

Dave Navarro

From Ballistic to Acoustic

Dave Navarro's stints in Jane's Addiction and the Red Hot Chili Peppers established him as one of the most innovative guitarists of his generation. And now, thanks to an MTV reality series based on his marriage to actress Carmen Electra and regular appearances on Bravo's *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, he's probably the most visible guitarist as well.

But Navarro isn't coasting on celebrity. His latest group, the Panic Channel, builds on the open-ended style he cultivated with his earlier bands and on his 2001 solo album, *Trust No One*. He has served as guest shredder for a dizzying array of artists, including Jay-Z, Christina Aguilera, and Michael Jackson. And like many musicians, he plays in a just-for-fun cover band, Camp Freddy, whose guest performers are as varied as the musical styles that comprise the group.

We spoke to Dave just as he was returning from a Camp Freddy gig in Las Vegas featuring Steven Tyler, Courtney Love, and most of the original members of Guns N' Roses.

You've got a new band.

Yes—the Panic Channel. It's an amazing project. We have no baggage, no money, no record deal. It's a back-to-basics, kids-in-the-garage situation. I'm excited in a way I haven't been since the late 80s, when we started Jane's Addiction.

What's the music like?

There are heavy Zep' and Rush influences. There are musical gymnastics, but also three-minute pop songs. Our singer, Steve Isaacs, is into songwriters like Elliott Smith and Rufus Wainwright, and the rest of us are into rock. So Steve brings something we don't have, and we bring something he doesn't have; and, hopefully, the combination will work.

You've just started recording your first disc, but there are live videos posted at www.thepanicchannel.com, plus an eerie-sounding song called "She Won't Last" (Alternate), which features only voice and guitar.

It's funny how that version of the song came about. We had recorded it with the whole band, and later we were sifting through vocal performances with all the instrumental tracks muted. I grabbed a guitar and detuned it to some strange open-B tuning.



I wound up writing a whole new guitar part in that obscure tuning, something that had nothing to do with the original part. It created a mood that I'd never intended, but one I really related to.

It seems like you've always been open to left-field tactics like that. For example, the weird rhythm guitar sound you got on Jane's Addiction's "Been Caught Stealing", when you mic'd an unplugged electric guitar.

Or using a toy guitar with a built-in amp and speaker for "Walkabout" on the Chili Peppers' *One Hot Minute*. I left it on for hours beforehand so the battery would start to die and it would sound all crusty. I love that sort of stuff. I never set out to do it—it just happens. Maybe it's because my favorite bands have always been a little obscure and left-of-center. Sure, I like songs I can tap my foot to, or ones that tell a clear story. But I also like songs that seem to have no rhyme or reason to them, like the ones on early Pink Floyd records. I love listening to music like that, and I love creating it.

You do a lot of your writing on acoustic guitar.

Yes. I wrote everything on my solo record on acoustic, and most of

the music from the Jane's Addiction *Strays* album, not to mention most of the Panic Channel stuff. In fact, the only guitars I have at home are acoustics.

Why?

Because I'm so pseudo-intellectually inclined that when I try to write with electric guitar and effects, it's easy for me to worry about the tones instead of the writing. But picking up the acoustic helps me get lost in the actual music. There's something instantly trance-like about playing acoustic guitar. It's so hypnotic just to play by yourself in a room with no wires, amps, or effects. You don't need anything else—the instrument is both harmonic and percussive. I love the simple human characteristics of acoustic guitar. Of course, as soon as I get into the studio, I process it and remove all the humanity. [Laughs.]

You recently teamed up with Yamaha to create a new acoustic guitar.

I grew up playing a Yamaha acoustic—it was the first guitar my mom bought me. And now Yamaha is making me a signature model. All the specs are exactly what I asked for. I needed it because I've always struggled with live acoustic sound. It's either been flat or brittle or tinny or prone to feedback. But then I tried a Yamaha that had both a built-in microphone and an under-the-bridge pickup, and realized that was exactly what I wanted. The system on my guitar lets me dial between the two sources so I can find the perfect balance between the warmth of the body and the percussiveness of the strings. It's important to me that I can do that from the guitar. I don't like relying on the monitor engineer, because the tone you get at the show is never exactly like you were getting at soundcheck. This way I don't have to make faces and gestures at the monitor guy all night. Also, I wanted the guitar to be clean and modern looking.

And white.

Yeah. I only play white guitars because I like how they change color under stage lights. However many gels there are in the lighting setup, that's how many colors of guitar I have that night. Yamaha was really willing to work with me on all the visual components. I put stars in all the inlays, but they're not too big—a guitar with big stars has the potential to be a little too Garth Brooks. [Laughs.] They also put my unicorn insignia in the headstock.

I definitely didn't want to see my name there—I know who I am! Anyway, I am so psyched about this guitar. But I'm easy to please—just make it look great and sound beautiful, and I'm happy!

So you've been playing in a rather remarkable cover band.

Camp Freddy is me, Chris Chaney from Jane's Addiction, Billy Morrison from the Cult, Matt Sorum from Guns N' Roses and Velvet Revolver, and Donovan Leitch, the son of Donovan the folksinger.

We play cover songs with our favorite artists from the musical community. We just got back from Vegas, where we did "Whole Lotta Love" with Steven Tyler singing. We played "It's So Easy" by Guns N' Roses with most of the original band playing and Courtney Love singing. We've had Ron Wood playing "Paradise City". Steve Jones from the Sex Pistols playing



Yamaha's new LLX6 DN Dave Navarro signature model is an inspired collaboration between the guitarist and the master luthiers at YGD, Yamaha's custom shop.

According to YGD's Mike Tempesta, the LLX6 DN is based on the LLX6, but with different pickups and EQ. While the LLX6 has a one-way active system and a saddle-mounted piezo, Navarro's guitar has a two-way system comprised of an under-the-bridge transducer and gooseneck-mounted condenser mic. The onboard controls include a 3-band EQ with adjustable mid-range, phase switch, mic volume and master volume and tone pots. Star-shaped inlays highlight the neck, and Dave's unicorn insignia tops off the headstock. And did we mention it's white?

A Vision in White: The Dave Navarro Signature Model





“Bodies” with Scott Weiland on vocals. Robbie Williams singing “My Generation”. Macy Gray doing the Pretenders “Brass in Pocket”. Terry Nunn from Berlin singing “Metro”. Gavin Rossdale doing Clash tunes. Kid Rock. Melissa Etheridge. The last time we played in New York, we got to play “Venus in Furs” with Lou Reed. So if the Panic Channel fulfills my obscure, left-of-center needs, Camp Freddy fulfills the adolescent rock quotient. It’s a dream come true.

You’ve also done some unlikely guest spots.

When I heard Eddie Van Halen playing on Michael Jackson’s *Beat It* when I was a kid, I thought, it was the coolest thing in the world. I wanted to be that guy! So I’ve been lucky to get gigs with people like Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Usher, and Christina Aguilera. I rarely turn down an artist that I find somewhat compelling on some level. I might not put on a Christina Aguilera record to unwind on a Sunday, but she’s a phenomenal singer, and there’s a lot to be gained and learned from working with someone like that. Playing with these different artists makes me a better musician. And I’m not one to shoot down an experience that might be fun. I don’t want to be on my deathbed saying, I wish I’d played with Jay-Z that time!

Does celebrity ever get in the way of being a musician?

It just comes along with being married to Carmen Electra. She’s the celebrity. I’m the byproduct. Some of the people who used to be my fans may not be my fans anymore, because I appear on *Celebrity Poker Showdown*. But the reality is that I like playing cards and hanging out with people, and the proceeds go to kids with AIDS. Look—I enjoy doing what I do. Life is short, man!

I spent too many years ducking life with drugs and other things. I could be dead now. Now I just want to live and do stuff. I’ve got a great wife. I’ve got a great bunch of guys to play with. I’m blessed to be in a band that fulfills every childhood dream I ever had. I’ve been given the gift to play music and entertain and work with other artists. I’ve never been happier.

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