

JOE SATRIANI
The Elephants of Mars

Joe Satriani's version of *carpe diem* seems to be continuously in play, a mantra ready to shift into position no matter what the exact circumstances might be.

The Elephants of Mars, the virtuoso guitarist's 19th studio album and his first for earMUSIC, sprang to life as an unexpected worldwide pandemic enveloped the globe. Like so many others, the San Francisco musician had a busy year planned.

Shapeshifting, his then-current album, was set for release in April of 2020. The usual Satriani cycle of album, tour, album, tour, meant that he was gearing up to circle the planet in support of the highly anticipated record. Instead, he had a new date added to the tour schedule. Home.

Initially, he had the idea that they would wait it out in regards to the pandemic, staying occupied by recording "two loose albums" as they lay in wait for the day that they could get back to the road and promote *Shapeshifting*. One would be an instrumental and one would be structured around vocal material.

Both would showcase and introduce his new band so that when they did finally get to tour, fans would be aware, "This is what they can do." He planned to just give the new music away at no cost. As the pandemic period lengthened, he realized that it made more sense to change focus and work on making the next proper instrumental album instead.

From the outset, Satriani set goals for himself. "I've done a lot of records that have swung back and forth stylistically," he admits. The guitarist had an aim to create a "new standard" when it came to crafting an instrumental guitar record. There are a lot of different ways to do that, he allows, mentioning jazz, fusion and rock records, in addition to "the current crop of young, brilliant players," who are playing "all kinds of stuff." Recognizing all of this, he notes, "I am a product of my generation, and I am the end result of all these influences."

He strove to openly challenge himself to move away from what he describes as "the classic rock" tone of the past few albums he's put out, replacing that with "a new platform of his own design. "Okay, I know what everybody else is doing. But I want to be in this new area," he explains. "I do want to show people that the instrumental guitar album can contain far more complexity of creative elements than I think people are using right now."

The band for *The Elephants of Mars* marries players from Satriani's universe both past and present. Legendary drummer Kenny Aronoff (John Fogerty, Smashing Pumpkins) is back for his second consecutive tour of duty with the guitarist following his initial debut on *Shapeshifting*. Bassist Bryan Beller slips inside the liner notes for the first time since 2015's *Shockwave Supernova*.

Longtime associate Eric Caudieux has been in the Satch orbit since 1998's *Crystal Planet* and also produced the album, collaborating on the mixes with Greg Koller (Bruce Springsteen, Beyonce). Rai

Thistlethwayte is the newest addition, beaming in from overseas where he was splitting his time between Australia and Tasmania.

While he has worked separately in the past with band members, Satriani often favored the approach of getting everyone in a room and following the spirit of the collaborations that developed. They would take a decidedly different path with *The Elephants of Mars*. The lockdown dictated an intriguing new direction that was joined by similarly exciting results.

Album opener “Sahara” immediately demonstrates that Satriani and his band are pushing deep into previously uncharted territory, quickly building out a cinematic soundscape that both musically and rhythmically feels as if one is surrounded by desert-like desolation.

Originally envisioned as a vocal piece, “Sahara Love Is the Answer,” it was Caudieux who urged Satriani to consider taking a second look at the track, to convert it into an instrumental. The guitarist decided to humor his collaborator and take a shot at it. He found it to be a “bonus” that he had a full set of lyrics, a helpful compass as to what the song was supposed to be about.

Sending musical ideas back and forth with Caudieux, what emerged was a song which has become one of their favorites of the album sessions and one that took pole position at the head of the record.

“It was all about a person who was completely lost, feeling totally isolated. He's walking the streets of an area like Gotham, in New York City. And there's nobody around,” Satriani says, spooling out the initial storyline. “It's almost like a desert, except it's a decaying urban landscape. And then he meets this spirit, and then it gets crazy. We were able to keep some of the melodies that were part of the vocal melodies and it just turned into something that wound up being one of our favorite songs, and we wound up putting it first on the album because we related to it so much.”

Satriani's ongoing work on musical cues related to his *Crystal Planet* comic book series gave birth to the title track of *The Elephants of Mars*. He recalls that his original demo version had a Nine Inch Nails-like beat built around synthesizers and a guitar section he had cut years ago. He was intrigued by one piece which had a sound that to his ears, “sounded like electronic elephants with the air coming through the trunks and everything.”

Pulling in that same guitar part as inspiration, originally recorded on an iPhone, Satriani recorded a fresh take of the guitar line and began to manipulate other parts of the song. “I wrote a section where I could just do a totally open guitar solo and I came up with the idea of using the symmetrical scale,” he recalls. “Just because I thought it was so much fun and it's so weird, it would fit the meaning of the song.”

Constructing a middle section and end solo, now it was time to set the elephants free. “The idea was now we really have to turn up those elephants because it really sets up the song,” Satriani begins. “But how do we get that weird synthesizer patch to match Kenny and Bryan and Joe just going crazy? Finally, Rai comes in and he does a Deep Purple, Jon Lord organ kind of thing throughout the whole song.”

It was a big vision to pull together and, in the end, Satriani says, “We were literally working on sections and crossing our fingers that it was going to work.” Happily, they were able to reach the perfect storm. “The Elephants of Mars’ sounds in the beginning finally made sense,” he concludes. “It took a lot of experience and technical work to get all those sound and sonic elements together to work with the rock band and make it sound like you're on Mars and the elephants are charging and they're gigantic.”

Aronoff and Caudieux were both in the Los Angeles area and were able to work together directly with the producer recording Aronoff’s parts at the drummer’s own Uncommon Studios. With each isolated in separate areas of the studio, Caudieux coaxed out an exciting variety of performances from the drum legend. “I got some of the craziest things from those sessions,” Satriani reflects. The marimba parts on “Night Scene” were a first for both the guitarist and the drummer.

The musical pattern had begun as a guitar part. It was Caudieux who heard how much it sounded like a marimba and wondered if they could get Aronoff to play it on an actual marimba instead. “Kenny was like, ‘I am doing this because I studied this instrument since I was in college and I've never been able to get on an album doing it,’” Satriani recalls with a chuckle. “So, we just thought, ‘Well, that's the best reason ever, let's just do it.’”

Similarly, the creative gates were wide open for all of the musicians to take liberties on the songs for *The Elephants of Mars* and share a side of themselves they hadn’t previously been able to. “The songs are so out there, they're such an odd collection of stuff, from, you know, “Faceless” to “Pumpin’,” he explains. “They're so different that everyone was able to take the song as a separate entity and say, ‘I always wanted to do this in a song, I hope the album receives it.’ Eric and I were really keen on making sure that everybody felt that -- that each song was an opportunity for them to apply themselves to the song as a singular entity.”

Working as a rhythm section for the first time, Beller and Aronoff would easily find their collective mojo. The bassist had seen the drummer play with Satriani on the *Experience Hendrix* tour and even though the skinsman is “one of the most recorded drummers ever,” as the guitarist terms it, the pair would still have plenty to explore together. “Kenny is so deep, he's always laying a new thing on people,” Joe says. “You give him the opportunity and he says, ‘Here's a new version of Kenny.’”

Highlighting the fusion vibe of “Pumpin’” and the similarly jazzy feel of “Night Scene,” Satriani calls Beller’s bass playing “unbelievable,” noting how the songs rise to the next level, thanks to the pairing of the bassist and Aronoff. The demo for “Night Scene” was an automated thing,” he shares. “I said to them, ‘Look, I don't know if this is humanly possible to play those parts like that, so you change them if you need to change them.’ But wow, I mean, they made them sound so much better and even more menacing, and fat and groovy and everything. There's nothing like fingers on strings, you know?”

While the pandemic found the musicians relying on numerous methods of communication since they weren’t in the same room -- including text messages back and forth with idea fragments, occasionally, it was the things that *weren’t* said which delivered surprising results.

Thistlethwayte was traveling when he received the initial tracks for “Sailing the Seas of Ganymede” to add his keyboard part. “In that particular song, Rai decided to do a solo in the wrong spot. But it was like once we heard it, everybody was just like, so blown away,” Satriani says with an incredulous tone. “We said, ‘No, Rai owns that spot. We’re not even gonna say that’s the wrong spot.’ Like you got it.”

“He did that a couple of times, and I’m not sure if he did it because we didn’t tell him where the right spot was, or because he just thought ‘I think this is better,’ but we never argued with whatever he did,” Satriani continues. “I mean his solos are really, really remarkable. I mean, just crazy good. They really raised the game on the album when it came to those bursts of crazy expression.”

The futuristic tone of “Through a Mother’s Day Darkly” is another moment that takes up partial residence in the worlds of *Crystal Planet*. Satriani had written an initial sketch on Mother’s Day, pulling out a seven-string guitar that hadn’t seen the light of day from its case in a number of years. He liked the “dirty, punky seven string guitar performance,” but wasn’t sure where to go from there.

Again, it would be Caudieux who heard something in the idea that the guitarist sent around. “Let me play with it,” he told Satriani. He posed the idea of adding orchestral elements, but it would be a struggle that played out over a period of months figuring out how to keep the “raw one pass guitar performance” that they both saw as a key part of the song.

The dramatic voiceover Satriani’s *Crystal Planet* partner Ned Evett contributed to bring the song home adds an unexpected sci-fi twist to *The Elephants of Mars*. “Through a Mother’s Day Darkly” takes listeners on a gripping journey that fits surprisingly well in the album sequence.

Ultimately, *The Elephants of Mars* stands as one of the most intriguing and interesting albums of Satriani’s career. With each new recording adventure that he embarks on, there’s always a carefully considered grouping of players, song ideas that have been vigorously vetted and studio environments and producers to be selected. In the end this time, Satriani and his bandmates would take the roads less traveled.

“One of the strange effects of the pandemic and recording an album remotely at home, and being away from everybody, was that we all had time,” Satriani says, reflecting on the many experiences he had previously, especially in the early days of his career, working against the clock. “We pretty much just kept working on the album without any hiccups.”

The results were “fortuitous by default,” he realizes now. “Normally we would have spent two months all huddled together in a room screaming at each other getting a record done. Instead, it was done through video conferencing and over the phone and text messages. You know, play faster, play slower, less notes, more notes. How about this idea?”

“The music just got so much better. I think especially with Eric. I granted him this sort of license to take something that I’d given him and turn it upside down,” Satriani continues. “That’s something that he wouldn’t be able to do if we were in a studio filled with a band with the time clock ticking away. It would have been ‘Oh, well, you know, in another life we could have done this.’ Instead, we did all those things.

We did the craziest ideas. And we entertained every notion we had about turning something backwards, upside down, seeing what could happen.”

Now, it’s the listener that gets to take the wheel for the next leg of the trip, an epic 67 minute trek. “How do I want my closest fan to feel when they hear this music,” Satriani asks, midway through the conversation. He laughs as he delivers the next thought. “That's what you're trying to communicate and everything else is out of your control anyway. You can’t decide what people are going to like or not like, so you just follow your heart.”