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MATTHEW MONTFORT'S “PURPLE RAGA”

“IN MY JUNIOR YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL I made a conscious decision to devote myself to music that fused ideas from various world traditions,” says Ancient Future’s Matthew Montfort. To that end, Montfort attended the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, California, in 1977, and studied with South Indian vina master K.S. Subramanian. He also modified his guitar to better accommodate the techniques he was learning. “The vina has frets similar to a scalloped-fretboard guitar,” explains Montfort. “And Subramanian taught me many techniques of pulling the

strings across the frets to create the various note-bending ornaments, which are often combined in very involved ways.” Sometimes, the various world traditions Montfort works with include his own. “I began to think about the intersection between raga and the music of Jimi Hendrix after seeing a photograph of Jimi in the front row of an Indian music concert, his mouth agape in awe of what he was experiencing,” he says. “Then one day a student of mine was having difficulty improvising over the chord changes in “Purple Haze,” and I had the idea that the techniques learned by studying

Indian music would help my student to improvise more effectively. Visit guitarplayer.com to watch Montfort demonstrating the raga he devised from the ‘Purple Haze’ solo, and read the accompanying lesson. —Barry Cleveland

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The Music of Jimi Hendrix Applied to Indian Raga

By *Matthew Montfort*

I began to think about the intersection between raga the music of Jimi Hendrix after seeing a photograph of Jimi in the front row of an Indian music concert, his mouth agape in awe of what he was experiencing.

One day a student of mine was having difficulty improvising over the chord changes in "Purple Haze," and I had the idea that the techniques learned by studying Indian music would help my student to improvise more effectively.

An Indian *raga* is a melodic recipe for a mood: a "super scale" using a set of notes in ascending and descending order, a hierarchy of note importance, and a key phrase that shows the heart of the movement of the raga. I was inspired to create a modern raga based on the guitar solo in "Purple Haze." Before I explain how to use this raga to create your own music that is tonally related to Hendrix's solo, some explanation of the Indian system of music is necessary.

North Indian raga uses a system of solfeggio (i.e. "do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do") known as *sargam* with seven note names per octave, starting with *Sa* (the tonic and main drone note) followed by *Re* (2), *Ga* (3), *ma* (4), *Pa* (5), *Dha* (6) and *Ni* (7). Indian music does not utilize the concept of perfect pitch where absolute note values are recognized. *Sa* can be set to any note, and is normally set to the most convenient place for the instrumentalist or vocalist. Just as in Western music, there are 12 main tones per octave, but there are also microtonal ornaments similar to the use of quarter tones in the blues. Indian raga uses a non-tempered tuning system where *Sa* and *Pa* are tuned a perfect just fifth apart. The other notes are close to the Western just tuning system, but the tuning of individual notes can vary from raga to raga. The word *komal* refers to the minor or flat version of a note, *shuddh* refers the natural or major version, and *tivra* refers to sharp or augmented version. *Sa* (1) and *Pa* (5) cannot be modified. *Re* (2), *Ga* (3) *Dha* (6) and *Ni* (7) can be either *shuddh Re* (M2), *Ga* (M3) *Dha* (M6) or *Ni* (M7), which correspond to the Western major intervals, or *komal re*

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(m2), ga (m3) dha (m6) or ni (m7), which correspond to the Western minor intervals. The note ma (4) can be either shuddh ma (P4), the natural perfect 4th, or tivra Ma (#4), which corresponds to the Western augmented fourth. In a common North Indian notation system, capital letter abbreviations are used for the version of the note that is highest in pitch and lower case letters for the note version lowest in pitch. For example, using this notation system, this is how a Western chromatic scale would be written:

S r R g G m M P d D n N S

Purple Raga

To improvise within Purple Raga, one should first practice the **ascending** and **descending** scales. Notice that the patterns zig zag: they don't simply go straight up and down a scale. This allows a raga to prescribe more than simply a mode and to include melodic instructions within the rule set. The **heart** phrase exemplifies an important melodic pattern for the raga. Try playing sections of the heart phrase in various octaves to emphasize the purple part of the raga.

Ascending:
 P1 (Sa) m3 (ga) P4 - #4 - P4 (ma) P5 (Pa) m7 (ni) P8 (Sa)

Descending:
 P8 (Sa) m7 (ni) P5 (Pa) P4 (ma) m3 (ga) m2 - m3 (ga) m7 (ni) P1 (Sa) P1 - M2 (Re) P1 (Sa) m7 (ni) P1 (Sa)

Heart phrase:
 P5 (Pa) m7 (ni) m3 (ga) P4 (ma) m2 - m3 (ga) m7 (ni) P1 (Sa) P1 - M2 (Re) P1 (Sa) m7 (ni) P1 (Sa)

While one could play "Purple Haze" using these melodic instructions, an unlimited number of improvisations in a similar tonal mood are also possible. On my *Seven Serenades for Scalloped Fretboard Guitar* release, rather than playing "Purple Haze," I instead improvised a contemporary interpretation of the North Indian musical form known as *alap* (a rubato exploration of melody without rhythmic accompaniment). Each raga has a patron god or goddess, which in this case has to be the god of rock guitar. So I serenaded to the spirit of Hendrix while improvising within the raga rules I created inspired by the guitar solo in "Purple Haze." Underneath, the didjeridu drones a chord in overtones: a D7#9, also known as the "Jimi Hendrix chord."

PLAY AUDIO

"Purple Raga" (Montfort) 5:59. Matthew Montfort (scalloped fretboard guitar), Alan Tower (didjeridu). © 2008 Ancient Future Music (BMI). All rights reserved.

View video of Matthew Montfort performing "Purple Raga" [here](#).

As leader of the world music group Ancient Future, Matthew Montfort has devoted himself to the scalloped fretboard guitar since 1978. He spent years of study with some of the world's best musicians, such as vina master K.S. Subramanian, with whom he did an intensive study of South Indian note-bending techniques. He has performed concerts worldwide, from the Festival Internacional de la Guitarra on the golden coast of Spain to the Festival of India in Mumbai. He has worked with many world music legends, including tabla phenomenon Zakir Hussain and Chinese zither master Zhao Hui. Montfort wrote the book Ancient Traditions – Future Possibilities: Rhythmic Training Through the Traditions of Africa, Bali, and India, which has been used by many musicians to improve their rhythm skills.

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