

GT152

Jeff Healey

Homage

This month Dario Cortese pays his homage to probably Canadian's best blues artist of all time: Jeff Healey

Jeff Healey was one of those people that are able to transform the impossible in possible, whose energy and vitality can't be shut in a few words, whose deep love for music breaks any barrier nature might have put: he was a force of the nature.

Jeff Healey was born in Toronto in 1966 and has been blind since the age of 1 because of a rare form of retinal cancer known as Retinoblastoma. Despite his blindness he taught himself to play guitar in his trademark style, with the instrument laid flat across his lap and using all 5 fingers (thumb included) of the fretting hand.

During his teens he became an attraction at the Sunday night jam session at Grossman's Tavern in Toronto and he soon caught the attention of blues greats Albert Collins, Stevie Ray Vaughan, B.B. King and even American legend Bob Dylan. It was in those jam sessions that Healey meet drummer Tom Stephen and bassist Joe Rockman and formed 'The Jeff Healey Band'.

In 1988, the band signed for Arista Records in the U.S. and soon released its first album 'See The Light' which includes the hit single 'Angel Eyes'. The album went platinum in the U.S. and caught the attention of movie producer Jimmy Lovine who hired the band to cut the soundtrack in the Patrick Swayze movie 'Red House'.

The sound of the band was aggressive, rock but Healey's guitar solo had always a real deep blues flavor. His unique technique gave him great ease in executing wide bendings and vibratos and sometimes he could play very unusual guitar lines because of the fretting hand position on the guitar and the use of the thumb.

After two years of no-stop touring, talk shows, press and radio interviews the band released its second album 'Hell To Pay' featuring Mark Knopfler, Paul Shaffer, Bobby Whitlock and George Harrison. The album went gold in the U.S. and the band was named Entertainers Of The Year at Canada's Juno Awards.

The Jeff Healey Band was finally established as one of the hottest rock blues band on the planet.

In the following years the band released other 4 albums, founded a recording and production company, tour extensively and finally rested for the first time since its birth!

Jeff unstoppable creativity couldn't rest for long time so in the past 3 years he released 3 albums as a solo artist discovering his youth love: '20s and 30's vintage jazz. The unexpected albums are a collection of swing, gypsy jazz and also New Orleans jazz standards that show Jeff playing in the style of the jazz greats like Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt, keeping always a personal voice on the instrument.

Sadly on the 2nd of March 2008 Jeff Healey has died after a lifelong battle against cancer. He was 41 and he left a wife and two children. The guitar world has lost one of his heroes and a big inspiration. We'll miss you Jeff!

Ex 1: This is a rock blues track in the style of The Jeff Healey Band. The solo features two of Jeff's trademarks: use and development of melodic cells and wide bendings. From bar 5 to 8 you can see how he often developed a melodic cell messing around with the rhythm. From bar 9 to 12 there's a heavy use of wide bending featuring both 1½ and a 2 whole tone bend. The last four bars are a combination of the two elements.

Staff 1: $\text{♩} = 132$ C⁵ B^{b5} F⁵ E^{b5}

Staff 2: 3 C⁵ B^{b5} F⁵ E^{b5}

5 C^5 B^b5 F^5 E^b5

T
A
B

7 C^5 B^b5 F^5 E^b5

T
A
B

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9 C^5 B^b5 F^5 E^b5

T
A
B

11 C^5 B^b5 F^5 E^b5

T
A
B

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Ex 2: This is a Jeff Healey ballad style in the key of Am. The solo features some heavy vibrato and wide bending. Sometimes Jeff played those wide bendings in unexpected strings because of the position of this fretting hand on the fretboard. Bar 5 to 8 show a very common idea that he used in many different solos. This is a very simple idea on 'how to connect' the different positions of the pentatonic. Before approaching bar 15 make sure you've got some spare E string!

Half Time Feel ♩ = 120

5 Am⁹ Am⁹/G D/F[#] F[#]sus² E⁷

9 Am⁹ Am⁹/G D/F[#] F[#]sus² E⁷

13 (8) Am⁹ Am⁹/G D/F[#] F[#]sus² E⁷ Am⁹

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TONE SETTINGS

Jeff Healey played a wide range of instruments during his long career. For his blues period with The Jeff Healey Band a Marshall stack would do the job. Guitar wise he used mainly solid body Strat type of guitar sometimes equipped with humbucker on the bridge.

To recreate Jeff's 'high gain' setting I found quite useful the use of compressor to add sustain and definition (just be careful with the settings to avoid unwanted noise). For his jazz period any hollow body guitar with 12s strings will do the job. He used a Fender Pro Junior for most of the jazzy stuff.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

If you're new to The Jeff Healey Band you should definitely listen to 'See The Light' (Arista 1988) and 'Hell To Pay' (Arista 1990). If you want to taste the band live then 'Live At Montreux 1999' (Eagle Records 2005) would do for you.

For his jazz period 'Adventures in Jazzland' (Stony Plain Music 2007) is one of the best. There's also a new blues album that has just come out 'Mess Of Blues'.