

January 17, 2006
Interviewed by Shannon West

Craig Chaquico started at the top. Before he was out of his teens he had become the lead guitarist for the Jefferson Starship, playing on the multi-platinum **Red Octopus** and remaining with the band through the eighties. He left the Starship, picked up an acoustic guitar and has become one of the most original instrumental voices in the smooth jazz universe. Always changing and evolving he has moved from the organic acoustic sound of his debut, **Acoustic Highway**, to the more produced smooth jazz flavor of **Four Corners**, then picked up the electric guitar for the hit single, "Café Carnival" and added yet another dimension to his music. His latest, **Midnight Noon**, is his most rock influenced so far. He is in the studio creating new music and exploring new directions right now, including some collaborations with Rick Derringer, another rock guitar hero who has been staking out some smooth jazz turf.

Craig is a storyteller. In concert he sets up his songs with tales, anecdotes and visualizations. The animation and excitement in his voice always draw you in, so as an interviewer you let him take center stage. As a musician he can't be pigeonholed into a format and to force this conversation into a format would compromise its spirit too. There the usual questions and answers, and there were stories. The first story being about how he put down the accordion and picked up a guitar:

Craig Chaquico (CC): My mom and dad were musicians. My dad played sax and accordion and my mom played piano and organ so they were always playing music around the house. In the evenings they would play music, it was so natural I thought everybody did that. They asked me if I wanted to learn to play an instrument. Since my dad played accordion I chose that and took two years of accordion lessons. Peter White plays accordion and so did Eric Clapton, so there must be some kind of weird torture element of accordion that we all have to pay our dues by going through, because when I was taking lessons I hated it. When I started listening to the music on the FM stations I noticed there wasn't a lot of accordion music on there. There was a lot of guitar so I started gravitating towards that. I loved camping and whenever we went camping there were a lot of acoustic guitars around the campfire which really intrigued me too. My mom and dad knew I was Jonesing for a guitar because I would go to friends' houses and see if they would let me play their guitars for a while. Finally my mom bought me this little acoustic guitar that was on sale for 10 bucks, which I still have. They thought it would be a phase and I would get it out of my system but I never put the guitar down. I played it incessantly. This was when I was 10.

Then he spoke of the power of music in the healing process:

CC: When I was 12 my dad and I were in a really bad car accident. We were hit by a drunk driver and I woke up in the hospital with two broken arms, a

broken rib, broken wrist, broken thumb, broken ankle, broken foot...two of my arms had casts, and one of my legs had a cast up to my hip. The first thing I asked for was my little acoustic guitar. Even though my fingers only stuck out about an inch from under the cast I could still reach one string on the guitar. My doctor encouraged me to play while I was in the hospital and when I was in the wheelchair and going through therapy. The guitar was a welcome companion. We all know that music can help you through difficult times and it helped me. It was a great place for my spirit to go and it was also great for my circulation while my hands were in these casts. I ended up writing a song on one string, the high E string, because it was the only string I could reach with my hands in the cast. That song is on the Acoustic Planet album. I call it "E"- Elizabeth's song because my doctor's name was Elizabeth, and the full title is "Center of Courage." Center of Courage is a rehabilitation center in Minneapolis where they take people who have been in serious accidents. They call it Center of Courage because the recovery process is usually difficult and challenging. I have a connection to one of the patients there. When I first played Minneapolis the limo driver who took me to the hotel said his friend wanted to come to the concert but he was in the hospital. He told me his friend had been hit by a drunk driver, which is exactly what happened to me. I told the limo driver that if he could give me a ride and get the OK from the hospital I would go over there after the show and do a concert for his friend. The hospital staff found us a conference room and I set up my guitar and played for him. When I told him the story about the song about the eagle you could just see his eyes light up while he was imagining the whole story behind the music. About six months later I get this letter saying how much the music inspired him. Having someone come in who cared enough to give him that time and turn him on to the music got him through the difficult times. He said when he was going through therapy he played my music to help him stay motivated. Almost a year to the day I go back and my concert is on the day this guy is getting out of the hospital. I mentioned it on a radio interview and a guy with a Harley Davidson and a sidecar called in and said "Hey, I'll go pick him up on the bike and take him to the concert. So this guy goes to the hospital and picks him up. It's the first time he has been out of the hospital since his accident, and this guy shows up, puts him in the sidecar and brings him to my show. Ever since then he's been an inspiration and that's why I called the song "Center of Courage." It was originally written in the hospital and I sort of dedicated it to all those people who have to go through that.

When my first solo album came out I went back to the hospital to play for the kids in the ward where I had been, just to let them know that it may be a frightening time they are going through but there is always light at the end of the tunnel. I broke all those bones and I got through it and ended up playing for the Starship and playing guitar for a living. Around that time I found out that there is an organization called the American Music Therapy Association where they use music in the healing process for all sorts of situations. For instance, if someone has an illness or injury that messes up their brain like a stroke, music therapy can actually help them start to rewire

the damaged parts of the brain. I remember talking about this at a concert, then after the show someone told me about his Grandmother, who had a stroke. They told her she would never talk to us again but a music therapist came in and started playing old songs from when she was growing up and she started humming along with them. Then she started remembering the words, then she started talking. If it wasn't for the music she might not have talked again. My favorite story is a guy who had Alzheimer's and a music therapist suggested to his wife that she play some music for him that they listened to when they were dating. He heard that music and he smiled, and then he remembered her and got up and danced with her. That lucidity lasted longer than the song did and it brought him back for a while. There are all sorts of stories like that. One time I played at a hospital in Oklahoma City after the bombing. There were a bunch of kids who still had glass embedded in their arms and faces. When I told them the story about the eagle and played the song you could see these kids close their eyes, put their hands out, and pretend they were Eagles flying.

*[Note: Curt Hansen, the limo driver who introduced Craig to Lee, tells the story about Lee on Craig's website. To see pictures of Lee in the sidecar headed for the concert and Craig at 12, with casts on his leg and arms and his first guitar in his hands go here:
www.craigchaquico.com/html/lee_sidecars.shtml]*

Then it was time for the obvious question:

SV (SmoothViews): How did you end up joining the Jefferson Starship?

CC: By the time I was 14 I had a garage band. My English teacher heard us play and he invited me to play lead guitar in his band. I ended up in this band with a group of guys who were 15 years older than me. I had to wear this fake mustache and lie about my age because you had to be 21 to play in clubs. My English teacher knew Paul Kantner and Grace Slick from the Airplane. They would come to some of the shows. They even recorded a song he wrote, it was on the **Sunfighter** album and I played on the track. That was the first album I recorded with them. I was 16. Every year after that I would get asked back to play more and more parts on their albums. Over the next few years I was on three studio albums with Paul and Grace, and the band I was in got a deal where we opened and toured with them. My band, Steel Wind, opened then I would come back out and play with the Starship too. After the tour I was going to go back to college, but Grace invited me to come to San Francisco and record an album with them. The album went gold. The next album was **Red Octopus**, which went quadruple platinum. I was on every album from 1974-1990.

SV: How did you get good enough to get to that level at such an early age. Especially since you were in a cast for a year? Are you totally self taught?

CC: I'm self taught. I used to take albums and put the needle down on a part

over and over again until I learned how to play it. When I first heard Duane Allman I didn't even know he was playing with a slide. I learned to play slide licks with a finger because I figured that was what he was using. I was just this kid in my bedroom playing along with these records.

SV: You must have totally shredded your fingers!

CC: My Mom always reminds me that I used to play until my fingers bled. All I did was play guitar. That's all I wanted to do from sunup to sundown. I'd go to school and the first thing I did when I came home was pick up my guitar.

SV: Then you started getting to play around older musicians who were really good...

CC: I learned a lot from the guys in Steel Wind, and from doing sessions with Grace and Paul Kantner and that group of musicians. There were a couple of songs where I was playing rhythm guitar and Jerry Garcia was going to come in and do the guitar solos later. I played a solo over the basic track on one song just for fun. I figured we could just erase it when Jerry came in. Jerry came in the next day and did the solos for several songs. When he heard the track with the solo I did he said "That's a great solo. Why don't you let the kid have the solo?" Being around all those musicians was like getting thrown into the deep end. There were so many different songwriters, musicians, and styles that I had to wear a lot of different hats. I had to go from playing on a ballad like "Miracles" to a rock song like "Ride The Tiger."

By 1990 everybody everyone was leaving the band. There were more than 17 different musicians in the Starship during the time that I was there. For most of it there was a core group with some different people coming in to play just to change the energy, but towards the end everything was starting to be done in the studio on computers and the only people who would actually be in the studio would be me and the singers. I felt like it wasn't a band anymore and I wanted to do something different. The first thing I tried was a rock project called Big Bad Wolf that actually ended up being released in Japan. Then my wife got pregnant and during the pregnancy it seemed like the acoustic guitar would be more welcome around the house than the loud electric so I started playing acoustic. Little did I know that it would lead to a whole new direction and winning awards and that kind of stuff. It was kind of a lucky change of style.

SV: Were you playing much acoustic before that?

CC: Not really. There were a few acoustic songs though. I played an acoustic 12-string on "Find Your Way Back" and "Count on Me" was acoustic.

SV: When you started playing acoustic did your writing process change?

CC: It did because I was writing instrumentals and there weren't any lyrics to get in the way. In the band the singer told the story and the lead guitar would have a part in the middle where I could tell the story in the language of music. It did change the way I wrote because the song had to have an

emotion that was defined enough that it could keep your interest. If it was a romantic song if the lyrics were romantic I would reflect the feeling with a melodic solo. If it was a rowdy song the guitar would reflect what the singer was singing about. As an instrumental artist I didn't have to wait for the singers to get done. I could tell the whole story on guitar. I wanted to create musical stories that did have a beginning, middle and end, so you felt like you were going on a musical journey. I like to tell "Theatre of the Mind" type stories to go with the songs. They are kind of like guided imagery because it makes it a little more interesting for the audience to know the story that goes with the song, then they can use their own imaginations to fill in their own feelings and memories. It's interesting to see people who don't speak English when they hear the music. Even when people can't understand the language when I tell the story you see them respond. If it's a romantic song they'll hold hands, if it's a rock song you'll see them playing air guitar.

SV: You have spoken about how instrumental music gives the listeners a chance to use their imaginations to fill in the spaces, but in most cases you give people an indication of what the song is about. Do you think this may close some spaces that people might fill in, that they might have a totally different personal interpretation of the song if they didn't have the story you told as a reference point?

CC: That's a possibility. On one hand it might limit it but I think it makes it more interesting that they have a place to go instead of just sitting there hearing another song. I know artists who don't want to explain anything about their paintings, their music, or whatever they create. They want to let every door be open to let the viewer interpret on their own. What I try to do is at least nudge them in a direction because if I tell a story, say about the outdoors or an eagle, everyone has a different picture in their mind from that or if it's a love song they will think of times when they have been in love. It still opens some personal creative doors for people. Hopefully there's a connection because even though the stories I tell are my experiences they are universal experiences too and people will add their story to it. So it's not just a song that I'm playing onstage, it's a song about their life. That's what I hope to do. For me it goes back to when I was in third grade and we had this music teacher who would play symphonies for us that had themes to them, things that had different characters and stories and different instruments represented different elements of the story. She would have us close our eyes and put our heads down on the desk while she played the music and told the story behind it. She had us visualizing the story while we listened. As different things happened in the music you could imagine them. She played things like "Peter and the Wolf" and "William Tell Overture" which I always saw as the Lone Ranger no matter what. I loved that, it really influenced me and that is what I try to do for people who hear my music.

SV: One of the things I love about the stories you attach to your songs is most of the imagery connected with this type of music has narrowed into being about big city nightlife, sophistication, and seduction. Your songs are about open spaces and nature, and your

romantic songs are more authentic. It's so much fun when you take us on a camping trip during an indoor concert too.

CC: That's one of the most fun things. When it all happens right and the lights go down the fire is on and the stars come out, people are transported to the desert because they just heard the story about sitting around the campfire with a bunch of Indians under the milky way and now they are sitting around the campfire with a tribe of people under the stars too, even if they are indoors and dressed up. That's one of my favorite parts of the night.

SV: You've been doing this for 15 years now and most of your songs are originals. How do you keep it fresh?

CC: With every album I try to put the elements that I hope for in a good book or a good movie. A good book will have scenery and a location, that's the instrumentation. There will be a love scene; I always put a love song on the albums. There will be action scenes and uplifting scenes; I put songs in there that set those moods too. Those are the things I try to do, with each album having at least a slightly different theme. Like kids in the same family who look similar but each have their own personality, that's what I try to do with my albums. The process we are going through now with the album we're working on is that we are trying to find songs that are comfortable, that have some connection with the other songs but have some twist, some different element. One different element will be that I am working with Rick Derringer. We're going to collaborate on some songs for this album.

SV: Your first few albums were mostly acoustic and more organically produced. then you went through a phase of using the LA session guys and more loops and effects. Was that an evolution that you wanted to do to stretch out your style, or was it something you felt like you had to do to fit your music into a format.

CC: A little bit of all of that. I really try to listen and be open to ideas from the people I work with, the record label people, concert promoters, and managers. I can't agree with everybody all the time but I do try to see if there is something there that is inspiring. I did go in some different directions with those albums. Sometimes it was based on the awareness that there is this trend on radio and that a group of artists are having success at that level. There was the other element out there with these more produced things. For me it was musicians I knew and enjoyed playing with anyway, so it was pretty organic in that sense. I don't like it when a song sounds like somebody just hit a button and the loop plays through the whole song. I like the sound of live musicians and the dynamics that brings. But I do like songs that have rhythm and a groove. At the end of the day you should just please yourself. I think anything else is cheating the public. You can try new ideas but if you don't like it yourself how can you expect anyone else to like it.

SV: You kind of wrapped up that phase when you released "Café Carnival," which was guitar based, had a live sound and a lot of energy, and went to #1 and stayed there for quite a while.

CC: It did break all the rules, it even had an electric guitar solo. It was a bonus track on a *Panorama*, which was a "best of" CD and bonus tracks don't usually do anything on the charts. We were so happy to see something a little bit different do so well.

SV: *After that it seems like you started to use more electric guitars. There was some on Shadow and Light and you really brought them out on Midnight Noon.*

CC: There was some electric guitar on the early albums. It was just really deep in the mix. "Café Carnival" really brought it out. Some of that was from the interaction when we were playing live, especially when I was doing the Guitars and Saxes tours. People really enjoyed it and I love playing electric. *Midnight Noon* was kind of out of the box, more of a departure from my usual stuff. There was a lot of inspiration from people like Hendrix and the Allman Brothers. I really did a lot of electric guitar and it was almost retro sounding.

SV: *New music for people who grew up with rock, still love it and want to hear new music that has that vibe! "Jazz Noon" reminds me of Tom Petty's "Breakdown."*

CC: We wanted to create the feeling of an after midnight jam with that one. "Jazz Noon" is midnight for jazz musicians because when you're playing in clubs midnight is the middle of your work day. So we wanted to create that atmosphere, when it's late at night at a club and the crowd has thinned out or gone home and the musicians are hanging out and just jamming.

SV: *You used multiple guitars, especially on the last two CDs.*

CC: I thought it would be cool to do different guitars for different parts. When I record I do play several different parts on different tracks. I wanted to use the different guitars to bring out different textures and tones. Besides, I taught my son how to tune and change strings for a slight fee, (laughs). It made it possible to have all these guitars lined up so I can feel like a painter and each guitar is a color on the palette. When I want a certain color for a certain part of the song I can just reach over and grab the guitar just like reaching over and taking your paintbrush and dabbing it in a color and putting that on a painting.

SV: *How do you decide which guitars and which sounds go where?*

CC: It's mix and match. You dabble and experiment and something will come to mind, then you try it. Like on "Girls Night Out" I wanted each guitar to have a different sound to represent a group of women on a night on the town and the different guitars were their different personalities as the night went on. That was a lot of fun to do. And there is the aspect that when you pick up a certain guitar it is going to influence how you play it because certain guitars have a certain personality themselves. Like if you pick up a Stratocaster you're going to play more like Hendrix or Stevie Ray Vaughn, if you pick up a Les Paul you're gonna sound a little more like Duane Allman. The guitar itself kind of leads you in a direction. What I will do sometimes is

play the song all the way through on several guitars and listen back and listen to different parts that I like from each track and see which ones speak the best.

SV: So what happens if you have three or four different things and you like them all? In the liner notes about that song you mentioned the characters from Sex and the City so to ask a Carrie Bradshaw type question: Do you move into the realm of too many choices?

CC: That does happen with the technology and so many different tracks you can use. I actually kinda fell into that Pandora's box on a song from **Shadow and Light**. I played the main melody on three different guitars and I couldn't decide which one I liked the best so I spent all this time in the studio blending the sounds to make one guitar sound. The way it came out nobody would ever notice the difference between the blend and what I could have done by just using one guitar and sticking with that.

SV: You've been collaborating with Ozzy Ahlers since Acoustic Highway. How did you hook up with him?

CC: I've known him for years. He was in another band called The Edge and a lot of band members from the Bay Area would be in the clubs and go see them. He was playing a lot in the area so he was well known. When I first started on my rock project I asked him if he wanted to help on some keyboards. He was working on a film where Joe Satriani was supposed to play the guitar parts but something came up and he couldn't do it so Ozzy asked me to do it. We actually ended up working together on a "Gumby" movie that ended up being a really popular kids video in around 1991. Then we worked on a project that we thought would be a song for the Olympics and it ended up being used for a film for the Air Force Thunderbirds, their flight demonstration team. Then while I was working on the rock project the idea came to both of us to do some more instrumental stuff. We went into my studio and started working on it. The first ones were mostly just him and me.

SV: How do you account for the longevity of this partnership?

CC: We've both been in a lot of different bands. There's a chemistry that is either there or it isn't. Sometimes you have to work at it and be patient with each other. I know he has to be patient with me and some of my idiosyncrasies. It's like opposites attract. If I was making these records with another guitar player it would be like two guys in a boat with the oars on the same side of the boat and we're going around in circles. With someone like Ozzy it's like we've got our oars on the opposite sides so we make some progress because we compliment each other. Respecting each other's differences and being open to each others' suggestions is what makes it work. We've had a really long run. We really have fun playing together and we're surrounded by great guys in the band. We really do enjoy each other and we love hanging out together on the road.

SV: You've mostly kept the same band and had an ongoing musical relationship with this group of people since the beginning.

CC: From the beginning it was Ozzy and me. Then Wade (Olson-drums) and Jim (Reitzel - bass) came in. Then Jim introduced me to Kevin (Palladini - sax). Jim and Kevin were in a band in the Bay Area together. He came to a rehearsal and the chemistry was instant so he joined the band. Marquinho (Brasil) has been doing most of the percussion lately and Ray Yslas plays too. I think we've just kept this lineup because we get along so well.

SV: And you've been on Higher Octave since Acoustic Highway. There have been a lot of upheavals and changes with labels coming and going and most artists have had to switch labels or start their own. Can you account for that or is it just a blessing?

CC: It's really been a blessing. I wish I could take some of the credit for it but I think it's been a blessing. I think somebody up there must like me!

Craig's Website: www.craigchaquico.com

For more information on the American Music Therapy Association:
www.musictherapy.org

Ozzy Ahlers has been Craig's co-writer, producer, and keyboard player since ***Acoustic Highway***. Visit his website: www.ozzyahlers.com

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