

Artists

CALIFORNIA GUITAR TRIO

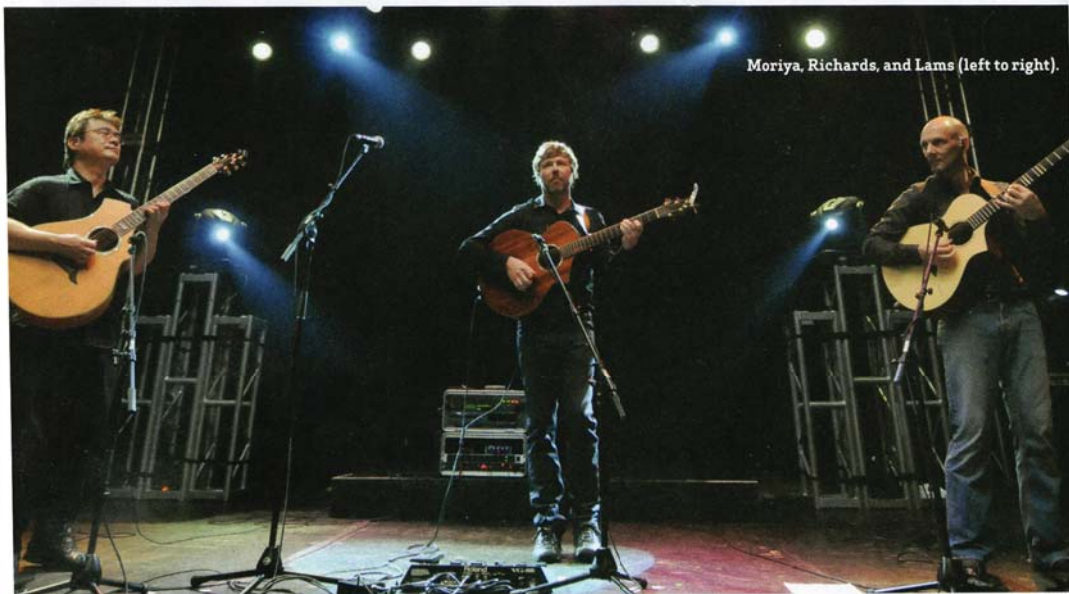


BY DARRIN FOX

“WE try to not get locked into specific recipes of working and being creative,” says California Guitar Trio’s Paul Richards. “Our recipe is the way we play and sound together.” For 20 years, Richards, Bert Lams, and Hideyo Moriya have cooked up a highly successful oeuvre, with 13 albums and an incessant touring schedule that has taken the group the world over. The trio’s inspired, progressive instrumental take on classical, jazz, rock, pop, even surf (thanks to Moriya, the trio’s resident surf guitar

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Moriya, Richards, and Lams (left to right).

expert and the shyest member of the group), is simultaneously serious and deliberate—much like their old teacher Robert Fripp—and playful, no matter how cerebral the composition or arrangement. Not bad for three dudes who met at Fripp's Guitar Craft course in 1987. *Andromeda* [Innerknot], the California Guitar Trio's latest effort, not only shows them to be in top form, it proves to be their best album yet as the group flexes its compositional muscles while indulging its improvisational urges.

Andromeda contains all original compositions—a first for you guys—and also a lot of improvised pieces.

Lams: Yes, we feel that the improvisations create a great contrast with the compositions. We toured the composed

songs for two weeks before we tracked them, so we were ready to lay them down. And it was fun having the improv in there. Each record is so different. I can't listen to an album of ours until at least five years after we're done with it, even *Andromeda*. I can't listen to it yet because I instantly recall making the music, the situation, the mixing process, everything. I can't listen in an objective way. In general, however, it was a really fun and spontaneous project, and we worked very fast and creatively.

The track "Improv VIII" has a Les Paul, speed-up tape thing going on. What's the story behind that?

Richards: It started out as a single-line circulation. Circulation is a concept we learned in Guitar Craft, where each player

takes one note of a melody and then passes it on, allowing the melody to circle around to each of the players. We did choose a key, in this case C minor, and then we played a circulation to create a basis. Then we backed up the tape—we actually recorded onto analog tape—and began layering improvisations over the top. After a few takes of that, our engineer said we should slow the tape machine down to half speed like Les Paul, and layer over that. In a way, it's our tribute to Les Paul. We toyed with the idea of calling it "Tribute to Les Paul," but the music is just too different sounding than anything he did, so we decided against it.

The track "Hazardous Z" is a standout as well.

Richards: Yeah, that one started out with Hideyo, who wrote out three parts and sent them to us while we were on a break from the road. When we got it, Bert and I adapted the parts to fit our own styles, and it changed the piece pretty radically. Bert pulled out his nylon string and played in an almost flamenco style. So I latched on to that feel as well, and added an almost flamenco-style rhythm. But since neither of us are flamenco players, it came out with a completely different feel. You have to be open to going

anywhere the creative process and the music take you.

What are some of your individual specialties as guitarists, and are there any examples of them on *Andromeda*?

Richards: We've developed as a group, but our personal styles have also developed over the years. For example, Hideyo is the fastest player. You can really hear that on the solo at the end of "Portland Rain," where he tears it up. Bert has a classical guitar background, and if you hear any fingerstyle, classical-oriented playing, it's him. In contrast, however, Bert also plays a lot of energetic, distorted solos on *Andromeda*. As for me, I like to play slide, and you can hear it on "Middle of TX." Keep in mind that these are small, very general examples of what we do differently from each other.

Lams: We're three very different personalities and we had styles and experiences that we developed before we met at Guitar Craft. I studied classical guitar and I had that ingrained in my body. Hideyo is a very different musician having played a lot of percussion in his life. You can really hear that rhythmic drive in his playing.

Moriya: I started playing guitar and drums at age 12, copying the Ventures' "Pipeline." I think learning the tremolo and glissando techniques in that music made me a faster picker. And playing drums made me listen to the drum parts as much as the guitar parts in music. I like to make the guitar groove as if a drummer is playing it.

What did you guys use to record the new album?

Richards: Everything on the album, even the distorted stuff, is acoustic guitar. I think a lot of people hear our music and assume that since there's distortion, there must be some electric guitar in there, but we use Roland VG-88s and VG-99s for distortion. I used my Breedlove A12 Auditorium Custom and Hideyo used a Breedlove CM Custom. Bert played an acoustic guitar made by Ed Golden on most of the record.

Are you happier with the tone of an amplified acoustic guitar now than you were, say, 20 years ago?

Richards: Acoustic guitar amplification is an ever-evolving technology, and we're always evolving what we use, as well. Over 20 years of playing together, I'd estimate that we've used more than a dozen different pickups. In fact, we're going through another evolution now, switching from RMC pickups to the L.R. Baggs Anthem system.

Lams: The trick with pickups is getting good dynamics when you're amplified,

which was lacking with previous systems. The Anthem has an internal microphone, which gives us more dynamics and transparency than just a piezo, because you get some of that natural guitar sound. The mic doesn't sound weird and nasal like a lot of internal mics. In the end, for us it's about finding something that sounds good in all of the different types of venues we play in. For example, one night we're in a club, the next night a church, and the next night a theatre, a conference room, a hotel, or a house. For what we do, we have to be able to transfer the dynamics to the audience, and the bigger the venue gets, the harder that is to do. Our concerts are really an experience in dynamics more than anything else.

Richards: Playing the acoustic guitar live is always a compromise. If you sit in a room listening to us play acoustically, it sounds completely different than when we go through a P.A. system. We want to retain the acoustic qualities of our guitars, but we need a pickup that works well with our effects and distortion too. When CGT started out, we were using Ovation's, which we played with Robert Fripp—it was the League of Crafty Guitarists standard-issue guitar. They worked very well and they have a certain clarity and definition, but they have plastic backs and that plastic sound to them. Since then we've used Martins, Taylors, custom guitars, and lots of different pickups, trying to get a nice amplified tone that works well with distortion. Believe me, it's hard to find the perfect acoustic guitar that you can also play with lots of distortion [laughs].

In *Andromeda*'s liner notes you thank Hiroshi Iketani for your picks. What are they?

Richards: We started using these triangular picks that Robert Fripp gave us when we were in Guitar Craft. A German company called Herdim made them from a material called India rubber. Unfortunately, Herdim went out of business, so we had to find something like them because we were all relying on them. They allow for really precise picking, and their tone is very clean, clear, and bright. Hiroshi Iketani makes something very close to the Herdim, so we use those, but they aren't cheap—about \$2 apiece. People ask for picks after the show and we say, "no way!"

Does Guitar Craft still inform what CGT does?

Richards: Oh yeah. It provided a very strong foundation and basis for pretty much everything we've been doing for 20 years, and it set the format for our working together. Robert has a unique way of work-

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ing that is very serious and focused on the music and playing together as a group. For example, the whole circulation technique he came up with is really a tool that forces you to listen to the other players.

After 20 years, how do you guys keep it fresh?

Lams: We've spent a lot of time on the road together, and you really get to know people that way. The biggest thing is giving each other space—both musically and personally. A couple of years ago we started getting separate hotel rooms, because when you're onstage together and driving in the van together, you need that breather from each other. We still go out and eat together and hang out. It's a fine balance, especially when you find yourself in a stressful situation, which happens on the road a lot. ■

BILL ELLISON

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