

Steve Vai Interview Questions

Tell Us about the DVD

S- I had just finished a year and a half of work on a double live orchestra CD and DVD with the Metropole Orkest called "Sound Theories" and "Visual Sound Theories" that came out in 2007.

I was itching to perform so instead of jumping right back into the studio to make a new studio record, I booked a tour of Europe, USA, and South America to satiate the fingers and the ego for a while. I wanted to put a unique band together that could bring a different kind of life to my catalog of diverse musical tracks.

I always like the idea of having a violin player in the band but during auditions I started to have serious concerns because I could not find one violin player that could play in tune and melodiously. Many were shrill sounding metal shredders or classically trained players that sounded wimpy when plugged in.

Then the skies opened up and Alex DePue and Ann Marie Calhoun came into my life. Two elite virtuosos that can play challenging music, but also understand the attitude dynamic of rock music. They have complete control of their instruments and look amazing doing what they do.

What do you look for in a musician for your band?

S- I've been touring for 30 years and the first thing I look for in a band member is a person who will be road-able. A tour is a little chunk of your life and when you are living with people in a highway submarine, there are no secrets at sea. No matter how successful a record or tour, if there's a jerk on the bus the whole experience can be hell so the first thing I look for is people who are essentially good people. They have to be able to do something special on their instrument too.

It helps if they can read music or at least have an understanding of it. The opening song on the DVD is in a brisk 25/32 time signature. It's an extremely complex piece but tremendously heavy. When I brought it into rehearsal the music for each part stretched close to 25 feet. Poor Jeremy Colson had a full on anxiety attack. But I knew that they would be able to play it and I'm an expert at rehearsing complex music. We took it piece by piece and gave our patience and our soul quite the work out. The end result is a glorious artistic metal track that is melodic, seamless, entertaining and flows very naturally. The band performs it with fierce confidence.

The Gods of good band Karma shone loud and clear on me regarding this band and tour.

I put together an extravaganza and hit the road.

We traveled the world, living and loving the life and enjoying each other and the enthusiastic audiences that shared our stage nectar.

This nectar was captured on video in Minneapolis at the State Theater.

Why did you choose Minneapolis?

S- The city of Minneapolis spun its spell on me years ago. A magnificent metropolis that's clean, cultural, and although cold and wet sometimes, the people are warm and friendly.

What can we expect to see in this DVD?

S- When I put a band and a show together I try to create an entertainment experience that I would like to see if I was sitting in the audience. I like to see great musicianship but nothing too cerebral or overindulgent, I like to be stimulated with a large dynamic range of emotional intensities, I enjoy when people love their instrument and it shows by their oneness with it.

I like to feel as though I'm part of a family with the audience and the band. I want to walk away feeling good and uplifted and not beat up by somebody's ego or the things they hate about themselves and the world. I would love a free t-shirt but Vai would never go for that.

There are basically two elements that go into performing a piece of music, regardless of its level of difficulty. One of them is the technical side of being able to perform the piece on the instrument, and the other is the emotional investment a performer has with the music. I strive to find an equilibrium between the two because I believe that it takes both elements to be an effective performer. Technical ability and emotional investment walk hand in hand. Of course you have to employ your imagination muscle too.

There's a very colorful piece on the DVD called "The Murder." It's more of a performance art piece. At the concert, I wielded the guitar around like a grand wizard and then in the studio I put all sorts of digital video FX and audio sweetening on it. I saw the whole thing in my head before I stepped on stage. It took many hundreds of man-hours to make it turn out as it did. But hey... what am I here for?

Will the show be available on Blu-ray?

S- Yes, absolutely. I know that there are relatively few rock concerts released on Blu-ray at this time but I believe that the medium, or at least the 1080p quality, will become very popular. After watching this on Blu-ray, hearing the 5.1 mix and seeing the brilliant colors just popping off the screen, regular DVD seems very lackluster.

There will also be a single live audio disc released from the show. It consists of tracks that have never been released in live versions before such as *Oooo*, *Tender Surrender*, *Taurus Bulba*, *Now We Run*, etc.

You Released a 5-CD box set of most of the tracks from your catalog mixed without the lead guitar. It's called "Naked Tracks." Sort of like, karaoke Vai. Did you get the idea instantly or has it been in your mind for years?

S- The idea for the Naked box set sprouted when I was mixing my first record and thought it would be good to have the tracks without the lead guitar so I could play along. So I decided that for all my records I would do a mix of the songs without the lead guitar, or the lead vocals if it was a vocal song.

Eventually when the technology to make loops came along I would create loops from different parts of the songs and just jam on and on. That is one of my favorite things to do, just play endlessly over a loop that seems as though it will go on forever. It will actually go on forever, or until the electricity in the house runs out.

Playing over a loop is how I come up with unique riffs. It gives you the ability to focus without interruption. It's like a musical meditation.

I thought other people might enjoy playing over these naked tracks too so I put them all together in a 5 CD box set.

You can also download them in most digital stores such as iTunes, or get it through our web site at vai.com

It's quite a beautiful package.

Although it's great to play over loops and to recorded tracks, it's also important to play with real musicians because music is a sharing experience that involves intimate communication with others, but every now and then it's nice to play with yourself by indulging in a steamy naked groove.

I have never heard of anyone doing anything like this before

S- I make a conscious effort to create projects that have a uniqueness to them. I enjoy challenging myself to come up with ideas that I believe are unique like the *Naked Tracks* box set, *The 7th Song*, *Alive in An Ultra World*, the Jem guitar, and some other projects. These things give me a feeling of accomplishment.

Most of your solo compositions require complicated techniques (and high-tech guitar equipment too), do you think people will manage to emulate it?

S- Trying to emulate what I do on my records is one way of approaching it. Perhaps not the simplest way.

Playing over these naked tracks is a great way to discover your own style. I suggest using the tracks as a bed to come up with your own parts and ideas. It's a great way to challenge your imagination. I would also suggest making it a goal to put something on top of these tracks that is completely different than what I did. Use your own creative expression.

You can be at any level of proficiency and use any guitar and gear. You can even use an acoustic guitar. What you do is limited to your own imagination.

But I would suggest that if someone was going to try and play my parts over these tracks, they should strive to take them up a level. Just don't hurt yourself, and don't blame me if you do.

Flex-Able 25th Anniversary

Back in 1984, what was your overall concept for *Flex-Able*? And what did you actually do for the anniversary edition? Were there any 'repairs' made to this one?

S- When I was 22 years old I purchased a house in Sylmar California and built a recording studio in the backyard that I called "Stucco Blue Studio." I was completely fascinated with the idea of recording songs and was not even concerned with releasing them on records. The music I was making was not commercial nor did it sound anything like what was going on at the time. I was working for Zappa around that time and was very inspired by him.

Whenever we create something it's usually a snap shot of who we were at a specific time in our life. Those early years in that house were a special period of living with friends and making whatever music we felt like making. We had no real concerns and we were not trying to be successful with what we were doing. We just wanted to make music and have fun. That music was meant to make us laugh. That's why it sounds so silly and carefree. If you have a silly streak in you, you may enjoy its absurdity. I did not have intentions to release it but then I thought... eh, what the heck.

Life was easy and relatively carefree back then. A simple time before the internet, cell phones, computers, when there was only 6 TV stations and 8 radio stations. When I listen to *Flex-able* it makes me smile. The Steve Vai that made that record seems so innocent and naive. Sometimes I wonder... "where did that sweet young boy go?"

I defy anyone to listen to *Passion and Warfare* and guess that the same guy made both records.

The 25th anniversary issue of *Flex-Able* is a digital re-mastering of the original 2 track master. I will also be re-mastering *Flex-Able Leftovers* along with the bonus material that was on those records and including them in the special 25th anniversary edition. It will include flyers and alternate art work from the period, photos and extensive liner notes.

There were no fixes in the re-mastering, only E.Q. and compression. Usually when I release something as far as I'm concerned there is no need for any repairs. It's been thoroughly operated on. Plus, music is art and if the artist

feels it's done... it's done!
I would not touch a hair on *Flex-Able's* head.

How many takes did you do and what equipment did you use during the *Flex-Able* session? And how do you feel about it now?

S- I cut my studio teeth with *Flex-able*. What I mean by that is I did not know anything about producing or engineering when I made that record. But I am very resourceful. To me it's always been easy to learn things that I'm interested in. I got some good books, I listened to some good records, and I worked with some great people. Frank Zappa taught me how to edit tape.

I built the studio, purchased the gear, wired the place, wrote the music, hired the musicians and recorded them, engineered it, mixed it, started a label and secured distribution for it, and paid for it all through teaching guitar lessons and collecting rent from the up to 9 people who would live in the house at any given time. The only thing I didn't do was master it and now I'm doing that 25 years after it was first done.

I did it all myself for no other reason except I enjoyed all the various processes. The music was very personal to me and did not want it to be diluted by anyone else's vision. I liked being independent and didn't want to bother anyone else by taking their time on my music. I know this must sound odd but I've always felt that if someone else can do it, I can too. Plus, I knew exactly what I wanted every step of the way and knew that I could figure out how to get it through trial and error. Having said that, I was practical with my goals and never tried to do things that didn't feel right to me.

I usually don't play a song, I build it from the ground up. It all started with *Flex-able*. I only had an 8 track machine and a handful of stomp boxes. I used a Carvin console and mixed everything to an ATR 2-track machine that Frank Zappa loaned me. I had to mix it in small pieces and splice them together. A song like "Little Green Men" probably has over 100 edits.

You were involved in many bands after *Flex-Able* was released. Do you think *Passion & Warfare* - music wise - is the conclusion of every disappointing experience you may have had during that era? What would you say is the most important thing that you took away from the whole experience?

S- I am primarily a rock musician, so playing in those big pop rock bands in the 80's was fulfilling on certain levels. But I knew that one day I was going to have to leave all that to pursue the music in my head because that music was **beyond** the scope of an 80's rock band.

There are important things that we take away from all experiences. If I had to

pick some from those 80's bands I was with I would say that it's a good idea to try and make the best of every situation you're in because later in life you will be left with the memories of the past and those memories have a tendency to shape you.

They can be fulfilling or haunting and it's all how you choose to perceive the situation and act while you are going through the process. I was lucky because I did make the best of those years. I am still friends with all the people I worked with. As far as living the whole rockstar life, there was nothing cooler than being in a major rock band in the 80's and touring the world, except perhaps being in a rock band in high school. I took full advantage of the situation.

Are we also going to see a special remix or re-master of *Passion & Warfare*?

S- I would like to do that eventually. Perhaps its 25th anniversary.

You are such a massive influence as an electric guitarist. Do you have some tracks from your solo albums that you are particularly proud of?

S- Each artist has their stand-out moments where certain inspired moments rise above others. What I might choose as stand-out moments for me may not be what others might see as my best. For me, the pieces that have seemed to capture the essence of who I am as a composer and guitar player are:

The Attitude Song
Love Secrets
Die To Live
For the Love of God
The Fire Garden Suite
All About Eve
Windows To the Soul
The Silent Within
Essence
Whispering a Prayer
Dying For Your Love
I'm Your Secrets
Under It All
Helios and Vesta
Frangelica

Within your guitar technique, what has been your biggest challenge?

S- Picking all the notes.

It takes a lot of practice and chops to be a fast picker and I'm only OK at it.

Is there one defining thing that has always been a distraction from writing?

S- The clock.

Some guitarists seem to concentrate upon being extremely technical within their playing, but don't concentrate upon writing a good tune.

S- Musicians have various strengths and weaknesses. Some, like many classical performers, focus on being able to play their instrument very well and are not interested in composing or writing songs. They don't see it like a songwriter does. Those types of performers are excited by playing their instrument and performing music that is written for them.

Consequently a composer is not usually a virtuoso. Nor is it even necessary for a composer to be accomplished on an instrument. A composer has the vision of music in his ear. He can hear and construct great oceans of sounds without even touching an instrument. He can write a piece for the most accomplished of instrumentalists, but he may not be able to actually play the instrument he is writing for.

For instance, I can see and hear music in my head that I can then write for the most accomplished of pianists or harpists, or whatever. I understand the mechanics and limitations, the do's and the don'ts of the instrument and how a musician who is playing that instrument would perform the piece. But I can even play a simple Beatles song on the piano. It's odd.

These same types of brain muscles translate into all forms of music. That can be why you can find some guitar players that can shred their face off but are not very interested in writing. It's all good.

But It's interesting how people judge others like this when music is completely subjective. I hear it all the time. They think every musician should have it all. I see music as art and its perceived value is based entirely on the listener's point of view or the composer's, and there are as many different points of views as there are listeners.

I think there is every type of player. I have known guitar players that have an extremely technical mindset and write what I would consider great songs and I have known players who are very technical and also seem to be tone deaf. I know players that cannot play their instrument very well but write beautifully inspired songs and I know players that cannot play well and write awful music.

Then there is everything in between. You don't have to play fast to suck! But my views are just opinion. As I said, music is mostly subjective. If somebody enjoys something that someone else feels is horrible, then that music is justifiably good and valid regardless of what it is, even if it's Euro Pop crap.

How do you work out an instrumental? Do you work out the melody first and then fast passages come later? Or do you have another formula?

S- There's no real formula. Sometimes the fast passages never come and sometimes it's only fast passages. Songs come in various ways and I usually do not like to get formulaic because that can limit you, but for the most part I hear the entire piece of music in my head in an instant and then I am left with the task of making it real in the world. For about 35 years I have been capturing little moments of inspiration either on a cassette recorder (years ago) to DAT and now on my iPhone.

I may capture these little snippets of ideas by playing them on the guitar, piano, singing them, or I can just explain them on tape. Sometimes they are only one small riff.

At the end of the year I usually go through these ideas and document them. I have it all organized into a digital library. It's called The Infinity Shelf. There are probably thousands of ideas. If I'm looking for a song I just go to this library and the moment I hear one of these snippets I can thread a song together out of it. That's how I write 90% of my music.

I would probably need a hundred more lifetimes to complete all the ideas on this Infinity Shelf. I have been dragging this stuff around for centuries and it keeps accumulating. One of my goals in this lifetime is to let go of the desire to complete all of these ideas into full songs and concepts and only pick a few of the realistic ones to do now, or else I believe I will have to keep coming back to this world to complete them. But I'm not unlike most people when it comes to fulfilling creative desires. Once I'm satiated I get hungry again.

Back in the days before the *Flex-Able* era, were you one of those players who would sit in their room and run through scales for hours on end or did learn more from playing along to records?

S- I did both.

Of the parts of your style that get the most attention, which do you feel is most representative of who you are as a player?

S- All of them.

And you've got chops mastered, so what do you struggle with as a musician?

S- Chops!!! But mostly I struggle with finding the time to develop new things. You can do anything if you have the time to focus on it. Chops are easy if you have the time and discipline, but developing ideas is the playground of the imagination. It's the most rewarding for me.

How do you expand your musical horizons today?

S- By imagining myself doing things that I can't do. If you can imagine it then eventually you will be able to do it. Of course you have to be practical and realistic.

That's how I have developed my style through the years. At night, when I am lying in bed, I imagine that I'm playing the guitar and I look for new ideas. I also imagine compositions. This imagination technique lends itself to exquisite mental freedom and liberation.

Thinking back, which guitarists had the most impact on you when you first started playing? And where did you get the idea of exploring whammy bar/tremolo arm technics?

S- When I was a teenager Jimmy Page was my hero. I liked Jimi Hendrix, Richie Blackmore, Brian May and others but Joe Satriani was my guitar teacher when I first started. He could always play great and was tremendously musical. He was a mentor.

You're using True Temperament right now, how this innovative technology effects your sound/tone?

S- It affects the intonation more than anything else. It allows certain chords to sound in tune that would normally not be in tune because of the physics of the way a guitar is built. It also helps with the sustain.

Joe Satriani is doing Chickenfoot, don't you miss to perform or be in a band again?

S- I have a band. But if you are referring to a rock band with a lead singer, no. I did that and it was great fun but I have no desire at this time to do it. Maybe in the future, who knows.

I went to see Chicken Foot the other night and it was fantastic. Sammy sang great and Joe played his butt off. It was a good ol' rock and roll time and I think they are a good rock n' roll party band.

If you could do a one-off cover album project, whose songs would you choose?

S- All Tom Waits

If you could do a once-off album project with any musician in the world, who would it be?

S- My band. And I'm lucky because it does not even need to be a once-off.

Alien Guitar Secrets

Tell us about Alien Guitar Secrets.

I've always enjoyed teaching and talking about music, the guitar, and the music business. I have a wealth of experience and felt that someday I would like to share that knowledge face to face with music enthusiasts. Now is that someday.

The past 35 years of my musical career has been spent composing, making records, traveling the world performing, and learning to navigate the complexities of the music business. Through all of this my main focus was to identify and cultivate a unique musical voice, acquire business and financial independence, while striving for spiritual equilibrium.

Looking back through the years, I can identify with pivotal periods of growth and various circumstances or techniques that inspired moments of clarity. In this class I share these discoveries with people in hopes to inspire them on their own path in music.

There are usually 3 questions a young musician has. One is, how do I make a record and actually get it into distribution so the rest of the world can hear it, how do I identify with and develop my own unique voice on the instrument, or how do I decide if being a musician for the rest of my life is a good idea or not?

All of these are valid questions and I address all of them.

The academics of music can be found on any good Internet site or book on the subject, but in *Alien Guitar Secrets* I talk intimately about identifying with your own inner musical voice and expressing it through a cathartic exploration of self-discovery.

I talk about the importance of setting practical goals, the power of visualization and positive attitude, and how to break down your goals into achievable steps. I touch on everything from the core of creative expression to the mechanics of making your ideas real in the world. I even touch on the music business and some things I feel a young musician should know in order to protect themselves and develop independence in the industry.

It's an intimate environment where the floor is open at all times to anyone to ask whatever questions they like. At the end of it we have a jam where I invite 5-10 guitar players from the audience, one at a time, to jam with me.

The *Alien Guitar Secrets* Master class is vastly different than a Steve Vai show. In the class I sit and talk, demonstrate some things on the guitar, and play to a handful of backing tracks. At my shows I'm an entertainer in a self-induced hypnotic guitar trance.

I enjoy playing the guitar, composing, and touring but I equally enjoy sharing my experiences with folks who are interested. The success of the *Alien Guitar Secrets* master class has exceeded my expectations. But most of all it's tremendously fulfilling for me when I see people's eyes light up when they make that connection between what I'm saying and how it can take shape as an inspirational tool in their life.

For more info on Alien Guitar Secrets, visit <http://www.vai.com/News/ags/>

Miscellaneous Questions

Do you have tapes from your school bands, and do you remember their names?

S- Yes, a whole bunch. Just the other day I was sent a 9 minute Jam of "Purple Haze" (some of which I played the guitar with a violin bow, how original) that was a recording of the first band that I played the guitar in when I was 13 years old.

The band was called Circus.

1st band "Hot Chocolate" with my younger sister when I was 8 years old

2nd band was Ohio Express. I played fake piano and fake vocals

3rd Band Circus First band I played guitar and gigged in.

4th band, Rayge. The coolest band I was ever in. We were all in high school

5th band "Morning Thunder" Berklee band.

The rest is whatever.

What album did you think was the best ever at that time?

S- Led Zeppelin 4.

What was your favorite record shop then and why?

S- A place at the mall called "World Imports" because they sold black light posters, black lights, pipes, bongos and rolling paper. Hey, I was a teenager, whatever.

Do you listen to music much?

S- All day.

What's the last album you bought?

S- Mastadon, "Crack the Sky."

The first?

S- Frank Zappa "Freak Out". I was about 9 years old.

What music moves you most?

S- Tom Waits and Gyorgi Ligeti

Do you ever listen to your own music?

S- More than any other music.

What would you ask your own musical hero?

S- Stop stalking me!

When was the best time for music?

S- When you're a teenager.

Who's taken music forward in the last 10 years?

S- *Steve Jobs*

What music makes you cringe?

S- My face usually doesn't do that unless I am writing a check to the government.

What music lifts your spirits?

S- Anything where I see the performer really trying and being sincere.

What's the best gig you ever saw?

S- 1976, Return To Forever at the Hofstra Playhouse on Long Island, but Evo Papisov and his Bulgarian Wedding band runs a close second.

Do you get involved with collectable editions, formats etc.?

S- Only if it's hot sauce

Do you collect the music of anyone?

S- Tom Waits, Igor Stravinsky, Luciano Berio, Edgar Varese, Ligeti, Antony and the Johnsons, Devin Townsend.

What record are you looking for?

S- I find everything online.

What'd you swap to get it?

S- \$10.98

What fact about you would surprise people?

S- That's a secret.

What's your worst habit?

S- Not keeping a secret.

Do you keep a diary, and do you plan a book?

S- I don't keep a diary, just songs. That's where my story is. I am planning on writing a book called "Under it All" once the *Real Illusions* trilogy is complete. It's a story about.... Oh never mind.

Where would you like to be in 10 years' time?

S- A state of spiritual bliss.

Which question do you wish people would stop asking you?

S- Hmmm, good question.

Who would you most like to record with?

S- I would say that question is the perfect answer for your last question.

What unfulfilled ambitions do you have?

S- To be free of all ambitions.

31. If you weren't a musician, what would you be?

S- Ahhh, I thought this interview was only supposed to have 30 questions. (For the answer to this question please see question 28. It's a close runner up to answer 29).

Q: If you had to describe yourself in one word what would it be?

S- Whatever.

How did your love for music start and why did you choose a guitar of all instruments?

S- I think we all have an inherent attraction for music. It resonates in our soul. When I was an infant I could distinctly remember thinking, while swooning in my mothers arms as she whispered lullabies into my soul, "hmmm, I can make a living out of this".

I think I chose the guitar because it most resembled my pacifier. That's the little

rubber thing that's shaped like a nipple that you suck on.

You played with various artists, which collaboration was most memorable and enjoyable for you?

S- When I was nine years old I started a little band with my younger sister Lillian who was six. I played bongos and she played an acoustic guitar with 2 strings on it. We wrote our first song together. It was called "Hot Chocolate."

The lyrics went like this:

Hot Chocolate...Hot Chocolate...

Makes you quiver, makes you quake

When you drink it, drink it straight

Hot Chocolate.

I would have to say that in my whole career Lillian was my favorite collaborator. We had a joyous, unconditional acceptance of each other's contributions. It's never been quite like that again with anyone else.

What inspires you to write music?

S- A good idea. Whenever I get one I'm inspired to work really hard to make it real in the world.

Frankly, I don't know where the ideas come from. I have suspicions but I would prefer to keep that private.

Do you consider yourself to be a role model for beginners?

S- You would probably have to ask the beginners to answer that.

What sort of audience do you have at your master classes?

S- There seems to be quite a big range. young to old, beginners to experts, male to female, (and in-between) short to tall, black to white, all races, ethnic background, religions....

It's sort of like the [United Nations of Vai](#).

But for the most part, they are all lovers of the 6 strings and in their hearts they want to play the instrument with freedom.

Do you have any hobbies?

S- Hobby??? Hmmm,

I built a fence that runs along the length of our back yard. It has 5 thin planks running horizontally that are connected by perpendicular white posts.

My wife, Pia, planted various colors of roses, (such as white, red, yellow, dark purple, etc.) and they mellifluously drape over the planks.

The roses against the fence look like beautiful music notes on a staff.

I go out every two or so days and take a digital photo of the fence and re-write the floral display into music on manuscript paper.

The different colors represent dynamics. The lighter roses are soft and the darker are louder. Then I play it on the guitar.

I call this process of writing music "fretstooning."

You would be surprised at what lush, warm melodies can come out of doing this, although at times you can definitely hear the thorns.

The variety of roses are called "China Dolls." I'm working on a sweet song that the roses are writing with me that I am calling "Weeping China Doll."

Oh, I would like to collect stamps, but it gets too complicated for me.

Steve Vai