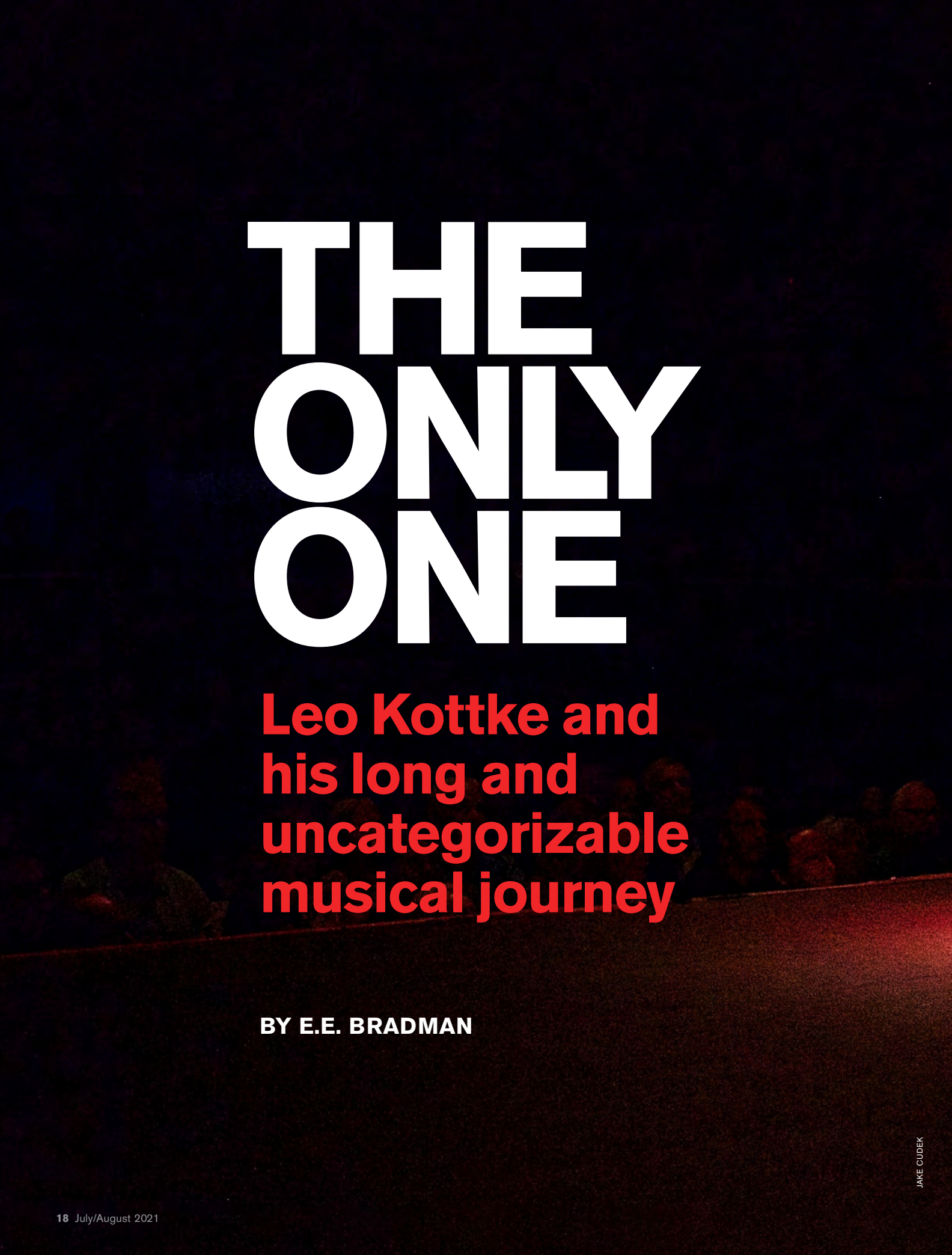
THE ONLY ONE

Leo Kottke and his long and uncategorizable musical journey

BY E.E. BRADMAN



JAKE CUDEK

"In the last 50 years, I haven't been off the road for more than two months," says Leo Kottke. "Sometimes I think I'd love to never see another airport. But you know what? It never stops being a surprise that somebody wants to pay me to play."

Surprising words, indeed, from a man whose adventures on acoustic guitar have inspired at least three generations of musicians. A road trip through the places Kottke has visited since *6- and 12-String Guitar* put him on the map in 1969 is dizzying: There are solo gems (1973's *My Feet Are Smiling*, 1981's *Guitar Music*, 1999's *One Guitar, No Vocals*, 2004's *Try and Stop Me*); full-band jams (including 1974's *Ice Water* and *Dreams and All That Stuff*, as well as 1975's *Chewing Pine*); effulgent '80s grooves (*Time Step*, *My Father's Face*), and big '90s pop (*That's What*, *Great Big Boy*, *Peculiaroso*). There's also a handful of live discs from the '60s through the '90s, a couple of orchestral moments (on 1976's *Leo Kottke* and with composer Stephen Paulus on 1990's *Ice Fields*), and thanks to YouTube, evidence of onstage magic with luminaries like Chet Atkins, Michael Johnson, Jerry Douglas, and Michael Hedges. Kottke's most recent release, *Noon*, is the third in a series of meditative, energetic, and sometimes humorous duets with Phish bassist Mike Gordon.

Throughout Kottke's journey, the one constant has been his love for acoustic guitar. The 75-year-old's discography is an inspiring showcase of dazzling technique in the service of multilayered compositions that are frequently syncopated and harmonically compact, and always self-sufficient. His ability to conjure so many flavors and attract so many labels—country, blues, new age, folk, jazz, pop, Americana—yet not be confined by any of them, speaks to his knowledge of (and ceaseless curiosity about) music beyond genre. Onstage, his gravelly voice and deadpan delivery are such a part of the Leo Kottke live experience that it's hard to believe critics once struggled to accept that this clearly gifted virtuoso wanted to open his mouth, too.

In conversation, Kottke comes across as a combination of self-effacing guitar hero, hilarious OG with Minnesota-tinged Zen wisdom, and eternal road dog with an endless supply of you're-kidding-me stories about some of the greatest musicians of the 20th century. Hearing him reminisce about opening for Mahavishnu Orchestra, being an audience of one for Mississippi Fred McDowell, watching Joe Pass meet Pepe Romero for the first time, his deep love for the music of Carla Bley and Bill Evans, and experiencing Buell Neidlinger play Henry Eccles' *Sonata in G Minor,* makes one wish

Mike Gordon and Leo Kottke

JARED SLOMOFF

Kottke would finally finish the memoir he's been working on forever.

Five decades after he first gained attention for reimagining his instrument's possibilities, Kottke can look back with humor at the 22-year-old who sent *6- and 12-String Guitars* to John Fahey's Takoma label in early 1968. "I see really good luck and privilege, but I hear a different guy in that stuff," Kottke says. "The music isn't different, but the guy is, and that kind of enthusiasm has been replaced by the current enthusiasm. In that sense, nothing has changed, but everything's changed; the imagination is very plastic. It has all the room in the world to go anywhere, and it gave me a life. It still does."

How did you first begin gigging on guitar?
My first job, I think, was at Bassin's Top O' the Walk, in 1961 or '62. At Bassin's, you played for free beer, and the first time I played there, they charged me for my beer. So I got a good lesson right away.

How long had you been playing by then?
I've been playing since I was about 11. I'd been sick, I couldn't get out of bed, and my mother brought me a guitar. I made up an E chord, and that E chord got me out of bed. I couldn't get enough of it, and I still can't. Curiosity—the desire to play around and see something happen—is all you need.

Your curiosity is very focused on acoustic guitar: It seems like you've never been excited about playing electric, for example, or with effects or large ensembles.
I did try playing in a band. I played with the Blackwells at the Domino Bar in a little town in Minnesota, but they fired me the next day.

When was this?
In 1964, probably. I asked them why they were firing me, and they said I didn't dress right. Musicians can be very kind [*laughs*]. I was playing a Rickenbacker 12, and I was completely flummoxed by its narrow neck, but also, I was already used to playing by myself, so I was stepping all over everyone and getting in the way. I still don't know how to do it right, but I'm starting to learn, and fortunately, it's a challenge that Mike [Gordon] is willing to take on.

Over the years, you've played with some killer bass players—including Mike Leech, John Leftwich, Roy Estrada, Billy Peterson, and David Miner—who've done a great job of supporting you while staying out of your way.
Way back when I first got to L.A., I was working with my manager/producer Denny Bruce, and he said, "You know, you're not going to be able to work with these 'ringers.'" I didn't understand at the time, but if someone plays the 2 and the 4 on the roots, it subdivides me and I start sounding kind of dumb. So, he put me with two guys who play jazz: [bassist] Putter Smith, who I saw playing with Thelonious Monk at Shelly's Manne-Hole, and a drummer named Paul Lagos. They were willing to accept that I'm kind of baroque instead of a horn, and because they're jazz guys, they could just float around. Billy [Peterson] would sometimes leave long stretches alone and then play exactly the right note. He never played with the guitar; he played to the piece.

Did you enjoy working with studio bassists like Leech?
Yeah! They'll do their job, and then maybe twice in any given tune they'll throw in a little figure somewhere. You only need one of those figures, and the whole track lifts, and everything you've heard before that little figure is lifted. They're playing with time and space. Leech and Leftwich are geniuses at that.

'Larry Coryell once told me, "Man, you'd really be something if you learned a little music."'
–LEO KOTTKE

Is it fair to say that Mike Gordon's approach is very different than any of the bass players who preceded him?
Mike is playing where other bass players don't. Early on, I told him that I've always liked Bill Evans' idea of having three front guys going at the same time. Mike liked that idea, and we went from there. That's why we both can get busy.

You encouraged him to be less supportive and more interactive and upfront.
Yeah. When we sit face to face in a room and play, I can't get enough of it. He's such a quick reader, and he just knows where everything is. We have some ideas about what we want to do in the future, and I've been jamming in the studio with [Bad Plus drummer] Dave King, primarily to loosen that up and do a lot more improvisation.

Watching you onstage and hearing you segue easily between eras, songs, tunings, and instruments, I think of you as quite an adept improviser.
Not all the time, but more often than I used to be. Sometimes I take off and I crash, and I don't mind that anymore. I'm willing to crash, and the crowd will go with you if you don't complain. And it's worth it. You never play off the stage like you do onstage!

Did you try other instruments before settling on guitar?
I spent two years as a very young kid with the violin. I tried the flute, but my mouth was too big, so I played trombone. I did that for a long time; I took lessons with three different teachers, and I played in marching band, which was a great thing to do, especially in junior high. But I was only able to play one note at a time, and what I heard in that E chord was a lot of notes. I tried to play piano, but it didn't have that thing, you know, that guitar does.

What was it about the guitar that satisfied you?
I heard parts and layers coming in and out, and the guitar could do all that.

Which albums inspired you early on?
You know, it was hard to find records. I found a Heitor Villa-Lobos recording by Laurindo Almeida and I liked it, but it wasn't what I wanted. I heard Sabicas, which was just incomprehensibly great, but that wasn't what I thought I might be able to do, so I just kept fussing with stuff. I learned early on that that was the really critical thing.

Was there a turning point, a light-bulb moment?
One day when I was in seventh or eighth grade, my mom dropped me off at a house and told me to go in. I had no idea why she brought me there, but I walked in and heard someone playing a different kind of fingerstyle, different than classical and flamenco, something I hadn't heard with Sabicas or Almeida. When I finally saw the guitarist—a young guy, probably in college, with a small Martin—I asked what he was playing, and he showed me a pattern.

Now, patterns are the death of a lot of people playing with their fingers; you betray yourself. But this pattern was long and open-ended. It didn't finish, and that's what that guy gave me. When you find a pattern developing, make sure it doesn't end, so you have room for some music. I never did find out who that guy was, but that was a big help.

What a moment! What other players planted seeds?
I had some ideas about rhythm, but the punch and rhythm on John Hammond's first record was a revelation. It really kicked in when I saw Mississippi Fred McDowell. He made you sit down in yourself, rooted in the pocket, and it was profoundly cool.

How can a guitarist work on developing rhythm?
Lean in! Your body will find the groove, and your hand will follow. If it doesn't, well, you're screwed! [*laughs*]

I've seen you mention a Stan Getz quote about playing everything with irreverence. What does that mean to you?
It's the opposite of taking it too seriously. It's not that you lose any of your reverence for music; it's that your performance is going to do a lot better if you don't impose anything on it. I remember one particular night in 1970 when I was playing at the Kennedy Center. Things weren't going the way I wanted them to. Nobody was unhappy; it was OK, but I wasn't feeling that great. I had taped myself that night—which I rarely do—and when I listened back to it, I realized that I was trying too hard. I had to sit back and just play.

What would you say to a guitarist worried about making mistakes onstage?
Relax. You're going to mess up. You're not going to be happy or get it right every time. Just bring what you have, let go of all that, and don't treat it like it's a big deal. You wouldn't be devoting your life to music if it wasn't a big deal to you, but don't treat it that way. Give it a little dignity.

That's a great realization to have so early in your career.
It really helped me a lot. Everything got better after that.

How has your relationship to technique changed over the years? Do you spend time working on exercises before going on the road?
No, I don't. I have learned that I ought to play for a while before I go out because it's better for *you* [*laughs*], but no, I never thought of technique except to get it wrong. I saw a picture of Lester Flatt and he had a thumbpick on, so I put a thumbpick on. Somewhere along the line, I started using fingerpicks, and that gave me tendonitis, which turned my hand into a claw that wouldn't move. It took three years to get rid of that, and it was the most awkward, humiliating, terrible three years I'll ever have. It was worse than being a beginner, because I lost everything I thought I could do.

How did you recover from tendonitis?
I stopped using picks, and I told my hand it had to do something else or I couldn't use it anymore. I knew not to rest my hand, my pinky, or heel; that just made sense to me. I remembered again that the guys who really knew how to do it, like Fred [McDowell] and Son House and John Jackson, most of them just had their fingers and they didn't pay any attention to them. They just did it. So, I loosened up, and that's how I have developed what I have now.

But you were playing during your recovery, right?
The only way I could do it was onstage. I remember the first night without thumbpicks or picks was in Melbourne. It was one of these big, beautiful halls they have in Australia, and the place was sold out. I walked on and started playing, and it was like a mouse in the sink: "Tinky tink tink"—there was just nothing. Oh, god! It was rough.

How do you feel about open tunings these days?
I've kind of abandoned them. I still use them to play some of the hits, but I'm more inclined to use concert tuning and tune one or two strings differently. There's a quality to playing in an open tuning that shows itself, and you don't hear that in concert tuning; you hear the player show himself or herself. I like that better. I get a little tired of open tunings, but sometimes, somebody will come along and do something that makes me wonder why I ever dropped them. I like Andy McKee, who plays in concert tuning and in open tunings. He breaks it up.

Do you listen to current players?
I am terribly behind. Somebody else has to force me [to check out other players] because I usually have my head in the guitar. What I find out tends to be from other players that I know or bump into. I used to be a record freak who'd just grab all kinds of stuff. Not so much anymore. But I really like Julian Lage.

Do you hear your influence in other places?
I have, and it's really nice to hear. I don't care

if they do it right, and I don't care what level they are or anything. I like that the tune appeals to somebody.

Did you ever have formal training in harmony or theory?
People I greatly admire and often envy have taken the time to study harmony and theory, which has always seemed like the wrong word to me. Larry Coryell once told me, "Man, you'd really be something if you learned a little music." I didn't think of that as an insult; I thought it was great. And I do know a little more music than I used to.

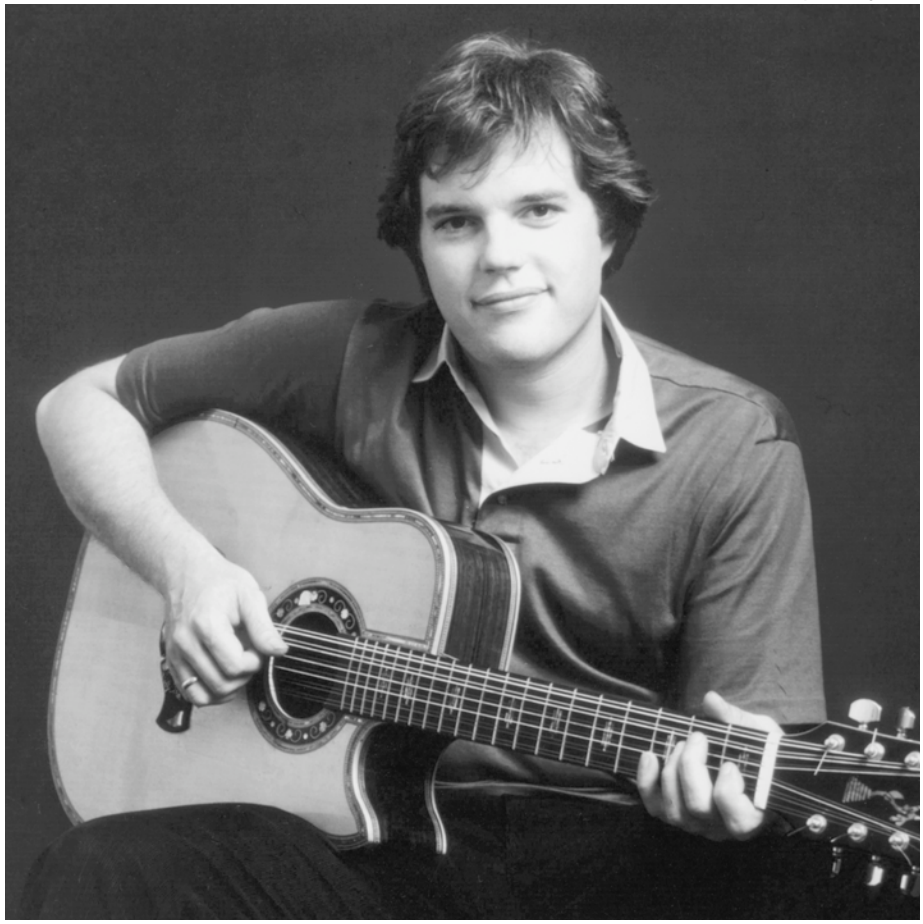
You seem to have a good relationship with Kevin Muiderman and his guitars.
I met Kevin 14 years ago. If I want to try something, Kevin will build a guitar along those lines; he allows me to make suggestions. I love a zero fret because it just seems to make sense, and not many people are willing to try it, but Muiderman's happy to punch one up. I've always wanted to try using an ebony saddle to tame the jangle on a 12-string, and now I've got a Muiderman 12-string with an ebony saddle. It worked great. He's building regular spruce tops with composite bracing, and I'm thinking about maybe thickening the tops a little bit more.

Are you still playing your signature Taylors?
Yeah, I still have the six and the 12.

How would you say your ears have changed over the years?
What I want to hear in a guitar is different than it was way back then. Now I want clarity most of all, and next to that, I need texture. Texture is like personality—it varies a lot, even within a brand, from guitar to guitar. For me, the texture I want is something like what rosin does for a bow. I don't mean the tap tone, exactly, but if you can hear your finger pads kind of crisp on the top, that's the texture that I really love. That's something I was unaware of in the beginning.

When I think of your signature texture, I think of the 12-string. How often do you play 12s these days?
Not as much, because of that clarity thing, but I still need it. I was nothing but a 12-string guy for a long time, so it's very odd to find myself playing more six-string. There's something about tuning a 12-string, and there's also something about how much I can ask my hands to do. One of the reasons I'm trying out the Muiderman 12 is the lower bout. I'm thinking maybe I ought to lower my shoulder. I don't have any problems with it yet, but it's a weird way to sit for an hour and a half while you're really getting into it. So that's one reason I'm backing off on the 12 at the moment.

Kottke in a 1970s publicity shot



CAPITOL RECORDS ARCHIVES

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–LEO KOTTKE

How has your approach been influenced by playing with your fingers and duetting with Mike?
I want to hear the note and I want to hear some bottom, but it has to be clear so I don't screw up Mike or another bass player by being in their range; you've got to watch it if you're playing with all your fingers. If I play like I'm playing a horn, I can respect the bass player.

How do your strings help you get the sound you want?
My John Pearse strings really shine; they have a little more of that rosin-y thing. I'm using Pearse lights on the six, and on the 12 I use the same six-string set and then build my own octaves depending on time, place, what I'm hearing, or what I'm having trouble with.

And you've used a Sunrise pickup forever.
I have, but in the last couple years, K&Ks are sounding good to me. They give me a chance to clear up the low mids, giving me a more vivid bass note, which is exactly what I didn't think they could do.

As we gradually recover from the pandemic shutdown, what projects are you most looking forward to?
Getting onstage and playing. With Dave King, I'm exploring rhythm and improvisation. I'm used to playing tunes, so jamming is a brand-new thing for me. There might be an album one day, but we have no idea.

How do you feel about leaving home and getting back on the road?
I feel more at home sitting in a hall and playing than practically anywhere. It's really an ancient thing: Somebody walks on stage, and people listen. It still gives me chills. **AG**