

Lindsey Buckingham Puts His Tusks Into It

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by Tim Bradley

"I'm a colorist. I work with the colors of sound and those are the things that excite me the most. I'm not really a lead player . . . I mean, I play 'lead,' but that's not really my forte. I grew up listening to Chet Atkins and people like that. And that's still far more interesting to me than the screaming lead type."

These words come from perhaps the most visible (and audible) lead guitarist in the world, Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham. As the interview for this article took place, the group's "Mirage" album was topping the sales charts and it was impossible to have the radio on for more than three minutes without hearing the lp's prime cut, the luscious "Hold Me." And the following weekend, the band would be jetting in from Orlando on a private plane to headline at the monster outdoor show, the three-day US Festival outside of Devore, California.

Not bad for a guy who, six years ago, was unknown to all but the few who'd seen an obscure Bay Area band called Fritz or who'd heard an equally obscure album called Buckingham Nicks. In fact, it was quite by accident that Buckingham Nicks landed him the F. Mac gig in the first place. Band drummer and progenitor Mick Fleetwood had been at Sound City Studios in Van Nuys checking out the sound system in preparation for a follow-up album after "Heroes Are Hard To Find." Engineer Keith Olsen fortuitously and fatefully used a Buckingham Nicks tune called "Frozen Love" as the tester. Shortly thereafter, then-guitarist Bob Welch decided to pursue other muses and Fleetwood's first round draft choices were Buckingham and singer-tamborinist Stevie Nicks.

Wasn't this a ridiculously good stroke of luck, the kind of big break guitarists dream about, being asked out of the blue to join one of the world's supergroups?

"No. It wasn't a supergroup. They were selling no albums at all. They were broke for all practical purposes. No, in fact, they would have been dropped from the label right after "Heroes Are Hard To Find" if it hadn't done as well as it had. "It was this fivesome that started selling records. Even in the early days, they sold no records. "Then Play On," as great an album as it was, sold something like ninety-thousand copies. I'm not saying that it was our doing [Buckingham's and Nicks'], but it was all of our doing. It was the right chemistry."

Pre-Lindsey Fleetwood Mac was, if not lucrative, at least legendary. Mick Fleetwood and bassist John McVie, who founded and named the group, first gained notice as the rhythm section for John Mayall and his Bluesbreakers. It was the Bluesbreakers who launched the careers of such guitar deities as Eric Clapton, Mick Taylor and Peter Green. And through Fleetwood Mac have passed guitars Green, Jeremy Spencer, Danny Kirwan, Bob Welch and (Long John Baldry alumnus) Bob Weston. It would seem that anyone attempting to follow in the fretsteps of such formidable predecessors would have some rough times ahead.

"No, not really," says Buckingham, looking back on it. "I had not really followed the band since the very beginning, and I was not really that aware of what they were doing. So I didn't feel any pressure to fill anyone's shoes. The only thing that was kind of a drag in the beginning was that

this was a group that had been playing on the road and they had a lot of material that they were used to doing. Stevie and I, for quite a long time, had to fit into their format. I was having to do a lot of Bob Welch songs that I wasn't real crazy about . . . I mean, nothing against Bob Welch, but it wasn't my style. I had to be a sort of musical chameleon, you might say. We did some Danny Kirwan tunes which were more in my style. But doing "Hypnotized" and things like that kind of left me cold, quite frankly. It didn't have anything to do with me and that was the only way I felt connected to a past guitarist. But certainly not as having to live up to someone else's reputation at all."

Lindsey's own reputation as a player, singer, songwriter, and especially studio wizard, was solidly established when his work on *Rumours* made Fleetwood Mac a virtual Buckingham Palace. The album sold a whopping sixteen million copies, one of the best selling records of all time, made the Brothers Warner very happy and moved the guitarist into posh Bel Air. Where did his studio acumen spring from?

"I've been working with tape machines since I was about eighteen (he's thirty-two now). I got a Sony two-track and was doing sound-on-sound. And when I was twenty-one, some aunt that our family didn't even know left my brothers and me each ten-thousand dollars when she died. I went out and got an Ampex four-track with half-inch tape, a professional machine in a console, and took it up to my father's warehouse. I learned how to work machines basically from that and it's been an ever-increasing process of learning. It's not that hard, really, if you can hear it in your head. You don't even need a console or EQ even. You can do it with mike technique. I love to be involved in that aspect of it, because it really broadens your whole scope of what's possible and how one side relates to the other."

For a good example of just how far Buckingham's scope has broadened, listen to *Law and Order*, his first solo lp, particularly a track called "Trouble," in which he employs a half-speed Stratocaster, a technique I've been using for years. If the song is recorded at 30 i.p.s., you slow it down to 15 and play half as fast, then speed it back up. And I also use a VSO, or Variable Speed Oscillator. That's a device to speed up or slow down the tape machine as opposed to having set speeds like 15 or 30. You can dial in, in very small steps or numbers. For example, 500 on my VSO is normal speed. Zero would take you all the way down to 15, if normal speed was 30. See what I'm saying? You can dial anything. And if you go like five of those points in either direction, the notes are going to start pulling away from each other, like the sound you get on a twelve-string. The reason you get that sound (on a twelve-string) is because the octaves or even the two high pairs that are the same octave are never going to be exactly in tune. So they start to phase a little bit, and you get that kind of clanging sound." You can hear this effect on "Trouble," "Crystal" on *Rumours*, "Not That Funny" on *Tusk* and "Eyes of the World" on *Mirage*. "That song ["Eyes of the World"] is heavily pieced together. That started off with fewer sections and ended up with . . . I mean, I love to chop up master tapes and add parts and add whole sections. That's what it's for. People are afraid to do that. That just started off with just the same three chords over and over again and we added the "Swingle Singers" sections in the beginning and repeated in the end later. Those were chopped in. There's tons of different guitars on there. It's like a succession of little sections, sort of like Brian Wilson or classical-meets-Eddie Cochran. It starts off with the 'swingles,' then it goes into a sort of Bach-esque guitar thing and they're all fairly succinct sections within themselves, all butted up against each other. I use guitars to orchestrate the records, and use them in unusual ways. I do a lot of strange tunings and strange combinations of strings. You can get a good sound out of almost anything if you know how to go about it and what kind of sound you want to get."

The guitarist's main stage ax was made especially for him by Rick Turner, formerly of Alembic. "He just brought me this guitar. He'd been trying to sell me an Alembic for years, but they were just too sterile for my taste. So he brought me the prototype to try out. It's like a Les Paul-it sounds very fat and very clean. I use half-wound strings on it. When I joined the band, I had been using Telecasters and Stratocasters. In the absolute sense, those are probably the best guitars for my style of playing. But when I joined the band, I had to fit into an already established sound; Mick's drums were very fat, Christine had a very fat keyboard sound, and those guitars just sounded really too thin, so it was really frustrating. I ended up using a Les Paul, and then this Turner was one step further. I don't use it much in the studio though, because it doesn't seem to translate."

The Turner is played through two hundred-watt Boogie heads, each driving a separate Marshall cabinet with four twelves. Buckingham uses a few different Ovation acoustics on stage.

Effects? "I tried them out for a while, but it always seems that for this group anyway, it always goes back to the basics. Like if I have a choice between a choral effect or just clean, I'm usually going to choose just clean. Now if I were in another group, that may not be the case. Somebody like Adrian Belew, you know, he does wonderful things with compressors and harmonics on his Strat and probably a synthesizer, but that's not going to fit into our sound too well. So, I've got a fuzz . . . in fact, up until recently, I was using the guts of my old tape recorder for a fuzz and got a great sound, but it finally took a shit. It was like ten years old. And I've got an Ibanez . . . I don't know how to describe it . . . it's just a box and it's got a number of effects-a parametric equalizer, a choral effect, a slap delay effect, and that's all I use. I don't use the parametric, I use choral very sparingly, and I use slap quite a bit. And that's about all-and fuzz-that's all I've ever used.

Also in the Buckingham collection are a Martin D-18, which he's had since he was seventeen, a couple of early sixties' Strats, and Broadcaster and a couple of Gretsches for "that Beatles sound. I've got a lot of guitars, more than I could lift, I'm sure, or remember at this point. A lot of times, I get repeats of the same guitars too. You need to have more than one of anything in case you need something and it happens not to be working properly. But it's not a massive collection. I'm not one of those people who's known for his collection of guitars, like Stephen Stills, and I certainly couldn't be considered a connoisseur of those things. There are limitations, but you can get a good sound out of almost anything."

One of the main features of the good sound Lindsey gets is that he doesn't use a pick. He uses a lot of up-strums with the fingers, playing many strings at the same time, a holdover from his early folk influences.

"My brother brought home 'Heartbreak Hotel' when I was like seven years old. Scotty Moore and Chet Atkins played on a lot of Elvis' stuff, so those are my earliest influences. Just the subtlety of that kind of playing, and the fundamentals, the fact that they are not being flashy, but they are doing things that contribute heavily to the overall picture of the song . . . whether or not the listeners are even aware of it. That's something that's important to me. I got into folk for a while after the initial surge of rock music sort of cooled off. I listened to a lot of Kingston Trio stuff, which was certainly not for purists, but it still sounds pretty good today. I had all of their albums and thought they had a lot of good energy, whether or not the form is particularly fashionable today, the energy still holds up very, very well. I also played some bluegrass banjo for a while, so I'm sure I was influenced by Earl Scruggs a little bit."

Ironically, PBS recently aired a Kingston Trio reunion special that featured on bass-Lindsey Buckingham. "I was the only one wearing a striped shirt, too!" John Stewart [former Trio member] and I are real good friends. Fleetwood Mac was recording at Larrabee studios down here in Hollywood and the Kingston Trio came in to rehearse in an adjacent room. This was the night before the show. So, I was getting a little nostalgic, especially because here I was with this group that was in the big time in my boyhood. I went over there and talked to them and they asked me if I wanted to play bass on a couple of songs. And when we got down there, John talked me into doing a duo with him, so that's how it went. The whole thing was fairly loosely thrown together. But it was a giggle. It was great just to be down there. It was good for them and it was nice for me."

Big band and early jazz has also had an influence, inspired largely by the great collection of 78s around the Buckingham household in the San Francisco suburb of Atherton as Lindsey was growing up. The guitarist inherited the records and credits them with a lot of his arranging ideas. Listen especially to "Love From Here, Love From There" on *Law and Order*. "It's like a rock song, but it's got sort of like a New Orleans-style jazz thing, too. The three basic horns used in New Orleans were the trumpet (and cornet), trombone and clarinet. The reason those guys can improvise all day long is because they're all within a certain, not only register, but they're each playing in a certain place in the measure and they stay out of each other's way and they know when to come in and when not to come in. Beyond that framework, they can play more or less anything they want, and they're all different sounding things. So I thought it would be neat to do a song where you took the roles of the three horns and tried to get as close as you could on guitars and change the sound of the guitars. So I used a slide guitar for the trombone, the high register of a Strat for the clarinet and used a Gretsch for the trumpet. I think even on the *Mirage* album, just the use of background vocals is fairly lush at times, a sort of space-age forties' feel. I think you'll find a lot of people getting interested in vocals again and even forties' music."

As for more contemporary favorites, "I listen to New Wave stuff, like Elvis Costello. I love the Clash. I think they're one of the best things out there right now. They don't try to be flash and they don't go for guitar playing that is for guitar playing's sake. You don't even notice it until you listen to the song six or seven times. Then you start hearing the stuff that Mick Jones is doing. The production is just wonderful and he's a very tasteful guitar player."

By late in the year, the second Lindsey Buckingham solo album should be at your local diskeries. What would prompt a man who is helmsman of the world's superest of supergroups, who has seen that group's star implanted along Hollywood Boulevard, who has had his likeness immortalized in silver by legendary lensmen Normal Seeff and George Hurrell, and who by most outward signs, "has it all," to undertake so risky a venture as a solo album?

"Well, you can trace the urges for that back to Tusk. We did the first album, *Rumours*, which was outrageously successful on a commercial level-and artistically, to some degree. After that, we had the choice of putting out *Rumours II* and going for the money, or doing something else. At that time it seemed very important to me, and not so much to everyone else, to delve out and try to explore some new ground. So I got an MCI twenty-four track in one of the back rooms where I was living, and a little Shure mixer, and one microphone, and just cut a lot of stuff in my house. Probably half of my songs on the Tusk album were done just like that, with just a click track and me playing all the instruments and going for something that was a little bit new and different. A lot of people were very surprised and some were disappointed. We certainly suffered some commercially from it, and it confused a few people. In retrospect, now it seems like everyone is looking back with affection on the album and thinking how courageous it was.

"Then, after the Tusk Tour, we ended up taking about eight months off. Everyone could just be selfish and do what they wanted to do. So I just went ahead and did a solo album, more or less in the same working atmosphere. Working with the band is like making a movie. You're doing things in a very logical, organized way with a lot of verbalizing, a lot of second-guessing, a lot of third-guessing, a lot of checks and balances to get from point A to point B to point C."