



GUITAR INTERNATIONAL EXCLUSIVE:
 10 FREE OFFICIAL TABS FOR A NEW SONG EVERYDAY
 FREE TABS FOR A NEW SONG EVERYDAY. PLUS MAJOR DISCOUNTS ONCE THE FREEBIES RUN OUT.

SPONSORED BY **Unitedwetable**
 The Online Guitar Tab Store

You are here: Guitar Magazine » '80s Rock » Rik Emmett Interview: Moving Beyond Categorization

Rik Emmett Interview: Moving Beyond Categorization

[Tweet](#) [Submit](#) [Share](#) [Like](#) [31](#)

By: [Matthew Warnock](#)

In the 1970's, two hugely successful power trios emerged from the Great White North, Rush and a little later on Triumph. Both bands would end up becoming two of the country's most successful rock bands, and would break the global market to find world-wide success in the decades since they first broke onto the charts. While Canada may be well known for producing pop acts in recent years, Celine Dion and Justin Bieber are two of the country's biggest musical exports ever, Rush and Triumph were key players in shining the spotlight on Canada's rock scene, which is often overshadowed by its U.K. and U.S. counterparts.

Just as [Alex Lifeson](#) was a major part of Rush's success, guitarist [Rik Emmett](#) was instrumental in leading Triumph to the top of the rock world in the '70s and '80s. Though the band and Rik Emmett was in 1988, the guitarist has kept his dance card full with his award winning duo with guitarist Dave Dunlop, the Strung-Out Troubadours, as well as become a highly sought after music educator. The duo has won two Canadian Smooth Jazz Awards, and although Rik is opposed to labels for their music, the group has become a fan favorite in the Smooth Jazz community.

Guitar International recently sat down with Rik Emmett to get his thoughts on working with Dave Dunlop, talk about Smooth Jazz as a label and find out the inside scoop on the rumors that Triumph is getting back together.



Rik Emmett and His Godin Guitar

Matt Warnock: After being in Triumph for many years, which was a power trio, what's it like working with a second guitarist, Dave Dunlop, in your duo the Strung-Out Troubadours?

Rik Emmett: I welcome the whole idea of collaborating with another guitarist and being able to play off of someone, having them kick my ass. From a musician's point of view, it's nice to have the freedom to play on your own, harmonically and melodically as you get in a power trio, but every type of ensemble or format has its own unique challenges that make it fun.

The thing that's the great thing about working with Dave, that we have similar mindsets. We're mostly rock and roll kind of guys at heart, but when we get a couple of acoustic guitars and we start to explore different types of influences such as jazz and Latin music, we take things in a new direction. I think that he and I work from the same palette and we have the same levels of energy that we bring to what we do.

He's a little younger than I am, so he's got a different sound. I'm more of a traditionalist and he's more willing to go outside. He's not afraid of certain colors and things, whereas I tend to be more of a dyed in the wool, old-school rock guy and my jazz roots are pretty traditional as well, mostly bebop kind of stuff. In the end, I think it makes for a great combination.

Matt: When you get together to work out a tune, do you have the whole arrangement written beforehand, or do you write one line and then get together to jam out the second part in the rehearsal room?

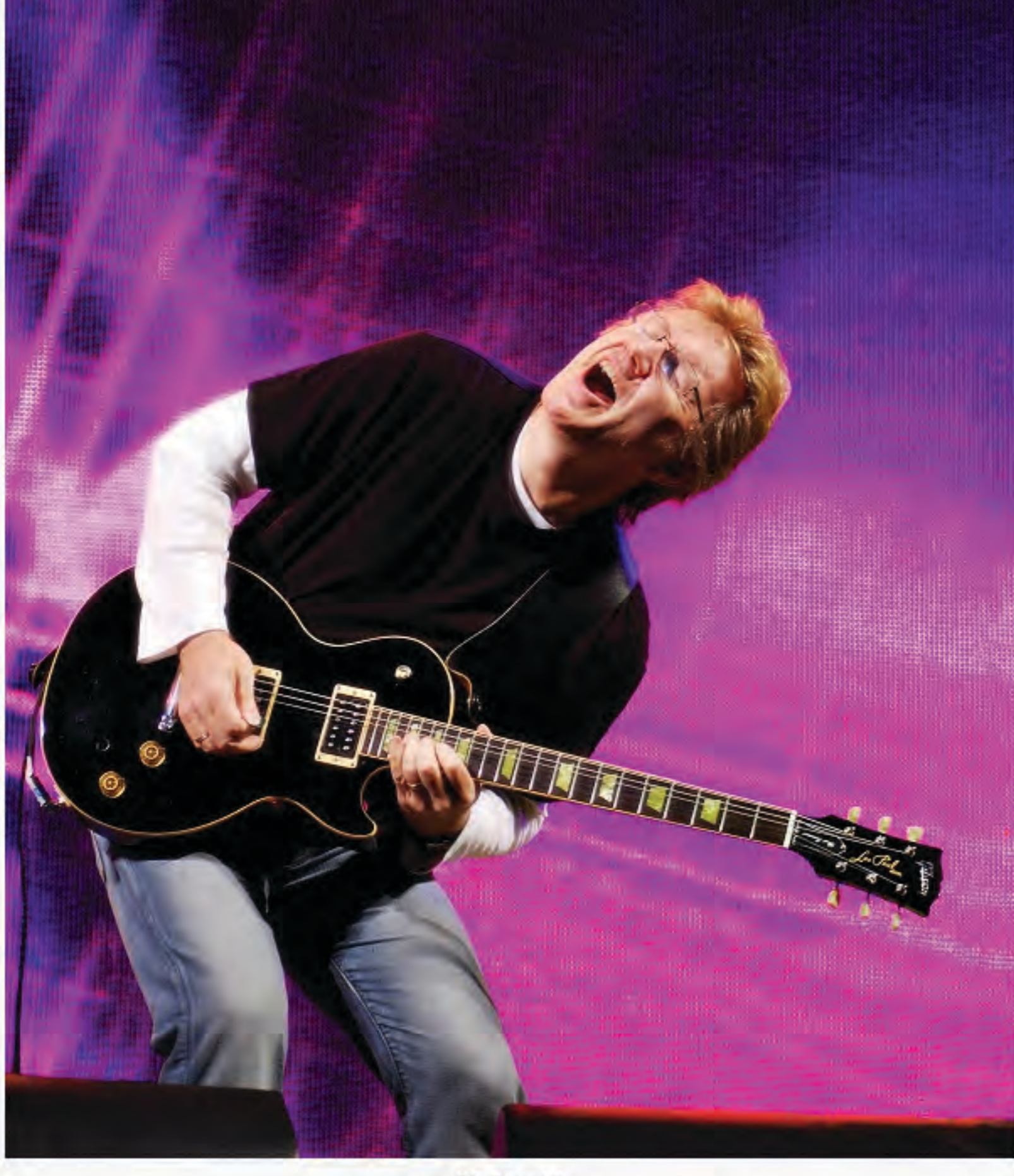
Rik Emmett: It comes in different ways, and you're never sure where it's going to go. One of the things that I try and impress on my College students, when I'm teaching writing and arranging, is that one of the things you need to do is quiet your own ego and your own expectations and then just let the music speak to you and tell you what it needs. With Dave and I, there are two egos. [Laughs] There are two guys that are trying to impose form and that have expectations of what things are going to sound like. Sometimes I'll have to say to him, out of my amazing, old wisdom [Chuckles], that we have to be patient and we have to wait.

Then sometimes, you're composing a piece and, I hate to speak in such esoteric terms, but the lattice work, or the mathematics of two lines is really dependent on each other to make it all work out. Sometimes I'll think that way. Like, if I add the 3rd above this line it's going to sound great. Or if I add a 6th below the line it'll work out, coming at things from that angle as well. Those kinds of things are fairly standard arranging techniques, but they work out on certain songs. Though, most of the time it's just one guy playing rhythm and the other guy blowin' his brains out. [Laughs]

Matt: Whenever you get two guitarists in a room, whether they're friends or not, there's usually a level of competition that arises and pushes each guy to new levels in their playing. Do you experience this friendly competition when you get together with Dave to jam?

Rik Emmett: He and I have been working together for a long time. I hired him for my band about 16 years ago, so he's been playing with me for a long time. It began as a sideman, employer-employee sort of thing. Over time I started to think that we should start collaborating on songwriting and get together to do some duo playing. I had been doing duo shows with a pianist, but I thought having another guitar in the mix would be interesting. Slowly but surely he began to worm his way into my life until he was like a partner. [Laughs]

Because of that long history, we work well together. I'm reading the Keith Richards' biography right now, and he talks about working with Ron Wood and the two guitars being greater together than just one. But there's also the ego and tension that exists between him and Mick Jagger, and Dave and I don't have that ego tension. It's more of a feeling that our jobs are to make the other guy shine and make it easier for the each other to do our jobs. All that history also allows us to know what will make the other guy happy and will make things work. So, that's what we focus on and we bring that positive attitude to our audiences when we're up on stage.



Rik Emmett

Matt: You've won Canadian Smooth Jazz Awards for your work with Dave, and your music with him has become labeled as Smooth Jazz over the years. I've talked to many different jazz musicians, some like [George Benson](#) were proud of that label for their music, others shied away from it. Where do you stand on your music being labeled as Smooth Jazz?

Rik Emmett: I think it's a little naïve, and that people are pretending they don't care if they say they don't. The music business is all about labels. It used to be that you had to have a label for your music so they could sort your records in the music stores, but that doesn't happen anymore. [Laughs] But there's still classification and there's still charting and formatting that goes on in regards to radio and online stores. It was a surprise for me and Dave when our first record was labeled as Smooth Jazz, we thought of our band as two rock guys doing a folky kind of thing.

We still think about it that way, though when we got to the *Push and Pull* album, we thought that since we're getting recognition from the Smooth Jazz community, then let's give them an album they'll enjoy. So we got more of an electric sound, and hired a great rhythm section to play with us, and we moved a bit more in that direction because of our relationship with that musical community.

Now, I teach at Humber College and there are people there who are serious artists, guys who play jazz in its purest and finest forms, your Pat Labarbera's and Don Thompson's. I could see where they might not get that label, because it's hard to put the word Jazz into what we're doing. It's more like very hip R&B with a very little jazz thrown in. In that sense, the whole thing with labels is kind of a joke. Look at me, I started out in a rock band wearing spandex pants, and now I'm going turn 58 this year and I play acoustic finger-style. I play nylon string guitar, 12-string guitar. I like to play what some people would call folk and other people would call Smooth Jazz. I don't really care.

As a guy who used to be in Cover Player and other magazines, do you take that seriously as well or is it kind of a joke depending on whether you're on the cover of the magazine and how many records you've sold etc. So much of this has to do with promotion, marketing and PR that in the end the labels start to become whatever. I think Benson was right. You just smile and let people call your music whatever they want, and you just go about doing your thing and hope that it finds an audience.

Matt: Going forward, do you see the Troubadours as being your main musical focus, or do you have other projects in the works as well?

Rik Emmett: I just kind of take it as it comes. I think that music, the best kinds, come in an organic and natural way. That's not to say that it's all inspiration and no perspiration. You have to have a strong work ethic and there's definitely more perspiration than inspiration to make things happen. But, I'm an eclectic guy, so one day I might wake up with an idea and I start to work it up and think, this may be good for the Troubs, or maybe I should reform Triumph for this track. [Laughs]

I'm fairly eclectic and I don't think that'll ever change. I'll go to my local music store, buy a pack of flat-wound string, put them on a Les Paul and learn Joe Pass solos. Why would I do that? Because I wanna. [Laughs] I'm not gonna worry about whether or not it'll fit into a group, or if I'll ever play it live. I think the best guitar tone in the world is Joe Pass playing "Little Darlin'", just amazing tone. I've never done something like that on a record, so maybe I'll do that someday, who knows where things will take me down the road.

Matt: There are always rumors about Triumph reunited for a tour or a new record. Can you confirm or deny any of these rumors as far as any plans for Triumph in the coming years?

Rik Emmett: I can't put them to rest, and the reason I can't is because there's nothing really going in. In a vacuum, people try and come up with stuff to fill the vacuum. There's a Triumph website and people are talking about it a lot, but we've got nothing planned. In all honesty, Gil isn't really all that keen on doing a full-time rock drumming gig right now.

When you're pushing 60, being a rock drummer isn't easy. I've maintained my playing chops over the past few decades, but the other guys were semi-retired. For the reunion shows we did a few years back, those guys had to bust their butts for a couple of months to get back into playing shape. We did 45 rehearsals for 2 gigs, something like that, because they hadn't played. So, when you look back on that experience you think that it's a lot of work for a few shows.

Gil is a busy guy. He's got the recording studio and the production company. He's always been a workaholic kind of guy. He's also really into golfing, so he's out on the course with Alex Lifeson and Tom Cochrane because he loves to make it to it. Then, Mike Levine is down in Jamaica every winter because that's what he always did, so it would be tough for he makes it happen. I honestly doubt that anything solid would materialize, but I guess you never know.

RELATED POSTS

- [Van Halen Panama Guitar Tab](#)
- [Queensryche to Release Dedicated to Chaos Summer 2011](#)
- [Nikki Sixx Interview: Being Vulnerable](#)
- [Steve Stevens Interview: Guitarist Extraordinaire with Billy Idol](#)

COMMENTS

NAME *

MAIL *

WEBSITE

Add Comment

SEARCH GUITAR INTERNATIONAL

Search Keyword here

CONNECT

- Subscribe via RSS
- Like Us on Facebook
- Follow Us on Twitter
- Watch our Videos!

OUR SPONSORS

Koentopp Guitars
 www.koentoppguitars.com
 LEARN MORE

TWITTER UPDATES

- At WIU for the guitar festival, amazing players here!! #wiuguitarfest 1 day ago
- Tom Petty MaryJane's Last Dance Guitar Tab: Free Guitar Tab | GuitarInternational.Com http://t.co/e8okIWj via @gtrintmag 2 days ago
- Tracy Chapman Fast Car Guitar Tab : Free Guitar Tab | GuitarInternational.Com http://t.co/8LokOWd via @gtrintmag 3 days ago
- U2 Beautiful Day Guitar Tab : Free Guitar Tab | GuitarInternational.Com http://t.co/wXdt8Rd via @gtrintmag 4 days ago
- Jack Grassel Guitar Pictures : Guitar News | GuitarInternational.Com http://t.co/9wb728Z via @gtrintmag 7 days ago

OUR SPONSORS

3 Awful Guitar Mistakes

If you do either of these 3 things you will NEVER play the guitar well. [Click here](#) to save years of pain.

RECENT COMMENTS

- Nikki Sixx comenta su opinión sobre Motley Crüe on Nikki Sixx Interview: Being Vulnerable
- Ignited We Stand on 10 Great Guitar Blogs: Classical Guitar Blog
- Nikki Lewis on Nikki Sixx Interview: Being Vulnerable
- CLBIII on Fender Pawn Shop Series of Guitars Announced
- Brazil Futbol | Vernon Neilly Interview: The Hardest Working Guitarist in Showbusiness – Guitar International on Vernon Neilly Interview: The Hardest Working Guitarist in Showbusiness

OUR SPONSORS

ARCHIVES

Select Month

OUR SPONSORS

PUBLISH WITH GUITAR INTERNATIONAL

Do you love the guitar and all things guitar related?

Find yourself with a great idea but have nowhere to express it?

Why not write a Guest Article? Contact GI today to find out how!

OUR SPONSORS

john page guitars