

# THE WANDERER

Guitarist **Richie Kotzen**'s musical journey has taken him all across the musical spectrum on a decades-long mission to show he's a songwriter, not a shredder. *Andrew Daly* talks to the man who's played with **Poison**, **Mr. Big** and **The Winery Dogs**, but whose immense solo catalogue reveals his true self...

**PENNSYLVANIA NATIVE RICHEL KOTZEN** burst onto the scene at the age of just 19 with his 1989 debut instrumental guitar buffet, 'Ritchie Kotzen'. It was obvious from the get-go that the kid broke the mould for two reasons. Firstly, he seemed way too self-confident for someone of his tender age. Secondly, he made it clear that while he could shred with the best of them, he absolutely did *not* identify as such.

"That was not what I was," he tells me. "It was *never* what I was. I had no connection to a guy on that scene looking for a gig. I was noticeably better than others, but I wasn't focused on my playing the same way those guys were."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the guitar-centric fun didn't last long. Kotzen's multi-track musical mind saw him blow up a financially rewarding deal with Interscope Records, leading him to take a wholly unanticipated left turn in 1991 and join a powerhouse band, the Sunset Strip's glammier-than-glam darlings Poison.

Kotzen was a million miles away from the band's former guitarist CC DeVille. But that was completely fine because young Richie cosied up nicely with Poison's cocksure frontman Bret Michaels and helped create 1993's 'Native Tongue', a grunge-tinged record that was intended to compete with the likes of Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden.

But that's not where Richie wanted to be either. "I was always focused on what I was going to *write*," Kotzen says. "What am I going to create? What's in my head? And how do I get this sh\*t out of there? That's the big difference you need to understand between Richie Kotzen and most other names in the basket."

Whether it was down to creative itchy feet, or a reported tryst with a bandmate's significant other, Kotzen's time in Poison was short. He left in 1993 to sign a solo deal with Geffen Records. That lasted for just one album. But in the late '90s, and after years of jazz experimentation, Kotzen finally gave rock another go with the equally dysfunctional Mr. Big, coming in right after Paul Gilbert split the scene in 1999.

The guitarist made two albums with that band, 1999's 'Get Over It' and 2001's 'Actual Size'. Those two records are pretty much ignored outside of Japan. Not that Kotzen cares.

"If you're going to talk about my work," he says, "you

have to look at what I've done over 30 years. Then it'll be obvious what I'm about. You'd think, 'Oh, I get the picture.' To be compared to guitarists like Paul Gilbert and Greg Howe was amazing. I worked for that, and it established me in the guitar community. But if you listen to my records you think, 'OK, I see this guy's a little different to what I thought.'"

Kotzen's combination of confidence meets arrogance is imprinted on all he does. It's probably why he's still here. But much as he may fancy himself as a musical renegade, Richie has mainly made rock music since he flamed out with Mr. Big back in 2002. Records with The Winery Dogs - a three-piece band featuring drummer Mike Portnoy and bassist Billy Sheehan - and Iron Maiden guitarist Adrian Smith show as much. And his solo releases, while ever-inventive, are also heavily guitar-oriented. That's fine, though, because Kotzen

feels he's now made his definitive - and possibly final - record in 'Nomad'.

"It's funny though," Kotzen admits. "There's something that happens when I finish a song. I get very depressed. It's post-partum depression. It happens with art, where you create something and all this energy that comes from who knows where is suddenly over. It exists, and then you have this thing where it's just a weird, depressed feeling. I know my relationship with that particular experience is over, and then I get on with life and it goes away. But it's been that way forever. Maybe it always will be."

## YOU PLAYED PIANO EARLY ON. WERE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT THE INSTRUMENT?

"Piano was never really a serious relationship for me. I was one of those kids who liked to sing, dance, and entertain the family. I always looked forward to the holidays or whenever we'd have company. I'd get up there and entertain, and someone suggested, 'Hey, he should take piano lessons.' I went to a teacher around the corner, but didn't really take to it."

## WHY'S THAT?

"I didn't like the procedure of learning silly songs that this woman was teaching me. I didn't find it interesting. But about a year and a half later I saw a guitar at a yard sale, and that intrigued me."

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