've been doing over the years. I feel like I know them so well now, they feel really good. I think that until I actually get them recorded though, that I'm not going to move on from there. I want to move into a different kind of playing and so I need to clear out some of the cobwebs, for lack of a better term, that have settled on. I'm not being very positive about this but I am really interested in doing this because I like playing other people's music on The Stick. I feel like it's a validating step for the instrument. I also just like to explore other people's compositions.

I'd really like to start arranging some music for multiple Stick ensembles. I really get a charge out of doing it at the seminars. The little bit of group playing we did at the last one was fun but playing that Terry Riley piece (In C at the Kamloops Seminar) was a big kick. Because of the range of the instrument, it really allows for something to happen. If you get a few people together who really know what they're doing, the sound could be unbelievable.

JR: What about the future of the instrument? Where do you see The Stick going in the next few years?

GH: I think that it's going to continue to break out into new genres of music. I think you'll see The Stick show up in country music in a way it hasn't before. You'll see a pop star playing The Stick.

JR: Any bet who that's going to be?

GH: I don't know, these days pop stars have to start out pretty young. Or we'll see it in some famous rock band's lineup. While Gabriel was famous and Crimson on a certain level, there's still no Stick magazine out there, there's no pop culture worshipping The Stick. Which I think is actually to its benefit but I think there will come a time when somebody is going to be playing it and it's going to breakthrough in a big way. I always hope that might be me. (Laughs)

That's the goal, to reach people with your music. However that happens is good.

JR: Any advice for young Stick players?

GH: Start before you did. Start as early as you can. Try to forget that it has anything to do with the guitar and treat it like it's its own instrument. Find the things in it that are really unique about it and learn from that because we've got a whole history of people trying to emulate other instruments on their own instruments and it kind of ends up stumbling into novelty in a way. Just because you can play bass notes doesn't mean that you should play bass parts. There's a whole new harmonic structure, rhythmic and counterpoint and physical interaction that no other instrument has. The piano doesn't have it, the guitar and the bass don't have it.

JR: All right, pick your five desert island Stick CDs and your own are off limits.

GH: Let's see, Discipline, El mundo de interior du los planeto, SHHHH by Steve Hahn...

JR: That's three, I need two more.

GH: Maybe Splendore and Parallel Galaxy.

JR: Why those five?

GH: I think those are really successful Stick records. The Stick is fully realized on those records. I think Steve Hahn's record particularly. People don't really know about that record, that record I really love.

JR: Any last thoughts?

GH: Yea, I would just say that it's possible to find an instrument that really fits your temperament. Which goes for anybody whether they're interested in Stick or not. Try different things out. Don't be satisfied with what you've got. Look around, see what's there. Our own preconceptions are our own worst enemy.

JR: On that note, what makes a good Stick player?

GH: Somebody who knows not to do more than they can.

JR: By that you mean?

GH: Somebody who let's the music come out rather than be a showoff. A lot of people think that just because you can do something that you should do it. Anybody can be guilty of that whether you're a drummer or a piano player or guitar player. I think that a great musician is somebody who does what's in his head, really pays attention to the music that's in their head.