



# All Hands On Neck

ANDY MCKEE'S ACOUSTIC GUITAR PLAYING is something to behold. Fretting notes with both hands from both sides of the neck, conjuring harp-like arpeggios and glistening harmonics, and rapping the body with his palms and fingertips, he makes you swear you're hearing two or three guitarists at once. You have to see it to believe it.

And that's exactly what more than 30 million viewers have done.

McKee is that uniquely modern phenomenon: a musician who found fame via a YouTube video. Shortly after the Topeka, Kansas-based guitarist signed with the small Candy Rat label, the label's owner suggested posting a few videos.

“We shot eight or nine in his den in one afternoon,” recalls McKee. “One song, ‘Drifting,’ started to take off. When YouTube put ‘Drifting’ on their front page, people started emailing me about gigs. I quit guitar teaching, hooked up with a booking agency and a manager, and started touring full-time.”

McKee actually started out on electric guitar. “I only got into acoustic guitar when I was sixteen,” he says. “I’d never had any formal fingerstyle lessons, but I discovered players like Preston Reed, Michael Hedges, Don Ross, and Billy McLaughlin. I learned tapping, slap harmonics, and hitting the guitar body from watching those guys, but then started using those techniques to write my own compositions.”

Andy has refined guitar percussion into something of a science. “I use the base of my hand to hit the sound board down by the lower bout to create a kick drum sound,” he explains. “Then I use my right-hand middle and ring fingers to hit the side of the guitar. When you hit it hard enough, you get a good, loud, snare drum-type sound. I use my left hand for percussion too, especially when I’m fretting over the top of the guitar neck, in which case I slap my hand against the face of the guitar on the upper bout, or use my palm against the side of the guitar at the upper bout to create a clap sound.”

Another McKee signature is his adventurous use of alternate tunings. While the popular “Drifting” video features the relatively common DADGAD tuning, other McKee compositions were created using such unique tunings as ECDGAD and DADEAC#. “Sometimes,” says Andy, “I take a chord I like in standard tuning, and then make it into an open tuning. I did that with my song ‘Art of Motion,’ where I tune to an F#m11 chord: F#AC#G#BE.”

McKee recently decided to tour with Yamaha guitars. “I’d played an LJX36C last year. I really liked the sound, and it was nice and easy to play. It felt like a solid guitar that could take a bit of a beating, which is important given how I bang on the guitar. It has an Engelmann spruce top and rosewood back and sides.”

Using that model as a springboard, Andy collaborated with Yamaha on a custom instrument. One request was to incorporate the True Temperament fretting system created by Swedish guitar gurus Anders Thidell and Paul Guy. Like an earlier system created by luthier Ralph Novak, the True Temperament system aims to improve guitar intonation by correcting for the tuning inconsistencies arising from traditional parallel frets.

“I’ve been playing guitars with the Novak neck, but this is slightly different,” explains Andy. “The Novak neck has ‘fanned’ frets, which are sharply angled at the lower frets, but which get closer to parallel in the middle of the neck. True Temperament is different—the frets look like squiggly lines.”

Another request is a dual pickup arrangement encompassing both Yamaha’s ART and SRT systems. “I’ve been amazed by the new SRT pickup system,” says McKee. “It has three different settings that simulate the sound of different microphones, and it sounds more like a natural acoustic guitar than anything I’ve tried. Meanwhile, the ART system has contact transducers attached to the soundboard, which are great for picking up those percussive body sounds. My guitar is going to let me set the balance between those two systems.”

With Yamaha in hand, McKee will carry on doing what he loves best: touring as a successful solo guitarist. “Ever since I was fourteen, I’ve wanted to play guitar for a living,” he says. “These last few years have been amazing, and I still feel lucky to be able to go out and do this.”

Visit [www.andymckee.com](http://www.andymckee.com) to witness Andy’s amazing performances, purchase his music, and check his tour schedule.

