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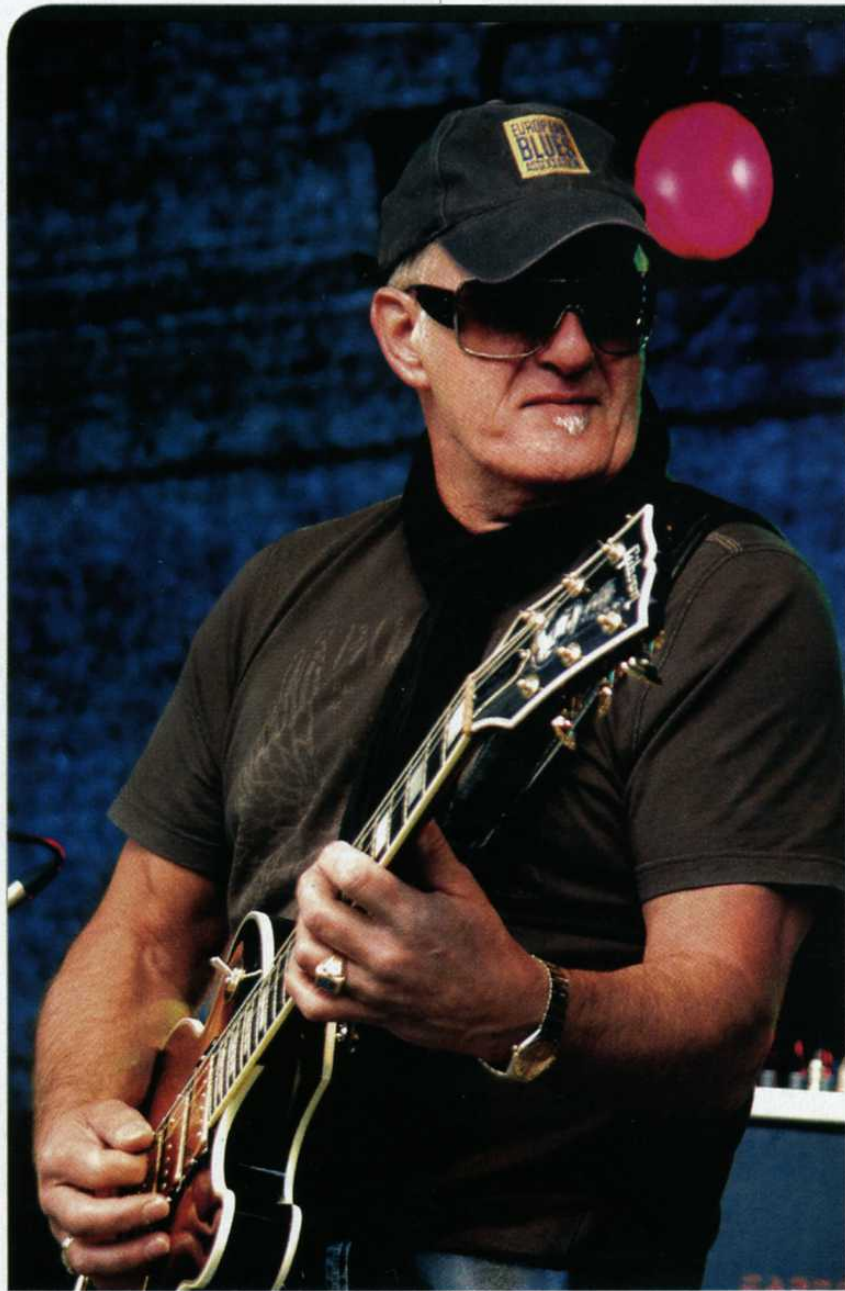


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Jan Akkerman

BY VINCENT DEMASI

"WHEN YOU RE-READ GUITAR MAGAZINE articles about me from the '70s, you see they had a hard time pinning down where I was coming from," says Jan Akkerman. "I played loud and fast rock, but it wasn't from the blues. My influences were Wes Montgomery and Django Reinhardt." Indeed, when the Dutch guitarist gained widespread recognition with the band Focus in the early '70s, his fiery fusion of melodic minor licks, neoclassical arrange-

"It always surprises me that crap like 'Hocus Pocus'—which we wrote in five minutes—continues to be popular, while all the beautiful, intricate things we did are all but completely forgotten."

ments, and hard rock sturm und drang had the world's ear. Between 1971's *Moving Waves*—which included the quirky hit "Hocus Pocus"—and 1974's *Hamburger Concerto*, Focus sold millions of records.

Akkerman has also enjoyed a stylistically unfettered solo career, releasing dozens of albums and collaborating with artists as diverse as Peter Banks, Carmine Appice, Charlie Byrd, Paco De Lucia, and B.B. King. His last official CD was 2003's *C.U.*, but Akkerman continues to issue live CDs in limited runs, and is currently working on a performance DVD that will include Amsterdam's Output Festival, where he was the soloist on Cheil Meijering's 100-guitar strong "The Wave." The guitarist also recently collaborated with Saga Musical Instruments on the Gitane DG-350 Modèle Jean Akkerman (yes, "Jean").

Is it true that you don't use an electronic tuner?
Yes. Everybody has a tuner now so it gets very boring. I was always attracted to false pitches on guitars, like the way John Lee Hooker would intonate. I say if you want the Rolling Stones to make interesting music again, take away their tuners. The tuners don't twang, man!

So you tune by ear?

The way you tune is very personal. I have the Hammond organ play the open strings *E, A, D, G, B, E*—that lovely *Em11* chord—and tune off that. I intonate by making the *B* a little sharper, and the *G* and high-*E* a little

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flatter. It's just a couple of hertz, but it makes a difference when playing with well-tempered instruments. In the old days we didn't have modeling. We grabbed whatever was at hand and if it didn't work the way it should, we made it work the way it was. I wanted a pedal-steel but I didn't have one, so I learned to do volume swells with my pinky and that became part of my style. That's the essence of authenticity in music—how you turn your limitations around and make them work for you.

What are some other limitations that work for you?

If you have more knowledge than the average musician, that's already a limitation, because you have to fit your music into the average listener's head. It's finding a balance between playing three chords for 10,000 people or 10,000 chords for three people. It's also about dealing with circumstances. Last October I toured Brazil and they wanted me to pay an extra \$2,000 because my luggage was two kilos overweight. Instead of paying, I left my electric home and just brought my acoustic. People found out that I wasn't traveling with my electric and every place I played there was a black Les Paul and matching amp waiting for me.

You do seem to be associated with the black Les Paul Custom.

Yes, but I can play just as easily on a Fender Telecaster Thinline or a Gretsch White Falcon. I got my original black Les Paul when I joined Focus, and I put a Gretsch pickup in the neck position, probably wired out of phase. Unfortunately, it got wrecked in 1974. My favorite guitar is still an early-'70s Les Paul Personal that was modified by Paul Hamer, who put a tiger-stripe maple top on it and replaced the original low-impedance pick-ups with old humbuckers.

What was it like performing "The Wave"?

It was challenging because you're making music with other people you can't even see. But it was exciting because we were standing on the stairs of the atrium of the music hall in Amsterdam, overlooking the city, and this sound wave just echoed through the building. I had monitors with a mic on the first and the last guitar player, a click track, and one eye on my laptop watching the measures. It sounded like pop Zappa to me. ■