



URGENCY & EXPANSION

WORLD-BEATING NYLON STRINGER LAWSON ROLLINS ON *3 MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT* AND SCORING THE *GOLDEN* SOUNDTRACK

BY JIMMY LESLIE

“‘URGENCY NOW’ IS THE OVERRIDING concept on *3 Minutes to Midnight* [Infinita],” explains contemporary world-jazz artist Lawson Rollins. “You’re alive in the moment trying to express as much as you can, as simply as you can. Everything hits from the get go, and you’ve got the gist of the tune within 30 seconds.”

It’s a real departure from the precision fingerstylist’s past albums where atmospheric intros might meander, tunes tended to go off on tangents, and the composer would occasionally indulge himself in his fleet-fingered ability to rip solos. Rollins’ resolution led to shorter songs with meaningful melodic motifs and more poignant solos laced with judicious threads of shred. He incorporates new plucking techniques to play aptly timed flourishes at supersonic speeds that will make your head spin.

The classically trained maestro, renowned for seamlessly blending various Latin styles, first gained international prominence exploring world rhythms such as rumba, salsa, and samba as a duo with guitarist Dan Young before striking out on his own. Rollins’ fast-impact approach on his sixth solo CD of original compositions might yield him even more success on modern media platforms such as YouTube, where he’s racked up millions of views. But Rollins is also branching out into the more ambient realm of writing for long-form video. He’s currently scoring the soundtrack for *Golden* [Brainstorm Pictures], which finds our nylon-string devotee playing steel-string acoustic, as well as electric guitar.

What made you decide to focus on nylon-string?

I started out on drums, but I always had a primal draw to the guitar. Then, one day, I heard my parents’ old Andres Segovia LP. They had seen him in concert. I checked out a bunch of his CDs from

the library, and immediately fell for the sound of the nylon-string—particularly on the Spanish pieces he played. *My Favorite Works* was a compilation of Segovia playing pieces by some of the great Spanish composers, such as Francisco Tarrega, Enrique Granados, and Fernando Sor. One piece was actually a collection of etudes Fernando Sor wrote for students, and Segovia was very gracious to record these student pieces that were very simple to play. I thought, “Gosh, maybe I can try to actually play one of those.”

What was your first instrument?

I got a hold of Yamaha’s basic model nylon-string—the C40—which was a very playable, durable, and pleasant-sounding guitar for \$100. I still have mine, and Yamaha still makes the C40—although it now costs about \$140. I recently recommended it as a starter nylon-string for a friend. The caveat is that they do tend to make the action on those lower-priced guitars kind of high to compensate for any imperfections on the fretboard. It’s worth spending another \$50 to have a tech lower the saddle, which makes it a lot easier to play.

Why do many nylon-stringers tend to exclusively play nylon-string instruments?

Well, I studied classical guitar with a teacher until I got proficient, and then as I got into my late teens, I started discovering and branching off into playing more rumba, bossa nova, and salsa styles. Once you get into it, you become obsessed with the technique, and your fingernails become very important. Taking that technique over onto an electric guitar or flat-top acoustic can be a real leap. You don’t want to risk breaking your fingernails on the steel strings. And if you don’t learn how to use a pick—which I never did—you’re kind of handicapped by your fingerpicking. I don’t use

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acrylic nails. I prefer the smoother tone of natural nails, so I'd be in trouble if I started picking hard on a steel-string.

It's funny you should bring this up, though, because I used a Gibson J-35 for a short solo on "Mary's Rock," and a little bit on "Island Time." I won the guitar as part of a prize package a couple years ago from the USA Songwriting Competition. I felt compelled to learn how to play it well enough to use on an album. I'm using it a lot more on the soundtrack for the film I'm working on, *Golden*. I also got an electric guitar, which is going to be all over the soundtrack. I'm slowly branching out.

How do you adjust to steel strings?

I don't pluck as hard. I use the classical "rest stroke" technique on nylon-string. It's more of a downward motion, instead of a straight back motion. So when you pluck, say, the high *E* string, instead of simply flicking off the string, your finger will end up "resting" on the *B* string. It's a forceful downward motion that delivers a lot of volume. Applied to a steel-string guitar, it would eventually rip the nail off. I adapt to a more gentle plucking motion with the finger flicking back towards my palm.

Some classical players primarily use that kind of motion, but your primary technique looks almost like fingerstyle bass with most of the focus on the first two fingers.

Right. I use the "picado" technique, which means playing scales really fast using the index and middle fingers, and that's usually a rest-stroke style. I have been incorporating a rather new technique involving the index-, middle-, and ring-fingers to play triplets. You can see it about a minute into the video for "3 Minutes to Midnight." That's a crazy solo. I'll admit it's a bit over the top for that song, but the idea is it's three minutes to midnight, so I'm trying to pack in the excitement with those flourishes. It's also a nice technique for outlining chord changes, and is a good way to top off a solo. I used it that way on "Island Time." I've been eager to apply that technique, so it's all over the new album. I use one brand new technique, and it's on a tune called "Time Shift."

That tune is in a different style, and has an almost heavy-metal vibe on the intro.



You're right. The opening riff does sound a bit like something you might hear in a metal tune played with some distortion. I'm using the first three fingers and my thumb to generate an atonal sound that doesn't really work over any chords, but it worked well for breakdowns. It was a challenge to get the technique down. There is a video that shows me doing it.

What is your primary recording instrument?

I've been playing a nylon-string built by Lester DeVoe for about four years

now—since my 2012 album, *Full Circle*. It's a custom cutaway version of his Flamenco Negra model with Indian rosewood back and sides, and a European spruce top. I also use one of his standard Flamenco Blanca guitars from time to time, but I like to focus on one guitar when I'm working in front of the mic, so I almost exclusively used the Flamenco Negra cutaway on *3 Minutes to Midnight*.

What's your main touring instrument at the moment?

I'm playing a custom Pedro Maldonado cutaway nylon-string that was my main recording guitar for a few albums. It's equipped with an L.R. Baggs Anthem SL Classical pickup system. I'm also using an Almansa Flamenco 447 Cypress, on which I had Gary Brawer install an RMC pickup system. I use a small Trace Elliot acoustic amp as a stage monitor, and then send its direct signal to the house. I'm actually taking a break from touring right now to focus on scoring *Golden*. It's a fairly detailed process. We haven't even got a rough cut of the movie yet. When that happens, you need to dig in and start tailoring music for particular scenes.

The teaser for *Golden* is spine tingling, and the soundtrack features creepy ambient and distorted electric guitar tones. What's it like to score your first film, and what's going on guitar wise?

That trailer features a repetitive, haunting riff that the director liked. When pitching ideas at first, I used a thin-bodied Godin Multiac Nylon SA run through effects to simulate the sound of an electric guitar. But that was pretty unconvincing compared to the sound of a real electric, so I wound up getting a Gibson Les Paul Custom. That's the tone on the arpeggiated, clean-sounding motif. I added distortion and longer delay on the bent single notes. The rest of the movie is going to sound similar with some steel-string acoustic as well. I even make a few little attempts at slide guitar. There's no nylon-string whatsoever.

That's pretty wild for you.

Yeah, but the nylon just doesn't seem to fit. It doesn't have the edgy quality of the electric by any means. This is a thriller movie—an *intense* thriller. It's kind of nice to put aside my main instrument for a while and do something totally different. ■