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Stealing Home: Greg Rapaport's Wyrd Music Proves Captivating

by Jedd Beaudoin

Wyrd (2001), the fourth release from New York guitarist Greg Rapaport, provides an exciting glimpse at a world where metal, funk and some other as-yet-unnamed musical mutation live in a kind of bizarre and wholesomely unsettling harmony. Whether the clear Sunday morning funk/jazz runs of "Mahdah," the airy, imaginative "Bugjuice," or the plain crazy "Diminished Returns," Wyrd becomes a kind of feast for those wishing to dine on exciting and dense (yet still accessible) harmonic matter. Of course that's not to say that the music here is without heart, for heart is a common denominator to all the tracks, though "Silk," the penultimate piece seems to speak the word most loudly and serves to solidify Wyrd's status as a winning recording, one of the most intriguing and refreshing instrumental releases in recent memory, one that could finally launch Rapaport into (inter)national acclaim.

Visit <http://www.gregrapaport.com/> for more information and to feast your eyes on some astounding graphics.

Purchase albums by Greg Rapaort at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/gregrapaport>, <http://www.guitar9.com/wyrd.html> and <http://www.amazon.com/>

JB: You play 7 string guitar, which has become a little more popular since I first heard Steve Vai playing it on Whitesnake's Slip Of The Tongue and on his own Passion and Warfare. What were the reasons that you chose to pick up the 7 string and what are the challenges of composing on the instrument?

GR: I picked up the 7 string for a few reasons. Since the music I write is a combination of jazz and progmetal I find the 7 string adds a lot of cool options. Things like chord voicings, wide intervals, and aggressive riffing can be taken a step further with the 7 string. The key (at least for me) is not to treat it as a six string with a low B. You have to incorporate all the strings into your playing. With the 7 string once you include the low B in your scale and arpeggio forms, your ideas for melody and improvisation can really take off. In a nutshell you really have to re-visualize the neck to take advantage of all the possibilities available to you.

JB: What I like about the 7-string is the kind of "chunkiness" it

gives the sound; it really is a much fuller sound.

GR: I'm into that as well. When you get aggressive on it, it can sound pretty cool. It can be tough to control at high gain especially when doing a lot of staccato type stuff so I use a noise gate and back off the distortion a bit to keep things clear and tight.

JB: I've read that you teach: if there's one thing you try to instill in your students, what is it?

GR: I try to instill a sense of humility in my students. Sometimes as guitar players get better, their ego grows exponentially.

JB: Are there times, where, when you're teaching, you encounter a student who doesn't have much potential? What, in your opinion, is the best way to approach that situation?

GR: I correlate potential with motivation. If the student is motivated and wants to learn and improve, I'm there until the bitter end. If they are just going through the motions and aren't interested in practicing...well...let's just say that I wouldn't really be into teaching them.

JB: What does it take to be a guitarist? By that, I mean do you believe there's a certain temperament that goes along with the instrument and a certain personality type who's more successful than any other?

GR: The spectrum of personalities is pretty wide. You have the ever-humble Allan Holdsworth on one end and then you have Yngwie Malmsteen on the other. Both are exceptional players. I think some common elements that good guitar players may share are things like perseverance, ambition, a wild imagination and a genuine love for music.

JB: Do you remember the first time you played and it felt absolutely effortless; you didn't need to look at your hands or really think about where you were going, it just came together? What do you think got you to that moment?

GR: Still waiting for that moment, Jedd.

JB: Turning to Wyrd for a moment, I'm really fond of your chord work [forgive my non-technical lameness], those clean passages on, say, "Madah" which then provide such a stark contrast to the lower moments.

GR: "Mahdah" is a good example of a combination of my favorite musical genres. It has a bit of jazz, funk, and some metal. When I wrote that I was experimenting with some standard jazz chord combinations and how I could warp them a bit. The first figure is in 13/8, which is pretty wacky, but it seemed to fit the tune. The lower stuff is just a straight blues box riff which kind of sets off the cleaner parts. Recording that song wasn't too bad. If I remember right the only tough part was playing the diminished figure on bass about 2:00 minutes in to the song.

JB: I also like the melody of "The Unconscience" quite a bit and

the lead that begins at about 1:35.

GR: Since the chord progression in the main part of that tune is pretty straightforward I wanted to develop a really strong melody for it. I try to focus on developing a theme in my tunes. I'm not really into just doing fast runs or cramming a million arpeggios into an improv. I think that in instrumental music a good recurring theme is important (at least to me). It helps to ground the music and give it structure. But most of all it helps make the song memorable.

JB: "Trust" is a really inspiring one in a way: I feel like driving whenever I hear that song and you've got some very fast little phrases in there.

GR: "Trust" is probably one the darkest tunes on the disk. This song is about someone who has been abandoned and has no one left to turn to. In the beginning I try convey a sense of fear by employing some weird synth pads and some sampling of a broken radio transmission. I use a lot of diminished ideas in this song and contrast them with a maj+9 chord progression. The rhythm tracks are pretty thick with guitars so I found this song the hardest to mix. It was tough finding a place for everything sonically.

JB: "Diminished Returns" has that absolutely sick beginning, then it mutates into something even more wrong. A great reminder that weird can be beautiful. It has touches, for me, of Alex Lifeson, particularly "YYZ."

GR: Thanks for the comparison, I'm a big Rush fan too. Essentially this song is an abomination. The intro is a diminished riff in 7/8 then it goes into a 15/8 diminished lick in low C. Then it turns into an old school funk vamp with a slap bass line. I've actually played this song live a few times (man, talk about fear).

JB: You have really great tone, especially on "Powderburn." Do you think that tone is something you can learn or is it more instinct?

GR: Tone is so subjective that it's kind of hard to comment on. I think that you have to gear your tone to really set off the song favorably. On each tune the rhythm guitars sound a bit different so the lead sound had to change as well to compensate. The important thing for me is to make sure that the solo sounds tight and articulate. The only time I use a heavily effected lead sound is if I'm going for something more textural than musical.

JB: But Wyrd isn't your only release, you've done other work, how do you see this one in the body of stuff that you've done so far and, also, in terms of where you're going or would like to go, musically?

GR: The first disk I was on was the one for my previous band, Nero. At that point I was writing to be somewhat commercially viable. The songs are decent and I learned a lot about working with other musicians and the whole recording process. After we broke up I decided to record a lot of the ideas that I had that weren't deemed appropriate for the band. The first CD I made was largely an

experiment, one that both succeeded and failed. It failed because I was too ambitious with too little knowledge. It succeeded because through the process I learned a great deal about what to do and what not to do as far as engineering and production goes.

The second disk Artifacts was a solid effort. I started developing my bass chops on that disk and began to refine my engineering skills. That album is where I also started to get a bit more unconventional in my songwriting. Songs like "Heavylikejupiter" and "Fathead" received some very good reviews.

Wyrd is definitely my best so far. I still have much to learn about the recording process but I feel that I have improved (I hope). Also I find that as time has gone on my music has become less and less marketable to the mainstream. I find that very satisfying. I'm psyched about what I'm working on now. I think that I have progressed as a songwriter and player since I recorded Wyrd. I'm hoping that the songs will reflect that. I have taken what I've learned from Wyrd, as far as production goes, and I have been applying it to this new recording, adding a few new twists as well.

JB: You are a self-contained one-man unit. What are the pitfalls of that when you're writing or recording and how important is self trust in that process?

GR: Great question! Being on my own has its good points and bad points. One bad point is that in a sense I'm limiting my creativity to one mindset. That's why I think that collaboration is great. It helps you break out of creative ruts and also allows to you see things from a different perspective. But collaboration can sometimes be a hindrance as well. Disagreeing on certain aspects of the song, time constraints and reliability can bring a project to a grinding halt.

A good thing is that being solo has pushed me to become better at the keyboard and bass. I would never have focused as much on these instruments if I hadn't been writing and recording my own material. As far as self trust goes I guess I've never really thought about that before. Probably because I don't have a gun to my head to sell a million albums to pay back an advance. I write and record the music that I like, I just hope others can enjoy it too.

JB: Ruling out Satriani, Vai, Carlton, Morse, etc. who do you think are some of the most important figures on the instrument today?

GR: I think the pioneers of modern guitar are players like Allan Holdsworth, John McLaughlin and Al DiMeola. These guys are very unique in their respective styles. I find each one completely different from the other and very recognizable. I also really enjoy Frank Gambale, Scott Henderson and Greg Howe.