



phil brown

BY MICHAEL ROSS

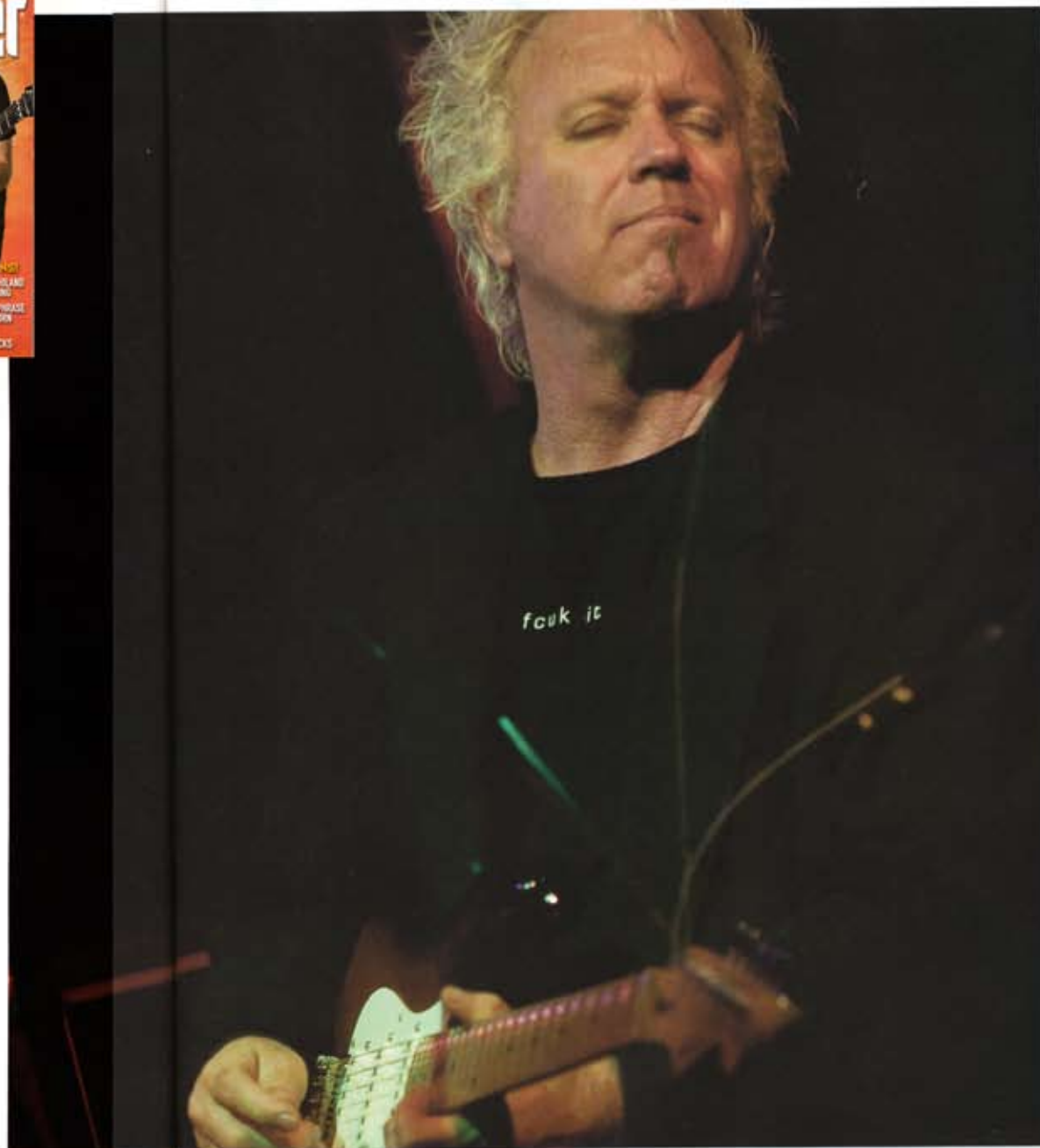
SHORTLY AFTER LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL laboratory director Norris Bradbury helped create the atomic bomb, his music teacher wife unleashed another explosive force upon the world: Phil Brown. "Mrs. Bradbury pushed me into being the accompanist for the glee club, which effectively launched my career," says Brown.

If you are asking, "Phil who?" it is because almost a half-century later this virtuoso tonemeister, singer, and songwriter is only just coming into the consciousness of guitar fans, let alone the general public. When Brown's first record, *Cruel Inventions*, appeared at the millennium's turn, the lucky few who heard it were treated to a unique trifecta of Jeff Beck-style whammy work, Bowie-meets-Sinatra vocals, and brilliantly crafted tunes reflecting the artist's years as a staff writer. "I wanted to get off the road so I spent 1983 to 1986 working for Warner Brothers and two more years with A&M," recalls Brown. "I had some great instructors teaching me how to break the rules."

Brown's professional journey began in 1968, with Kansas-based garage band legends, Smack, and later included a tour with members of Little Feat. "Little Feat's *Hoy Hoy!* album was released after Lowell George died, and they called me to go on the road," he says. "Paul Barrere was having vocal problems and couldn't sing the whole night." They performed an evening divided into half Phil Brown songs and half Little Feat tunes.

After some years lost to an admitted "Behind the Music" lifestyle, Brown followed opportunity to Europe. "In 1989, I was invited to Germany to work with alumni from Jack Bruce's band," he relates. This led to connections that would see the first release of *Cruel Inventions* on the French Dixie Frog label (it was subsequently rereleased on the Apaches from Paris label). "I sent them 60 songs and they chose the ones for the record," says Brown.

While putting together the tunes that would become his next release, *Imagine This* [Apaches from Paris], Brown took a detour, recording a CD of re-imagined Hendrix songs called *The Jimi Project*. "It was something I was originally going to do for my friends and family and it just ballooned," he says. "I love Jimi's songwriting. I played at a club every week where I developed a trio that understood what I was trying to do, and eventually I had about 15 cassette tapes of different versions of the songs." What Brown was trying to do was stay true to the emotion of the tunes, while putting his own stamp on them. "It's hard for me to copy somebody else's work—and besides, where can you go from Hendrix? On 'Purple Haze' I played this Herbie Hancock/Jan Hammer-type chord, and I don't use a pick so I was able to play a bass line with my thumb like Lenny Breau might do. Then I thought, 'What if I put a Chet Baker/Tony Bennett-style vocal on it?' I've always wanted to sing like Ronnie James Dio, but that is just not going to happen. I'm more of a crooner. The Rat Pack was a big influence."



Artists

PHIL BROWN

Though the song starts with altered chords and crooning vocals, Brown later introduces the signature lick as his singing moves closer to Dio than Bennett. If the chords conjure Hancock on these arrangements, the solos and tones often recall post-Guitar Shop Jeff Beck. "Of course I have been influenced by Beck," he admits. "When I hear him play, it's like skipping rocks on a lake: everyone else gets five or six skips—but he gets 17. The whammy bar is something I have been playing with for many years. And I have also been influenced by pedal-steel players."

For expressive whammy excursions that, in their own way, rival Beck's, Brown uses two different types of vibrato bridges. "Some of the traditional bridges I use float on two screws," he explains. "I can pull up a fourth or go down an octave. They sit about a quarter of an inch off of the body. I am also using the Don Ramsay Linear Tremolo on two guitars. It slides back and forth rather than rocking, and has two bars: one normal and one that curves around and points up at you. It sounds great."

Some of the Oklahoma City resident's massive tones come from low-tuned instruments. "I use a Curt Mangan 7-string set on a couple of 6-string Strats," he reveals. "I leave off the high E and tune down to B, so the gauges are .013-.056. I also have a baritone set that I use when I tune down to A. I use .010-.046 sets on my normally tuned guitars."

Often, guitarists who are into fine-tuning their tone are adamant about vintage gear or clones thereof. For Brown, however, it is a case of whatever works—and he has some interesting ideas. For one, he refrains from cutting the ends off his strings, leaving them sticking out like porcupine quills. "They add an ambient sound, and they look sexy," he claims. "For *The Jimi Project*, I used a 50-watt amp that Lee Jackson built, through a '70s Marshall 8x10 cabinet that Robin Trower used on *Bridge of Sighs*.

I placed the cabinet on its back facing the ceiling and put a couple of two-by-fours under it so I didn't crush the speaker jack. I got the idea from two guys who worked with producer [Robert John] Mutt Lange."

Brown's recording process reflects his personal tried-and-true methods, which combine modern and vintage technology. "I run through an old DBX 163X mono compressor into a Roland VS-880 Digital Workstation, because the VS-880's A/D/A converters impart more warmth than Pro Tools," he says. "Then, I dump the digital files into a DAW. I still use an old AKG C1000 microphone and/or a '65 Shure 520DX 'Green Bullet' mic on the cabinets."

After hearing *Cruel Intentions*, *The Jimi Project*, and/or *Imagine This*, it is hard to argue with Brown's process. His tone is consistently thick and warm, heavily distorted but articulate and never buzzy. Many players achieve awesome sound live, only to lose some of the magic in the studio—but Brown's recorded sound is a tone fanatic's fantasy.

"The real trick to getting a great recorded sound is not to play your guitar or amp on ten," says Brown. "If you play too heavy and too loud, you crush the microphone diaphragm. I play a little louder than the level that we are talking about now. I use pedals—including a gain booster Lee Jackson built for me—and preamp volume. Also, I try not to double any parts. Miles Davis, Eric Clapton, and Itzhak Perlman didn't double parts."

Brown may not double the same lines and chords, but *Imagine This* is richly layered with different guitar parts, from Townshend-like acoustic strumming to octave effects. "I have a '59 Gibson B-25 acoustic guitar that I used on 'Trouble,'" he says. "It is not a big sound. The back is cracked, and I was thinking about getting it repaired when I realized that it almost sounded like a Dobro. The cracked back acts sort of like a resonator. I also have an Alvarez. I record

the acoustics with the same AKG and Shure mics—one over the sound hole, off axis, and one further up the neck—then combine them in mono."

Brown occasionally layers two vocal parts an octave apart, recalling soul music or David Bowie, and finds the concept also translates effectively to guitar parts. Rather than play the same part twice, separated by an octave, he adds an octave effect to the second guitar, imparting a more interesting tonality. "Lee Jackson makes this thing called the AtomSmasher," he says. "It is a combination of Jeff Beck's Color-Sound Octave divider, and Jimi Hendrix's Roger Mayer Octavia."

For road amplification, the guitarist has recently become enamored of Reinhold Bogner's creations. "I hadn't had a new amp in 20 years, but I just started using Bogner amplifiers," he raves. "I consider them the Maserati of amplifiers."

Lately, the guitarist has been doing solo acoustic gigs. Though lacking his trusty whammy bar, and eschewing distortion for these performances, he is not without sound modification, using a selection of the same pedals he employs on electric gigs. "I use an Electro-Harmonix Micro POG," says Brown. "It tracks so well I can even do acoustic guitar chords with a 12-string sound. I also have a Boss Tremolo and this ancient Boss CE-1 Chorus Ensemble from 1978, which is beat to hell but still works. I also use a Bonepicker Tight Squeeze compressor, which is the best compressor I have ever heard on acoustic instruments. For acoustic amplification I need something that will handle the low end, so sometimes I use a Soundcraft EFX12—which is a 12-channel P.A. with Lexicon effects—powering two Behringer bottoms."

Whether on electric or acoustic, Brown belongs in the same club as his heroes, such as Hendrix, Beck, Clapton, Pass, and McLaughlin—players whose sound resides as much in their touch and spirit as in any gear they might select.

"I am basically telling my life story when I am playing guitar," says Brown. Finally hitting his stride at 60, he offers encouragement to players who persist long after others would give up. "We are not really playing music, we are selling a dream. Time is suspended when we play, and that is why music makes us immortal." ■

MORE ONLINE



- Watch Brown perform the title song from *Imagine This*.
- See Brown play "The La La Land" from *Cruel Intentions*.
- Check out Brown's re-harmonization of "Manic Depression" for acoustic.

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