

RICK
KENNEDY

String Theory

Virtuoso guitarist Scotty Anderson is staying put, and that's great news for his foot-stomping fans.

Hheavy-metal rock star John5 has never ventured into a smoky Cincinnati bar or noisy American Legion Hall to see guitarist Scotty Anderson blaze on his Fender Telecaster. No, the former Marilyn Manson lead guitarist came to know the Park Hills musician when he stumbled on an instructional DVD in which Anderson teaches his rockabilly fingerpicking technique. But that's all it took. One hearing, and John5 immediately joined the international Cult of Scotty.

"If you listen to him, you won't believe your ears because it's crazy," John5 recently told *Essential Guitarist* magazine. "He's doing leads at my speed but in chords. It's incredible. If you really want to be blown away, pick up something by Scotty Anderson."

The guitarist received the praise with a belly laugh. "That's so nice of the cat to say that," said the 52-year-old, curly-haired Anderson, sipping a beer at Willie's Sports Café in Covington. He was drenched in sweat after cutting the grass at his nearby Park Hills home. "But, oh man, that whole Marilyn Manson crowd kinda scares me."

Anderson was being typically unaffected. After all, legions of guitarists in different music genres have admired his blend of country-jazz, including players whose commercial success has exceeded his own, such as James Burton (Elvis Presley's longtime guitarist) and the late Chet Atkins, who liked to say that Anderson "played Chet better than Chet." And now Anderson's reputation has spread thanks to the World Wide Web. Like so many non-touring musicians, he has a following in cyberspace, where his technique is analyzed and praised on obscure guitar Web sites.

Yet, on most weekends around Cincinnati, you can pull up a chair a few feet from Anderson (he usually plays seated) and witness for yourself the unique fingerpicking technique and lightning-fast fret runs that have stunned the guitar world. A recent "sighting" posted by a musician on the Web site of Grammy-winning guitarist Eric Johnson of Austin, Texas, is a typical reaction: "I saw Scotty Anderson at a little club in Lebanon, Ohio. It was



PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM CALLAWAY

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quite possibly the most amazing thing I have ever seen. Fifty people, no cover, good food, and a guitarist who should be a household name.”

ANDERSON'S LOCAL GIGS, whether with his own quartet—the Scotty Anderson Band—or other groups, inspire predictable reactions. His followers assemble around a few tables very close to the bandstand in order to capture his every nuance. At a recent gig at Fat Bob's, in Lebanon, a new listener squatted down in front of the band, his eyes transfixed by Anderson's fingers, as if he were watching an optical illusion. As always, Anderson played harder as the night wore on, exhausting his drummer by kicking songs into double time. After every number, from “I'll See You In My Dreams” to “Sweet Sue,” the small crowd hollered their approval. “With musicians, Scotty is a cult figure because no one plays quite like him,” says Mike Kervin, a guitarist with Anderson's band. “His CDs are on the Internet, so [other musicians] may not know anything else about him ex-

cept for what they've heard of those records. I'm amazed the distance people will travel to see him play.”

These same people often corner Anderson at intermission to praise him or ask questions about his technique, and then, sounding like an old record, bemoan his lack of notoriety. “They mean well when they do that,” Anderson says. “But they don't know.” What they don't know is that Scotty isn't naïve about the music business. He's been a professional musician since he was a teenager and has two critically acclaimed albums to his name. He has toured the nation, opened for The Doobie Brothers, and shared the stage with big-name guitarists like Danny Gatton, Atkins, and Duane Eddy. Over the same career, he has also struggled with fickle country music trends, seen live gigs killed off by karaoke, had countless guitar solos interrupted by noisy cocktail blenders, and seen many promises made but few kept. Bottom line: Anderson knows the price of big-time success in the business, and he isn't willing to pay it. “Truth be told,”

he says, “I've never had the drive to really make it. I don't put any expectations on myself anymore, maybe from being a little beat down over the years.”

These days Anderson declines tours that could bring greater exposure because he insists on sleeping under the same roof every night with his wife, Judy, an administrative assistant at Kroger Company. Today, he plays local gigs arranged almost exclusively by friends. He also maintains a stable of guitar students, and many sit in with him in the bars. “Some nights, they really give it back to me,” he says, laughing. Anderson enjoys teaching wild guitar licks as much as he does playing them. “I'd do better in Austin or one of those music towns,” he says, “but I'm really enjoying myself. You have to reach a point where you ask yourself, ‘What drew me to the guitar in the first place?’”

HEREIN LIES THE heart of Anderson's musical soul. He first picked up a guitar as a boy surrounded by a family of fast pickers: Grandpa Virgil Anderson played banjo, his dad Herschel (a

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carpenter by day) played a mean fiddle and guitar, and uncle Dillard Anderson played rockabilly in Cincinnati bars in the 1950s, recording as a sideman for the local King and Lucky record labels. Some say Dillard still plays the best steel guitar in the South. Anderson's brothers, Rick and Ed, are outstanding musicians in Cincinnati, too.

So who taught Anderson his first chords? "That would be my mother," he says, laughing. "There's only one way to explain it. My family has a God-given talent. Many years ago, a promoter organized a concert of Kentucky pickers at Carnegie Hall in New York City and my grandpa [Virgil] was in the band. He walked out on that big stage with all those people and his first thought was, 'You could hang a lot of tobacco in here.'

My music heroes have always been in my own family."

Anderson recalls fondly the fish fries with friends in tiny Monticello, Kentucky, where his family strapped on instruments and played as neighbors danced and hollered. "I heard a lot of great music around me as a kid," he says. "When the Beatles came along, I guess I didn't think it was such a big deal because Lonnie Mack had already hit it."

At 19, Anderson moved to Over-the-Rhine, encouraged by Uncle Dillard. For years, he taught guitar in the basement of Latonia's Good Ole Boys Music store, owned by the late Dave Allen. "Back then, I was grateful for 'Stairway to Heaven' because I made a lot of coin teaching it to the young guys," he says. While making the rounds of country

bars, teaching in the store, and playing at music conventions, Anderson began to get his name around. In the 1980s, a representative from Yamaha heard him and put him on the road, touring the music convention circuit to promote Yamaha guitars. In the process, Anderson traveled the continental U.S. and met hundreds of guitarists. In the early 1990s, he became friends with legendary guitarist Danny Gatton, who was based in Washington, D.C. Like Anderson, Gatton was a virtuoso player better known by his peers than by the public. "Danny was amazing," Anderson says. "He and I used to talk on the telephone for hours about how easy it is to get down on yourself in this business." The two were discussing a joint recording project when Gatton committed suicide in 1994.

ANDERSON CONTINUED TO hold clinics at music stores and conventions, even performing in Paris—France, not Kentucky—for the French Chet Atkins Appreciation Society. But Gatton's death was clearly an emotional setback for

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him. By 2000, he'd grown disillusioned with the music business. He decided to stay put, and that's when his local visibility blossomed—with a little help from his friends. Now most local appearances are with his buddies Kervin on rhythm guitar, Jim Miles on bass, and Jon Curran (a.k.a. Sammy Sinatra), who plays a single snare drum with brushes and sings ballads. Kervin lines up the dates, Miles publicizes them via e-mail, and Anderson simply shows up and plays. "Our arrangement is fine," says Miles. "We all know who the real meal ticket is."

Another local catalyst for Anderson has been Jay Radabaugh, a shop-floor worker at the GE jet engine factory. He first heard the guitarist's name through Chet Atkins. During his Tall Stacks concert in 1999, Atkins told the crowd that he was pleased to be in the backyard of Cal Collins and Scotty Anderson. "I knew Cal, but Scotty Anderson?" Radabaugh says. "I didn't know who Chet was talking about. But I made it a point to find out." After finding Anderson's band playing for free beer in the back room of a Colerain Avenue bar, Radabaugh took it upon himself to help them land jobs and publicity. "To take someone to hear Scotty is like presenting a gift," says Radabaugh, who once hounded former *Cincinnati Enquirer* critic Larry Nager until he went to hear Anderson for himself. Nager came away impressed. "He can not only do it all," he wrote, "he can do it better than just about anybody who has ever done it anywhere." Nager's glowing article for the paper in 2001 led to a recording deal with Dale Rabiner's local J Curve Records label.

Since 2002, Rabiner, a private investor by day, has financed two CD releases for Anderson—*Triple Stop* and *Classic Scotty*. The tracks are wildly eclectic; *Triple Stop* includes the bluegrass tune "John Henry," Elvis's "Love Me Tender," and the theme from the 1960s TV show *Perry Mason*. Rabiner spared no expense in hiring top jazz and country session players to support Anderson. Reviewers around the country were amazed at the ease with which Anderson crossed music genres, though many local fans, and even Anderson to an extent, wished for simple productions featuring his local bar band. While not invited to play on the J Curve sessions, Kervin still sees the genius behind Rabiner's ambitious stu-

dio projects. "They showcase everything he can do with a guitar," he says. "That's at the heart of Scotty's greatness."

Anderson is easily the most popular act in Rabiner's modest-selling J Curve CD catalog. Rabiner also financed Anderson's appearances at guitar shows in New York City, Nashville, and Dallas to wild receptions. "I can't tell you the number of veteran New York City musicians who tell me they've never seen anything like him," Rabiner says. Still, he adds, Anderson "won't tour. He's so personable, and so modest, and so non-driven. He has his friends, his students, he loves his wife, and he stays put. You can lead a horse to water.... But that's just Scotty."

Anderson's recordings on J Curve did, however, catch the attention of Clayton Smith, an optometrist and guitar enthusiast in Macon, Georgia. Three years ago, he asked Anderson to name his price to appear for a concert of musicians he had assembled in Macon. "I named a huge price so I wouldn't have to go," Anderson says. "But doggone it if he didn't pay it. So, he sent me a plane ticket and I went down there and it was great fun, and we've formed a great friendship." Smith financed Anderson's Web site (www.scottyandersonguitar.com), and they are considering other music projects. For many owners of small record labels throughout history, the lofty dream is to document an artist whose original sound lives on. In the 1940s, Ross Russell's tiny Dial Records preserved the genius of saxophonist Charlie Parker, while in the 1950s, Sam Phillips captured the young Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins at Sun Records. Mirroring Kervin's view and others, Rabiner believes Anderson's records on J Curve will be discussed for decades for the sheer originality of his finger-picking technique. "I've had so many musicians—musicians who would know—tell me this," Rabiner says.

What does Anderson, who recently signed an endorsement deal with Kustom amplifiers, think of such grandiose possibilities? Well, he doesn't. It's just not his style. He'd like to make more money as a musician, and plans to do future recordings. "But this has to be fun or it ain't worth doing," he said. "I don't know if I've ever had more fun playing than I am right now. And that's really what's important to me. I can't control the rest." ©