“I LIKE TO PLAY ALL KINDS OF MUSIC,” SAYS 66-year-old Elliott Randall. “So if there’s a theme to my new album, it is that it’s like an art exhibition—a bunch of different works on a wall representing a period of time, with everything working together harmoniously to present a complete whole.” Indeed, although the dozen instrumental pieces on Virtual Memory [Private Collection] span a stylistic range from basic blues to pastoral minimalism to soulful rock to Miles-inspired improvisation, they flow together beautifully, all informed by Randall’s exquisite playing and tones.

Widely celebrated for his immortal solos on Steely Dan’s “Reeling in the Years,” Randall was also a member of Seatrain in 1969, and formed his own band, Randall’s Island, in 1970. The bulk of his career, however, has been spent as a first-call session musician, contributing to hundreds of recordings by everyone from members of Kiss to John Lennon and Yoko Ono, as well as additional Steely Dan discs and the motion picture soundtrack to Fame. Randall has also scored Hollywood movies, produced advertisements for Fortune 500 corporations, worked as a technical consultant for musical instrument manufacturers, and toured with major artists as a hired gun.

The London-based guitarist continues to perform on both sides of the Atlantic and record continuously.

Although the songs on Virtual Memory originated in various time periods and differ in style, there is an almost uncanny continuity to the album. How was that achieved?

Song sequencing can take days or weeks, but in this case it took me ten minutes. I just looked at the list and dragged things around instinctively. And that actually touches upon my whole philosophy of music and music production, which is about taking listeners on a trip. That’s the epitome of the old school approach that started in the ’60s. Now, that’s being lost, as people tend to buy just a song or two from an album—assuming they buy them at all, as many people feel that music is an entitlement. I don’t think they realize how badly downloading from pirate sites actually hurts artists financially.

“What guitar did you use to get such beautiful tones on that song?”

I played a guitar I call “Strat #2.” My main guitar, which has been an extension of my body since 1965, is a blonde ’63 Fender Stratocaster with a humbucker in the front position. But in the early ’70s, I bought a second ’63 Strat. It mostly resided in the cupboard until I met Eric Stets and we mounted one of his Stetsbar vibrato bridges on it. I’m not really a wang bar kind of guy, but the Stetsbar is smooth, and I love the expressiveness I’m able to achieve with it. I didn’t love the original pickups on that guitar, however, so I tried some of Larry DiMarzio’s original stacked humbuckers, but they were a little too polite. Then I contacted Seymour Duncan, who I’ve known since 1965, and he handwired some pickups for me. After that the guitar was every bit as good as my main Strat, though it sounds totally different. I used it a lot on the album.

“What amplifier did you play through?”

In 1991, Jim Marshall gave me a Valvestate 8080 1x12 combo because he knew I liked small amplifiers. It has one tube in the distortion channel, but is otherwise
solid-state. I generally prefer 10’ speakers, but that amp is superb.

How did you capture all of those big and warm electric guitar sounds on the record?

I used an sE Electronics RNR1 ribbon microphone designed by Rupert Neve. I love old ribbon mics like RCA 44s and 77s—but the RNR1 is sensitive to a wider range of frequencies. I combined it with the Shure SM57 that I’ve had since 1978.

How did you position the mics?

The ribbon mic was positioned about three or four inches away—high enough to also capture the vibration of the cabi-net, because half of a great amplifier sound comes from the cabinet—and the 57 was placed right on the speaker cone. Both mics were angled slightly off-axis.

Do you have any sage advice for recording guitars?

First of all, phase correlation is critical if you are using more than one microphone, because if one is even slightly out of phase with the other, nasty things can happen. Understanding how different types of mics work is also very important. For example, ribbon mics have a figure-8 polar pattern, which means that they reject sound coming from the sides, and there’s an equal amount of sound coming from the front and rear. So, unless you want the sound from the rear, you’ll need to block it. I sometimes use a leather jacket on a chair for that purpose.

Back in 1978, while recording at Columbia Records’ studio in London, I asked this great old-time engineer which microphone would work best for recording my 1947 Martin D-18, and he laughed and said, “Of course different microphones have different characteristics, but I’ll show you something interesting. Play the same thing three times and each time I’ll move the microphone.” On playback, it sounded like three completely different guitars. My personal preference for recording that Martin, and any other acoustic guitar, is an AKG 451, which scoops out a little of the middle, accentuating the warm bottom and crisp top.

Did you use the 451 to record the acoustic guitar on “Balloons”?

Yes. And that’s the same Martin guitar as well. “Balloons” was recorded in the ’80s.

Is that cool modulation sound on “Later Last Night” an Electric Mistress flanger?

Yes, but it’s not just an Electric Mistress—it’s one of only three prototypes that came before the Russian production. It’s khaki green, looks like a tank, and sounds absolutely amazing. It’s got all of the great qualities
that the original Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress had, without the noise.

I love the way that the flanged guitar crisscrosses the keyboard sound in the mix.

That’s a concept that goes back to when Eddie Kramer and I produced my first album during the Hendrix era. We would pan the flanged sound from one side to another to give it more motion.

The solo sound on that track is really different than on other the tunes. Is that a different setup?

That’s Strat #1, which I just plugged directly into the Marshall combo. I fiddled with the controls to get a distorted sound that was bluesy and rough enough to be right for the track. And it was one of those one-take affairs. Of course, I had been living with that tune since I cut it back in the ’80s. The only things that changed were the guitar parts.

Was “Mixed Metaphors” entirely improvised?

Absolutely. I had worked with a guitarist named Tommy Emmerton while doing a production of Hair in 2010, and I invited him over to do some recording. We improvised several pieces, including a long one on which we actually played to a click track for reference. The results reminded me of certain thought and feeling processes dating back to Miles Davis’ Bitches Brew days, which inspired me to ask five other musicians to record improvised parts individually, just responding to what they heard. I prefer to have musicians all playing together in the same room, because there’s a special magic to that, but I love the way that “Mixed Metaphors” turned out.

Was “Milton Keynes Rag” also improvised?

Yes. Mick Abrahams and I have this sort of Bluetooth musical relationship, and we played that piece without previous discussion. I wasn’t enamored with the original guitar sounds, though, so we had to work to bring them fully to life, mostly using subtractive equalization.

Please elaborate on that.

If you want something to sound sharper, for example, don’t increase the highs—decrease the low and mid frequencies. That way you aren’t adding frequencies that weren’t part of the original sound of the instrument, but rather drawing attention to the aspect of the sound that you do like, thinking sort of like a sculptor. In fact, a painter friend once gave me one of the most important lessons of my life in terms of music when he said, “If it doesn’t add, then it distracts.”

You still play and record continually. What keeps you going?

David Spinoza was over here a couple years back and Jerry Friedman had just passed away. David looked at me and said, “Geez, Elliott, we’re dropping like f**king flies.” Now, this may be terribly unromantic, but that’s one of the reasons why I feel the urge to carry on full speed ahead while I’m still here. I’ve got a lot to say, and I’m going to keep playing until I drop.

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