

Rory Gallagher

By Steve Rosen

Rory Gallagher was mentor and founding member of Taste, a pre-Cream trio which pioneered the way for the so-called "heavy" bands. With his Irish trio he laid down the foundation upon which many groups subsequently were built: Passionate guitar, thundering drums, and throaty vocals. But what set Rory apart (and still does) was his ability to draw a screaming guitar sound from a Fender Twin Reverb amplifier turned up half-way when everyone else was rocking the world with banks of Marshalls. His first consideration was always the music, which he tempered with the right amount of volume and tone.

Gallagher's trademark is his battered sunburst Stratocaster which has seen him through countless festivals, concerts, and albums. Long before the days he ever plugged in an instrument, the Irishman practiced and toyed with various inexpensive acoustic instruments, and it was at the age of nine that he first set finger to string. "I was playing before that actually," he says, "but it was with an Elvis Presley ukulele I got at Woolworth's."

Completely self-taught, Rory learned chords and fingerings by buying tutorial books and "seeing where they put their fingers." He has some regret for never having taken any classical training, but feels there is still a straight "classical type" approach to his playing. In any event, Rory prefers an instinctive style as opposed to a structured one.

It was three-and-a-half years later, when he was thirteen years old, that this guitarist picked up his first electric instrument. At that time, when he was still experimenting with acoustic guitars, he had no interest in electric six-strings. His main concern was with skiffle music (a popular English/Irish term put on the music of performers like Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie played on combs, wash-tub basses, etc.), and it wasn't until he actually had his first non-acoustic instrument that he realized the potential of rock and roll. A Rosetti Solid 7 plugged into a Little Giant amplifier (with an output of four-watts) was the first electric setup, but after that thirteenth year guitars and amplifiers were changed annually.

The infamous Stratocaster came into Rory's hands when he was fifteen, after it had been in the possession of another player for about three months. This Fender sunburst is a late 1959 model

with new machine heads, new frets, and a new pickguard. "In all those hot gigs in Taste the pickguard just folded up one night," Gallagher explains, "just came up off the guitar." Other minor alterations include the changing of the bridge to enhance string/neck action, and the discarding of the tremolo arm after it fell off. To accommodate the loss of the vibrato Rory has slipped a small wedge inside the bridge to keep the tailpiece from moving and to keep the other strings in tune if one breaks. "I never put the vibrato back on, because I don't particularly like it," he says. "I like the Clarence White attachment [Evans Pull String. See Alembic Report mfrg. address.] where you can bend up a second or third string a tone. But as to the tremolo arm, I try to get the vibrato with my fingers, though it was fun in the early days with the dance bands, when you'd be playing a guitar boogie shuffle, and go *wooo* [imitates the sound of bending guitar string]."

Because Rory has brandished a Fender for so many years he obviously feels compatible with that make of guitar, though there have been several occasions when he has substituted his Strat with a Gibson. Taste bass player Richard McCracken would loan Rory a red Gibson if his Stratocaster was in the shop for a refretting or if he needed a particularly different sound for a studio recording. As for Gibsons in general, Gallagher says, "I don't feel that at home with them. I'm obviously so much a Fender musician. I can't get the clarity from a Gibson, the metallic clarity you can get from a Strat. You can't get syncopated rhythmic things with most of the Gibsons. There's a few odd Gibsons which are beautiful. But then again you can get a beautiful big fuzzy chord from the Gibson that on a Fender can be sometimes difficult to get. I don't think it travels as far as a Fender either; a Fender will hit the back wall. Even playing with a small amp in a huge band with brass, though a Fender might not be loud enough, it always peaks through. That's the main difference." Rory also contends that you "can't get away with as much" on a Fender as you can with a Gibson because of the former's clarity.

As for boosters, fuzzes, wah-wahs, and boxes, the only time Gallagher ever used any was in his first pickup dance bands and the early days of Taste when he used a fuzz-tone. Now, he stays away



Photo by Len DeLessio

from external devices because he sees them as crutches and not as creative embellishments. "I'm a little bit old-fashioned about boxes and effects. I mean I'm not narrow-minded. I've heard a lot of great songs from them, but I like the old wah-wah effect with the tone control a little more. I don't know, I've just seen so many guys playing boring guitar breaks with them. I've seen guys play a nice interesting solo, and they get bored, and they go over to it and say 'Oh to hell with it,' and bam - *waaaah-waaaah*. It's too much of a getaway - I like naked guitar."

For amplification Rory plugs into a Fender Twin tweed amplifier which was pre-dated in the primal days of Taste by an AC-30 Vox. To this day he still uses the standard Vox on stage after being introduced to it years ago when he saw the legendary Shadows [early British rock group] using them. Gallagher used his for ten years, and even during the Cream/Hendrix period when everybody was rushing to Marshall he stuck with the relatively unknown amplifier. He describes the tubed setup as having a "loud throaty" sound, though he feels that the American versions built between 1963 and 1965 leaned to the "flimsy side and were weak in the treble

RORY GALLAGHER

department." The "fawn" box with his amp had numerous click switches which according to Rory meant nothing, but did "weird" things. "I think they just made them to change the design each week. Every time you opened it up, it had different tubes in it."

As with his guitars, Rory prefers not to tamper with the basic structure of his amplifiers. "You might stick in a different resistor or you might try that wire there," he says, "but I've never had them doctored." He isn't entirely against modifications, but believes that guitarists who place Gibson pickups on Fender instruments completely destroy the unique qualities of that brand of guitar.

The different sounds Gallagher achieves are strictly created by hand, guitar, and amplifier. One technique he uses to great effect is that of harmonics. The Fender neck creates overtones up and down its entire length, and lends itself particularly well to this style of muffling notes. On its lower reaches Rory's use of finger/pick muffling causes the notes to sound like a synthesizer, while notes "pinged" higher up the neck sound like they're in a tape loop and are coming out backwards.

When asked how he manages to extract such a clean, ringing sound Gallagher hems and haws and finally just chalks it up to experience. "I've been doing it for years," he says. "It depends on the tone, and how much you really want to get them out. You can get a lot of interesting effects from it. Mind you, you wear your nail down to a shred though." The pinging is achieved by the combined use of the pick, thumbnail, and the first finger; and to add to the basic difficulty of this technique, Gallagher caught his thumbnail in a car door some nine years ago, and since that time, it has never grown back normally.

To facilitate the crisp tones of the harmonized notes, Rory sets the treble control on his Fender Twin just about full up. He likes a "stinging" sound without it being too trebly: "I like it clangy," he states, "clangy is the word." He plugs into the normal input of the amp, though there is a "brilliant" input which would make the guitar even sharper sounding than it is. He sets the amp volume on seven which in the case of his amp is a little over half-full (this particular year of amplifier ranges to number twelve). When he uses the AC-30 it, too, is placed at this point, and then miked naturally through whatever public address system is being used. Above this range the amp is sending out more distortion than tone, though Rory has talked with guitarists who recommend playing an amplifier from the

seven to ten or twelve range.

To control his sound for a particular passage and to make a solo clean, Gallagher can lower his volume on his guitar. Then, for chording, he turns the guitar volume back up full to achieve a fuzzy tone.

While Rory has stuck with Fender and Vox he has experimented and tested several makes of amplifier. Some of the more interesting makes he ran across were Stramp (a clean-sounding German amp which Leslie West used), Magnatone, Burns, and Vincent (an Italian brand). For studio work Rory also uses Fender — a small Deluxe which sounds rather fuzzy at the time of recording, but which comes across very clean on record.

Rory strings his Fenders with Fender Rock & Roll ordinary light gauge strings, but in the past has used Clifford Essex (which he found to be temperamental in the heat), Gibson Sonomatics, and Showboat. Strings are changed every two nights on the Strat and every fourth or fifth night with the Telly.

For picking Gallagher uses a Herco Heavy which gives a flexible attack because of its nylon makeup. Fender heavy and medium picks were too brittle, he explains, and didn't allow him to "do things with the strings" as he's able to do with the Hercos.

Another side of Rory Gallagher is his ability as a slide guitarist, a technique which came in part from listening to the old masters like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf (though Wolf seldom played slide on records), and the more modern players like Jeff Beck and Duane Allman. Rory alternates from metal tube to bottle for slide work, usually using the latter in the studio to achieve a softer sound. The action has been raised considerably on the Telecaster (though Gallagher normally plays his guitars with high action) and sports medium gauge strings with a wound third. He

tunes the Fender to open E or A (his singing range) and employs a capo to get a G, B, or C tuning. He also uses a Martin D-35 and a National steel guitar for slide.

"I just try and get a volume whereby the guitar is still almost of an acoustic nature," Rory states. "You know, if you just hit that a little *harder* you can get a hard note, and if you hit quite soft you can get a soft sound. I still like to get that acoustic feel about the guitar. Does that sound crazy? I don't like to see a guy hit a note and then turn up his volume control and let that do the work. I just like to go *woomph* and really dig the note. For an introduction or solo I have my guitar up to ten or maybe nine-and-a-half to give myself a little room, and then for the rhythm guitar I'd have it about seven-and-a-half or eight." Rory adds that with a Strat there is a different nature and volume for the separate pickups, and that in a certain position you can get away with less volume for a particular passage, because of the pickup setting.

"I like to keep that acoustic approach," he reiterates. "I mean I like to have electronics, sure, but I'm just into the *guitar*. I don't want to get into the so-called popular blues style — playing single notes and then turning your guitar down and singing. I'm into getting as much out of the guitar as possible, which was the original idea of the guitar. I'm almost, if you will, into the classical approach to the guitar like Segovia had of getting *everything* you can out of the guitar by the use of all the fingers and all the means you can get. There's a million things in there to come out. Sometimes you can get them out with an electronic device, but that's the beauty of the instrument." ■

