


- [About](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Staff](#)
- [Contact](#)

[Subscribe to our Feed](#)



THE LANGUAGE OF THE BLUES: FROM ALCORUB TO ZUZU
 "One of the wilkiest, bawdiest, most fascinating dictionaries ever." - LA TIMES
 by Debra Devi with a Foreword by Dr. John
 Winner ASCAP Deems Taylor Award \$9.99 eBook from Guitar International

- [Guitar Hero Interviews](#)
- [Lessons](#)
- [News](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Guitar International eStore](#)

[Guitar Magazine](#) » [Blues](#) » Johnny A. Interview: Gibson Guitars, Intrumental Music and Live Recording

Johnny A. Interview: Gibson Guitars, Intrumental Music and Live Recording

[Tweet](#) [Share](#) [Like](#) { 4 } By: Dr. Matt Warnock

Describing someone as an instrumental guitarist is about as ambiguous a label as one can give. The label is often given to any artist who performs, as either a soloist or within an ensemble, without the aid of a vocalist. Over the years the label has been given to jazz musicians, Joe Pass, finger-style players, Michael Hedges, classical musicians, Andrew York, shredders, Yngwie Malmsteen, country players, Chet Atkins and rockers such as Steve Vai and Joe Satriani. While many of these great players excel within one genre or another, few have been able to move between multiple musical genres with the ease, and success, of Boston born guitarist Johnny A.

Trying to pin down a single genre to describe Johnny's music is a difficult task to say the least. He is definitely an instrumental guitarist, but beyond that label he has developed a sound that is uniquely his, that is personal yet recognizable at the same time. His repertoire represents myriad genres from the American popular music catalogue, and he is able to switch between country picking, blues wailing, rock



riffing and jazz chording at the drop of a hat. Something that not only distinguishes his sound as his own, but is a testament to the level of commitment Johnny has to his instrument and his level of performance.

Photo Credit: Rick Landers

The self-taught guitarist recently released his first live recording, the 2010 DVD-CD package *One November Night*. The performance, which was recorded over two sets during one night at Scullers in Boston, finds Johnny at his absolute best. A diverse player and composer, Johnny brings the audience along for an enjoyable musical ride as he showcases his ability as a country picker, “Tex Critter,” ’60s classic rocker, “Jimi Jam,” and soulful balladeer, “Lullabye for Nicole.”

The video also showcases the emotional and improvisational qualities of Johnny’s music that have drawn so much attention over the decades. There is a constant reverence for the melody and arrangement of each song. Though he has the ability to tear up the fretboard at will, Johnny is always respectful of the mood of the song, preferring to solo within the context of the piece as a whole, rather than just show off his incredible chops. With such a deep connection to his music, and to each song specifically, it’s no wonder that even through the lenses of the cameras used to shoot the DVD, a strong emotional connection is made between Johnny and his audience.

Instrumental guitar giant Johnny A. recently sat down with *Guitar International Magazine* to discuss his love of Gibson guitars, his new live DVD-CD project and where he sees himself fitting into the world of instrumental music.

Matt Warnock: Your new DVD-CD *One November Night* was recorded live at Scullers in your hometown of Boston. What led to the decision to record a live album instead of a studio recording?

Johnny A: Honestly, I had a bunch of fans over the years come up to me backstage after shows who told me they loved the studio albums, but that the live sets had an edge and rawness to them that they really enjoyed. Normally I like to be in control of the mix and those types of things when doing a recording, but I felt that there was definitely merit in what the fans were saying and by happenstance I had a film company approach me asking if they could film a concert.

At first I said no, but they talked me into it, and when I saw some of the raw material I really got what the fans were talking about, it was a different vibe than the studio albums. When I’m sitting on stage, with my eyes closed most of the time, I don’t really get to experience the music from the fans point of view. After I saw the rough cuts I got to see things from the fans perspective and I thought that there was some value in recording a concert and releasing a live DVD.

It also gives the fans who own my records, but that haven’t had a chance to see the band live, that experience. The records get sold all over the world, but there’s just not enough time to get to all those places when we’re on tour. Maybe there’s a guy in Iowa, or India or Brazil who enjoys what I do but we haven’t been able to get to their town on tour. Now they can enjoy that live experience in the comfort of their own homes.

The other reason was that I had spent a long time on tour for those first two records, and I thought it was kind of a cool way to close the book on that period of my life. It was a snapshot of where I was musically at that particular time in my career, and it provides a presentation for those songs in my catalogue.

Matt: It seems like there would be a lot of pressure to really nail those tunes during those two sets of recording, since you can’t really go back and edit or do retakes like you can in the studio. Did you feel more pressure to do the live recording than you normally do in the studio?

Johnny: I didn’t really feel any extra pressure when doing those sets. We had just come off of a West Coast tour when the production manager approached me about the film project. I had also just come off recording another

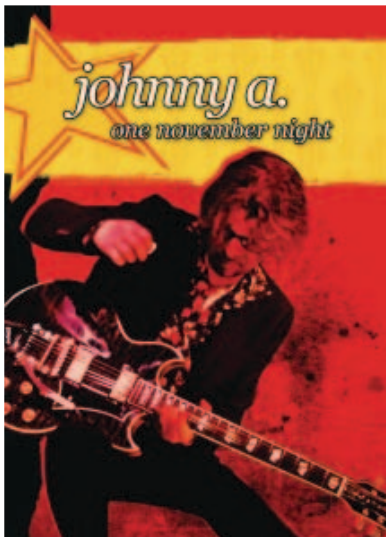
live album, which didn't turn out well because of sound issues and I was really kind of burnt out on the whole idea of recording live at that point. But, to their credit, the production manager talked me into it, with the stipulation that the crew would be basically invisible to me on stage. They would just record the sets and if it worked out great, if not so be it.

When you see the video you can tell that we're having fun up there, just playing music and not paying attention to the cameras as they did their thing. And you're right. Those tracks were all recorded live, with no edits or overdubs at all. So what people see on the DVD is what was played in those sets. It's a very accurate representation of what happened in that club on that particular day in time.

Matt: All of the tracks on *One November Night* are instrumentals, which is what you've become known for recently in your career. Do you find that it can be more challenging to reach the audience since you don't have the benefit of a singer, who can draw a storyline for the listener in the lyrics, or has that never really been an issue for you?

Johnny: You know, I've been to plenty of shows where the band has a vocalist and they can't connect to the audience at all. I think it's more a matter of can the performer convey their emotions through their music, regardless of the instrument, in a way that connects to the audience, with or without lyrics. There are some guys that sing the phonebook so convincingly that people are drawn in, while other guys can be singing the most powerful lyrics but just don't have it in them to capture the audience's attention in a meaningful way.

I just think it's the same way with an instrumentalist. There are plenty of instrumentalists on the planet and some of them are just better at connecting with an audience than others. I don't think it's a matter of whether or not a song has lyrics, but it breaks down on more of a case by case basis as to whether or not a musician can reach out and captivate the audience with their performance.



Matt: To further that a little bit, all of the tunes on the DVD were performed in a guitar trio setting, with bass and drums. Since you are functioning as both the melodic and main harmonic instrument in that setting, do you ever feel like you have to play more, or use thicker textures to fill up the space that's there because there's no second harmonic instrument to accompany you?

Johnny: One thing about being in a trio, and really being both the premier polyphonic instrument and the premier melodic instrument, I really have to play all the time, in one role or the other. As far as feeling that I have to play more, one thing that I realized when recording *Sometime Tuesday Morning* is that space can be powerful. Space can be used for dramatic tension, or as an instrument on its own. I don't feel like I have to fill everything up at every moment.

Sometimes when you take things away they open up and things feel bigger, without having to play. It's kind of like when someone yells at you. When someone yells at you there's an initial impact, that's startling and really makes you feel certain emotions. If that person continues to berate you, you kind of shut down a bit, but if they're whispering it forces you to listen harder. I kind of realized early on that using dynamics, and space, can be a powerful tool when trying to engage an audience.

Matt: One of things that stands out to me on the DVD, and in your playing in general, is your ability to create an atmosphere around a tune. A song like "Lullabye for Nicole" for example, finds you using reverb, your whammy bar and other non note-specific things to create the mood of the piece. Do you spend time practicing in this way, going beyond scales and chords and really focusing on telling a story and creating a mood with those notes and harmonies?

Johnny: It's never about me playing chords and scales, it's always about me delivering a song in an emotional way. Whether it's a chicken picking thing, or a balladeer type song like "Lullabye for Nicole," which is more mournful, I'm never thinking about using the whammy bar here, or this scale there, it's always about being in the moment and playing in a way that is emotional rather than technical.

Even though I might play the same song a few nights in a row, it's going to be different every time. There are sections, like the melody of course, that will sound the same, but the delivery will be different depending on what's going on in that specific moment and how I feel that night about that song. It's never a conscious effort to play this lick here, or use the whammy bar there, all of those inflections are based on how I feel emotionally about the song at that one point in time.

Matt: Being an instrumental guitarist I'm sure you're aware of the history of the genre, especially what went on in the '80s with guys taking the technical side of things to such a level that the genre lost a lot of its audience. Do you ever get any pushback because you're labeled as an instrumental guitarist and people compare you to those technical heavy players, or have you disassociated yourself from that type of playing enough that it doesn't really come up?

Johnny: Consciously disassociating myself with that group of players is not something I've ever done. I think everybody has value in what they do, they're creating art and if they believe in what they do then who's to say if it's right or wrong. I don't try and push away from those players, I just do what I do and I think people realize that I have my own style and voice in the genre.

I think if people listen to my music it's pretty apparent that I'm not the same player as a Yngwie Malmsteen or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, like a Joe Pass. Yngwie's basically a metal guitarist who has the chops he has and Joe Pass was an instrumental jazz guitarist who had the chops he had. It's just a different take on that style of instrumental guitar playing.

To be honest, I'm just really into songs, melodies and arrangements. I like to follow the path of guitarist as vocalist, in a similar fashion as Les Paul or Chet Atkins. I'm not saying that I'm in that category of player, but those guys would take lyrical based songs, such as "How High the Moon" or anything Chet did like "Mr. Sandman," which originally had lyrics and then transferred them onto the guitar.



Johnny A. Photo by Michael G. Stewart.

These days a lot of guys are writing instrumental songs, which never had lyrics, so I guess I'm trying to follow in the path of guys like Wes Montgomery, Les Paul or Chet Atkins. I'm not trying to be retro or anything, I just love playing songs. It's only been about ten years that I've played instrumental music, before that I played in bands where I sang or had a singer.

If you look at my records there's only been one cover song on them that didn't originally have lyrics and that was "Walk Don't Run." All of the other cover songs I did are lyrically based, and then I took them and arranged them for solo guitar.

Matt: Since you do have such a lyrical quality to your playing, and compositions, do you prefer to write away from the guitar, say on a piano or just from the top of your head, or is all your writing done on the guitar?

Johnny: Mostly when I write I usually have a melody in my head first, then I'll hum that melody into a recorder and then bring it onto the guitar later on. After that I'll work out a basic chord progression to go with that melody and then begin to work on spicing up the chords, adding substitutions, that sort of thing. Then I'll get into the actual composing and arranging of the way that I deliver that melody, whether it's going to be a chord melody, or single-line melody, what sections I want to have and how long they'll be, that sort of thing.

Even some of the original songs that appear on both of my solo albums, even though they're instrumental performances, they originally had lyrics to them. Songs like "Ignorance is Bliss" and "Bundle of Joy" from the *Get Inside* album were written for a band I had back in the '80s called Hearts on Fire. They were both written to be performed by a singer with lyrics, before I did the solo guitar arrangements. It's the same approach as a take with cover songs. If I write something that has lyrics, and I really like that tune, I'll take it and work it out as a guitar instrumental arrangement.



Matt: Talking about the types of guitars you play for a bit, you're a Gibson guy going back a number of years. You mentioned some of your idols earlier, guys like Johnny Smith, Chet Atkins, Wes Montgomery and Les Paul all played Gibson guitars during their careers. Is this what first drew you to those guitars, trying to emulate the sound of the guys you grew up listening to?

Johnny: I have a deep affection and attachment to Gibson guitars, my first Gibson was way, way back. I think how Gibson's work out on this particular instrumental project goes back to when I stopped playing with Peter Wolf. I had started using Gibson's again when I was playing with Peter, before that

I had a period of time where I was playing other guitars.

A lot of the guys that Peter was listening to growing up used Gibson's with a very clean tone. This was RnB and Motown music, so pre Zeppelin, pre John Mayall, pre Peter Green, who all used the guitars with distortion. This was more how Gibson's were used in the '50s and early '60s.

When I left the Wolf thing in the late '90s I was just looking for a particular sound. I knew I wanted to use a Bigsby tailpiece, because I love that sound. I started playing around with an old Gretsch Viking that my dad had gotten me back in '67, but it just wasn't right, it wasn't quite the sound I was looking for. I had this sound in my head but I just couldn't find it.

I happened to walk into a guitar shop one day and picked up a Gibson 295, which was the guitar Scotty Moore used with Elvis. It looks like an ES-175, but it's all gold with single-coil P-90s. That was the guitar that first unlocked that sound for me, I loved the way it sounded clean, especially with the Bigsby tailpiece.

When I was recording my first solo album, even though 90% of it is done on the 295, there were certain tracks that just didn't work on that guitar. So, that's when I grabbed my L5, or 335, or one of my Les Paul's or Firebirds, and that's how the Gibson thing really started to work for me.

That led to the signature guitar I've developed with Gibson. I really don't like to switch guitars on stage, and I was finding that I had to use a number of guitars because there were feedback issues with the 295, and certain songs where I needed a different type of tone, so I was changing a lot.

Back in 2002 I met up with some of the Gibson guys at the summer NAMM show and they were asking me about my thoughts on the Les Paul's that I was using. I mean, it's one of the greatest guitars ever designed, but I told them I was missing that hollow element that I had with my 295.

So, just by planting that seed, of having a guitar that's as versatile as a Les Paul but has that hollow quality too it like the 295, led to the development of the Johnny A signature guitar.





Gibson Johnny A. Signature Model

Matt: Now that you've done your first live recording, and first DVD, is this a recording format that you think you'll return to down the road on a future project?

Johnny: I think that depends on circumstances. If there's enough music in the catalogue, and there's enough value to the fans, then I could see myself doing another live, DVD, project. I don't think there's value in redoing the process if it's going to be the same thing. If it's another recording with the same set up, in a small club, with a similar production set up then I'm not sure if that's worth doing again.

But, if it's a special event, like we play with an orchestra for example, and it's providing the viewer with a new and unique experience, then I could see value in doing that. I think it's all circumstantial, it all depends on the event and the timing and what value I think there is for the fans.

Johnny A – “Oh, Yeah”