

Talking Sticks®

James Reilly talks with players, fans, and the people behind the scenes of the Chapman Stick, a five and a quarter octave stringed and fretted musical instrument played with a two-handed tapping technique.

Emmett Chapman created The Stick in order to facilitate an original, unique method of playing stringed instruments he first discovered on Aug. 26, 1969. Publicly available since 1974, The Stick has found its way into the hands of thousands of musicians across the world. The Stick offers orchestrally complete live music: bass, chords, melody, even percussion played simultaneously.

These interviews can be heard regularly on CFBX radio, 92.5 FM in Kamloops, B.C. Canada.

Steve Adelson
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What do you get when you combine one of the foremost Chapman Stick players with a seasoned group of New York musicians, and then throw in a couple of music legends?

If you are Steve Adelson, you get one of the most exciting and accessible CDs to feature The Chapman Stick. Steve's new album *The Answer's Inside* picks up where his last disc *Sailing Down the River*, Sane leaves off, offering a feast of jazz forms and sounds. From the Latin influenced "Fran's Mambo" to the McCoy Tyner inspired "The Answer is Free," Steve has managed to fuse a tight, concise group sound that places the overall music ahead of virtuoso musicianship.

After a quick congratulations on the Yankee's 2-1 win over the Mariners and quicker geography lesson to locate just where my home town of Kamloops is in relation to New York, Steve and I got down to business. We spoke about the new album, making music with some really great players, the state of Stick playing in New York and looked towards the future. And those music legends Steve worked with? Don't worry we talked about Larry Coryell and Tony Levin as well.

James Reilly: Let's start off with the new CD. What were your plans and goals going into the recording?

Steve Adelson: Just to put out the best music possible. It wasn't necessarily to show off technique or a stylish sort of thing. It was just to get a lot of good musicians and put out the music I've played for a long time without trying to showing off the fact that you can do two things at once.

I think the goal was achieved.

A lot of people who listen to it don't hear The Stick out front. It's just music, that's the bottom line. When you listen to a CD, you don't see anything, you just want to hear good music. Hopefully that came across.

JR: How did you go about tracking down the people on the disc, and putting that together?

SA: I've known a lot of the players for a long time. I've known the percussionist for 10 years. His name is Nydia Matta. I've been playing with the drummer, Vince Chericco, on and off with for 3 or 4 years. The vibraphone player, Bryan Carrott, was on my previous CD.

The harder people to get, of course, were Tony Levin and Larry Coryell.

I've known Larry for about 10 years, but we've never recorded together. I was interviewing him for Vintage Guitar Magazine and I asked him if he wanted to do a CD. He just said, "Sure, why not."

He lives in Florida and was up in New York playing at the Blue Note, so we just worked out a date when he was off.

Tony, I just contacted and he was gracious enough to say "sure," and set it up at Jerry Marotta's place.

Everybody was just open to the idea. There were a few other people I wanted on the CD but we just couldn't get the timing right. Rather than wait and sacrifice Tony or Larry, I just went with those dates that we had. There will always be another CD.

The sessions with Larry and Tony came out with no problems. No rehearsals, we just went in there and did it. I'm really pleased with the results.

JR: Let's go back to your pre-Stick history. What was your music before you picked up The Stick?

SA: I was still a jazz player, a jazz guitar player with the hollow body thing. I played around town with my own groups. I had a two-year run where I did a lot of duos with a some pretty famous jazz guitarists: Tal Farlow, Joe Pass, John Scofield. It was a good learning experience.

I had studied with one teacher in particular. His name was Charles Didier. Then I took a lesson here and there with different people, but this little two-year run of playing duos in clubs was a real learning experience. I played with some really great horn players as well. I did a lot of finger picking, pretty much anything that sounded good guitar wise, but not too much of the heavy rock stuff.

JR: And then you saw Emmett in 83?

SA: I saw Emmett, in 84 or 85. He came to New York for a big guitar show in Madison Square Gardens.

I had dabbled a bit with the technique. I had seen other people do it and I knew this was the instrument I was going to get. A few months later I had one. I've had about 2-dozen of them now, on and off.

I went from 10 string to 12 string, through the polycarbonate and the old MIDI.

JR: So was it an instantaneous sort of thing, you just saw it and knew that was the instrument for you?

SA: No.

LAUGHS

JR: Did it take picking it up and having it for a while?

SA: I went into Sam Ash music, they used to carry (Sticks) in the store. I knew the owner really well. He said “take one home for a month, if you like it then pay me, if you don’t then return it.” So he kind of lent it to me for the month. Needless to say, that month changed my life.

Now I’m a Stick player.

I still teach guitar but I don’t play it anymore.

JR: Let’s talk about gear, since we’re going that way. Tell me about your current set up and the stuff on the album.

SA: I have 3 Sticks. On the album I pretty much use MIDI Stick because I play through a VG 88, to get the simulator for the amplifier.

JR: Are there any MIDI sounds, any straight MIDI sounds on the album?

SA: Yea, there are a couple.

On “The Answer is Free”, at the beginning there is a sort of marimba, xylophone kind of sound and then it goes into a piano thing. That’s MIDI. The first minute and a half are all MIDI sounds through the GR 30. Then there’s some straight, regular grand piano, not by me, by the piano player. At the end there is this screaming Pat Metheny kind of sound. That’s MIDI also through the GR 30. And the rap song at the end of the album also has that MIDI sound.

Otherwise, I’m using the MIDI pickup to go through the VG 88 to get the more guitar type of sounds. I was very pleased with it. If you tweak it up right, you can get some really nice sounds and have more flexibility.

JR: What about the bass side? What are you running that through?

SA: I’m running that through the SWR Workingman’s 15.

It was nice in the studio. Between the two amplifiers, I had eight or nine outs to the board. We had direct, we had microphone, we had MIDI, without the MIDI, so when you go into the studio to mix, you have all this flexibility. I think there were six sounds on the treble side alone.

Then on the bass, we had the microphone, we had the direct. So if you want a little more high, a little more low, each track offered a different kind of sound. You didn’t have to

play with the E.Q. for that one track, you can just mix the different sounds to get one nice sound. Hopefully.

JR: Tell me about the Snake Stick (SEE PHOTO).

SA: The Snake Stick is a maple Stick which I enjoy playing a lot. I was doing a guitar show, a vintage guitar show, and there was a luthier there from Canada named Peter McCilton. We just started talking about it. He makes these incredible guitars and we just decided to have some fun with it. I was in Montreal, we designed this snake thing and two months later it was done. Now I have it and it is quite unique. I wish I had some MIDI on there but that's for another time I guess.

JR: It's just the standard pickup on there?

SA: Yea, I only have one MIDI Stick right now. I have another one on order. The VG 88 offers so many sonic possibilities. I'm just kind of addicted to that right now. I really like the natural Stick sound also, but you just have that one sound. MIDI offers you so much more possibility.

JR: It's just the stock passive pickup? It's not the block?

SA: Right, I do have a Block Stick also.

JR: How do you like the sound of the Block compared to the passive pickup?

SA: I like the Block sound. But then rather than switching Sticks for each tune, I just step on a button and I can get that Block sound, a Les Paul sound or whatever. That's the flexibility from the MIDI pickup. As a matter of fact, sometimes when I play now I use the MIDI and don't even plug in the treble side of the standard pickup. There just aren't enough holes in the amplifiers sometimes.

MORE LAUGHS

JR: Tell me how The Stick is being accepted in the jazz world. I remember seeing the article you wrote for Downbeat. Is it becoming more accepted? Are people recognizing it for what it is?

SA: I think that guitar players may feel threatened by it. Bass players definitely do. They see it as a bass. But now I don't call my bass player friends for gigs because I don't need them.

I think the traditional jazz guys just have this thing. The word traditional means traditional and if your not playing a sax or a trumpet, they don't want to know this other voice that looks like something from the future. It's not from the future. It has a history now, but they still look at it as a futuristic kind of instrument. It's the same kind of

attitude they had toward synthesizers. It was not part of the jazz tradition, although it's creeping in more and more.

People are accepting it more. Still there are a whole bunch of guys who just want to play traditionally. They don't even want an electric bass. They just want the upright. So when I show up with these things, sometimes I get these dirty looks.

The people I play with accept it, but sometimes when I go to jam sessions they just look at me funny. Usually when I'm done they see that I am doing standard stuff with them, it just doesn't look the same.

It's not my own crusade, but I'm getting more acceptance as I fit into the role more. If I play a little bit outside of their lines though, I'm backtracking into that weirdness again. I guess it depends on the situation. More people are open and there are some experimental players, some more electric players that are obviously more open to it and in fact are excited by it.

JR: Is there a lot of work for a Stick player in New York these days?

SA: There's not a lot of work for anybody on New York these days. It's a tough situation. When you're playing instrumental music there are not a lot of venues and when there are venues, they don't pay a lot of money. There's work if you want to work for free.

JR: That's not work!

SA: Right, that's not work, that's play. I think that's what it is, you play, so why should you get paid?

I'm getting more and more openings but again, the money is not a priority, at least not for me. It's a little better as a Stick player you can go in as a solo or a duo; you don't have to split a little bit of money five ways. There are just not a lot of venues, unless you want to travel a lot, and then it's costly to be on the road.

Hopefully, the new CD will open up some other things. If it clicks, if it gets picked up by a label, which I have some high hopes for, then the festivals could open up. There are only so many clubs in a city even as big as New York that you can't make a living doing what I'm doing. That's why I teach a lot.

JR: Tell me about your influences, Stick and non-Stick.

SA: There are a lot of good Stick players but I wouldn't say the influence comes from there. I never looked at The Stick as an instrument to pursue its own kind of musical course. Basically, it just has to hit me as music.

JR: Who are you listen to right now?

SA: I always listen to Wes Montgomery. And Pat Metheny, those are probably my two biggest influences.

JR: Both of those come through in your music.

SA: When I was learning jazz guitar, Wes knocked me out, just his creativeness. I guess because he wasn't schooled in a traditional way. There are guys who know a ton more than he did and have more technique. But the soulfulness and the ideas and creativeness still amazes me today. Django Reinhardt also, those two as straight guitar players.

Pat Metheny more from the writing, arranging and presentation. To me, every song is like a movie with a beginning, middle and an end. It builds. It has all the qualities that music should have as far as dynamics and all that.

I listen to a lot of piano players because of the chords. If you're going to be playing all those strings and you have all those possibilities you want to listen to as many harmonic possibilities as you can, like Theolonius Monk, McCoy Tyner. Actually one of the songs on the CD was really influenced by McCoy Tyner. The song called "Nada Chants", which Larry is on.

Rock players like Jeff Beck, people like that. Technique wise, you get influenced by your peers, Bob (Culbertson), Emmett, people like that.

JR: What does the future hold?

SA: Just keep going, I guess, musically.

The CD is being shopped right now. We are talking to some companies, I won't mention yet. Optimistically, if it works out I don't know what is going to happen but life will change, hopefully.

If you don't have a label, if you go independent, it's a constant struggle. You can sell them on your own, at gigs or whatever, but I don't think it ever translates into a full career. It's just always a struggle because you're on your own.

The goal is to get a decent company interested, to pick it up and use their publicity and press and all that kind of stuff, their promotion.

I've gotten real good response. That whole jam band kind of thing with Medski, Martin and Wood and Charlie Hunter, these guys are playing fairly big venues, not scuffling for \$100 a night playing clubs. Which might be romantic but I've been doing for 30 years. The romance is off.

LAUGHS

JR: The honeymoon is over?

SA: Right. It would be great to play in some larger venues, jazz festivals, but I think to get that kind of clout, you can't be an independent and not have the power behind you of a decent record company.

As much as everybody thinks they are a little too powerful, there is a necessity for them sometimes.

JR: Any last thoughts, words for aspiring Stick players out there?

SA: It's a wonderful instrument. It's very expressive. There's tons of stuff on there. If you play Stick already, just try to keep open and listen to other players. Don't be locked into just what the instrument offers you.

When you play guitar there are chord books and videos and stuff and you kind of get into this idiomatic sense of playing. You play like your idols and you play like your peers. But I think what The Stick offers, that is great for exploring, are all these open possibilities, all the strings, all the fingers, all the different techniques. I just enjoy playing it all the time. It's so open and if you have that searching kind of personality, there is always something you can find.

That's what it offers me.

There's just something always adventurous and the satisfaction of achieving that destination is just wonderful.

I hope that doesn't sound too poetic?

JR: Just poetic enough. Thanks.

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