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METRONOME

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by Brian M. Owens

Paul Speidel is one of the finest musician gentlemen that you'll ever meet in this business. With seven albums to his credit, he continues to churn out instrumental music that touches on blues, fusion, jazz and rock. His latest album *RetroRocket* is one of the best local releases of the year and positions Speidel as one of the leading instrumentalists on the scene today. I caught up to him one day in June and we talked about guitars, amps and recording music that makes you feel good...

METRONOME: How many albums does your new release *RetroRocket* make for you now?

Paul Speidel: This is our seventh record.

METRONOME: How many years have you been playing under your name?

Since 2004.

METRONOME: That's an album a year?

Yeah, I try to record and write all the time. We always have tunes that we're playing. Since we improvise a lot on stage, a lot of ideas go back and forth between the drums, guitar and bass. Things will percolate and I'll go home and chart it out, do a mock up in the studio and see what I think... stuff is always in progress.

METRONOME: Are the twelve songs on *RetroRocket* recently penned tunes or are there some older songs included?

On that particular record, there are four different recording date years on the songs. Some of the material that comes out on the studio records have been played live for a long time, have gelled and then feels ready to put in to a fixed form. Most of these songs are things I've been working on in the studio piecing parts together. Two songs were actually left over from our live record that we had some production problems with.

I have two live records out. I'm pretty idealistic. To me a live record is live. We don't do any punch-ins or note fixes on our live records. Most of this record was recorded here in my home studio and some of the songs go back in to the nineties.

METRONOME: Is PSP your home studio?

Yes. Paul Speidel Productions. It's my one man operation. I do function and production work on the side. I have a Tascam 2488. I still think in analog terms when I record. Some of my guitar students laugh at me for how primitive I am.

METRONOME: Why didn't some of the older tracks make it on past albums and why were they more appropriate for *RetroRocket*?

The debut CD came out in 2004. That was the first record I did here in my home studio. Then I renovated (laughs). I soundproofed everything and drove my wife crazy. I teach down here too so there's a lot of activity down here. I was hoping the renovation project would take me 3 months, but it took me a year. We had a lot of stuff that we were doing live, so we decided to go to one of our favorite places, run two nights of music, and that became our first live record, *Guitar Bass Drums* in 2005. Joel Lawitts recorded that for us.

METRONOME: How did you meet Joel?

Joel has been one of my long running students. I've been teaching him for years. I teach a Blues Curriculum through Newton Community Education. Joel has become a very fast friend at this point and he's a fantastic guitar player/musician. He has his own bands now and plays out. He's very enthusiastic about music and has

his own home studio like a lot of us do.

METRONOME: I noticed that Derek Pisano worked with you on some of the tracks. How did you meet Derek?

Derek is at Mockingbird Studio which is really a neat place in Mansfield. We were semi-finalists in the Boston Blues Challenge in 2006 and finalists in 2008. Karen Nugent and Heather McKibbin were able to put together for all the participants chosen as part of the compensation packages, free studio time at Mockingbird Studio. They're a great music facility. They do lessons, sell gear and have a great studio in the back of their facility. They donated the time to a bunch of us artists who were in the challenge. Derek is a great guy to work with. He's musician friendly and has great ears. He helped us come home with some basic rhythm section tracks and I hung on to them until I was able to finish them for this project. It was the right time for those tunes.

METRONOME: It seems like on *RetroRocket* you stretched out a bit more genre-wise. You mixed it up and it's really fresh sounding. Was that intentional?

The CD series is called Blues Extensions and

this is the second CD in the series. We're essentially an instrumental group which puts us in between categories. I feel like we play blues based music, and that's where the inspiration comes from, plus I have a real strong affinity for blues players and blues musicians as well as the community. The community is vastly supportive but sometimes instrumental music doesn't always find a place in that.

All the guys in my band, including myself have played a lot of jazz gigs. We're full time working players, so you do everything. Over the years, the blues has really branched off in to many different things. If you listen to any great blues radio show, you're going to hear that variety of styles, but it is all blues based.

METRONOME: So this is a plan that you're carrying out from album to album?

Absolutely, but it's less than a plan than a response to where I come from. I suppose I could market it as a rock album or a pop album. It all comes from the blues, but what it evolves in to is something different. I like the idea of extending it, taking risks and making it sound interesting. All those jazz/blues players and rock players

were all innovating. Those guys of their time weren't taking things for granted. They were taking risks. Muddy Waters plugging in during the 60s, Dylan going electric... that was a huge risk. They were thinking forward and trying to extend the blues. I don't think you do justice to your inspirations if you try to replicate them note for note.

METRONOME: When you play live, who are the core members of your band?

My drummer Brendan Byrnes has been with me forever. We're very close friends and have common roots in music. He's really loyal and he's always there for me. He plays with some other amazing people too. Unfortunately bass players can work more than anybody, so I always try to find the best guys I can work with. I do have a group of two or three guys who have stuck with me. The core guy is Ed Spargo. He is my first call player. He's on both of my studio CDs; the debut record in 2004 and then *RetroRocket*. Ed is solid. He is the mantle of the earth. He lays the bass down like nobody else I play with. There's a couple of other guys I like to call too. What's fascinating about an instrumental trio is that the bass player has a huge impact on the sound. I write the tunes and make the arrangements, but the bass player's concept drives the band.

METRONOME: It seems to me that the first five or six songs on *RetroRocket* are your newest tunes. Would that be correct?

Yes, they were recorded the most recently, but for instance "Swing & Stomp" I wrote almost fifteen years ago. "Hard Wire" was written five years ago.

METRONOME: What did you use for guitars on the recording? Did you mix it up a bit or did you use the same guitar(s) throughout?

I'm not a gear head but having said that, after I completed the project there are probably seven or eight different guitars on the album, and eight or nine different amps. But because they were recorded at different times it was like, well what's the best instrument on the floor here and which one is the most comfortable to me? Basically though there were two instruments that were the lead voice; one was a Strat and the other a knock off of a PRS.

METRONOME: What year is the Strat?

It's a newer one. It's the Jeff Beck model. Not the original one with the round C-neck but the revised one.

METRONOME: I never knew you as a Strat guy. I always thought you played Gibsons. Is that something new for you?

Very perceptive. I've always been a Gibson guy. I figured that if I'm telling the world that I'm blues based and I'm not playing a Strat, I'm a hypocrite (laughs). When I buy a new guitar, I don't play it out for a year. I have to learn how to play the guitar which is the opposite of most people. Most people get an axe and they want to play it right away as much as they can. I kinda live with it. I really want to find the tone and voice and the nuance and learn how to play that particular instrument and really feel comfortable on stage or putting something on tape with it.

METRONOME: I find the PRS, the Strat and Gibson to be completely different animals from one another, yet you seemed to have mastered all three. Did you spend a lot of time

with each instrument?

I don't feel that I've mastered the instruments, I think it comes down to responding to what the particular instrument will do. If you're playing an acoustic show, and it comes time for a melody song on a particular part and the bottom drops out, I feel like that's not the right guitar for that tune.

METRONOME: Acoustic guitars are a different animal as well.

Oh man, and there are acoustic masters. I just hopelessly flail away on them, but for me I want to find out what an instrument will give me and what its tone of voice is. I want to see what I have to say in that tone of voice. And I may not have anything to say with that particular tone of voice.

I've never really played a Telecaster, but I've never been really drawn to a Tel either. I love [[Roy] Buchanan, I love [Danny] Gatton. I love [Mike] Stern. I love people who play Teles but not as a player. It's the same thing with amps in a way too. You're lucky if you find a solid state that appeals to our ears.

METRONOME: Absolutely. They're critical to your sound. What are some of the amplifiers you're playing?

That's another one where I'm sort of late to the game. I finally bought a Fender Hot Rod Deluxe. It's a 1x12 with a nice gain stage. I have a Twin, but it's so heavy, I can't carry it around anymore.

METRONOME: There's nothing that sounds like a Twin though.

I know, but isn't that what the pedals are all about since the 1960s? Every pedal is basically a modeling pedal so that everyone who plays in the basement doesn't blow the family out of the house.

I always hear people say this is a good recording guitar and this is a good recording amp, but I don't have much experience with that kind of thing. I had a taste of it on this record though because I went through several amps that I had and used some of my friend's amps. In terms of clean recording I really started to value that a loose tube wasn't vibrating or a speaker wasn't crackling. When you're sitting with head phones on and the microphone is picking everything up and it's compressed, a lot of my amps were noisier than I ever thought.

The Twin on the clean channel was a great recording amp for this project. I found that the Hot Rod Deluxe really got nasty fast. I have a Yamaha 2x12 from the 80s that is solid state. It's one of the best solid state amps I've ever had.

METRONOME: I think Yamaha was ahead of their time during that period. They were really well built amplifiers. Do you own one of those?

Yeah. I got it at a pawn shop in Rhode Island back in the 90s. It was one of those lucky moments. I love it. That came in handy recording the CD.

METRONOME: Did you use any special effects on the album?

I don't have a whole lot of experience in

exploring tone and gear and stuff. I just try to find stuff that felt good. I was fairly intuitive about that. Sometimes I'm very intentional. I really think through a game plan when it comes to the business side, but when it came to the musical decisions, it was a lot more intuitive. If the amp started to break up during a lead part, and I liked it, I left it. I have a DigiTech multi-effects unit that I use mostly for live work. I've used it for years because it has a million pedal options in it. It's a great live tool. I used that once or twice.

One pedal that used that I am in love with was an MXR Vintage Analog Chorus pedal. The yellow one with the AC plug. On the track "She Chills Me" there's a ringing chord thing and that's probably my favorite part of the album just to sit and listen to. The lush crystalline, old analog chorus sound. Other than that, there were no boutique pedals. My next thing is to learn about all that stuff.

METRONOME: Do you have a steady place that you consider a house gig where people can drop in and check you out?

Interestingly enough, I'm playing around town alot with vocalists. It seems like the acoustic duo thing is really happening. Live music hasn't gone away, but it is sure different. Right now I'm running the blues brunch at the Purple Shamrock down at Faneuil Hall on Sunday afternoons. I get to work with my two of my favorite singers, Lisa Marie and Shirley Lewis.

METRONOME: What time does that start on Sundays?

It's noon to four every Sunday.

METRONOME: How long have you been doing that?

Since May. It will run through the summer and if we can get the word out, after September when the tourists leave, we're going to try to keep it rolling.

I also play out at the Gardner Ale House. We do that with the band and sometimes with Lisa Marie. I've been playing out at the Bull Run. They do a Wednesday night dinner show in the restaurant and they put my band in there. We've played all three rooms at the Bull Run.

We did our initial Retrorocket CD release party at Johnny D's.

METRONOME: Do you still play at The Attic in Newton? Is it still in business?

No. The ownership changed about four years ago. Twenty five years ago that room was an attic with a little stage setup in the eaves so you had to bend over to play (laughs). It evolved and evolved and the previous ownership group had all these touring bands play there. Then that side of live music dried up and they were only booking one act, Jennifer Trynin. Eventually they jumped ship. It's been renovated, repurchased and it shrunk back down and now there's nothing there. I still do student recitals there. They still do outreach with local teachers and local music programs, but they'll throw a DJ in there or a cover band with horns and have a party every now and again. They really should have kept the Attic brand.

METRONOME: It was so well known and for a long time they had some great acts play there. I'm surprised it dried up the way that it did. Did it have anything to do with the Station nightclub fire and the sprinkler system in the Attic not being up to code?

I don't know. I never heard anything about that. One of the owners, Alan Moskowitz told me it was the turn around, it was the business. They had a very big Boston College crowd and they lived and died on the jam band scene. Like retro swing in the 90s came and went, I don't see jam bands being what they were ten years ago.

METRONOME: What do you have planned for the summer? Any festivals?

I have tons of club stuff. I'm working with three different agents now that are booking me every where. I'm doing a lot of radio promotion. This is the first record where I've really promoted it to radio nationally. We cracked the Top 50 on the Roots Music Report.