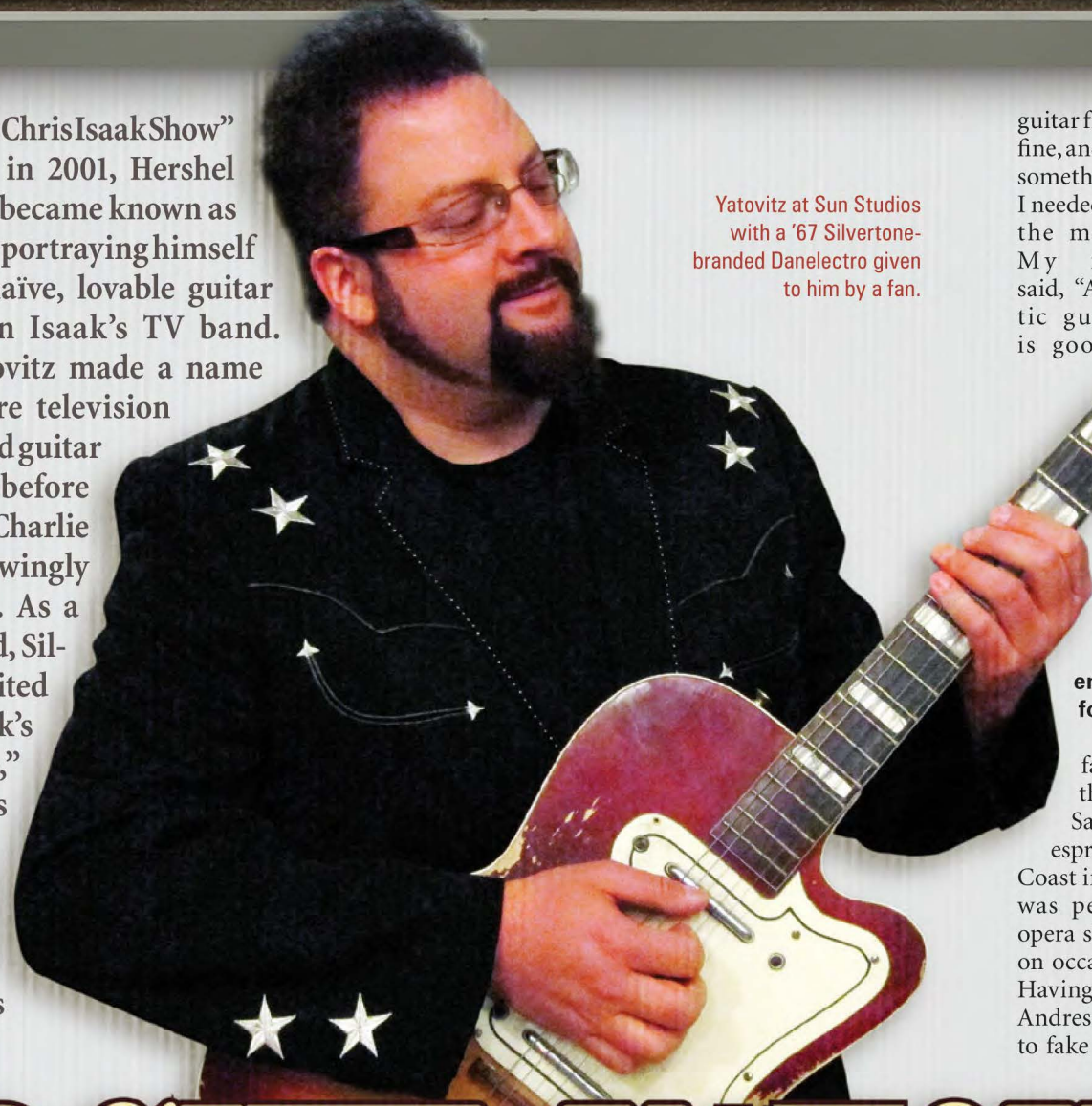


**W**hen “The Chris Isaak Show” debuted in 2001, Hershel Yatovitz became known as an actor, portraying himself as the naïve, lovable guitar player in Isaak’s TV band. But Yatovitz made a name

for himself well before television came calling. He studied guitar under Tuck Andress before playing with virtuoso Charlie Hunter, who in 1998 glowingly referred him to Isaak. As a new guy in Isaak’s band, Silvertone, Yatovitz inherited the iconic lick from Isaak’s 1989 hit “Wicked Game,” recorded by James Wilsey, its descending Dorian arpeggios cascading across the ambient sonic landscape pierced by Isaak’s mournful vocal.



Yatovitz at Sun Studios with a '67 Silvertone-branded Danelectro given to him by a fan.

guitar from the attic was fine, and if I wanted something better I needed to earn the money! My mom said, “Acoustic guitar is good

enough for Elvis Presley.” I was grateful for the lesson, but geez! A factory-second Les Paul Deluxe was my first real guitar, with the strap set to about 6” below the belly button, just like Jimmy Page. I couldn’t reach anything!

**How did a nice Jewish kid end up playing traditional Italian folk music?**

I was invited to join the Giotta family for their weekly concert at the Caffe Trieste in North Beach, San Francisco – the place where espresso was introduced to the West Coast in the ‘50s, where *The Godfather* was penned, where world-famous opera singers would stop in to join us on occasion. It was a real schooling... Having been taught jazz theory by Tuck Andress, I had just enough ear training to fake it through the opera arias and

# HERSHEL YATOVITZ

## TOUCH, TONE, AND TV

BY WILL KELLY

An expert on tone and touch, Yatovitz’s contributions to Isaak’s music evoke a feel and artistic direction all their own. VG caught up

Italian classics. Fabio Giotta’s virtuoso accordion playing and ability to call out complex changes by root/chord type was the real catalyst. He could take a “four-chord song” and do an orchestral version with tons of passing chords, and everything was solely by ear – no rehearsals. I learned a lot of Western European music sensibilities in those years.

**How did you meet Charlie Hunter?**

I had the honor to participate in a two-year long project, working with the great

never been a question what I might do with my life. My second-grade teacher played guitar and sang with the class every day, and that was it for me. The next three years, I cut class during his music time to help him lead the class. In third grade, Dizzy Gillespie came to

producer Lee Townsend. Charlie was one of the artists Lee was producing at the time, and that’s when Charlie heard me doing rock with hard and distorted, then sometimes sensitive, pedal-steel-ish vibes.

**Was Chris on your radar before you were asked to join the band?**

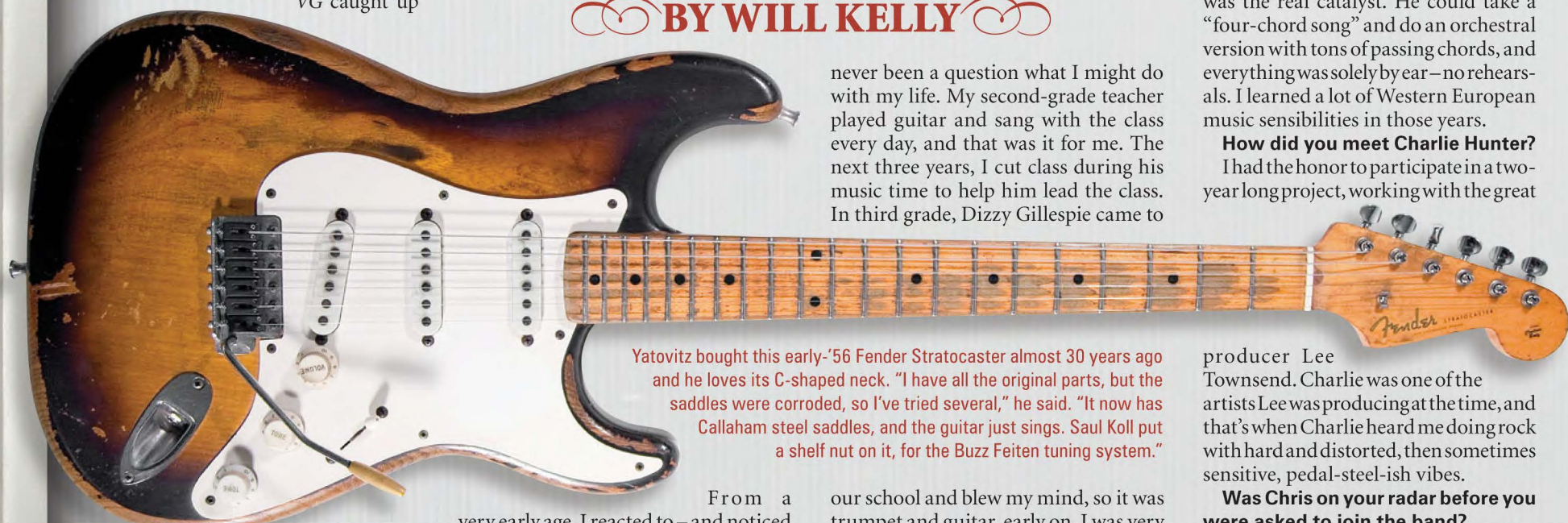
Embarrassingly enough, no. I was into more-esoteric music, and though I had played some Top 40 gigs, I was unfamiliar with the material which has since become such a big part of my musical personality. I’m really grateful to Chris, for both his willingness to let me

From a very early age, I reacted to – and noticed other people’s reaction to – music. In retrospect, I can see that, as corny as it might sound, my main connection to music is to be lifted and help others to be lifted up, and music is the main tool I’ve used to accomplish that goal. I have been very blessed, because there has

our school and blew my mind, so it was trumpet and guitar, early on. I was very fortunate to have those early influences.

**Was obtaining your first good electric guitar planned in advance or a fortuitous accident?**

It was planned, and took a few years since my folks insisted that my grandpa’s little old Cuban nylon-string student



Yatovitz bought this early-’56 Fender Stratocaster almost 30 years ago and he loves its C-shaped neck. “I have all the original parts, but the saddles were corroded, so I’ve tried several,” he said. “It now has Callaham steel saddles, and the guitar just sings. Saul Koll put a shelf nut on it, for the Buzz Feiten tuning system.”

with him while the band was on tour in support of Isaak’s most recent album, *Beyond The Sun*.

**What set you upon your path as a guitarist?**

experiment with lead-guitar parts and create ambient sound design for records like *Speak Of The Devil* and *Always Got Tonight*. His insistence on my finding an authentic old-school feel on other records has given me an awareness I might not have otherwise.

**How did your life change, professionally and personally, after Chris’ show became a hit?**

I initially thought, “How different can actors and film people be from musicians? We’re all in show business...” The answer wound up being “Very different!” After literally being told, “Put your guitar over there, we’re starting acting today... meet your coach,” I found myself in an all-new world. I have come to believe that musicians really play like who and how they are. Our personalities come right through the vibration of our music. And other art forms I’ve practiced informed my music, too. You have little choice but to expand your knowledge of human interaction when you engage in the study of acting. And just like the other ways I have matured as a human, the process of being on a TV set 16 hours a day for three years, working with professional actors, changed me as a person and as a guitar player.

The show was unique in that the band played the songs live, idiosyncrasies and all, with no lip syncing. I don’t know of any other TV show that has done that. It takes the better part of an hour to turn the cameras around, re-light, and redecorate the set between shots for a scene. And the best part of all that waiting around was not only did I get to work with legendary guest artists for multiple days for each episode, but often wound up with an hour to kill with instruments in our hands. I don’t really know of many other environments where that happens. I might get a chance to meet someone like Joe Walsh backstage at a festival or play one song with them at an awards show, but jam with them for days? It was a great time...

**How do you view as your role in Chris’ music?**

I try to make everyone sound as good as possible. Leave space in the music, not just to serve the song, but allow the listener space to feel and react to the music. If they are bombarded with too much density, the music may not be a catalyst to lift them up. I know that may sound “groovy,” but I have found it to be profoundly true. I pay close attention not to step on the vocal or other instruments unless it’s an appropriate counterpoint, as a Dixieland trumpeter or such might do. Of course at times I cave in to the urges of gratuitous riffing, like *any* red-blooded guitarist, but on a good day, I fit into spaces in the song.

**What was it like to inherit the “Wicked Game” lick, and how has that influenced your contributions to Chris’ sound?**

I think the fact I’d been playing similar styles when I joined the band made it an easy transition. It’s really a great guitar take on the vocal melody of the chorus, and that approach to crafting an instrumental section which really serves the song in such a focused way has influenced me a lot. Not just on the parts I create for Isaak’s music, but beyond.



- 1) “When I begged him to sell it to me, my friend, Bill, warned me that it weighed, like, 14 pounds!” Yatovitz said of this 1970 Gibson Les Paul Custom. “But it has serious mojo, and I used it on the TV show with Paul Stanley to play ‘Rock and Roll All Night!’”
- 2) “Whenever I pick it up, it demands I play smelly and wasteful rather than mellow and tasteful!” Yatovitz said of his ‘63 Gibson Firebird. “It’s so deliciously nasty and has the perfect combination – shrill, yet muddy! I say that with love... It’s hard not to launch

- 3) “Tuck Andress plays an L-5. Wes Montgomery played an L-5. Therefore, this became my dream guitar a very long time ago,” said Yatovitz, who used this 2001 Gibson L-5CES heavily on *Beyond The Sun*.
- 4) A friend found this ‘34 Gibson L-50 in his attic and sold it to Yatovitz.
- 5) This ‘64 Gibson B-20N has mahogany back and sides, and a neck shaped like a ‘50s Les Paul.
- 6) This Gibson Custom Super 200 is

- 7) This Carvin SH575 is one flexible axe, with a piezo, coil-taps, and custom circuit that allows synth/guitar mixing.
- 8) This Chandler lap steel has a holoflake finish and appeared on an episode of “The Chris Isaak Show” that featured Joe Walsh.

**You own a recording studio...**

I love to produce and record artists, because it’s just so rewarding to be a part of people reaching a higher place in their craft. Also, since I played bass for years and drums in a few bands I have a bit of understanding how grooves can be honed to make the sum greater than the individual parts, and having a

say in that is an indulgence I’m able to get away with in that setting, as well as the arrangements, vocals and the other elements. I also love mixing, it’s really gratifying, especially with the latest options in Pro Tools.

**How involved do you get with the production of Chris’ albums?**

Usually, he writes words and chords

and we rehearse to create our parts and the arrangements. After that, it may go in a number of directions, from the old-school “set up in a circle in a studio” approach to doing a lot of overdubs. Sometimes, other players are brought in, or a song will be given to a producer afar to try different things. When we worked with John Shanks, it was great





fun for me, since he is a guitar whiz and had a huge collection of guitars and amps ready to grab for this color or that. And his sensibilities for rock grooves were great, too. A good producer can keep the vibe fresh, so it's a blast.

Sometimes, we record in a more-raw fashion – just rehearse and record. It's definitely more like a session player experience, working with Chris; we work fast and don't belabor tonal stuff. If you have outstanding engineers like Mark Needham and Will Briere, you can work that way. Would I do some things differently if I were producing? Some times, but then we get back to that acceptance stuff I was talking about. Not to mention it's all subjective, and one thing may seem like a better idea at a certain point, but that doesn't mean it is... or perhaps it's just different. I have learned that collaborative work requires a willingness to let it come out the way it does. As long as nothing seems atrocious, you're okay. There are a lot of my less-than-favorite takes on our records because we tracked stuff live with what might've been Chris' best vocal, but that's the nature of the beast. It keeps me trying to play my best at all times, so it's good for me. It's very different when I'm at the helm, with control over guitar editing, etc. Sometimes that can lead to overly manicured tracks with less soul than a raw take, so that is always a consideration, as well.

**Would you characterize yourself as a guitar geek?**

Oh yes, of course! I'm a guitar weenie just like so many others.

**What's your dream guitar?**

Mypal, Bill Richardson, puta '56 Strat with a fat C-shaped neck in my hands 30-some years ago. It now lives in my studio and remains my reference point.

**During the recording sessions for *Beyond the Sun*, at Sun Studios, did you play any particular guitars in homage to your surroundings?**

I used my Gibson L-5 with big flatwounds and a '56 Gibson Super 400 with big rounds. I picked up a Gretsch Duo Jet quite a bit for a second rhythm guitar, as well. I also used my '61 National Studio



66 with a very honky pickup that was great for overdubs and slide, as well as a '67 Danelectro a fan gave me and really adds life to a track.

For my live work, I've recently added a Koll Jr. Glide to the collection. Saul Koll is as great a luthier. I also have a Nordstrand guitar in the works I'm very excited about. Nordstrand pickups are exquisite and I use them in two of my touring Strats. Carvin built me a beautiful SH575 semi-hollow with a hex pickup and a Bigsby, it is superbly made. Now that they're making the rounder-radius necks, vintage guys like me can dig in. I use the synth pickup for MIDI input for pad parts I might otherwise have to use a keyboard for. For baritone guitars, I use a Jerry Jones Longhorn with a EMG EXG preamp. That preamp is great for scooping out mids and getting the twang just right.

For acoustic guitars, I use a Gibson Super 200. It's literally a "J-200 meets Super 400" Gibson made in 2001, with an extra-fat body and ebony neck. For the most part, I like a good, well-balanced Jumbo for recording, over a

dreadnought. I also have a Taylor Jumbo I use for more-modern country stuff, as well as a Taylor Jumbo 12-string. A '66 Martin classical fills my nylon-string needs, as I'm not a traditional classical player. I have a little Tacoma Papoose soprano tuned up to A for color or mandolin-style riffs. To do chimy hook lines or such, I'll high-capo a 12-string panned to one side with the Papoose on the other.

**On tour, you play a couple of custom double-cuts. What are they?**

The Yatocaster! Saul Koll built those. The neck joint is unique because a plate sits between the neck and body, rather than on the back. Under the pickguard is a noise-cancelling coil developed by Suhr Guitars that's routed and installed surrounding the entire pickup area.

The pickups are wound by Carey Nordstrand. The Tone knob has a pull switch to engage the bridge pickup regardless of the position of the five-way, and the output jack is an integrated Villex mid-booster with mini-toggle. I use the Buzz Feiten tuning system on most of my guitars; it's a complete game changer

(CLOCKWISE) Yatovitz with Silverstone bassist Rowland Sallee and matching '67 Fender Coronado in Antigua finish.

Yatovitz as a kid, with an adoring "audience," requisite Zeppelin and Hendrix posters, and his Les Paul. "I hadn't lowered the strap to Jimmy Page depths yet, but I was enjoying a fresh set of .007s!" he said.

Yatovitz onstage with Chris Isaak.

for me as a musician. I have come very close to the perfect guitar with the Yatocaster, though now I'm excited to hear how a Callaham vintage-style bridge will function with a light body, stainless frets, and such, as opposed to the Skyway bridge.

**Are you a pedal guy or more straight into the amp?**

Pedal guy, through and through. Over the years, I've used everything from rack/pedalboard loop-switching rigs to simple pedalboards to multi-effects. I tried so many tape-unit simulators, but the only thing I found remotely close to the mojo of the Fulltone Tube Tape Echo I used for years is the Strymon El Capistan. The Fulltone TTE has that exceptional tube preamp, and I miss that; even in bypass mode, everything sounds amazing through the TTE. Now, I have a nice, tight setup and my tech doesn't need to change tapes, or clean and demagnetize heads. Strymon left no stones unturned. I did a lot of comparing, and they nailed it. I'm also using their Timeline for my stereo delays. It does great tape, too, but you have to run it mono to get that focused, true sound. So I use both. I also have their Blue Sky reverb, which sounds huge and easily replaces my big Eventide rack unit.

I also have been digging the Mojo Hand Colossus for Big-Muff-style sounds – way more versatile and really musical. I just got a Paul Cochrane Timmy pedal... Wow! It plays really well with others. That's a pedal I could use with any amp in the studio just to make everything bloom, as well as combining it with an Home Brew Electronics Power Screamer or Wampler pedal through a clean amp. On the utilitarian front, I



**9)** Yatovitz appreciates the single-coil pickup on this very art-deco '61 National Studio 66. "It honks and squonks like nobody's business, it's great for adding texture."  
**10)** Yatovitz keeps this Koll Jr. Glide tuned to D.  
**11)** Yatovitz uses this Italia 12-string on tour. It has a pair of DiMarzio pickups and, for him, more-comfortable string spacing than a

Rickenbacker 12-string.  
**12)** Yatovitz's first Koll "Yatocaster," with stainless-steel frets, quartersawn maple neck, Pau Ferro fretboard, Villex Mid-boost circuit, Nordstrand pickups, and prototype Skyway vibrato.  
**13)** This Skyway prototype bears no serial number and was stolen from the stage at the Azkena Festival, in Spain, in 2010. "Its bridge is a unique prototype; no other whammy-bar

bridge looks like it," said Yatovitz. "The face of the body has a unique, silver-swirl finish with a matching pickguard, its inlay material is from the Fender factory in Fullerton, California, the back of the body is painted opalescent white, and the neck and headstock is birdseye maple."  
**14)** Yatovitz's late-'60s Fender Twins have been rewired to blackface specifications.

use a Durham Sex Drive boost and a TC Electronics Nova Dynamics for multi-band compression early in the chain, then channel B as a gate after the overdrives. The Visual Sound volume pedal is my best friend, giving me, the front of house engineer, and the rest of the band consistent levels for each song night after night. If you like to play with consistent levels and still have headroom for an extra push or swell here and there, it's a must have. Otherwise, you put your volume pedal somewhere in the middle—you're guessing. We use in-ear monitors, so it's tough, as apparent levels are not always true to what the front of house gets. A Peterson Strobostomp takes care of tuning.

This year's touring rig is definitely my simplest with Isaak, and though it lacks some program-mability, it and a couple of well-placed Option Knobs give me the control I need.

**What part do amplifiers play in crafting your musical persona?**

In the studio, I use a lot of different amps and guitars – Marshalls, Voxes, Fenders, boutique amps like Juke or Bad Cat or Matchless, and smaller vintage amps. I love my Fender VibroKings, and have a 50-watt '73 Marshall JMP that is the bomb! For live shows, I use two Fender Twin Reverbs and one Deluxe Reverb. Nothing beats those tweaked, modded, and well-maintained amps I tour with. We do a lot of fly-in shows overseas, for TV, radio, etc. and it's easy to rent Fenders, which have that legendary sparkle, perfect for clean sounds I need for Isaak. But then the challenge

then becomes how to replicate tones for all those tunes which were recorded using Les Paul guitars with Marshalls? Until recently, the answer was real tube overdrives like the Duncan Twin Tube or the Vox Cooltron – both over-the-top boosts. I tried countless boutique solid-state stomp boxes, some which sounded really good until I A/B'd them with real tube-distortion pedals. But the problem with real tube pedals is because we work so much, they were always being sent for re-tubing; the pedal's tone would change over the course of a tour as the tubes would wear down. Fair enough... they're light bulbs, after all, but I prefer consistent tone and less work for my tech. I then discovered the Wampler Ecstasy (now called the Euphoria) and

I can't say enough about how much I dig those. So, this year marks a shift, as I dig my touring overdrive tones like never before – all through clean Fender amps!

**If you're just hanging around your house, how much do you pick up a guitar and play?**

It really varies. I keep a '34 Gibson L-50 by my bed... I've written a lot on that. I basically work on original song ideas when they arrive, and when that happens, it can last a few hours or a few minutes. And I keep little recording devices on hand at all times, ready to go. If I have to find a battery, the idea may be lost by the time I get it. I just play songs pretty much, I don't "practice," per se. Sometimes, I'll play jazz standards or drums or piano for a bit, whatever.

But now that I'm telling you myself, I'm starting to re-think my habits!

**What do you do for fun when you're not playing, recording, touring, or writing music?**

I practice meditation and a certain kind of energy healing work originating from the spiritual side of yoga. I didn't expect or seek that, things just unfolded on my path, and I met some amazing people who have helped me beyond words. It all fits perfectly with the rest of who I am. I do it while I play music, too. The rest is more the usual things one would imagine – wife, friends, family, nature, movies... Life hasn't been without the requisite challenges, but I'm very grateful, and I seem to be holding up so far!

Yatovitz's perspective on music goes beyond even Isaak's varied palate. His performances are accessible and authentic, and he has an obvious appreciation for the guitar and the music he helps make; he is every bit the well-rounded, intelligent, versatile musician.

"It's almost impossible to find a guitar man who can really master rock and roll and my more-soulful style, then do it night after night onstage, in the studio, on radio, and on TV with the camera starin' you down," said Chris Isaak, the man he has backed for almost 15 years. "On top of that, you have to fit in with the rest of the clowns on a tour bus. I'm glad to say Hershel fits the bill in every way. He loves to put on a show when he plays, and he is always ready to hit the stage and he sings pretty good, too!" VG