

Puremusic Interview with Charlie Hunter
by Frank Gooman (July 2002)

First time I ever heard of Charlie Hunter must have been around '94, I was managing sales at Mesa/Boogie, the amplifier company in Northern CA. I was down in the sales room with a couple of my team, and we heard some demo-ing going on upstairs in the Tone Lounge, as we called it.

It was on the jazzy side, sounded great. We were kind of busy, as usual. Someone drifted through the office that had been upstairs, and I asked, "Who's playing guitar upstairs?" "Charlie Hunter," they replied. "Uh-huh...and who's playing bass?" "He's playing that too," they answered with a coy casualness. "Oh, really," said I. "I'll be right back. I'm a check this shit out."

I poked my head into the Tone Lounge; it looked a little lively at that moment. No wonder—sure enough, this cat was playing guitar and bass at the same time. Not just walking the bass and comping a chord, but walking the bass and soloing over it...yikes. I heard at a later date that Charlie was playing at a birthday party for Kirk Hammett of Metallica, if memory serves. But I was not to own a CD or see him play again for a decade. In that space of time, he had created quite a few waves, both in the world of guitar and the world of jazz.

Though they had one of my favorite band names of all time, I had never seen his group The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, didn't know he was one of the founders. (Rap poet Michael Franti of Spearhead was also part of that unit.) But I sure wish I'd seen them now, or seen him play with Jay Lane, a great drummer I used to enjoy when he was with a legendary Bay Area funk rock act called The Freaky Executives. In his young career, Charlie has played with numerous players of incredible skill and expression, and he will continue to attract the cream of the crop with his daring musicality and soulful spirit.

In case you've never heard or seen Charlie play, let me set the stage for you, so to speak. He plays an instrument with three actual bass strings on the bottom, and five treble or guitar strings on the top. Each set of strings has its own dedicated pickup, and are sent to different amplifiers with their own speakers. The top strings are frequently going through a Leslie rotating speaker or a device simulating a rotating speaker, so those top strings sound like an organ. His bass side sounds more like the bass pedals of a great Hammond B-3 player than a regular bass player. And the artist himself clarifies that organ giants like Jimmy Smith, Larry Young, and Big John Patton were deep sources of inspiration for his great experiment.

Some months back, I was covering the Americana Conference here in Nashville, and had been all night at a great show of those artists at a little joint called The End, on the so-called Rock Block. As I ambled out on to the pavement around midnight, suddenly it hit me: "That's right—Charlie Hunter is across the frickin street!" And I tore ass over to the Exit/Inn and caught a big fat groove comin in the door, and ran down front to see what was up. It was Charlie and two percussionists, and that was all! I couldn't believe it, I kept looking around for some other players. Then someone stood up and started playing the shit out of a saxophone, yo. There were a lot of young renegades dancing, it wasn't like no jazz show that I'd ever seen. It

was a stone groove, that's what it was. I'd been there about thirty seconds, and I was already having a mighty large time. Luckily, they did several encores, so I got to look and listen and dance and generally revel in the atmosphere that had been building for hours... I went home super sated, like you are after a four or five course meal. Four good Americana sets, and then the Charlie Hunter group. I slept like a stone.

After that, I got up with Blue Note and got the latest record (*Songs From The Analog Playground*, see our review) and subsequently picked up earlier ones, *Bing, Bing, Bing* and *Ready...Set...Shango!* They're all really good. I caught up with Charlie on the phone at his home one recent morning, and posed him a few questions. Join us now for that confabulation.

Puremusic: So I'd like to take it back to the time and place of what must have been some initial brainstorm that led you to want to play both of these things on one instrument and create an instrument to do it with. How did that all come about?

Charlie Hunter: Well, there was no brainstorm, I assure you of that. It just slowly kind of came out of listening to a lot of Joe Pass and a lot of Tuck Andress. And I also played bass for a while as a street musician. I played a lot of bass on the street.

PM: Now, when you were playing bass on the street, was somebody else also playing something else?

CH: The first time I did it, I was in Europe. We had a band with three guitar players in it. And, you know, who the hell wanted to hear that? [laughs] We were playing on the street, we had to make some money. So what we did was, one guitar player played drums, and I played bass, and the other guy, a third guy, played guitar.

PM: Who were the other two guys? Were they Euro guys or West Coast guys?

CH: No, they were guys who were there. One guy was from New York, and another guy was a great, great player, a Rumanian gypsy guitar player.

PM: Wow.

CH: And it was just a real ball. So I kind of had to play bass because I was the low man on the totem pole.

PM: Really? That's hard to imagine. [laughs] So after that you came home, and where did it go from there?

CH: Oh, you know, I was just trying to really delve deeply into learning more about music in general. And I went to the community college in Oakland, Laney College.

PM: Laney, sure.

CH: You know, where you can work a day job and go to school on the weekends and nights kind of thing. And so I did that for a while. After that, I was playing little gigs in the area. And I just slowly developed the technique. And I'm still developing it. I'm still figuring it out.

PM: Well, I mean, what you're doing, had that ever been done? If so, I'm not aware of it.

CH: I don't think so, not the way that I did it. Because my thing, the whole idea about it is independence, the two sides of it. It's kind of like the drum set...with the bass and guitar voice, that's kind of the idea behind it.

PM: Well, the drum set is, on certain levels, simpler than what you're doing. When I think of splitting my brain down the middle to walk a bass line and solo with an organ sound on the top, it's just like, "Oh, come on! How do you possibly get there?"

CH: Well, yeah, I don't know about that, man. I don't know about that.

PM: At some point, though, you decided, "What I'd like to do is to do both."

CH: Yes. I think it just kind of came about because, really, I'm just a sucker for challenges, you know?

PM: Yeah.

CH: And it's really almost too much of a challenge. But people like Tuck Andress and Joe Pass kind of showed me the way and really got me started, as far as the technical things that you can do just on a six-string. And I thought, "Well, if I expand the range and really have the bass, and then really know how to play bass, learn how to think like a bass player and develop that skill, I could do something decent with this."

And it is kind of difficult. I mean, anybody could just take some instrument, some new instrument, and play a few tricky little things on it. But it's another thing to try to be musical with it, to create a voice for yourself, and make it not just be a novelty act. To really try to use it to make music, and to create a different statement than the guitar or the bass would create separately within a band. And so that's what I'm dealing with now, working to get past the technique and create a musical voice on the instrument. It changes the dynamic of the music, and it changes the dynamic of the people in the rhythm section in the band. It's an interesting thing. I'm still working it out.

PM: It's fascinating to see somebody breaking new ground. It's far beyond, say, somebody getting a Chapman stick and making up 12 tunes on it and cutting a record. It's not like that because it's like playing guitar *and* bass, and it's playing straight ahead jazz, or it's playing Stevie Wonder tunes, or Bob Marley tunes. And that's a horse of a different color. It's not just 12 tunes that you made up on this thing.

CH: Right. Well, my attitude has always been that it doesn't make a difference what you play. No matter what it is you're playing, make music happen on it. It's just to make the music

happen, do whatever it takes to create that. I mean, if someone said, “You know what? We’re taking the eight-string away from you. The only thing you get to play from now on is a one-string instrument,” I’d be like, “Okay, fine. I’m going to make music happen on that.”

PM: [laughs] So let’s see, where did—was Fat Dog involved with any of those early instruments?

CH: Yeah, my first: it was an old messed-up six-string Vega that I got from him.

PM: God, I love those Vegas.

CH: Yeah. One of his guys turned it into—they turned it into a seven-string by changing the nut and the bridge. That’s kind of when I first started that. Then it just went from there, when I got with Ralph Novak, who hooked me with essentially what I’m playing now, in a much earlier form. And he’s still working on getting these things together for me, figuring out different scale lengths and things like that. The instruments have to evolve with me, because I’m always trying to evolve. For instance, the scale length I’m playing on right now, I’ve kind of outgrown it.

PM: How so? What does that mean?

CH: Well, I just need a little more scale length on the bottom, a little more bass scale length, because I’ve become more and more of a bass player.

PM: What does that mean, exactly, when you say, “I need more scale length on the bass”? How does that translate?

CH: Well, it’s just for the tone. You know, it’s nitpicky stuff. There are guys in Africa and the Caribbean who play instruments that are made out of cigar boxes that will blow your mind, so it’s neither here nor there.

PM: That’s a very interesting point, and one that you never hear all these tone crazy cats bring up. That’s very funny.

CH: Yeah. And then they get all excited about, well, how does Ali Farka Toure get that sound. You know, he’ll get that sound on *whatever* instrument you give him. I’m sorry to say, it doesn’t have anything to do with—oh, there will be slight variations on it, slight variations, but that’s the sound that he’s going to get. [laughs]

PM: I remember when Novax first hit the scene—I was doing NAMM shows with Boogie where his first guitars appeared—and thinking, “Wow, fanned frets! What can this be about?”

CH: Right.

PM: Now, I never did really grasp the theory of it. Why is the fanned fret thing more—how you say, is it more in tune, or what is it?

CH: It comes back to scale length. Like each string has its own individual scale length, so the lower you go, the deeper the sound, the longer the scale length gets. So for me, I have a pretty severe scale length. It starts at 25 and it goes down as low as 30. And I need that just for the tone. If I didn't have it, I would have this instrument that, on the low string, sounded like a rubber band, and on the high string sounded like a banjo.

PM: Wow. So when you first met Ralph Novak, how far along were you on your idea of needing a hybrid instrument because you had a hybrid idea of what you wanted to play?

CH: I was pretty far along, you know, I think I was.

PM: You already had a seven-string, or maybe even an eight-string by then?

CH: I had a seven-string.

PM: How low was your low string?

CH: A. That's as low as it went.

PM: And so when you got up with Ralph, did he first make you a seven-string, or did you guys go right to eight?

CH: Well, he first made me a seven-string, and then we went to eight after that. And then we kept messing around with the scale lengths.

PM: And that was all about tone. And were you using Bartolini pickups, right from the top, with him?

CH: That's what Ralph used, and they seemed to work real well. They sound real good. I've always used them.

PM: So once you got to the eight-string, how did you start to teach yourself this new task of essentially playing two instruments at once?

CH: Trial and error. It took a long time. And I started listening to a lot of organists, because they do the left-hand bass thing, foot pedal bass, just to get an idea. Like Big John Patton and Larry Young, Jimmy Smith, just to kind of get a foundation for what I wanted to do. And a lot of that stuff I just really, really shedded. I shedded a lot of bass players, and also shedded a lot of drum set, too. It's not like my drum set playing is great at all, or that I would even think about playing in front of people, but it's a great kind of a cross reference, because that taught me how counterpoint works, how rhythms work together, and how it's supposed to feel when you play one rhythm over another rhythm.

PM: Right. And learning independence of your hands.

CH: Exactly, yeah. That's the big thing. Because on a keyboard, independence is really no problem because you're using two hands to do it, and that's not a big issue. You should be able to be as independent as you want on the keyboard, do whatever time against whatever time you want. That's not that big of a deal.

PM: And it's not like guitar. All the keys are like laid out in front of you.

CH: And it repeats itself every octave, etc.

PM: Right.

CH: No, but the deal with the eighth string is it's just too difficult, and the technique is just really a little bit too hard, you know? [laughs] But it's a challenge.

PM: It boggles my mind, frankly. And even though you're only a number of years into this brave new bag, you're really good at it.

CH: Well, I'm trying. It's all about being a better musician, that's my attitude. If tomorrow I couldn't play an eight-string, I really would try to make a good contribution on bass or guitar, or whatever it may be.

PM: Right. Is your early teacher, Joe Satriani, still a friend?

CH: Well, I haven't talked to him in years. I'm sure he is still a friend in spirit, but I haven't talked to him in a really long time.

PM: So you don't know, for instance, if he's hip to what you're up to?

CH: Oh, no. He knows.

PM: Do we know if he likes it, or—

CH: Yeah, yeah, he's down.

PM: That's great. I remember I used to see him with The Squares in Berkeley. What a great guitar player he was, even way back then.

CH: He's great. He's a great teacher, too.

PM: So how long have you been in New York City?

CH: About five years.

PM: And that must have been a huge change in your life.

CH: Oh, yeah.

PM: Because I know how much the West Coast is not happening. I mean, it's beautiful, but...

CH: Yeah, for the music scene, it's kind of slow. Also, prices became so difficult to deal with, as far as living there. That kind of chased a lot of people away, a lot of musicians away. Because you figure if you're a musician and you can go to New York and live cheaper there, you might as well do it, because that's the spot where all the greatest musicians are.

PM: Can you really live cheaper in New York?

CH: Not necessarily, but I mean, it's different. It's just a different pace. You can get so many more gigs out here.

PM: The metropolitan area has so many more clubs.

CH: Exactly. There are that many more musicians, but you can really make it happen for yourself out here.

PM: There may be that many musicians, but [laughs] how many eight-string guitar players are you going up against?

CH: No, none.

PM: You gotta love a guy that invented a gig.

CH: I guess so. Well, I didn't just invent it, I had to make it happen, and it took a long time. And it's still taking a long time. That's why my attitude has always been: make music, don't rely on the instrument. Only rely on the instrument as a bonus thing. Make music with it. Because who cares what you're playing if you're not making music?

PM: Right. Be about the music.

CH: Yeah.

PM: So, are there ways you'd like to say that New York has changed your life?

CH: Oh, yeah. It made a man out of me.

PM: Really?

CH: For sure, yeah.

PM: Made a man out of you.

CH: I mean, there are just the baddest cats around here, and it made me really want to shed a lot, and work on my stuff, so that I didn't look like a sad idiot on a gig.

PM: [laughs] Where are you guys living in the city, what borough?

CH: I lived in Brooklyn for about four years, and now we're out in Jersey.

PM: Oh, yeah?

CH: Brooklyn West. I'm in Essex County, like near Newark.

PM: So what about Blue Note? Are you done with them?

CH: Yeah. That's over.

PM: Who's putting out the next record, and what will it be like?

CH: I don't know who's putting it out yet. But it's a quintet thing.

PM: Because that's how you're gigging in the city?

CH: Yeah, and just around. I'm putting together this quintet thing because I really wanted to write for horns. And it's a cool group. It's got trombone, tenor, and chromatic harmonica.

PM: Who's the harp player?

CH: His name is a Gregoire Maret.

PM: Where's he from?

CH: He's from Europe.

PM: He's a Frenchman, or...?

CH: He's from Geneva. But he's awesome, man. He played with Jimmy Scott for a while. And I mean, he's playing with everyone now, because the secret is out. [laughs]

PM: That's almost my favorite reed.

CH: Oh, he's incredible, wait until you hear it. He definitely is the next step for that instrument.

PM: Wow!

CH: Oh, definitely. There's no one else around who can touch what he's doing.

PM: Because it's such an expressive sound, and it's not overbearing, it's never too loud.

CH: No.

PM: And it's just so delicate and so much, really, like a singer. Oh, wow, that's exciting.

CH: Yeah.

PM: So we don't have to go into why it's done with Blue Note. Things just run their course.

CH: Yeah. My time was up.

PM: But you made some really good records with them.

CH: Yeah—*for* them.

PM: [laughs]

CH: [laughs] That's a big difference.

PM: [laughs] Thank you, I hear that. So I wonder, who might it be? Are you looking at labels?

CH: Yeah, we've got a few little things. And it's going to be a small label, just because I'm really getting more and more disinterested in the gigantic, corporate music reality. It's not what I'm interested in doing, and it doesn't really work for someone who's small like me. Maybe the distribution would work, but not the record label, all of that mumbo-jumbo, it just kind of grosses me out.

PM: All the overhead and the corporate bullshit, sure.

CH: Yeah, it's unnecessary. And then you're kind of linked to a lot of really awful things. Six degrees of separation, but you are, you know. And I don't really want to be a part of, in even a remote way, something that's really kind of gross.

PM: For instance?

CH: Well, I mean, corporate music America. What can you say? Three major companies...

PM: Own it all.

CH: And then, right now, it's just all the ridiculous moves they're making with trying to combat recordable CDs, and it's just embarrassing how out of touch they are with reality.

PM: And they're trying to kill internet radio.

CH: They're out of touch. They should just look at history and take a chill, you know?

PM: Yeah, right. "Remember when you guys freaked out about cassettes, too? Take it easy."

CH: Exactly. “And remember when you put CDs out, and then never lowered the prices as it got cheaper and cheaper to make them?”

PM: Yeah, right, as they turned into thirty-five cents, but they’re still \$15.99.

CH: Exactly, exactly. It’s incredible. So I don’t know, I think there are more creative ways of doing stuff, especially for someone like me who’s so low on the totem pole as far as the kind of capitalistic music community is concerned.

PM: And on the other hand, so important to the jazz scene, if you ask me.

CH: Oh, well, that’s nice of you.

PM: Because there aren’t that many cats that are really bridging audiences the way your act is.

CH: Oh, well—

PM: And the way some people say, well, Joshua Redman is, to some extent.

CH: Right.

PM: They say he’s kind of dipping into the jamband scene, or like that. But I think you’re bringing, you know, a lot of hipsters into the field of jazz music. And I think that’s really, really important. Who would you say tops the wish list of guys with whom you’d like to record?

CH: Oh, man. Well, I’m going to be doing some gigs with Idris Muhammad, coming up, as a duo, just the two of us. And that, to me, is definitely way up there on the wish list.

PM: You know, I know the name, but I don’t know the man’s work.

CH: Well, he’s probably up there with Hal Blaine and those guys, like Earl Palmer, one of the drummers who’s probably played on the most recordings. He’s been on pretty much every Blue Note record from—every organ record on Blue Note was him playing drums on it. And he also did a lot of soul and funk stuff. I mean, it’s endless. His credits are pretty much endless.

PM: So how did you come to get next to him and be in a position to record with him? What’s that relationship?

CH: Well, I don’t know if we’re recording. I mean, I hope we are. But we just played a gig together in New Orleans at Jazz Fest that someone put together, like a jam kind of thing, with me, him, and Donald Harrison and Wilber Arden.

PM: Oh, where were you? Because I was down there for Jazz Fest. Where were you guys playing?

CH: It was at the Blue Nile. It was like really late. It didn't start until two in the morning.

PM: Yeah. Yeah, I went down there to see my old friend Steve Kimock play a gig at Tipitina's. They don't start until around one o'clock. It's unbelievable.

CH: Yeah, it was really like that. There are a lot of people that were my idols that have passed on, that I'm really bummed I never got to see or play with. Roland Kirk would be one. Billy Higgins, who just recently passed away. I never got a chance to play with him. I got to play with Pat Martino, and he's a real hero.

PM: And he's very up and at it these days, right?

CH: Oh, yeah. He's kicking butt.

PM: Yeah. After coming back from a stroke and all that.

CH: Yeah. He's amazing.

PM: How do you get that organ sound on the top strings?

CH: Well, if you're lucky, you get to use a Leslie speaker. But I also use this thing called a Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere. And that does it. But even without the sound, I make it kind of organ-istic, you know, the voicings and the comping, and stuff like that.

PM: Right, what you're playing.

CH: Exactly.

PM: Huh. Now, when you're not using either the Leslie or the Rotosphere, what other ways do you like to process those top strings?

CH: Oh, very minimally. I use like a tape delay.

PM: Whose?

CH: Whatever—I mean, I had a Space Echo for a long time, but that thing hit the junk pile. Now I'm using this Guyatone Space Delay. Or if I have a real small gig, I'll bring my Aquapuss Analog Delay and a volume pedal. And sometimes I'll bring my old 70s Ross Phase Shifter out.

PM: They're nice.

CH: And other than that, Amp Tremolo.

PM: Right. So you keep it pretty minimal. It's about what you're playing.

CH: Yeah, I just like the real sound of the amp, whatever the amp is, to be out, which sometimes is bad when you're renting amps.

PM: Yeah, it sucks. They're never giving you the good one.

CH: No, you always get a Twin that's been through hell.

PM: Yeah [laughs], right, with a JBL.

CH: If you're lucky, you get a JBL, because at least the speakers aren't blown.

PM: So I dig how you really are a real proponent of the legacy of jazz, especially the work of Monk, Mingus, and Roland Kirk.

CH: Oh, for sure.

PM: But, you know, you're up front about having a lot of influences in the music. Who are you listening to now, lately?

CH: I really like Avishai Cohen's stuff.

PM: Now, again, I'm ignorant.

CH: The bass player. His group is called The International Dance Band.

PM: And he's a jazz bassist.

CH: Yeah. He played with Chick Corea for a long time. He's bad. And I've been listening to a lot of Cuban and Brazilian music, West African music. Lately I've been really digging out the old Eddie Palmieri La Perfecta records.

PM: Ah, yeah.

CH: With the trombone, Barry Rogers. I just love that.

PM: Oh, yeah, because you got 'bone in the new band.

CH: Yeah, man.

PM: Who is playing the trombone?

CH: Well, it's usually either Curtis Fowlkes or Josh Roseman.

PM: Excellent. Are there other players in the current quintet that we should know about?

CH: Yeah, John Ellis.

PM: Ah, yes. He was on tenor when I saw you play last year sometime, at the Exit/Inn in Nashville, which was a great show. I had been covering the Americana convention, all these alternative country acts, and at the end of the night it hit me you were right across the street! So I ran over and got duly grooved and baptized. That was amazing.

CH: Thank you. That was a fun band. We definitely had a fun time.

PM: That was a soulful jam. It seemed like you were there with about five percussionists.

CH: [laughs] No, it was just two, but it maybe sounded like five. For the quintet, I haven't found a permanent drummer yet. It's hard in New York to keep a band together because everyone is scrambling to keep gigs.

PM: To do every gig they can.

CH: Exactly. So availability is not always what you'd like it to be.

PM: Do you find time to read? Are you much of a reader?

CH: Oh, yeah, totally.

PM: Have you read anything lately that turned you on?

CH: I've been reading *Awakening the Buddha Within*, by this guy Lama Surya Das. It's awesome. Every time I get kind of backed up, I just read that book, it's very enlightening.

PM: *Awakening the Buddha Within*. I'm on it, man. [laughs] I'm going to go get it.

CH: Yeah, it's great.

PM: How do you practice?

CH: Oh, well, I got a kid, so [laughs] late at night. Whenever I get a chance to.

PM: And what is the approach to practicing? Is practicing arranging, or how do you practice doing the two things together?

CH: Well, you know, I'll try to write stuff, and then I'll be playing it as I'm writing, and I kind of get some practice time in there.

PM: So you'll write something and work it up.

CH: Right.

PM: Because if it wasn't "I write something and I work it up," I was wondering, well, how do you practice two things at once?

CH: You also hear certain parts, things you like, and the way you want to hear it, and you'll just find a way to play it.

PM: Right, I dig. What do you see coming up in the future, near and far?

CH: Hoo! I have no idea, man. You never know.

PM: [laughs] I like an honest answer.

CH: You really never know.

PM: Yeah. Would you say it's a happy time? Are you doing well?

CH: Well, I mean, economically, I don't think anyone is doing too well at the moment. But my attitude is always, you know, ups and downs and that thing, and not to get too bent out of shape about it. Just be glad you're living, and feel lucky that you get to play music.

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