

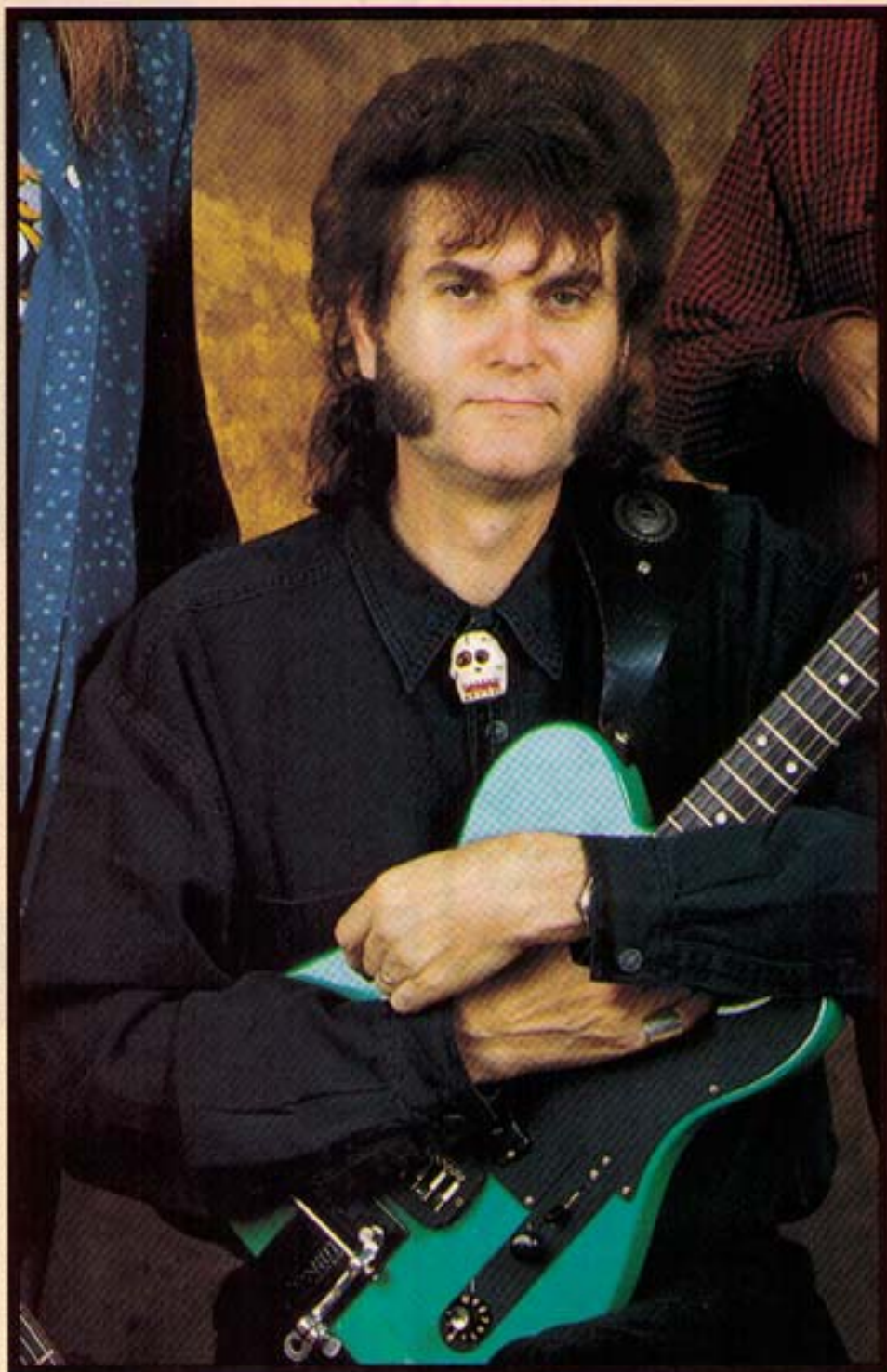
With mutton chops gracing his face and slide rings flashing on his fingers, Will Ray cuts a visually striking figure. But he more than holds his own as a player in the Hellecasters, thanks in part to those shining slide rings.

"They're really just spoon rings, cut off from silverware, which I bought at a flea market in Richmond, Virginia," explains Ray. After some experimentation, he finally settled on one ring-slide for the middle finger of his left hand (which he wears mid-finger) and another for the little finger of his right hand (which he wears all the way down). It took years before he was accustomed to them, but now they feel so natural to him that he switches with ease between standard and slide playing.

"A regular bottleneck is clunky and requires you to give up a finger," notes Ray. "Without [*that spare finger*] there are a few chords I can't play that well, but the way I barre anyway is the old country way of doing it—with the thumb. I can cover two strings with a ring-slide, and when I want more I can slide vertically and arpeggiate. The one on my right hand acts like a floating bridge, which I can move forward to change the pitch."

But those rings aren't the only novel way in which Ray bends the notes and rules of slide guitar. He also uses the Hipshot string bender, which "just pops on the guitar really easily" and is rocked back-and-forth "as opposed to doing the 'hip shake.'" So Ray can either ring-slide, "or use the string bender if my fingers are tied up."

Not surprisingly, Ray cites Amos Garret's playing as a prime influence, particularly the legendary solo on Maria Muldaur's "Midnight At The Oasis": "He had a Lenny Pogan blues slide, which you put on the little finger and is one-and-a-half inches wide. You can supposedly slide it out of the way when you play traditional style, but it's too heavy and bulky for me." Other guitar heroes include Danny Kalb of The Blues Project, Mike Bloomfield, Roy Buchanan, whom Ray pays tribute to



WILL RAY

LORD OF THE RINGS

seriously, but people kept asking, 'What's happening with The Hellecasters?' So we scheduled another gig six months later. Even more people were there, including all the guitar players in the area!"

This was back in 1990, but The Hellecasters didn't really get rolling until last year, after Jorgenson completed his Desert Rose Band commitments and Donahue cleared up a calendar full of U.K. gigs with Fairport and his own band, The Backroom Boys, as well as a second solo album and an instructional video. In January of 1993, Donahue, Jorgenson and Ray finally began recording *The Return Of The Hellecasters*, and only after its release in April did the trio actually undertake an official tour.

On record and in concert, Donahue wields his own Jerry Donahue Signature Telecaster, which has a five-way toggle switch expressly designed to straddle the best of both Stratocaster and Telecaster worlds.

"I used Fender Strats through the Sixties, then got into Teles. I always wanted to incorporate my favorite sounds from both in one guitar, since sometimes you can only take one with you if space is limited," he explains. Due to the high price of his Signature model, Fender has issued a less expensive version, dubbed the "J.D." As for amps, Donahue, like the other 'Casters, uses Matchless equipment.

Donahue's signature tune is a blistering rendition of Jerry Reed's "The Claw," a version of which appears on *The Return Of The Hellecasters*. The most remarkable feature of his technique is his contrary-motion bending, where he bends two (and sometimes even three) strings in different directions simultaneously.

"Most guitarists bend a tone or a semitone, but I often bend two tones and sometimes even a fourth," notes Donahue, likening the end result to the sound of a country steel guitar bend. "It can be eerie, rocky, sweet and mellow. I saw a guy do it once, just for one trick lick. It didn't seem to make much of an impression on him, but it sure did for me!" —J.B.

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on "Sweet Dreams," and Clarence White, whose string-bending techniques also left their indelible mark.

While Ray has played all over America with Carlene Carter, his most important tour was of a very different nature—the tour of duty he did in Vietnam, where he was stationed as a member of the 101st Airborne. There he bought a Vietnamese mandolin that he modified and played while stationed 10 miles south of the demilitarized zone. "I played it in the rice paddies 'til I was hit by a booby-trap mine." Sent back home, he received a check for \$180 each month to go to school. "But," he remembers, "every time the check came in, I'd go buy a vintage second-hand guitar."

After saving some money, Ray decided to move to Los Angeles and try to make it as a musician. "It was early in 1983, and I fought like hell to break into the bar circuit—and after a few years fought like hell to break out of it! So I started doing studio work and buying recording equipment, and producing people like Wylie & the Wild West Show."

Ray also did "a zillion" sessions for the varied likes of Tom Jones, Thomas Dolby and, most recently, Joe Walsh and Steve Earle. He played the late Roy Orbison in the posthumously produced video to "Heartbreak Radio," calling it "a religious moment—I got to use his guitar, which hadn't had the strings changed since he died." He also headed his own band, Will Ray & The Gila Monsters.

Ray first met John Jorgenson when the latter was playing stand-up bass in Shakin' Snakes: "Next time I saw him he was playing guitar and I thought, 'He ain't a bad guitarist for a bass player!'"

Jerry Donahue was somebody Ray knew pretty well, and in 1988, he enlisted both Donahue and Jorgenson to cut "Superpickers." Before long, fate smiled on the three guitarists and the Hellecasters were officially born.

"The whole thing about The Hellecasters is that we like variety," concludes Ray. "We don't like getting tied down with anything that much—that includes being in The Hellecasters!" —J.B.

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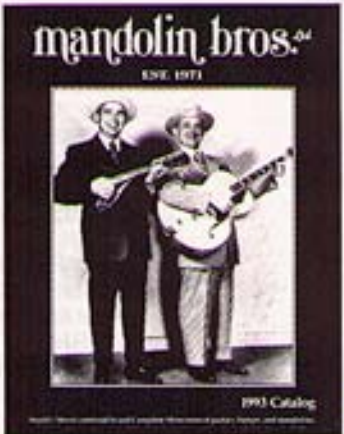
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