

# Steuart Smith

## Session Stalwart

By Rusty Russell

**F**or more than a decade, Steuart Smith has woven his richly-textured chords, crystalline harmonics, and head-turning solos into a wide variety of musical fabric. He has added his special touch to the chart-friendly country of Vince Gill and Wynonna Judd, the citified grit of Suzzys Roche, the hillbilly rock of Marty Stuart, and has powered such heavy hitters as Don Henley, Shawn Colvin, and Joni Mitchell. His compelling tone has earned him a place on first-call lists in New York, L.A., and Nashville.

What's surprising is that Smith has ignored two long-held tenets of his profession. He doesn't live in a recording center, nor does he collect the latest high-tech gear. The longtime Arlington, Virginia, resident coaxes his signature sounds from a few favorite guitars, amps, and pedals.

"I probably own fewer guitars than any player I know," Smith admits. "I've never been into the gear thing because the albums that inspired me to become a session player weren't about technology. When Steely Dan's *The Royal Scam* came out, it just blew me away. Being a session player always appealed to me more than being in a band, and when I heard what Larry Carlton did on that album, it was all over. His sound was unbelievable, and



Steuart Smith listens to the mix while his '66 Strat sits ready for the next overdub.

it wasn't because he used a ton of gear. The three keys to succeeding in the studio are getting a good tone, being in tune, and making sure you're in the pocket. If that's all working, you're going to have a good day. And if it isn't, someone's going to bust you for it. It's as simple as that."

Though he briefly studied piano as a youngster—and started his pro career as a keyboardist, eventually touring with Nils Lofgren in the '80s—Smith is a self-taught guitarist. Called to play guitar on a Rodney Crowell session, Smith met Rosanne Cash and Nashville producer Tony Brown, who introduced him around town.

"It's funny," Smith remarks, "I wasn't even looking for country sessions at the time, but from there, I started doing more

records in Nashville, and the stuff on the coasts kept building up."

Working in various music centers has given Smith a unique overview of recording styles. In New York and Los Angeles he'll typically add parts to existing tracks, but in Nashville he finds live sessions are still the norm. "There's something to be said for each method," Smith says. "When it's just you overdubbing, you can really hone your parts. On the other hand, it's a joy to sit down and play with a bunch of other people. There's an unconscious division of labor, where everybody makes room for everyone else. Nashville's mostly about singles, and the parameters are a little tighter. You play more conservative parts there."

Much of Smith's unique sound can be traced to his pick-

ing-hand technique. Using a thumbpick, he employs all five right-hand digits for a pianistic chordal attack, and plays single-note lines with his thumb. "I use the thumbpick like you would a flatpick," he explains. "I alternate downstrokes and upstrokes. People ask for the harmonic thing a lot, where I'll palm chords to get a mixture of natural notes and harmonics. You shape the voicing with your left hand, and sort of brush the strings with your right. That's a lot easier with a thumbpick. The only time I'll use a flatpick is for strumming."

Part of Smith's signature chordal sound stems from his modified open-G tuning (C, G, D, G, B, D). "I end up playing a C shape on the top four strings and moving it around a lot," he details. "I don't solo in that tuning,

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though, because when you get too much of one thing on a track, it takes away from the magic. I hear a certain sound in my head, and I know the shape that will get me closest to it. I use a lot of clusters, stacked seconds, and fourths, so I'm always reaching for these big stretches. That comes from listening to Steely Dan, and especially to Andy Summers of the Police. He was great at that stuff, and he never gets enough credit. Andy had as much effect on '80s guitar as Steve Cropper had on the '60s stuff."

Smith believes that keeping an open mind is the best insurance against stagnation, and borrows part of his guiding philosophy from a discipline known as information theory: "The classic example is that you ride a bike to work every day along the same route. After a while, you cease to notice that ride. It all just floats by you because you've seen it so often. But if something different happens—like your tire blows out—then suddenly your mind goes on alert. That applies to music in a big way—if it's going to be meaningful, there has to be some element of surprise. For me, that often comes down to one little unexpected note, or maybe a chord with a slightly dissonant tone. When it's really clicking, sometimes I'll even surprise *myself*."

## TRAVELIN' LIGHT

No producer will ever go broke paying Stuart Smith's cartage bills.

His "rig" is downright spartan. "I've never owned a rack in my life," he says with some pride. "With me, it's usually a silverface Fender Vibrolux or a '63 Fender Super Reverb running through a closed-back, 2x12 Fender cabinet. I've also got a silverface Twin that sounds really good, and I've recently taken to this Peavey Classic 50."

Smith typically arrives at a session armed with his EMG-loaded '66 Strat, and a humbucker-equipped Music Man Silhouette. He also favors his two Fender Esquires: a '56 with '55 Tele pickups, and a late-'60s model. Smith uses Ernie Ball strings—one Esquire is strung with a Skinny Top/Heavy Bottom set (.010-.052) for lowered tunings, and his other guitars sport .010-.046 Regular Slinkies.