

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Stanley Jordan Lets the Eagle Fly

*A four-time Grammy nominee opens a decade-old vault: *Flight of the Eagle*, *Feather in the Wind*, and the night the last-minute guitarist stole the Kool Jazz Festival.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · Text by Christine Thompson · AMFM Magazine



Stanley Jordan on stage, both hands on the fingerboard. Photo: Guitar World

Stanley Jordan is calling from Kansas, near Wichita, and he sounds like a man who has finally decided to open the closet. Forty years after *Magic Touch* sat a record fifty-one weeks at No. 1 on Billboard's jazz chart and went gold—the record that helped Blue Note feel contemporary again—the Chicago-born, Bay Area-raised virtuoso still treats the guitar like a piano with extra colors. Leonard Feather called him a genius. Jordan would rather talk about the tapes he has been sitting on. “I have a backlog of stuff in the can,” he tells Paul Salfen, “and this year I’m gonna be spraying it out like a fire hose.”

The first spray is already in the air. “Meditation,” his Jobim collaboration with Milton Nascimento and the late Ivan Conti—Mamão to everyone who loved him—arrived in May. On August 28 he followed it with “Flight of the Eagle,” his first original composition in fourteen years and the second single from *Feather in the Wind*, the album he cut mostly a decade ago and is only now willing to let leave the house. African Rose Records has the single. The full record is due this fall. The tour dates are already on stanleyjordan.com.

“Flight of the Eagle” is the one he keeps calling a classic jazz-rock tune, the kind people made before anybody said fusion. Larry Coryell’s *Eleventh House* is in the DNA. So are two members of what Jordan calls his Dream Team Band who are no longer here: bassist T.M. Stevens and keyboardist Delmar Brown. That is the whole point of putting the tape out now. The performances are already ghosts. The music is not.

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THE FLOWER CHILD AND THE GIFT

Jordan has never treated music as furniture. "The music has always been a sign of the times, and also a driver of the times," he says. He was eleven and twelve, living with his mother in Stanford graduate housing while she chased a Ph.D., when the lesson locked in. Silicon Valley did not have the name yet. The war did. "I was probably one of the youngest Vietnam War protesters. I was part of the San Francisco flower-child scene. I was literally a flower child." The records, he still believes, helped get the country out of "that damn war."

The private version of that conviction arrived even earlier. At ten he played a recital piece he had written himself, *The Musical Odyssey—2001: A Space Odyssey* rattling around a kid's head—and watched grown-ups walk up afterward with "this dreamy look in their eyes." Congratulations were the surface. Underneath it he felt something he has been chasing ever since: the music had touched them.

He almost became an engineer instead. The neighborhood was already breeding inventors; he was into electronics, chemistry, robotics. At thirteen he ran a thought experiment. If somebody put a gun to his head and made him choose, music or engineering, which one? "I think I would pick music... Music has this immediate effect." He still builds his own tools—MIDI sequencers, business organizers, the software he needs—but the hierarchy never flipped. "Deep down, what it's really all about is the music, because I do feel that the music has the most power to change the world in a positive way."

The ear announced itself at seven, in the middle of a scolding. He had not practiced his twelve major scales. His teacher called him on it. In the stress he noticed he could hear instantly whether a note was sharp or flat. "This is a sound that's in my head." Notation and fingering were the curriculum. Perfect pitch was the gift nobody had assigned. By high school he was tying for first as a soloist at the Reno International Jazz Festival and sharing a stage with Quincy Jones. In 1981 he took a B.A. in music from Princeton, studying theory with Milton Babbitt and computer music with Paul Lansky, and found time to work with Benny Carter and Dizzy Gillespie before the Blue Note machine ever knew his name.

TWO HANDS, ONE FINGERBOARD

The touch technique did not drop from the sky. It arrived as a pile-up of shortages. After his parents split there was no piano. A guitar was cheaper. He took it up at eleven, the week he heard Jimi Hendrix had died, and decided the instrument was his. Then he missed the piano anyway—the counterpoint, the two independent hands, the chords you cannot grab one-note-per-string.

A third thread: synthesizers he could not afford. Pink Floyd on KQED before *Dark Side of the Moon*. Wendy Carlos, *Switched-On Bach*. A borrowed ARP *Odyssey* and an oscilloscope. He started drafting an electronic fingerboard he could play like a guitar and hear like a keyboard.

Harvey Starr's ZTAR would eventually be the instrument he did not have to invent. While he waited, he asked a more reckless question: how close can you get on a real guitar?

Roy Buchanan's scoop. Joe Pass. Lenny Breau. Hendrix tapping with the pick. Hammer-ons and pull-offs promoted from garnish to the whole meal. In Mountain View, around 1975–76, a luthier at Hal's Music spent hours lowering the action until the strings would speak to two hands. Jordan already had a symmetrical all-fourths tuning—E A D G C F instead of the usual B and E on top—so the patterns repeated. He already had piano coordination. "It's really just a question of putting together pieces that were already there." He called it the Touch Technique before he had ever heard of Jimmy Webster. The name was in the air. He liked it.



Jordan in the studio. Photo: WNYC / Soundcheck

"If I just do hammer-ons and pull-offs... if I could base a whole technique on that, then maybe I could make that work."

— STANLEY JORDAN

A COSMOLOGY OF TAPPING

Salfen tells him he makes it look easy. Jordan will not let that stand. "I've made a career out of making it look easy... but to be really honest, it's not really as easy as it might seem." Two-thousandths of an inch on the action can turn a veteran into a man who thinks he has forgotten how to play. Temperature moves the strings. The body clenches. "There's sort of a zen, or sort of a yoga—actually kind of a hatha and raga yoga—to playing an instrument. This really brings that out."

He maps the forest he macheted into three branches. His own line sits with Jimmy Webster and Emmett Chapman: polyphonic, independent parts, fluid lines, the Stick's fourths-and-fifths logic so one hand can think Chick Corea while the other thinks Stanley Clarke. The Van Halen

branch is helping hands on a single screaming line—rapid arpeggios, pull-offs, acrobatics a pick cannot reach. The Michael Hedges branch is acoustic, rhythmic, tapping braided with conventional technique; Kaki King lives there. “That’s sort of my cosmology of tapping.”

He is teaching it now on purpose. Integral Arts Academy lives as a sub-site of stanleyjordan.com. A live “plug-in”—his word for a weekend retreat—is planned for mid-November near Richmond, Virginia. The early adopter wants to flatten the hurdles he had to invent. The same instinct sent him into music therapy—graduate work at Arizona State, outreach in schools and hospitals, a long stint as an artist-spokesperson for the American Music Therapy Association. Technique was never the point. Warmth was.

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen’s co-host is Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboy who caught the Hail Mary and went into the Hall of Fame. The question is mandatory. Jordan does not dodge it.

He was a street musician with a writer’s introduction to Bruce Lundvall, then president of Elektra. He walked into Lundvall’s office with a lawyer to close a deal and was told, before they started, that Lundvall no longer worked there. The chairman of Capitol had called the night before. They wanted Lundvall to revive Blue Note and stand up a major pop presence on the East Coast under EMI. “I want you to be the first artist I sign. So give me some time.”

When the phone rang again Jordan effectively had two labels and two promotion staffs: Blue Note and Manhattan/EMI. Manager Christine Martin walked him into George Wein’s office. Wein booked him as the opening act at the Kool Jazz Festival in front of Maynard Ferguson and Wynton Marsalis. Ten minutes. Then fifteen. “That was my moment. That was sort of my make-or-break moment.” He stayed in what he calls the inner zone. The New York Post wrote the line he still grins about: last-minute guitarist steals show.

“That was my Hail Mary pass,” he says, “and man, I caught it.”

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THE NEWTON PROBLEM

Catching it once did not cure the other habit. Jordan will say it before anyone else does: he can be reclusive, “overly nerdy,” happy in his own workshop while the world waits. Feather in the Wind sat for ten years for business reasons he will not unpack on tape and for a temperament he will. He tells the Isaac Newton story—the visitor who needed equations Newton had already written twenty years earlier and never bothered to publish—and recognizes himself. At fifteen he resented gigs because they stole practice time.

Magic Touch, the 1985 Blue Note debut produced with Al Di Meola, spent a record fifty-one weeks at No. 1 on Billboard’s jazz chart and later went gold. Radio did it with “The Lady in My Life” and “Eleanor Rigby.” Jordan still thinks the trick of that record was a marketing sleight of

hand: sell the technique so hard that people would accept the rest of his appetite. Bill Milkowski's famous warning—do not be deceived, this is one guitar player, no overdubs—was the misdirection. Underneath it he was already refusing to specialize. Four Grammy nominations, a stretch with Clive Davis at Arista, a 17-minute “Bolero,” the first-generation Power Macintosh startup chime, Monday nights with Les Paul at the Iridium, cameos from Blind Date to jam-band stages—none of it made him pick a lane. The more focused albums that followed, the ones that obeyed conventional industry wisdom, did worse. The eclectic ones did better. He thinks the streaming era, the cousin-as-DJ stacking 45s, has finally come around to the way he actually hears.

“One of the most difficult things that we can do is to share our true self with the world,” he says, quoting the narrator of a Cinderella he loves. Feather in the Wind is that attempt: Jobim with Nascimento and Mamão; “Flight of the Eagle” with Stevens and Brown; a vocal on “City of New Orleans”; ambient pieces with strange harmonies; a duet with Sharon Isbin on a piece by Antônio Lauro. His daughter Julia is already on the next record, a love letter to Brazil that is also in the can, with Mamão as the main drummer. “At this point, I can celebrate some of these wonderful people I’ve had a chance to work with.”

LEMONS, LEMONADE, FEATHERS

The album has a subject, and the subject is not technique. Jordan lost people while he was making it. B.B. King—his first guitar hero, before Hendrix—was supposed to guest. They had settled on “Riders on the Storm.” King died. Jordan played the part himself, not as an impersonation (“that’s not my thing”) but as devotion. He lost his father, David Jordan, Hewlett-Packard’s first personnel manager, while he was recording the title track. The record is dedicated to him. “In a way, his spirit is in there.”

Two days before he sat down with Salfen he learned of another death. It keeps happening. “Life gives us lemons, and we make lemonade. So what the album is about is the things that we do to maintain constancy and keep going forward in the face of loss, death, change, the stuff that the world throws at us.” He reaches for Todd Rundgren and then past him: spirituality as the refusal to let the physical world have the last word.

That is also, he thinks, the job of a record in 2026. “Life can get to be so mundane, especially in this world of mirrors, when everything is all about surfaces. It’s hard, especially for young people today. They don’t have the encouragement and the examples of how to go deep within.” Music, if it is doing its work, manufactures a present tense too vivid to abandon. “The sages from the East tell us that to awaken on a spiritual level, you have to become fully present. We call it mindfulness. Well, that’s what music does. It creates a here and now that’s so amazing that you can’t possibly be anywhere else.”

Salfen lets that be the last word. Jordan is on the road—Iridium in New York with Kenwood Dennard and Wes Wirth, City Winery in Nashville, Keystone Korner, the Triple Door, Daryl’s House, Middle C Jazz in Charlotte, dates already stacking into 2027. The vault is open. The eagle is up.

FIND STANLEY JORDAN

“Flight of the Eagle” is out now (August 28, 2026) on African Rose Records, the second single from Feather in the Wind, due this fall. Lead single “Meditation,” with Milton Nascimento and Ivan Conti (Mamão), arrived in May.

Listen: streaming services under Stanley Jordan — Flight of the Eagle. Site and tour dates: stanleyjordan.com/en/tourdates. Teaching: Integral Arts Academy via the same site. Mid-November live retreat near Richmond, Virginia — watch the site.

Upcoming: The Iridium (New York, Sept. 11–12, trio with Kenwood Dennard and Wes Wirth); City Winery, Nashville (Sept. 16); Keystone Korner, Baltimore (Oct. 2–3); The Triple Door, Seattle (Oct. 7); Rehoboth Beach Jazz Festival (Oct. 17); Crossroads, Garwood, N.J. (Oct. 23); Daryl’s House, Pawling, N.Y. (Oct. 28); Middle C Jazz, Charlotte (Dec. 20).

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.