

The Allan Holdsworth Solo Album Collection recently released

An appreciation of virtuoso guitarist Allan Holdsworth

Kevin Reed
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The recent limited release on vinyl of Allan Holdsworth's remastered solo album collection provides an opportunity to review and appreciate the career of one of his generation's most influential and gifted guitarists and musicians. Holdsworth died at age 70 on April 15, 2017.

The remastered LP set, entitled *The Allan Holdsworth Solo Album Collection*, includes all 11 of his studio recordings from 1982 to 2001, and one live recording from Tokyo in 2003. The collection was previously released as a CD box set called *The Man Who Changed Guitar Forever!* just eight days before the artist's tragic death in Vista, California (near San Diego) from heart disease.

Holdsworth was internationally recognized as a guitar virtuoso in the jazz fusion and progressive rock genres. He had a unique melodic sensibility and idiosyncratic solo technique and was renowned for his legato playing style—with smooth and sometimes rapid transitions between notes—that produced an unusually fluid guitar sound.

Holdsworth's compositions and improvisations also featured highly complex chord progressions and scales. Although he was self-taught, Holdsworth's understanding of harmony and music theory was advanced, and he often used unconventional chord shapes. Some of his unorthodox voicings were derived from his physical stature: Holdsworth was very tall, had large hands and could stretch his fingers across the fret board in ways that many guitar players could not.

Holdsworth's solo recordings are mostly instrumental, although there are some songs that include vocals, most of which were written and performed by his long-time collaborator Paul Williams. Due to the unusual asymmetry of the harmonics that he uses, many of the songs have an ethereal or mysterious quality to them.

In addition to his solo recordings and performances, Holdsworth worked with a wide range of musicians and groups in the US and Europe and performed on nearly 60 other recordings. In the early to mid 1970s, he played with the jazz rock band Nucleus, the jazz fusion bands Pierre Moerlen's Gong and the Tony Williams Lifetime, and the British rock band Soft Machine.

In 1976, Holdsworth had the first of many confrontations with the official music business when CTI Records released a recording of what he thought was a rehearsal session as an official album, *Velvet Darkness*. He was very angry about the dishonesty involved and loathed the record for the rest of his career. It is not included in the present collection.

In 1977, he performed on violinist Jean-Luc Ponty's *Enigmatic Ocean* which reached Number 1 on the Billboard Jazz album chart. Also in 1977, Holdsworth joined with former King Crimson and Yes drummer Bill Bruford and played on his solo record *Feels Good to Me*.

In 1978, Holdsworth teamed up with Bruford, keyboardist/violinist Eddie Jobson and bassist/vocalist John Wetton to create the progressive rock supergroup U.K. Although U.K. experienced a limited degree of popularity, it was during this time that Holdsworth began to clash with other band members who wanted him to play his guitar solos night after night exactly as they were recorded in the studio. He later said this experience was miserable.

Once he began recording and releasing his solo studio albums, Holdsworth came to the attention of some well-known guitarists who lauded his virtuosity and recognized him as among the greatest, if not the greatest, guitar players of all time. Among the guitarists to appreciate Holdsworth's genius were Eddie Van Halen, who said, "Holdsworth is the best, in my book," and Frank Zappa, who said, "One of the most interesting guys on guitar on the planet is Allan Holdsworth."

At the time of Holdsworth's death, guitarist Steve Vai wrote that his

unique contribution to the electric guitar is unquantifiable. I remember him saying to me once that his goal was to create a catalog of music that was undiluted. Well, that he did. ... Dear Allan, you were extraordinary and from all of us who you've touched so deeply with your brilliance, we are grateful. Rest in deep peace my friend.

Shortly after the release of his first solo album, *I.O.U.*, Eddie Van Halen brought Holdsworth to the attention of Warner Brothers Records. This resulted in a record deal and Holdsworth's second studio release, *Road Games*, an EP, in 1983, which included two songs sung by Jack Bruce (Cream). However, the experience did not improve Holdsworth's relationship with the record business, since he clashed sharply with the Warner Brothers producer over personnel and creative decisions.

Holdsworth was an innovator and was not afraid to try new things. He broke new ground when he became an early adopter of the SynthAxe, an electronic instrument that resembles a guitar. The SynthAxe is a MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) device in which its strings trigger different synthesizer sounds. The SynthAxe also has methods for controlling sound quality parameters that mimic the expressive elements of guitar playing such as note bending and vibrato.

The beauty and expressive potential of the SynthAxe is evident, for example, in the track "Distance vs Desire" on the fifth album in the collection entitled *Sand* from 1987. In this song, like so many others, Holdsworth's melodic genius truly shines.

This writer first became aware of Allan Holdsworth when he appeared on the self-titled debut album of the progressive rock band U.K. in 1978. The opening track from that album, "In the Dead of Night," features a short guitar solo by Holdsworth in which his unique approach is instantly evident. Here is another sample from a later period.

In writing about the legacy of Allan Holdsworth, one is tempted to drift off into the esoterica of scale form and tonal center theory. Holdsworth developed his own symbology for the variants of the Western musical scales that he used most often. He published several books about these scales, including one called *Reaching the Uncommon Chord* in 1987.

However, as Holdsworth was careful to explain, his goal was not the exploration of obtuse musical forms, but to make music and create melodies that could be related to and appreciated.

Even though he became known as a musician's musician, Holdsworth most of all wanted his work to be heard by the broader listening public. In an instructional video he made on his techniques in 1992, Holdsworth said that, although his complex chord-scales have names,

a name is only to transmit the information or communicate it to someone else. And really the communication that we are speaking about is music [in] which you don't shout [out] the changes to the people. They only hear the music and that's the only thing that matters.

Bradford, England on August 6, 1946. He was raised by his maternal grandparents and his grandfather, Sam Holdsworth, was a jazz pianist. In his youth, Allan was exposed to classical and jazz music, and he had said that his early influences included Debussy, Ravel, Chopin, Bartok and Stravinsky and, later, John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

He had wanted to play the saxophone, but his grandfather could only afford to buy him a guitar. In an interview, Allan explained,

An instrument by the nature of its name just means that it's a tool like a spanner, a wrench or a screwdriver. It's something that you can use to get a job done. Because I love music, I ended up trying to do it with this [picking up his guitar]. So, I suppose I'm going to try to spend the rest of my life trying to make the guitar sound like it's not a guitar and that's where the legato thing came in because I just wanted it to be a lot more fluid than it was natural for this particular percussive instrument to be.

Throughout his solo career, Holdsworth maintained a very high level of creative independence, and this was supported by the musicians around him. Meanwhile, he was willing to share his musical discoveries with anyone who wanted to learn them.

However, even though he was celebrated as legendary by fellow artists, Holdsworth never achieved a mass popular following and he was excluded from the fame and fortune of the corporate music and recording industry. While this perhaps speaks to his unwillingness to compromise, it is a fact that the guitarist died in relative poverty and obscurity.



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Allan Holdsworth was born in a working class community in