



Don Ross

A powerful and commanding guitarist, his complex, acoustic music straddles funk to folk.

By M.D. Dunn

It's a nightmare scenario. In late 2017, just nine days before embarking on a month-long tour of Eastern Asia, guitarist Don Ross severed the tip of his index finger while making salsa. For many musicians, an injury to the fretting hand would mean cancelled dates and months of rest.

"I felt a bit as if I had been hit by lightning. My immediate thoughts were that I may never play guitar again," says Ross, "Even before I had the wherewithal to try to staunch the bleeding!"

Ross did what one is supposed to do: he gathered his severed fingertip in a jar, called a taxi, and hightailed it to the hospital. Although the bit of finger he'd saved couldn't be reattached, the doctor assured him the injury would heal over time. With the first show in the South Korean leg of the tour approaching, Ross had adjustments to make. Some frantic research uncovered a finger plaster that could have been designed for injured guitar virtuosos. The bandage, which fit like an artificial callus over the end of the finger, enabled limited use.

"The first couple of shows I did, I relied a lot more on my vocal material, keeping the guitar parts relatively sparse," he says. "But, I did manage to play some of my more challenging material even at that first concert after the injury. By the third concert, I had healed enough and was adept enough at dressing the wound that I was really able to play at about 90 per

cent of my usual ability."

By mid-December, as the tour concluded in China, Ross could play all but a couple of pieces in his regular repertoire. By year's end, the wound had almost completely healed.

"I may just have to deal with some lingering nerve sensitivity for a while, which may mean applying Superglue to the missing callus to reduce that sensitivity for playing. That's a tip that many other people have given me. Pardon the pun."

Considering his kinetic style and the number of engagements he's played over the decades, Ross has been relatively free of injury. Tendinitis has been an issue, but a manageable one.

"With tendinitis," he says, "the ultimate irony is that the only time you're not in pain is when you're performing the action that gave you tendinitis! So, when my arms have hurt, one way to make the pain go away was to play

more! That is definitely not what the doctor would order. When people ask my advice on how to avoid playing-based injuries, my usual response is simply not to play too much.

“Problems like tendinitis and more serious things like carpal tunnel syndrome and focal dystonia are the direct results of too much repetitive motion. Being an obsessive can have very deleterious results. Don’t overdo it.”

Don Ross has toured for three decades. His first official album, 1989’s *Bearing Straight* (Duke Street Records), brought him wide acclaim. But the fingerstyle innovator was already well-known in guitar circles from his award-winning performances and appearances on CBC television. So respected was the 29-year-old guitarist that Michael Hedges wrote the liner notes for that first Duke Street album. Since then, Ross has released 19 solo albums, with the most recent, the gorgeous *A Million Brazilian Civilians* (Candy Rat Records) appearing in 2017.

Listening to Don Ross’s music is the aural equivalent of riding an avalanche. There is a power and command in his playing that can seem otherworldly at times. Multiple lines of melody, complex harmonies, harmonic punctuation, and a nuanced percussive attack come together in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Genres blend in Ross’s music, making it a genre of its own. It’s Don Ross music, and you know it when you hear it. His parents’ passion for classical music was an early influence. His father studied opera at École de Musique Vincent D’Indy in Montreal, and his mother introduced young Don to the music of flamenco guitarist Carlos Montoya and classical guitarist Narcisco Yepes.

These genres are still heard in Ross’s syncretic sound. Other influences—Bruce Cockburn, British fingerstyle legend John Renbourn, jazz, African rhythms, and funk—inform his playing. It was trying to “play all the parts” of Parliament funk records that helped the young guitarist develop his chops. Music unrestricted by genre is what he is after; the guitar is just the vehicle.

“I have always felt that I am playing music on the guitar, as opposed to just playing guitar music. The guitar is a wonderful, gorgeous, portable instrument, capable of playing both melodically and harmonically, but I’m not a guitar head. I also didn’t grow up listening to solo guitar music.”

Bruce Cockburn provided the young Ross with a model of what could be done with an acoustic guitar. “Bruce’s music was really my first exposure to someone doing something modern on the guitar that made it viable as a solo instrument,” Ross says of his first guitar

hero.

Ross began teaching at the age of 12, just four years after first picking up the acoustic guitar. The experience with that first student—a nine-year-old who, after two years of instruction, could play Bruce Cockburn’s *Foxglove* along with other challenging pieces—revealed a talent for teaching in young Ross. He continues to teach, although he has struggled with the role over the years.

“I used to consider teaching something of a necessary evil, or even a compulsory bit of community service that professional musicians are compelled to offer simply by virtue of demand,” he says. “I often found myself wanting to fall asleep just before my student showed up, which I think was a reaction to the dread I felt about putting in time to teach people. I just wanted to play live, and I often felt teaching just got in the way.

“But, when I started having children, teaching sure made staying home much more feasible financially. It was nice to make the family’s grocery money in my home studio. I think at that point I kind of reconciled myself to the fact that I was actually a very good teacher. It explained why some of my students stayed with me for years. Teaching has, more and more, become an important part of my income stream. As a musician, you need as many of those as you can possibly find!”

This year, Don Ross will serve as artist-in-residence at Carleton University in Ottawa, where he will teach music theory for guitarists and give private lessons, lectures,

master classes, and performances.

“I’m going to split my time between Ottawa, my home in Halifax, and the road. It would be nice if somebody would hurry up and perfect the home cloning kit!”

While the spare parts may have come in handy after the salsa incident of 2017, multiple copies of this unique player could very well cause catastrophic stress to the fabric of the universe. Genetic cloning aside, Ross does not encourage prolonged emulation of guitar heroes.

Rather, he advises guitar players “to listen to all kinds of music played on all kinds of instruments. The mistake a lot of new players make, especially now with so much online access, is emulating or imitating to the point where they are not developing any sense of self on the instrument. After having played an instrument for a couple of years, it’s nice if something of the personality of the player starts to come through rather than simply being a human tape recorder.

“With the sheer volume of people who play the guitar, the emergence of truly unique musical personalities is still a relatively rare thing. When I do hear promising talent emerge from someone’s playing, one of the first things I tell them is to stop listening to guitarists. I encourage them to start trying to play like a pianist or like an orchestra or like a horn section. It helps to break one out of the mould of sounding like everyone else who has ever played the instrument!”

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