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On seeking inspiration strictly from within

Guitarist Michael Schenker discussing the accidental development of his technique, the value of not listening to anyone else's music, and why it's more important to discover than practice.

How would you describe your artistic philosophy?

I intuitively knew what I wanted to do early in my life. When I was 15, I copied less and less, and when I was around 17, I came to the realization that I have to do things the way I see it. I was fascinated with a single string. I was fascinated with finding one note, getting the next, and then finding a third one that would create magic and so on. I decided not to listen to any more music or guitarists or anybody. That's because the brain is like a sponge—you just take things in automatically; you just kind of copy things. If you expose yourself as a consumer to music, you automatically become part of doing something similar. So I stayed away from music in general, so that I would not be consumed by it. I wanted to stay in the creative process. I wanted to be a creator rather than a consumer.

I never want to take instructions from anybody. So I learned it all wrong, completely wrong techniques, but that doesn't matter. It's the fun—by actually discovering how you can do things and how you can improve. That's why I developed some kind of technique, [as] modern guitarists would probably call it. But that wasn't important. What was important was what was coming out, and recognizing that the single string is an endless combination. You can hit it once, twice, you can bend it, you can leave a gap in between. It's endless. And so that's basically what I started. I didn't know that I was doing something that would have unusual results.

Without even knowing, I developed a style that was recognized by others as "Michael Schenker." But that's not why I did it. I did it because, just like a person in a laboratory, I wanted to put the different chemicals together and see what kind of reaction comes out of it. That's what I wanted to do—create some kind of unique combination of notes that creates an effect on the emotions.

You recently said that you haven't listened to any new music in almost 50 years. How have you managed that?

I can only describe it as my assignment. I think that's what I was born to do. If something is meant to be, it's not really difficult to do, because it's part of who you are. And it's as simple as leaving out pepper when you eat your soup or something. If you don't like pepper, it's a natural thing. I don't have

to force myself not to do it. Very early in life, it became very clear, but I actually... I'm kind of a bit phobic, to be honest. It's that phobic feeling—you know you hear something, and you might be influenced by it. Of course you can't avoid listening to music when you're in a shopping mall or whatever, but I don't consume it, I don't focus on it, I don't buy it, I don't analyze other people's music. I don't need to be part of that. I don't need to copy that or create the same thing—it's already been created. I understood that I wanted to do it the way I see it, and [for that to happen,] I knew I would have to stay away from consuming.

Consuming also wears you out. I'm now 64 years old, and I'm still enjoying and excited about music. I don't know about others, but I'm sure that is part of why I still have a freshness and why I still love to do it. But, of course, we have the consumer, and the consumer is the one who takes it all in and analyzes it maybe or [makes] comparisons and stuff like that. I imagine there are also musicians who purposely copy a trend to get a piece of the pie. And so there's all sorts of different ways, but it's a personal choice how you want to do it.

How do you deal with writer's block?

What does that mean?

When you can't come up with an idea or get stuck on something.

I don't put myself into that situation. I play and discover. You have to imagine a kid in a sandbox. You're just having fun. You're not expecting anything; you're not looking for anything. You're not following a trend; you don't do something that needs to be similar to something else. It is actually from within yourself, which is endless. It's like a kaleidoscope—you shake it and you have a bunch of new ways of doing things. So I think this block only happens to people who expect something, or who want something or are chasing something or who are trying to write something that sells or whatever. If you don't look at all of these aspects, if you're just having fun with notes, it doesn't happen.

Your work in the '70s with Scorpions and especially UFO helped set the template for the heavy metal guitarists of the '80s. If you weren't listening to any music except your own, do you have any concept of the effect that your playing has had on other players?

No, I didn't. Then somewhere in '80 or '81, my brother Rudolf from the Scorpions was calling me up from America and was saying, "Michael, you won't believe it. They are all playing your guitar style." I said, "Okay." It didn't really affect me that much because I was not in the scene anymore. I wasn't keeping track of what Rudolf was doing, what the Scorpions were doing, what UFO was doing [after I left]. I had no information whatsoever, other than once in a while Rudolf would call me up and tell me his latest exciting achievement, and that would be it. At some point, I was so far away from the orbit of what I developed as UFO and Scorpions. I felt like I almost lost sight of planet Earth, and I was in a completely different world. I wasn't even wondering if people still knew who I was.

That was around the time you auditioned for Aerosmith and were offered the gig as Ozzy Osbourne's guitarist after Randy Rhoads died. Instead, you went solo and formed the Michael Schenker Group.

It was a very strange place, because I went away in my experiments and my own little world so far that I had completely lost touch with what was going on around me. But it was important because I did electric instrumental albums, I did acoustic instrumental albums, I did cover songs, I did all sorts of stuff, stuff that Osbourne or the Scorpions or Europe... they would have hated me if they would have had to go through this experimental phase with me. It would not have suited them at all, because they were part of the money-making machine and what I was doing was the opposite. It was off the wall and complicated and crazy, but I had to do all of that to get it out of my system.

And that was important; I had to get everything out of my system. I was bubbling with creativity so much that I could have not dealt with one band. I had so many ideas of what I wanted to do, what I wanted to experience—musically and also in terms of my personal life. So I took care of that school of life and as a result of that, in my third chapter now, I can celebrate and I can consciously carry on and continue what I put on hold and what I created unconsciously in the first chapter of my life.

How has your relationship with the guitar evolved over the years?

It's strange because every album I did, from *Lonesome Crow* on to *Lovedrive*, I noticed every year an improvement, a step forward. And so I actually kept track of my development. And up to *Lovedrive*, that's when I didn't really focus on that anymore. Because for me, I developed to a certain point and from then on, I just wanted to experiment. And in the '80s, I still continued to do new things. And so, even though what I did in the '70s people used for the '80s and overexposed my own guitar style, it was okay because I wasn't in the scene. I was not looking for anything. I found out only in the '90s that people like Slash, Metallica, and all of those guys were big fans, and got influenced by my guitar playing.

Then I left completely in '92. I went to Arizona and created my own recording studio and just did whatever I wanted and completely left the scene. But I kept playing—I call it "play and discover" rather than "practicing." It's like treasure hunting—you try and find a piece of gold but you enjoy the journey of looking for things along the way. You find something and then you capture that in a special place. And we use it later for making an album.

And so that's what I kept doing. I was always looking within myself for the next discovery. That's how I automatically kind of changed, but you could always hear it's me. I would not completely repeat myself exactly the way I did in the '70s. I would always move on. When I play my set, I keep solos that are important and copy them in a way, but also leave space to improvise and add something to it. But of course the highlights always keep being repeated because they're part of the song. Otherwise, you change the song around [and] it's not a song anymore.

You've played with many talented musicians over the years. What do you see as the pros and cons of writing by yourself versus writing with others?

I have never written with others.

Never?

From day one, never. The first song I wrote was "In Search of Peace of Mind" [which appears on *Lonesome Crow*]. That solo was played when I was 15 years old, and there's nothing wrong with it. It's still one of my favorite solos. The other solos on *Lonesome Crow* are underdeveloped, but that particular one for some reason came out of nowhere and still today, it's just perfect the way it is. This song was my very first song, but it was credited to all the Scorpions because I was six and a half years younger than them and they took advantage of me. I did all the work and they took all the credit. They did the same with *Lovedrive*. So I guess I was always a victim because I'm a musician and never watched out for money or anything. People can make [you] a target easy and very quickly, and that my older brother would do that to me is disappointing. I never found out until just recently because I never looked back.

Is there a piece of advice that you wish someone had given you as a 15-year-old just starting your career?

No, because if you want to be yourself, you don't want any advice.

Your current band, Michael Schenker Fest, has eight members—half of whom are vocalists. Why did you want such a large and unusual lineup?

I eventually came to a realization after I finished [my previous band] Temple of Rock. I went, "You know, Michael, you haven't played your original compositions with the original singers for so many years." I was playing my most popular music but with other singers, and so that's how it started. I thought if I can at least get the singers all together from the different [Michael Schenker Group] lineups I had, or the energy that I spread into the different lineups, I could combine them all into one and make one band out of it. So, then there is no energy lost. All the energy is put together into one effort.

Your bandmate and drummer Ted McKenna passed away unexpectedly last year. As a bandleader, how do you recover from a sudden blow like that?

It's simple. You just have to... well, it wasn't simple in the beginning, but eventually I found a way and said to myself, "You know what? Ted wants us to carry on." And that's it. And when you see the album

cover, actually Ted is there watching over us from heaven. It's a very interesting album cover with very many little details to discover. But Ted is in there, and so are many other things.

Your old UFO bandmate Paul Raymond also passed away last year...

That was just as much of a shock... plus David Bowie and all of these people. David Bowie actually died on my birthday. I saw a star in the sky when he died, but I didn't know he had died [at the time]. I heard the next day and I went, "I can't believe it; I looked at that star but I didn't know he was dead." So basically, it seems like the more people that are dying, the more I feel like they're paving the bridge for me. It helps me to connect with the other side and get slowly adjusted to it.

I think we are getting prepared on a daily basis, more or less. We know that it can happen anytime. Your friends, your loved ones and close people that go—especially in the music business; it's a small world—and they die somehow you know, when you die you're not going to be on your own. You are going to join them. Somehow I know they are creating a room for me on the other side. And that's how I deal with it as well. The fact is you have to accept that it happens faster and faster the older we get. Our generation is getting smaller and smaller. And before I know it, it's going to be my turn. So acceptance is the only way—and knowing that there is something that takes us to the next level beyond this.

Essential Michael Schenker records:

- 1) Scorpions - Lovedrive
- 2) UFO - Phenomenon
- 3) UFO - Lights Out
- 4) UFO - Force It
- 5) Scorpions - Lonesome Crow

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