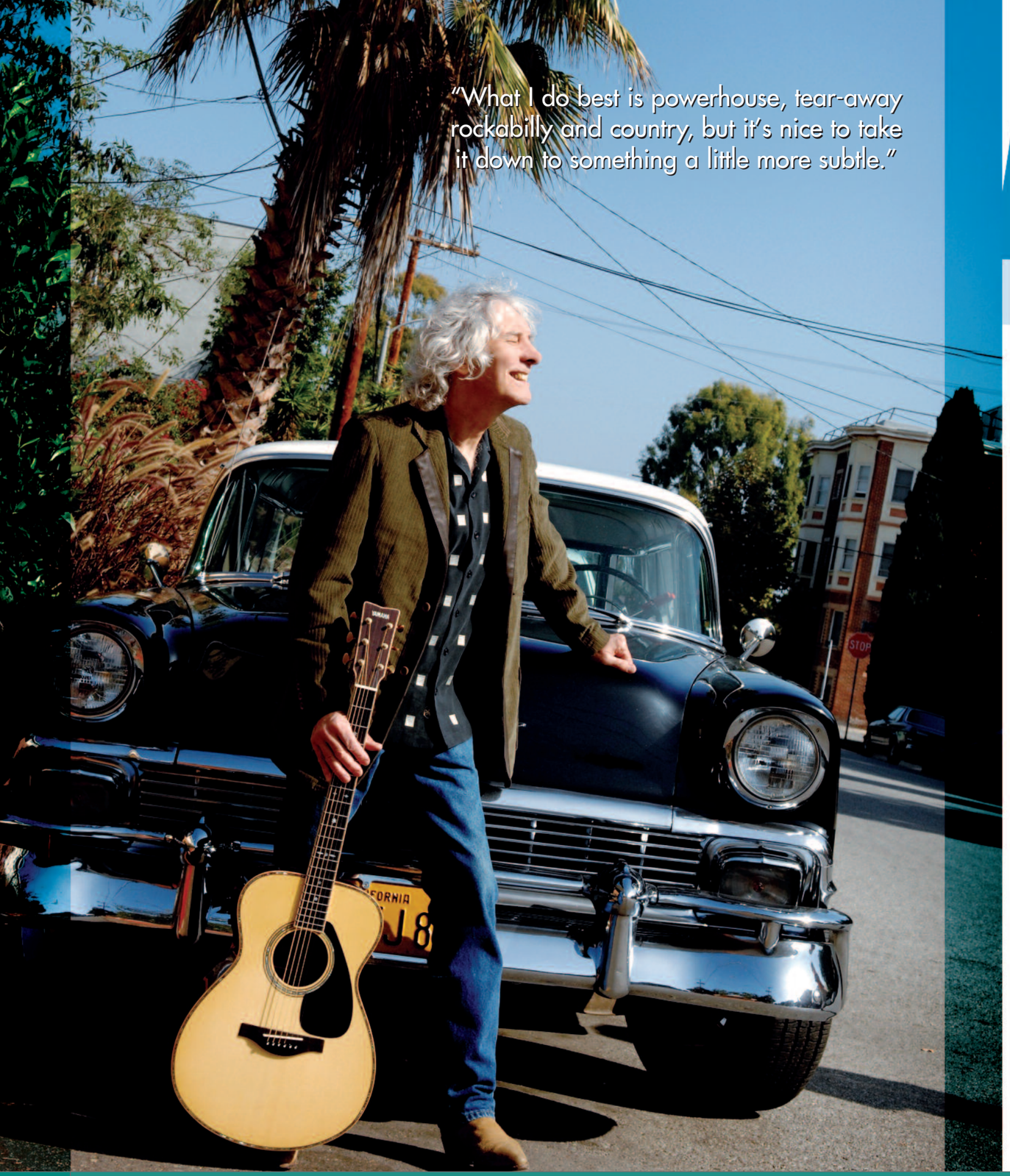

ALBERT LEE

the acoustic side

He's British by birth, yet Albert Lee is one of the finest guitarists to master those quintessentially American genres, country and rockabilly. Since attaining fame in the '70s as Emmylou Harris's instrumental foil, he's played with Eric Clapton, Dolly Parton, Joe Cocker, Jackson Browne, George Jones, Linda Ronstadt, Jerry Lee Lewis, Travis Tritt, and many other leading rock and country artists. We spoke to him during a rare break in his overbooked schedule.

What have you been up to lately?

I have a British band called Albert Lee & Hogan's Heroes, which works primarily in Europe. I played in Chicago with Eric Clapton a few weeks ago. I played with Vince Gill's band, and I was onstage with Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson. I also play with Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings, who have been chosen to open for Led Zeppelin's comeback gig in London. I never know who's in that band 'til I show up. We may have Pete Townshend and Paul Rogers this time.

Wow. You get to play with as many great guitarists as vocalists.

[Laughs.] That's not by choice! In my band, I'm the only guitarist, though we do have a pedal steel player. But it's nice to be asked to play in other situations. I was very lucky in getting a chance to go on the road with Eric Clapton for five years. He was very generous in what he let me do, and I got to sing a couple of songs and even play keyboards.

Piano was your first instrument.

That's right. I started bashing away when I was eight or nine, but I lost interest in having to practice what I was supposed to. Mind you, this was the mid-'50s—pre-rock-and-roll. It was the era of Guy Mitchell and Doris Day. Then we had a guy named Lonnie Donegan, who played folk music with a driving rhythm section. That's what got everyone playing guitar in England.

Like many players of your generation, you became obsessed with American music. But why did you pursue country rather than rock-and-roll?

We all started out listening to the early rock and roll records: Chuck Berry, Elvis, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis. Not many country records made it to England, but I liked what I heard. It was Jimmy Bryant who really made me pay attention. His playing was unbelievably clean and fluid, but also quirky. Because I'd played piano, I had the right-hand fluidity in that direction, though it took me a long time to get anywhere near what he was doing. I formed a country band, and we wound up backing some American recording artists who came to the UK. Later I moved to the States, because that's where the music was.

You're best known for your fiery electric work, but you're a fine acoustic player as well.

I started out on acoustic, because it was all I could lay my hands on. I'm certainly influenced by people like Don Everly, who got such a great acoustic on those intros to the Everly Brothers' records. Later I heard Doc Watson and some of the bluegrass players. That's a whole different world! To get a good sound out of an acoustic, you've got to have heavier strings. When I play bluegrass with acoustic players, I can't get the guitar across using my right-hand pick and fingers like I do on electric. I have to lay hard into every note with the pick.

Do you play much acoustic live?

Not so much in recent years, but I very much want to revamp my band's set so that I do. What I do best is powerhouse, tear-away rockabilly and country, but it's nice to take it down to something a little more subtle.

You recently got a Yamaha LS36 with pick-up installed in it.

Yes, they just built me one. I played several models, and that one seemed to be the right size for me. I needed an acoustic guitar I could play a nice rhythm on but that also sounded sweet for soloing, which is a quality you usually associate with smaller guitars. This guitar seems to cover both areas really well. I don't like guitars that are too big.

It sounds like you have no immediate retirement plans!

No. If you're serious about music, that idea never crosses your mind. Now, I wouldn't mind slowing down a bit. I'm playing 250 or 300 dates a year, with hardly any time off. I had a Christmas tour in Sweden with a band called the Refreshments. I drove around the country for four weeks in November and December. It's not exactly my idea of fun, but it's work, and we made it fun. [Laughs.] I guess I'd love to earn a bit more per gig, and take a few less of them!