

FEATURES

Corrado Rustici

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF SONIC INVENTION

BY MATT BLACKETT

FOR MUSIC FANS IN ITALY, THE NAME Corrado Rustici conjures up images of sold-out stadiums, massive hits, and unprecedented record productions, with the thread of amazing guitar work weaving through it all. Indeed, Rustici has worked with Italian megastars Zucchero and Ligabue (trading licks with special guests such as Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck), and, as a producer, simultaneously occupied the top three spots on the Nielsen chart with three different artists.

Still, though, American audiences might not recognize the name, although they know the guitar work. Thanks in part to his work with Narada Michael Walden, Rustici's playing is all over '80s smashes by Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, Elton John, and many others. When he wasn't working those sessions, he would gig around the San Francisco Bay Area, and it was common to see Walden, Neal Schon, Randy Jackson, Clarence Clemons, and other luminaries in attendance, all drawn to Rustici's pop smarts, airtight rhythm work, brilliant guitar synth playing, and breathtaking solos that somehow combined John McLaughlin speed picking, Allan Holdsworth legato runs, and Jeff Beck-style whammy bar work—all in the context of three-minute pop-rock tunes.

Rustici's latest release is unlike anything he's done prior, and most likely unlike anything you've heard. *Aham* [Corrado Rustici], is a collection of nine tunes where every sound was created with guitar. Not guitar synth (even though he's a monster on that), but guitar. That includes not only violin and cello textures, but oboes, trumpets, clarinets, hi-hats, kick drums... *everything*. And Rustici accomplished this sonic feat with a surprisingly small collection of guitars and pedals. It would be intriguing and impressive even if the tunes weren't great, but they are, with deep, cinematic, and expansive progressions and melodies. And, although he is adamant that he did

not want to make a "shredder record," the guy really shreds, employing consistently fascinating tones in the process.

Explain the concept of your record, what you were going for, and what it actually took for you to create this.

It took me many years to do it. I had no points of reference because I don't think anybody's ever done anything like this. I've always been interested in sound, because I think sound is one aspect of playing guitar that many guitar technicians forget. They concentrate so much on learning how to play notes that they forget about sound, which is really one of the instrument's strongest methods of expression. Over the years I just got bored. I felt like guitar players have been in a trance. The geniuses in the '60s created a sound that unfortunately became this big monolith and we are still stuck there, mentally, in terms of what we think the guitar can do. I decided I wanted to see how far beyond that I could get with just the guitar. I sat down and figured out which instruments I needed—violin, cello, flugelhorn, oboe, drums, percussion, and so on—and then I kind of deconstructed those sounds and tried to figure out how I could make the guitar sound like them.

Percussion and drums were in a way the easiest to replicate, because the guitar is a percussive instrument, although it took me weeks to figure out how to make it sound like cymbals and hi-hats. I used a couple of plug-ins. The one that I used the most is a suite of vintage plug-ins called GRM Tools on Pro Tools. It has a frequency shifter, which was very helpful. It's almost like a ring modulator, but applied to different frequencies that you can shift in different ways. For cymbals and hi-hats, I would start with different harmonics on the guitar, and I would process those through the frequency shifter. Then I would distort or put reverb on them to create a cymbal.



I created a nice library of sounds that I orchestrated and arranged manually in Pro Tools for the rhythm section, which would serve as an anchor and provide some continuity for the record.

How did you go about creating the other instruments?

I actually found that distortion, if used in an intelligent way, can sort of be like clay. You can make distortion sound close to a lot of things that I was trying to emulate. I figured out if I split the original signal into three or more different channels and then used different settings on each channel for distortion, EQ, compression, and attack, I could get much closer to, say, a violin sound. I sometimes used an old fretless guitar that I've had since the '70s, and the sound of a finger on wood—as opposed to frets—was really helpful. I also used an EBow, an Electro-Harmonix Pog, and a Sustainiac on one of my guitars. That allowed me to elongate the sound without being

overly aggressive with distortion.

It seems to me that the attack is a huge part of what differentiates a guitar from, say, a trumpet, a clarinet, or a violin. How else would you manipulate the attack of the notes?

That was one of the main challenges. How do you make a guitar sound like a flugelhorn? There is an attack, but it's different than what we're used to. With guitar, you have those milliseconds of the pick or finger hitting the string, and then it kind of dies off and you have the sustain. How do you manipulate that to get it closer to what the other instrument sounds like? The human brain tries to decipher pretty quickly what it's hearing. So in those first milliseconds, the way you strike a note makes your brain say, "Oh, that's what that is." Using the EBow helped with that, but I didn't use it in the same way that everybody knows about. For horns, I actually found a way to hit the strings

with an EBow to make it sound like the initial instrument breath. Then I would do the same for an oboe. How do I create that attack? I would change EQ, compression, and distortion and then I would hit it differently. I would spend hours figuring out how certain frequencies do one thing, while other frequencies do something else. But it was rewarding because actually I got such a great knowledge of what sounds are made up of, which is one of my loves anyway.

It sounds like a painstaking process.

It is. At first it was frustrating, but I started getting great feedback from the instrument. The guitar was opening up and telling me, "Look, I can do this. I can do that." Then it became fun. The guitar dictated the kind of music that I was going to write and I really got into it. After six years I stopped because I didn't want to go on forever. In fact, at the end of the sixth year I was going to start all over again because I had learned

so much about this new way of approaching the instrument [*laughs*]. That's always my problem with every record that I do, though, so I just let it be.

There are a million cool tones on every song on this album, but take the opener, "As Dark Bleeds Light," and tell me how you crafted some of the sounds.

The percussion part is just me hitting a Godin with sticks and my hands. Then there's a low conga that's in tune with the tonic of the song, which is created by playing it on the guitar and EQ-ing and compressing the heck out of it. The main melody part is me trying to recreate one of my loves, which is a hybrid between a saxophone and an Armenian instrument called the duduk. I've always loved that sound. It's so sensual and beautiful.

You created all these sounds with a fairly limited collection of gear.

I ended up using five different analog pedals and three or four plug-ins for the

most part. The most useful one was the Pog, but I only used it to change the attack, not to make the guitar sound like a keyboard. I used my old Digitech Space Station on the backwards reverb setting for "Ananda's First Steps." I used my beloved Eventide Harmonizer for harmonization and the beautiful reverbs and delays that they create. I used the Talker by Digitech on the last song on the album. On "The Last Light Spoken," I played a Gibson HD.6X Digital Les Paul. It has a hex pickup, and I sent each string into a different channel and then EQ-ed and effected and panned them in totally different ways. It sounds like six different guitar parts, but it's actually just one guitar. Another cool thing that came out of this record is, because I did all this research and sound design, I'm actually building some pedals with DV Mark that should be available next year. So guitar players will be able to have some of these sounds at their disposal.

This record is obviously fascinating from a sonic standpoint, but the songs are really strong.

It makes me feel good that after many years of work, people really get the *music* of it. It's not just an experiment, it's not just sounds. I'm not interested in that. I did use skills that I've acquired throughout the years producing records and just playing guitar, but I wanted the music and the compositions to be intense and passionate and meaningful. I feel grateful for all the geniuses who have inspired us all over the years, and I wanted to try and make people think that they can do something different. In my life I've heard things that have driven me to explore. I'm telling guitar players there's so much that this thing can do. It's awesome. I don't pretend that I'm going to change anybody's life with this record, but if it inspires guitarists to look at the instrument and approach how they play it a little differently, then it's all worth it. ■