



# MAKER

**Nile Rodgers has produced and played on more hit records than anyone has the time to count. So isn't it time we count him among the guitar gods?**

**By Bob Gulla** Photography by Rayon Richards

**T**oo much of guitar history is etched in stone before its time. Too many pundits are quick to cement a player's place in the pantheon of rock before his career is over, before his work is finished, before the final votes are counted. Because of this, certain players are deemed eternal, while others, who've perhaps not had the same exposure, are never formally awarded the guitar-hero status they deserve. Among the latter are guys like Billy F. Gibbons, whom we selected (MAR/06) as the first in our continuing series of Other Guitar Heroes.

Joining Gibbons in this esteemed group is Nile Rodgers, a player who easily merits a double-wide berth. You may not know it, but few guitarists have contributed as much to the art of playing as Rodgers has. Many, of course, associate him with his dance-pop band Chic, or his production work for Madonna and Britney Spears. And rightly so—he's made a name for himself largely by playing in and producing dance acts.

But Rodgers has done much more than dabble in danceability and high-profile pop. In addition to producing scores of credible artists, he's worked with a bevy of the best guitar players on the planet, including John McLaughlin, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Steve Vai, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. And he's done far more than merely turn the knobs for these guys; he's written with and played alongside them as well.

Rodgers, who's now 54, possessed exceptional musical talent from a young age. By 19, he had locked up a gig as a house guitarist for Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater, where he backed artists like Aretha Franklin and George Clinton. Before long, however, he tired of being in the shadows, and

so tried his hand at a few different bands, settling at last on Chic, which he founded in New York City in 1977 with talented bassist Bernard Edwards. Chart-topping anthems like "Le Freak" and "Good Times" followed. But the disco backlash eventually killed the band (though music aficionados knew Chic were more R&B than they were disco); they broke up in 1983.

"I was coming off that whole 'disco sucks' thing," says Rodgers, "and I was wondering why people ever called us disco, anyway. We were a funk band. We were an R&B band. When we came out, though, there were no pure R&B bands like War or Earth, Wind and Fire, so people associated us with the bands that were coming out at the time."

Yet it's when Chic split that things got really interesting for Rodgers. He began lending his ample talents to a vast array of artists, such as Sister Sledge ("We Are Family"), David Bowie ("Let's Dance"), Paul Simon, Peter Dinklage, the Vaughan Brothers, INXS, Robert Plant, Duran Duran, and many other of the very biggest names in music. Indeed, Rodgers's work as a producer and as a guitarist has done as much to shape the sound of popular music over the last two decades as anybody's—and much, much more than most.

At the heart of Rodgers's artistry is his guitar, an axe that has graced more hit records than anyone has the time to count. More than any other black performer with the exception of Jimi Hendrix, Rodgers is associated with his guitar; in fact, he's rarely seen without it. So if the folks who write history are at all concerned with accuracy, they should quickly find a home for Rodgers alongside rock's already well-documented guitar heroes. Guitarists, meanwhile, should seek out his work, cop some moves, and see for themselves why we're calling him a hero.



# NILE RODGERS

**You can work in virtually any style: jazz, blues, funk, R&B, disco, soul, pop, rock, soundtrack.**

**How do you pull that off?** Well, I was fortunate to have been raised in New York City in Greenwich Village during the Beatnik era. I was around at a time when pop culture was world culture. Typical was the way I dressed: a jacket from China, a shirt from the Middle East, sailor bell-bottoms, a hat from Australia, and a poncho from Mexico. It was a mishmash of cultures. That's what it was like to be a Beatnik. Back then you could see Ravi Shankar and Deep Purple on the same stage. And it's still how I'm wired. I feel just as comfortable with Jimmie Vaughan as with Angélique Kidjo, Herbie Hancock, or Steve Vai. All of this makes me feel connected to the world. When I show up to work, I show up with my guitar and my amp. Organically, whatever I say comes from my fingers and my heart. Only after that do we bring in the technology.

**You've accomplished so many things as a player. What is the common thread that holds all your work together?** The guitar is the essence from which all my musicality flows. I just finished my first Broadway show. It takes place now, but it's a ghost story from 1929, and all the musical influences are from that period. As a guitar play-

er during that time, you were probably playing with a Django-ish, or maybe banjo-like, vibe. It was great for me to compose for that period; I was inspired by people like Kurt Weill, Cab Calloway, and Louis Armstrong. The way I wrote, in my mind, sounded authentic for the period. On the session, I played guitar a little, and did most of the writing. But even though I understand the musical history, I still wrote from a guitarist's standpoint; the melodic concept is based on the way a guitar player puts melody and chords together. So I'm playing the melody and the harmony at the same time. Even for Chic records, when I compose I'm actually playing the melody and the rhythm at the same time.

**People have paid good money to bring you and your guitar in for sessions. How do you prepare for one of those sessions?** The thing that's good for me is that when I walk into a session, I walk in blind. That's how I was raised. I'm a tool for the producer and the artist and they can use me however they please. I don't want to color the ses-

sion with my stuff until I find out what they have and what they need.

Unfortunately, those sessions don't happen as much these days for anyone, not just me, and it breaks my heart. In five or ten years, with the evolution of technology, they might not even be happening at all, and that's a shame. I'm young enough to understand today's business, but I'm old enough to have worked with the old school.

**So you've seen things done both ways, then.** Yeah, when it comes to the old way of doing things, I have one foot in the door and one foot out. The way I look at technology is: the more colors you have, the prettier the painting will be; the more options I have at my disposal in the studio, the happier I am. I believe in technology. But it's only a tool to aid you. The fact is, when you're on a boat, you have to have great gear, but you should also learn celestial navigation, in case something goes wrong. People grow up in a world never expecting anything to go wrong.

**Can you give me an example of a band that came into the studio with that mindset?** When I recorded Maroon 5, they were sort of overwhelmed. I had every guitar amp you could think of in the studio for them, and I wanted to be able to spend time and explore guitar sounds. But they come from a world in which you can do it all with plugins. They were subordinate to technology.

**You've been on a serious quest over the years to find a second guitar exactly like your beloved Strat—the “perfect guitar.”** Let me start by saying that Fender is finally recreating my one-of-a-kind guitar, and I'm really happy about it. But yes, I've spent some ungodly amount of time and money trying to find a Strat just like mine. I've looked at some 300,000 of them, and I still can't find a single one like it. I've even tried to trace serial numbers, to get close. Finally, though, a guy from the Fender Custom Shop came to visit me, and he told me that I have one of those one-of-a-kind Fenders: it was made in 1960, and it didn't come off an assembly line, but out of one guy's garage. Back in the day, when Fender had custom orders to fill, or when its guitar makers wanted to make extra money, they'd take jobs back to their garages. Or they'd paint guitars in their houses over the weekend. This is the reason why I couldn't find one exactly like mine anywhere.

**Can you describe your guitar for us? At this point it's got to be one of the more famous Strats in pop music.** The Custom Shop guy told me it has a '59 neck, but a '60 body. They took it apart to discover that, and they determined the year because of the shielding paint, which they used in 1960. It's made out of high-end alder, which

CONTINUED ON PAGE 136



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## NILE RODGERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64

Fender didn't use routinely, so it's incredibly light. And I don't have a tremolo bar, so the body is completely solid.

**So now they're recreating it? After all this time?** Yeah! It's called the "Nile Rodgers Hitmaker" guitar. It will be a high-end replica of my guitar, and it'll be out sometime this year, in conjunction with Fender's 60th anniversary. I'm thrilled for the honor. Plus, finally, I'll have the second guitar I've been looking for!

**I've heard that you take your guitar with you wherever you go.** My whole identity is wrapped up in my guitar. People can't understand why I'm always carrying it, but I will not let it out of my sight, ever. Over the years I've played dozens of vintage Strats, but not one of them sounds like this guitar. If something happens to this one, I don't know what I'd do. It's like family. It's part of my world.

**You've worked with some of the greatest players in history, Nile. That must be a thrill for someone who loves the guitar the way you do.** It is! I've played with some amazing players. For example, playing with John McLaughlin at Montreux was ridiculous, as you can imagine. And I remember showing Eric Clapton an arrangement we were working on for a song we were doing for a Hendrix tribute, "Stone Free." I was playing the melody and the rhythm at the same time, and he was like, "If you're doing both, Nile, then what am I supposed to play?" I also played with Dweezil Zappa. Man, he's a monster! We did a duet on a video-game theme, and trading eights to fours with him was ridiculous; I had to pull out my best shit. His father is, hands down, one of my favorite musicians of all time—his intellect, his harmonic approach. It must have been strange living in his head.

**Tell me about your time with Steve Vai.** Amazing. We worked together on the soundtrack for the video game *Halo 2*. I walked away from that project knowing in my heart that Steve may be the best—if not the best, he's in the top two or three—of all the guys I've worked with, and I've sat down with monsters. Steve's running that stuff all day long! I'm like, Are you kidding me? I think I'm hot stuff, but Steve's another story entirely!


**Can you tell us about your experience with David Bowie on *Let's Dance*?** It may not get any better than that, ever. I consider it the apex of musicality and spirituality all rolled into one. At the time, Chic was a great band. My colleagues were monster players and we were making great music. And doing the *Let's Dance* record with Bowie in the midst of

all that put us on a real high. I asked David if he wanted me to play, and he told me, "I want you to do what you do best—I want you to make hits." He handed me some music and said, "These aren't hits, they're Bowie songs that need to be turned into hits." So I started reworking his songs. "Let's Dance" was demoed as a folk song on a 12-string guitar. If I didn't change it up, I couldn't go back to the 'hood again! So I changed the chords, changed the groove, and gave it to him. I was like, "Now dig *this!*" I played every guitar on that record except for the leads that Stevie [Ray Vaughan] came in and did.

**What about Jeff Beck? How do you accompany someone with such a distinctive style?** What an incredible musician he is. He's both complicated and complex—two very different qualities in my eyes. He had my jaw dropping. We did "People Get Ready" with Rod Stewart, and it seemed like the guitar was attached to Jeff's body. And while doing that, I got a call from Robert Plant to do the Honeydrippers, which was also great fun.

**You have a new Chic album coming out this spring. Are things with the band different now than they were back in 1980?** Bernard Edwards isn't here with me. [Edwards died in 1996.—Ed.] He was the only one in the world that ever played like that. I was truly with some amazing musicians. And Chic was the place Bernard and I lived out our fantasies. Nile Rodgers isn't a fantasy, but Chic gives me the ability to do anything—we're role-playing as big-time musicians. When I call myself Chic, I put on a suit and play funk that's amazing to me. We played for 75,000 people a few months ago. I was shocked to find that the music is still important to so many people.

**What would you like people to know about you right now, in 2006?** I have a simple life. I'm not extravagant. My life is what it is, and it won't change. I truly dig making records; it makes me feel good to get them done. Honestly speaking, I have to say I only did one record in my life that was blatantly made for money. We said no thanks three times, and they just kept upping the price, to the point where we couldn't refuse.

I'd also like people to know that I learned to play classical music first. Clarinet has the same written range as the guitar. So when I picked up the guitar it was an easy transition, not technique-wise but in that the knowledge I had gained on the clarinet was rooted in my spirit. I was an adept reader at sessions, too. I got so many jobs early on because I could read fast, and get to the next session, which was important. That's why I recommend that all your readers also learn to read music. It was tremendously important to my career success. 

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