

DIZZY UP THE GUITAR

*an interview with Johnny Rzeznik of the Goo Goo Dolls
by Eric Kingsbury*



With the dizzying success of the breakout hits "Name" and "Iris," Johnny Rzeznik, Robby Takac and Mike Malinin have unexpectedly found the spotlight focused directly on their Buffalo New York-based trio. Unexpected, perhaps - the Goo Goo Dolls released their first album on an indie label 12 years ago and spent most of the past decade confined to college radio and cult status. The Goos' desire to experiment and mature musically has destined to bring the world around to them.

On their latest CD, *Dizzy Up the Girl*, guitarist and vocalist Rzeznik brings his indie-rock spirit of experiment into play, going from distorted power-pop to oddly tuned acoustic numbers, powering it all with a seasoned expressiveness that puts many modern-rock newcomers to shame.

Rzeznik has been playing Guild acoustics for several years, including jumbos and S4CEs. Additionally, he requested from the Guild Custom Shop a solid thinline acoustic-electric that he could play at high volumes without feedback. The Custom Shop's solution was the S7CE Peregrine.

Guild Gallery: What were some of your earliest musical memories?

Johnny Rzeznik: Oh, man. I have musical memories like staying up late on Friday night and getting to watch Don Kershner's rock concert on TV, listening to my older sister's records. There was always a guitar around the house, and I just like making noise on the thing. Playing the tennis racket.

GG: How old were you when you started playing the guitar?

JR: I was probably 7, 8. But I took accordion lessons, you know. Like every good Polish boy on the east side of Buffalo, you take accordion lessons. Then I played drums for a little while, but my mother put a stop to that and finally bought me an electric guitar

GG: What was your early motivation as a guitarist? Did you see being in a band or was it just playing around, having fun?

JR: I was really bad at sports. so it was just to have people to hang out with. You know, all the other losers in the neighborhood that were lousy at sports, we hung around together and we played music.

GG: Did you have an image of the kind of player you wanted to be?

JR: It was really weird because I took a couple of lessons, and I just decided that was useless. I was never very good at playing cover songs, playing other people's music, so I just started writing my own. And I did a lot of things, back then, with screwing around with the guitar, you know, winding up the tuning pegs to get different sounds out of the instrument. I've never been into guitar virtuosos. That stuff just really bugs me. I want to hear somebody playing from their heart. I don't care how many notes they can play, you know, or what their technique is, I just want to hear them mean something that they're saying to me.

GG: That attitude was basically the root spirit of punk rock.

JR: Yeah, in a lot of cases. Iggy Pop was definitely the roots of punk. He was pretty real. The Sex Pistols, as far as I'm concerned, were just the Monkees with dirty words.

GG: One of the great things about punk is that 14- or 15-year-olds can just pick up guitars, get together with their friends and play Ramones songs.

JR: Right. Exactly. The Ramones kicked butt. They were one of the greatest rock'n'roll bands ever. It's not even so much that they were a punk rock band, which they were; they were just a great rock'n'roll band. And they understood a 15-year-old's energy. They legitimately wrote about their environment. New York City - their songs are mostly about being bored, living in New York City, going to Coney Island, digging rock'n'roll, chasing girls. That's cool. I loved the Ramones. The whole punk rock thing, for me, was all about complete nonconformity and being an individual. But there started to be too many rules to that, too. Can't stand completely image-driven music. That's why I always hated hair-metal. The music becomes secondary to how cute the singer is. But at the same time, you can't underestimate the power of having sex appeal as a component of music. Sex has definitely always been a part of rock'n'roll. Mick Jagger is just pure sex. I have this rule: it's like, if you write an amazing, cools song that you mean, and then you go and put your leather pants on and sing it in front of people, that's okay. But if you put your leather pants on and stand in front of the mirror and go, "Okay, I've got to write a song to fit these pants," then you're in trouble.

GG: The music scene has changed a lot since the Goo Goo Dolls started. "Alternative Music" used to mean something different then. As a band that saw those changes, what's your view on it?

JR: We're the only band that survived the '80's. [laughs] I think that there were people in the record industry that saw all these alternative bands and said, "Hey, we could make money off them." They started marketing and packaging it correctly. And people were sick of spandex.

GG: Well, let's talk about guitars. You're playing a Guild Custom Shop S7CE now.

JR: Yeah, it's something that those guys put together for me. I told them what I wanted, and they pretty much gave it to me. There were two things that I asked them to do for me. I said make a guitar that A, will not feed back, and B, still sounds like it's made of wood. You know? [laughs] Because a lot of thinline guitars sound like metal, they don't sound like wood. I wanted it to sound like it was made of wood, and they did it. The guitar still sounds like a guitar, instead of an amplified pie tin. It's really beautiful.

GG: Do you plug into an amp with the S7CE?

JR: I plug into a Demeter DI and then right into the PA. That's it. To me, it's one of the only guitars out there that you can crank through a PA and set of monitors and the notes aren't going to go crazy on you. I fought for two years on our last tour trying to find a good acoustic guitar tone. Finally, I hooked up with the guys at Guild and kind of put it all together.

GG: With all your alternative tunings, do you experiment and then work things you like into songs.

JR: Yeah, I just start winding tuning pegs. What I'm doing now with a lot of the electrics, I use banjo tuners on the high E and B strings and a hipshot on the low E. That way, I can tune my B up to C. I can tune my E up to F-sharp. And I can drop my E down to D. So I can switch in and out of crazy tunings.

GG: And you don't have to carry around 30 guitars.

JR: Well, I still carry around 30 guitars. [laughs] But it just gives you more latitude. I can segue a lot faster. It keeps the momentum of the show up. That was one of the things that I learned from the Ramones. I like to machine-gun off about 7,8 songs in a row without stopping. I dig that.

GG: With Robby, you've played together for so long, I'll bet you've got pretty tight musical chemistry.

JR: Yeah, you sort of start to become psychic with each other. You know what each other's going to do. It's funny because me and Mike and Robby will be playing together - Mike's the drummer, but he's sort of tied in to this thing - we'll all screw up exactly the same place and pull it off. I think it's mostly them catching me screwing up. I'm king of the clams. I clam so much, man.

GG: Do you see yourself as a "guitar hero?"

JR: A guitar hero? I ain't no Al DiMeola, and I don't want to be. But I think I've done a few things that other guys may not have done. Or I sold a lot of records doing weird things with my guitar. But I'm definitely not doing anything that a thousand guys before me haven't done. I got popular at it, so I get noticed for it. Which is good, because I'm glad that I get noticed for my guitar playing once in a while and not who I'm sleeping with or something like that.

GG: You've said that you don't have much of a repertoire of solos, but your playing works well in the service of the music.

JR: It's all about doing what's right for the song. The song is the most important thing, you know. Like the tuning for "Iris," it's five Ds and a B. [laughs]

GG: Not a lot you can do with that.

JR: Not a lot you can do with that, but the point is that it's a very special kind of drony thing that goes on underneath. The guitar is very much a background instrument in that song. It's there to support the melody and meaning behind the song. There's this great book that I really think every guitar player should read. It's called Zen Guitar [by Philip Toshio Sudo, Simon & Schuster]. He describes the way things have to be with playing guitar, you know, that it's about finding a spiritual pulse, more than just showing off the instrument. The only reason I really like guitar solos is because the songs would be too short without them. Most of the time, I get dragged into having a guitar solo. [laughs] Then, I just rip out the standard Ace Frehley #2 solo. I just rip it out.

GG: Ace was great.

JR: I ask you: what are the greatest guitar solos of all time?

GG: I'd have a hard time picking. Page or Hendrix, maybe. I would pick those guys over, say, Van Halen.

JR: But I give Van Halen props for being the guy that sort of invented that stuff. Maybe not invented it, but refined it and popularized it. I think Eddie Van Halen definitely had a huge influence, probably was one of the most influential guitar players ever.

GG: You're right, he got a lot of players going. It's not his fault that so many guitarists in the world imitated him and essentially played that style to death.

JR: Exactly. I mean, the first 2 or 3 Van Halen records were great. I used to catch hell from my little punk rock friends, but, man, those records kicked. The songs were amazing. And David Lee Roth was just out of his mind. That was amazing music. For me, my favorite solos, it's the guitar solo on the live version of "Stairway to Heaven." Jimmy Page's solo on that is unbelievable. He's got a few that are amazing. His guitar playing was just so insanely innovative. He's slopping up all over the place, but it was unbelievable. Also Alvin Lee, that guitar solo on "Goin' Home" from the Woodstock record. And Ace Frehley. Okay, so he only played three different guitar solos, but he played the hell out of them.

All rights to photos and article belong to Guild Magazine

 **Goo Goo Dolls Sites Web Ring**
[<< Prev](#) | [Ring Hub](#) | [Join](#) | [Rate](#) | [Next >>](#)
© [WebRing Inc.](#)

Hosting by [WebRing](#).