

Dennis Budimir

Guitar's Eclectic Wizard

Having the admiration and respect of one's peers is gratifying for an artist and it's something Dennis Budimir enjoys. His name is often spoken with a certain awe by other players and deservedly so. His cachet as a first-call guitarist for decades in Hollywood belies the rather enigmatic aura that has somehow become his calling card. That reputation is ironic because he's one of the most charming and genuine people one would ever hope to meet. And he personifies the fact that having a likable personality is a prerequisite for being a top studio player. Nevertheless, even the great Joe Diorio is reputed to have called Dennis "a mystery man." But if he is so, perhaps it's because he's his own person and someone with an appealing self-confidence that's unaffected by time and trend. I found him gracious in his comments and great fun to talk to.

If you're lucky enough to have, or find what he calls his "recordings from the Middle Ages," in particular his *Alone Together* album, you'll hear him take such tunes as "East of the Sun," "I Can't Get Started" and "Embraceable You" through breathtaking paces. They're simply timeless renditions with progressive horn-like lines and inventive chord changes that'll have you listening repeatedly.

Like many veteran studio players, he comes from a jazz background. In his early career he worked with Chico Hamilton, Eric Dolphy, Bud Shank and other jazz luminaries before establishing himself as one of the top session players in L.A. He's flexed his protean chops for such diverse artists as Quincy Jones, Tom Waits, Randy Newman, Julie London, Herbie Hancock, Harry Nilsson, Ravi Shankar, Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, Ringo Starr and even the Partridge Family. Such credentials no doubt contributed to his being honored with NARAS's MVP (most valuable player) Award "For Consistently Outstanding Performance as a Guitarist" for four consecutive years from 1975 through 1978. The award wasn't given out in 1979, but in 1980, Dennis received NARAS's Emeritus Award for "Consistently Outstanding Past Performance." Both awards can be conferred only by the music community, which comprises musicians, producers, conductors, composers and arrangers.

He has hundreds of film credits but a very short list would include: *City Slickers*, *All The President's Men*, *M*A*S*H*, *High Plains Drifter*, *Body Heat*, *Airport*, *Caddy Shack*, *Silent Movie*, *North Dallas Forty*, *Ordinary People*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Norma Rae*, *Sugarland Express* and far too many more to mention here. He's probably played on more films than most people see in a lifetime. His TV, record date, and commercial performances are equally as impressive and comprehensive. Suffice it to say that Dennis Budimir is one of the most often-heard instrumentalists in the world.

I talked to him shortly after he completed a recording session with the legendary arranger Sammy Nestico that included a who's who of Hollywood's studio elite. Dennis had also just given an in-depth interview for broadcast on Columbia University's radio station, so luckily, he was well prepared to recollect a great deal about his career which has spanned more than forty years.

Our conversation included his observations about his early days as a jazz player, mostly in New York and L.A., his studio career, musical influences, guitars and electronic equipment, and memorable artists who have helped shape his attitude and artistry.

I remember listening to an Al Hendrickson interview in 1972 in which the interviewer asked Al who he thought were among the best and brightest young players of the day. Dennis Budimir was the first person he mentioned. That's an endorsement with some weight behind it. We also extend our thanks to another studio great, Mitch Holder, for helping facilitate this rare interview with one of guitar's most intriguing masters.

JC: Let start at the beginning. Who or what got you jazzed about the guitar as a kid?

DB: Let's see. When I was about eleven, or maybe even younger, I wanted to play an instrument - I think a ukulele of all things. So I went to a music store and asked to see a uke, and they showed me one, but the fellow there said, "Let's see if your hand is big enough to fit around a guitar neck." It was, so he suggested that I take guitar lessons.

JC: *So you took lessons. Which method books did you go through?*

DB: I don't remember which books, but I had a teacher named Bill Lyons and I studied with him for a while but I don't recall any of the books in particular that we used.

JC: *I just wondered if you ever got into the Mickey Baker books that were so popular. They were some of the first guitar books with really good chord forms and ways to use them.*

DB: Well you have to remember this was over fifty years ago.

JC: *What about your first guitar?*

DB: It was a Stella – a very cheap guitar - probably plywood. And due to the fact that I had no calluses, my fingers would bleed and I was blaming that on the guitar, which had a very high action. Then, I think my folks bought me a relatively inexpensive Martin.

JC: (laughs). *Stellas are legendary for their horrific action. But so many players started with them. Mason Williams even wrote a song called "\$13 Dollar Stella."*

DB: Oh that's funny.

JC: *So, your parents encouraged you?*

DB: Oh, I wouldn't say that. Again, we're going so far back, and I wouldn't say they encouraged me, but they allowed me to do it and they paid for my

lessons and my instrument. But I don't recall that they were on my case to study or anything.

JC: *I read where you were influenced by Tal Farlow and Jimmy Raney.*

DB: Probably as a very, very young guitar player, but when people ask me who my influences were, meaning guitar players, the answer is: nobody! And I'm not trying to be contrary, but my main influences, because I consider myself a jazz player, were Charlie Parker and Bud Powell.

JC: *That's very hip. But did you ever get to hang with Raney or Farlow later?*

DB: Yes, when I was with Chico Hamilton, or maybe Peggy Lee, in New York. Many years ago there was a picture of Jimmy Raney in a Gibson catalog with his Charlie Christian guitar when he was a very young man, and if you ever look at some pictures of me with my Charlie Christian, we look like we could have been cousins.

JC: *I know the ones you're talking about.*

DB: Anyway, I called him up and either he knew of me, or maybe I just told him who I was, and went over to see him. And I got to see, and even play, his Charlie Christian. But it was in such bad shape that his baby had a habit of putting his rattle inside a hole in the back of it (laughs). The guitar sounded lovely but it wasn't really in pristine condition.

JC: *(laughs) I wonder if that was Doug who became a fine player.*

DB: Don't know. That could be.

JC: *Well, let me back up. When did you begin your professional career?*

DB: The first job I had with anybody well known was with Harry James when I was 19 in 1958. Then I went with Chico Hamilton in '59 and '60. After that, I went with Peggy Lee in '60 and '61 and got my draft notice while I was in London with her.

JC: *Did you get to be in the army band?*

DB: No, that was a drag. I was stationed at Fort Ord in California and tried to do everything I could to tell them that I was a famous young guitar player (laughs), and one officer took a liking to me but nothing really happened. I was put in a meteorological division that released balloons to determine the atmosphere so the artillery could make elevation and azimuth corrections for their guns. Do you follow what I'm saying?

JC: *(laughs) Oh yes, I was in an artillery unit.*

DB: Anyway, I ended up in Munich, Germany during the Berlin Crisis and talked my way into the drum and bugle corps. I played cymbals with them. Then I got out early, predicated on my going to school, and went to a state college for a year.

JC: *I've been listening to you a lot lately, in particular, your "Session With Albert" recording from 1964, and your solo album, "Alone Together," from the same year, and your playing was so modern and progressive. How has it changed over the years?*

DB: Unfortunately, for all intents and purposes, I probably stopped playing jazz on a regular basis around 1964 because when I got out of the army I started to get a few dribs and drabs of studio work and there wasn't much work elsewhere for jazz guitar, which had been my focus. But that's an

interesting question (laughs). Jazz-wise, I suppose it's changed, but who knows? I'll have to play sometime (laughs).

JC: That's interesting to me because I was reading an old blindfold test with Joe Pass in which the interviewer put on an Eric Clapton record. And Pass said, "I don't know who that is, but there are guys in the studios who can do that on demand all day long." What is the prevailing attitude of studio players, especially the older ones who've studied years to master their instruments, toward rock stars who are making heavy bucks playing three-chord songs?

DB: That's an easy one to answer because I could have been put into that category, because I came in with, not a snooty attitude, but an attitude that jazz players were the better players; but the more I got into the studio thing, I realized that while some areas of rock and roll and country may not be as sophisticated as jazz, in order to be very good at those forms it requires knowledge, talent, skill and conception similar to what you have to have in any music, including jazz and classical music. So I modified whatever feelings I had. And after almost forty years of being a studio player, I have a great deal of respect for people like Larry Carlton or Robben Ford or whomever. Larry and I worked hundreds of dates together and he always amazed me with his expertise in what he did well, which is contemporary rock guitar.

JC: That's a great answer, but what I'm talking about, more specifically, are pop groups and pop stars.

DB: Well any good musician would not think so well of groups or any players who are not very good. But again, for example, I did hundreds of dates with Glen Campbell, who was an unknown when I got out of the army. He was a young longhaired kid who'd gotten into the studios. And we did literally hundreds of dates together. He wasn't a real reader or a sophisticated musician but he was great at what he did. He would always sing little tunes to me when we were sitting side by side on dates and I always thought he was a great musician for what he did. I wasn't analyzing

him with my nose in the air from the standpoint of jazz, and obviously later he became a big star.

But I've sat next to, and listened to people, that you'd want to throw up over because they were such terrible musicians. But Glen was certainly not like that at all. He had a great ear, had good time, and did what he did within his own boundaries. So he couldn't play jazz, and I don't think you'd ever say that he could, but again, it goes back to what I said before, you can be a good player, but not necessarily a jazz player.

JC: Do you think there was deterioration in the sophistication of pop music that began in the sixties?

DB: I guess you could say that. But again, being a studio player I have a different perspective than I did, or would have had as strictly a jazz player. My view has broadened so I analyze things from the point of view of the music and musicality within that framework.

I'll tell you. The guy who really turned me around to listening to rock guitar was Louie Shelton. I remember doing a date for Mike Melvoin, a very good jazz pianist, arranger and composer. I think it was a Peggy Lee date at A&M that Louie and I were on. And he would play very simply - not a lot of notes - but very tastefully. And I said to myself after that date, "Man, if Miles Davis was an electric rock and roll guitar player, that's how I think he'd approach it." That really turned me on to listening to that style more seriously. Louie's playing was so tasteful and so sophisticated. So, then I got into contemporary music and started to like it. And no doubt, Larry Carlton was influenced by Louie as well because he took that style and really elaborated on it. I've done many dates with Larry - they would probably number in the hundreds - and he would constantly amaze me. But I have to say that the one I first heard play that style was Louie.

And speaking of Larry, one day we were playing a date together at the Record Plant. I think Chuck Domanico, the great jazz bass player was there and I believe drummer John Guerin was too. And often, before a date the rhythm section would play - maybe a jazz tune or a blues or whatever. So we did, and when we finished, Larry leaned over to me and said, "Can you teach me how to play like that?" And that was a high compliment from someone

like Larry, who I really respect. I never forgot that. I really felt very pleased that he said that because I know he meant it.

Larry was the first guy I ever heard who used a volume pedal to great effect. It wouldn't be a steel guitar sound or a country thing but rather lyrical, sparse things with or without overdrive dialed in with a volume pedal. And I thought, "Man, that is really hip."

JC: I wonder if he used one of those old DeArmond pedals.

DB: Oh yeah, exactly!

JC: Well, he's certainly an inventive player. He tells a story about bending a note up a half-step or so before he picked it. And Tommy Tedesco heard it and said, "Larry, what did you just do?" So, you're right, even veteran players can benefit from younger players' ideas.

DB: Right. Yes.

JC: You've worked with so many heavy hitters because you are one, yet have still maintained a busy schedule as a first-call studio player. Did you ever think about leaving the studios and going back on the road?

DB: No, because I had done that with Harry James, Chico Hamilton, Peggy Lee, and then with Julie London in '63 and '64 after I got out of the army. I hated the road, and I still don't like to travel, but I've often wondered. Eric Dolphy and I both left Chico Hamilton at the same time in New York. I remember the night at Birdland when we both gave him notice. Eric opted to stay in New York and do the jazz thing and I opted to come back to L.A. and do the studio thing. And I've often wondered what would have happened to me and my career had I stayed strictly with jazz. But I don't necessarily have any regrets.

JC: *When did studio work become a way of life for you?*

DB: It just gradually happened. I started doing demos and one thing led to another. Tommy Tedesco, Bob Bain, Al Hendrickson and some of the other established players started throwing me work and things started to happen.

JC: *I read where you were considered Tommy Tedesco's first protégé.*

DB: He said that?

JC: *Don't know, but I read it on the site that has Tommy Tedesco's eulogy.*

DB: Oh?

JC: *Your name is mentioned as being in attendance and in parentheses it says, "Tommy's first protégé."*

DB: Well that's nice. He always had a great deal of respect and affection for me as I did for him. And I might add, that at his service, it was a who's who of L.A. guitar players - and I have a picture of it. All of us played. Lee Ritenour, John Pisano, Mitch Holder and many more were there and it was quite a service.

JC: *Yes, Tedesco was everybody's avuncular "older brother."*

DB: That's right.

JC: *You did an interesting interview in a book about studio players in which you talked about what it takes to establish and maintain a career in the studios. Would you comment on that for our readers?*

DB: I don't remember too much about what I said in that book, but you laughed at what I said about having a sense of humor.

JC: *Sure, because I remember your first piece of advice was, "Become a doctor!"*

DB: (Laughs) Right. You do need a sense of humor and you have to have a thick skin as well. Sometimes you don't get many compliments or you get criticized. They're not trying to be mean to you but if the composer doesn't know you, he might say, "I don't like what the hell you're playing." So you can't take things too hard. You should be able to read well and play all the styles. And you have to be aware that there are so many great players in L.A. that you're constantly competing with. And now, unfortunately, it's not a good time for the guitar. When I was starting out there were sixty or so record dates a day! There were also assorted TV shows, motion pictures, jingles and what have you. But today the business is not good at all, especially for rhythm section players. It's tough. So things have really changed.

JC: *Do you think Nashville would be a better option today than L.A. for someone who could cover that country style?*

DB: I have no idea because I don't know the situation there.

JC: *It's obvious that you were often called because the contractor either wanted the Budimir sound, or at least the Budimir reliability, but were you ever asked to sound like someone else?*

DB: I remember one thing in particular where an ad agency was producing a commercial and they wanted me to get an Albert Collins sound, which was a very bluesy, raw, hard-edged style. So I got some of his records and nailed his sound. Collins wanted twenty-five grand to do it and I did it for whatever

I got. But they said it was too raw. And I knew I'd nailed it, and the composer knew I did, but I had to tone it down. But had they gotten Albert Collins they'd have wasted twenty-five grand.

JC: You did a lot of dates with Phil Spector. Did you get along with him?

DB: Yeah, I didn't say too much to him and he didn't say too much to me, but I did a number of dates with him. I'm trying to remember - I think it might have been a session he was producing for John Lennon at A&M. Anyway, he had a habit of using many, many guitars - there could have been ten or more on it - and he usually divided it so a bunch of guys were playing electric and a bunch were playing acoustic. So once, I was really tired and in a humorous mood and I thought, "Should I, or shouldn't I?" and I finally decided to pull out my banjo (laughs).

JC: Oh that's hilarious.

DB: He said, "What the hell's that?" And I said, "Phil, give me a break. You might love it." To be honest, I really don't remember what happened, if I played some boogaloo on banjo or if I put it away, but I know everybody was on the floor laughing. You know, I think if my memory serves me correctly it was one of the Beatles things but I can't remember for sure. But I'm thinking it might have been.

JC: I think Spector was involved with one of their last sessions. Tell me about playing the synth-guitar. I heard you have quite a midi setup.

DB: Right. It was a hell of a challenge for me. I haven't done anything with the synth in two or three years but I probably did two hundred calls with it.

I didn't start out to use it in the studios but one thing led to another and it became intriguing to me. It was really hard for me in the beginning, but I caught on and put some of my own ideas into two racks full of modular synths. So when I'd get a call, I'd send these two huge racks of synths with a

volume control for one foot, and then my electric guitar, with the heads and speakers and its own effects rack also with a volume control pedal. It was a pretty impressive thing but it was a handful and I'm kind of glad now that I've retired them. I had to compete with keyboard players who had been doing it for so long and it was tough when composers would ask for different sounds. It was very difficult and one of the most challenging things I've ever done.

JC: *Was it tough to find a synth guitar that tracked well?*

DB: It wasn't the synth. It was the device that translated the guitar into the synth stuff. But the only one I ever used was the Roland - their first. But it was pretty good. It had its drawbacks but it turned out pretty well.

JC: *Your bio said you played piano as a kid.*

DB: Yeah, I think I took some piano lessons as a kid and a few drum lessons too. One of the things I'm known for is having very good time, but as a young kid I had terrible time and I think the drums thing was about that.

JC: *So you're not playing piano anymore - even arranger piano?*

DB: Well I can, but I don't play much of anything anymore unless I get a work call. I can play arranger piano. I can play any tune with the chords behind it.

JC: *Are studio dates way down for you?*

DB: Oh absolutely. But now I'm what I'd call semi-retired with an emphasis more on the retired than the semi. But I get calls occasionally. Sometimes they come in clumps, and then I have long periods where I don't do anything. But the guitar chair itself, even for the busier guys, is hurting

because recording work now is mostly for motion pictures and most motion pictures don't use guitar.

JC: *That's why I wondered if that was why you'd switched over to the synth.*

DB: No. I didn't switch over to anything. It came out and I kind of liked it, and I got one, and a couple of guys heard it and said, "I'll use you on my call." So that's how that got started.

JC: *Some of the other studio players I've talked to said there were some writers who wrote very well for guitar. Who were your favorite conductors and writers in the studios?*

DB: I never analyzed conductors or composers from the standpoint of how well they wrote for the guitar. That's like what I said earlier about whom I listened to. I said Bird and Bud. Similarly, with composers, I always used to say, "My favorite pound for pound composer is Dave Grusin." And I haven't thought about it in a long time but I'd still say that he certainly would be, if not number one, certainly in the top ten.

JC: *You've done thousands of sessions. Do you have any studio horror stories, or just memorable studio stories?*

DB: Horror stories...I'm trying to think. I remember Shorty Rogers years ago when folk music was popular wrote a very difficult fingerpicking thing for twelve-string that you'd normally improvise, but he wrote it all out in the key of Gb. At the time, I didn't know too much about capoing, and when I tried to play it, he said, "No, make it more sustained." And of course it should have been in an open key. But I got through that somehow.

And I remember one of the first times I worked for a real big composer; I think it was Lalo Schifrin. Tommy Tedesco, who was fond of playing little tricks on people, saw that I was having a hard time with a part because it was difficult and in odd time, and it might have been what we call a prepared

click. But Tommy kidded me. He said, “Den, you’re new in this game and you’re not doing too well right now and you have one more shot. And if you don’t get it, you’re outta here.” So, when we started the next take I realized that he’d disconnected my headphones (laughs). But he loved to tease people like that. And he always said he never messed with anybody unless he respected them.

And years ago, probably twenty or twenty five years ago, there was a studio rock and roll guitar player named Mike Deasy who was kind of a wild guy then, not by today’s standards, but he had long hair and dressed a little funky and so on. He was a very good player but, nevertheless, was somewhat narrow in his scope. And he had a habit of always playing very low-level distortion - not through a fuzz box - but through his amp. It didn’t matter if it was a ballad, a rock tune, a pop standard, or whatever. But he would kick in the overdrive and then use his wedding ring and slide it up on one of the high strings. It wasn’t loud, but often we felt like saying, “Come on” (laughs). Occasionally, it might be great, depending on the type of tune, but a lot of times it really wouldn’t fit. So, to be funny, anytime I saw Mike on a date, I started a pool to see at which bar he would start doing this. And (laughs), he would always do it! Sometimes I would have bar 12 and another guy would have bar 3, and another would have bar 25 and so on, and everyone would put a buck in the pot. Then, we’d figure out which bar it was and give the money to whomever won the pool (laughs).

JC: *Did Deasy know it?*

DB: I don’t even remember now. But anyway, I was on my first date with Sinatra, who by the way was as great as everyone says he was, and of course this was very memorable. It was at a huge old film studio called Goldwyn Studios on Santa Monica Boulevard. The conductor was Gordon Jenkins and the orchestrator, who was also excellent, was Don Costa who used me on a number of things. And interestingly enough, to get a little rock feel on things Costa would often hire Mike Deasy. So, Deasy was on this Sinatra session. I was there for other things, more legit things, reading and so forth because it was a big orchestra. In fact, Al Viola and John Pisano were also playing guitars on the session. So it was three jazz guys and one rock guy.

Well, Sinatra was known to be a pretty controlling guy who didn’t like to do a lot of takes so we started running this tune down. And, I think it was during the first take at about the fifteenth bar we started to hear this sound

(laughs). Just imagine an overdrive fuzztone sound with a bottleneck (laughs, sings eeeeehh). And Pisano, Viola and I start to laugh even though we had to try to keep it in, but we knew where it was coming from. And about five seconds after we started to hear it, Sinatra stopped singing and said in a very loud voice, “What the fuck was that?” And everybody froze. I mean this was the man! He’s looking around and up in the corners of this huge soundstage and everybody stopped in their tracks – Costa, Jenkins, everybody. Now, we’re on the floor but trying to be cool, and Don Costa, who’s embarrassed, says, “Frank, I think it’s the guitar player.” Sinatra says, “Get that fucking shithead outta here!” (laughs). So, Costa says, “Gee, I’m sorry Mike.” And Deasy had to pack up his stuff and leave.

And another time, I got a call from a contractor, who shall remain nameless, because he was on the cheap side and didn’t want to pay much money. And most of the good players by this time had gone to guaranteed double scale.

But he called me with a Sinatra date at Warner Brothers and I wanted to do it but I didn’t want to undercut myself because that also undercuts all those who’ve established themselves at getting double scale by proving themselves. But, I really wanted to do the date so I said, “Okay.” And I knew it would be the same scenario with Sinatra doing just one run-through and a take.

So I go, and it’s great, but there was a little table there at which this beautiful, glamorous lady, who was wearing a turban, was sitting. Now, over the years, lots of people have asked me who I’ve worked with, and anyone who has been in my business has worked with just about anyone you can think of in the music world and often in the movie business as it’s not unusual for film stars or directors to show up at the studios. And not that we don’t appreciate famous people, but we work around them so much that we just aren’t in awe of them or shy around them. We’re just all there together. But anyway, on a break, I walked over, and it was her! Guess who it was?

JC: *Rita, or Lana?*

DB: No, it was, from what I’ve read, his number one all-time love, Ava Gardner. I very seldom get impressed with celebrities and such, but to me, Ava Gardner was a big star. We’re talking major movie star.

JC: *That must have been a kick indeed. Did you prefer doing films to television, record dates or jingles?*

DB: It didn't make any difference which medium it was as long as it was good. Sometimes we'd hit a good record date, or sometimes a good jingle, TV show, or sometimes it was a good motion picture. I just prefer doing good music.

JC: *I know for a fact that many of your peers would love to see you gig more. Are you ever going to play club dates again?*

DB: Well that's an interesting thing and I've often thought about it. And I guess because everybody gave up on me so long ago that they don't ask me anymore. But I still have a love for it, and whether I'll ever play out again remains to be seen. But I'm not closing the door. Some people, if they know me, and read this might laugh and say, "He'll never do it" but I say never say never.

JC: *John Pisano runs Guitar Nights there in L.A.*

DB: Right. And he's asked me, but so far I haven't done one. But, like I say, you never know.

JC: *Will you talk about that wonderful esoteric session you did with Pisano and Billy Bean back in 1959?*

DB: Yeah. I don't think I did it with John though. I think the CD that came out was of old tracks that he did with Billy and some others that I'd done with Billy.

When I was a young jazz player, before I was in the army, I used to get together with a bass player, who's since passed away, named Ralph Peña. We used to jam in his garage, and in those days I was pretty confident about

myself - not obnoxious or cocky, but I knew who was out there and I thought I was a pretty good player. And at that point, I'd heard no guitar players who absolutely killed me like some other musicians did - Bird or Bud Powell. But having said all that, one day this young kid came into Ralph's garage and we met and played a tune and I nearly fell off my chair. It was Billy Bean. And I've never had that feeling since. Not to say that maybe there haven't been other great players, but he so knocked me on my ass and so impressed me that we became fast friends and would hang out all the time and play to the wee hours of the morning. And I don't even remember now, but occasionally someone would tape us and I think some of that is on the CD that's out now.

JC: *In doing research on you, two words that kept coming up over and over were: highly inventive.*

DB: Well that's nice. Those are two nice words.

JC: *Yes indeed. And that was perhaps referring to your jazz chops, but it has to be a rare few who are hired by such disparate artists as Ornette Coleman, Julie London, the Partridge Family and Tom Waits. That pretty much runs the gamut (laughs).*

DB: Oh right. And that's one of the things I'm kind of proud of. I remember when I first got into studio work; I think some of the fellas, not wanting to be mean-spirited, were saying that I'd "sold out." But looking back, I like to feel that I can play in a lot of different ways and I think that's kind of nice.

JC: *In a way, you just answered my next question. I've heard and read where other studio players regard you with tremendous respect - and these are heavies I'm talking about - do you think that's because you have so much scope in your playing - that you can pretty much do it all?*

DB: I don't want to be presumptuous so I'll leave that up to other people to say. But if that's the case, it would be nice.

JC: *I've heard your cache of guitars is impressive. What do you have?*

DB: For studio work, for my jazz electric guitar, I converted my 347 Gibson and have a mix between rock and roll strings and jazz strings, in that they're not too heavy but not too light. And I have a Martin 12-string, which is one of the early ones with no truss rod and therefore very hard to play. I want to burn it in my fireplace for Christmas (laughs). I hate it. I think the Guild 12-strings are probably the best. Oh, I also have a D-35S Martin flattop which I use for an acoustic.

And believe it or not, for a jazz rhythm guitar I use an Ovation. And my particular Ovation is awful, not that I haven't played some good ones, but the best thing about mine is that when I'm sitting in the bathtub, I can put it in there with me and it'll float (laughs). And I can have my rubber ducky on top of it (laughs). But amazingly enough it sounds very similar to an L-5 f-hole archtop. So that's what I use it for. Several people over the years, who knew what an f-hole archtop was, would see that and say, "No, no, no." And I'd say, "Don't hear with your eyes, hear with your ears." So it kind of throws people, especially if they know about Freddie Green. They see me with this fiberglass guitar, but I tell them to be patient and listen to it.

JC: *Was the Harry James gig mostly rhythm guitar?*

DB: I think so, because at that time we were all in love, and still are, with Count Basie's *Atomic Bomb* album. In fact, I made a study of Freddie Green, watched him play and listened to him, and I don't want to sound pompous, but I think I'm one of the few guys who nailed his sound. I did several albums for Concord with Greg Fields, a drummer who played with Basie, who told me that I was the closest thing he'd ever heard to Freddie Green. And I thought that was a pretty good compliment.

But with Harry James, I used an L-5, which I later sold to Mike Post. And I'm kind of sorry I did. I also have a Manzanero classical guitar that I bought from Laurindo Almeida, which is an excellent guitar that was made for Laurindo and inscribed to him. But I probably prefer my Ramirez. I don't

like all Ramirez guitars but this one is incredible. I use it occasionally but usually keep it at home. But if I get a special call I'll bring it. Then I have an old banjo that I bought from Bobby Gibbons that I think is a 1920s Vega. It weighs about 400 pounds (laughs). But it's a great banjo. A lot of guitar players say it's the loudest banjo they've ever heard in their life.

JC: *A plectrum or tenor?*

DB: It's a plectrum. And I have a couple of Strats made by Valley Arts that I use for workhorse all-around studio electric guitars. And I have a Dobro without a raised nut that I just play with a bottleneck and not lap-style. I used that on *City Slickers*. Whenever you see Jack Palance, that's me playing that Dobro. And I have an old Danelectro six-string bass guitar, a baritone uke and a Martin mandolin. I also have a real old Martin round-hole archtop, a C-2, which I use as a high-strung.

JC: *That would have a flat back?*

DB: Yes, but an arched top.

JC: *I've heard people say they're some of the best archtops ever.*

DB: Yes, it's a pretty wild guitar. And let's see what else...that's pretty much what I carry. There might be a few instruments I left out. I have carried on occasion an electric sitar but I haven't played it in years.

JC: *A Coral.*

DB: That's right. And as far as what I have at home: a Ramirez peg-head Flamenco guitar, two Charlie Christian guitars and some odds and ends.

JC: *I think MitchHolder said he saw an L-7 at your house.*

DB: Yeah, I have an old L-7 from the thirties and I think another box in there. I haven't looked at them in twenty or thirty years.

JC: *If you were headed to Guitar Night with John Pisano tonight, which guitar would you take?*

DB: My initial impulse would be to use my old jazz guitar, my Charlie Christian, but it's so hard to play and has no cutaway, so who knows? So I might use that, or pull the 347 out, or I just might buy another guitar (laughs).

JC: *Oh, that's funny. Well, you're the well-stocked studio man.*

DB: Yes, but a lot of other guys have many more instruments. Oh, I know what else I have here; I bought some of Tommy's instruments, a mandola and a mandocello, but I've never had a bouzuki or some of the more odd instruments.

JC: *What about your studio amp setup?*

DB: Okay, I'm really kind of proud of that. I have two Howard Dumble heads. He's changed his name from Howard to Alexander. He's a very enigmatic, highly intelligent guy - very unusual. Carlton uses his stuff. And it's very difficult to get anything from him but he took a liking to me. Dumble was making a head for himself and he let me buy that. I also bought Jay Graydon's Dumble head that I guess he wasn't using. So I have two of them because I wanted to go stereo. So that's what I have in my effects rack with two separate speaker cabinets.

JC: *What else is in your effects rack?*

DB: Old stuff. I haven't kept up at all. I have an old controller. What is it, a Gibson MC-700? I also have a Lexicon delay/chorus. I don't remember which models. I have an Alesis chorus unit, a real old Korg that I never use, a noise gate and a parametric equalizer. The things I really use are the chorus on the Alesis and the delay on the Lexicon. For overdrive, or fuzz, I use the overdrive on the Dumble heads.

JC: *Are you still practicing?*

DB: No. I'd have to say categorically, no. The only time I practice is when I get a call for a date, which is not as frequent as it used to be. I figure I'd better because my calluses will start going down. So I do normally practice before every call I get. But basically, I haven't practiced since 1963 - really practice.

JC: *Have you ever had any desire to teach?*

DB: Not particularly. Used to when I was a teenager but I really don't have any desire to teach now.

JC: *Have you ever been asked to make an instructional video or write a guitar book?*

DB: No, I don't think so.

JC: *I don't hear any clichés when you're soloing. It sounds as if it's coming straight from the heart. What's your mental process when you're taking a solo?*

DB: I think if I have any talent, or predilection to talent, I just do what talented people do. So where does that come from? I'm not going to put myself in the league with such monster players as Charlie Parker, but I always felt that I had something unique to say and I think it comes from maybe being a good musician and good player. But I think it's also something within you. So who knows where it comes from? I don't think of anything in particular.

JC: *You're just playing what you hear.*

DB: Yeah, just whatever comes out.

JC: *You've worked with so many great artists; may I throw out some names and get your comments?*

DB: Oh, absolutely!

JC: *Did you know you shared a birthday with Eric Dolphy?*

DB: Oh really? Was he June 20th? I didn't know that. We were roommates when we worked with Chico Hamilton. He was interesting. We were youngsters in L.A. but we didn't hang out then. He was relatively reclusive – oh, I remember, I worked with him on my first union job maybe in '55 or '56. We played a black nightclub and H.B. Barnum played piano and Eric played alto. I remember H.B. helped me get in the union, so it was 1955 and I was seventeen. Anyway, Eric was quiet and the only way I got to know him was when we roomed together.

JC: *You did some sessions with Carmen McRae.*

DB: What a tremendous talent and singer - and I really enjoyed that. Don't remember how many dates I did with her but I can recall one at a studio called Western and it was very pleasant. She was great. One of the greatest.

JC: *Tell me about working with Ravi Shankar.*

DB: What a delightful man! It was a privilege for me to work with him. And I'll never forget the first time I heard Indian Hindu music. I couldn't believe that this music was hundreds of years old. And this was before the Beatles and rock and roll discovered him. I was with Bud Shank and we did an album together and it was just a real treat. He was a real gentleman to me and I'm just very proud to have been associated with him.

JC: *Red Mitchell*

DB: He was one of my all time favorite people and musicians. He really took me under his wing and took a liking to me personally and musically. And he helped me in every way he could. He was one of the greatest jazz musicians I ever heard and I sorely miss him. I had a true affection for him.

JC: *Randy Newman.*

DB: Phenomenal. Probably, if not the funniest guy I ever worked with, one of the top five of all time. He was very self-deprecating and couldn't care less what he said in the studio to the guys in the band regardless of the people in the booth – the big producers and directors. He's just tremendous and I can't say enough about him – a very musical guy.

JC: *Did you work with all the Newmans?*

DB: I worked one time with Alfred, which was great. It was towards the end of his career and life. And you know how famous and well respected he was. I worked with Lionel many times. I don't think I've ever worked with Tom but I've worked with David Newman many times and I worked with Randy

many times. That family has a great sense of humor. Lionel was unbelievable. I used to do *MASH* with him and drive a fair distance to Fox studios at eight in the morning - maybe after working all day and night - and we'd be finished at 8:20 a.m. (laughs). I'd say, "Lionel, why are you doing this?" But he loved to get up early. So, at 9:00 a.m. I'd go home and go to bed (laughs). That was when *MASH* was very popular. But a lot of times there wasn't much music and we'd be done, literally at 8:15 or 8:20 a.m (laughs).

JC: *What about Frank Zappa?*

DB: Very interesting guy. I remember the first date I did with him, he took his shirt off and that was kind of wild. Then, I did an album with him called *Lumpy Gravy* and that was quite an unbelievable thing. It was almost like a mad scientist and rock guy mixing it up with classical. It was very difficult to read. He was a very unusual and eclectic guy. And maybe I didn't know what to make of it sometimes but it was always very interesting.

JC: *Harry Nilsson.*

DB: A lovely guy and a pleasure to work with. I worked with him the night John Lennon got murdered and I guess they were very close. I think it was a session for Frank Stallone. I think we even called off part of the date. I worked with Harry a number of times over the years and he was just a delight.

JC: *Herbie Hancock*

DB: I only worked with him once. Was it *Harlem Nights*? Of course I respect him so much as a jazz musician and player but I think that was the only time I ever worked with him.

JC: *Quincy*

DB: Oh what can you say about Quincy? Another delightful man. I worked for many years with him on several different projects. In fact, the first date I ever did with Quincy was for the film, *The Pawnbroker* and the piano player on that was Dave Grusin. I just can't say enough about Quincy Jones. You talk about a guy covering all the bases.

JC: *Oliver Nelson*

DB: A phenomenal musician. I did a number of TV shows with him at Universal. It was a pleasure to work with him.

JC: *Henry Mancini*

DB: Another prince of a man. He treated musicians with the utmost respect. What can I say? An institution.

JC: *I read where he came by your house to look at your synth.*

DB: That's right! I remember that. He wanted to write for it and came over and checked it out. I think that was for the film *Harry and Son*.

JC: *Ella Fitzgerald*

DB: I remember Norman Granz, the producer, had seen me or heard me, or something. I used to wear a visor and tennis shoes, and Granz told the contractor, "I don't know the guy's name, but get me the kid with the visor and tennis shoes (laughs). But it was very enjoyable to work with her.

JC: *Tom Waits*

DB: Don't remember too much about the date, but he was another unusual personality.

JC: *Jay Graydon got the nod, but will you tell me about being called in to play the solo on Steely Dan's, "Peg?"*

DB: I remember, for lack of a better term, auditioning for them, and I guess I didn't get it as I didn't get called back. But Victor Feldman, God rest his soul, recommended me so I went in there and played for them. But that was just once.

JC: *Well, you were in great company. I understand they also brought in Robben Ford and (saxophonist) Tom Scott, among others. Even Walter Becker himself gave it a shot. You're listed as being on Ronstadt's, "What's New?" album, so you've worked with Nelson Riddle.*

DB: Oh I've worked with Nelson many times - another great writer.

JC: *What about Bobby Caldwell? He's a guy who has big expensive, beautifully orchestrated sessions. And I understand he's huge in the Orient and Far East.*

DB: Let me just say he's wonderful. I really didn't know that much about him but I think he sings his ass off - a great singer.

JC: *Bud Shank*

DB: Yes, that was prior to my being in the army, and working with him and Gary Peacock was probably the most exciting jazz gig I ever had, and I knew it at the time. Carmell Jones, a well-known trumpet player was with us

too. Gary's with Keith Jarrett now and world-renowned. He was one of the most amazing musicians I've ever worked with. We were young guys and really enjoyed playing together especially when we were with Bud at a little club in Malibu. It was an incredible experience for me but I got called to the army and didn't really see him again.

JC: *Any other gigs that have stayed in your memory?*

DB: When I was with Chico Hamilton we worked at Birdland in New York, probably the most famous jazz club ever, and worked opposite probably the greatest jazz group ever, which included Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderly, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Wayne Shorter.

JC: *The "Kind of Blue" crew.*

DB: It was unbelievable. And to get up on the stand after those guys had played was just incredible. That was one of the thrills of my life. I can't even believe it to this day. It was amazing. To get up on stage and play after the greatest jazz ever played, and of course we couldn't compete with them, was really something. I just can't believe I was there.

JC: *I had no idea you were there.*

DB: Oh yeah. And another time, Kenny Burrell invited me to Minton's in Harlem. Do you know what Minton's was?

JC: *Oh sure, Minton's Playhouse.*

DB: Right. The very famous club that went back to the forties where all the great jazz guys used to play. I was in Birdland, talking to Cannonball, and told him that Kenny Burrell invited me to play with him over at Minton's and asked how to get there. He said, "Well, you take the A train," (laughs). I

said, “Oh my God, I never knew what that meant. Obviously the tune was delineating the name of the subway train and I didn’t know that, being a kid from L.A. And believe me, it was a thrill for me to play there when Kenny let me sit in.

And New York was where I met the famous trumpet player, who has since passed away, Booker Little, and George Coleman, the tenor player. They invited me to George’s house to play - just the three of us. And they’d call “All The Things You Are” in Gb and “Stella By Starlight” in B, and just pick the hardest tunes in the hardest keys and would just eat them up. That was quite a thrill.

JC: *That’s amazing stuff.*

DB: Another time with Chico in L.A., we worked opposite Sonny Rollins, who didn’t say much to anyone. But one time he gave me a “yo” or a “yeah” and I was on cloud nine for about two years after that.

And someone else, going way, way back when I was a kid, who I played a lot with was Billy Higgins, who’s since passed away. He was one of the most famous jazz drummers of all time. I just wish I could have played with him in the later years but it didn’t come to pass. That was really something because he was quite a player even in those early years.

JC: *Dennis, you’ve been so nice to do this interview. I know our readers will enjoy finding out about your career and getting your insight and observations about music and the music business. I very much appreciate your doing this.*

DB: Jim, you’re very welcome. This was my pleasure. Perhaps next time we could have a glass of wine or something and I’ll get on a roll because after forty years in the studios I really have a lot of stories. So, maybe we’ll do installment number two some day.

JC: *Dennis, just say the word.*

