

# Better Days Ahead...

An interview with guitarist Carl Roa

Following up their '98 debut CD *Elf Tales* and their 2000 *Live* CD, New York's coolest fusion trio, Magic Elf released their finest album to date in 2003. The ingeniously titled *Heavy Meddle* establishes the power trio of guitarist Carl Roa, bassist Roy Altemus and drummer Dave Miranda as contenders among today's great progressive fusion bands. A combustible composite that echoes the spirits of Steve Morse and the progressive stylings of fretboard masters such as Jethro Tull's Martin Barre and fusion king Alan Holdsworth, *Heavy Meddle* is guitar-based instrumental music at it's finest. The band's future looks quite bright indeed and if Magic Elf continue releasing albums this good in the future there will be no stopping them. Not only are the tunes on *Heavy Meddle* melodic and memorable, but they're delivered with enough electrifying intensity to blow your roof off. In the following 20th Century Guitar interview, Magic Elf guitarist Carl Roa discusses the band's history, his guitar concepts and the chemistry that makes Magic Elf prominent among today's outstanding instrumental power trios.

## MAGIC ELF



**TCG:** Hi Carl. I wrote in my review that I thought Magic Elf are the best guitar fusion band on Long Island. Are you all from the NYC area?

**CR:** Thanks for the compliment! We've helped build a pretty large rock fusion scene here on Long Island, which has been great! Many people have told me how happy they are to see this style of music live in the clubs again. The heavy guitar fans are definitely out there. Yes, we're all from the New York area, though Roy is originally from Philadelphia.

**TCG:** *Heavy Meddle* is the best Magic Elf CD yet. What inspired the album title?

**CR:** We are always meddling with various music gear and with various music related business. Meddling comes natural to us Elves you know. And given the heavier musical approach the album was taking, the title *Heavy Meddle* seemed very appropriate. *Heavy Meddle* is our second studio release, and we feel it represents our growth as musicians, engineers and producers. While there is always room for more growth, *Heavy Meddle* is something that we can say we are proud of.

**TCG:** Carl, how would you describe your guitar style?

**CR:** I would say my style is a mix of rock, jazz, blues and classical music. It is a "fusion" no doubt, leaning towards the rock style. I have always been interested in many types of music, and have spent much time working on different styles and techniques over the past 23 years. I grew up playing rock, but when I got to the University of Miami my principal instrument was classical guitar. And I ended up graduating with a jazz degree. Coming out of school and trying to make a living as a musician meant you needed to be able to do any type of gig. Playing with various bands and situations added diversity to my style.

**TCG:** Can you remember some of your first guitars?

**CR:** I actually taught myself to play in the very beginning by learning Beatles songs on an old Yamaha acoustic guitar. I saved some money and bought a cheap Les Paul copy, a Hondo or something. After my parents saw how serious I was about music they got me a real Gibson Cherry Sunburst Les Paul Standard. I played that Les Paul for ten years till the back of the neck was just raw wood!

**TCG:** How about early guitar influences?

**CR:** Some of my early guitar influences would be Alex Lifeson, Eddie Van Halen, Randy Rhoads, Jimmy Page, Tony Iommi, Santana, Hendrix and many more. The big changing point for me came when I was 16 and my friend asked me to see the Dregs. I had never heard of the Dregs or Steve Morse before then. Hearing Steve Morse live for the first time was a major revelation! I never knew it was possible for musicians to play like that! I would have a similar experience a couple of years later seeing Pat Metheny play at a Jaco Pastorius benefit concert.

**TCG:** What guitars are you playing now and why?

**CR:** My main guitar is a Brian Moore C90P.13. I actually have two of them now, a



third on the way. I had always wanted to get into guitar synth and explore the possibilities of running multiple signals from the guitar at one time. After Magic Elf finished *Elf Tales*, I needed to figure out how to recreate the Elf music live. I was looking at the Roland guitar synth but I couldn't find a guitar that was comfortable that could interface with the synth. Shortly thereafter I attended the Long Island Guitar Show, sponsored by 20th Century Guitar! That's where I stumbled upon a chipper fellow named Pat Cummings, president of Brian Moore Guitars. Amazingly, right there in front of me was my dream set up! Pat had his guitar wired with magnetic pickups going to a guitar amp and a Piezo signal running into an acoustic amp. He also had a 13 pin out running a Roland GR33 into a PA. All from one guitar! He let me play it, the guitar played and sounded incredible! Pat started dialing through the GR33 patches, and I was going from Bach to Zeppelin riffs. We started to draw a crowd at the booth and Pat said, 'Keep playin, kid.' I fell in love with the C90 and Pat offered me an endorsement deal on the spot. Pat and the Brian Moore crew are great people, and top-notch craftsmen. I couldn't be happier with their guitars.

**TCG:** Carl, can you mention any special effects or sundry studio wizardry that enhances your guitars and sound?

**CR:** My good friend Joe Nardulli custom built my pedal boards and helped me to realize the tri-signal set up that Brian Moore made possible. For effects I use a Lexicon MPX 500 and Rocktron Intelliflex. All effects run in stereo through an Ashly LX-308B line mixer into two Tech 21 Power Engines. The only pedals I use are an Ibanez Tube Screamer, and a Tech 21 Acoustic DI for the Piezo signal. I also use the Lexicon MPX R1 midi pedal to change effect patches and to control the amount of delay for any given patch. My main amp is a Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier running through a Rectifier 4-12 cabinet with Celestion Vintage 30's. One trick to getting a good guitar sound in the studio is to constantly

experiment with the mic position. It's amazing what a big difference moving the mic a quarter inch can make. It's an inexact science to say the least. We also spent a lot of time testing each speaker in every cab. Every speaker will sound different. It was through a lot of trial and error that we found sounds that we liked.

**TCG:** Where do you get some of your musical ideas from?

**TCG:** Ideas often come to me late at night when it's quiet and I can play without interruptions. They can also come after being inspired from hearing some great music. Or maybe sometimes from a traumatic event in life, whether bad or good. The more difficult part for me is finishing those ideas into a cohesive composition. That often can take a long time.

**TCG:** How would you describe the musical chemistry between you and drummer Dave Miranda and bassist Roy Altemus?

**CR:** Dave and I have been working together for years. We are musical brothers. It's rare that you find someone that you can really work with at such an involved level. Often when we work, one guy may catch something the other missed. We back each other up. We can use each other to measure our ideas, if I hear something in the mix that is not right, and then Dave points out the same issue, we know we have a problem. It's pretty rare that we don't agree on something. Dave is also the first guy that I will bounce new tunes off of. If Dave is smiling, then I know I have something good. Roy is actually an early original member of Magic Elf from back in the 80's. After I left to go to school we lost touch. Roy then miraculously resurfaced just when we were looking for a bass player in more recent times. We work great with Roy. He has a real handle on the physical and mental demands that Magic Elf places on a bass player and he is completely dedicated.

**TCG:** The song "N.S.D." has an almost Jan Akkerman kind of vibe to it. Or is that a Bach-

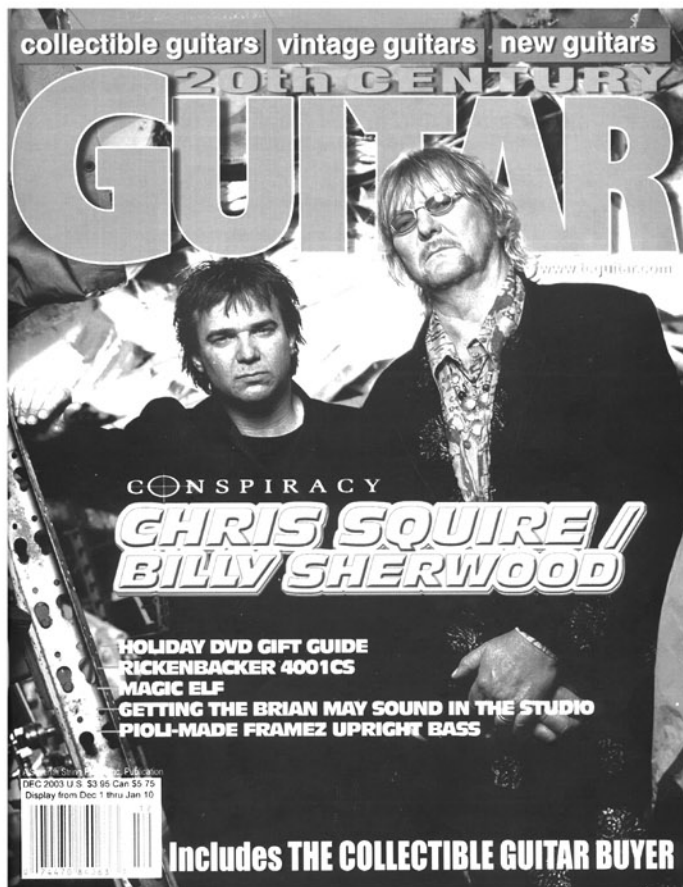
like influence as well? Classical music melodies, some written hundreds of years ago, seems to provide perfect lead lines for hard hitting instrumental rock.

**CR:** The goal with N.S.D. was to write a super heavy contrapuntal Bach infested workout! I love Bach's music, so without a doubt some of his influence can be heard on this track. Of course we Elf-enized it with double bass drums and fast distorted unison runs. Throw in some Black Sabbath and presto: N.S.D!

**TCG:** What's been the reception to the album and live shows, and also can you let us in on some future plans?

**CR:** The great thing about playing live is the energy that you receive from the audience. It is a real phenomenon, but somehow people's positive vibes push the music further than we could ever get to in a rehearsal studio. People's response to our live shows has been overwhelmingly positive. It has been very rewarding to meet our fans. They've come from as far away as Connecticut, Rhode Island and even California to see us play! That's true dedication and we really appreciate it! The *Heavy Meddle* CD has been doing exceptionally well! People's response to the album has been extremely positive. We are very grateful to all the kind people who have supported us through the years. We plan on continuing to make the best music we can, always!

For more information check out the Magic Elf web site: [www.magicelf.com](http://www.magicelf.com)



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