



DON ALDER
THE FEARLESS FINGERSTYLIST



THE FIRST TIME YOU ENCOUNTER DON ALDER'S PLAYING, you may be uncertain whether you're hearing a single acoustic guitarist or a small army of Alders. The Canadian virtuoso tackles many parts at once, blending traditional fingerstyle work with extended techniques such as slapped harmonics, fretting over the neck, and mimicking a drum kit by beating the soundboard.

In 2007, Alder's skill earned him acoustic guitar's highest accolade: a first-place victory in the International Fingerstyle Guitar Championship, held each year in Winfield, Kansas. He's also toured extensively and issued several thrilling solo CDs, including the recently released *Not a Planet*.

Alder's playing is so fiery and fearless, it's hard to believe he once doubted whether he could forge a career in music. Alder began performing as a guitarist and drummer 30 years ago in his native Williams Lake, British Columbia. He gigged with country bands and worked as a recording engineer while developing his technique. But it took advice from a famous friend for Don to pursue music with every ounce of his passion.

Years earlier, Don and a friend, athlete Rick Hansen, were involved in a driving accident. Don escaped permanent injury, but Rick's back was broken, paralyzing him from the waist down. Hansen went on to become the most famed wheelchair athlete in history, establishing many world records and, in 1985, literally wheeling himself around the world, accompanied by a crew that included Alder. The adventure inspired the David Foster/John Parr song "St. Elmo's Fire (Man in Motion)."

"Once, Rick and I were fishing," recalls Don. "He asked, 'What are you going to do with this guitar stuff?' I said I wasn't sure. And he said, 'Don, many people don't pursue their dreams because of fear of failure, but failure is really just not having the courage to try.' And being an athlete, Rick said, 'Why not enter a competition?'"

The rest is fretboard history. "The first year I entered the Fingerstyle Championship, I got my butt kicked because I was trying to show off too much," remembers Don. "But I took second in 2006, and then won in 2007. Besides being the first Canadian to walk away with the title, I'm probably the first to be doing it with extended techniques."

But Don didn't triumph with technique alone. "I used all those extended techniques, but they didn't stand out that much," he notes. "The judges look for song structure more than anything else." Alder shares those sensibilities. "Composition is the most important thing," he insists. "It's what you'll be remembered by at the end of the day, right? Coming up with a simple song with a fresh, new hook is really tough. So for me, it's about using the technique for the sake of the composition, not for the sake of the technique."

Alder's compositions rely heavily on alternate tunings. He's experimented with many, but typically uses eight in performance. "There's standard tuning," he says. "There's Dropped D and Double Dropped D. There's DADGAD, BADGAD, and CADGAD. There's DADFCE. And finally, there's EADGAE, which is standard tuning, but with the B dropped down to an A."

Soundboard drumming is another Alder signature. "I create a kick and snare effect to keep the groove going," explains the onetime drummer. "I hit the soundboard with my palm near the bridge for a thumping kick-like sound, and slap the top below the soundhole with several fingers to simulate a snare sound." Such aggressive techniques are hard on guitars—Alder bemoans years of expensive repairs to cracked soundboards and smashed pickups. But he says those problems have diminished since he started playing Yamaha L Series guitars.

"I used to be pretty snooty about using only custom, hand-built guitars. I wouldn't touch a factory-brand guitar! But Chris Seldon from Yamaha suggested I try a hand-built Yamaha. When my LLX36C arrived, I tried to hate it, but I couldn't, because it worked better than most of any of my other guitars! The Yamaha's tone, the sound of its mic and pickup system, how easily it tuned, how it resonated onstage—it was like, whoa, man! Then I got several more hand-built Yamahas and fell in love with them."

The dreadnought-sized LLX36C remains Alder's main stage guitar, though he also uses a smaller LSX36C and a jumbo-sized LJX36C. "After a lot of exploration," says Alder, "I've concluded that Yamaha offers you the best bang for your buck in a hand-built acoustic guitar." You can hear and see Don's extraordinary guitar work at www.donalder.com, or visit www.myspace.com and search for "Don Alder."