

FRET

ARTIST

HAVE CHOPS
WILL TRAVELNYLON-STRING VIRTUOSO LAWSON ROLLINS RETURNS
WITH *TRAVELER*

BY VINNIE DEMASI

RADIO AIRPLAY, RECORD SALES, AND MTV ROTATION were once the coveted trifecta by which the music industry measured success. In the global internet age however, a significant online presence and uncompromising entrepreneurship are more likely to represent the gold standard of achievement. By this measure, composer/nylon-string artist Lawson Rollins is a bona fide star. The native-born Tar Heel with the “gotta-see-it-to-believe-it” level of flamenco-flavored chops has garnered millions upon millions of YouTube views for compositions such as “Locomotion,” and “Santa Ana Wind” and created a viral video sensation with his self-described solo nylon-string homage to Van Halen’s “Eruption,” entitled “The Fire Cadenza.”

The key to Rollins’ mass appeal is his signature artistic balance between classically influenced compositional refinement, infectious exotic rhythms, and the unbridled intensity of full-on shred. He’s landed songs and albums in the upper regions of the Billboard Contemporary Radio, Billboard World Music, Sirius-XM Radio, Smoothjazz.com, and Amazon.com charts and recently grabbed top honors in the USA Songwriting Competition’s instrumental category for the expansive “Shifting Seasons.” His latest CD, *Traveler*—the fifth on his own Infinita label—is, in Rollins’ words, “a musical travelogue, where my guitar serves as a filter through which my impressions of the world are processed and expressed in the language of music.”

When we last talked to you in 2012, you mentioned that you were using beat libraries on your demos but were worried you’d get too enamored with them and be led astray a bit. How has that played out since then?

They’ve actually been a great addition to my set of creative tools and haven’t affected the core nature of my music. The guitar is the heart of my compositions and, if anything, it’s been inspiring and more enjoyable to have the beat patterns on demos as opposed to just a click track. Ultimately I can judge whether I

have a good song on my hands or not by just the rhythm guitar and melody. The beat libraries help the song become more fully realized when going from the demo to the actual recording, but all the beats in the world aren’t going to help if the material isn’t strong to begin with.

Is it safe to say there’s a unifying concept behind the compositions on *Traveler*?

Yes, but it was due more to an emergent progression than a pre-conceived idea. When I make an album, I find that during the process an underlying concept will often start to reveal itself. There’s actually a theory of “emergence” in biology; it postulates that once you reach a certain level of complexity, a unifying order—something greater than the sum of the parts—presents itself. After I had composed three or four pieces, this idea of the traveler—different songs inspired by my having visited different parts of the world—is what surfaced.

Having made five records as a solo artist and four with your previous duo Rollins and Young, have you become more confident that this unifying order will happen?

Maybe slightly. I think I suffer the plight of all artists in that you’re in constant fear that your abilities might dry up or that the muse won’t visit. I’m certainly more confident than I was maybe 20 years ago, but I don’t always assume that I’ll be able to “top” myself and what I’d done previously. I think a bit of insecurity is a good thing though. It’s sort of the fuel you need to keep creating and continuing on. If you get too comfortable as an artist, it can lead to repetition at best and creative death at worst.

The album cover photo of *Traveler* shows you with your custom-made Lester DeVoe nylon-string. What were some of the specific qualities you wanted in a custom-built axe?

Because I play a lot of single-note lines above the 12th fret, I wanted a rounded heel as opposed to the triangular pointy one you find on most off-the-shelf guitars. The cutaway is a bit deeper, which allows me much easier access to notes above the 17th fret.



Also the neck is only 50mm wide as opposed to the standard 52mm width you find on most classical-style guitars. This makes single-line playing easier but more-traditional contrapuntal classical-style playing more challenging.

What, if anything, do you do to take care of your picking-hand nails?

Fortunately, I've been blessed with good keratin. I don't use any glue or anything, and I rarely break a nail. I just maintain them by filing every day and eating a healthy diet. It's important to moisturize them as well. You've also got to be mindful of what you do with your right hand and not stick it under a couch to find something, for example [*laughs*]. I do keep the nails on my index and middle finger shaped in such a way that it helps facilitate some of the faster single-note runs. They are shorter than a traditional classical guitarist might have them.

You play almost everything with your index (i) and middle (m) fingers, correct?

Yes, but on this album I started incorporating a new three-finger technique where I fret chords on the top three strings—or any three adjacent strings—and do a repeated ring-finger (a), middle-finger (m), index-finger (i) triplet roll. The trick is that after sounding each note, you ease pressure on the fretting-hand fingers slightly for a dampening effect. It gives this real rhythmically propulsive staccato sound. (Plays **Ex. 1**)

You can hear it on "Metropolis" and see it on the little video teaser on my homepage. I'm actually using it quite a bit on *Traveler*. I haven't figured out what to call it yet though.

How about "The Rollins Roll"?

Yeah! I guess it is kind of like a banjo roll.

What inspired "Berlin Bossa"?

Initially I decided to take Bach's "Bourrée



in *E Minor*—a piece I've been playing since I was about 15 years old—and set it to a bossa nova beat. I realized that just playing it with a new rhythmic concept wasn't gonna cut it, so I fleshed it out with some chords that seemed to work well with it. There's an *Em9* to *Am9* vamp that I think is particularly effective. I feel I was able to both honor the piece by playing every note of it but also take it somewhere new by adding a bridge, a B section, and a solo section. I called it "Berlin Bossa" because every day for the last year I start my day by listening to Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* while reading the newspaper and eating breakfast. Berlin is in the Brandenburg district of Germany and I've been fortunate enough to spend some time there.

Is that you playing slide guitar on the bed tracks of "Beyond the Bayou"?

No, that's a wonderfully talented blues player from Memphis named Matt Tudor. I find the combination of slide guitar and Dobro with the nylon-string to be a really unique and unusual pairing. I'm actually thinking of

Ex. 1

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doing a whole album with him at some point.

How did your collaboration with the members of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy come about?

They were working at the same studio as me, and the co-producer/engineer of all my albums, Dominic Camardella, introduced us. I've always been a big fan of theirs and they seemed to enjoy my albums as well.

The horn section is featured prominently on "Barcelona Express" and saxophonist/clarinetist Karl Hunter is on "Meeting in Madrid," and "Café Paris." Scotty Morris plays rhythm guitar on "Café Paris" as well. The sessions were easy—they came in, wrote out some charts, and knocked it out fairly quickly. The tricky part was mixing the wall of horns and

the nylon-string guitar in "Meeting in Madrid." In some sense there's an artificiality to the sound because the horns and the nylon-string could never actually work together in an acoustic setting.

You play in minor keys and use different types of minor scales fairly often. Did you ever formally study the theory behind their usage?

I dabbled in some music theory study on my own but I'm not formally trained in it at all. My approach is much more organic. My school of thought is that if it sounds good to me, that's all that matters. I've never really worried about whether I'm playing the correct scales over the correct chords. I'm not saying that it's any better or worse than another approach; I'm just saying that it works for me.

Despite the itinerant concept behind *Traveler*, you haven't made plans to tour for this album.

I've taken a little break from touring to concentrate on some other studio projects I've been working on. The main one is a remix album of ten Brazilian-flavored tracks from my previous solo releases due out this summer. It's going to focus less on guitar and more on the ensemble and creating a general vibe. I'm a big fan of "chill" ambient electronica and one reason is because it offers a different kind of listening experience. Not every musical experience has to involve intensely focused listening. It's entirely valid to do something that functions as a soundtrack to everyday living, and that's what I'm going for. On one hand, the de-emphasis on soloing and the guitar in general may be a turn-off to some of my audience; on the other hand it may expose me to a new audience who otherwise might not hear my music.

You've had major success on YouTube. Was that a deliberate marketing strategy for you?

No. It's been kind of a fluke actually. I've done well but it's not "Gangnam Style" numbers by any means! At the time I began my solo career, I was told by promoters that you need to market yourself through video these days. Sending out an album to critics isn't enough anymore. There's got to be other supplemental media content as well. It's not something I particularly approve of or am happy about per se, but I have the good sense to realize that you've got to play the game to some extent. Thankfully, it's worked out. ■