

# CRAIG CHAQUICO

## VOYAGES BEYOND THE STARSHIP

By Ward Meeker

**N**o matter their level of achievement or fame, most guitar players spent time “in the trenches” – jamming in garage bands, playing clubs, maybe getting to tour regionally. But Craig Chaquico didn’t kick it much with kids of questionable talent or inclination. Instead, by the time he was 17, Chaquico (pronounced cha-KEY-so) was jamming with the likes of Jorma Kaukonen, Jack Casady, and the Grateful Dead. • Growing up 100 miles from San Francisco, Chaquico took to the city’s music scene at a young age. “We’d pile in a van and go to concerts at Winterland, get home at four in the morning, get grounded,” he recalled, laughing. “But really, I dug [being grounded], because I’d sit in my room, listening to records and learning to play guitar.”

At age 14, he was invited to join a band with a bunch of “grown-ups.”

“My English teacher heard my band play, and then asked me to join his,” he said. The gig presented some unique challenges. “To get into clubs, I had to wear a fake mustache and lie about my age,” he said. But it proved worthwhile, as the English teacher’s circle of friends included members of Jefferson Airplane.

“One thing led to another, and next thing you know, I’d met all the these people I used to go see at concerts, and a couple years later, I was in the studio with them—Graham Nash, David Crosby, Jerry Garcia, Jorma Kaukonen, Jack Casady... It was a great time.

“As corny as it sounds, we were kind of a family. It was neat to play with them—we were on the same page. In the late ’60s/early ’70s, it was part of the counterculture movement; there was your parents’ music, the Vietnam War, and then there was *us*. It was a great opportunity.”

After recording and touring with Jefferson Airplane’s Grace Slick and Paul Kantner for their early-’70s side projects, he was invited to join their primary band in the mid-’70s as it moved away from its San Francisco sound to harder rock, and changed its name from Jefferson Airplane to Jefferson Starship. In the mid/late ’80s, the band dropped “Jefferson” from its name and focused on making

radio-oriented pop. Ultimately, Chaquico would serve as the only member to play on every Jefferson Starship/Starship album.

After the original Starship stopped recording in the late ’80s, Chaquico shifted his focus to a solo career as a jazz/new-age guitarist. His work – still rooted in blues and rock – proved popular, and since 1993 he recorded 10 solo albums, selling more than a million copies and charting #1 singles and albums in the genre. He was also chosen Best Pop Instrumental Guitarist in *Guitar Player’s* annual readers’ poll winner, and landed on *Jazziz* magazine’s list of 100 most influential jazz guitarists of all time. His 1994 effort, *Acoustic Planet*, garnered a Grammy nomination for Best New Age album.

Now entering his fifth decade in music, Chaquico recently went retro by releasing

a blues album, *Fire Red Moon*, on the Blind Pig label. A mix of originals and covers, it’s highlighted by “Lie To Me,” with lead vocals by Noah Hunt, of the Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band. There are also renditions of Robert Johnson’s “Crossroads,” an instrumental take on Albert King’s “Born Under A Bad Sign,” a cover of Muddy Waters’ “Rollin’ And Tumblin’,” and originals that reflect Chaquico’s time spent listening to Cream, Hendrix, ZZ Top, and other acts.

**What prompted you to pick up a guitar? You were right in their demographic wheelhouse when the Beatles hit the U.S.**

I was just starting to play guitar at the time. My first instrument was the accordion, and I’ve heard that Clapton played one... I guess it was popular with our parents; my dad played accordion and sax, but I gravitated to guitar because of the Beatles, and there wasn’t a lot of accordion music on the radio (laughs)!

My mom and dad were really supportive, being musicians when they were younger. They knew it was a tough road to make a living playing an instrument, so they insisted I keep my grades up. That was the leverage – if I kept my grades up, I could play guitar.

**Did any particular music or player motivate you?**

My older brother’s record collection really spun my head around. I was 14 or 15... maybe younger, when I discovered his headphones and Jimi Hendrix’s *Are You Experienced?* album. That changed my life, man! I didn’t know anybody could play guitar like that; I’d been listening to the Beatles and a lot of great music – the Stones – but when I heard Hendrix, it turned my life around. I remember once when I was supposed to be babysitting, and when my brother and his wife came home, I was sitting there with headphones on while their kids were having a pillow

Photo: Pat Johnson.



fight, jumping on the furniture... I was oblivious!

**So it must have been a real trip for you, as a gung-ho 15-year-old, to end up in the thick of it.**

It really felt that way at the time. There was kind of a reality check because I was still in school. Being in a band with my English teacher helped my English grades (laughs), but I had to go through some stuff. I was still riding my bicycle to school, then on weekends doing sessions with some of my heroes. But I learned pretty early that it's not just about partying. You have to take it seriously. When I was asked to move to San Francisco to record the first Jefferson Starship album, *Dragon Fly*, I was thinking, "Well, I can go back to college, or go to San Francisco and play in this band with Grace Slick!"

**What was life like, being a rock star.**

Depends on how you define "rock star." I had the best job in the world – playing guitar in a band. I had to pinch myself every morning. Being that young, it was such a blessing, being around great musicians and songwriters, learning about guitars and amps. I remember how it was such an eye-opener, working on recording; it's not the same as giving a good performance. It's another art form, really. And the music business wasn't like what it became later – everybody was into the camaraderie and expressing themselves through the band. There were no serious ego problems or butting heads, and the last thing we expected were platinum records.

**One of your best-known licks is the opening of "Find Your Way Back," from Jefferson Starship's 1981 album, *Modern Times*. There's a country song getting a lot of radio play right now that borrows heavily from that lick – "Something To Do With My Hands." Have you heard it?**

No. But I'm ready to sue 'em, man (laughs)! Of course, then I'll get sued by the Monkees for stealing from "Last Train to Clarksville," because that's where I got the lick!

**Uh-oh! Confession time!**

I know! But you have to really listen to it. I think "Last Train" was one of the first licks I ever played; I inverted it or played it backward.

We all pick up things by osmosis. Listen to any Robert Johnson recording and you go, "Oh, Cream, Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin..." A lot of those songs were turned-around Robert Johnson riffs – and some *not so* turned around! Obviously, with Chuck Berry and guys like that... Albert King. Those guys influenced the guys who influenced me.

When I look at my playing – and I said this to Blind Pig when we were talking about a blues record, because I was a little apprehensive. I told them, "My blues roots don't go back all the way to Robert Johnson and Albert King, they



(TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE) In the era of Starship megahits like "We Built This City," "Sara" and "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now," Chaquico took a magic marker to a pair of white pants and made them fit the theme of the finish

on his main guitar, a Carvin V220. "I also used duct tape to make its fretboard inlays look like sterling silver," he laughed. "I still love the V220."

Chaquico has served as one of Carvin's leading endorsers since

**'90s, when you stepped away from Starship and started making jazz/new age music?**

Well, a lot of that was because an acoustic guitar was more welcome around the house during my wife's pregnancy

Not really. I've always felt that my musical inspiration has been blues-based, but rock-influenced. Being in Jefferson Starship, we had to wear a lot of hats, and I often found myself thinking, "God, do they know I'm faking this right now?"

So, doing an acoustic record taking the same inspirations gave it a different intensity, and gave me a recognizable style.

Part of that was taking the acoustic guitar and modifying it so it would be more like a Les Paul or one of my Carvin V220s, with bigger frets and the wider neck; I did some things to make it more comfortable to do electric techniques besides the actual fingerstyle or flatpicking that you expect on an acoustic guitar. I was able to do bends with the higher frets; I'd do blues bends and hammer-on techniques, slide, and all kinds of rock influences showed up on my acoustic records. But on my acoustic guitar and with a little bit mellower beat, it was perceived as smooth jazz, new age, instrumental, contemporary instrumental, or whatever. To me, it's still rock and roll, or soft blues. Lately, I've been bringing in some of the tunes I wrote in Jefferson Starship, like "Jane" for example, or "Find Your Way Back," and they went over really well with the "jazz crowd." I thought to myself, "A lot of us grew up with rock and roll," but as you get older, your tastes broaden. A lot of people who listened to Jefferson Airplane or Starship started listening to jazz-orientated stuff – their tastes evolved. Still, it surprised me that rock went over so well in that setting.

**Was there any particular reason you decided to do a blues album?**

I thought it would be fun to do something blues-based – a little more rock-oriented – not screamin' rock or anything, but energetic in places. It was just something I loved and wanted to put down on tape. And I felt lucky Blind Pig was open to it. So, we put our heads together and I had some great co-producers, like Bill Heller from the Rippingtons, several amazing singers, and a great songwriting team. Getting

Noah Hunt to sing a song was remarkable, and then my touring singer, Rolf Hartley, is incredible – he's done sessions for Sammy Hagar and the Journey guys, Heart, and Michael Bolton, as well as national TV and commercials. Having him do lead vocals and play guitar on tour has been a real blessing. Eric E. Golbach added his voice to a song, too.

**Your affiliation with Carvin goes back to the '70s and the X-100. They also built a doubleneck for you, made of Koa, back in the day...**

They sure did. They were such a great



go to the guys who were influenced by Robert Johnson and Albert King. They're more contemporary – Hendrix, Clapton, Jimmy Page, David Gilmour, Santana, Johnny Winter. I said, "I don't know if I have the credentials to make a record." But they said, "That's great, because it'll be different – an evolution of the blues." So, they gave me some license.

**One could guess that helped set up your choice of cover songs for the new album...**

Exactly.

**What was going on in the early**

(laughs)! I got to put the Carvin stacks in the garage for a while and play acoustic. Little did I know it would lead to #1 albums and Grammy nominations and a solo career, because it was more or less because life around the house was more acoustic during the pregnancy. And I left Jefferson Starship after all those years because all the people who I enjoyed playing with had left. I wasn't the first to part. In fact, by the time I left, it was just me and [singer] Micky Thomas.

**Was it daunting, going out on your own and changing directions?**

the '70s.

Chaquico with his '59 Les Paul Standard, onstage with Grace Slick and Jefferson Starship in '78, prior to a riot during which much of the band's gear was stolen or destroyed.



company to work with. Until then, I'd really prided myself on the vintage guitars I recorded with; I had all the classic dream-come-true guitars – a '57 goldtop, a '59 sunburst, a '57 Strat, a reverse Firebird with dot inlay, a '58 ES-335 – all great guitars and amps like blond Fender Bassmans I used to love to record with. A lot of those were tips from guys like Jorma and his brother, Peter, and John Cipollina from Quicksilver Messenger Service, who were already into the vintage guitars and these old amps. But they also turned me on to Carvin; I had just lost a bunch of my vintage gear in this big riot in Europe...

#### Where Grace Slick couldn't make the show?

Yeah, and, unfortunately all these vintage guitars and amps were stolen or trashed. After that, I thought "Touring... you never know what's gonna happen to your gear." So I thought I should probably come up with something less hard to replace.

When I started working with Carvin in the '70s, they let me pull together some of my favorite things about my old guitars and apply them to their V220. I told them, "Let's take the feel of my '57 goldtop, get a neck like that, put some big frets on it, double-coil pickups..." I started picking all the elements I love and suggesting them as details. Then they would incorporate the best tuners, pickups, bridges, and knobs. And beyond the woods, designs, and craftsmanship/quality control, they were ready to rock right out of

#### the V220 the Craig Chaquico signature model?

They did! But even I go "Who's Craig Chaquico?" (laughs) I said, "That's really nice, but..." Later, we ended up doing a Craig Chaquico acoustic, but even then I



(LEFT) Chaquico's primary live/acoustic-jazz guitar is his Carvin signature model. (RIGHT) While recuperating from a car accident, Chaquico's father used guitars to motivate the 12-year-old through physical therapy. In the hospital, he strummed his Arwin acoustic, but dad promised better things once he was healed!

felt weird putting my name in mother-of-pearl script on the fretboard. I thought "If this is a good guitar, people are gonna buy it because it's a *good* guitar, not because my name is on it." I also

I talked to Les Paul about that. As a kid, I was in a bad car accident; broke my arms, my thumb, my wrist, my leg, ankle, foot... As a kid, you recover faster, of course, and my dad told me about Les Paul and about how he was in a car ac-



#### Which guitars and amps do we hear on the record?

On "Fire Red Moon" I played a Jimi Hendrix "tribute" replica guitar that a good friend gave me, and everything else was a Carvin California Carved Top or their Bolt T, mostly with single-coil pickups. Any that had humbuckers had coil taps. But you also hear some Carvins that have been around for 25 years – double-cutaways with Floyd Rose bridges. They're some of my favorite guitars.

Carvin's guitars today are exquisite, right out of the case! The workmanship is so breathtaking, you almost don't want to touch them... why am I thinking about Nigel Tufnel right now, and his Les Paul Standard (laughs) – "Don't even breathe on that!" I've had experiences like taking a guitar through airport security when the agent stopped it, then called coworkers over to see the fantastic guitar that just came through the X-ray!

I talked with my singer recently, and for an hour on the phone, we just talked about how great his new Carvin is. And my bass player, Jim Retizel, has been using their

basses and amps since the '90s.

#### Which amps did you use on the album?

I used their V3, which is their newest tube amp. I've got a combo version. I play it in the studio, go direct or mic the speaker, and I use the preamp sometimes. My rack amp is an old rack-mounted console version of the Rockman. Tom Scholz was nice enough to have tweaked it for me back in the day.

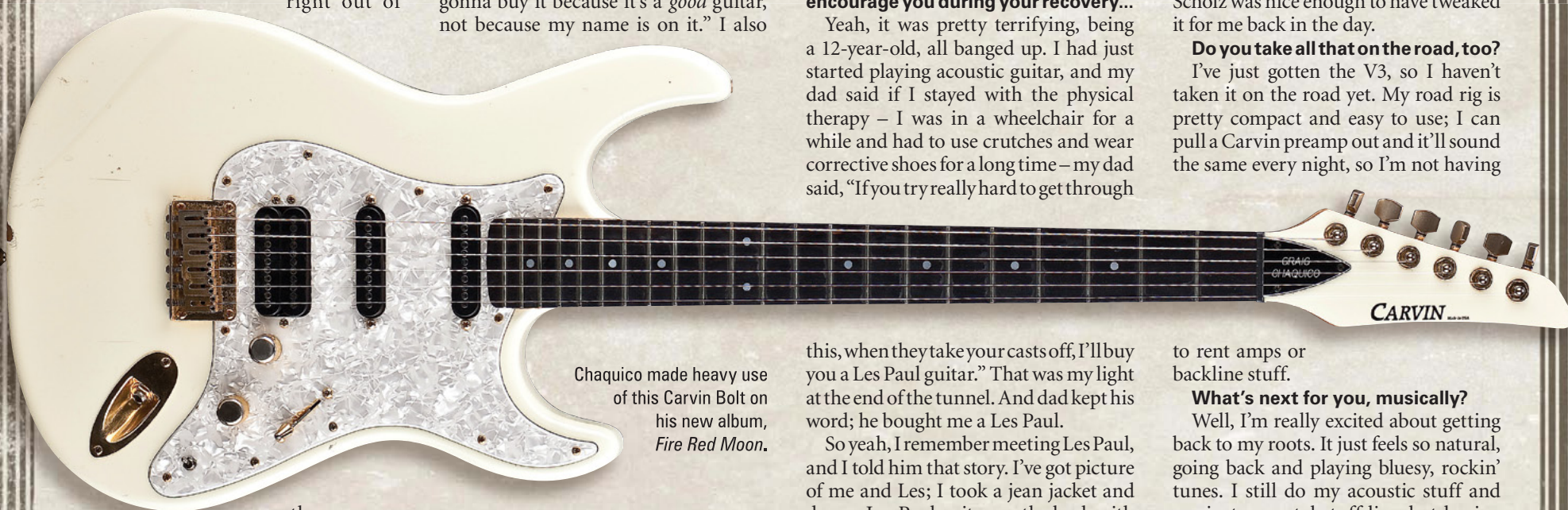
#### Do you take all that on the road, too?

I've just gotten the V3, so I haven't taken it on the road yet. My road rig is pretty compact and easy to use; I can pull a Carvin preamp out and it'll sound the same every night, so I'm not having

to rent amps or backline stuff.

#### What's next for you, musically?

Well, I'm really excited about getting back to my roots. It just feels so natural, going back and playing bluesy, rockin' tunes. I still do my acoustic stuff and my instrumental stuff live, but having this new chapter is really inspiring, so I'd like to do more records along those lines – blues-based, with traditional influences. I'm still a Hendrix fan, big-time. I love Stevie Ray Vaughan's work in that area, and I'm always blown away by David Gilmour's playing with Pink Floyd. Clapton, obviously. Jimmy Page, Billy Gibbons, Steve Miller, Santana, Johnny Winter, Rick Derringer... I love doing music inspired by those styles, and hopefully, I add something new and modern to it. VG



Chaquico made heavy use of this Carvin Bolt on his new album, *Fire Red Moon*.

the case – no mods needed. They were the best of both worlds.

It's kind of like how you learn to play – you take ideas, learn the musical vocabulary, then tell your own musical stories in the language of music with your own style. Carvin was open to suggestions based on what I learned from playing other guitars – the design elements that made those guitars fun to play and sound so good. And ever since, I've been a serious Carvin devotee.

Did anybody ever suggest making

wondered whether any high-profile artist would want to play a guitar with "Craig Chaquico" on it (laughs). So I told them, "Just make it a good guitar, you can call it my model." And, it's funny, when I met Les Paul, the same thing crossed my mind. There's a guy you don't mind having his name on your guitar. But Craig Chaquico? I don't think I'm quite there yet.

You had something in common with Les Paul – you were both in serious car accidents...

this, when they take your casts off, I'll buy you a Les Paul guitar." That was my light at the end of the tunnel. And dad kept his word; he bought me a Les Paul.

So yeah, I remember meeting Les Paul, and I told him that story. I've got picture of me and Les; I took a jean jacket and drew a Les Paul guitar on the back with a magic marker, and had him sign it. Later, I had Santana and Jerry Garcia sign it... Sammy Hagar, Slash – several of my favorite guitar players signed this jacket and we auctioned it off for a cancer benefit. It made me feel that I'd taken it full-circle to help others in challenging situations like me when I was all busted up and Les Paul. And so it was kind of a funny full circle. I told him that my dad had bought me that guitar and I started talking to him about having his name on a guitar and he laughed.