



A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, playing a mandolin on a stage. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is dark with some stage lighting. The title 'Two Hundred Percent POWER' is overlaid on the top left of the image.

# Two Hundred Percent POWER

NELS CLINE AND  
JULIAN LAGE CHAT  
ABOUT THEIR DUO,  
THEIR FAVORITE  
GUITARS AND THEIR  
RESPECTIVE MUSICAL  
EXPERIENCES

By David R. Adler



IT'S MID TO LATE APRIL AND SCHEDULES HAVE NEEDED adjusting. Nels Cline and Julian Lage, two of today's most forward-thinking and original guitarists, were set to play a Brooklyn duo gig and then record a studio album, but all of it had to be postponed. And though Cline expected to have summer 2013 free, now he'll be joining Wilco, the major rock band he's worked with since 2004, on the AmericanaramA tour with Bob Dylan, My Morning Jacket and others.

"So we can record in the fall—we don't have a deadline," Cline says of the Cline-Lage duo, a hugely promising venture that has gigged a handful of times at Le Poisson Rouge, the Stone and elsewhere. One thing will go forward immediately, however: Cline and Lage will record a seven-inch single (A- and B-sides) to support their upcoming appearance at Wilco's Solid Sound Festival. "We want to have something fun as a little introduction, a souvenir for people. We'll just do tape so it'll be analog format at every level."

A former mainstay of the Los Angeles creative music scene, Cline now makes his home in New York, although "my story is I haven't really moved," he says. "I just live here all the time. I still have all my stuff in Los Angeles."

With his 2006 tribute to Andrew Hill, *New Monastery*, his trio work with the Nels Cline Singers, and many other projects, Cline has exhibited the temperament and ability of someone deeply versed in jazz while pushing toward its avant-garde and rock-

related outer regions. He's got 32 years on Lage, age 25, a prodigious talent who broke into the jazz scene apprenticing with Gary Burton. A new *New Yorker* as well, Lage has since flourished with the albums *Sounding Point* and *Gladwell*, and made key sideman appearances with Burton, Eric Harland, Taylor Eigsti and others.

The day before they recorded their single, Cline and Lage joined *JazzTimes* for a full-on guitar-nerd discussion at Sammy's Noodle Shop in the West Village.

**JazzTimes:** You're both Californians. Is that a musical connection in any way?

**Nels Cline:** The only ironic connection is I learned that I had met Julian when he was a teenager, outside a Charlie Hunter gig in Petaluma. He went to the gig with his dad, and my band the Singers opened for Charlie. Scott Amendola was playing with Charlie that night, replacing Tony Mason. And I found out that for 10 years, my Singers lineup with Scott and [bassist] Devin Hoff had been Julian's trio. He said, "I have your band!"

**Julian Lage:** I poached his rhythm section very early on.

**NC:** They never told me! Anyway, we met again in New York, right across the street from here at French Roast. I was invited by Brian

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▼ Brad Mehldau and Redman in Philadelphia, October 2011



BEN JOHNSON

Camelio of ArtistShare to start coming to what they call these Jim Hall crony lunches. I'd written a piece in *JazzTimes* selecting 10 tracks by Jim Hall, and Brian saw it and wanted me to meet Jim. That's how I heard about Julian—Jim was talking about him. So Julian finally made one of the crony lunches, and we started chatting afterward, "Oh, California, blah blah blah." I guess it was some kind of spiritual connection.

**JL:** I wanted to write that piece about my favorite Jim Hall records. They were like, "Oh, we're sorry, Nels took Jim." So I picked modern guitarists.

**NC:** Jim wrote me a thank-you note, which is how he rolls. He's old-school and really delightful.

**JT:** Can you each talk about your previous experiences playing duo, and why the idiom works so well for you musically?

**JL:** Growing up I studied with Randy Vincent, from the time I was 8 until 12. I took two three-hour lessons a week for that crucial period, and it was just duo guitar. We played, studied records, learned things together. So from very early on, duo always felt like the most complete expression, at least of the guitar music that I was a part of. Over the years I've played duets with Martin Taylor. I did a brief little run of things with [John] Abercrombie. I played duo a lot with David Grisman, and acoustic music was always an interest of mine.

When Nels and I first played together, the way I describe it is "I found my people." At last I found a scenario where you could have two guitars, you could be free and adventurous, you could utilize sound and be extremely melodic and evocative. Sometimes people say "duo" and it kind of downplays the impact—"Oh, it's just a duo." It's 200 percent power, is how I think of it.

**NC:** I've actually thought of myself as Mr. Duo for a while. The level of intimacy and immediacy is generally profound. And maybe I have an ability to reach across those few inches and really connect with that one person. Vinny Golia and I played duo for many years, and I started with my old musical partner Eric Von Essen in 1978, playing bass and acoustic guitar duos. It was totally inspired by listening to Jim Hall and Ron Carter. There's one duet on an Oregon record with Glen Moore and Ralph Towner, highly influential. The duo on *Death and the Flower* with Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden called "Prayer," very influential. Jim Hall and Red Mitchell, on and on. And, of course, Ralph Towner and John Abercrombie.

Beyond that I started playing duos with Thurston Moore. Also, a duo with Zeena Parkins, with acoustic and electric harp and guitars that goes from completely intimate to really epic and explosive. I had a duo with my musical partner Carla Bozulich for years, a duo with Devin Sarno in Los Angeles—now people would call it a noise duo, though I don't really like that term so much. I've done guitar duets with Elliott Sharp; we have two records out. I played a duo gig with Marc Ribot about a year and a half ago. I was terrified but I think it ended up working out really well.

So at one point I thought, "Gee, all I'm doing is duos." I realized

## PICKING PAIRS

DAVID R. ADLER CHOOSES CLASSIC AND INFLUENTIAL GUITAR-DUO ALBUMS

### LARRY CORYELL/PHILIP CATHERINE

*Twin-House* (Elektra, 1977)



Classic fusion-era guitar wasn't all shredding at high volume—a lot of it was acoustic, in fact. This steel-string duo covered Django Reinhardt and Keith Jarrett in fascinating ways, and the originals (several by Belgian guitarist Catherine, the opening "Ms. Julie" by Coryell) had a way of reconciling jazz modernism and white-hot chops with calmer folk-like moods and textures. There's heavy improvisation, the twang of rock and blues and the allure of simple and lasting melodies.

### JOHN ABERCROMBIE/RALPH TOWNER

*Sargasso Sea* (ECM, 1976)



Playing solely original material, this intimate duo was all about timbre: Towner's nylon-string and percussive, expansive 12-string meeting Abercrombie's mystical swells and legato runs on electric and steel-string acoustic. Despite the dark and ethereal bent, the music locks into tempo and swings (Abercrombie's "Avenue," Towner's "Parasol"), and the writing is ambitious (Towner's virtuosic "Staircase" stands out). Towner saves the final number for a compelling turn on piano, his first instrument.

### JIMMY RANEY/DOUG RANEY

*Duets* (SteepleChase, 1979)



Jimmy Raney was 52 at the time of this recording with his talented son, then 22. No bells and whistles, just two bop-oriented pickers playing evergreens like "Have You Met Miss Jones?," "Invitation" and "Oleo." Comping, soloing, basslines, counterpoint: The Raney's show how it's done, mining a classic electric hollowbody sound, warm and round with just a hint of bite. Raney père, of course, is the more seasoned storyteller and melodic wit.

### JIM HALL/PAT METHENY

*Jim Hall & Pat Metheny* (Telarc, 1999)



On tunes like "Falling Grace" and "All the Things You Are," Hall and Metheny play straight-up jazz duo in the Raney fashion. But they travel far and wide aesthetically on these 17 tracks (live and studio), with Metheny playing his acoustic guitars, Picasso 42-string guitar and even fretless guitar. Amazingly, Hall says just as much with one instrument. He's the more understated partner but is in no way overshadowed: His thick tone, swinging attack, compositional riches and free-improvising abilities elevate the music at every step.

that it was a combination of it working, me liking it, but also really much easier to schedule [laughs].

**JT:** Was the duo with Julian a departure from all those previous encounters?

**NC:** At the beginning I was reluctant to try a duo because I've done a lot. I'd been thinking about a chamber ensemble playing some of my written music with structured improvisation and no drums, and first I wanted to try it as a trio. I asked Erik Friedlander about trying two guitars and cello, and that was the plan for our first gig at Le Poisson Rouge. But Erik couldn't do it; he was leaving for Europe that day. He wrote to me, "I know how these things are. I'm

sorry if this window is probably going to close.”

It was so immediately satisfying when Julian and I started working toward what we were going to play at this gig, there was definitely no turning back. It almost saved my life at that point because I was in a bit of crisis about my playing. I was burned out on touring, burned out on myself, really feeling depleted. And when we started playing together it kicked my ass hard. At the same time it inspired me and refreshed my soul.

**JL:** Likewise.

**JT:** What guitars are you playing in the duo?

**JL:** Only four total, two each. I’m playing my Linda Manzer guitar, which I’ve been playing since I was 11.

**NC:** It’s the “Julian Lage guitar”—reliable, attractive and excellent-sounding.

**JL:** And then I have a Nash Telecaster. The only effect we have is reverb. I’m playing a Carr Rambler amplifier, which belongs to Nels.

**NC:** He loves it.

**JL:** I’m obsessed with it.

**NC:** It sounds best when Julian plays it. I finally convinced him to just leave it in his apartment.

**JT:** And your guitars, Nels?

**NC:** Mainly I’m playing a ’65 Gibson Barney Kessel. Jeff Tweedy of Wilco introduced me to the joys of the Barney Kessel—I think he has five of them. It has the raciest neck; [it’s] a very zoomy guitar, with two pickups, so rock guys like me can have some tone selection. I guess I’m a rock guy to some people. And it’s got double cutaways so I can play up high. I also have this rather cumbersome but delightful Hofner 12-string archtop from the ’60s.

For an amp I’m playing my ZT Club, a little solid-state plastic box. I just throw it in the cab; it’s not precious. I’ve used it playing with Tim Berne and Jim Black, blasting, and I’ve played it with Julian at intimate volume.

**JT:** How about the duo’s repertoire?

**NC:** My original idea was that we’d do a lot of improvising. Julian expressed that this was very liberating for him, and I’m better at improvising than playing written music anyway. At the same time, the duo suggested so much music that I started writing what we were calling “squibs,” which has changed; now they’re actually some real tunes.

I can play very harmonically specific material with Julian that I can’t play with a lot of other free improvisers, because Julian knows how to do all that stuff, better than I do. For me that’s super-liberating, because I haven’t been able to do as much of that as I used to do with Eric Von Essen and all these people I played with in the ’80s—this kind of impressionist harmony and jazz harmony going in a few new places, modal playing, not just “whatever.”

I think it’s important that we continue to be as free as possible and then balance that. I was sheepish to bring in these finished

harmonic pieces at first because I thought it might be too limiting. But I was so inspired that I started writing tonal pieces, either a little bit folk-like or jazz-like. There’s one dedicated to Eric Von Essen titled “Whispers from EVE,” and it’s very much like the kind of piece he and I used to play as a duo. We also have this piece, kind of a fake Ornette Coleman line also partly inspired by Scott Amendola, so it’s called “Amenette.” Usually after the line is done it’s completely open.

**JL:** We also have one that’s four chords, my E-major thing. It’s just, “Don’t disturb the equilibrium, play the chords, repeat them until you’re done.” That’s another type of piece we’ll have.

**JT:** Does that have a title?

**JL:** No, I don’t have a title for that...

**NC:** I think we call it “Chords” or something.

**JL:** Yeah, it’s called “Chords”!

**NC:** We have a comfort with minimalism, which I think balances the fact that in the first 10 minutes of one of our sets I’ve probably played more notes than I have in a week with Wilco. So it’s nice to have contrast. We have one that we sort of ritually end our recitals with—it’s a long coda dedicated to my wife; I call it “Yuka Song.” It just builds over and over and it’s completely tonal. There’s something about it that creates this very emotional response in the audience and in us. We just don’t want to end the show with anything else.

**JT:** Nels, you mentioned Julian’s strength with harmonic material, and yet I’ve noticed a freer kind of energy in his playing recently—in the unaccompanied solos he does with Eric Harland’s Voyager, for instance.

**JL:** I feel like I’ve always had these two diverging aesthetic interests. One is über-purity, where it’s strikingly tonal, really beautiful. And then there’s this kind of grungy, everything’s broken, semi-robotic idea. I’ve always had this love of robots and computers breaking down and what that sounds like.

**NC:** Glitchy.

**JL:** Exactly. I’ve never known quite how to realize both of them fully. The tonal, pretty stuff I can see way easier. But in the duo with Nels I recognize that I have permission to cultivate that aesthetic, the glitchier side. What I like about that is it requires a certain amount of technical understanding about the instrument, but you’re using your technique to sound really ugly. That’s a nice balance to this whole trajectory of getting better technique so that you can sound more perfect, so that you can be cleaner, faster. I’ve never felt that the two always went together.

**JT:** With Harland you were also using an effects pedal in a pretty radical way. Can you explain?

**NC:** I’ve been hearing about this. I gotta check this out.

**JL:** What I do is record four or five layered samples with the volume down throughout the night. I just let them build up and never





turn it on. And then I turn it on and put it in reverse, and go twice as fast or half as fast. I'm using it kind of the way drummers use fills with the snare, this modern aesthetic of short bursts. It's kind of out of the Houston scene; you hear it in Chris Dave or Harland or Kendrick Scott—there's a backbeat and then there's a flurry [*sings a busy drum fill*] and then they're right back in. So I was using my guitar to simulate that.

I've also been using a laptop and an iPad to trigger different samples of Jane Goodall speaking where I mess with her voice. When I was 16 I went to see Björk live and it completely changed my life, and I've been chasing that ever since. I've always wanted to do something more experimental and head scratching.

**NC:** Julian was asking me about delays. He wanted to be able to take snippets of sound, not necessarily real-time coherent phrases, and reassemble them, almost a mathematical extrapolation, kind of like Aphex Twin, like tiny particles. And I said, "Well, I can't help you there. Good luck with that." [*Laughs.*] That's a little beyond me.

**JT:** One thing I've noticed, Julian, is that you use a lot of dynamics and can get pretty loud on the archtop without worrying about feedback. You push the archtop right to the point where the sound might break up, but you don't lose control.

**JL:** There are a couple of factors. I grew up listening to Eddie Lang and Carl Kress and Dick McDonough, really early jazz players. By the very nature of technological limitations they're pushing their archtops. Those are [Gibson] L-5s, old D'Angelicos, just pushed to the limit. There's this beautiful acoustic overdrive that I've always loved. You hear it on old Clarence White recordings. Tony Rice was always at the limits with his dreadnought. Secondly, I play a laminate guitar, so basically it just doesn't feed back. I don't like carved archtops with pickups because then you're taming the guitar all night rather than playing.

But I'm on the lookout for another guitar right now, more for Harland's stuff.



**NC:** Really?

**JC:** Yeah, can you believe it? I'm thinking thinner but with a humbucker. I don't think a Les Paul is the right thing.

**NC:** I have a couple of suggestions for you.

**JC:** OK, we'll talk!

**JT:** Finally, Nels, can you talk a bit about the experience of rock touring and the kinds of guitars and gear you're using with Wilco?

**NC:** Being in Wilco has certainly changed my life. There's rarely a day I walk down the street in New York that somebody doesn't say hello to me. And it's because of Wilco, not because of my old trio [*laughs*].

We have a really nice band chemistry and we have a good time. We work our asses off, a lot of touring. I'm fine with touring. Now that I'm pushing 60 we'll see how much more I can take [*laughs*]. But it basically agrees with me. We're like circus people—we come and spread the magic and don't stay too long.

My main guitar is the same one I played with Mike Watt and the Geraldine Fibbers, what I thought was a '59 Jazzmaster that I bought from Mike Watt. According to my guitar tech it's a 1960. It's beat to hell; I beat it to hell. I have a couple of Jazzmasters; I have a spare. I have a '69 Jaguar with Seymour Duncan custom pickups. I play my Jerry Jones Neptune 12-string with Wilco. I play a Jerry Jones double-neck—12-string and baritone. It's for one song. I play an old Les Paul faded double-cutaway, cheap, in open tuning for slide that Jeff Tweedy gave me when I joined.

For amps I'm using a Schroeder DB7, which he designed with me in mind. I'm using a Marshall reissue of the JTM 45 offset head 4x12 cabinet with custom Celestions. It's the only time I've ever used 4x12s in my life. And it's basically too big for Wilco. I sometimes scare myself up there, it sounds so good. **JT**