



Johnny A.

Valley Virtuoso

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shot on location at **Mal's Lounge at George's Restaurant - Haverhill, MA**

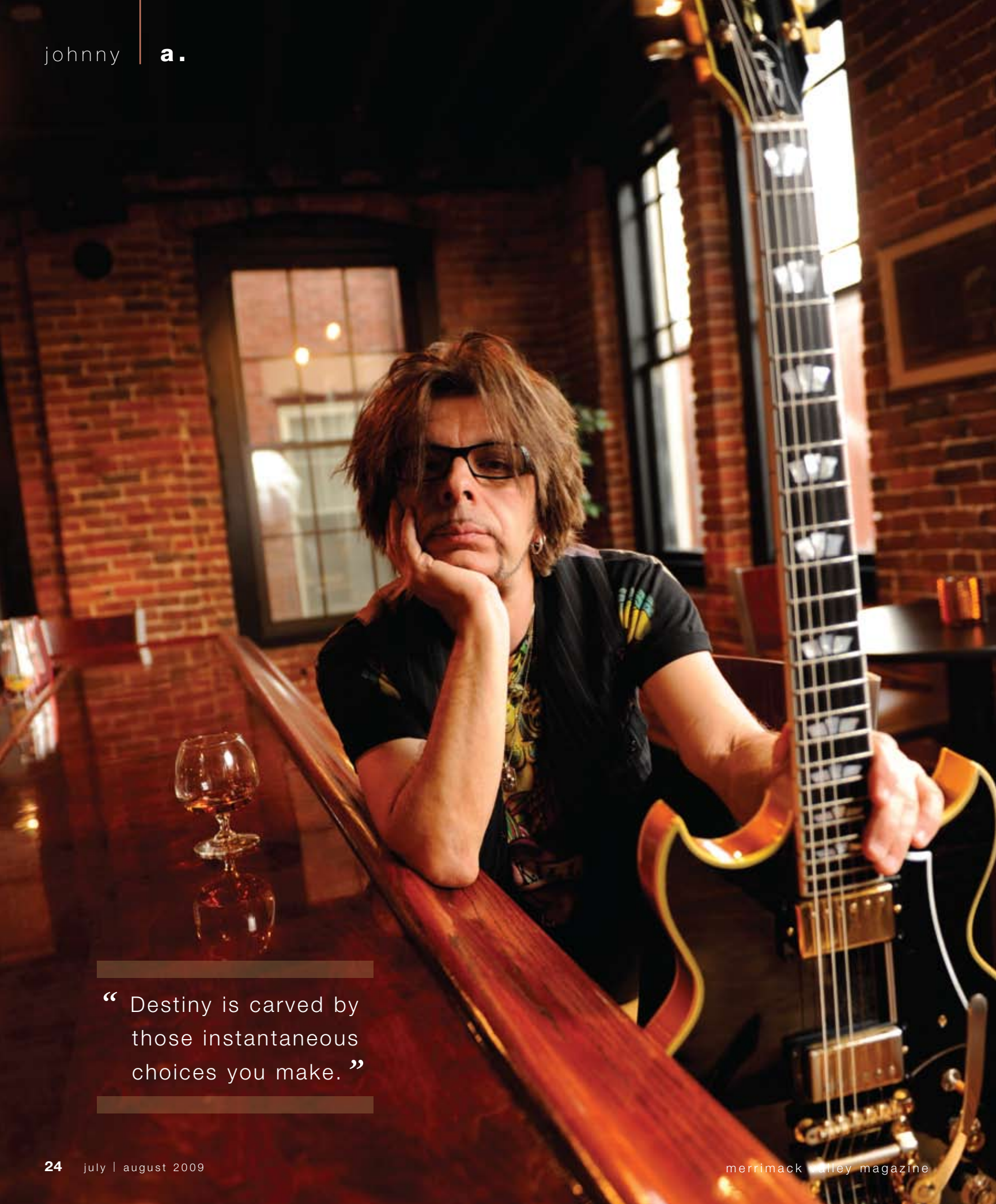
The word “independent” looms large in the current lexicon of music terminology, a moniker that is now applied to artists and record labels of varying size and degree of true independence. For an artist like guitarist Johnny A., being independent is not the result of being on the outside looking in, but is a statement of his art, his style and his vision of how honest instrumental music is made. Originally from Malden, Mass., Johnny lives in Salem, N.H. with his wife. He was gracious enough to spend a few hours with me talking about his amazing career, his stellar list of friends and co-workers, and the current state of his music.

Johnny, whose last name caused so many tongues to twist into knots that he's been known since childhood simply as Johnny A., has reached a high level of virtuosity in his guitar playing; the kind of virtuosity that earns you a coveted spot as one of only seven guitarists for whom Gibson Guitars has issued a custom signature series electric guitar; the kind of virtuosity that earns you the attention of guitar master Steve Vai and his Favored Nations record label, and also opening spots for six-string luminaries such as Jeff Beck, a performance at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Festival and a seven-year-long stint with former J. Geils Band singer Peter Wolf.

Prior to being picked up by Vai's label and getting the chance to meet (and often play) with many of his idols, Johnny spent time in Boston's music scene, eventually landing work with Wolf after his departure from the J. Geils Band. While that period of time is fraught with its own tales and accomplishments, it was after his tenure with Wolf that Johnny's remarkable tale really begins. This is the point when Johnny takes the term “independent” and makes it not only a descriptor of his genre, but a mantra for his career.

Most musicians were brought up to believe that you could only build a music career if you lived in L.A., New York or Nashville. In days past that may very well have been true, and in many instances today it may still be. But the advent of online marketing and the changes that





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technology has wrought upon the music industry have dramatically changed the landscape of the record business, and Johnny A., with his impeccable sense of timing both on and off the fret board, rode the new music business wave in a way most artists could only dream of.

A mixture of the need for true artistic expression and the necessity of providing for his family inspired Johnny to release an all-instrumental album. *Sometime Tuesday Morning* was recorded on Johnny's terms, intended for his enjoyment and that of his friends and family, but quickly turned into much more than that. Sales of *Sometime Tuesday Morning* began to snowball, and after the first pressing of 1,000 CDs ran out, Johnny returned to the well and continued to refill until sales hit 8,500 copies and attracted the attention of record labels, including Vai's Favored Nations. With Favored Nations' marketing and promotions department casting a much wider net, Johnny saw sales soar to over 85,000 copies and his opportunities continue to expand to include gigs with the likes of blues legends B.B. King and Robert Cray.

A second CD, *Get Inside*, was also released on Favored Nations to critical acclaim and further expanded Johnny's circle. After the release of *Get Inside*, Johnny and Vai's organization parted ways amicably.

"It was great," Johnny says of his time with Favored Nations. "It definitely helped boost the profile of my career."

True to his independent spirit and continuing his relentless quest for the holy grail of perfect tone and total artistic control, Johnny began constructing a home studio and is planning on releasing his third album himself. Having ended his tenure with Favored Nations on a positive note, Johnny is once again relying on his own ability to make connections and develop relationships with distributors and booking agents to further his career. His accomplishments are admirable, as making a living as an instrumentalist is a daunting task in and of itself. But to have a song such as "Oh Yeah" from *Sometime Tuesday Morning* become a hit, and to build a successful career while based in the Merrimack Valley, is quite a feat.

A firm believer in the philosophy of “the harder I work, the luckier I get,” Johnny makes sure to take advantage of every opportunity. A particularly striking example is a story he relates concerning his haunting rendition of Jimmy Webb’s “Wichita Lineman” from *Sometime Tuesday Morning*. Johnny was roughly four hours outside of Boston on the last leg of a long haul home from Seattle when he received a call that Webb was performing in Boston. Webb stated that Johnny’s cover of “Wichita Lineman” had captured the essence of the song better than any other version he’d heard, and invited Johnny to sit in on the song at Webb’s show at a club in Boston that night. Exhausted and unsure, Johnny almost told the songwriting legend he’d be at the show but wouldn’t be in any shape to perform. But, true to form, Johnny saw a golden opportunity he was not about to let slip by.

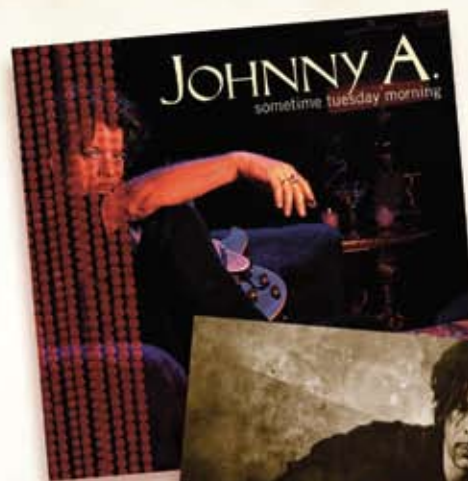
“I said, ‘I gotta do this... I’ll never get this opportunity to play with this guy again,’” Johnny recalls. Dashing home to freshen up, he was once again in the presence of his lifelong heroes who, like many others along the way, have called upon Johnny’s guitar wizardry, taken in by his blend of raw emotions and technical skill. “Destiny is carved by those instantaneous choices you make,” Johnny states in a nod to similar circumstances that led to many golden moments, such as performing an opening gig for another of his heroes, guitarist Jeff Beck.

“It’s twenty-two and a half hours a day just to get up and play for an hour and a half, hoping people will like it,” Johnny adds. And like it they do. Johnny’s blazing fret work and tender string manipulations are a product of his approach to writing an instrumental song, which is to make his guitar the lead singer of his music with its own melodic voice, and not to rely solely on sheer virtuosity.

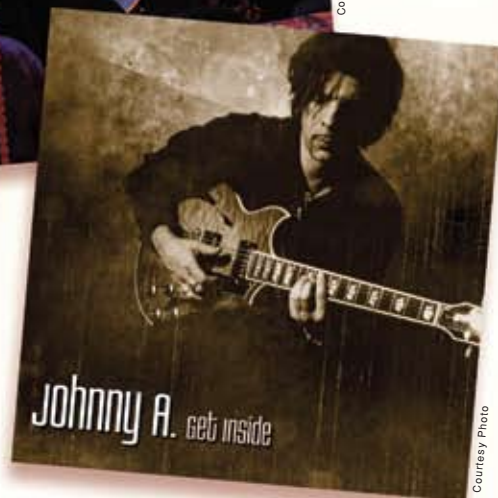
“Whichever instrument carries the melody is the focus of the song,” he states, writing each song as if it were written for a vocalist. Johnny’s rare ability to sing a song through his guitar makes his albums stand above similar efforts by many of his peers. His mix of jazz, blues, country and pop create an aural cornucopia with something for everyone.



Michael Sparks Keegan



Courtesy Photo



Courtesy Photo

Left: Johnny A. onstage with Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler at ‘Music for Middlesex 1,’ a fundraiser for the Middlesex Human Service Agency, February 27, 2003 at the Regent Theatre in Arlington, MA. Right: Johnny A.’s impressive career includes two CD releases, with a third in the works.



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Johnny talks about his tours and all the traveling with a mixture of gratitude, weariness and wistfulness. It's easy to assume someone in his profession, who plays with the caliber musicians that he does, must be living the high life of limousines, champagne and five-star hotels. The truth is that while Johnny cherishes the opportunity to travel the world and perform his music, most people remain unaware of the long nights behind the wheel of a van while he and his trio make their way around the country. It's the journeyman's choice, the providence of the road dog, and it's all part of the twenty-two and a half hours of hard work that open up that golden stretch of time on the stage. For Johnny, it's about leaving behind a legacy in song. A statement to friends, family and the world; a statement that is filled with what Johnny values most in music: honesty.

Johnny's latest project is a DVD recorded at Scullers Jazz Club in Boston, a 24-track, five-camera musical bonanza currently in the final stages of production. A new album is also in the works, with seven tunes penned so far.

There are few privileges afforded a musician greater than that of the rapt attention of an appreciative audience. Johnny values the fact that his audiences listen to his music, listen to him sing with his guitar and tell stories without words. In conversation Johnny is talkative and expressive, but it is with his music that he speaks in a voice that is truly independent and, above all, honest.

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On the Web:

JohnnyA.com

myspace.com/JohnnyAGuitarMusic