



Visitors to www.fingereleven.com are greeted by a gallery of eerie drawings: distorted faces, peering eyes, strange swirls, and spirals. All flow from the pen of Finger Eleven guitarist James Black, who created the artwork for the band's albums and the stop-motion animation for a recent band video.

DOES BLACK SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN HIS DRAWING AND HIS music? "I think they do influence each other," he replies. "I think I have a strong sense of visual things in general. When I play live, I definitely think of what I'm doing visually — the way my body curves to the music and things like that. A dance looks beautiful because of the way it looks in relation to the music. So yes, the music and visuals bleed into each other."

The members of the Burlington, Ontario-based quintet started formulating their emotion-charged, hard rock sound as soon as they started playing together in high school. In the last seven years, they've released three albums, placed songs as in the film *Daredevil*, and supported Ozzy Osbourne on tour.

Like many growing bands, they've gradually learned the virtues of simplicity. Their latest CD, *Finger Eleven*, is as stripped-down as its title, with fewer overt production touches than their earlier work. "We knew even before we went into the studio that we wanted to take a more organic approach," says Black.

pitch [E], A \flat , D \flat , G \flat , B \flat , E \flat]. "We also tune down the low string to D \flat on a lot of songs," says Black. "That's a really comfortable tuning to write in, because you have a working chord just across the low open strings. It's a good starting point, though you have to be careful about getting into too much of a pattern. Sometimes I change my tuning when I'm writing, just to keep myself from going to the same place every time."

The two players also share a taste for tuneful, ego-free solos. "Anytime we play a solo, we try to make it something you can sing along with," James says. "My favorite solos were the kind David Gilmour played with Pink Floyd, where it's as fun to sing along with the solo as with the lead vocal. People forget that solos can be musical that way. A lot of people got turned off to the idea of solos; and there haven't been a lot in recent songs, because some people think that solos have to be some technical, wowie-zowie thing."

Black's guitars of choice are the Yamaha AES820 and the

Mike Stern signature-model Pacifica 1511MS. "My favorite AES is probably my stock one, though I have two great customized ones with different tone knob and pickup configurations." He's also experimented with hybrids of the two models, fitting one of his AES820s with a Mike Stern-style neck and popping AES820 pickups into the Mike Stern model. "I like that a lot," he says, because the rail pickups that come with the standard Mike Stern are a little too big and woofy for my particular sound."

In one of his first conversations with the Yamaha Guitar Development team, Black casually mentioned his interest in a double-neck guitar/bass. "The next thing I knew, they built it for me!" he says. "It's great for jamming — it's great to be able to grab another instrument, just to change things up a bit. I was blown away by the fact that Yamaha was so adventurous about building something I'd imagined."

Black's current guitar project: decorating a blank Pacific 1511MS Mike Stern body with his evocative drawings before having Yamaha finish the instrument. It's sight-meets-sound all over again.

Finger Eleven's James Black: The Art of Guitar

"That's how we approached the writing — we tried to capture that loose free energy right from the beginning. We were able to do that, because everyone had finally gotten comfortable with the chemistry of the band — the way everyone has quirks that bug you, but also amazing and unique things that they bring to the table. We figured, we've been doing this long enough that we should be able to open up to the process and just enjoy ourselves. We had a good time, instead of obsessing."

Over the years, Black has cultivated an effortless division of labor with co-guitarist Rick Jakkett. "It's a pretty even partnership," says James. "If there's any sort of guitar solo or a little lead melody that goes on under a verse, I tend to do that, while Rick does more of the effects stuff. But to be honest, a lot of what we do is interchangeable. Basically, we do whatever it takes to get the job done in the studio. Same thing live — we're out there on the wings of the stage, freaking out in our own little worlds."

Both guitarists tune down a half-step below standard

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