



Surfing with the Alien

At least until Google ruins it, YouTube is bringing back rock virtuosity. Welcome home, Yngwie Malmsteen.



AT SOME POINT during the past year, I assume you have consumed a news story regarding YouTube.com. This assumption is based on the fact that there have been 16,578,000 stories about

YouTube.com written in 2006, roughly 20 percent of which were then read aloud into the lens of a camera phone and posted on YouTube.com.

These articles fall into three general categories:

- 1) "This reporter thinks YouTube is awesome."
- 2) "This reporter believes the content of YouTube is insane."
- 3) "This reporter finds YouTube to be insane in a specifically awesome way, and this is going to revolutionize marketing, even though no one (including this reporter) is quite sure how that will work."

I HAVE YET to meet a person (who is not a copyright lawyer) who hates YouTube for any reason whatsoever. YouTube is slightly less popular than oxygen, but it currently has a higher approval rating than wood. And while I'm still mystified as to what compels the average citizen to upload the opening credits of *Head of the Class* onto a Web site he doesn't own, I completely understand why other people enjoy watching such clips. It kills time, and it makes it infinitely easier to experience the past (and these are the things that make life worth living). Moreover, I've started to notice another positive impact of this technology, and it's something I would

have never anticipated: Completely by accident, YouTube is fostering the rediscovery of rock virtuosity, particularly as it applies to the guitar.

Several months ago, *The New York Times* ran a story about a hyperpopular YouTube file that is simply titled "guitar." The file¹ shows a young Asian fellow whose face cannot be seen; he wordlessly performs a rock version of Johann Pachelbel's "Canon in D," an astonishingly complex song that necessitates a rarefied guitar technique called "sweeping."² The crux of the story centered on who this unknown wunderkind was (he turned out to be a twenty-three-year-old South Korean named Jeong-Hyun Lim), and it noted a minor controversy about the validity of his performance. It was all mildly interesting. However, the questions

I found more intriguing were these: What prompted people to view this video 9.8 million times? Since when did people *who aren't themselves guitarists* suddenly care about classical-rock geniuses? And why did I watch Jeong-Hyun Lim play "Canon in D" five times in one night, especially considering how rarely I listen to (or even think about) this kind of music?

One of the first YouTube clips I ever saw was lost footage of a godhead ax solo Prince performed at the 2004 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony; just last month, I was sent a YouTube file of a ten-year-old playing Led Zeppelin's "Bron-Yr-Aur" acoustically. Both were semitransfixing. But if these performances had been given to me as MP3 files, I wouldn't have cared about either. (I would have listened to the Prince track once and ignored the Zep kid completely.) This illuminates one of those depressing paradoxes about

¹youtube.com/watch?v=QjA5faZF1A8

²"Sweeping" requires the musician to rapidly press and release points on the fret board in order to create blurry arpeggios. It's not something that can be done casually; sweeping is a muscle-memory skill that can only be achieved through "woodshedding," i.e., compulsively practicing the move over and over and over and over and over and over and over again.

rock 'n' roll: Very often, profoundly exceptional guitar playing is boring to listen to.³ I own Steve Vai's *Passion and Warfare*, and I wish it was better than the first *Elastica* record; it should be, but it isn't. I own multiple Yngwie Malmsteen albums, and only one of them is more interesting than the second *Libertines* record. Poison songs are better than Frank Zappa songs; this is just the way rock music tends to operate. It's difficult for nonmusicians to appreciate world-class guitar playing through solely sonic means, mostly because a) the difference between great guitar playing and serviceable guitar playing is often subtle, and b) every modern listener assumes production tricks can manufacture greatness. (As a result, radio audiences are automatically skeptical of what they hear.) Guitar brilliance usually comes across as ponderous. But that changes dramatically when one adds the element of video; somehow, watching changes the experience of hearing. There are certain things that sound good only when (and if) you can see them. And YouTube lets you see them.

³The glaring exception to this, of course, is *Jimi Hendrix*. This is another of rock's great mysteries: Hendrix's guitar playing should sound boring, but it almost never does. And on a semi-related point, it is equally mysterious that very few Americans spell the name Jimmy as Jimi or Hendricks as Hendrix. It's almost like *Jimi Hendrix* was so cool that people are afraid to rip him off.

Whenever you enter the highest, stupidest, Bucketheadiest stratosphere of electrified insanity, one thing becomes clear: Guitar-godding is an athletic pursuit. Jeong-Hyun Lim is kind of like Joe Satriani, but he's also kind of like a mountain climber. And athleticism needs to be seen in order to be appreciated; Frank Deford could write fifteen thousand words about what made Jerry Rice different from Jimmy Cefalo, but his sentences would be less effective than forty-five seconds from NFL Films. Early in his career, Eddie Van Halen turned his back to the audience

was fucking hard to fucking operate. You can fake being cool, but you can't fake being good. That's the musical potentiality of YouTube: It allows us to see elements of musicianship that are difficult to hear (even though hearing is supposed to be the whole idea). It could make a handful of people recognize (and care about) virtuosity in a way that hasn't happened since the fall of King Crimson.⁴

What's somewhat ironic is that this has (sort of) happened before, although with completely opposite results: When MTV premiered in 1981, it offered a visual alternative to FM radio. But MTV,

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whenever he played solos, supposedly because he was afraid rivals would steal his techniques. Had he insisted on doing this forever, very few people would have cared about his music. (We would probably assume "Eruption" was performed on a German synthesizer built from the spare parts off a fire engine.) People needed to see how his fingers worked. Only then could they understand that Eddie Van Halen was doing something they could not understand. His guitar was not a primitive machine that made it easier to meet girls and get free drinks; his guitar was a futuristic machine that

of course, was a commercial enterprise. Rock videos were just advertisements for albums, and it was hard to sell albums on the basis of technical brilliance. Mass audiences will never care about how well musicians play; very few teenagers buy rock albums with the hope of being impressed. But YouTube isn't selling anything (yet), so that stuff doesn't matter. Nobody has to prove that the type of person who likes Jeong-Hyun Lim will also like Tide. If someone figures out how to play the guitar in a way that has never been done before, he (or she) can just videotape himself doing it, and the kind of human who cares will find it. There are still members of society who do not like the simplicity of conventional rock 'n' roll; most of them are over the age of forty-five and occasionally wear Pendragon T-shirts, but they exist nonetheless. These people feel like what they love has been ghettoized into extinction, and that no one even plays the kind of rock music they desire. But they are wrong. Within the unpoliced, uncommercial universe of YouTube, no one can stop you from surfing with the alien. And once you see it, you might want to see it again. ■

⁴I have noted this in the past, but I think it bears repeating: "21st Century Schizoid Man" by King Crimson is the scariest rock song ever written. Recorded in 1969, it tells the story of a man who travels back in time despite the fact that he suffers from mental illness. That's a lot of shit to throw at a dude.

→ BILL ROMANOWSKI'S SECRET TO A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

DURING HIS SIXTEEN-YEAR NFL CAREER, Bill Romanowski was a world-class hitting machine, a maniacal workaholic, and something of a jerk. (He once spit in the face of receiver J. J. Stokes for no apparent reason.) After he retired, he wrote his autobiography, *Romo*, which I happened to read on an airplane. And—much to my surprise—I actually learned something from this book that has improved my life.

Much of *Romo* chronicles Romanowski's longtime obsession with minerals, vitamins, Supac, trauma IVs, acupuncture, and pretty much anything else he believed might give him a competitive edge. (This included a questionable relationship with BALCO.) One of these supplements was over-the-counter magnesium, which is supposed to help you sleep and dream. Romanowski started taking magnesium supplements in 1995. "From then on," writes Romo, "my dreams were so real and so vivid that the only way I can describe it is this: It was as if the rare dreams I had [in the past] were broadcast in black-and-white. The new ones were being transmitted in high-definition TV."

Amazingly, this seems to be a very real phenomenon. I've started "mag loading" before going to bed, and my dreams have become memorable, dynamic, and beautiful; taking magnesium is akin to ingesting Michel Gondry in tablet form. In fact, my dreamscape changed so rapidly that I wonder if it's mostly psychosomatic. Which, I suppose, would be just as good, since that's mostly what dreaming is anyway.