

Bio information: **RICHARD LEO JOHNSON & GREGG BENDIAN**
Title: **WHO KNEW CHARLIE SHOE?** (Cuneiform Rune 258)

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FILE UNDER: ROCK / ACOUSTIC GUITAR

"Johnson...finds sounds and odd chord changes that must have been hiding in the basements of lonely shacks all over the South. He sets these ghosts free. ...Believe the hype, and don't feel like a poseur when you add your own outrageous praise..." – Music Emissions

*"...the guitarist creates a sound that is both mystical and rural, like the ghost of McAlister slipping his sound through static and haze."
– Amazon.com (editorial review)*

"Every guitar has songs inside it. I want to turn them loose." – Charlie Shoe

"Legends aren't often freshly minted," said *Jazz Times* in its review of guitarist **Richard Leo Johnson's** last release, *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, "but Vernon McAlister may be one of them." Indeed, since it emerged from the hollow steel body of Johnson's National Duolian guitar, Johnson's "Legend" has taken on a life of its own. Early in the 2000s, Johnson had fallen under the spell of a battered, 75 year-old steel guitar featuring the name of its former owner, **Vernon McAlister**, crudely scratched into its steel side. Enchanted by the sounds that emanated from the guitar's rusted hollow, he wove a fictional tale of its owner, sequestered himself in his attic and brought the antique instrument to life, unleashing the sonic wonderland hidden within the instrument, recording a solo album with only the guitar and some old mics. The result was Johnson's 2006 **Cuneiform** release, *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, an astonishing, hauntingly beautiful work of new acoustic Americana, which served as a soundtrack, or "aural" history, to a written "legend" of Vernon McAlister, posted on www.vernonmcalist.com. The experience marked a watershed in Johnson's musical career; he previously had used a variety of finely made, modern guitars – most notably an 18-string, custom made, double-necked **McCullum** – to express his fleet-fingered, idiosyncratic and highly innovative style. But Vernon, a genie unleashed, taught Johnson that songs were hidden in the humblest of instruments, aching to be freed. "Some ways a song just lives in a particular instrument," says Vernon in Johnson's printed legend, "When I got my guitar songs were already in it, it just took me a while to find them." As the legend continues, when a new fictional character, **Charlie Shoe**, encounters Vernon's guitar, "it still had the wild animals living in it, and the trains, and the fires, and the angels, and the love, and the trouble." Says Vernon: "People keep the songs locked up in their hearts, I went around showing people songs that were right there in front of them."

In *Who Knew Charlie Shoe?*, Johnson expands on the lessons, legend and instrumentation of *Vernon*, working with percussionist **Gregg Bendian** to reveal that music and magic reside in the everyday – in commonplace objects and even in trash – and do not reside solely in one very special, mysteriously inscribed, metal guitar. The new CD's liner notes feature the story of **Charlie Shoe**, Vernon's protégé, which is elaborated online at www.charlie-shoe.com. With Johnson adopting the persona of **Charlie Shoe** and playing dime-a-dozen acoustic guitars bought off **eBay**, and Bendian, aka **Junk Fish**, aka **Jaden Barrel**, playing percussion on "stuff" ranging from lard cans, brooms, pots, washboards, attic stairs, water and more, the duo expand on Johnson's singular, acoustic Americana hybrid. Together, Johnson and Bendian create music that is simultaneously traditional and experimental, merging past with present and avant-garde found object with folksy "swap-meet" discard.

Richard Leo Johnson is one of the most imaginative, innovative and inspired acoustic guitarists on the current American music scene. *Amazon.com's* editors called Johnson "perhaps the next in a short line of guitar greats – a line that includes [Michael] Hedges, Derek Bailey, Pat Metheny, Sonny Sharrock, and a few others," while *Playboy* touted him as "the most innovative guitarist since **Jim Hendrix**." A passionate and intuitive player, he is often compared to such masters of the steel-string acoustic guitar as **Bruce Cockburn**, **John Fahey**, **Michael Hedges**, **Burt Jansch**, **Adrian Legg**, **Leo Kottke**, **Steve Tibbetts** and **Ralph Towner**. But Johnson's style, characterized by complexity, exhilarating speed and hauntingly unfamiliar harmonies created through 'found' tunings marks this self-taught player apart from any other musician.

Johnson was raised in a small Arkansas town in the Mississippi Delta. He began playing guitar at age 9, briefly taking lessons from a hard-drinking oil field worker before deciding he'd learn more on his own. Johnson recalls that his "real jumping off point" was a cassette he received as a teenager, including **John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra's Inner Mounting Flame** on one side, and **Leo Kottke's Greenhouse** on the other: Says Johnson: "I thought it was one person playing this stuff! The initial impact was that it was somehow possible to make something happen that fused the linear liquidity of McLaughlin and the dense harmonic structure and drive of Kottke." The distinctive playing of Oregon's guitarist, **Ralph Towner**, also impressed Johnson. Practicing incessantly on his own, he developed an idiosyncratic playing style which combined plucking and strumming, alternating between 6, 12 and 18-string guitars, using all parts of the guitar, and employing 30 tunings he devised.

Music remained a private passion while Johnson pursued architectural photography as a profession, receiving an MFA from Louisiana Tech, running his own studio and creating photos sought by collectors such as D.C.'s **Corcoran Museum** and the **New Orleans Museum of Art**. In 1993, Johnson self-released a CD with percussionist **Jud Martindale**. Called *Creatures of Habit*, it caught the attention of **Cuneiform's Steven Feigenbaum**. Three years later, Johnson's studio in the Ozarks burned to the ground. The fire destroyed his entire life's work as a photographer – over 300,000 photo prints and negatives. Devastated by the loss of his art, with his photographic studio and career in ashes, Johnson decided to pursue a music career. He moved to Nashville, began gigging incessantly and within a year signed to a major label: **Capital Records' Blue Note/Metro Blue**.

Johnson's first major label CD, a solo work called *Fingertip Ship*, was released in 1999 on **Blue Note's** then-sister label, **Metro Blue**, to a staggering amount of critical acclaim. The CD was reviewed in such publications as *DownBeat*, *Jazziz* and *Playboy*, and sparked feature articles on Johnson in *Billboard*, *Guitar*, and *Jazz Times*. **Language**, Johnson's 2nd major label release, came out on **Blue Note** the following year. A departure from his solo CD, it featured guest artists on a variety of instruments. Musicians **Gregg Bendian**, **Paul McCandless**, **Andy Reinhardt**, **Warren Haynes**, **Glen Moore**, **Reggie Washington**, **Matt Wilson**, **Cyro Baptista** and **James Wormworth** had received recordings of Johnson's guitar tracks and were asked to play along. Hearing it, *The Washington Post* proclaimed, "you can bet a few jaws will drop. ...There's no way to categorize this music, except maybe by creating new hybrids...but that doesn't matter. To do so would only box in Johnson's enormous talent."

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While Johnson was recording *Language* for Blue Note, the CD's engineer, **Jay Newland**, introduced him to percussionist **Gregg Bendian**. Johnson recalls: "He said he thought Gregg and I were made up of the same DNA strand. The chemistry was obvious and the first rehearsal was a blast. Gregg could work effortlessly with my lack of formal training and we arrived at a mutual musical dialogue almost over night." The two began touring together to support Johnson's 2nd Blue Note release, doing short tours with **Tony Levin's Band** and **King Crimson** and opening for **Bela Fleck & the Flecktones** and the **California Guitar Trio**. Sharing a love of music beyond genre, Johnson and Bendian continued touring independent of Blue Note, until Johnson left the tour road to settle in Savannah, Georgia and balance his music career with renewed photography interests.

Bendian was based in NYC, where he was respected in both the New Music and jazz communities for his talents as an improviser, composer and player. He had begun his music career at age 9 with drum lessons and was formally trained in classical music (percussion & composition) at **William Paterson** and **Rutgers Universities**. Privately, he cultivated interests in progressive rock, jazz and improvisation, sparked by hearing the **Mahavishnu Orchestra**. At age 19, Bendian was performing with jazz great **Derek Bailey**, and a few years later, touring and recording with **Cecil Taylor**. During the 1980s, Bendian was a key player in NY's Downtown music scene, leading a chamber jazz/New Music group, the **Gregg Bendian Project** (2 CDs), while working with **John Zorn**, **Tom Cora**, **Bill Frisell** and others. Bendian's subsequent collaborations included working with world-class free-jazz improvisers such as **Peter Brötzmann**, **William Parker** and **Wadada Leo Smith**, and especially, with numerous adventurous guitarists including **Nels Cline**, **Gary Lucas** and **Pat Metheny**. Bendian has appeared on countless recordings, and has released 18 CDs under his name, including a solo percussion CD, *Definite Pitch* (1994); shared collaborations with **Nels Cline** (a 2000 CD of **John Coltrane's** music), **Derek Bailey**, **Paul Wertico**, **Alex Cline** and **Paul Plimley**; and bandleader recordings, on **Atavistic**, **CIMP**, **Truemedea**, **Cryptogramophone** and **Aggregate** (his label, begun in 1993). Currently, Bendian leads **Interzone** (3 CDs), **The Open Aspects Ensemble**, **Trio Pianissimo** (3 CDs) and **The Mahavishnu Project** (3 CDs), a highly-regarded repertory group that performs the music of **John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra** and in 2007 released a critically acclaimed double CD with an 11-piece lineup, *Visions of the Emerald Beyond*, Bendian's 1st CD on **Cuneiform**. Bendian is also drummer for the popular **Genesis** repertory band, **The Musical Box**.

In the early 2000s, while Bendian led **Interzone** and launched his **Mahavishnu Project**, Johnson made his **Cuneiform** debut, contributing a solo track to *156 Strings*, **Cuneiform's** 2002 acoustic guitar compilation, curated by guitarist **Henry Kaiser**. In 2003 Johnson formed his first "band" with two members of the recently disbanded **Savannah Symphony Orchestra**, **Andrew Ripley** (wind, electronics) and **Ricardo Ochoa** (strings, theremin). Called **The Richard Leo Johnson Trio**, the group performed in Savannah and beyond and released a CD on **Cuneiform**, called *Poetry of Appliance*, in 2004. *All Music Guide* described it as "Difficult to categorize... but marvelous to hear," while *Progression* commented: "The sheer beauty of this album is overwhelming. It is just about as perfect as a collection of tunes can be..." *All About Jazz* saw the recording as a landmark in Johnson's career: "Johnson has reached the point, with *Poetry of Appliance*, where rather than being "influenced by" he becomes plainly *influential* in his own right."

Johnson's next recording, his 5th, was his most radical and visionary work yet: *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, a darkly beautiful solo work featuring him playing his "Vernon McAlister" steel guitar. Released by **Cuneiform** in 2006, the CD stopped all who heard it in their tracks. "Johnson has glimpsed the Duolian's haunted inner life," said the *New York Times*. *Music Emissions* stated:

"When I heard the opening track, "Morning Glory", I literally fell off my chair, and almost bawled... The dexterity and emotional power is truly overwhelming. ... the Legend of Vernon McAlister is a classic, raw and moving and historic. 5 stars"

Vernon McAlister received an astonishing amount of press worldwide and was praised in music magazines, major newspapers (*NY Times*, *Washington Post*) and NPR as "mystical", "haunting", "beautiful", "eerie" and even "sublime". Australia's national radio, ABC, aired a full-album feature on two occasions. Awarding it 4 1/2 stars *DownBeat* noted:

"His devotion to this 75-year-old instruments...is so deep, that the rootsy music he draws from its inner chamber has a mystical quality. He has assimilated all the various music he has ever heard – the list would seem to include Charles Ives, Ralph Towner, John Fahey, Robert Fripp, Mahavishnu, raga, ambient, minimalism, Delta and Piedmont blues, American and Japanese folk – in order to express humanity through his own singular hybrid."

Calling it "cinematic", the *Washington Post* said: "Imagine **Ry Cooder** scoring a film based on the life of late Delta bluesman **Bukka White** and you'll have an idea of what Johnson is up to here." *Jazziz* placed "this haunted, mournful album...right between **Ry Cooder's** soundtrack to Paris, Texas and **Tom Wait's** Mule Variations."

Extending the tale of Vernon, Johnson created the character **Charlie Shoe**, an untrained guitarist-savant/small-engine repairman who "focuses on individual instruments, learning how to coax the most appealing sounds from inexpensive and even discarded guitars. Perhaps the key to Charlie's personality is a deep respect for both the instrument and the song, no matter how humble the origins." Johnson performed in the guise of Charlie for the *Vernon* CD's release. He began work on a new CD with Charlie at its core and recruited **Bendian** for percussion. The resulting CD, *Who Knew Charlie Shoe?*, featured the story of Charlie and another new fictional character, **Jaden Barrel**, aka **Junk Fish** – a Memphis rock drummer/salvage yard worker – that is printed in the liner notes and augmented online at www.charlie-shoe.com. The CD was a true collaboration between Johnson and Bendian, as Johnson says:

"When I started thinking about this most recent cd and how it might be expanded on sonically, I immediately thought of Gregg. He came up with the character of Junk Fish and the idea of playing found objects etc, to enhance the down home nature of the guitar songs that I had already written. It was remarkable to hear Gregg's thoughtful compositional treatments, which gave many of the songs a whole new meaning. ...This cd is my favorite effort to date and seems to arrive at a place that expresses a fine blend of tradition and experimentation."

In *Who Knew Charlie Shoe?*, Johnson's 6th CD and 3rd on **Cuneiform**, Johnson and Bendian create a new, hybrid, acoustic Americana that merges rural roots music with urban avant-garde. Expanding Vernon's vision from its austere focus on a single guitar, and brightening the mood from his dark, eerie atmosphere, the duo play an entire salvage yard of instruments and found objects for 53 minutes. The songs include some brief "found sound" snippets: old-time radio advertisements, spoken word and even "blackbirds, chainsaw and a lonely dog." Johnson plays an assortment of discarded and/or borrowed guitars: "five vintage guitars purchased on eBay for around a hundred dollars each, an early '60s 12-string Harmony borrowed from Bob Holman, [and] a 1930s concertina." As relayed on the website, Charlie's guitars have pet names, like living creatures from whom songs can gently be coaxed – "Water Buffalo", "June Bug", "Brindle Fox", "Possum", "Big Noise" and "Mule"; Charlie maintains that "Guitars are like the birds, they all have their own songs." Bendian plays: "a bunch of rather special found objects" including "lard can, blocks o' wood, chunks o' metal, washtub water, attic stairs, springs, pots, pans, bowls, rakes, brooms & brushes, water jugs, plastic tubs, hubcaps, sheet metal scraps, little shaker, big drum, tiny saw & bow, washboard, bells." In the hands of Johnson and Bendian, these simple instruments create music that is sophisticated, accessible, beautiful and sincere. *Who Knew Charlie Shoe?* is a joyous celebration of the music and beauty hidden inside the most down-home of objects, if we only have the vision to see it and set it free.

The CD should appeal both to new generation acoustic music fans, attracted to the edgy solo acoustic guitar music of **Harris Newman**, **Steffen Basho-Junghans** and **Jack Rose**, as well as to fans of such established geniuses as **Robbie Basho**, **John Fahey**, **Michael Hedges**, **John McLaughlin**, **Steve Tibbetts** and **Ralph Towner**.