



## Artist Interview: Chapman Stick Virtuoso, Steve Adelson

by [Stephen Rekas](#)

### Personal/Biographical

***Who or what events inspired you to play the guitar?  
Was music a part of your household when growing up?***

I loved the mid-late 60's musical output. I was at the Fillmore East just about every weekend listening to bands like The Allman Brothers, Jethro Tull, Frank Zappa, Procol Harum and many others. There was so much good energy in this music. I was at home. Well in the summer of '69, just before Woodstock, a friend showed me a couple of chords on his guitar and I was hooked. A year or so later I started taking real lessons from a local jazz guitarist named Charlie Didier. I studied with Charlie for about three years.

***How were you initially exposed to the Stick? When did your conversion to the Stick occur? How long did it take before you felt comfortable in performing on it?***

After playing guitar for 14 years, I started doing the two-handed tapping thing on the guitar after seeing Stanley Jordan perform on the streets of NY. A year later, I saw [Stick inventor] Emmett Chapman do a demo at a guitar convention at Madison Square Garden and knew I needed a Chapman Stick if I was truly going to pursue this new technique. Paul Ash of Sam Ash Music helped me obtain my first Stick and the rest is history.

As far as feeling comfortable, there have been many stages. I brought my first Stick out and performed in public just three months after purchasing it. Possibly ill advised but it was so exciting to share my newfound ax. The comfort zone changes depending on musical situations even to this day.



***Do you still play jazz guitar?***

No, I don't play the guitar at all anymore. I still teach guitar full-time, but all my practice and performance is done on the Stick.

***What styles interested you when you first began to play?  
How do those preferences influence your current music?***

I was a musical child of the very fertile 60's. The Allmans, the Beatles, and all the creative bands of this time period were in my DNA. My initial guitar noodlings went that way until I started studying jazz and was introduced to a different universe of music. I still try to combine sophisticated jazz harmony with the energy of the rock repertoire. It's fun to play swing versions of Led Zeppelin tunes.

***Who were your teachers, mentors, and guitar heroes? Who did you listen to early on, and who do you enjoy listening to now?***

As I mentioned, my main guitar guru was Charlie Didier in Brooklyn. I haven't seen him in 30 years and would love to find him. His teachings lead me to repeated listening of Wes Montgomery, Django Reinhardt, Kenny Burrell, Barney Kessel, Joe Pass and Chuck Wayne. Of course I also found Jimmy Raney, Tal Farlow and a slew of swinging jazz players along the way. I also loved Canned Heat and Frank Zappa.

My listening pleasures now include: first Pat Metheny, then Wes plus all the other cats. Add Ralph Towner, Joe Satriani, Jeff Beck, John Fahey, Michael Hedges and Ben Lacy and you have a small sampling of what I listen to. Playing the Stick, I'm also influenced by many pianists like Lyle Mays and McCoy Tyner. I take it all in. You can learn from almost any musical situation.

***What elements are particularly challenging about playing the Stick? Could you give us a brief historical resume of the instrument? Does Emmett Chapman still oversee production of each instrument?***

Whew! Okay, Emmett pretty much is in charge of most of the production of each instrument. Each is his baby and he ensures that they're all healthy. His first official Chapman Stick was made available to the public in 1974 after about five years of research and development. The models have changed and been refined over the course of these 31 years. Emmett's a master inventor and luthier and is always seeking to make his instrument better. The Stick has added more strings, frets and electronics. More variables are available to the interested player concerning pickups, fret styles and design. The stick comes in 8, 10 or 12-string models, the latter being known as the Grand Stick. Materials have also changed and Emmett has made Sticks out of various woods, a sophisticated polycarbonate material and now also offers graphite.

As far as the Stick being challenging to play, it's like any other instrument. It takes time. I actually think it's easier to play than the guitar. And it is so inspiring! The two-handed tapping technique takes some patience to master but the results are worth every minute of exploration. The joy of discovery is priceless

***In your role as a teacher, what areas do you emphasize with your students?***

Understanding the musical vocabulary is number one. What's a C Major chord? If you're educated in music theory the rest will fall into place. It's much more important than technique.

***Can the Stick sustain a note as long as an archtop guitar?***

Easily. The Stick is electric and depending on the processing it can do as much if not more than any kind of guitar. I use a Roland VG88 [processing/modeling system] and the variety of sound possibilities is mind boggling.

***Can the tone or volume be altered by the way it is played rather than by turning a knob?***

Yes. The Stick is sensitive to finger control and interpretation. It's up to the player to be expressive.

***Have you ever had to weather a creative dry spell in your playing or composition? If so, how did you overcome it?***

I'm sure every player of every instrument has gone through these periods. I'm usually confident that with time it will change. I'm patient and fortunately the Stick is so motivating, these lulls are very brief.

***How has your family affected your music?***

Support. And of course that's pretty major. It's very important if you wish to pursue your passion. My family has always been there in support of my musical adventures. A big thank you to them!

***Apart from music, what are your interests?***

For a while I was a member of The Society of American Magicians. I love good sleight of hand. And I also love to toy with the English language. I love puns. I also write for a few music publications and that has its own creative edge.



**Technique**

***Please describe your practice routine.***

I try to be disciplined and play a few hours every day, aside from my teaching. Sometimes I can still get in an eight-hour practice day, but not often. I run through repertoire, vocabulary and technique. The coolest part about learning the Stick is still its newness. It doesn't have a 200- year-old history with millions of players. Each Stickist is a pioneer. I love trying to find new Stick turf. It's amazingly inspirational

***Do you recommend any particular teaching/learning techniques, such as maintaining a log of practice time?***

I just wing it. Unless I have an agenda, like writing for a CD or performance or learning material for a specific gig, I love to noodle with some aim of finding a new idea or technique. Then the practice time just takes its own course.

***How do you go about choosing/learning new material?***

First, I try to choose material I like to hear. Then the challenge is to interpret it on an instrument that has a unique tuning and technique. Sometimes it doesn't work and I scrap the tune. I like the challenge of arranging which is inherent with this situation. I love to attempt to play as many parts as possible, simultaneously in real time.

***What do you do to keep your repertoire fresh-sounding?***

I just try to find new presentations of standard fair. Swing "Stairway to Heaven" or samba Beatles. I can't play things exactly like the originals. What's the sense in that? I'm not going to improve on it. The only option is to make it my own and present the song as "me".

***What are the key elements of your style?***

Well, hopefully a fun vibe. I don't want to get too serious. I try to offer a good variety and create something interesting that I will enjoy as well as the listener. In my bones I have a good mixture of jazz feel and rock overtones. I only want to play honest music that comes from inside. Hence the title of my last CD- The Answer's Inside.

### ***Any suggestions for developing right or left-hand technique?***

For the Stick, practice each hand separately first. As each develops, try playing simple parts simultaneously. A good teacher should be able to pace the student in this respect. You can get frustrated trying to bite off more than you can chew. I will approach all these concepts in my much anticipated Mel Bay Stick Method book.



***Is it possible to play the Stick as though it were a guitar, fingering notes with the left hand and plucking with the right?***

Absolutely! It will sound a bit different than a guitar though, mainly because of the string tension and the string heights relative to the neck. It's useful as an occasional alternate offering. The drawback is that it utilizes both hands to achieve one sound, thus defeating the two handed independence concept. There are many two-handed, ten-fingered applications for achieving expression on the Stick. Half the fun is discovering them. The Mel Bay Stick book will illustrate many of these varied examples.

### **Gear**

***What are your preferred strings, pickup, amp, pedal board and mic? Do you have any product endorsement agreements? Is there anything on your wish list as far as equipment?***

The Stick uses D'Addario strings and the pickups on my Sticks vary. I have a Roland GK [MIDI pickup] on four of my Sticks plus a variety of extra pickups from active to passive. My favorite Stick pickup is the Villex that Emmett Chapman has developed in conjunction with an associate. The original pickup is actually called a "Stickup"- really! For effects I use a Roland VG88 on the melody side and a touch of reverb on my bass. The melody side goes through a Koch Twintone amp and my bass plays through a Gallien-Krueger 1001RB combo. I'm pretty happy with this setup. I have endorsements with Gallien-Krueger, Koch, D'Addario, Evidence Cables, and of course Stick Enterprises. My wish list would include a few dozen more Sticks-(you can never have enough)- And a roadie to carry my amps.

### **Current**

***What inspired your Mel Bay recording/publishing project?***

I've been teaching guitar for 35 years and Stick for 20. The knowledge and organization for the Stick community is a needed entity. So when Mel Bay actually approached me to write this book, it was a natural order of events. I look forward to documenting all my experiences and offering these ideas to the growing Stick community. I know it will be a welcome addition to the string instrument world of education. As the Chapman Stick history evolves, I'm sure this new book will become a major part of the instrument's literature.

***Are there any upcoming performance dates, travels, or workshops you would like to mention?***

Depending on the date of publication of this interview, I'm performing for the first time in Istanbul, Turkey at the Nardis Jazz Club in mid December 2005. What's cool about these types of shows is that every time I play a new venue, I can pretty much announce that this is the first time a Stick has performed at that particular place. In January 2006 I'll be demonstrating at the Anaheim NAMM convention and performing at Muriel Anderson's All Star Guitar Night. Other high profile gigs are in the works. I will also start working on the fourth annual Long Beach (NY) Jazz Festival for 2006. I am the producer of the festival and this presents a whole new set of challenges. I'm awaiting some logistics to fall into place for my next CD. It looks like a duet recording and I'm just waiting to get the scheduling ironed out. It will include some great guitar players in duet with me on Stick.

***What is your advice to students who are considering becoming career guitarists or Stick players- Do you recommend private lessons and gigging, or a university degree?***

Network. Get your name out there. It's almost more important than learning that Gmin9 arpeggio. Practice, know your craft, have a game plan and be creative. Your degree really won't get you gigs. It's about selling yourself as a musician. Be true to your music and your ideals but also be flexible without compromise. Adapt to the needs of the moment. If you want that university degree, you're probably better off with a master's in marketing. Apply that knowledge to your music career and perhaps you'll find success. The joy of playing should keep you on track.

To learn more about Steve Adelson and his music please see the following websites:

[www.steveadelson.com](http://www.steveadelson.com)

[www.stickenterprises.com](http://www.stickenterprises.com)