

New Age Guitarist Billy Rogan Approaching the Unconscious

By Sherrie Wilkolaski

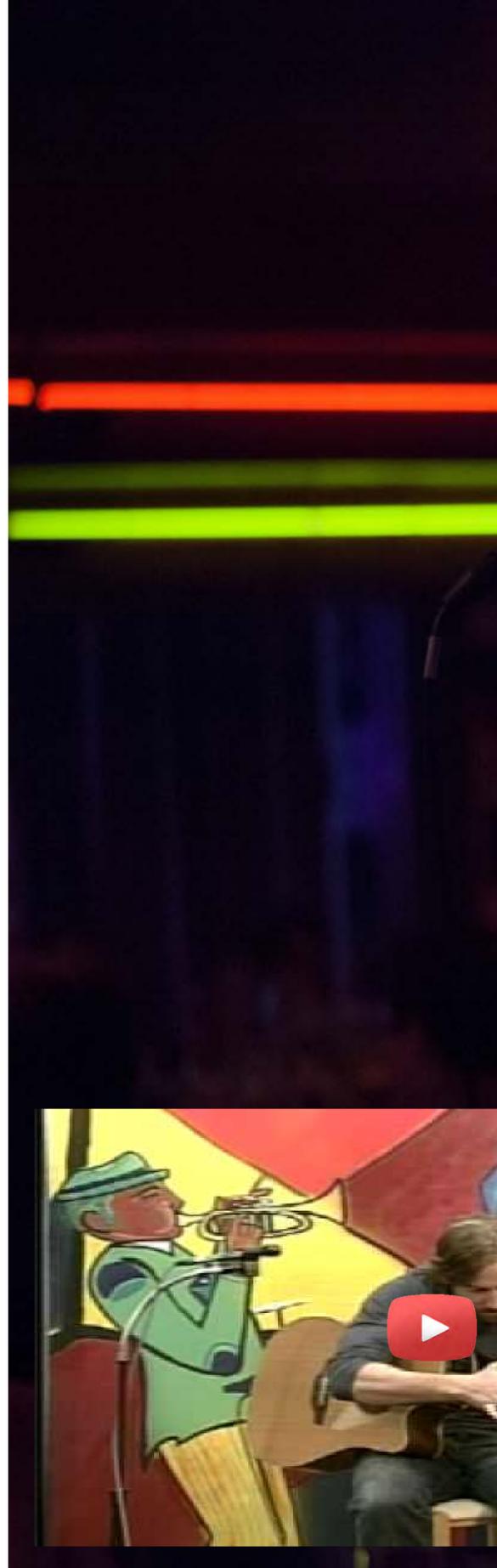
Traveling around the world, it is curious how you meet some people along the way. A single solitary incident can alter your existence and in the moment that change is taking place, it may not be evident that your self-existence is soon to be transformed. I had such an experience on my summer holiday in Nantucket, while staying at The Summer House, when I met musician Billy Rogan. This new age guitarist was vacationing with his mother and as it turns out, we had some mutual acquaintances. We ended up running into each other on several occasions. Billy had been playing in the bar at The Summer House restaurant the first night I arrived and then again at a private party I attended on my last night on the island.

His style of playing is not what you would expect from a typical acoustic guitar player. He plays a "classical and modern fingerstyle" and you would swear there were several instruments playing at once, as he strums, picks and blends melody with rhythm. If you've ever seen the video of Gotye's acoustic version of "Somebody That I Used to Know," there are five people playing the song on one guitar. If you close your eyes when you listen to Billy's music, you'll hear all of the different music elements coming together; just as if there were more than one musician playing at the same time.

After his set, we struck up a conversation and I was intrigued by his approach to music. As we delved deeper into the discussion, I knew I wanted to interview him. The party

was coming to a close and our group headed back to the bar. Billy again, along with a local piano player, played for guests. He was a huge hit. We exchanged numbers at the end of the evening and made arrangements to follow-up for an interview.

Like any good musician, Billy had brought with him copies of his CD *A Loss for Words* and I picked up a copy. On my drive home from the airport the next day, I listened to it and my mind wandered. It was nice to sit back and enjoy his music. His style of playing is not typical of what you'll see at the local pub, he is a well-versed guitarist, known mostly for his instrumental acoustic work. My favorite tune on his album is "Summer Slumber" and it reminds me of the late Michael Hedge's style, particularly what he did on *Aerial*





Boundaries. His music has a soulful feel to it and there is a driving element behind it that gets into your unconscious and lingers.

Billy graciously made time to talk with me the following week and it gave me a better comprehension of where his music comes from. My first question to him was how early influences in his life shaped his career as a musician. He told me, "I suppose those first few records and albums every musician hears stick into their subconscious and become more of their conscious playing as we all slowly peel back the layers to the musical process of learning and writing. My mom listened to just about every musical genre. Jazz influenced me to pick up sax. Those grooves, mixed with her classical training and 70s folk/singer

songwriter, gave me a pretty fair understanding and appreciation of melody."

His mother, Mary Rogan, is a classically trained pianist and has made her living in the music business. I didn't want to assume music has always been a part of his life, but when asked, he said, "Yes, but not always performing, or studying constantly while young. Not until my teens with guitar would I say that the honest and heartfelt expression of songs that resonated with my life took place. Then, it truly became something more. Music has always been there though; ringing in the background day in and day out, from my mother teaching piano six hours a day, then practicing and writing her own music. It was most certainly always

there, as more than just albums were played in the background."

When he was in third grade, about 8 years old, he had his first childhood performance. Billy was playing saxophone at this age, not the guitar. "My mom took me down to a local blues club that was located in this alley of downtown Scranton called 'Blues St.' I sat in with a blues band led by a blues guitarist named Clarence Spadey. In my mind, it was all like something out of a movie. The neon sign reflected pink neon onto wet black pavement as we walked down the alley and made our way to the venue. I met the guys in the band backstage, which, at my age, felt like some sort of initiation and introduction to a religious sect of superhuman god like beings. I remember a lot from that night, I'll never forget it.

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“My first real professional gig as a guitarist, I suppose, would have to be my CD release at a local theater in my hometown of Scranton, PA. That was a big one. A few hundred people were there. I had to set the whole thing up, massive sound equipment and everything. I learned a lot and had a lot of help from some wonderful friends and family.”

It is clear from our conversation that music is in his blood, but I get the sense it goes deeper. He said the thing he most enjoys about music is, “The expression and channeling of the greatest forms of creation in

the universe, the energy it brings to all our lives.” At this point during the interview, I’m gaining a deeper understanding of where the complexity in his music comes from. There is more to this musician than just music. He describes his music as, “Compositional guitar, or, being that is the total opposite of Deathcore. I sometimes like to refer jokingly to it as, Lifecore.”

Billy Rogan is a musician’s musician. He has collaborated and played with some of the best artists in the business and was selected and featured on ASCAP’s highly-

acclaimed Audio Portraits series. Humbly, he has this to say about working with other performers, “Learning from, or simply spending time with anyone who has something to show you, is a part of life that I’ve always felt was of importance. I’ve been lucky to have at a young age, some older people around me influence my decisions to pursue art. Naturally then, having the opportunity to play along with someone who has devoted his entire life to music can show you a thing or two. Opening for, and jamming with, Bill Kirchen of Commander Cody, who is also known as ‘The titan of the

Telecaster’, was most certainly a fond evening I won’t soon forget.”

He finds his inspiration by simply picking up his guitar and practicing voicings, riffs, looking for different ways to approach things in a traditional way and then building off phrases that stick with him. “I suppose this is describing the creative process as well, but they are so very closely related. The inspiration comes from the excitement when you know you’re on to something, and the starting point of it all is simply just loving that process itself.” Presently, Billy says

he's most creative during the late morning and throughout the day; "Always after coffee, though, always after coffee."

The conversation moved from music to movies, books and other various topics. His favorite film is Unforgiven or is it Back to the Future? "Every shot in that movie (Unforgiven) is remarkable. It's truly a beautiful film. The music and cinematography in Brokeback Mountain is quite good as well. But I always just seem to answer, Back to the Future for this question, because it's been my favorite since childhood."

Since we're on the topic of his childhood, I ask what musical influences he had, growing up. "I suppose those first few records and albums every musician hears stick into their subconscious."

"Well, I am a child of the 80s, so there were some late 70s and 60s tracks that hung around the record player frequently, while neo-pop was still figuring itself out. Those guilty pleasures also made their way in to my head and heart while my older sister teased her bangs radically to the catchy and poppy tunes of the time. The first few albums on repeat that I grooved to were Grover Washington Jr., 'Winelight'. I think that was in every household or tape deck I visited as a kid. Most also had Bruce Springsteen, 'Born in the USA'. Michael Jackson, 'Thriller' and 'Bad'. I remember I got 'Bad' on cassette for Christmas when I was maybe six. I thought Michael was the coolest thing ever. I can go on and on, Paul Simon, 'Graceland', George Benson, 'Give me the Night' and 'Breezin', Billy Joel, '52nd Street', Chicago, 'IX Chicago's Greatest Hits', George Gershwin, 'Rhapsody in Blue', Dave Brubeck, 'Time Out'. These are popping into my head right now while seeing the album covers pop-up in my mind, as I recall sitting at the stereo." When he's not making music, he's

hiking, biking, reading and listening "To just about every piece of audio by Alan Watts, Carl Jung, ancient Egypt, prehistory, lectures by Graham Hancock, John Anthony West. I love learning about truths surrounding the highly relevant political world today and the conspiracies that surround them, and reading proper and integral journalistic pieces that share this knowledge with the world." He's currently reading Man and His Symbols by Carl Jung, and it make me wonder where his passion for uncovering the truth, or whatever it is he is seeking, come from. Billy says, "I don't know."

This artist is thoughtful and studies more than music, he studies the art of life. I ask him how this relates to him as a musician and he tells me, "Well, I suppose music most certainly has an incredible impact on my level of continuous perception of things, a state of mind brought about by always 'listening'. In music, you have to listen constantly to what is going on to give the most honest and sincere form of intelligent design back to that same foundation of short existence that is taking place. This is all quite palatable even for listeners. It's that spark you search for or want to hear from others. It's really all part of the same design of beauty, light and truth that the human soul gravitates towards, that continuously shows itself in ancient building designs, paintings, languages, cave art from all over the world from tens of thousands of years ago."

What is his biggest challenge as a musician? "Well, as an independent musician, it is keeping it all going while life pulls your focus away from staying on top of things. Self-discipline, sacrifice and commitment to your goals and keeping on top of those goals are necessary. You have to keep that focus while trying to bridge the gap between working for 'the man' and the gigs you want to be doing, the music you want to be playing. You want to create new things that are all your own and find people to collaborate with on these projects that might not pay, and find a way to make it work one gig at a time. But that's just being a musician, I guess."

Billy's doing the job of his dreams, and would like to be doing more of it with a few more dedicated musicians by his side--performing his compositions and new ones from the rest of the group.

Billy Rogan Trivia

Birthday: December 31
Favorite Cocktail: Old Fashioned
Favorite 80's Tune: 'Head Over Heels' by Tears for Fears
Vanilla or Chocolate: He says, "This proposed question or decision within the mind is what hell must feel like. Why must I choose? Torture."

Old Fashioned Cocktail

- 1 sugar cube
- 1 tsp water
- 1 dash bitters
- 2floz. whiskey (rye or bourbon)
- 1 lemon twist
- ice cubes
- 1 orange slice, for garnish
- 1 maraschino cherry, for garnish

Muddle sugar cube, water, and bitters in an old fashioned glass for 1min. Pour in whiskey and stir for an additional minute. Squeeze the lemon twist over the glass and drop it in. Add ice cubes. Garnish with a slice of orange and a maraschino cherry.



He is a philosopher and a man looking for answers on very deep and meaningful level, both conscious and subconscious. When you listen to his music, you'll hear complexity of the man whose loss for words seems to have a lot to say. Has he found the answers to what he is searching for yet? "Maybe I already have found it? Maybe...I don't think so, but at least a sliver of something that will stick with me to know when it's there."

To learn more about Billy Rogan, go to billyrogan.com.

