

KOCH ROCK

GREG KOCH'S OVER-THE-TOP CHOPS

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n the liner notes of his debut album, *The Grip* [Favored Nations], Greg Koch addresses the most frequently asked questions about his career. So, if you're wondering how to pronounce his last name, it rhymes with "chalk." (No jokes, please—the dude is 6'7") And if you're curious about what kind of music he plays, Koch offers, "Imagine Chet Hendrix meeting the Kings—Albert, Freddie, and B.B.—at the first annual 'Zep-pelin/Holdsworth Coffee Guzzler's Hoedown.'" There you have it. ►

BY MATT BLACKETT

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But the reality of his amusingly evocative statement is that it only scratches the surface of the World According to Koch. It's a world where Albert Lee-approved chicken pickin' collides with an unholy Clapton/Gibbons alliance played with all the reverence of a Looney Tunes soundtrack. And these influences don't just co-exist on the same album—they co-mingle, fornicate, and wage war with one another within the same *lick*. And the licks just keep coming. An impossible stream of riffs jumps off of Koch's fretboard like clowns spilling out of a VW Bug—and when you're convinced that there can be no more, out pops another one. Through it all, Koch's zany sense of humor beats you over the head like a cartoon sledgehammer.

It has been an interesting journey for Koch, who honed his jaw-dropping chops doing tons of gigs, clinics, and sessions in the greater Wisconsin area. ("I was ensconced behind the bastion of culture that is the Cheddar Curtain," he deadpans.) When Fender tapped Koch to demo the most talked-about product at the 2001 NAMM show—their Cyber-Twin



amp—he became the most talked-about performer at the show. When an associate of Steve Vai's caught Koch's shtick, it quickly led to Koch inking a deal with Vai's Favored Nations label.

"I felt very fortunate to show off this savage amplification device," says Koch of the Cyber-Twin. "And when the amp took off, I was able to catch a ride on the same crazy train. I look at it like me, the Cyber-Twin, and Steve Vai all

meeting on the serendipity highway to hell."



Your music is pretty diverse. What did you listen to as a kid?

My brother is 14 years older than me, and we roomed together, so I was exposed to all of his music. I got infatuated with Jimi Hendrix when I was a kid—unusually so. I did a report on him in the third grade, and I made cardboard Strats. I also used my sister's sewing machine pedal as a wah-wah. That was a cry for help.

So, early on it was Hendrix, then Clapton, then Zeppelin. After that, I became a blues nazi. Then the country influence came to the fore. I was a schizophrenic child.

That schizophrenia is all over The Grip. Walk me through the opener, “Zoiks.”

What you have there is my American Standard B-Bender Telecaster. I plugged that rascal into a Vibrolux Reverb that I did a little “self-relic” job on—I beat the amp into submission so it looks like it’s from the ’60s, even though it’s only four years old. I also replaced the speaker with a delicious new Jensen, and as a result it’s a tone counsel from the gates of hell.

Is the overdrive coming from the Vibrolux?

For the most part. I did bolster up the gristliscious tone with some Fulltone Full-Drive 2 activity to add a little bit of snot. That’s a great-sounding pedal.

How did you play the melody?

The melody and solo are all B-Bender. I love that device, because you never know what’s going to happen if you start jerking your shoulder back and forth when you’re running some fast stuff. The next thing you know, you’ve got a whole cauldron of wrong.

And that’s a good thing?

That’s a *wonderful* thing. That’s why I never

do more than two takes on a solo. I'm not looking to perfect it. I like mistakes. On the old Jimmy Page stuff, he would always leave in the "wrongness"—and that's part of what makes his playing so delicious.

What's going on in the intro to "Spank It"? Are you using a delay to produce some of those notes?

No. I do this thing where I chicken pick a note, and then slap the third finger of my left hand on the fretboard directly thereafter. I appropriated that technique from a bass-playing roommate in college who was really into the Brothers Johnson.

What are the two tones panned left and right in that tune?

I was recording upstairs in this music store, and I just grabbed an American Standard Tele off the wall. That's on one side. For the other side, I played my Custom Shop Strat. It started out blue, but due to barroom mutantry spilling various secretions on it, it's more of a sick green now. It has a big, fat maple neck, and it's a weapon of destruction.

One thing I do to all my Strats is put a push/pull pot on the tone control so I can get all three pickups—or the bridge and neck—together. I'm using the bridge/neck combo on "Spank It."

What did you use for the solo?

The leads go back and forth between the Tele and an ES-335. I tracked every guitar on the song through a Fender Pro Jr. amp.

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“Draw My Number” has a bunch of cool layers.

The dirty tone is a different B-Bender Tele that’s a snotty little weapon. It has Texas Special pickups in it, and for a Telecaster, that thing is as meaty as the day is long. I played that through the Vibrolux. The Leslie-ish tone is the Cyber-Twin.

Did you use any other amps on the record?

I used my 100-watt plexi Marshall on “Holy Grail.” I took two of the tubes out of it to make it growl a little more. I also used that amp for the clean tone on “Defenestrator.” I jump the two channels, turn them up to about 7, and then turn my guitar’s volume down. I always put a capacitor on my volume knob so when I turn down I don’t lose any highs. For the clean rhythm, my volume is turned down. For the solo, I crank it up and turn on my Full-Drive and Roger Mayer Octavia.

How important are all the different layers to your music?

Well, I don’t want people’s attention to wane. Instrumental music obviously doesn’t have a vocal or a lyric for people to latch onto. I like to add stuff to build excitement and keep the listener interested. Also, I’ve done a ton of jingle work, and the guy I work with has always let me do all this wacky layering. That’s crept into my writing over the years—the psychotic blends and weird amalgamations are just me hearing holes in the music and filling them.

Do you think any label other than one designed for guitarists would have given you a deal?

There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell of that happening. I mean, I’ve had some amazing contacts in this zany business over the years, and they never amounted to anything. Then I send Steve Vai my CD on a Thursday, and by Monday he got in touch with me. It’s a pretty kooky little tale, because I sort of looked at that NAMM show as my one last try. I still loved playing, but I was fed up. If nothing happened there, I was going to become a postal worker or something.

Do you think that you and the other artists on Vai’s label can make it cool to play your

ass off again?

I hope so. We're definitely coming out of an era where if you can play well you're a dickhead. It's amazing how the pendulum swings around. My nephew is 17, and he and all his cronies are into Hendrix, the Beatles, Zeppelin, and the new jam bands. I think the time is right for people to once again realize that the guitar is the most expressive instrument on the planet. Learning how to do a bunch of stuff on the guitar is good, clean fun. Nobody ever mowed down a family of five by playing too much guitar.

Do you consider yourself legally insane or criminally insane?

Aw, man—I'm just a little over the top. ■

“Everyone thinks they know everything about the guitar, so it's hard to get your music listened to in a benevolent, rather than a critical, fashion,” says Koch.

❖ Koch's Rockers

With a style that encompasses blues, rock, country, and a healthy dose of reckless, wacky humor, Greg Koch is a tough guy to pigeonhole. Here Koch discusses some of the music that shaped, twisted, and mutated his guitar playing. —MB

❖ **Jimi Hendrix** My favorite Hendrixism of all time is the version of “Red House” that was originally on *Hendrix in the West*. He does all that dean, false harmonic stuff. It’s kind of his mutant version of Albert King. I probably stole more lead lines from this than from any of his tunes.

❖ **Eric Clapton** “Steppin’ Out” off *Live Cream Vol. II* is a good one for all the people who say, “What’s the big deal about Clapton?” If they listen to this they’ll get the proper message.

❖ **Duane Allman** Although I didn’t put much of it on my record, I play a lot of slide, and Duane Allman is totally inspiring to me. His playing on “Statesboro Blues,” from the *Atlanta Pop Festival Collection* is unbefreakingly lievable. I think that record is out of print, but a jaunt down to a used record store might pay huge blues dividends.

❖ **Albert Lee** His MCA Master Series records—*Speechless* and *Gagged but Not*

Bound—are both riddled with riffery. But the Albert Lee solo that really turned my head was on “Further on up the Road,” from Clapton’s *Just One Night*. He’s not doing his chicken pickin’ thing, but his note choices and the way he plays over every chord are simply awesome. The guy just throws down like a Sasquatch in heat. It’s a thing of beauty.

❖ **Jimmy Page** I taped the Zeppelin BBC sessions back when they were on the *King Biscuit Flower Hour*, and Page’s playing was hugely influential. He does some licks over and over in “Heartbreaker” and “Dazed and Confused” that are delightful. It’s hard to describe—they sound like they’re wrong, but they’re right.

❖ **Billy Gibbons** One tune that always made my nostrils flare with incredible vehemence was “Blue Jean Blues” on *Fandango*. I must admit that when it comes to Caucasian mentors of Texas blues, the Rev. William G. is my favorite.

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FAVORED NATIONS



"It's so unusual for me to record stuff that I think is cool, and then have it come out on a record," says Koch of *The Grip*. "I can't believe there wasn't a producer saying, 'This sucks. This is never going to sell.'"