



# Richie Kotzen

**YOU NEVER WANT TO ACCUSE SOMEONE OF BEING** too talented, but Richie Kotzen might be a candidate for that criticism. A great singer, a strong songwriter, and a flat-out amazing guitarist (not to mention a pretty good drummer), it's tough to pigeonhole him in an industry that insists on pigeonholing everyone. Kotzen is one of the more charismatic exponents of the Shrapnel wave of the '80s and early '90s, and in addition to releasing solo albums, he also landed a glam metal gig with Poison, played fusion in Vertu with Stanley Clarke and Lenny White, and replaced super-shredder Paul Gilbert in Mr. Big. Currently touring his latest record, *Peace Sign* [Headroom], where

he plays pretty much every instrument, Kotzen continues to elude easy classification.

**How did you get such a live sound on a record where you're playing all the instruments on almost all the cuts?**

For starters, there's no programming or any of that sort of stuff in the production. It's all live instruments playing parts. Another reason is, if something happens during the recording—as long as it's musical—I'm more inclined to let it go and then work around it. I have a studio at my house, and I leave everything set up at all times. The drums are miked and going through the preamps

and compressors, and that doesn't change until the record's finished. So, I might lay down some sort of drum groove to work off of and then play something on the bass and think, "It would be really badass if the drums reacted to that." Then I can hop behind the drums, punch in, and do that. It's easy for me to keep those cool little accidents that happen and make it sound like the instruments are all reacting to them.

**There's cool interplay between the guitar and**

**drums on "Paying Dues."**

I knew I needed some kind of excitement in the drumming department that I would not be physically able to deliver on that tune. So a good friend of mine, Dan Potruch, played drums. You really do hear the guitar and the drums interacting, and although it sounds like we cut it together, we didn't. I had a click track, a guide guitar, and a guide vocal and he cut his performance to that. He did about five or six performances and then we put

together what I thought was the best representation of the drums by editing the five performances down into one. Then from there, I played off of his drumming. That's where you get that interaction, which is something that I've always had live. Even back on my first record, with Steve Smith, I was into that whole notion of playing off the drummer.

**How did you get the solo tone on that song?**

That my signature Fender Tele into a Fender Vibro-King. I used that amp for probably 50 percent of the guitar sounds on this record and the rest were the Cornford RK100. I set the Vibro-King for an aggressive tone—not the kind of tone where you'd want to do a shredding lead, but definitely a cool rhythm tone—and then by adding an overdrive pedal, it let me sustain notes and be able to solo that way. The overdrive was a Tube Booster from Ed's Custom Shop. That was a pretty straightforward solo as far as attempts. I did not labor over that one at all.

**You don't run as much gain as a lot of the guys that you are associated with.**

That's true. That solo doesn't have a typical high-gain tone. By contrast, "My Messiah" has a full-out distortion tone. But a song like "Paying Dues" has a cleaner tone, with just enough gain so the notes don't die out.

**Talk about the ringing chords that are in the beginning of "Catch Up to Me." Those have this incredible sustain. How did you get that sound?**

There are a bunch of guitars happening there. There are two 12-strings playing the open chords, there's the electric guitar doubled through a standard amp, and then there's the Leslie guitar, which I use a lot. That was a Mesa/Boogie Revolver rotating speaker that I've had it for as long as I can remember. You have the regular cabinet and then you have that one where the speaker spins and you get this big, lush, stereo sound. Any time you hear that chorus-y effect, like on this song or "Peace Sign," it's the rotating speaker cabinet.

**Is there a ton of compression on the 12-strings?**

Yes. You might not want that sound on everything you play, but in that instance, I think it was very effective because I'm hitting these long, ringing chords. The attack is at one volume and then the chord ringing out comes up to the same volume. I have a few compressors in my studio. I have an Anthony DeMaria that's basically made like a Teletronix LA-2A. I have a Manly compressor called a Variable Mu, and I have a Focusrite Blue series channel strip

that has a pretty good compressor. It was the DeMaria on the 12-strings, though, because I used my vocal mic to mic those guitars and that's the compressor I use on that mic. It's an old Neumann U87 that I bought from a friend of mine years ago.

**You bring a lot more funk to your rock than a lot of shredders do.**

I never considered myself a funk guy. I think what you're referring to comes from where I grew up—outside of Philadelphia—

and the music I listened to and what was on the radio. When I was young, I had the classic rock records like Bad Company and Led Zeppelin and all that, but my dad had Percy Sledge and Otis Redding records, so I was also exposed to the R&B stuff. When I write something it tends to still have those roots to it, which I would imagine is pretty common. If I grew up in Latin America and listened to that music, then that influence would be more prevalent.

**Both funk and R&B players value space and dynamics. Talk about how you apply those concepts.**

Dynamics—that's a very powerful tool. Everything you do with music should ultimately be about expression. So, if you're mad all the time and all you do is scream, then all you'll have is a constant barrage of angry sixteenth-notes, which becomes ineffective after a while. You can't just have one emotion all the time unless there's something wrong with you. You naturally adjust how loud or how soft you play at a given time. With my band, so much of what we do is based on dynamics. Every time I do a show, I'm in a different country with a different soundman and I have to tell him, "Don't touch it once it's right. We're a three-piece band. We're going to control our own dynamics." When we have that going for us, it's extremely effective. The guys listen to me and I listen to them. If I start playing more aggressively, they play more aggressively. If I start getting quiet, they get quiet with me. It's communication. And I think the space also comes as a result of listening to what's happening. If right now you were to speak, I would shut up because I want to hear what you have to say. It would change what I'm thinking and what I'm saying and that's part of the conversation. That's how I look at music.

**Think back to the Shrapnel days, where it was you, Paul Gilbert, Jason Becker, Vinnie Moore, and Yngwie, and you guys just ruled the guitar roost. What was the vibe like amongst you?**

There was a lot of respect from my end. I came into it thinking, "These guys are amazing musicians. They're great guitar players. I want to be part of this crew." It motivated me to work really hard as a musician. Then, once I got around Jason Becker and Greg Howe, I realized that I was never going to be like those guys. I didn't have a handle on the classical thing, so I wasn't a neoclassical guy. And at the time I wasn't really a jazz guy, either. So what was I? What I always really enjoyed was getting on stage and playing songs with my band. So I thought, you know what? I've got to make that kind of music. I started writing songs that were based on more of a vocal situation than a guitar situation, and that's what led me to become a singer—the minute I started singing, I found my calling as far as who I was as a musician. The thing that made me happy was playing the guitar and singing my tunes. I'm better at that and more comfortable at that than I ever am doing any of those other things. ■