

Steve Tibbetts: Express Purposes

by [MATT MICUCCI](#)



Steve Tibbetts' Hellbound Train carries 40 years of adventurous guitar explorations.

There were practical reasons for assembling the new two-disc anthology, *Hellbound Train*, Steve Tibbetts acknowledges. From his home base outside Saint Paul, Minnesota, the guitarist now has a handy, compact package representing four decades of releases for the ECM label to serve as an introduction to his absorbing and exploratory music. But the main inspiration was a simple one.

“Vanity,” Tibbetts explains during a Zoom conversation from his longtime studio, a slight, sly smile forming at one corner of his mouth. “There are other reasons, but all is vanity.”

Hellbound Train spans the majority of Tibbetts' career, from his third album and ECM debut, 1982's *Northern Song*, to his most recent release, 2018's *Life Of*. The guitarist toiled over the sequencing of the compilation, veering away from strict chronology to craft a double album that could be listened to as a set of music in its own right. In some cases, that

took the form of mini-suites from a single album where the music didn't make sense divorced of its original context, particularly in the case of *Big Map Idea* (1989), *The Fall of Us All* (1994) and *A Man About a Horse* (2002).

"Could you break up *A Love Supreme*?" Tibbetts asks. "I had trouble with the blue and red Beatles compilations because they were taken out of context. It was like suddenly landing in seven different countries in 20 minutes."

The Fab Four are a constant point of reference for Tibbetts. He essentially picked up the guitar under the sway of '60s rock, but discovered new possibilities when he heard John Lennon's "Tomorrow Never Knows" at the end of *Revolver*. In that one heady track are rooted the swirling drones and absorbing soundscapes that make up much of Tibbetts' own catalogue.

"I think 'Tomorrow Never Knows' was a key moment for everybody that put on *Revolver* and realized that the mop tops were gone," he explains. "It didn't make sense to trade Beatles chewing gum cards anymore — the gum wasn't that good anyway. But something had happened. We accepted whatever our four versions of Moses were bringing down from the mountaintop. They were tablets, and we would study them accordingly."

Another key influence on the music of *Hellbound Train*, especially the decade beginning in the late 1980s that is the anthology's main focus, was Tibbetts' extensive travels in Nepal and Bali. "There are a few things that we know work in the propagation of music," he says. "One of them is coffee. Travel also works. It helps to be away from yourself and away from music. When I travel, I come back with a different perspective on the music that I've been making. It helps you stop breeding with yourself, so you don't end up with blue skin and six fingers."

Perhaps an even more important perspective to Tibbetts' art is that of percussionist Marc Anderson, the one other constant throughout the recordings on *Hellbound Train*. "He's the key part," Tibbetts insists. "If I can make Marc smile, if I see him nodding and playing hard, then I know it works. He's a very wise man, he's helpful on many different levels, he's a very calm presence on the road and he can play his ass off."

Not that Tibbetts has been on the road much of late. With the looming loss of the studio he's called home since 1985, and Anderson's planned move to Portugal, the guitarist is scrambling to create as much new music as possible before this major chapter comes to a close. That turn of the page was another instigation for putting this compilation together, which gave Tibbetts the opportunity to review his oeuvre to date.

"Mostly I'm satisfied," he sums up. "Because it's ECM and because I'm still somewhat isolated and a bit of an amateur, there's always a little fear associated with the label. I try

not to even send them a demo until I think they'd be embarrassed if it came out somewhere else. That's the Rubicon we have to cross." — ***Shaun Brady***

Featured photo by Diane Waller.