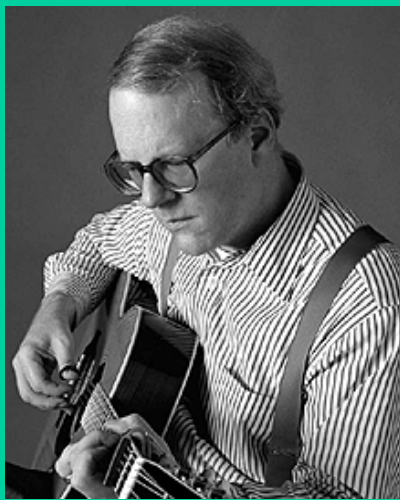


An Interview with [El McMeen](#)
by [Stephen Rekas](#)



An Interview with El McMeen

For many years Ellsworth ("El") McMeen has been juggling a career in music with one as a lawyer in a prominent New York law firm, LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae, L.L.P. His guitar arrangements are accessible to the casual listener and intricate enough to be rewarding to the academically trained ear even after repeated hearings.

El has long been known for his impeccable phrasing and his renditions of Irish tunes in low-C tuning-CGDGAD. I had asked him for an interview practically from the first issue of *Guitar Sessions* (October 1999). I suspect he judiciously held back in conceding to do this interview until he had seen the tone displayed in other interviews, and until his music career had begun to eclipse his law pursuits, which, thankfully, it has.

El is disarmingly sincere and direct in his responses and it was this quality in our email and phone exchanges that inspired the following interview. He began our dialog with a compliment on the extensive "Artist Interview" with Carlos Barbosa-Lima, which appeared in the June 2000 issue, and the ball just sort of bounced and rolled naturally from there.

El McMeen: ... Carlos Barbosa-Lima was a genuine prodigy, quite a contrast to myself. I started out relatively late in life. He said some things that I feel strongly about. It was nice to hear his perspective. *Guitar Sessions*: How do you feel about that late start now?

EM: It hasn't impeded me in terms of what I'm trying to do. Whether I would be more versatile or more interested in different things if I had started earlier. I suspect that I would be. When you do things as an "older" person, I think there's a greater efficiency about it and a directed quality. You can accomplish things without being distracted, so you tend to be more focused in what you're doing. At least I think so.

GS: What accounts for the late start?

EM: My history in a nutshell is that I started playing guitar when I was around 17 or 18 and it was basically to accompany myself in singing. I was really into the folk boom of the '60s. I wasn't really into doing instrumentals on the guitar until much later, but in the course of accompanying myself, I developed a knowledge of the alternating bass technique listening to Phil Ochs play and sing. I wasn't knowledgeable about the blues. Also, I was listening to music before cassettes were widely available. I was listening to LP records, where you had to slow the record down to learn licks. It was before the explosion in music instruction and the proliferation of a lot of music [learning] aids.

Interestingly enough - just a digression - I was thinking about my involvement with Mel Bay and I am sure that I learned clarinet from more than one Mel Bay book. I started to play clarinet as a kid, so when I started playing the guitar I was [already] playing an instrument seriously. So I was familiar with some music theory and notation and the attributes of certain instruments. That helped me as I got into guitar playing. I accompanied myself in singing original songs and other people's music, and I did arts festivals, and things like that. It wasn't until the mid-'80s that I even thought about doing instrumentals on guitar. It was really the Irish music and the Dave Evans low-C tuning that were very stimulating to me. The tuning is: CGDGAD.

GS: So, did you meet Dave, or how did that exposure come about?

EM: I heard he had some albums on Kicking Mule, which was Stefan Grossman's label at the time, and there were three or four arrangements of Irish tunes that he did. I was captivated by the sound of the guitar in that tuning, so I learned his arrangements, which were the only ones I could find in that tuning [at the time]. It was only recently that I first communicated with him directly by email, and we had an interesting exchange. I asked him how he found the tuning, and he said he invented the tuning, based on his playing in open D tuning and open G minor, the latter being DGDGBbD.

The sonority of the CGDGAD tuning seemed perfect for rendering "Celtic" music that was rich in melody. Among the instrumentalists inspiring me were harper Kim Robertson and dulcimetist Joemy Wilson, the latter of whom recorded several beautiful tapes of O'Carolan music in the early to mid-'80s with the dulcimer stating the themes and other instruments backing her up. The beautiful Celtic melodies stimulated me to do my own arrangements in the low C-tuning. Those, along with hymns, were the basis of my early work for Stefan and for Shanachie. I was really taken with those melodies and by the sonority of the guitar in rendering those melodies. That's what I've been doing up until now, although I did branch into some pop and folk stuff, and I've been doing some original music more recently.

GS: So was it mainly through recordings that you got your early inspiration, or did you go to live performances in Boston and at Harvard Square?

EM: It was primarily through recordings. At Harvard I was listening to folksingers, people like Tom Rush and Phil Ochs, and the other singer/songwriters of the '60s. That music is what stimulated me at the time to try to accompany myself on the guitar while singing, rather than doing instrumentals. There were some instrumentals I did way back then like "Mole's Moan" - one of my favorites for years - by Geoff Muldaur.

GS: How about your family; were other family members playing music?

EM: My father played a little banjo and my mother's family was very musical in its interests. I was encouraged to pick up an instrument in the fourth grade. I was a rather serious clarinetist. I played it in the band through freshman year in college, and then I gave it up in my sophomore year to concentrate on the guitar. I also took piano lessons as a kid but was kind of a middling student. All the same, that was formative later on in terms of my ability to read music and write musical notation. It helped me, for example, when I began to write books for Mel Bay and had to write the notation and tab (except for the most recent book in which Jim Ivler did the music notation, allowing me to be more expansive in the arrangements).

GS: Any university-level music courses?

EM: No. I would say I'm self-taught. In terms of education, I derived a lot of benefit from Stefan Grossman's *Guitar Workshop* tapes in the mid-80s. I really spent a lot of money buying those tapes. It was interesting because after a while I sent Stefan some examples of my own playing and arrangements, and he asked me to do some tapes! It was like coming full circle. I was very gratified by that.

GS: Are we talking video or audio tapes here?

EM: They were audio tapes at the time, I did eight, 1-hour audio tape lessons for Stefan. Then I did three videotapes in the '90s when he first started doing video tape lessons, but it was audio tape in the '80s.

GS: Who were some of the players who influenced you?

EM: There were a number of guitarists who had important influences on me. The first was Dave Evans for the tuning and also his playing, his renderings of Irish songs. He did a lot of different types of music, but his Irish tunes are the ones I particularly appreciated. Stefan Grossman was very helpful to me on several different levels. One is actually connected with your Barbosa-Lima interview, which mentioned the importance of left-hand control in

guitar playing.

I think that focus on the left hand is relatively neglected in steel-string guitar playing because people are more concerned about right-hand techniques and view the left hand as merely the means of fretboard placement. But, as Barbosa-Lima said, "The left hand is your soul." I really loved that metaphor. I've likened the right hand to being the "conductor" and the left hand being the "orchestra." That's overstated, but meant to correct the other view - that the right hand is substantially more important than the left. Stefan is an expert in left-hand control and he's the one who taught me the "slow-hand vibrato" which is different from the classical vibrato because you're dealing with a string of higher tension. It's a vibrato that works perpendicular to the neck, or at least at a 45-degree angle. It's really derived from what Eric Clapton taught us, among others, and it's much easier on the electric guitar. It's a way of working with the string to sustain the note as well as give it some color.

GS: Is that basically pulling and releasing the string?

EM: It's more like pushing it towards you as you're holding the guitar, without placing your left-hand thumb behind the neck. So you're pushing the string towards your body up and down. Your right arm keeps the guitar from flopping over to the left as you're holding it; so your body is the fulcrum instead of the typical situation where your thumb is the fulcrum. It's a very difficult technique on steel strings because of the high tension.

GS: When playing the slow-hand vibrato, where is your left-hand thumb positioned?

EM: Off the back of the neck, so you're pushing the fretting finger against the fretboard and, on the right side of your body, you're holding the guitar, keeping it from going over to your left. Your body is the fulcrum rather than your thumb.

GS: Do you demonstrate that technique in your videos? That would be of interest to our readers.

EM: Yes, there is one video where I demonstrate that technique. This vibrato is probably the most important thing I've learned in the process of trying to find my "voice" on the guitar. This vibrato technique and the idea of playing with commitment with the left hand have had a tremendous impact on my arrangements. One might think, "How could one little thing like that affect you?" What happens is that when you have some level of mastery of this technique, you can sustain the notes longer, so they don't die away as fast. It ultimately affects how you create your arrangements. They don't have to be quite so busy; they can be very evocative.

Pierre Bensusan is another example of someone who has really mastered this technique. That's what stuck me in listening to Pierre.

His left-hand work is tremendous. It's not just his speed, which is masterly, but the character of his playing with the left hand.

The other thing about Stefan was his openness in sharing guitar techniques, not hiding the ball but very openly sharing them. That very much characterizes the Mel Bay approach, too.

Back to this vibrato thing- a lot of people struggle with it because they attempt to use the classical vibrato technique, which doesn't work too well on the treble strings of a steel-string. The tension is high and the string is thinner, so you have to do something else generally. I don't want to speak categorically, but I am trying to work the strings of the guitar with my left hand all the time.

GS: Is this something you would have learned one-on-one with Stefan?

EM: Yes, I went to his house and he showed it to me. He said, "here's a way to help your sound," and he showed me this technique. Six months later I almost had it! Some people take to it more quickly, especially if they've played electric guitar, because then they know the technique and it's just a matter of dealing with the higher string tension. You try to do it with each of the fingers and on each of the strings- even on the bass strings. Then you try to do it on chords. I do a version of "Hard Times" and there's a chord in there on which I try to do a vibrato - that takes an effort. If you can get the vibrato to sound on three strings with that technique, it creates an "old timey" sound. It's again an example of how that particular technique can lead to arrangements that take a certain path.

GS: Other influences besides Evans and Grossman?

EM: I love Pierre Bensusan's music, not only his virtuosity but also his musical background. He's just unique in terms of his North African and French background. His music is very exotic. In terms of left hand/right-hand technique, he's a very admirable player. For example, playing his music really put the pinky of my left hand to work; his DADGAD music utilizes the little finger quite a bit. Playing his music increased the strength and versatility of my little finger. Until then, I hadn't done much with my little finger; I hadn't thought much about it. In his DADGAD tunes, Pierre was doing vibrato with the little finger, and now I do a lot of that myself.

GS: I've done very little myself with alternate and open tunings, principally dropped-D, double dropped-D, and the G tuning with the fifth string also dropped a whole-tone. Those tunings severely limit the player to a few keys. How is it with DADGAD and CGDGAD in that respect?

EM: Some people are doing interesting things in G tuning in different keys and Renbourn does a lot in double dropped-D. I don't think of tunings in terms of limitations. I guess I don't really see

that. I find myself playing in *G* and *G* minor a lot in this tuning [low-*C*]. I've done a lot of things in *C* and I'm working on some pieces in *F* and *B-flat*.

GS: All within the low-*C* tuning?

EM: Yes. I think it's strong in the key of *G* because the subdominant chord in the key of *G*, which is *C*, is wonderful, consisting of two octaves "and change." It's just a glorious chord in this tuning. So I find myself playing in *G* and *G* minor a lot. *C* is very nice, too. The root note in the *C* chord is at the first octave below *C*, and the next octave is at the fifth fret of the fifth string. So it's kind of out of first position, which is a little inconvenient when playing in the key of *C*. You have to deal with not having that *C* root note in the first position. I'm experimenting. I do the song "Sheebeg an Sheemor" in three keys: *D*, *C*, and *G*. I'm probably insane for doing that, but it has a different sonority in each key. Now I'm fooling around in the key of *F*. and it sounds really exotic.

GS: Do you use partial capos or anything like that?

EM: No. What you do find in this tuning is a lot of partial barre chords, barring the lower three strings a fair amount. One reason I like this tuning is that it's akin to standard. I had trouble with open tunings myself, for example, *G* tuning; I could never do a thing with that; it always sounded like a tonic chord waiting to happen. One reason that I took up the low *C* tuning was not only its strength in the keys of *G* and *C*, but also because it 's somewhat like standard. It's more like standard than *DADGAD*, which is so mysterious to me because I don't play much in chords, but rather in single-note lines, when I do play in it.

But in this tuning [*CGDGAD*] the chords are available in first position. There are several inversions; there are eight or more different ways of playing the *G* chord or *G* minor- things like that. There's a typical kind of barring approach to it as in standard as far as closed position chords. It has a lot of affinity to standard tuning. I like to think in terms of chords in the first instance and then going beyond the chords as a way of getting the focus on the melody. I have a better feel for the fingerboard when I do that as opposed to just playing melody lines.

GS: Would you talk about your instruments and string gauges with this tuning? I'm sure you've had to experiment to find something that works for you. I believe you mentioned you're playing Tippin guitars now.

EM: Tippin is a very talented luthier who makes maybe 40-50 instruments a year up in Massachusetts and I've played a number of his guitars. I like them all, but I've settled on a guitar that my touring partner Larry Pattis and I partially designed. (Maybe I'd better say HE designed it, and we nodded approvingly!) Tippin calls it a "deep-bodied OMT", the "T" being for "Tippin." His OMT is

typically deeper than a standard *OM* model. The deep-bodied *OMT* is still deeper than his *OMT*. Larry is also quite fond of Tippin's 000 12-fret, as am I.

GS: Does this guitar have onboard electronics?

EM: Yes, it has the B-Band system, made by EMF Corporation, consisting of a microphone as well as an under-the-saddle element.

GS: Do you have an amp or pre-amp preference?

EM: The B-Band has an external unit called the Entity. We use it on tour. It obviates the need for having a battery inside the guitar - a great advantage. I also have a Fishman Performer Pro amp, which is a nice unit for playing in bigger spaces.

GS: Do you also use an acoustic mic in front of the guitar?

EM: No, I just have the little internal mike. Even without the internal mike, the element under the saddle that EMF has engineered produces a very natural sound.

GS: So the audience is hearing what you hear in terms of it being an acoustic guitar?

EM: That's right.

GS: What are we looking at in string gauges?

EM: I'm having an ongoing debate with Larry about string gauges. I like lights with a medium .056 on the bottom. I also like the timbre of a medium first (.013) and second (.017), but I generally use .012 and .016. I like the timbre of the thicker strings but not the way they feel. Some who play in alternative tunings use the .013 and .017. They do perhaps sound a little better, but I just don't like the feel of them.

GS: And the third string?

EM: I think it's maybe a .24, something like that.

GS: So it's basically a light gauge set with a medium sixth [.012, .016, .024, .032, .042 and .056]?

EM: Exactly

GS: Any particular brand of strings?

EM: I endorse Elixir Strings. They're put out by W. L. Gore. Elixir is a registered trademark of W. L. Gore and Associates.

GS: So, nothing especially concocted by or for you?

EM: Not for this humble troubadour!

GS: Regarding the right hand, do you use any picks?

EM: Just a thumb pick. Stefan heard a radio show that I did in 1987 and he said, "It's fine but you've got to lose the fingerpicks." So, I lost them and couldn't play for three months, but then I really learned to play the guitar. I do use a thumb pick. I tried doing away with that and just couldn't get the clarity I like on a steel-string

guitar, especially with an arpeggiated approach. I play with flesh and nails, and my nails aren't too long - about an eighth of an inch or less over the fingertip. I've also gotten into the habit of playing primarily with the index and the ring finger; I hardly ever play with the middle finger anymore.

GS: So you use the thumb, index and ring finger?

EM: Yes. It can be a challenge for fast stuff. I sometimes have to go back to using my middle finger for that. I analyzed it to be sure it wasn't impeding me in any way and, again, it's only really fast pieces that are an issue.

GS: Any particular brand or density of thumb picks?

EM: The medium plastic Nationals are the ones I like. They are hard to find, though. I like the mass of them. Some picks have a radically different tone, as you know, depending on their material and mass.

GS: So when you tour, you play on one instrument in a single tuning?

EM: That's right. I have some other guitars by Tippin in different woods. I used to travel with two guitars years ago when I was just learning this tuning. I kept one in standard and one in low-C, and I found that I rarely played in standard! It was very odd, but that's the truth. I carried two guitars and just played everything in low-C tuning or DADGAD. I've just gotten away from standard. You know what's interesting in this - you mentioned playing in various tunings. I like Martin Simpson a lot. He's one of the great "phrasers."

GS: He's a very clean player and a very musical guy.

EM: Absolutely. A steel-string player with great phrasing. A lot of his music in dropped-D tuning in the key of D transfers very well to the key of G in low-C tuning. In a number of my arrangements, I've taken some of the ideas he's had and tried to see if they work in low-C tuning. I think they work pretty well. There's just a different quality to the sound, but each has merit.

There are some things you can do in the key of G in the low-C tuning in terms of the individual notes when you play out of the chords. Often you can work the strings on the melody note in a certain way that you might not be able to achieve in dropped-D. I'm not sure you would have that same freedom in dropped-D where you use the open strings a little more. So there are nuances and differences between the two tunings. If I hear something in dropped-D tuning that I like, I think I can render it in low-C tuning in the key of G relatively easily, particularly if I can hum it. Kind of interesting how that works.

GS: Any thoughts on going to a 7-string guitar?

EM: I just had a question on that today, so it's interesting that you should mention that. My friend Steve Baughman, who's lilting, exuberant playing I really love, has a 7-string guitar. Interestingly enough, he puts an extra string in the middle of the fretboard and

doesn't have a "super bass" string. It helps him in some arrangements and I think he does "O'Carolan's Draught" with that guitar. I have all the range I need on the 6-string guitar and find the concept of six strings daunting enough. The idea of adding another string would totally baffle me.

GS: That's similar to what I believe Segovia said in reference to the 10-string guitar. Six strings were complicated enough and musically sufficient for him. I've noticed that in dropped-D tuning, due to the large interval between the fifth and sixth strings, some very odd fingerings result when trying to incorporate the sixth string in your playing - to the point that it inhibits what you can do melodically.

EM: I've never had much luck in dropped-D tuning to be honest with you. Maybe I haven't paid my dues on the fingerboard in standard tuning. I'm willing to admit that. Maybe that's why I like low-C tuning. The D in dropped-D tuning, again, is like the tonic chord waiting to happen, whereas in the low-C tuning, when I play in the key of G, the low C is in the subdominant chord rather than the tonic. I think this all has something to do with the low-C tuning being a G sus2 sus 4 tuning, but don't ask me to explain why!

GS: One nagging question comes to mind - and I say this with all due respect for your artistry and our professional association and friendship: Have you ever played your music on a classic guitar or studied classic technique? A greater variety of timbres and dynamic levels would be available to you. It is possible, for example, to simultaneously project the melody in one tonal color and play the bass line and chord elements in another. I'm sure there are many factors involved in your instrument of choice.

EM: Since I play in an arpeggiated fashion, somewhat akin to a harp, I haven't generally listened carefully to the timbre of the bass notes, but more to the volume and clarity. Maybe I should, however, so I will. I treated myself to a fine classic guitar for my fiftieth birthday. I gave it an honest shot, but admittedly didn't fully pay my dues in terms of technical studies regarding the proper attack, hand position and the like. In the end, I craved the sustain capability that, to my ear, only steel strings possess.

GS: Have you gotten to a point in low-C tuning that you actually improvise, or are you more like most classical players who would play a piece the same way note-for-note every time?

EM: I think I'm a very improvisational player in the sense that I'm an intuitive player. I'm very sound-oriented, so what happens is that my [published] transcriptions never exactly match what I'm doing. I'll play tunes differently each time, in subtle (or highly unsubtle!) ways. Sometimes I'll hear a certain note in an arpeggio and maybe I'll emphasize, or harmonize against, that note in some other measure, or emphasize different notes or use different ornamentation. I guess I would be closer to an improvisational player

than to a classical musician in that respect. However, what I'm basically trying to do is to render melodies that I like without detracting from them, and doing it in an engrossing fashion - hopefully - within a certain time period of, say, 2 ½ to 3 minutes. As I'm getting into more original pieces, there's more freedom involved, so we'll see how that develops.

GS: So, are there more original compositions on the horizon?

EM: Yes. Larry, my playing partner, keeps encouraging me to do original compositions. He does almost all original compositions. I think that because I've tried to be a lawyer and a musician all these years, I've gotten much more directed - or perhaps risk-averse. Now that I'm rolling the "lawyering" thing back, I'll have more time to explore melodies in my head rather than the "external" melodies.

GS: That leads into my next question - How do you keep your music fresh?

EM: In terms of arranging tunes, early on I was very happy to arrange things in low-C tuning because I thought the sonority was great and people hadn't heard the tuning very much. So the guitar sounded different, and the sound of the chords and the suspensions and such kept me going through two or three albums.

At this point, I really don't want to arrange a tune unless I feel I can bring something new to it that, to my ears, hasn't been done before. I've done two O'Carolan tunes in the last month. One is called "Planxty Irwin" and a whole bunch of guitarists have done arrangements of that tune. I carried that tune around in my head for about a decade, but didn't do an arrangement until I felt that I could do something that satisfied me. The same goes for a tune called "George Brabazon, the 2d Air" - again, which several other guitarists have done very well (including Steve Baughman and Seth Austen) In terms of doing arrangements, I've gotten a little fussier about that to which I dedicate my time. If I decide to do a piece, I want to make sure I can do it in a way such that its quality is evident compared to other pieces in my repertoire. In a sense, that's akin to writing an original piece. I've done a version of Greensleeves that was inspired by a treatment by Steve Baughman. He recorded about a 6-minute arrangement of Greensleeves on his first album with all kinds of effective variations. It's really a tremendous piece. I played with Steve at the Freight and Salvage in Berkeley, California in December 1999 and was really stimulated by that piece. For the first six months of this year I worked on my own version and have been playing it on tour. Mine is about four minutes long with several variations. I'm pretty pleased with it. It showed me that a fair amount of original music can be incorporated into an arrangement of a traditional piece.

Also, my impression is that most guitarists don't look at songs - that is, sung music - as a source of instrumental repertoire. They can be

a great resource. However, when arranging a song for the guitar, there are two daunting problems: the existence of sustained notes in the melody, and the concept of repetition. Some songs won't bear a 3-minute version and you have to resort to including them in a medley.

GS: You mentioned singing earlier on. Do you think that it still influences your approach to arranging?

EM: Yes, absolutely. I think it's fundamental to what interests me. In essence, what I'm trying to do is capture that vocal quality in guitar arrangements - in effect, to sing through the guitar. I'm less interested in massively percussive music, although I think texture is critical to a good arrangement. I love Preston Reed's music. It's quite different from what I do, even though he sometimes uses a tuning akin to mine. He often uses a C-based tuning, so it's interesting to compare notes with him. There's a Canadian guitarist named Don Ross, whose work I really like. His music is very different from what I do - more percussive, more urgent - but he can play melodic things too. I think his textures are more dominant than the melody, whereas with me, it's probably just the reverse, but you definitely need both to create an effective arrangement.

GS: Do you sing at all in your performances now?

EM: Every now and then I get goaded into it. My mother cajoled me for decades and I did a lot of singing in the '70s. To be a really good singer, you have to sing a lot. Also, I frankly think it's hard to sit down and sing well, and it's hard to both sing and play at the same time. I sing a song on my live album. I like singing but I try to sing through the guitar. I hope that doesn't sound too hackneyed.

GS: I had a good Swedish friend, Kent Lampa, whose father was a singer and Kent himself sang very well, accompanying himself on the guitar. Kent told me that by simply listening to a guitarist, he could tell if the player had ever made a serious effort to sing. He was referring to the player's richness of phrasing, the ability to make the guitar sound like a living, breathing thing that requires a breath now and then.

EM: Martin Simpson's playing is reminiscent of that.

GS: Yes, of course. He's a singer too. I'm sure it influences his playing.

EM: Martin and I like similar things, yet the playing ends up a little different. It's really stimulating for me to try to figure out why. I've never met him, but we've talked by phone and emailed. I think there's a different texture to the playing. It could be that his music is a little more urgent and mine is a little more behind the beat. His may be more related to pieces sung by singer-songwriters, and mine may be more related to my choral background, and an interest in opera. Or, of course, I may not know what I'm talking about!

GS: Which album would you recommend to someone buying one of your records for the first time?

EM: I like my new live one - *El McMeen Live*. My playing there has more urgency than some of the studio ones, or as a booking fellow recently said to me, "channeled fury". I liked that, although perhaps I'd prefer "channeled passion". Among the studio albums, I like *Acoustic Guitar Treasures*. Then there's the hymn album (*Of Soul and Spirit*). Those all support your singing theory.

GS: Are all of those albums in low-C tuning?

EM: Either low-C or DADGAD.

GS: Are you taking students?

EM: I'm trying to pick that up as I've rolled back lawyering after all these years. Larry and I do workshops, and I teach workshops at my house. The ones I teach last a minimum of three hours, and are one-on-one.

GS: So it's like an extended class that might meet once a month?

EM: I think the most anyone has done is four or five. With three hours, it gives people a chance to settle in and sometimes it's in the last fifteen minutes that I figure something out. It also represents a commitment on the student's part. The one-on-one part is very important as some people have physical issues in their playing that might be inhibiting. There are some things you just can't fix with video and audio lessons. People always worry about what they don't do, discounting all the good things they do; sometimes they need to be told they're doing fifty things beautifully and that there are two or three things that need work - just kind of a summing up.

GS: Do you have any kind of practice routine?

EM: I did for many years. I keep referring to Larry Pattis, my touring partner. Perhaps due in part to previous experience as a world-class gymnast, he is known for his "muscular lyricism" in his guitar work. He has stimulated an intense self-assessment of my music and practice procedure and has been a tremendously positive influence. Larry goes through scales and arpeggios every day. I'm a much less structured player but his approach has made me think about things.

When I was going into the city every day - and I live in New Jersey and was commuting to New York-I got into the habit of playing for an hour before going to work and an hour when I came home. I was in this mode that when I got up in the morning I had to play the guitar. More recently, I've had to get used to the idea of playing in the afternoon for practice and rehearsal, getting ready to perform at night.

To answer your question, it's really more a matter of rehearsing things. I spend a lot of time honing the tunes that I've done,

rehearsing for performances as opposed to practicing. I don't have a practice routine in terms of exercises and studies and things like that. Whether I should or not, I don't. If it's something I'm working on, I'll just focus on it assiduously until I get it, like an oyster working on a pearl.

GS: When you're putting together an arrangement, do you write it down or simply hone it by playing until you're satisfied?

EM: There have been some things that I've lost because I didn't write them down, so I'm really aware of that. Due to the Mel Bay books, however, there are a fair number of my pieces in notation and tab. I do want to write things down as a record of where I've been rather than as a map to where I'm going.

GS: Do you do your own management for the most part?

EM: Yes, I make the calls and Larry and I each have our contacts. We're trying to reach audiences that aren't primarily guitar players. It's not that we don't like the idea of having guitarists in the audience. We do! But we have this idea in our heads that if people could ever listen to guitar music played this way, then hopefully they'd like it. Our music doesn't fall into a compartmentalized name in the industry. It's hard to find a word for it other than just "fingerstyle guitar."

GS: Are you also producing your own recordings?

EM: Yes. Shanachie did the first two records and I'm on compilations with Narada, Shanachie and Rounder. I just find it easier to do recordings under my own label, Piney Ridge - or, I should say, an eminent label that has the good sense to specialize in my music! When I get a head of steam up, I go into the studio and just do it that way.

What happened with Rounder was that we did two performance videos of Celtic material for Stefan Grossman - Ramble to Cashel and Blarney Pilgrim - and then the CDs of the same titles were put out by Rounder. Notation and tab booklets were issued with the videos and the music was also made available in book format by Mel Bay Publications. It's interesting there was this cross-fertilization.

GS: Any advice to up and coming players on the acoustic scene?

EM: That's really a tough one. For me the paramount issue in guitar playing is sound. Stefan always got on me about the volume of the guitar, saying I didn't play loud enough. That's why I worked so hard to make the guitar resonate. This is more of an issue on steel strings than on nylon. I'm not an expert at all on nylon guitar. With steel strings, because the thing is so heavily braced, you really have to attack it to get the whole thing vibrating.

The idea of getting a good sound and good volume out of the instrument is really important because a whole lot of good things can come of it. One is that it exposes fingering problems in the left

hand. You can cover up problems like that by playing softly, but if you play loud, you hear the fingering problems. Then you have to solve them, simplify them, or otherwise deal with them. It also makes the left hand work the strings harder. The vibrato is harder if you're playing with more volume. And, of course, it gives you a much broader dynamic range.

If you can play loud, then hopefully you can play softly too; all of a sudden your arrangements start to increase in drama. So, listening to the sound of the guitar and not being so concerned about speed are the ticket. I'm more into melodic playing rather than fast, alternating-bass lines, although I really love Buster B. Jones's stuff. I really get a charge out of his playing. Buster can play really beautiful slow ballads as well as fast tunes; he's a very gifted player.

GS: Buster has always been sensational at the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society Convention in Nashville.

EM: I met him when we went up to Woodstock to record some video lessons for Stefan Grossman. I think we enjoyed each other's music because we're different from one another. He's a very entertaining and creative guy.

GS: I believe Buster has a routine in which he explains low-C tuning in both lay and precision musical terms. It's hilariously self-effacing.

EM: This tuning is catching on. Laurence Juber has done some very nice things in this tuning. Adrian Legg learned it from Joe Gore and Joe had worked on something I had done. I would really love a classical player to probe it, because I'm sure the discipline of classical training and the things they listen and look for in the interval relationships would be productive and informative. One student of mine, - a talented performer, Chris Heard - gave me some very interesting chord charts for low-C tuning, which I've employed.

GS: Yours is a more linear approach.

EM: Yeah, it's both a strength and a potential weakness in my playing. I think it's a strength in the arpeggiated approach because you can create a flowing effect. It also allows you to arrange a piece so that it develops a certain way over three minutes. It doesn't, however, naturally bring into play the middle voices in chords as much as I'd like to, and I am focusing on that now.. Pat Kirtley is a guy who has a very good ear for chords. Listening to his playing makes me want to find the chords in low-C tuning. So you always learn from everybody and everything.

GS: In art, you have those who are good as colorists and others who are stronger as draftsmen. In music it seems you have to put them both together, the harmonic and the linear motion.

EM: In my seminars I often talk about how to bring character to a piece. I keep referring to Stefan Grossman. Someone once asked him, "What makes a good arrangement?" and he said, "Something melodically or rhythmically compelling, rich in textures." In one sentence, that covers it all. If a piece doesn't really grab you, it could be because it has good texture but it's just not rhythmically or melodically interesting, or vice-versa; it might be melodically interesting but, after a minute, you might lose interest because it's not textured enough. The concept of [a balance of] texture and melody or rhythm is very interesting and, it's like what you said about color and draftsmanship- you really need both.

I recently came across an important book by Jimmy Webb, the fellow who wrote so many hit songs for Glen Campbell. It's called *Tunesmith* and it's really fantastic as a literary guide. One thing he does in the book that is quite relevant to guitar arranging is to map out a tune and mark it in accordance to its dramatic development. When he's doing a song, there's a definite dramatic evolution. He'll place little marks showing the rise and fall of the dramatic emphasis in the piece. I think it's very important in guitar arranging that a tune not be just a repetition - ABAB or AABB. It has to develop a certain way dramatically. I think that's a really helpful concept as we try to do arrangements. Webb's book had a great influence on me, putting into words a concept that I had felt intuitively.

GS: Is there anything else that should come into play, something you might reveal in workshops or private lessons?

EM: I do have a quandary; to the extent that I know what makes a good arrangement, how much of it is technique and how much of it is some kind of intangible soul/flesh feeling or an internal gift? I haven't quite figured it out. Maybe it's impossible to figure out. I find the technical aspects are essential to good arranging. But then there is this question of feelings, soul - those internal qualities that help us distinguish mere technicians from those who play with feeling. I haven't been able to figure out how much of it is technique, how much of it gifts. Maybe the answer is different for everybody.

I listened to Julian Bream's Romantic album - it just blew me away, glorious! How much of that is technical? Obviously, a tremendous amount, but there's something else too. But what is it? And can it be broken down into something purely technical? Maybe it's phrasing, speeding-up or slowing-down, playing with or without rubato; maybe it's a dynamics issue. That's something I'm intrigued by intellectually and the more I think about it, the more guitar playing seems to break down into technical matters. On the other hand, maybe there's something that's way beyond technique in how people employ the techniques. In workshops, we talk about things like that.

Another workshop topic is, having played other instruments, I like to compare/contrast the guitar with them, particularly the piano. After we go through a 15-20 minute exercise, people really get excited about the guitar because there are so many different things that you can do with the guitar that you can't do on the piano. The piano is an extremely logical instrument and the guitar is a highly arbitrary instrument. Yet look at what we can do on guitar - snapped or bent notes, the same note on different strings, vibrato, harmonics.

Chords on a piano are also radically different. A "C" major chord and a "D" major chord on the piano are played with almost the same hand position whereas the same two chords on the guitar in first position are wildly different. Comparing and contrasting the guitar with other instruments - there may not be that many guitarists who think in those terms. When you bring in other instrumentalists to talk about their instruments, it really does give one an appreciation of the difficulties as well as the joys of guitar playing.

One thing I've noticed that pianists do that most guitarists don't do is play in different registers. I don't know whether the tuning I use lends itself well to that. It might. Even a good lounge pianist may play the melody in different registers, sometimes in the same measure. We just don't do that with the guitar very much, tending to find something we like and keeping it in the same register. That's just one example of what we might learn from another instrumentalist.

GS: In your own composing, when you're working for a melody that grabs you, do you assign temporary lyrics to the melody?

EM: No. I sort of hum something I may be carrying around in my head. I was always afraid to probe what was in my head, not because it was screwed up, but because I never knew if there would be an endgame. When you work on original music you might spend a lot of time and not come up with anything. That always scared me during the years when I was trying to balance law and music. I really wanted the results of my efforts to be clear. If I worked on a melody that I liked, either I'd be able to do a half-decent guitar arrangement or I would abandon the melody. It wasn't a situation where you might flail around for nine months on an original piece of music without coming up with something concrete. Now I have the wherewithal to try that, and I'm quite stimulated by it.

GS: Do you use a tape recorder for possibly fleeting ideas?

EM: I do when I think I've gotten it down. I'm a little worried that if I record it too soon then I might freeze myself into a certain way of playing it and perhaps exclude some possibilities. I do make a lot of home tapes of talking and playing. I've also gotten into a teaching exercise where I will review people's tapes for a fee. It's like a lesson by tape. Someone will send me a tape with four or five songs

and I'll make him a tape in return. That way I can comment on one tape while the other tape is playing on a second machine.

GS: Anything else along those lines that I haven't asked you about?

EM: I think the main point of emphasis for me is that left-hand business, that commitment. Of course I have to speak in terms of steel strings. If there are steel-string players that you particularly like, in the area of tone and taste that I might not know about, I'd be interested in listening to their work. Regarding transcriptions, almost all of the tunes played on my albums are covered in books I did for Mel Bay, so we're in good shape there. I just try to do the best playing and arranging that I can.

For more information about El McMeen and his music please see his website: <http://www.elmcmeeen.com/>

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