

Phish Scales: Trey Anastasio Breaks Down His Improvisation Techniques

Posted 05/31/2011 at 6:59pm | by [Andy Aledort](#)



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In this classic interview, Andy Aledort talks to Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio about the magic behind his improv techniques

"Musical inspiration can come from just about anywhere," says Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio. "For me, so much inspiration comes from the rhythms of the natural sounds in the air. Walking out in the country, you'll hear certain sounds — a train, a boat, or maybe a horse walking on the road — and each of these sounds has a rhythm. If your mind is open, the simple rhythms of those sounds can inspire you and spark new musical ideas."

Anastasio, holding court in a Mayflower Hotel suite high above the streets of New York City, has come to discuss Phish's latest release, *Farmhouse* (Elektra), the band's 11th album. Though Phish is rarely on MTV and resides somewhere well outside the Top 40 radio charts, the group has sold close to five million albums worldwide, with five of those certified Gold, and one, *A Live One*, certified Platinum.

For years now, Phish has been riding the crest of a wave that erupted with the band's welcome embrace from the "Deadhead" counterculture. Today, that once-insular musical scene has blossomed into a massive "jam band" revolution, paving the way for a cross-pollination of musical styles, sounds and genres. In many ways, Phish was the movement's prototypical band.

"In Phish, we've dropped the concept of musical style and accepted all music as a global mass of sound," says Anastasio. "We operate from two opposing philosophies: one is that you should lock yourself in a room from birth, and write music with zero influence from the outside world; the other is that you should listen to everything, to the point of being able to faithfully recreate

the Beatles' White Album, as we did before a show a while back. As odd as it sounds, we try to draw from both philosophies simultaneously."

Enjoying a brief respite before heading out on a huge summer tour, Anastasio took some time out to give *Guitar World* an exclusive guitar lesson. In it, he details the intricacies of Phish's more complex music and provides a broad overview of his approach to music and the guitar.

GUITAR WORLD: What fueled your initial interest in music?

TREY ANASTASIO: The first three albums I ever owned were *Diana Ross Presents The Jackson Five*, the first Led Zeppelin album and *The Best of Cream*. Led Zeppelin was a huge influence for me. I was obsessed with them; I had every album, and I memorized them all. Actually, I played the drums from a very young age; I was probably about 5 years old. I played on and off, but I always had a drum set in my room.

When did you first pick up the guitar?

When I was in the eleventh grade. I had always played the drums in the bands I was in, and in high school I switched to the guitar. Two years later, I started Phish. When I first started to play the guitar, I took some classical lessons and learned to play the Bach Chorales and the basics of fingerstyle. But I moved on to the electric right after that.

The influence of Bach's fugues is apparent on songs like "You Enjoy Myself," in which the melody is based on a progression of baroque-sounding chordal arpeggios.

The sound of Bach's music has always appealed to me. The use of arpeggios in "You Enjoy Myself" is definitely influenced by Bach. Back in 1995, one of the things we liked to do was have everyone play in a different time signature at the same time: I'd play eleven beats, Fish [Jon Fishman, drums] would play seven beats, and Mike [Gordon, bassist] would play five beats, and this would cycle a few times until we all met on the downbeat of "1" again.

Did you work that out through experimentation, or was it written out?

Things like this were written out on paper. A lot of our stuff was scored back then.

Is it difficult to perform these long, complicated instrumental passages live?

The secret is, you can't think about it. Whenever we come to a hard passage, I try to think about anything but that particular lick. I'll look out into the audience or do something to distract my mind. I'll never fuck up if I don't think about it!

FIGURE 1 Scale Investigation

A) G major scale in the 7th position

B) ascending and descending in groups of four ascending

4 4 1 1 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 1 3 1 2 4 1 2 4

The layering of different time signatures is a technique used by Captain Beefheart, who seems to have had an influence on your music.

Oh, he's great. "Tropical Hot Dog Night," from Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller), is one of the five best songs ever written! Captain Beefheart's big claim was that he was influenced by no one—he used to say that he was completely free-floating in the world. If he was influenced at all it was by visual artists, because he was a sculptor.

In Phish, we like the idea of dropping the whole concept of musical style and just accepting all music as a global mass of sound. It's too late for us to go the Captain Beefheart route though [laughs], so we'll cover anything.

Did the progressive rock and jazz/fusion of the early Seventies influence your music?

Oh, yeah, I love progressive rock. I'm a big fan of Robert Fripp [guitarist and founder of Sixties/Seventies progressive rock masters King Crimson—GW Ed.], and I still love a lot of his stuff. I was especially into his work with Brian Eno, on albums such as *Another Green World*, and I was really into King Crimson's *Larks Tongues in Aspic*, which is one of my all-time favorite albums. I like Red, too. Then there's the stuff he did later for his Discipline Records label. The "patterny" thing that Fripp is known for had a big influence on me.

Are you a fan of jazz/fusion guitarists, like John McLaughlin, for instance?

The record that I listened to the most that featured McLaughlin's guitar playing was Miles Davis' *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* (1970). I love his playing on that record. I used to listen to it all the time, and I worked out some of the guitar parts that he plays on that record.

Are there any other guitarists that have had a big influence on you?

There are so many, probably just about anyone you'd ask me about. Pat Metheny is one. Jerry Garcia has been a huge influence for me.

In the development of your own style, did you work out any of Garcia's solos?

I worked out a whole bunch of his solos. From listening to Jerry, I learned a lot about getting around the neck using different scale shapes and patterns. The first thing I picked up from him was the many different ways of "walking around" scales diatonically [staying within the tonal

structure of a specific scale—GW Ed.]. If we use a G major scale in the 10th position [FIGURE 1A], we can play the scale in groups of fours, ascending and descending [FIGURE 1B]. You can recognize that sound as a "Jerry" thing right away.



Once you get a handle on that pattern, you realize that there are zillions of other patterns you can do, and you begin to work them all out. Another good one is to ascend in groups of four, but start from a lower scale degree each time. [FIGURE 1C] There's also this variation [FIGURE 1D] that utilizes a descending progression of diatonic thirds, in which the first three notes of each beat are thirds apart [either one and one half or two whole steps]. This pattern creates a melody reminiscent of "If I Only Had a Brain," from *The Wizard of Oz*.

I would take riffs I learned from other guitar players and use them as doors into new ideas. By investigating the playing of guitar players I loved, I discovered the methods they used for creating improvised lines. Once you find a particular pattern, try transposing it to diminished scale, or to each of the minor modes, and so on. Then start moving those patterns all over the neck, studying them in every position.

For example, I transposed a melodic pattern similar to the last one I showed you [FIGURE 1D] to the chromatic scale and came up with this [FIGURE 1E]. This pattern was devised by first moving up a minor third [one and a half steps], and then down a half step, down a minor third and down another half step. This pattern is played repeatedly, with each group of four notes starting one whole step lower than the previous group.