

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARC BONILLA

CRIS COHEN

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Cris Cohen

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Photo of Marc Bonilla used in cover art: Ron Lyon

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Introduction

Guitarist, songwriter, composer **Marc Bonilla** has released three critically acclaimed albums: “EE Ticket,” “American Matador,” and “Celluloid Debris.” He has produced, recorded, and performed with Keith Emerson, Ronnie Montrose, Peter Frampton, and many others. Bonilla has also composed and performed for numerous television shows and major motion pictures including “The Bourne Legacy” and “Iron Man 2.”

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An Inexhaustible Pool of Resources

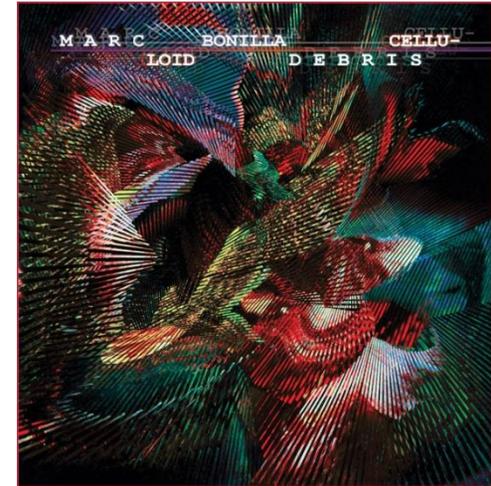
Cris Cohen: “[Celluloid Debris](#)” is primarily an album of instrumentals. When you are creating an instrumental, are you guided by imagery? Are you guided by lyrics that no one will hear? How does that work?

Marc Bonilla: The way that I see music and the way that I see writing, none of this stuff comes from you. It all comes through you. It's not you. It's whatever voice is coming through you, your channel. When you start to think of things coming from you, you've already set yourself up for writer's block. You've set yourself up for a finite source of inspiration.

It is like going out to the desert with a canteen of water. You have it for a while, but then the canteen goes dry. What are you going to do after that? But if you see creativity as a river that runs alongside that desert, then all you have to do is go over there and dip your cup in whenever you're thirsty.

I've never had writer's block. Whenever I've had to write something -- whether it was for a TV show, a movie, an album -- I just sit down, start playing, and the ideas come. If you want to term it as muses, they are like fireman up in the loft. They're up there reading a magazine, watching the soap opera until the fire bell rings. Then it's like, “Shit! Somebody needs us!” And they come down the pole. Well, the fire alarm is your piano. It is your guitar. It wakes him up and he's like, “Hey, I guess we're needed. We need to throw some ideas down there for them.” I've always trusted that. And because of that, when I sit down and start writing, ideas just come. I don't have to force them.

I basically follow my ear, which is being led by my muses, whatever that is. That's why, if you're a composer or you're a writer and you go back to something you've written, you'll think, “I don't even remember doing that.”



How the hell did I do this?" You don't remember any of that stuff because you didn't do it. You weren't there. You were basically relinquishing your driver's seat to somebody else that knew the way there. You were in the passenger seat. A lot of people still think it comes from them. And because of that, they are cutting themselves off from an inexhaustible pool of resources.

Cris Cohen: How does editing figure into that? You're getting all this stuff that is being sent from on high and maybe there's something that needs to be tweaked or should you not mess with it at that point?

Marc Bonilla: No. It's kind of like mining raw ore. You want to get it into a faceted diamond at some point, right? So, there are going to be places that you're going to carve off once you have all of the ore that you need. It's like Michelangelo looking at a piece of granite and going, "Well, there's the statue. It's in there somewhere. So, if I just chip off everything that doesn't look like The Pieta, I'll be safe."

That's kind of what you do once you start flowing with your ideas. Because they will come. And you have to have the red button on record the whole time. Because they will leave as soon as they come. And just as quick. That's why you always have to have a digital recorder or something around so that you can record everything right away.

The first time through is going to be the purest because it's unfiltered. You have to watch out for your mind, because your mind is the one that gets you into trouble. You start rethinking and start going, "Is this a hit? Who's going to like this?" Forget that. It really has to come from the heart to the hands. When you get it out there, then you can sit back, listen to it, and go, "Okay, what does this need?" And then you can piece things together.

You're constructing an engine that is going to eventually push a car, which is really the emotional response of the listener. So, you kind of construct things as you're given the parts to do it. And then you sit back and listen to it.

You have to give it a little bit of air. Because sometimes you get too close to it. I'll take it in my car and listen to it there because ideas will come in your car, when you're jogging, when you're hanging out somewhere. Because your mind has to be in an idle state in order to create. And this is one of the reasons I still have [a flip phone]. I do not have an iPhone. The reason being: It's a fucking distraction. People, when they get bored -- they're standing at a stoplight or the supermarket -- they just start looking at this thing to entertain themselves. They are depriving themselves of daydreaming. You have to be bored in order to create. Your brain has to be idle for things to come in.

When you're driving, when you're doing sports... whatever you're doing is a form of meditation. You're not thinking hard about what you need to do. And that's when the ideas float in. That's why I always keep something in the car that I can write ideas down on. I'll put a tune on in the car and I hear it in a different way. And then I know exactly what needs to happen. Whereas if I was sitting in front of the computer with my keys and my guitars, it's not so clear. You kind of have to put yourself in a different frame of mind, a more meditative state. It can be just doing an idle chore. It could be gardening. Anything. Ideas will then come.

Cris Cohen: I remember hearing that the author Neil Gaiman purposely makes himself bored so that it gets his imagination going. I also remember reading a thing about Paul Simon and how he would write songs by repeatedly throwing a tennis ball at the wall.

Marc Bonilla: It's a form of meditation. It frees it up for things to come in. And that's the thing, you have to uncomplicate your brain. Being bored is wonderful. If you're an only child, a lot of times we'll have a bigger imagination because you had to invent your friends, you had to invent people to play with. And that gave you a sense of, I can create anything I want because I have nobody to tell me that I can't.

Cris Cohen: It also reminds me of the old saying -- and you could easily reverse the genders on this one -- that the hardest thing for a writer's wife to understand is that, when he's staring out the window, he's working.

Marc Bonilla: It's true. When I was a kid, I lived in a very, very small house and my room was probably the size of a bathroom. And I'd be in there day in and day out. My friends would say, "How could you stay in that room for that long and never go out?"

I'm not in that room. I may physically be in the room, but my mind is off on a Roger Dean landscape somewhere. That's the thing: Staring out the window, all of that stuff, you're just seeing the outer. What's inside is an infinite universe of creativity.

“The Eruption of John Minimum, Part One”

Cris Cohen: Well then that makes me wonder, most of these tracks are instrumentals, except for “The Eruption of John Minimum, Part One.” Was that a case where legitimately the muse delivered some lyrics when he or she had not delivered any lyrics before?

Marc Bonilla: That track was actually written when I was doing the Keith Emerson Band album. Keith and I had put together a long piece that we wanted to do called “The House of Ocean Born Mary,” which is on there. This was part of that. I dreamt that title. I woke up going, “‘The Eruption of John Minimum.’ What the hell is that?” I had to put some kind of meaning to it. I wasn't sure what it meant. So, I thought, “If I was an audience for my own stuff, what would I think that was?” And what I came up with was a person that basically you live next door to, that never did anything out of the norm, was completely quiet, kept to himself. Until one day when he went on a rampage and shot 40 people in a mall or something.

You always hear about these people. They are always like, “Well, he was a quiet man.” So, he's a quiet man. He kept to himself. He escaped unnoticed until that moment where... bam... everyone noticed him. And so the lyrics basically are about how he's brought to this point of snapping from a point over here. And people may see the warning signs, but they never really take them seriously until it's too late.

And then Part Two is the act, the massacre. Then it goes through all of his mental changes. If you notice, that song goes through maybe 17 different mental rooms until finally in the end he takes his own life. But these are things I didn't really put across in the record, as far as being literal.

I wanted people just to kind of experience it for themselves, because I don't like to assign meaning to a song for them. I remember the first time I saw the video for “The End of the Innocence,” which I love, the Don Henley song. I'm watching and I'm like, “What are these football players doing in this? No, no, no, no. This has nothing to

do with my image.” That's when I started to detest videos, because what they were doing was forcing you to subscribe to a vision that the artist had. When in actuality, art should be subjective. Whatever you related to in your life, that's what you apply it to. That's why I rarely do videos. Because of that. Because I feel it is an infringement on people's imaginations.

But if I'm asked what I was thinking of when I did the song, I will gladly give them that information, because it may prove to be insightful to some degree. With that song I just wanted to put lyrics to it, so that the second half was a musical conclusion of what happens when he reaches a breaking point. And then after that, I didn't need lyrics. I just needed music.

And then Keith said... we were going to do it on the album and he goes, “Man, it's just... it's too rock. It's too rock and roll. I love it. But it's not fitting in with the rest of the stuff.”

I said, “Well, I really think it's great.”

And he said, “Well, then do it on your solo album then.”

I said, “Well then I fucking will.” And I did. But he still plays the organ at the end.

Videos Versus Music for Films

Cris Cohen: To back up a hair, you were talking about not liking videos and their forcing a certain imagery onto music. And yet you've done a lot of work for film, creating music soundtracks. Does that feel different or is that like, "All right, I'll go down this road."

Marc Bonilla: No, no, because what you're doing is you're splitting your medium. You've got visual and you have musical. The main things that you have in a film or any TV show... you've got the cinematography, which says a lot, depending on how you frame something, what you emphasize, what colors you use, what lighting you use put across the mood of the script and the characters. You can say a lot with lighting and camera technique, where you don't need dialogue and you don't need music. Obviously, dialogue is a secondary form of the communication of the story. The third is the music. Those are the main three and they all work like a sprinkler system, where, if all of them are working properly, the whole lawn gets green. If you've got one that's short, you're going to have a dead spot over there. So, they all need to work in balance.

And so what music does is it will often communicate an idea, a mood, an emotion, or an irony, or whatever you don't put across in words. An example would be the scene with Sergeant Elias in "Platoon" when he's being chased out of the jungle by the North Vietnamese. And you're playing "Adagio for Strings" by Samuel Barber, which is this beautiful, poignant piece and completely plays against the scene. But it gives you something else. It gives you the tragedy of human life, the loss of all of this, the operatic drama of war. And so that music puts across an emotional response that you wouldn't normally have gotten if it was just an action scene without it. It puts in something else.

So you, as a composer, have to decide, along with a director, usually what story you're telling in that scene. What character are you really portraying in that scene? It may not be the person that has the majority of dialogue. It could be the person reacting, the person that isn't saying anything, or could say something, but decides not to. I

mean, it could be the story that you're telling at that certain point doesn't necessarily have to be the protagonist's that you've been focusing on.

So, you have to understand the story. And really, that's what music is all about is storytelling. When it comes down to everything else, you're telling a story with music. And therefore you have to follow a narrative. You have to follow the punctuation that you do if you're reading a story. All of those things have to fit into place in order for the story to move ahead and to arc properly and to retain the reader's, or in this case, the listener's interest.

Cris Cohen: And then it seems like all of that dovetails, at least on this album, in the song “Westwood,” where you said it was inspired by the music of all these spaghetti westerns. And yet you're putting it into a single rock song.

Marc Bonilla: Yeah, it was originally called “Eastwood Rides South.” I was and always will be a huge Ennio Morricone fan. His boldness with his instruments. He would interject things that were just so wonderful. But yet his themes were so gorgeous and beautiful. There was nobody that would, could, will ever touch him as far as film composing. And there have been some brilliant film composers out there. But Ennio, I think everyone to a man or woman would tip their hat to him. He was like the Beatles of soundtrack music as far as I'm concerned.

So, I wanted to write something that was kind of romantic in that way. Using the elements that always appealed to me, whether it was the choir, whether it was the whistle, the soprano singing, whatever it was. All those things that resonate, I tried to combine them in a four-minute piece.

Cris Cohen: It's one of those things you wouldn't have guessed. I'm happy that you include liner notes in the digital edition, because you can get all of this extra information that you wouldn't have expected. I grew up in Los Angeles. So, I saw “Westwood” and thought “The town surrounding UCLA?” But the liner notes cleared that up.

Cover Songs

Cris Cohen: Another example is the tune “4 + 20,” which I did think of the Crosby, Stills, and Nash song, but I thought, “Well, it couldn't be that.” Because it doesn't seem to fit what I knew of the original song. And then I read the liner notes. “Oh, it is actually inspired by or an offshoot of...,” which I found quite fascinating.

Marc Bonilla: Well, that is the original version. If you listen to it, I was really careful to try and play Stephen Stills’ vocal inflections. I heard that song one day, but man, for some reason I heard a John Bonham “When the Levee Breaks” kind of groove to it. I thought, “I wonder if that would work.” If you're going to cover something, there are different reasons to cover a song and the least of them is to replicate it exactly like the original. Because you're never going to. It's never going to succeed on the level of the original. That's a onetime thing.

So, the only thing that you really should be looking at is shining a different light on it so that you can see it from a different angle. Try to communicate what emotions you were going through when you heard it, what the song means to you emotionally, and spotlight those things on it. Which is what I think Joe Cocker did for “With a Little Help from My Friends.” What a brilliant version of that. Completely different than the original. Yet, I don't know which one I like better. Some days I like the Beatles’ version. Sometimes I like Joe Cocker's version better. But the fact that he made it his own... the way (Jimi) Hendrix made “All Along the Watchtower” his own...

Cris Cohen: That's almost beyond. I read that even Bob Dylan started performing the song Hendrix’s way after he heard Hendrix’s version.

Marc Bonilla: Blood, Sweat & Tears did “Fire and Rain” on the album “Blood, Sweat & Tears 3.” I heard that before I heard James Taylor's version. So, when I heard James' I thought, “Who is this wanker ripping off Blood, Sweat & Tears?” Until I wised up and went, “No, this is brilliant too.” But I was so used to Blood, Sweat & Tears’ arrangement of it. I thought it was a brilliant arrangement of it. So the fact is you do something different because

you want to kind of reflect what you feel about it or how the song can succeed in an alternate universe where Spock has a beard, that kind of thing. Which is what I did with "4 + 20." I kept some of the original vocal line and some of the lyrics. I did a couple of different inflections with... there is a part in there where it says, "Is she gone?" and everything dies away to just complete silence before a new section comes in.

So, there are different things that I did within there. If you listen to the lyrics and apply them to the point in the song where the guitar is taking it, it will have more meaning because I'm playing the emotional content of those lyrics. I'm not throwing the lyrics away with this. I'm using the lyrics to influence my guitar playing for them. And so that's the thing that I tried to do with that particular song.

Cris Cohen: It reminds me... my favorite re-interpretation of a tune is on the "Bob Dylan's 30th Anniversary Celebration." Eric Clapton doing "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," where he turns it into this complete blues number. It's still the same lyrics, but it's like, wow, this is a whole different song.

Marc Bonilla: The thing about a great song is it can survive in many different incarnations. It's like a great story. It can be told in different ways because the core of the story is good, and the core of the music is good. The core of the sentiment is good. That's why you can do those things. If it's a good song, you can take those chances and shine a different light on it. So people go, "Wow. I never thought of that song like that."

It also tells a lot about an artist who does cover a song, what their interpretation is of it. You can tell a lot about someone who does a cover almost more than you can with them doing an original, about how they see things. Bloodrock. I don't know if you remember that band Bloodrock. They did a wonderful version of "Eleanor Rigby." Like a Dave Brubeck style. It was bad ass. It was great. It's on the album "Whirlwind Tongues." A great arrangement of that. It was Warren Ham. He used to play with a lot of different bands. Did a wonderful arrangement of "Eleanor Rigby." One of my favorites. I like it as much as the original. But it was bold, and it was completely different. I thought it was beautiful.

Snippets from Our Life

Cris Cohen: And then getting back to your cinematic theme, one of the fun extras was, as each song fades out, there's a little bit of what sounds like little movie clips playing in the background and working as a segue from one song to the next. Do you feel that those kind of reflected the imagery you had going with the song or was it more of a Pink Floyd theater of the mind kind of thing?

Marc Bonilla: Most of those were taken from my childhood. They were actual recordings of things that I experienced growing up.

My oldest and dearest friend, his name is Jim Gammon, lived across the street from me growing up. He was blind since birth. I used to see him on his tricycle going down the street on a big hill. He's peddling like hell, then lifting his feet up, just clicking it, and then running into his driveway.

And then my mom told me at one point that he's blind. I went, "Huh?"

I went over and said, "Jimmy, you got no eyes? How can you see? How do you know to do that?"

He said, "Oh, I count the clicks in the sidewalk." When they frame out sidewalks, there's a little indentation. With those tubeless tires on a tricycle, he could count how many clicks before his driveway. And he said, "Yeah, I've missed one click once in a while and I ended up in a hedge."

But he was fearless. When he got a two-wheeler, we would flank him going down the hill. He was fearless.

But what he did for me is he opened me up musically. Because with blind folks, man, it's all about sound. It's all about hearing and feeling. He bought every record. He turned me on to Mahavishnu Orchestra; Blood, Sweat &

Tears; Hendrix; ELP; all these bands. He was the first to go out and get the record. And I would go over there and have my mind expanded.

And he's actually on my album. He's on the tune "Sailor." He plays trumpet.

So, he used to record everything. We would walk around the neighborhood. He'd always have mics set up, record stuff off of his ham radio. And we archived all that stuff. So, a lot of the stuff that's in those segs are actually snippets from our life growing up. And I've montaged them in a way that it prepares for the next song. It generates a mood for the next song. And again, that's where the "Celluloid Debris" terminology comes from. There are little pieces, little film clips that were on the editing floor that I've pieced together and put into some kind of a cohesive fashion in the segs to prepare you for the next one.

This album basically was musically an account of the last 25 years of my musical life. Things that I learned working with Terje Mikkelsen and the orchestra, learning about orchestral writing by doing it. Not by studying it. By getting thrown in the pit and saying, "You've got the Munich Symphony, you need to write a couple of orchestral pieces. Okay. Sure." And I started writing.

What was funny about that was there was a tune on the "Three Fates Project" called "The Morning Sun" that I wrote for strings and percussion. And the producer, Torsten Schreier, who was I guess like the Rick Rubin of classical music in Europe, he's up there and we're editing it together. And he goes, "So where did you study?"

And I go, "Huh?"

"Where did you study? What conservatory?"

I went, "I didn't study in any conservatory."

“Well, you must have studied Mahler. This sounds like a Mahler piece.”

And I went, “I don't even listen to Mahler. I like Debussy.”

And he goes, “Well, now wait a minute...”

He actually got pissed because I was destroying his paradigm right in front of him. “I’m just the fucking guitar player. I don’t know anything about Mahler.”

It really annoyed him. But it shows that if you call on the right people, they'll come down and do the stuff. You just have to be open and free and not let your brain defeat you by going, “I've never done this before. How am I going to get to that spot?” Forget that. You can throw this thing (pointing to his head) away. You don't need it. No one has ever needed that, except for the technical ability of executing what ideas come across.

Pushing People Out of Their Comfort Zones

Cris Cohen: Well, now I'm wondering if you specifically try and put people into challenging situations.

Marc Bonilla: Oh yes.

Cris Cohen: Because the mutual friend who arranged this interview, Troy Lucketta, he and I talked a lot about the "[Three Fates Project](#)." He said, "I was so nervous going into that. I was not sure. But Marc said, 'You can do this. Don't worry about it. Just go.'"

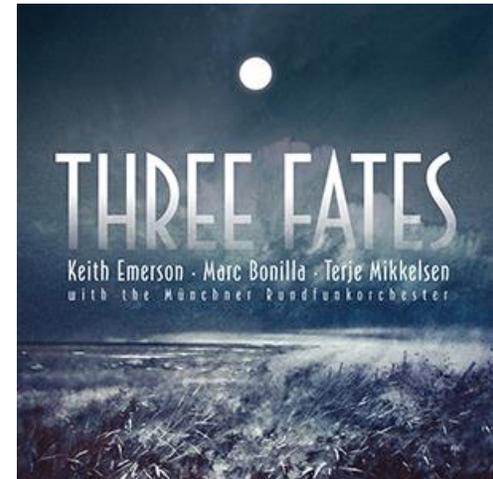
Marc Bonilla: Well, that was the thing. I didn't want somebody who had done it before. I wanted somebody who was new to it because he would bring this "Oh shit!" attitude to it. Troy just does that anyway. He's always unbridled and I've never known to turn anything down that challenged him. He'd be scared, but he'd go into and do it.

That's why I didn't tell him about it at first. I was in China and I called him and said, "So what are you doing in the next couple of weeks?"

And he goes, "I don't know. Why? What's up?"

I said, "Are you available?"

"Yeah."



“Good. You're coming to Mongolia to do an orchestral thing!”

I had to make sure that he couldn't claim, “Oh I'm busy.”

“You just told me you weren't busy.”

So I got him to basically commit before he knew what he was committing to. And then I would push him in these areas. I try to do that with all my players... to push them out of their comfort zones. Because you don't know what you're capable of until you get yourself out there. You need to get out into the water far enough, like David Bowie says, until your feet don't really touch the sand. That's a good place to live your life because then you're open to those things and you push yourself a little bit more. And you'll be surprised what you come up with. You really will. And each time you succeed in doing something you didn't think you could do, that gives you more confidence to go out further in the ocean, see what's out there. And Troy is a perfect example of that. And like I said, with my other guys too, I try to challenge them to do things that they normally wouldn't do because they always end up better for it. As I do by pushing myself and how others have pushed me too. So I know that it works.

Cris Cohen: That's what strikes me and makes me wonder... so you're dealing with accomplished players, but maybe in a fish out of water scenario. You've already talked about how you try and not overthink things, let the muse kind of take over. Based on all of that, when you're running a project like that, what kind of instruction do you give to people?

Marc Bonilla: A lot of times it's verbal. I hear voices. I'll hear drum riffs. Troy will tell you, I air drum all the time. My brother was a drummer. I grew up watching the drummer more than anybody else in any of the bands. The guitar players, I knew kind of what they were doing, but the drummer, man... So whether it's Gregg Bissonette or Thomas Lang or Joe Travers -- any these guys --- I would go, “Okay, on this lick, I want you to go [makes a series of drum noises]. Can you do that?”

And they all go, “Why don't you just do that on the microphone? It's a lot easier.”

But I would give them the riff to do just that little part. I don't tell them, “Here's how I want the whole song to go.” Leave that to them. They're the experts. But still there may be a lick that defines the song. And so I'll often air drum it for them. And because it came from me, it's not a normal lick that they may do, especially since I'm left-handed. Then they can add it to their list of weaponry if they so choose or discard it, but it'll work for the song.

You just try to push people a little bit in one area or another. I would do that with Danny Seraphine and he would curse me for putting him in that situation.

Keith Emerson

Cris Cohen: With the “Three Fates Project” and other such stuff, spending a lot of time working with Keith Emerson, how did he, a keyboardist extraordinaire, influence you as a guitarist?

Marc Bonilla: All through my early formative years. I still have my vinyl of Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s “Tarkus,” “Trilogy,” and “Brain Salad Surgery” with the binder paper that I had in high school with everything written out. I copped all of his keyboard parts. I would play them because they were just beautiful. I could play all of those records. I couldn't even begin to tell you how much he influenced me. And he was a keyboard player, but he got me into classical music, which was a number of the people that he opened (me up to). You know, “Who's Mussorgsky? ‘Pictures at a *what?*’ ‘Fanfare for the Common *who?*’” And then I would go back and I would listen to the originals and go, “Wow! This is great!”

He opened so many players up to the classical world, either opened the door from the rock into classical or from classical into rock. In Munich during the “Three Fates,” so many of the players were coming up to him and going, “If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here in the orchestra.” And he was floored. He wasn't expecting it.

So my thing with him was to try to pay that back a little bit. He'd never really been in a four-piece band. He was always shouldering the load, you know, in Emerson Lake & Palmer. But now he had a guitar player. We could do stuff together. And his favorite thing was to comp, let me go out there and do stuff and comp and play chords behind it. He could relax a little bit. Then he would come back out and do his thing.

So, I was always trying to push him to do more. And it was hard because he was one of my idols. And then when he asked me to produce us for the Keith Emerson Band... this is really weird, me telling Keith, “You know, that wasn't good enough.” It took me a long time to get over that. And he would (play) and I'm going, “Not quite.” And he was so patient. Then he reached a point where he got into this turbo mode where the next four takes were just outrageous, where I didn't know how I was going to choose between them. They were amazing. So we

learned the rhythm of how he created and how he needed to be kind of elevated before he really could go past the point that he was normally used to.

It was a great working relationship for years. We really did have a lot of trust for each other because we both had each other's backs. It was just a wonderful relationship. We made a lot of great music and had a lot of great experiences doing it.

And I learned so much from Terje Mikkelsen, the conductor on the project. He really redesigned my playing for me as far as expressing goes, because an orchestral delivery on something is completely different than an electric version of something. There are so many different interdynamics that you can use and breathe and not repeat the same phrase, even though the same phrases repeated. All of these things that he woke me to really come across on "Cellular Debris." It was an epiphany when he explained some of these things that usually just the classical players know how to do. A lot of times they do them that way because the acoustic instrument is a lot more dynamic than the electric. So I had to find ways to make the electric do that. So it changed me as a player. But it was all because of Keith opening that door as well.

What was interesting is, when we got over to Munich, we were both a little bit intimidated by the orchestra. The orchestra was intimidated by us. We would fly a piece of music in front of them and they could play it right away. Then they go, "Where's your music?"

And we said, "We don't have any."

"What do you mean you don't have any?"

"We memorized it."

"You did what?! You memorized it?"

They were so impressed by the fact that we memorize shit. Well, that's all we know to do. That's how we do it.

We were so impressed that they could play anything that you put in front of them. So we earned each other's respect. And then we find that you've got those two worlds: You've got the orchestral world, which is really born out of the earth. It's made from wood and brass, gutstring, and all of that. Then you have the sky over here. You have the electricity.

And both of those together make an entire spectrum. You can get lower in frequency than the contrabass with electric bass and synth. You can get higher than the piccolos with your guitar. And you can have moments together, shared, hybrid voicings that actually make things like seeing different color. We were handed a whole new set of secondary colors on a palette that normally neither universe apart from each other would have. So because of that, we captured on the "Three Fates Project" (our) really kind of discovering each other's universes. That's why I'm so proud of that record.

And Keith, it meant so much to him because we were doing "Tarkus." He was at the back of the hall and I went back there. I thought he was just listening. He was back there and he had tears.

I'm like, "You all right, mate?"

He said, "When I first wrote 'Tarkus,' I was in my parents' basement on an old, upright piano. And I always imagined it sounding like this. That's why I did synthesizer, because it was the closest thing I could get to an orchestra. But this is how I really wanted it to sound."

Ronnie Montrose

Cris Cohen: You've also talked about Ronnie Montrose being your mentor. What did he teach you outside the realm of guitar?

Marc Bonilla: Well, he was a carpenter. He worked for Bill Graham before he got involved in music. That's where Bill knew him from. He brought those principles of carpentry to his music.

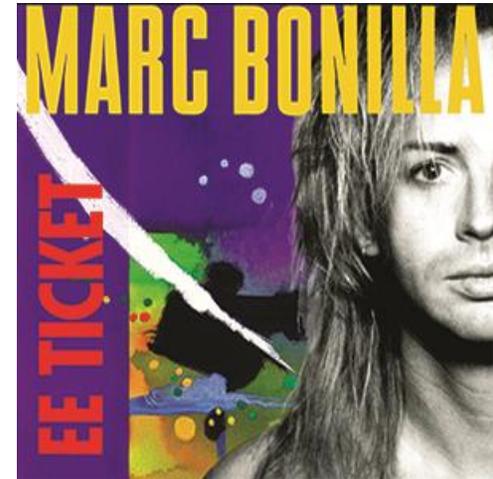
When I met him, I was in a band called Rock Island. This is my high school band. It was 1977. I want to say he came into produce us because our manager at the time, Ken Greenberg, knew Bill Graham's organization. He used to work for him. So he knew Ronnie because Bill managed Ronnie. So Ronnie came in and we immediately hit it off. We both had a really perverted, sick sense of humor and that really bonded us right away.

But the way that he would tear a song down and rebuild really expanded my mind. Seeing how he was telling a story. Seeing how he was building a house.

And this is how he did it with his solos. This is one of the things that stuck with me all this time that I still employ is... how to build something musically. Laying a foundation. Not starting at the top. With a solo, he was one of the only guys that had no fear of playing low on the neck. He'd start down there on that low wound six string and do all kinds of cool shit down there before he even got anywhere near the bird house, way up at the top. And he would just build and construct a solo. You put the foundation down. Then the cement. Then the dry wall after you framed it. Then you paint it and put furniture in it.

He taught me how to build and it was one of the things that I don't think people gave him credit for. They gave him credit for the Montrose stuff and the Gamma stuff and "Town Without Pity." But he had so much attitude.

Like if you listen to “Town Without Pity,” which is another brilliant recreation of the original done more in the James Bond kind of feel, which was just great. “Slaughter on Memory Lane” was a tribute to that off the “[EE Ticket](#)” album that I did. But he was so slow and deliberate with his notes. He would ring it out like a sponge before he even graduated to another note. Because he filled every note like a great seasoned actor with just fullness and commitment and attitude and experience. Same with David Gilmore. David never played a fast riff in his life. I don't hear anybody complaining. It's because he knows the right things to say and at the right moment to say them for as long as it needs and not a moment longer than that.



And these guys in that school, Gilmore and Montrose, didn't need to play fast for people to go, “Wow! That's great.” They played honest. And instead of saying, “This is something I learned today,” they're saying, “This is what I lived through today.”

I learned a lot from that deliberateness. Really just letting the notes breathe, and then building from that point on. And there were all kinds of other things as well, but those are the things that I can call up right away that I still use as major tools whenever I solo, whenever I play.

Cris Cohen: Well, that makes me wonder... you've written a book about guitar and you teach guitar. From your perspective and with the people you're seeing, I'm curious about the kinds of gaps that maybe they have in their education that you help to fill in. And I'm wondering if one of those things is that they're a little too anxious to start showing off their notes-per-second abilities.

Marc Bonilla: Well, you know, I think youth is maybe three parts piss and vinegar, one part experience. I hear recordings of me when I was in high school doing “I'm Going Home” by 10 Years After and it was all about speed for me. Because that's what got the Ooohs and Aaahs, and got me into the band actually. But you learn after a

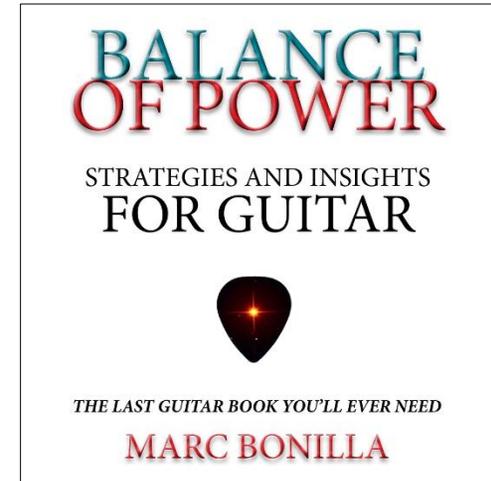
while... it's like the joke about the young bull that goes... we won't talk about that... "Why don't we walk down and..." It's very similar to that though in the fact that, what I've tried to teach in the book are things that I've learned over the years that were never in any books, never in any videos, the things that you learn by doing it wrong and then going, "Duh. What was I thinking?"

In our minds there are so many things to think about when you're learning something. It would be nice to have a book that told you only the essential things that you needed to know and not clutter your brain up with other things, which is what I've tried to do in this book, "[Balance Of Power](#)."

I've also talked about the band situation. Listen to what everybody is doing. You guys are having a conversation. Don't just do five parallel soliloquies, like so many bands do. Have an exchange. Have a response to somebody. Listen to what's going on. Because that's what the great players do. They listen before they play.

And I emphasize storytelling a lot in the book because you're constructing a story with each tune you write, with each solo you do. It has to have an art to it. A lot of times, all I'm hearing is guys reciting the alphabet. I know all the notes. But there's no words in there. You just said ABCD. Slow down. Form some words. Put in some space. Put in a little punctuation. Put some of it in bold, some of it in italics. Learn to be creative. Learn to be orchestral with your parts. You're like a mini orchestra. You can do all those things, which is what I've done on "Cellular Debris." It's really an orchestral guitar record.

So those are the types of things I try to put across in the book. It's kind of a straighter line to where you want to go without all of the other distractions. Here's what you need. After that, it's up to you. It's up to your fingers. It's up to how much you're willing to give up emotionally, how much you want to bear your soul in front of people and are comfortable with that (that will determine) how good you are going to be.



Afterword



Interview conducted in August 2020 via video conference.

Watch the video of the interview at
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About the Author



Cris Cohen is the founder of Bands To Fans.
He is also the producer and host of the Bands To Fans interview series.
He plays the drums... badly.