



## An Interview with Emmett Chapman, Inventor of the Chapman Stick

by [Stephen Rekas](#)

I met Emmett Chapman at 1981 Summer NAMM Show in Chicago. Then as now, I was impressed with his willingness to entertain questions from the largely uninformed. As I had come to Chicago from Spain where I was studying the classic guitar, I had to try the Stick on for size- and failed miserably. I could see it required a different mindset than the guitar, and reading Emmett's responses to my questions now, I can see that he too "completely changed character as a musician stylist" the moment he picked up his newly invented instrument. I simply wasn't ready to make that change, and I'm still not ready.

Fast forwarding to July 2005, I happened to meet Stick player Steve Adelson in Litchfield, Connecticut at the First International 10-String Guitar Festival directed by Narciso Yepes protégé, Janet Marlow. Steve and I remained in touch and together we hatched the idea of a *Stick Method* to be published by Mel Bay Publications and endorsed by Emmett Chapman. My boss, William Bay, has to be credited with the business acumen and foresight to see the possibilities in such a project. Look for Steve's book/CD sometime in 2006 or early 2007.

I am privileged to interview both Emmett Chapman and Steve Adelson in this issue of *Guitar Sessions*.

Stephen Rekas  
Guitar Sessions Editor

### In the Beginning

***What inspired the concept of the Chapman Stick? Was there an Aha! moment?***



Barney Kessel was following several of my innovations on guitar. I would see him at his Guitar World music store in the round Capital Records building on Vine Street in Hollywood and he would enthusiastically encourage me to continue my musical and technical explorations. He was my mentor with his "Poll Winners" jazz guitar trio albums and live gigs at Shelly's Manne Hole on Cahuenga Blvd., just guitar, bass and drums, no piano - revolutionary, I thought. After I discovered and committed to a basic new string tapping method of each hand as equal fingering partners, all fingers perpendicular to the strings, hands approaching the fretboard from opposite sides, Barney formed a quartet around my newfound technique and we played some local jazz clubs.

I'd also been following 7-string guitarist George Van Eps' intricate solo orchestrations with inner moving lines and was trying to master his approach, along with Barney's "cookin'" jazz blues lines, all in one technique with conventional pick and a home built 9-

string, long necked, solid body guitar. Then there were the jazz pianists of such great influence, including McCoy Tyner, Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. And then Jimi Hendrix got into the mix and I had to try to recapture his melodic grace and freedom.



How to combine it all? I had to have it all, and that moment arrived in August 1969 when I put my right hand at right angles over the fretboard and started "drumming" on the higher melody strings while continuing to finger familiar left hand chords at lower pitched frets, pressing them down four to a bar. That was my first two-handed tapping experience and it freed me to play Hendrix-style lead lines (with the fuzz, wah and spring reverb of that time) while accompanying myself with bass/chord patterns.

***When did you construct the first prototype? How many strings did it have and how were they tuned? What is the logic behind the tuning?***

It was that same 9-string guitar, which I reworked over two or three days to optimize a very low setup for dedicated tapping. I threw out ten years of intricate jazz technique and from one day to the next, I completely changed character as a musician stylist.

I already had the reversed bass 5ths on my guitar, having raised the low E one octave, leaving the next higher A string as is, and lowering the next higher D by one octave. This novel tuning preserved all the familiar lettered notes everywhere on the board, but allowed me to more easily integrate the low bass notes with my chords. Also, the double-string grouping of 4ths and 5ths added focus to the bass roots, inversions and lines.

Upon discovery of my Stick-type tapping method, this double tuning made for easier left-hand accompaniment of the melodically creative right hand. I later added two more, lower 5ths on the bass side, arriving at two groups of five strings in 1970.

***What is the Stick's range?***

My first Stick instruments were all in "standard" tuning (now referred to as "classic" tuning), the lowest interior string on the bass side being an open C below low bass E. The high melody string reached an Eb at the highest pitched fret, embracing a total range of 5 1/4 octaves.

***How does the playing technique influence the basic design?***

Since I've been a player from the outset, every aspect of the Stick design has been influenced by the technique. My design has an "ethic" that goes back to my junior high school days - minimum means to achieve maximum performance. And true to its form, The Stick is not self sufficient in appearance when standing alone. I feel it comes to life when "worn" by the player, the slim, bodiless shape somehow ennobling the performance.

***Why is the fretwire so thick?***

The "Rails" fret system is a patented invention with several advantages, including precise playing feel and tone, also precise fret dressing and setup for the flattest and most even playing surface of rounded Rail tips. The normal light touch, even on the bass guitar frets of my earlier Stick productions, keeps the fingertips from actually touching the fingerboard surface. Anyway, the Rails are only about .060" high off the board, similar to the average height of guitar frets at about .050".





Rails are made from 3/16" stainless steel square stock, then milled along the bottom corner to a 5-sided end view, then slid from the side into the fretboard, bound by epoxy. Most of the steel is sub-surface, anchoring each Rail against any upward or sideward pressures.

***What are the basic materials used to construct the Stick?***

I use laminated hardwoods including dark-grained Indonesian rosewood, yellowish and rainbow-hewed Argentine tarara, a rust-red padauk from Africa, maple from North America, bamboo from China, also long-fiber graphite through-neck beams by Moses, Inc.

***When was the first model available in the marketplace?  
How many orders did you receive in your first year of operation?  
What was the reception for the instrument like among music professionals?***

I finished my first production run of six Sticks in late 1974 after having played my fourth prototype for several months in various Manhattan jazz clubs. Joe Zawinul of Weather Report came to the Five Spot to hear me play in an improvising sextet I had assembled. He picked up my instrument after the show, stood up on a table and played some impressive rhythms.



The reception by musician artists and public alike was intense from the beginning and remains so today. People who encounter a Stick player usually love the innate sound of the instrument and playing method (which in itself produces a unique and articulate tone), and they usually have a lively interest in the novel way of playing on strings (the visual complement to the sound).

***Obviously you were the instrument's first and greatest advocate. As a performer and music merchant, what measures did you take to promote the Stick? How long did it take to build a solid client base?***

I wasn't so much of a "merchant" as a player, teacher and builder. In the late '70s and throughout the '80s I taught mostly guitarists at music store clinic tours, college music department lectures, and guitar schools like GIT and Berklee School of Music. I taught and demo'd my basic string-tapping technique of perpendicular hands with all eight fingertips oriented in a "line of attack" along any single string, with the fingers of each hand fitting into sequential fret spaces, scalar style.

My wife Yuta and I formed a California Corporation, "Stick Enterprises" in 1975, and we signed a sales distribution deal with Gibson/Norlin. Around that time I filed for several patents and trademarks which were later granted. I thought it would all catch on big, but because of the nature of the instrument as a product and its intricate manufacture, it has taken some 30 years to become "solid".

***What proportion of Stick players are repeat customers?***

I'd say about one quarter.

***Assuming that the majority of tones on the stick are produced by tapping, is it possible to alter the dynamics or tone of the notes without interrupting the music to turn a knob on the amp or the Stick itself?***



Yes, there are hundreds of "finger effects", before you ever get to electronic processing. That's how I and many others play Stick these days, carefree with just a stereo cord, the straight audio string signal being one of the best "effects". Then there are the volume dynamics, dependant on finger velocity, at least as great as on the "piano forte". When the tapping action is set ideally low (as I set them all after the basic structural work is done), you can just touch a string, laying it down upon a fret to get the quietest note (almost by purely thinking about it). From this subtle place you can also "whap" a note or a chord for the broadest dynamic range.

***Is it possible/beneficial to play the Stick with guitar technique, fingering with the left, plucking or strumming with the right?***

It's a dedicated two-handed tapping instrument. Peel-offs and strumming are used, but are only part of the repertoire of countless expressive effects available to both hands.

***How does it hold up as a solo instrument as opposed to being part of an ensemble?***

I'd say at least half the Stickists out there actively performing are soloists. I like to play solo, then to take that ability and extend it to a drum duo or a duo with a specific instrumentalist, depending on what musical style and orchestral texture I'm looking for.

***What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Stick compared to the guitar?***

The stereo Stick allows the live performer to execute the complete musical conception, from bass on up through chords, melody and counterpoint, even drum fills. The sweetener might be missing but then The Stick can be outfitted with MIDI, a third output that provides live orchestral accompaniment. Rhythm guitar techniques don't work very well on The Stick, but drum and percussion techniques are a powerful part of the instrument's repertoire.

***Does the Stick have the same contrapuntal potential as a keyboard instrument?***

Yes, but with vibratos, bends, slides, etc. in each voice. Notes are not in a line as on keys, but are uniformly tiered on a rectangular board. Guitarists and multi-string bassists know the advantages of such two-dimensional playing surfaces.

***Are there any good method books currently available for the Stick?***

Yes, Greg Howard's Stick Books for the various tunings in the family of Stick melody 4ths/bass 5ths, also Chris Crain's Sticktionary of chords, and my early and unrevised Free Hands. Of course, we'll all be awaiting a new resource for the world community of Stickists, Steve Adelson's Stick method book, to be released by Mel Bay Publications.

***Do you act as a teacher, mentor or clinician?***

Yes, quite often, also as a "coach" (or mother hen).

## Middle Period



***How did the Stick evolve? Has the tuning concept changed? Were more strings added?***

Stick models gradually became fully adjustable and universal to accommodate all custom tunings, any gauge string fitting at any position. We have our various recommended 4ths/5ths tunings, but also lots of custom tunings. In 1990 I introduced the 12-string Grand Stick which has been very successful not only in terms of sales but also for its musical output. And in 1998 I introduced the 8-string Stick Bass all in 4ths from the

conventional low B.

***Who are some of the influential soloists or bands that have championed the stick?***

Tony Levin above all others in actual influence among musicians, especially with King Crimson and Peter Gabriel. Also Greg Howard, Bob Culbertson, Don Schiff, Jim Lampi of London, Ron Baggerman of Holland, Andre Pelat of France, Nick Beggs of London with John Paul Jones, Virna Splendore of Italy, and Alphonso Johnson formerly with Weather Report. In jazz circles it has mainly been Steve Adelson of Long Island, NY who regularly gigs with some of the world's leading musicians. There are many other talented and dedicated Stick artists as well, all with their own styles, sub-techniques, recordings and live venues.



## Then and Now

***Who manufactured the Stick in the early days? Who makes them now? Do you still have a hand in building the instruments, or do you inspect each one before it is shipped? Does your part in the manufacturing get in the way of your own practice or performance time?***

Yes, I made them by hand at first, but continue to work in production, repairs, dressing of frets, setups, and of course R&D for new models and improvements. I do all final setups of new and repaired older Sticks. And yes, it leaves me with less time for music. I try to make enough time for it all by working until 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning and on weekends, but time is indeed the most precious element.

***Thank you Emmett, for your detailed and articulate responses.***

My pleasure, Stephen.