

GUITAR PLAYER

Soulful 6-String Excursions

# Phil Keaggy

By [Barry Cleveland](#) | October 2006

Phil Keaggy had already achieved recognition as a gifted guitarist while he was still in high school, and his band, Glass Harp, inked a deal with Decca Records when he was only 19 years old. That same year, Keaggy embraced Christianity, a decision that affected his guitar playing along with his life's course.

"I began to become more of a melodic guitar player around 1970, whereas before that I was trying to be fancy," he explains. "When peace and sanity finally came into my life, I learned how to connect the dots musically a little bit more."

Glass Harp released three albums of music with progressive and psychedelic leanings between 1970 and 1972, after which Keaggy left to pursue a solo career within the burgeoning Christian music industry. By the late '80s, however, Keaggy's association with that industry was problematic.

"I got squeezed out along with a lot of the other original artists, because they were just out to sell records, and I didn't really fit the image," he relates. "I was too religious for the world, and too worldly for the religious. But I am living proof that there is life after being with a record company."

Indeed. Over the course of his career, the ultra-prolific Keaggy has released nearly 50 recordings—featuring both acoustic and electric guitar—covering genres ranging from rock to new acoustic to new age jazz. His two latest releases indicate the breadth of his stylistic diversity. Jammed! [TAG] is a collection of mostly electric jam sessions that took place throughout the past 35 years, providing insights into how his playing has evolved during that time. The songs on Roundabout [Strobie] were compiled from looped acoustic guitar improvisations recorded during recent tours.

Keaggy's playing skillfully blends elements from just about every imaginable style, as well as incorporating volume-knob swells, slapped harmonics, dramatic glissandos, tasty bends, and various textural tricks. His looping abilities—as showcased on Roundabout—rival those of anyone.

"After 45 years of playing, I have developed a signature style," he says. "But I'm also a constellation of all my influences. There are things that were inspired by Michael Hedges, George Harrison, Allan Holdsworth, and Pat Metheny, to name a few. I love all guitarists that play well, and there are many."

## What is the origin of the looped pieces on Roundabout?

They began with me messing around at my soundchecks before the audience came in. I'd typically just come from taking a nap at a hotel, so my mind would be fresh, and I'd improvise loops that would be recorded by my soundman, Brian Persall. The loops have rhythm, lead, bass, and even percussion parts [Keaggy uses the internal microphone in his guitar to record shakers, finger cymbals, etc.], along with textures created using an EBow and placing plastic between the strings, which creates koto, banjo, and steel drum-type sounds.

After I returned home, I imported all of the loops into Pro Tools and edited some sections, but no overdubs were added either after the initial recording or while in the studio. If a song was too long, I might edit some measures or repeated sections to make it a little less repetitious, or maybe move some bits around. For example, there are moments on “Skippin Stones” and “South of the Boredom” where I repeated a phrase or inserted it again at the end, and on “Blue Moon,” I moved the sections around a bit to create more dynamics. “Blue Moon” is actually the only unoriginal piece, and that melody just came to me, because, you know, the solo that Clapton does in “Sunshine of Your Love” is really “Blue Moon.”

### **What signal chain do you use for looping?**

I run my guitar through a Boss volume pedal into a Visual Sound Route 66 compressor/overdrive; Boss tremolo, Dimension C, and Octave pedals; and a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler, and then into channel one of a Peavey Deltafex set for chorus. I send the chorused signal to a Lexicon Jam Man, and route its output into channel two of the Deltafex for reverb, then out to the P.A. mixer. Between the Jam Man’s 32 seconds of memory, and the DL4’s looping setting, I can get some nice-sounding loops.

### **What advice would you give to the novice loopist?**

Get a looper that is simple, intuitive, and responds easily to your foot and the way your mind works. Then, go easy with it until you are comfortable putting down a rhythm thing and settling into it. Guitar players have a tendency to rush and get above or ahead of the beat, and what’s great about looping devices is that they really help you lock in and get a good sense of rhythm and timing. Also, don’t be afraid to experiment—especially when you’re alone. Take chances, and eventually you will get confident with it.

### **What was the impetus behind Jammed!?**

I released a two-CD set called Premium Jams back in 1995 that was available only through my fan club. My record distributor thought it would be great to give my fans something electric again, and as those recordings were never released commercially, he recommended we put together a collection of about 12 pieces. He even suggested which ones should be included. I edited them in Pro Tools, and added a few unreleased tracks—such as the Beethoven-derived “Joyphil,” a raucous little number called “Phlagan’s Flow,” and “Prehistrobie K-18,” which was recorded in my bedroom when I was barely out of high school.

### **“Prehistrobie” is very interesting. Can you describe what you did there?**

That’s actually a short excerpt from a composition called “Experimental Music 1970” that’s about 15 minutes long. I had a Sony TC 630 reel-to-reel, and I just connected it to the external speaker jack on my Fender Twin Reverb with the speakers unplugged [Ed. Note: This is not recommended, as it can damage the amplifier and the recorder] because I didn’t have a microphone. You could record sound-on-sound, change the tape speed, turn up the onboard echo for regeneration, and turn the tape over to do backwards stuff. I had been playing Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Jeff Beck tunes, but during the winter of 1969/70 I would just sit in my room, searching my heart, and trying to find a voice with my guitar. I’m playing my old flame-top Les Paul, and doing the pinkie volume swells that eventually became kind of a trademark for me in Glass Harp. The piece is titled “Prehistrobie” because my dad used to call my playing “strobie” when I was little.

## **Speaking of pinkie-volume swells, I understand that you have your guitars fitted with custom volume pots.**

Yes. Some pots increase the volume real gradually, and then bark at the end, while others cut the level dramatically within the first 20 percent or so of their travel. I like pots that fade the volume down evenly.

## **How did losing a finger as a child affect your playing?**

I lost my middle finger before I began playing guitar in fourth grade, so I never missed it, because it wasn't there. I could still hold a plectrum. The only thing I had to get over was the embarrassment of playing in front of people, because, as a kid, you're self-conscious of things like that. But I began to accept who I was as a person, and, in 1970, I became a Christian, and God helped me see that it's okay to be me. That's when I accepted who I am, and I found total joy in playing in front of people and just being myself. The only thing I can't do is that wonderful flamenco tremolo stuff, but I've found ways to compensate. By the way, I lost my finger in a water-pump accident. I might as well get the story straight, because there are some wild stories out there.

## **Yeah, I read somewhere that you lost it in a cutting match with Hendrix.**

That's one of the stories! Glass Harp recorded in his studio two weeks after he died, but I never met him, and I don't think he ever heard my music. But I sure did admire him.

## **Would you say that you gravitate more toward Hendrix or Michael Bloomfield?**

Bloomfield. I got a chance to open for him in 1971, when Glass Harp played at KSAN radio in San Francisco. I was all excited. I'd bought a Les Paul because of him, and I played along with his records, and learned as many riffs and solos as I could. I felt that both Bloomfield and Hendrix were soulful players beyond me, but Bloomfield's solo on "Another Country" by Electric Flag—where he really swings into it—was awesome.

The promoter of that gig asked Bloomfield if he wanted to jam with me, but he wasn't feeling well at the time, and he wasn't playing like the Bloomfield I had been studying. He had a stereo Gibson guitar instead of his Les Paul, and he didn't have his usual band. But when I ran into him at Criterion Studios in Miami three years later, I introduced myself as the guy whose band opened up for him in San Francisco, and he said, "I remember you. You're that little guy who played his ass off." And it was like a confirmation that he was really listening. I smiled, and he grinned at me. That really meant a lot.

## **Phil's Gang**

Guitars: Olson SJ Cutaway, Del Langejans BRGC-6 Grand Concert, McPherson MG 4.5 (all equipped with L.R. Baggs Micro Duet pickup systems), custom Zion, Parker Fly, '71 Gibson Les Paul Deluxe (modified with PAF and hand-wired PRS pickups), '63 Fender Stratocaster, '59 Gretsch Anniversary.

Amplifiers: Modified late-'60s Fender Deluxe, mid-'60s Vox AC30, Yamaha DG Stomp, Line 6 POD and PODxt.

FX: Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler, Lexicon Jam Man (controlled with an RFX MIDI Wizard), Peavey Deltafex, Visual Sound Route 66, Heet Sound EBow, Boss FV-60 Volume, CH-1 Super Chorus, TR-2 Tremolo, DC-2 Dimension C, and OC-2 Octave.

Strings: GHS or Elixir, .011, .016, .026, .036, .046, .056 (acoustics) and .009-.042 or .010-.046 (electrics).