

Words: Rob Sandall

# OUT OF FOCUS

FEW GUITAR PLAYERS IN THE WORLD HAVE SOMETHING QUITE AS SPECIAL AS JAN ACKERMAN. WE FIND OUT WHAT TAKES THE DUTCHMAN TICK.



**Not all** bands last forever, and inevitably, some musicians will be left dawdling without music, forced to find something to at least pay the bills for a while. For someone with so much creative talent lurking within – pretentious as this might sound – it's often a bit of an ordeal. It's one that's avoided, however, if you never

from an environment in which I was able to do and learn what I have. Not that I was swimming in money, but I had enough of a life to explore what I wanted to do, which was music obviously. The first thing I had was a siturn, which was an Austrian thing lying around the house, and you couldn't tear me away from it.

more emphasis on songwriting than widdling. It's an after-effect of his Focus days, although he's never had the desire to adopt the more 'typical' virtuoso style.

"Well, I think I'm a child of my time," he reflects, "in that I'm born and raised with blues and rock and roll, and that was all about the small

"I've never had that problem," he's quick to point out. "I always tremendously enjoyed the live interaction of it all, and really that's what music is for. It's about playing in a group, playing together all over the world. That's what counts, that's what matters."

It's a noble sentiment indeed, and

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even consider a 'real' career as an option. But how can you really know that playing the guitar is the only goal you'll maintain in life?

"Difficult question, but on the other hand very simple to answer," decides Jan Ackerman, ex-guitarist of legendary band Focus. Nowadays he's far better known for his own solo work, and the UK in particular has always warmed to his unique blend of styles and intuitive feel for the guitar. "It was clear from a young age, really. Thank god I come

Ever since, I've never ever wanted a 'real' job, and all my friends, you know, from the schools and private schools I went to, it still didn't stop me from my ultimate goal: playing from the heart."

Passionate words, that are 100 per cent sincere. It only takes a quick listen to Jan's work to realise quite how much effort he puts in to every note, and how much joy he takes in crafting his songs. His work is more than the usual virtuoso fare, grounded as it is in a style that puts

combos and little bands, so much so that I never really even thought about it. I mean I never wanted to do the classical training, sat up dressed like a penguin and feeling sorry for myself, and playing something that was written 300 years before. It's nice that it survives, but there are other people that do that, and to me it's no fun."

But aren't bands tricky for someone with such a forthright musical style? Do conflicting egos get in the way of the music?

one that's not always the case for a great deal of musicians PICKUP has interviewed in the past. But perhaps it's because nothing about Jan is in anyway ordinary. While many players will ground themselves in constant scales and arpeggios in an effort to make it big, THE dutchman makes it clear that to him "It's all crap! I think it should come natural. Forget the money and the fame because it's not relevant to what I've always wanted to achieve. It's about what binds you to your instrument." ▶



▶ His influences, too are important to him, but they're not the ones you'd expect...

"Well. To come back to your first question – what's the goal?" resumes Jan. "Not to reach the top, because that's something I've never thought about. And since I was young, all of my main influences have stayed with me, like the old Django stuff; gypsy jazz. I don't play it, I don't copy it, but I try and incorporate it into what I've learned in schools, because they're good for something. I played accordion for the first five years of my life, for instance – the first national air conditioner! As soon as I saw it I fell in love with the thing, because it's to do with the environment.

"My father used to be in the car trade, and into old scrap metal, all that stuff. There's a famous band in Holland called the Rosenberg trio, and their dad used to be friends with my dad. I didn't know until 45 years later, that they lived just around the corner from me in Amsterdam.

They used to take me to concerts, private ones, in very chic and daft places, where the gypsy dutch orchestra would play. Can you imagine what an impact that would have on a boy of eight or nine? That always stayed with me. I never had pop, rock or blues players in the back of my mind. Never. That taste and that passion for music is the nucleus for any guitar player – remember what binds you. It's not the fame and the money. It's the same with the hippies in the 70s – you have to be aware of what binds you, always. To whatever you want to be."

Strong words, and again ones that are believable. It's surely a dream come true, then, that Jan has charmed enough fans to continue doing what he does best. While he's more than grateful for the adoration, it's not anything he necessarily con-

cerns himself with too much...

"I never think in those terms, when it comes to next albums. I don't give a damn," he laughs. "I play the way I live and I play the way I am. In the 70s, I lived in a certain way, and I had to say 'how can I make something out of nothing, musically. From what I've got, what can I do? So focus was a cabaret group, musically, but I still take great pride in that side of music. It's all blown up, and I'm grateful that Britain picked up on what we did. I certainly don't complain. If it inspires people to feel proud of themselves, or even disgusted of themselves... I don't know. It will go on till I die: it's the greatest gift I can achieve. It's for free!"

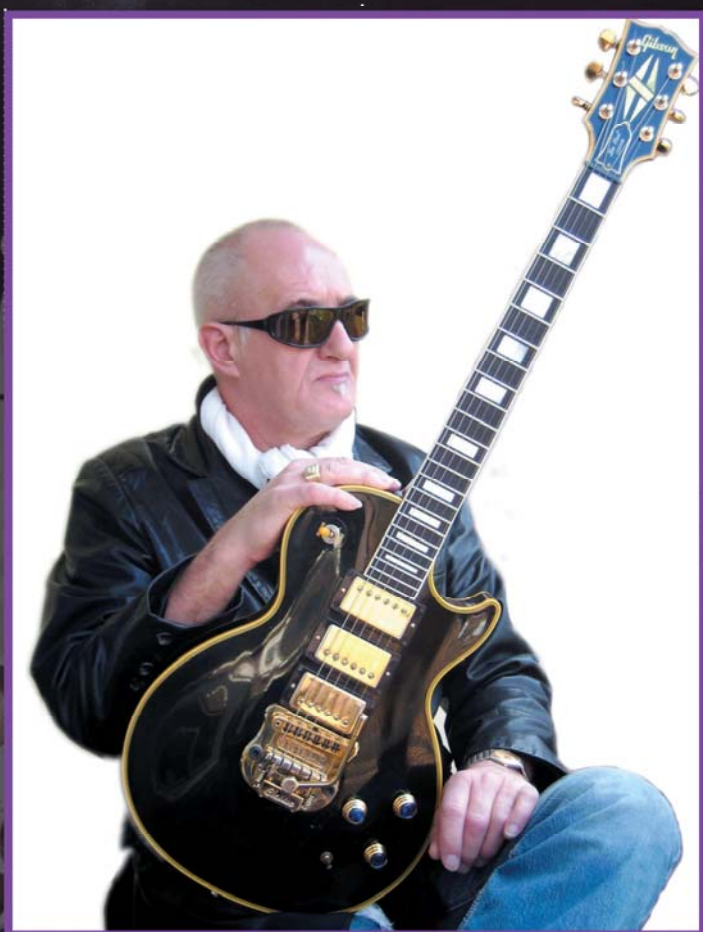
It's a refreshing attitude from someone of Jan's veteran status – many players who have created as much work and played as many gigs often come across as somewhat jaded by the whole experience. That extends to 'competition', too. Jan is keen to welcome new guitar players across the world, although if he's being blunt, he's not always impressed.

"At certain times it makes you itchy: some guy starts to sing and play and you think 'oh my God, no wonder the world has gone down the drain! Talking about taste and musicality, of course. Or it's all about the Berkely cats who can only do one thing. Its like you're invited to a gigantic banquet, and you have to wait until one or two good potatoes pass by from the choice of 100 courses. I go around the corner and get some fish and chips, something like that."

While describing Jan as the musical equivalent of fish and chips is perhaps a little strange, it makes sense. No frills – just satisfying music that you can take away with you, and that's all the better in its simple honesty.

Make ours a large portion. **PU**

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