

First Street



Peter Parcek

Learning the Hard Way

You'd never know from listening to Peter Parcek's *The Mathematics of Love* that the guitar was a mystery to him when he first encountered it. The record is a collection of blues-based tunes that go far beyond, mostly on the imagination and technical prowess of Parcek's playing.

Growing up in Connecticut, Parcek's strongest influences came from the radio. He dialed in stations from all over, including Chicago, which introduced him to the delights of the Chicago blues. After that, "I ordered records from a local store – *Moanin' For You* by Howlin' Wolf and *The Best of Muddy Waters*. I listened to them, and the hairs on my body stood up. I thought, 'If I ever learn guitar, I want to learn like what's on these records.' But we couldn't afford lessons, and most of the guys I knew who played were fingerpickers. Somewhere along the way, I got a Melody Maker and was able to pick out the phrasing. I didn't even know any scales! It's a wonder to me now."

Coincidentally, road to *The Mathematics of Love* has twists and turns that make it an unlikely release. During the Vietnam War, Parcek was a conscientious objector, and moved to England. "That was a big part of my musical and guitar education. I saw lots of players – Peter Green at the peak of his powers. He was unbelievable."

In London, Parcek played more harmonica than guitar. Authorities eventually sent him back to the U.S. for playing

without a permit, and that's where his guitar playing took off. "I locked myself in a room and played all day."

He then formed a trio that played gigs on the East Coast, including one opening for the Grateful Dead. "I got to meet Jerry Garcia. He was engaging and encouraging about my playing. He knew everything about the stuff we played."

Parcek's record suggests a player with big ears, which comes from his desire to keep moving. "I have a restlessness that led me along a winding path. At one point, I became interested in jazz – John McLaughlin, Sonny Sharrock – and started trying to learn things by them, along with Pat Martino and George Benson. I was practicing about 10 hours a day, and that amount of practicing gives you a certain freedom. You break through barriers."

One of Parcek's objectives on *The Mathematics of Love* was to capture his playing like one would hear in a live setting. "I made an earlier record that was good – clean and crisp – but didn't feel it represented me. It didn't feel live. I think it's the first thing I've done that actually represents me."

Like many bitten by the six-string bug, instruments have become an obsession for him. "I've got a real bad guitar, amp, and effects desire. It's hard to hold off. I have, unfortunately, sold a lot of the vintage guitars through the years just through economic necessity.

I've had old Strats, a '59 Les Paul, and others." These days, he has a menagerie of guitars, including two Fender 50th Anniversary Strats, a couple of Hamers he calls "fabulous," an Anderson Hollow T he calls "really cool," a Gretsch White Falcon given to him by a friend, and a Gibson Classic '60s reissue Les Paul Junior. An amazing slide player, he favors a Harmony H-44 for that style. "I don't know the year, but it looks like they did the neck-through ones from 1952 to '57. It's copper, but most of the finish is worn off. It's an amazing-sounding guitar." Parcek bought the guitar from a buddy, literally in pieces, then had it reassembled with new parts by a luthier friend.

He has also become enamored of tweed-style amps and has a great one made by Craig Collins. "It's called a Tweed Tone. He decided to make me a signature model; he did all the work. I just asked him to make it so it cleans up easily. He made it with a switch where one setting emulates a certain tube and the other another tube." He also uses an old blackface Fender Super Reverb and a Supro Thunderbolt, along with several amps made by Tungsten, Dr. Z, Swart, and Top Hat.

While he has so far stayed in the New England area, Parcek says the goal is to expand. "With the economy as it is, live music isn't doing well. So, I'm just trying to spread it around, and hopefully, we can get it out there." – **John Heidt**