



## ALEX SKOLNICK: New Metal Standards

An old proverb states, "Unto thine own self be true." Sage advice, but difficult to follow when attaining truth involves personal struggle and change.

Such was the case for guitarist Alex Skolnick. He began his decade-long quest toward enlightenment in the late '80s, when he was a member of the speed metal band Testament. The native Californian joined the group at 16 and, for a five-year run, enjoyed healthy record sales, major music festival appearances and concert dates with many leading rock acts. Still, Skolnick was disillusioned. For all the accolades accrued for his axe-shredding prowess, he felt creatively stifled. That is, until one fateful night while watching a concert on public television.

"I saw Miles Davis with one of his electric groups," Skolnick says. "I don't remember who was on guitar, but the energy was incredible. Much of the jazz I heard, at least up to that point, never excited or captivated me the way this did."

Sparked by that initial experience, recordings by Joe Pass, John Scofield, Mike Stern, John McLaughlin, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock

found their way into his collection. As his musical influences and listening habits evolved, Skolnick found himself drifting further from the confines of heavy metal to weekly jam sessions at local nightclubs and bars. However, his newfound joy did not come without its share of self-doubt and uncertainty.

"I had no role models," Skolnick says. "I didn't know of anybody that went from playing rock professionally to jazz. Especially heavy or speed metal. What I was doing made sense to no one. But there were no two ways about it. I was going to improvise."

Transforming as an artist required diligent commitment and dedication. He realized he had to upgrade his playing technique, study habits, sight reading abilities and general theoretical and harmonic knowledge in order to become a competent improviser, so Skolnick attended the New School. It was there that the Alex Skolnick Trio developed, and an unlikely fusion of his rock and jazz backgrounds emerged.

Skolnick teamed with classmates bassist John Graham Davis and drummer Matt Zebroski to

form a trio that would serve as a study and live performance vehicle. At first, their repertoire consisted of traditional standards. But as their sound blossomed, so did their sense of musical daring.

"This bossa nova piece came to me in a dream one night," Skolnick says. "I finally realized it was 'No One Like You' by the Scorpions. It gave me a chuckle at first but then I thought of the song's strong melodic and harmonic possibilities."

What began as a curious notion of blending one's rock & roll past with the metamorphic present produced the Trio's independent release, *Goodbye To Romance: Standards For A New Generation* (Skol Productions), which offers great jazz interpretations of classic rock songs, such as the Scorpions song. Also featured on the disc are instrumental jazz arrangements of songs by Kiss, Aerosmith, The Who and Ozzy Osbourne.

Because of the Trio's highly unorthodox reputation, Skolnick has become a sort of bebop evangelist. "I get e-mails from people that bought the album and have said they never liked jazz before," Skolnick says. "But now they're going out and buying John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter albums."

Aside from the trio, Skolnick involves himself in a wide array of projects, including violinist Joe Deninzon's Stratospheerius, Trans-Siberian Orchestra and the fusion-based Attention Deficit. "I'm playing music with a multitude of styles, dynamic ranges and interaction between instruments," Skolnick says. "I want to present jazz that is exciting and spontaneous."

—Eric Harabadian