

There are metal guitarists who live only for speed-socks and spandex. Then there is **Vito Bratta**—the rock of White Lion.

White Lion came to my attention under the most banal circumstances. It was during one of those special "special" preserved for staring blankly at my feet while meditating on a degenerate beer 'n' Cheetos lifestyle. MTV yammered in another group of androgynous yokels grimacing pointlessly. "Great," I monotoned, "more cookie-cutter, twang-bar guitar jockeys riding pell-mell on Miss Clairol's hellbound train."

Since I have an itchy trigger finger and a "guilty until proven innocent" attitude, I decided to state their case or risk termination. Just as I was ready to change channels and scan cable for some hot aerobics programming, one of the MTV images uncorked a guitar solo that sent chills down my spine. Respectfully, I checked the closing credits. The song was "Wait" and the band was White Lion. A few days later I purchased their debut, *Pride*; a single spin confirmed that the break on "Wait" was indeed some pretty snaky poetry.

BY BRAD TOLINSKI

Photograph by Mark Weiss/MWA

LONGSIGHT

HELL

VITO BRATTA



Bratta taps out
some sonic
Morse Code
on his '88
Steinberger

GUITARIST VITO BRATTA's work is immediately distinctive for its strong sense of melody, thoughtful use of dynamics and pick attack, as well as a graceful, near-metronomic sense of time that sounds neither forced nor rigid. Although he's definitely not from the Malmsteen school of high baroque, Bratta's liquid phrasing is in spirit reminiscent of certain passages from Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. The elegant trills over the A chord in the ninth measure of the solo in "Wait" and the call-and-response of the alternating legato/detache phrasing in "Don't Give Up" suggest a guitar player who understands music in a classic, rather than classical sense.

"Little Fighter," a song off White Lion's latest release, *Big Game*, solidifies Bratta's hot-shot standing, and adds some bonus points as well. The solo calls to mind a word rarely associated with a distorted guitar—*joyous*. As the solo passage in "Little Fighter" glides by, you *have* to believe it is played by someone who loves his instrument.

But the real bargain for guitar players in

**"MY SOLOS AREN'T
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Big Game is Vito's rhythm work. Without diminishing White Lion's rock grassroots, his intelligent use of chord inversions and fingerstyle set the band apart, and will hopefully become food for thought for a growing generation of rockers looking to cruise some new avenues.

Six months after my discovery of White Lion, a somewhat bleary-eyed Vito Bratta greets me in the lobby of one of New York's semi-swank hotels and makes me an offer I can't refuse: breakfast. Not

wanting to conduct the formal interview until we quaff a few mugs of strong coffee, I make a feeble effort to steer the conversation to commonplaces: the weather, his plane ride and other general yadda yadda. But this is nearly impossible to sustain, as we are presently joined by Guitar World Music Czar Dave Whitehill. Whether I like it or not we're off and running, swapping guitar stories like three sailors at a White Castle burger joint.

GUITAR WORLD: On *Big Game* you dropped quite a few of the hyperactive fills that were standard procedure on *Pride*.

VITO BRATTA: The rhythm guitar took care of most of the dead spaces. I've been developing a more personalized approach to chord voicings and inversions. The problem is, these voicings don't always sound good through a distorted amp. So instead of using more conventional inversions, I'll arpeggiate the chord. This allows me to mute certain notes within the chord, eliminating some of the ugly overtones you get when you play close har-

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monies with distortion. The end result is the arpeggios fill up most of the excess space that, in the past, would've been occupied with a lead line. The great thing about this technique is that it allows my songwriting to open up. If I want to use a diminished chord, it's no problem. Previously, a C diminished chord would have sounded terrible on a Marshall or on my ADA preamp. It's weird; sometimes I feel like I'm playing for the amp. On the other hand, I'm sure quite a few styles and techniques were an outgrowth of equipment limitations. Al Di Meola once said his muting technique was a result of not wanting to wake anyone when he was practicing late at night! Sometimes good things come out of compromise and determination.

GW: Would you say much of *Big Game* is an outgrowth of your rhythm technique?

BRATTA: It would seem that way, but it has more to do with my songwriting. I wanted to be able to experiment with different harmonies and chords, so I had to figure out how to get away with it within the confines of amp distortion.

GW: Another unusual aspect of your rhythm technique is the extensive use of fingerpicking, particularly on the new record. How did that evolve?

BRATTA: That was another outgrowth of my songwriting. I usually write songs by myself, then play them for Mike [Tramp, *White Lion* vocalist] so he can write lyrics. Because I want to give Mike the most accurate picture I can, I'm forced into creating a fairly complete sketch with my guitar alone. I know an easier way would be to use multi-track tape machines, but I'm not into that. So when I start thinking of the basic feel, I'll come up with a bass part and play it on the low strings with my thumb. Next, I'll create a chord progression and try to coordinate the chordal movement so that I can play the bassline simultaneously. Finally I'll add a suggested melody line on the top. The only way to have all three things happening at once is through some form of fingerpicking.

Since this approach really excites me, I didn't want to drop it when we went into the studio. That's why my rhythm guitar parts have a lot of movement. If I was going to use the typical heavy metal approach on something like "Little Fighter" [see transcription, p. 131], I would just chunk away on the low E and A strings.

GW: Many of these concepts were evident on *Pride*, but the execution was more rigid.

BRATTA: The reason for that is kind of complicated. I wrote the whole *Pride* record on acoustic guitar. Then I went into the studio and started playing all these wonderful chord inversions through a Marshall, and it came out sounding like

shit. So instead of rewriting the whole album I kept the voicings, but did a whole lot of muting. *Big Game*, on the other hand, was written with my Steinberger in dressing rooms across the U.S., so I had a chance to audition all my ideas on an amp way ahead of time. As a result, I was able to create sympathetic voicings so I didn't have to mute the strings as much. The overall sound is more legato and less staccato, and the pre-production made me more at ease in general.

GW: Your latest work doesn't sound as heavy as it did in the past, yet it does sound more aggressive.

BRATTA: After touring with AC/DC and Aerosmith for a year, I felt a little more aggressive. Some nights I would come up with something pretty, but after seeing Angus bash it out, I would say, "Fuck 'pretty'."

GW: The strains of folk music in "Cry For Freedom" are surprising.

BRATTA: It wasn't really calculated, but what I wanted to create was something like a compilation record where every song sounded like a different band.

GW: That idea is almost a throwback to Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* or the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*. It's an expression of doing what's right for the song rather than worrying about maintaining a "band sound."

BRATTA: To me that keeps the interest. I don't want to turn White Lion into a band that's exclusively...[plays power chords in straight eighth-note rhythm], and I'll never limit myself to someone else's conception of what White Lion is or should be. I'm a songwriter. If I write a country and western tune, I'll play it. I could write a song for George Michael or for Exodus. Just because I have long hair and play through Marshalls doesn't mean I'm limited to going "dub, dub, dub, dub."

Ultimately, it doesn't matter what I write. All it takes for a song to become White Lion is having the band come in and play it. That's where the transformation takes place. We're much more versatile than people think.

GW: What was your overall musical concept for the new record?

BRATTA: I was aiming for variety. More and more, it's important to me to give each song its own character. I wanted to write a great car song, another that would be good when you're with your girlfriend, another that would be good for hanging out...

On the first record, *Fight To Survive* [Grand Slamm Records], I was really green and didn't know anything. *Pride* was a small step in the right direction. But on this record, I knew exactly what I was after and what I was doing.

GW: How do your songs evolve?

BRATTA: Most of my songs come out of my daily practice. I'll stumble across a melodic line that functions as a germ of an idea. The tempo of the tune will usually

depend on the song written previously. If I've just finished a ballad, I'll usually go in the opposite direction because I'll have that slow-feel out of my system. Then I'll try something heavy, and so on. Before I know it, ten completely different songs are finished.

GW: Because of the dramatic nature of "Cry For Freedom," it would have been easy to play a corny, clichéd solo in the upper register. You show a lot of maturity and restraint by inserting that bruising, low-end riff instead.

BRATTA: If I wrote an entire record and didn't hear a solo in my head, there wouldn't be one. In "Cry For Freedom" I wanted to almost lull the listener into a daydream, then shake him up and punch him in the nose. It's hard to create the tension found on "Cry For Freedom," both compositionally and technically. You have to start quietly and build by using varying degrees of distortion, which can get tricky in the studio. You also have to consider using an acoustic or nylon-string guitar to achieve certain dynamics. Some people I know wouldn't even enter-



tain the idea of using a clean electric sound, let alone an acoustic.

GW: Did you do the volume swells on that song via pinky or pedal?

BRATTA: The studio dictates using a pedal because guitar volume pots tend to be too noisy. Live, I'll use the guitar's volume knob. You'll never hear a little noise in an arena.

GW: How do you plan to handle your guitar overdubs in concert?

BRATTA: I approach overdubs cautiously. I try to craft them so they don't call too much attention to themselves or become signature riffs. For example, when we play "When The Children Cry" live, nobody misses the background swells that are on the album. Our producer, Michael Wagener, is good at helping me make certain parts almost subliminal. Another trick is to make each part strong enough to stand on its own—with or without overdubs. In the beginning of the recorded version of "Wait," I'm playing both chords and an arpeggiated figure, but in concert I just play the chords and, again, nobody seems to mind.

GW: Do you do much doubling?

BRATTA: You have to, occasionally. For example, "If My Mind Is Evil" starts really

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raunchy, so what do you do when it gets to the chorus? Sometimes you have to add two more electric guitars and maybe an acoustic to build dynamics.

GW: One of the things that distinguishes your approach to soloing is your thoughtful use of pick dynamics, like on "Don't Give Up" and "Little Fighter."

BRATTA: I like to balance out the creamy hammer-on passages with staccato lines. The pick suggests real aggression, and I really enjoy hearing players like Gary Moore who use the pick well. However it's not one of those things I analyze closely—it comes naturally. I just try to play the things I wish I heard in other players.

If anything, my playing tends to be too smooth; but I was never into that Ted Nugent sound. Ted's sound is great, but it's too harsh. I've always understood Van Halen's description of getting a "brown" sound, and that warm, round tone is what I've looked for. When I went on tour with AC/DC I was running 2,700 watts of power and you could still stand in front of my amp. Angus was using the same kind of amp I was, running pretty close to the

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same power, but you couldn't even get close to his system because it was so biting.

GW: You seem to be using a little more midrange.

BRATTA: That happened at the mixing board. For years I played in a band that didn't have a bass player, so I created a sound that would appear as a "V" shape on a graphic eq. In other words, lots of bass and lots of treble. But when I went into the studio, Michael, our producer, said, "Listen to your sound." I asked, "Where is it?" You could barely hear the guitar. He explained that the cymbals were eating up all my high-end and the bass guitar was masking the low-end. Because my set-up lacked midrange frequencies, my sound was being swallowed up. I started to realize that it was the midrange that cut through. I was forced into creating a new sound—one that had more mids, yet retained a creamy, round tone

The real trick was to avoid that "honky" midrange. Some people like that weird "wah-wah pedal that's halfway down" sound. George Lynch uses that a lot, but I never really liked it.

I owe a lot to my Steinberger as well. When I used to play Strats, I'd play one note and get a bunch of bizarre overtones. I'm not sure what it is, maybe it's the graphite neck, but when you hit a single note on a Steinberger you hear just one note very cleanly—even when it turns into feedback. It's just a great guitar and it helps me get that smooth tone that I look for. Everything is still evolving. I don't think I've really developed a distinctive sound, tone-wise. If I sound unique, it's more in my fingers. When we did *Big Game* there was no attempt at duplicating the sound of *Pride*.

GW: You're not much of a special-effects man, but what outboard gear do you use live?

BRATTA: On the next tour I'll probably use some reverb. Other than that, nothing else except the chorus and distortion built into my ADA MP-1 preamp [see *axology*]. I hate complicated set-ups; just pull out my three-pound rack with three ADA's and I'm ready. An electric guitar is just an amplified acoustic, so I don't believe in adding flangers and a ton of special effects.

GW: But you frequently use chorusing.

BRATTA: What you hear on the record isn't always my choice. I record everything unaffected. Our producer adds a lot of things during the mix. I trust him, though, because he does it with taste. I don't have it in me when it comes to effects, all I see is a bundle of wires and it drives me crazy.

GW: Speaking of effects, I notice you don't use a vibrato bar.

BRATTA: I felt it was holding me back. Instead of thinking of something melodic or musically challenging, it was too much of a temptation to just grab the bar and go *uaaaaaang*. I think the bar holds a lot of players back. I don't even pull it out when I'm practicing.

GW: The idea of covering the old Golden Earring song, "Radar Love," was great. How did that happen?

BRATTA: The idea had been kicking around for a while, then Atlantic requested something special for a European B-side. We were shocked because Europe isn't like the U.S.—singles never sell over there. The idea of doing a B-side seemed crazy, a waste of time and a waste of a good song. We knew nobody would ever hear it! It was really a pain because I don't write 30 songs a year and pick the 10 best. What you hear on our records is pretty much all I've written. So I suggested we do a cover of "Radar Love." After we recorded it I said, "Y'know, this sounds pretty good." Now it's our CD bonus song.

GW: I liked it for its spontaneity—it has a real sense of humor.

BRATTA: It's loose because it was designed as a throwaway. It was like, "Who cares if we fuck up? Nobody is gonna hear it, it's in Europe [laughs]." Things like "Radar Love" are good because it's easy to get too fussy and caught up in the paranoia of being the latest "hot" guitarist. You start looking over your shoulder [pantomimes someone being followed].

GW: Is being a "guitar hero" really hell? You seem pretty down-to-earth.

BRATTA: It's not hell, but it can get strange to deal with people's positive and negative expectations. You just have to feel confident that what you're doing is valid. I never set out to be the best. I just thought it would be cool to be somewhere in the top 50. The truth is, I don't really feel pressured because my solos aren't about dexterity; they're about personality and composition. Those are things that people can't take from you. It gets back to what I was saying before: If the song is good, then I'm happy. I don't worry if I'm burning all the time. The only time the "guitar hero" thing comes into play is if I'm going for the great solo—then it has to be perfect. But I'm just a kid from Staten Island. A year-and-a-half ago I was playing in Brooklyn. I used to lay in bed picturing myself on the cover of a guitar magazine, or even having my name mentioned. Now that it's happening I'm going to try and enjoy it. It's wild. ●



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