

Interview with Damir Simic Shime

by David Konow
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As musicians, many of us are lucky to be surrounded by our peers and influences. Imagine, if you will, the horror of growing up in a place where you have to not only leave the city or state, but cross international lines in order to get new music. Damir Simic Shime grew up in Croatia before moving to America at the young age of 22. He hasn't "made it big" yet, but he's gained several endorsement deals and has released albums through Warner Chappell and his own label.



What was it like growing up in Croatia?

Growing up in the Socialist regime at the time, it was very hard to get a hold of any foreign-made music. I mean, we had a few shops, you could find the Beatles, but that was about as good as it got. If I wanted to buy anything cool like Van Halen I had to figure out how to travel to Italy or Austria.

The way it started with me is, there was a lot of old footage of Deep Purple, you know—they would show old concert films at the local clubs. So it went from that to AC/DC and from AC/DC it went to Eddie Van Halen. And that just blew my mind because Eddie, at that time, had just elevated guitar-playing to the “nth degree” at the time. And that was my first big true influence on the guitar. Anyway, that's kind of how I got acquainted with all these great guitar players of that era.

So what brought you to America?



Those guys also inspired me to move to The United States of America, which I did back in '91. It was a really far-fetched idea for any 22 year old to move to LA—even if you're from Wisconsin, that's a big step in your life. In a country like where I was growing up, it was almost like saying “Hey dude, I'm gonna move to the moon.” So I sold all my gear at the time, when I moved here I had like, I don't know, \$5000 in my pocket, which was like the most amount of

money I'd ever seen in my life, which really wasn't that much money. But it gave me enough money to come to the American soil, to rent an apartment, to start living and paying for my food. I enrolled into the summer session at Guitar Institute of Technology, which was the easiest way for me to obtain a visa.

Right after I got off the plane, I was featured in a guitar magazine back in '91, and that was like the first recognition for me. Then, when I signed a deal with Warner Bros, I had basically been two months on American soil. It was just like a dream come true! So everything appeared to be like phenomenal right off the get go. The problem is that a few months later Kurt Cobain came on the scene, and when he did, he single-handedly removed guitar soloing from the mainstream. Since then, for the most part, it did not exist. And soloing only just recently started creeping back in maybe in the past three, four years. And with Guitar Hero, the cool thing to do is to imitate soloing. So I think things are actually as good as they've been since 1991.

How did you feel when soloing ended, did you think you needed to switch gears?

No, not really. I never really had any serious thoughts of joining any band or doing any band project. I cannot see myself playing rhythm guitar 90 percent of the song and have maybe my 16 bar solo.

So to me it's irrelevant, I always knew that the size of the guitar following is relatively small, and I always liked to compare that world with boxing. Like you got a champion, and the guy's making millions of dollars and you've got the contender, and that guy gets paid pretty darn good for doing one fight. Then the number five or seven guy on the list is a guy that boxes at a local gym, teaches kids how to box, struggles to get some endorsements so he gets his like free gloves and whatever.

So you can translate that exactly to the shredding instrumental music too, it's exactly the same. You've got guys like Satriani and guys like Eric Johnson, but after that all the guys that you may see now in guitar magazines, it's like everybody's basically struggling to get their acts together, get it across, they're stretching themselves to various other venues, how to make money with music. Whether it's like doing clinics, whether it's writing articles for magazines, whether it's giving private lessons. But that being said, I know I'll be playing guitar until I die, whether I play it in my room or on stage in front of 200, 300, or 500 people.

When did you get the DiMarzio endorsement?



The DiMarzio endorsement, I also got very early at that time—I can't remember the exact date, but it was like within the first year. I gotta say, they've been extremely supportive. And it's only in America where somebody recognizes your talent, and even though they don't see like a return of their investment or whatnot, these guys have been behind me. I mean they've sent me literally hundreds of pickups for all these years. Larry put me in several ads a few years ago, which I'm really proud of, because he put me there neck to neck with all my heroes such as Yngwie and Satriani at the time. And the fact is that I'm still not a famous guitar player by any means in those terms, but I do have a solid following in what I do.

How were you able to get guitar training in Croatia?

One of the things I didn't mention is my dad was a guitar player. He was more of a jazz guitar player, so I didn't really have an interest to become a player similar to what my dad was doing at the time. I was lucky enough that my dad had a good hi-fi system, which was also not so common in those days. But anyway, what I did is, I was acquiring those LPs and vinyl from, let's say Van Halen, that was the first thing I was trying to cut my teeth on. And I had like a big reel-to-reel. So I would record in a higher speed and slow it down and listen to it and try to figure it out. So basically that's how I started figuring out those intricate, fast, complicated licks.

And that's really my influence, trying to figure out stuff on my own. Obviously a lot of things I didn't figure out exactly at the time, which I think worked in my advantage 'cause if you learn something exactly note for note today, it can be a blessing, or it can be a curse. Because now you know exactly how he does it—so you're not really putting any brain power how to figure something out. Even if you figure it out wrong, it actually may be cool because now you kind of made it your own. So if you deviate from it a little bit, you just have all this arsenal of cool licks and stuff that are not rip-offs per se, because they become by default your interpretation of it.

How many guitars do you have?

A hundred plus. I have a bunch of cool vintage Strats like a '58, a few '69s and what not. When it comes down to little gadgets and pedals, I am a total pedal junkie. I've got hundreds of pedals.



Why do you prefer Fender?

I'm primarily a single coil guy. I like Les Pauls, too. I've got several Les Pauls. Sometimes I have this expression that a Strat can be like my wife and a Les Paul is my mistress, because a Les Paul is an instant gratification guitar. When I grab a Les Paul after I've been playing Strats for a long time, it feels like somebody just like shifted into a higher gear in terms of how much easier for me it is to get solid tone out of it.

But it after a little time I just like go back to playing my old Strats. That certain "bluesy tone" is what I like about them. There was a guy that used to work here at Bogner [where Damir works as general manager] that told me like a month ago, "You're the only guy that kind of has Stevie Ray Vaughn tone and shreds on it." So that's kind of like the idea of my tone. I really like that classic, bluesy, Fender tone.

Some people are saying you can do better without a major label—is that why your album is on your own label?

Yes and no. A lot of people say those things just out of pure despair because they cannot get the major label deal. The major label—what does that mean? That means you have an enormous machine behind you. You have enormous PR or possibilities, they have open doors to promote your stuff and to make the world know that your stuff is out. But the beauty of today's internet and YouTube and MySpace and whatnot is you can do so much on your own and you can make it work. So that's the beauty of it.

If you sell 10,000 CDs on MySpace you're doing better than selling through a major?

That's a given. But it's not easy to sell 10,000 records on your own. That requires a lot of work on your side or you need some help in that! But if you're doing it on your own that means that you're keeping the majority of the profits. For George Lynch that might work 'cause that guy could sell on his own probably 30 to 40 thousand copies, which means if he releases them himself he can probably make ten dollars of pure profit on the CD. So just multiply 30,000 times ten. This guy can bank \$300,000 on one CD on his own because he's got a bankable name. So it requires a lot of dedication and work too.

There's a good number of people out there that know that I exist and they kinda like follow what I'm doing if I have anything new out, whatnot. So that obviously helps a lot in terms of self-promotion or selling through my CDs.

As for now, there is no like bigger plan there than that.