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ACOUSTIC GUITAR

APRIL 1998 NO. 64

Paco de Lucía

A Rare Interview with
the Flamenco Master

**Martin's Bargain
Dreadnought**

Duncan Sheik

words and music

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SHEIK CHIC

Duncan Sheik makes his mark with smart, sophisticated acoustic pop

By Julie Bergman

DUNCAN SHEIK'S SELF-TITLED DEBUT CD ON Atlantic Records has found unexpected exposure on pop radio with the Top 20 success of the single "Barely Breathing," which was nominated for a Best Male Vocal Performance Grammy. But Sheik's music has less in common with typical Top 20 fare than with a deeper, more tonally and harmonically complex acoustic landscape. If you pick up a guitar and try to find just where on the fretboard Sheik has gone to provide the heavy, satisfying chords behind "Barely Breathing"—or any of his other songs—you'll find that ninth chords and unusual minor voicings are the custom rather than the exception.

Very little of what the 28-year-old South Carolina native creates comes even close to the status quo. "I think it's just my sense of being very turned off by typical chords," Sheik says, "and my need to explore a different harmonic vocabulary and find those voicings that seem unique."

Even Sheik's open tunings aren't run-of-the-mill. "I use a lot of variations on E B E F# B E, because I really like ninths a lot," he says. Tracks on his *Duncan Sheik* CD feature acoustic guitars tuned to open E7 (E B D G# B E, "The End of Outside"), D minor (D A D F A D, "Little Hands"), and E B E F# B E ("Days Go By"). The rest of the tracks on *Duncan Sheik* are in standard tuning, partly a concession to working with a producer, but of the 18 potential songs for his next album, only two are in standard tuning. "The rest are all over the place," he says.

Sheik started playing an old acoustic Yamaha guitar when he was about five years old, and he was also inspired to play piano by his grandmother, who had been a piano student at Juilliard. His forays into rock and jazz while in school expanded his chordal lexicon and put him out front on lead electric guitar, but his own songwriting on acoustic guitar was the primary inspiration for his unorthodox musical explorations. Sheik says, "Piano does give you a wider sense of harmonics, but in a way the guitar ends up offering you more surprises, especially with alternate tunings. There are more interesting combinations that can come out of the woodwork on guitar, whereas the piano is always set up the same way."

Uncharted musical territory and guitar tunings were fodder for Sheik's composing efforts from the time he got his first tape recorder. "I got a four-track recorder when I was 14, and I always did these little instrumental compositions. That was my musical outlet. I had very little to do with other people's music. Essentially I was always playing by ear. To this day there's like one cover that I play."

While at Brown University, Sheik played in the band of Lisa Loeb—the young singer-songwriter who later struck gold with the song "Stay," featured in the movie *Reality Bites*—but the draw of his own material was overwhelming. "When I was a sophomore," Sheik recalls, "I said to Lisa, 'This is really fun, but I don't want to continue doing this unless I'm going to have some creative input into the band.' I liked being the guitar player, but it was not all I wanted to do. That's kind of when we parted ways, although we do see each other pretty often now."

He thought he would find a career writing film scores, given his penchant for instrumental composition. But on a vacation in Mexico during college, he went from strict instrumentalist to singer-songwriter overnight. "I don't know what triggered the thoughts, but I came to the con-

Continued on page 39

clusion on the beach in Mexico that the reason you play music is to communicate with other people, to move them in some hopefully profound way," he says. "All of the artists I love are musicians and singers. I realized that I was probably going to have to get it together and communicate with my voice as well, so at that point I hunkered down and started to write words."

Sheik did not have a particularly strong background in the written word, but his classical literary education leaks into his songs. "I had amazing and inspiring teachers in English and poetry," he says, "and a lot of those things were imprinted on my brain. I definitely appreciated those great works, but I didn't think then that I would [later] be so engaged with words."

"Piano does give you a wider sense of harmonics, but the guitar ends up offering you more surprises, especially with alternate tunings."

Sheik's lyrics are inspired by the mood that his instrumentals create, so he has never found it possible to write words first. "Words are very important," he says, "but for me, the music absolutely comes first, and the kind of harmonic movement, and how the melody relates to that setting, and how that all works rhythmically. That's the base on which everything sits."

"One of my struggles," he says, "is that I come up with so many musical ideas that I find it difficult to find lyrical concepts to go along with them. It also has to do with this sense I have of so many songs, so many singers, and so many lyrics. It just becomes shouting at the wind at a certain point unless you find something great to say."

The songwriting process has often been "a trial and error thing" for Sheik and always an acoustic experience. All of the tracks on his current CD were written on acoustic guitar, including the one that ended up with no acoustic guitar in the mix. Sheik's description of his songwriting craft brings to mind the words of the late Michael Hedges. "I like to sit there and put the pieces of the puzzle together," Sheik explains. "With something like a D minor or E minor chord, you get certain sonorities, and it's almost like an Indian way of playing, where you're jamming with yourself

and things emerge if you're patient, just listening to how the guitar resonates."

The search for a melody follows the same pattern. "With the melody, there's absolutely zero thought of construction at all," Sheik says. "It's just what is supposed to be there. It's as if there was some predetermined nature to it. That's a Robert Fripp thing. He talked about music being this existing essence that, depending on how open you are, you're able to shoot out into other people's consciousness."

Consistent with his approach to writing, Sheik has let experimentation dictate his guitar-playing methods. His style developed as a result of what he was working to compose. Several songs on *Duncan Sheik* that seem at first hearing to have a fingerstyle base are actu-

ally played with a plectrum. Sheik says, "I am a plectrum-oriented guitarist. I think 'Little Hands' is the only track on the record where I'm really playing fingerstyle, although it might seem like it on 'November' and a couple other tracks. Arpeggios are a big part of how I structure things, but that is definitely mostly plectrum-oriented."

Sheik is not especially sophisticated as a fingerstyle guitarist, but he hopes to get there eventually. "That's another thing I'm working on, becoming a better fingerstyle player. But for now, it's the music that's really important, and I try to spend the time there. Ultimately it has made my technique pretty solid and definitely very individual."

Sheik is a self-confessed "tech-head," with lots of recording equipment and electronics in his home studio in New York City. He studied music theory, as evidenced by his harmonic finesse, but sight-reading was his Achilles' heel, and technology has helped on that front. "While I can talk about chords in fairly complex detail, if I have to sit there and look at it on the staff, it's very rough for me," he says. "I can read the kind of computer-oriented notation of my sequencer much faster and easier."

While Sheik likes to keep up with technology, it also brings up a conflict.



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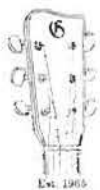
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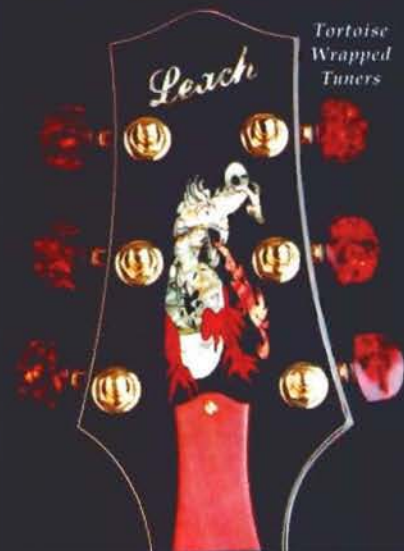
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"I have a Godin guitar with a MIDI setup, and I've been thinking about getting a Roland VG-8-type guitar synthesizer, but this is where my organic versus modernist mind-set starts to battle. I love what technology can do, but at the end of the day when I listen to recordings, the only things I end up really enjoying are super-organic-sounding things. My head wants one thing and my heart wants another." (For more on Sheik's guitars and equipment, see Gearbox, page 102.)

When Sheik signed with Atlantic, he brought compositions to the table that were ripe for studio exploration and found a sympathetic and compatible producer in Rupert Hine, who has worked with the likes of Kate Bush and the Waterboys. What Sheik wanted

Sheik added electric guitars, keyboards, EBowed guitars, and snatches of drum programming and brought in friends to play bass and drums. Fran Banish, who teaches guitar at McCabe's in Santa Monica, California, came in to add some electric and slide. Although Sheik is capable of covering the lead work himself, he had another motive for bringing in Banish. "I don't care if you're Bill Frisell," he says. "It's still good to have another person's essence and energy around to add some creativity and intrigue to a track."

Sheik toured last fall with Shawn Colvin, recently recorded a track for a forthcoming Fleetwood Mac *Rumours* tribute album, and is now settling down to work on his next CD, for which he already has a slew of compositions in

"I come up with so many musical ideas that I find it difficult to find lyrical concepts to go along with them."

was more strings. Lots of them. The label balked. Sheik says, "I was going through a Nick Drake fascination at the time, and when I first told my A&R person and the people at the label that I wanted to have strings, they said, 'Well, it's so expensive.' And they were afraid I was going to make an Air Supply record or something. But I said, 'Listen to George Martin.' It's a sadly underused thing, to have a real string section playing arrangements, as opposed to sampled strings doing disco lines or whatever. So we brought in Simon Hale, a British arranger suggested by Gavyn Wright, who did the strings for Bjork and a lot of British pop that used real string sections." Most of the tracks for *Duncan Sheik* were recorded in Hine's 150-year-old French chateau, and the CD was mixed in London.

Hale had gone home to do the string arrangements, armed with samples from Sheik's computer of what he had in mind. Sheik will never forget the day he first heard Hale's charts played by the London Session Orchestra Strings. "That was the zenith of my musical experience," he recalls, "that day at Metropolis Studios, because it was so much the essence of what I wanted, and you don't know if you're going to get it. I was crying. It was incredible."

various stages of completion. He has been working on incorporating more improvisation into his next studio experience. Some of the inspiration comes from jam sessions that took place on his tour bus in Europe last summer. He played with the lead guitarist from the tour, Irishman Gerry Leonard, and recorded the sessions on a portable DAT machine. "I want to bring interesting musical conversations into the context of a pop record," Sheik says. "It's not something that gets done very often. Hopefully I can make this all come together and work. Easier said than done."

Meanwhile, Sheik is helping Atlantic promote his releases, including a new single and video of "Wishful Thinking," a track written for the Fox movie *Great Expectations*. He hopes that in the end he'll reap the benefits but won't fall prey to the pitfalls of having a hit record. "I'm very proud of the record," he says, "but I really did not think that this kind of acoustic guitar record was going to sell half a million copies, or that I was going to have a big hit song, which is a bit of a double-edged sword." Ultimately, Sheik just wants to write and play his music, make a living at it, and continue to explore the depths of the acoustic universe, listening for those exotic chords. ■

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G E A R B O X

**EQUIPMENT PICKS FROM
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 CATFISH KEITH, AND
 CHARLIE LOUVIN**

REVIEW: MARTIN D-15

NEW GEAR



American luthier Lester DeVoe built two of de Lucia's negras.

Paco de Lucía began playing *flamenca negra* guitars in concert long ago and has helped to popularize them among young flamenco concert artists. Traditional flamenco guitars are made of Spanish cypress. They're set up with very low action, and their necks are slanted slightly backward, creating a subtle fret buzz. These design details afford flamenco guitarists a bright, penetrating sound that is ideal for cutting through the sound of the singers and dancers. A *flamenca negra* is constructed and set up like a traditional flamenco guitar but has rosewood back and sides, like a classical guitar, giving the sound more depth and complexity.

De Lucía's touring guitars are built by the Conde brothers (Hermanos Conde) of Madrid, Spain (Calle Gravina 7, Madrid 28004, Spain). They learned their craft from one of the greats of the flamenco guitar-making tradition, Domingo Esteso.

De Lucía also has two instruments (both *negras*) made by American luthier Lester DeVoe (Long Look Farm, 568 Paris Hill Rd., South Paris, ME 04281; [207] 743-9764). One has Indian rosewood back and sides and friction-peg tuners, and the other is made of Brazilian rosewood and has geared tuning machines. Both have German spruce tops. De Lucía played the

Indian rosewood instrument in the films *Don Juan DeMarco* and *Saura's Carmen*, as well as on a couple of recordings, including the one he is currently working on.

De Lucía uses Luthier strings (Luthier Music Corp., 341 W. 44th St., New York, NY 10036; [212] 397-6038). He treats his fingernails with varnish and his thumbnail with Kleenex and Crazy Glue.

—Guillermo Juan Christie

...

Duncan Sheik plays a Froggy Bottom acoustic guitar, Alvarez acoustic-electrics (which he endorses), and Martin guitars, among others. The Froggy Bottom, a style H with koa back and sides, a spruce top, an ebony fingerboard, and a Martin Thinline pickup, is his primary studio instrument. "The Froggy Bottom is a kind of 1940s 000, 12-fret parlor guitar," he says. "It's a very special instrument."

Froggy Bottom guitars are made in Vermont by Michael Millard (Froggy Bottom, RR1, Box 1505, Newfane, VT 05345; [802] 348-6665). "I really like Michael Millard's work," Sheik says.

"His guitars are comparable to a Collings or a great Martin, and they're not as expensive."

On tour and in his "Barely Breathing" video, Sheik plays an Alvarez 6503 Summit series acoustic-electric, which features a thin body with a small sound chamber, a flamed maple top with f-holes, and an EMG under-saddle pickup. Sheik came across the guitar at Rudy's in New York and learned from Alvarez that it was out of production. "They searched through their factory and found one other one and sent that to me, which was great," Sheik says. "For a stage acoustic guitar, it's genius." Sheik also uses an Alvarez Bob Weir model on tour (the 000-size WY1BK, with a cedar top, rosewood back and sides, a black finish, and the Alvarez 500 preamp/EQ system), and he recently acquired an Alvarez-Yairi CY140 Concert Master classical with a solid cedar top and jacaranda back and sides, as well as an Alvarez AV2SB, a sunburst Avante Series baritone guitar. He also travels with a Gibson ES-335 hollow-body electric. He keeps his guitar tech busy on the road. "Especially with all these tunings, I'm using a lot of guitars," he says. "I change guitars after every single song in the set."

Sheik played a '64 Martin 12-string with a 12-fret neck when he recorded the song "Serena" for his CD, and he's now writing songs on a '45 Martin tenor guitar. "I saw Freedy Johnston using a Martin tenor when he played with Shawn Colvin a few months back," he says, "and that inspired me to go find one." Also in his working guitar collection is a nylon-strung Fender Telecaster Thinline.

Sheik experiments with a 16-track in his home studio, applying different effects to his keyboards and to some extent to his electric guitars, but he goes mostly basic on his acoustic guitars. "In the studio I love to do lots of different things with electrics, but with acoustics, my philosophy is to keep it sounding like it should," he says. "When I play on stage, I plug my acoustic guitars through a Boss reverb, a Boss equalizer, and a Boss compressor, the last two of which I use for about 30 seconds during the set. I go into the reverb, then straight into a D.I., end of story. I do have an in-ear monitoring system, so that's where the technology part of it comes in on stage. I use the compressor for solos, just to get a little more sustain on the instrument, and I use the equalizer

REVIEW

Martin D-15

Much has been said in recent years about the new golden age of the acoustic guitar, as individual luthiers and manufacturers build some of the highest quality instruments in history. Within this high-end guitar frenzy, it is easy to overlook the entry-level guitar market. Although great strides have been made in addressing the needs of players who don't have thousands of dollars to spend (see "Real Deals," May '97), few guitars built entirely of solid woods have fallen below the \$1,000 mark, a number that is still out of reach for many young musicians.

This is exactly the market that Martin's D-15 (\$849 with hard-shell case) fits in. It is refreshing to see that Martin has the courage to build a no-frills guitar that emphasizes tone and playability over flashy looks and features. While it is the lowest-priced Martin currently available, the D-15 is the only guitar in the company's line to continue the tradition of all-mahogany guitars. It also has a lower retail price than the company's DM and D-1 series guitars, which have solid spruce tops and laminated sides.

Adhering to Martin's classic dreadnought dimensions, the D-15 employs the same patented neck-joint technology (mortise rather than dovetail) and top bracing that was introduced with the 1-series instruments a few years ago and is now found in all new Martins up to the 16 series. The guitar features a low-profile mahogany neck (1 11/16 inches wide at the nut) with a rosewood fingerboard and 28-style position markers. At the headstock we find high-quality enclosed tuning machines as well as an excellently fitted Corian nut. The body of the instrument sports a rosewood belly bridge with plastic pins, a tortoiseshell-colored plastic pickguard, and a decal rosette.

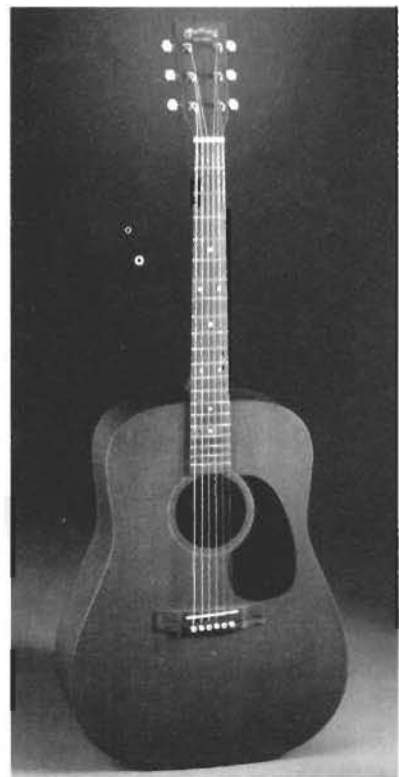
The guitar's overall craftsmanship is excellent, and it features some of the best fretwork I have seen in this price range. The lack of binding contributes to the guitar's plain looks, but while it certainly saves Martin time during production, it also makes the edges of the body more prone to nicks and dings.

The test instrument came beautifully set up with light-gauge Martin SP strings. No adjustments were needed. My first impression upon removing it from its nicely fitting TKL hard-shell case was that this was one of the lightest-weight dreadnoughts I ever held. Giving the guitar a light strum, I was immediately impressed with the volume it produced, and I could feel its back vibrating against my stomach as the notes poured out of the instrument.

In order to calibrate my ears, I compared the D-15 to an excellent D-18 Vintage reissue from Martin, and the D-15 held its own remarkably well. Although the guitar's voice didn't quite have the three-dimensional sophistication and evenness of the spruce-topped D-18, it was clearly the louder instrument of the two, and it also responded better to a soft touch, making it a great-sounding fingerstyle guitar. The D-15 had the strong midrange typical of mahogany-topped guitars, and while this quality masks some of the low end, it makes the instrument less boomy and more airy sounding than most dreadnoughts. Indeed, the D-15's tone often reminded me of the sweetness associated with smaller-bodied guitars, only much louder.

Besides being an excellent value for the player looking to buy his or her first "good" guitar, the D-15 would make a great second instrument for an established player who's looking for something to take to jam sessions or wants a slightly different sound in a recording session. It is a new yardstick in the entry-level solid-wood market.

—Teja Gerken



almost like a volume boost. Because I'm singing, I find it really hard to mess around with pedals, and, frankly, I don't want to."

Sheik has tried many different types of pickups in his acoustic guitars, trying to find a sound that can hold up in concert with an electric lead guitar, bass, and drums. "What I've realized is that with an acoustic in a live setting with a band, it becomes unfortunately less about tone and more about a balanced, strong signal-to-noise ratio, and about being able to compete," he says. "It's a kind of practical approach to acoustic guitar."

Sheik has no brand preference when it comes to strings. His acoustic guitars are generally strung with gauges .012-.056.

—Julie Bergman

♦ ♦ ♦

Blue Rags lead guitarist Aaron Wood, aka Woody, plays a Martin HD-28-2R, which features an enlarged soundhole à la Clarence White. "I'm starting to learn its personality," he says. "It has a robust tone, and the

sound is even all the way up and down the neck."

When the Blue Rags' attack is in full force, Woody shoves a T-shirt in front of the soundhole to mitigate feedback. "The Martin is so well made that in addition to producing a lot of sound, it also captures a lot of sound," he explains. He is still looking for a soundhole cover large enough to fit the enlarged soundhole. He also uses a Martin Thinline Gold Plus pickup and runs it through a Polytone amplifier. Woody is partial to D'Addario strings, though he also experiments with John Pearse strings.

Scott Sharpe strums a vintage 1947 Gibson ES-300 hollow-body electric. To preserve an acoustic sound, he miked the guitar directly on *Rag-n-Roll*. Sharpe uses D'Addario or D'Aquisto strings and a Fender Blues Junior amplifier.

—Marc Greilsamer

♦ ♦ ♦

Catfish Keith has two custom guitars, both made by luthiers in the United Kingdom. Peter Howlett and Tony Revell Musical Instruments (Unit

3B3, The Lion Works, Newtown, Powys S716 3AG, United Kingdom; [44] 686-624279) built his small-bodied acoustic. "It's the Catfish Keith Model," Keith says with a scampish grin. "It's fabulous!" The back and sides of the instrument are mahogany, and the top is German spruce. "It's little, but it sounds big and barky," he says. It replaced his Gibson Nick Lucas Special on the road.

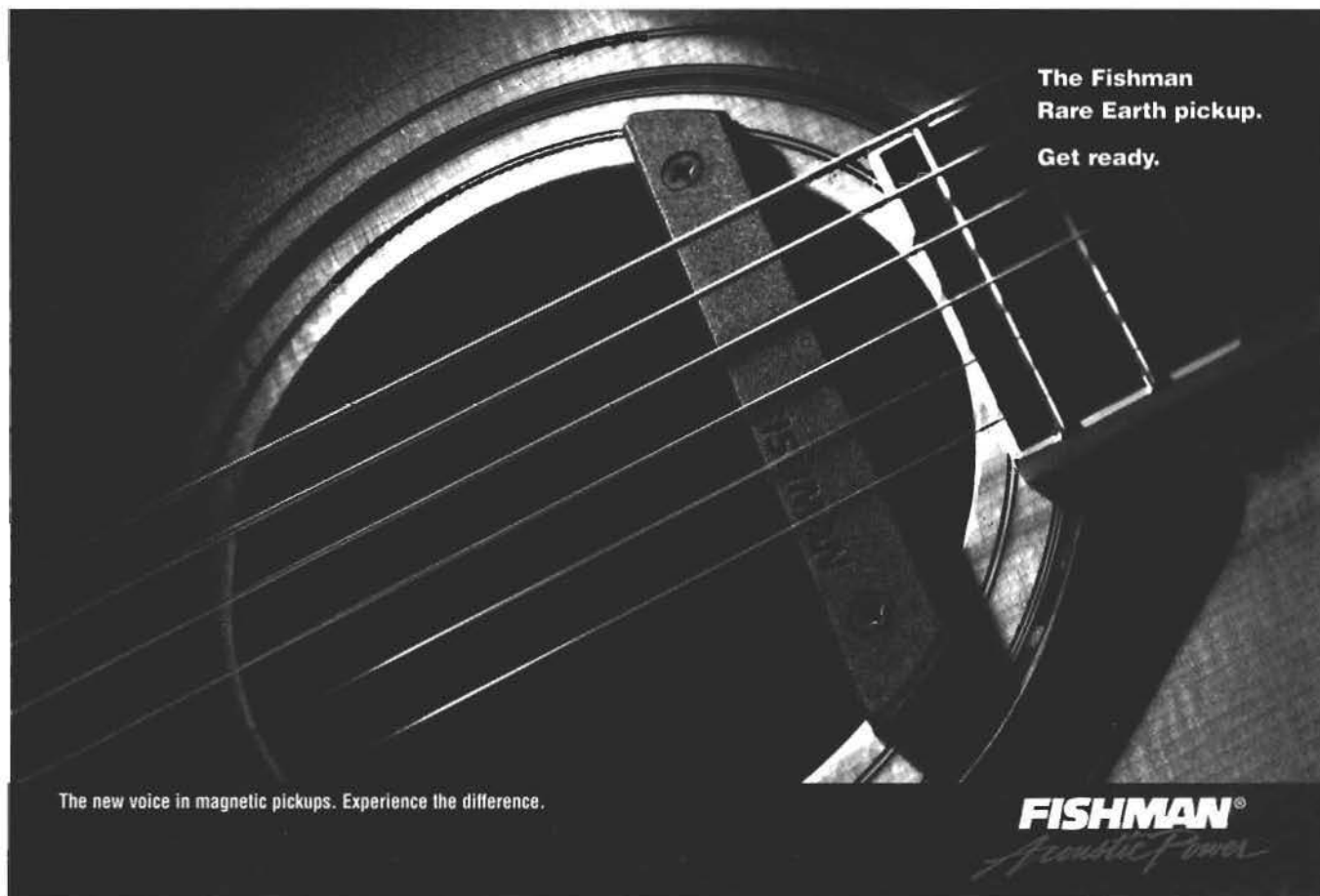
Keith's Beltona steel-bodied guitar recently took over for his rusty 1930 National (Beltona, 8 Knowle Rd., Leeds LS4 2PJ, England; [44] 113-275-3454). He says the Beltona has "a great neck, a stainless steel body, and a deep, spanky, singing tone." He uses "big, fat strings," especially on the high end—.017-.056.

—Gayla Drake Paul

♦ ♦ ♦

Charlie Louvin's main guitar is a Martin D-28, which he strings with Martin bronze mediums. He's not picky about microphones or pickups and uses medium-gauge picks without preference for any brand.

—Dan Ouellette



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