



By John McGlasson

I find myself asking that question a lot lately. It's partially because I haven't heard anything really &quot;new&quot; for a long time. I get a lot of cds in the mail from great guitarists from around the world, and while I get a lot of listening enjoyment from some of them, the truth is, they almost all fall into one of these categories of influence;

Vai  
Malmsteen  
Holdsworth  
Eric Johnson  
Morse  
Beck  
Petrucci  
SRV  
Hedges

In that order.

I don't think there's much question that Vai is the most imitated among the super-technicians in the Global Guitar World, and that may just be my perception, because in my opinion, Vai is so technically perfect and his style so identifiable that even the slightest bend, slide, or other Vai trademark shines through immediately in another's playing.

If you picked one of these things up early in your learning process, it may be a regular part of your style and you may not even know it, but when I pop in someone's cd and I hear that classic Vai backwards slide ahead of the note, or a flurry of finger-tapping with that heavily-processed Vai-esque tone, or that vibrato, or Steve's brand of perfect, trademark, rubbery whammy bar usage, it really causes me to dismiss the rest of what I'm hearing, because it doesn't seem like the artist has taken the time to look at his or her own style honestly, step back from it, and purge it of all easily recognizable influence. It's a tough thing to do, but every legendary guitarist had to do it at some point. A quick flurry of Malmsteen notes can make me cringe if they're not from Malmsteen. (Who's pretty much a Uli-Jon Roth hack, but that's another article...email Mike Varney about that please, not me!)

I have a rule that I break sometimes because I get friendly with these players and a &quot;thanks anyway&quot; isn't enough...I don't critique the cds or the players' styles. But sometimes after talking to them for awhile about the industry and such, they want to know why

I'm not as excited about their album as they are, and they pin me down to get an honest review. Some of the players who are most guilty of what I described above get the most hurt when I can easily identify almost every aspect of their playing as a bundle of cliches derived from their heroes, and gently give my opinion that while they may be incredible, entertaining guitarists, they really don't have a style of their own. There's nothing "new"; there for me to try to deliver to the guitarists of the world.

And while there are many who take what I say either with a grain of salt, or take it to heart, but they take it politely, the response from the artist is often the same series of events, and can be either courteous, combative, or both...

- 1) Explain how we're all influenced by our heroes so to try to be original is a waste of time
- 2) Look at the other artists on my label, and pick them apart, and second-guess me for signing them
- 3) Pick apart my playing, note-for-note, and question whether I should be on my own label.

And if you look at the artists on my label, they all may not exactly fit the criteria I'm trying to fill for the future. I founded the label out of frustration that all these great guitarists I was finding here in Illinois were being ignored by labels and the press mostly because of pure geography, so I consolidated them, made albums, put them out, and we were global within 18 months, something we never expected. If you listen to the first album I produced and released, Isaiah Sharkey's "Skyliner", you'll hear nothing but great jazz technique, a couple Wes covers, and some very obvious influences. But Isaiah had just turned 14 when we made that album. You would've heard of Isaiah Sharkey someday whether I mentioned him or not, there's no stopping him. He's not on our label anymore, but we launched the career of a true guitar prodigy who's now an incredible performer, singer, and an ungodly, genre-defying player by anyone's standards, and without ego, but who had no idea how to get himself heard. So of course what this 14 year old genius lacked in originality at the time doesn't cloud the fact that he deserves to be heard. There are exceptions to the Originality Rule, and if I find another Isaiah, I'll do it again.

Of course, the Big Question for me, and I suspect every label owner who's also an artist on his own label (other than Steve Vai I'm sure...) is...would I sign myself? It can't be answered, other than to say that I started my own label partly so I could put out my own stuff, so it ends there. Don't want to deal with labels? Start your own.

I'm going through the after-effects of scrapping my own album a year ago that was 70% complete, with a really good drummer and bassist, good material, but it was all over the place, with songs that were just displays of various styles that said "look at me, I can play rock, swing, jazz, country..." it wasn't an album by a great band, it was me being backed up by a drummer and bassist, playing what I told them to play, with a producer doing what I told him to do. And while I think I've done a good job of removing most of the cliches from my style(s), the kind of album I was making made me guilty of what I was trying to change. So I scrapped it, focused on a single style that makes me happy for this album, assembled a great band and got

a great producer that'll be in charge of what goes on in the studio completely, taking that out of my hands. It's a band effort, with all new material, and it'll be a good album.

But in the words of the great Jimmy Page, to paraphrase a bit of advice I sometimes wish I'd heard a lot sooner...&quot;Never, ever start your own record label.&quot;

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