

Dick Dale

An audience with the King of the Surf Guitar

by Rob Warmowski

From the zine Wind-Up Industrial Burnoff, 1994. Copyright Liz Clayton.



Dick Dale, the father of reverb guitar drama, is a wise man. Just ask him. He'll tell you. He'll bend year friggin EAR off about animals and mine shafts and Surf music. He invented that last expression of American teenage sound before having his creation displaced from American culture by 4 foreigners and about 60 million screaming 13-year old girls... but not before it had inspired young musicians from Maine to Malibu to smash out that relentless beat and play the living shit out of simple, piquant melodies. Before the Wilson family got to it and ruined it with the human voice, instrumental surf was the most expressive of the rock idioms, surpassing the hardened and formalized r&b of the 50s with jumpy Caucasian rhythms, adolescent adrenalin and tons of rattly reverb. Elements of show tunes translate well to surf, and it has inspired more than a few great film scores and session arrangements. It was the first punk rock, and I'm not even embarrassed that it took Agent Orange and JFA

records in 1982 introduce me to it.

After chewing the fat for two and a half hours, I came away knowing that Dick Dale's resumé doesn't stop with the obvious. He's a lion tamer. He's a licensed pilot. He's a martial arts black-belt. He's a pain in the ass to edit. After reviewing the tapes, I immediately called the editorial offices of Modern Aviation, Martial Arts World and Whip & Chair Weekly to attempt to broker the surplus. Wind-Up 5/16" Galvanized Steel Wing Nut readers need not wait for the major media to sit with a legend, though.

Dick: Warmowski...Are you Polish?

Rob: You got it.

Dick: My grandmother and grandpa on my Mother's side came from Poland when they were 21. I remember my Grandpa used to make his own beer in Massachusetts, God it was black... I used to sit down with them while they talked and we laughed...it was great. But you know, they're such a happy people, and that's it in a nutshell. My Father's side is —

Rob: Lebanese, right?

Dick: Yeah, and they're... they're real strict, stern people.

Rob: So was "Miserlou" (a Middle Eastern folk standard, Dick's 1961 recording of it now universally recognized as the title theme to the film Pulp Fiction) played in the house at all when you were a kid?

Dick: Well, when we lived in Quincy [Mass.] we would go on the weekends to the Lebanese relatives in Boston. They'd all sit on the concrete steps in the front, in the concrete jungle... The ladies would go down the steps and they would cook this great big deal, and then the old men would sit up there and smoke their... uh... Arabic stuff or whatever...

Rob: They'd use a hookah?

Dick: Yeah, that's exactly what it was, they'd sit in a circle and pass the mouthpiece around. Of course, my dad didn't smoke, and that's why he made me eat a whole pack of cigarettes when he caught me lighting up a corn cob pipe once. They'd play all the Arabic music, my uncle would play the trvaki, a kind of Arabic drum that you hold, and then this

other man played the oud, [Arabic guitar precursor] I remember he played it with a chicken quill, so all of that was a big influence on me. I would also play these 78 RPM records of the Harry James Orchestra, and listen to Gene Krupa drumming, he was a huge influence... I'd play along with Gene with knives on little canister sets, scratching them up and having my father kick the shit out of me for doing it.. So I learned all styles of music, and of course, Hank Williams too, being very sentimental, he made me always want to be a country singer... So I was reared with all styles of music.

Rob: Talk about the early days of the Fender company and your involvement.

Dick: Well, let's get a couple of things straight. The amplifier is not called a Twin Reverb, the Dick Dale amplifier was called the Dual Showman. A lot of the magazines, I dunno where they get it from but they say I created the Twin — that was done later. The first power amplifier in the world was the Showman, and we blew up over 48 of them in those days, because Leo [Fender] was making gear for Country players with only 8" or 10" speakers... and we were driving them with too much power out of the amps. Then I got this bright idea to make an amplifier to make the guitar sound like a drum, like Gene Krupa, this heavy, pulsating angry thumping sound, and the output transformers couldn't hold it and we kept on designing until we could find one. Meanwhile, we had to design a speaker that would hold the sound. After burning and blowing up a few dozen of them, we went to the Lansing people. They thought we were nuts. We wanted bigger coils, bigger windings, we wanted to rubberize the outside ridges. Those became the D13015F, that's exactly what I played through then and today.

Rob: So when did the reverb get added?

Dick: The reverb didn't get added until later. I wanted it there at first not for the guitar, but for my voice. My voice has no natural vibrato, and half of my set was vocals. So I said to Leo Fender, "we gotta get something to sustain my voice". We talked about it and we found a revere unit that was inside a Hammond organ, I think it was the B-3, probably earlier... we pulled that out of one, stuck it in a box, plugged the mic into it, and voilà. Leo didn't like special effects on anything, he wasn't interested in echoes or repeaters. He didn't even like stereo. It was maybe a year later when I

plugged the Stratocaster into it.

Rob: It's wild to hear that it actually came later, since that's so synonymous with the sound...

Dick: Well, here's an opportunity to smack these little historians right in the ass... you want facts? The Ventures... the Ventures came to ME to promote their guitar, the Mosrite. Of course, I was wedded to the Stratocaster, it's the Rolls-Royce of all guitars... but all these books claim that these bands were playing when I was. No way. My Dad used to give the Beach Boys \$50 to open for me for chrissake, nobody had that sound, nobody had those power amps, nobody. These bands played surf songs, but they didn't have the surf SOUND, the power. Look at the serial numbers, look at the equipment. I was playing that Dual Showman 6 months before it was on the market. So let there be no mistake — I had the sound first. You know, that's another thing, all these books and these magazines get wrong, I created surfing music in the '50s, not the '60s. I met Leo Fender in '55, we were blowing up amps during '57, '58, that's when this whole thing was taking place.

Rob: I have always heard a lot of aggression in your music, and there were a few punk bands in the '80s, like Agent Orange that also heard it and picked up on it, making their own versions. Do you see surf music as the first punk rock?

Dick: My music is totally all about frustration, it's anger, it's pain. Every song I wrote, I wrote as if it were my last. Most guys write two songs, good ones, and the rest are fillers. I'm funny about things like that, I've always overdone everything. I overbuild, like when I'm building a house or something, I build it to last 100,000 years. I wrote these songs like Salvador Dali painted, with feeling, with emotion. I write riffs that go with what I see around me.

Rob: So were you trained, or were you the punk rock of your day?

Dick: I can play any instrument, any style and make it sound like I've been playing for 20 years.

But, I don't know the first thing about being a professional musician. Bands open for me, like headbanger type bands, and guitar players are always saying "fuck, man, those scales you play, where did you learn that?" I'm not playing any scales. I don't even know what I'm playing. All I know is that I'm creating a sound of Mother Earth, of pain, her animals, thunder and lightning, the ocean, lions and tigers, me going through a solid object with my hand... that's what I'm screaming about, that's what's coming out of my instrument.

Rob: Did you set out to define a sound when you started playing out or...

Dick: When I came to California in 1954, all I knew was, I had this guitar, bought it out of a hock shop. Then I met Leo Fender, and he gave me a Stratocaster, had only been out for 1 year... and he said "take this guitar and beat it to death". At that

time, I was strumming country music, I was calling it rockabilly, and I wanted a Gene Krupa type beat, and I didn't have a band, so I wanted to make that sound with the guitar, it was just my friend Ray on another guitar. We'd strum these old Hank Williams tunes and put a beat to them. I'm playing one day, and this little kid comes up to me and says "can you play something one string?". I said "I dunno", and tried playing this old standard boogie-woogie rhythm line from the '40s a walking line. I could only play a little bit of it, and I did it with a neat, new rhythm. And I'm thinking "Wow. What can I play with this neat new sound?" And that's when I remembered my relatives, I remembered Miserlou. I wanted to make it thick, so I played it fast, with the real rapid picking. I lifted that straight from the oud playing I remembered from my Lebanese family.

Then I went out and started surfing right at that same time. I started playing that sound, the sound of the water crashing...

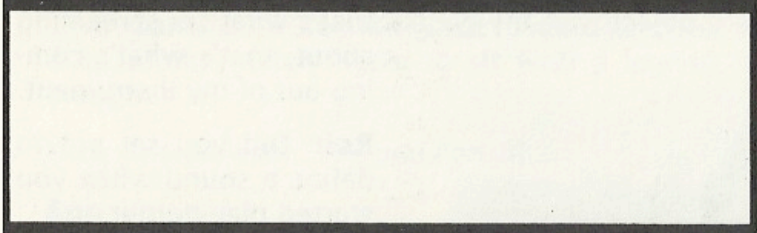
Rob: I always felt that the sound was...physical. Totally dramatic.

Dick: Yeah. It's physical all right. When I'm play-



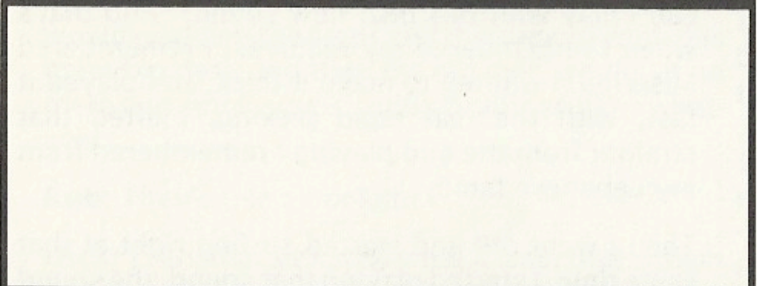
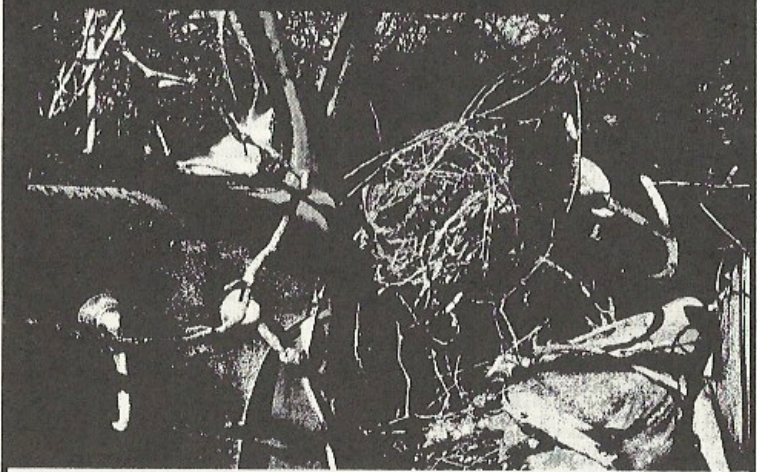
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ing, my drummer says he sees my whole body shaking, and it is. My picks, when they melt down on those heavy strings, they melt so far that my fingernail, at the quick, is getting sawed in two. Guys say "those faces you're making are so cool." I tell them, that's pain, that's not cool! But it's the only way to get the sound, that severity. It's the difference between real and bullshit.

Rob: The album version of "Miserlou" is one of the greatest tracks ever recorded, from your playing, your barking, to the strings and horns in the arrangement, it's a perfect two and a half minutes. Where did the idea to do such a powerful arrangement come from?

Dick: My father, god bless him, he always wanted me to sound like Bobby Darin. His experience was with the Big Band sound, and that's what he was trying to put across. Mostly so that some of the older people would enjoy it. I've always loved big orchestration, but the idea with the recent tours was to go back to the beginning, go from a 17-piece revue to the pure form.

Rob: What were the first surf gigs like? Were they any different from the teen-type shows of the day?

Dick: Well, the first big one..it was 1958 at the Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa California. My Dad went to the promoters there and asked if we could put on a show, and they said "No, we just lost \$80,000 because Stan Kenton tried to bring jazz back and it failed." They had closed down, actually. So here's this big vacant building, and we went to the city officials and tried to get a permit. They wouldn't give us one. They said "no, that's Devil's music, we don't want our kids dancing to that". I got a lot of that bullshit, there was a High School graduation I was booked to play, and the teachers wouldn't let anyone dance the Surfer's Stomp. That was "too dirty". So what we did was, I had a meeting with the PTA and the Chief of Police and we said "look, would you rather have your kids in the street, or would you rather have them in a building where you can watch them?" They said "Okay. But they gotta wear ties."

Rob: Oh man...

Dick: Yeah, so we went and got a box of ties, put and put them by the front door and gave them to everybody. And the guys came in with bare feet, the first group that came in was 17 surfers, the

guys I had been surfing with. Wearing no shoes, but these goddamn ties. Those were the first guys to go "Maaan, you're the King....you're the King of the Surf Guitar". That's how that title came to be, it wasn't "self-proclaimed".

(Sensing Dick's ire at the notion some people have that he had crowned himself King, I hastily apologized for Peter Margasak's snide use of that very phrase in a Reader show review of Dick's August '94 appearance at the Cubby Bear. Dick was quite displeased about this. I would have continued and apologized for Peter Margasak as well, but thought better of it. Jazz-addled hipster quasi-writers are beneath mention in the court of the King of the Surf Guitar.)

Rob: Until last year, you had never formally toured, is that right?

Dick: Yeah, and I love it. I'm gonna do this until I die. I was the first rock guitarist to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show, the first to appear in Life Magazine, and I'm gonna be the first to explode onstage, body parts everywhere. *

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Dick Dale or Dick Daley?

Everybody knows that Dick Dale is the King of the Surf guitar, and Dick Daley is the name of a present and past mayor of Chicago. See if you can guess which Dick uttered the sage phrases below.

1. "If a lion likes you, he'll lick you. If he doesn't, he'll eat you."
2. "There's nothing in the world more wholesome than a fish."
3. "When everybody's backed up in traffic, if you would only look out your window and see a dandelion coming up through the tar and wonder "how did that happen?". Then the traffic starts moving again and nobody gets shot."
4. "Sure, I think people should pick up the sh- uh, poop from their dogs."
5. "They have vilified me, they have crucified me, and yes, they have even criticized me."
6. "I dunno how to become successful, but I know how to become a failure. Try to please all the people all of the time. I mean, don't."
7. "The meek will not inherit the earth. You can only get them if they don't know you're coming."
8. "The only difference between an animal and a person is the animal doesn't know when to go to the doctor."
9. "I support the death penalty. I'm against it. Basically, I'm pro-death."
10. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the League of Women Voters."

ANSWERS: Daley: 1, 3, 6, 7, 8. Dale: 2, 4, 5, 9, 10