

“...On “The Legend of Vernon McAlister” (Cuneiform), Mr. Johnson revels in the Duolian’s metallic tone, its resonances, its sharp plinks and its capacity to slide and sustain. The pieces he overdubbed often draw on folksy picking patterns, but those down-home materials can be enveloped in eerie near-electronic wails, quasi-orchestral surges and spiky percussive sounds – all made with just that steel guitar. It sounds as if Mr. Johnson has glimpsed the Duolian’s haunted inner life. ...”

– Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 5, 2006

“...Johnson, best known for his nimble fingerstyle acoustic guitar recordings, was so taken by the sound of his vintage National Duolian when he first played it – “Bells, voices, horns and other mysterious qualities” emanated from it, he recalls in the CD’s liner notes – that he decided to use the instrument to orchestrate an imaginary telling of McAlister’s life.

In keeping with blues mythology, the tale is murky...

Orchestral, dissonant, odd – all those adjectives apply to the music Johnson has composed for “Legend,” a sharp departure from his previous, contemporary-sounding releases. Another adjective fits, too: cinematic. Imagine Ry Cooder scoring a film based on the life of the late Delta bluesman Bukka White and you’ll have some idea of what Johnson is up to here. The 20 solo guitar performances evoke Southern blues, folk and gospel traditions by emphasizing altered-tuning atmospherics, full of yearning refrains, droning vamps, skittish rhythms and sustained overtones. Besides imbuing much of the music with a seamless beauty, the strategy makes “Love and Trouble,” “Angry Angel,” “First Night Alone” and other tunes all the more haunting.”

– Mike Joyce, *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2006

“Richard Leo Johnson has a remarkable relationship with a restored National Duolian steel-bodied guitar, which he showcases on as fine a solo all-instrumental album as you’ll hear. His devotion to this 75-year-old instrument, inscribed by previous owner Vernon McAlister, is so deep that the rootsy music he draws from its inner chamber has a mystical quality. ...

Johnson’s enlightenment is our gain. 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. Johnson’s deft fingers on strings, the eccentric tunings, the awesome sound manipulations and the metallic ring of the guitar conspire together enchantingly. He invests 20 songs...with a multihued sobriety beyond the reach of pretense, sentimentality or self-conscious artiness. ...4.5 out of 5 stars.”

– Frank John Hadley, *Downbeat*, June 2006

“...when a friend presented him with a 1930s National Duolian steel-bodied model, Richard Leo Johnson took an immediate shine to its surprising playability and fascinating colors. Particularly intriguing was the name “Vernon McAlister,” crudely etched into the steel body. It fired Johnson’s imagination, and he spun a tale of a Tennessee man who teaches himself to play a strange, sweet, unruly music... The album is Johnson’s musical document of the legend, and it’s a stunner.

Johnson gets an incredible variety of colors from the Duolian: Whistleable tunes...and fleet arpeggios sit next to moody yet captivating textures conjured from sustained, eerie whines, metallic grinds and buzzy plucks of the strings. You can hear jazz, blues, folk and classical at times, but the lasting impression is how meaningful and heartfelt every note sounds; this is endless invention in the service of a private yet compelling beauty. ...Legends aren’t often freshly minted, but Vernon McAlister may well be one of those.”

– Andrew Lindemann Malone, *JazzTimes*, May 2006

“...a wonderfully hushed and delicate universe that manages to be beautiful, eerie, ominous, soothing, and startling by turns, as Johnson overdubs light percussive taps and chiming notes into the mix, along with weeping, whining tonal washes of E-Bow and gently applied tape effects. Everything here is of a piece, forming an insular and unified suite... Imagine sitting at the bottom of a deep and tree-lined Appalachian hollow, a place where the sunlight just barely reaches, and then imagine hearing a strange yet oddly familiar music drifting down to you from the next hollow over, slightly muffled and distorted into echoing fragments and harmonics, and all of it sounding like the work of new age angels...”

– Steve Leggett, *All Music Guide*, www.allmusic.com

“...the 2005 CD from guitar great Richard Leo Johnson is a stark look at the underbelly of rural America. For the 2005 release of *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* Johnson combines the spirit of Michael Hedges, John Fahey, Derek Bailey and Leo Kottke and comes up with an authentic sounding, instrumental acoustic Americana soundtrack that borders on the sublime. That vintage effect further underscored by Johnson’s expert performance on National Duolian, a steel bodied guitar from the early 1930’s. ...Johnson’s work on the resonator guitar...adds a brilliant touch on an instrumental album filled with deep musical expressions.”

– Robert Silverstein, *20th Century Guitar*, April 2006

“...*The Legend of Vernon McAlister* finds Johnson as adventurous as ever. With an arsenal of unusual playing and production techniques, he has created an album that is filled with strong melodies but, perhaps more importantly, shows just how far one can take a simple premise if only one has a vivid enough imagination.”

– John Kelman, *All About Jazz*, March 8, 2006, www.allaboutjazz.com

#### “25 ESSENTIAL ECHOES CDs FOR 2006

...These are the albums that snapped the synapses of John Diliberto and the Echoes staff in 2006.

...#8, Richard Leo Johnson, *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, Cuneiform”

– *Echoes*, January 1, 2007, www.echoes.org

“To paraphrase Henry Miller, whenever I hear someone mentioned with the greats, I reach for my revolver. Over the course of three records, Country blues guitarist Richard Leo Johnson has been praised all the way to the pearly throne, putting him in the room with Fahey, Kottke, Bailey, and, gulp, even Hendrix. But damn, if there hasn’t been an ounce of hyperbole yet. 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. Johnson, playing a vintage 1930 National Duolian Steel guitar, finds sounds and odd chord changes that must have been hiding in the basements of lonely shacks all over the South. He has set these ghosts free.

“Angry Angel”, “Triumph Over Loss”, and “Everything is Beautiful and Sad” not only channel raw, rural gothic blues, but reinvents them.

Believe the hype, and don’t feel like a poser when you add your own outrageous praise: the Legend of Vernon McAlister is a classic, raw and moving and historic.”

– Mike Wood, *Music Emissions*, June 21, 2006, www.musicemissions.com

“...*The Legend of Vernon McAlister* sounds in every way like you would expect an album exclusively recorded with a 1930s steel guitar to sound. The gorgeous, creaky resonance of the slide-scrapes over the strings on the steel body is here in opulent display. But what really pleases about this record is Johnson’s ability to coax so many harmonic textures and rhythms out of said instrument with no hint of overdone melodic content or unreasonable studio embellishment.

The opening track, “Morning Glory,” starts the album on an upbeat but somehow peculiar note by blending syncopated pick scrapes with very major-sounding melody lines that often swing their way instantly into the minor and back out – almost mimicking the flow of the entire record. This is the duality of *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*: beneath all of the very pleasing, open melodies creeps a kind of darkness or heaviness that gives the music its depth, much like how the mystery surrounding McAlister and his steel guitar inspired Johnson enough to create these songs in the first place.

There is also something very rugged sounding about this record. One can almost smell wild flowers blooming...or imagine people corralling horses... Beyond where any one of these tracks takes you in your mind, there is without a doubt a real creative talent in Johnson and a true passion in him to create.

The quintessential track that exudes to the fullest all of Johnson’s depth and romanticism is the lush and grand “More Than All the Stars in the Sky.” Contained within the sharp slides, pulsing, arpeggiated picking, and glistening harmonic matter are worlds of sound as big and as fierce as storm clouds rumbling far off in the night sky spread out before an endless desert.”

– Cyrus Shahmir, *PerformerMag.com*

“...this evocative album...tells the mythical tale of this long forgotten musician. Featuring 20 short pieces (none over 4 minutes) the album features some wonderfully moving playing which slowly draws the listener in, invoking the ghosts of the past in a quite amazing way. Stylistically the album bears comparison with Leo Kottke, or Jack Rose, the steel string managing to produce an incredible array of sounds, that are merged beautifully together to produce a fine release worthy of your time.”

– Simon Lewis, *Terrascope Online*, May 2006, [www.terrascope.co.uk](http://www.terrascope.co.uk)

“...what would you do if you laid hands on a well-preserved steel-bodied guitar with a name and a hidden history? Precisely what an imaginative musician like Richard Leo Johnson has done: dream up a story, create a legend, imagine a music and record an album. The story and the legend are simple, elegant and charming... The music is equally charming but not simple at all. Quite the contrary. It comes across as the result of months of exploring the possibilities of the instrument by an uneducated and enthusiastic player, someone who isn’t spoiled by any formal musical training and who has lots of time to find out what kind of sounds he can draw from this loud-mouthed stringed box.

In 20 short tracks, Mr. Johnson explores the whole range of sounds the Duolian can produce, from gently tapped percussion to orchestral chords and from sweet melodic lines to harsh, crying harmonies. The entire record is built like and meant to be heard as a suite of wordless songs where each separate piece serves to emphasize the overall versatility of the music. Much more than being a mere showcase of sound effects, it is a dialogue between musical means and meanings. Each piece shows how the instrument influences the expression and vice versa, and the whole is loosely constructed but closed in on itself, following its own musical logic. Vernon McAlister, wherever he is buried, proves to be truly a legendary master of the steel-bodied National Duolian.”

– Stefaan Van Ryssen, *Leonardo Online*, [www.leonardo.info](http://www.leonardo.info)

“...Richard Leo Johnson is a devoutly self-taught guitarist, which means he's both open to possibility and occasionally naïve... He's worked out an idiosyncratic interpretation of blues and bluegrass and jazz guitar that suggests all these styles without ever quite becoming one of them. ... “The Legend of Vernon McAlister” shows a typical bifurcated personality. Johnson acquired a steel-body guitar with the name “Vernon McAlister” scratched onto the back. He invented [an]...imaginary history of the Depression-Era picker and his guitar. It reads like a parody of a passage from Harry Smith's “Anthology of American Folk Music.” But if that reference means something to you, you should check out Johnson, because at his best he sounds like a lost performer from that venerable collection: a hermit loner, doing impressionistic, historic twangs about side roads, boxcar dreams, briar patches and angry angels.”

– Milo Miles, “Music: Roots Revolution,” *WBUR – Boston’s NPR News Station*, April 11, 2006, [www.wbur.org](http://www.wbur.org)

“In the age of the sampler, three innovative guitar players are taking their instruments to new heights: Richard Leo Johnson, Dominic Frasca, and Jonas Hellborg. ...”

– Milo Miles, “The Guitar, Alive and Well,” *NPR – Fresh Air from WHYY*, May 10, 2006, [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)

“...The tunes here also owe something to Fahey’s uncompromising Americana, conjuring images of the swampy South. Throughout, you can hear Johnson’s joy at coaxing new sounds from this loud, raw instrument: from fast, banjo-style finger picking to bluesy slide and beyond into wolf-howl moans, Japanese koto and medieval madrigal – there’s even a hint of John Cage’s prepared piano. ... 3 out of 5 stars.”

– Daniel Spicer, *Jazzwise*, April 2006

“A rustic strain of ambient Americana has been in the wind for the last year or so... Richard Leo Johnson's *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* may have upped the ante. Johnson was already a critically acclaimed fret-burner, bringing two-handed tapping techniques to his double-necked acoustic. Here, he opts for a gentler, but possibly more avant-garde sound, trading his acoustic for a National Steel guitar. Like a Dobro on steroids, the National Steel is a metal guitar whose overtones and strange resonances make it capable of the most unearthly sounds. Creating a mythological narrative around the story of Vernon McAlister, whose name is actually etched on Johnson's ancient instrument, the guitarist creates a sound that is both mystical and rural... Johnson overdubs himself, picking and sliding notes and often using an e-bow that makes the instrument sound like a musical saw. *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* traverses the Appalachian fantasy of...serene backwoods reveries...and experimental tone poems... Richard Leo Johnson has created an album of hidden and subtle charms.”

– John Diliberto, *Amazon.com (editorial review)*

“...Despite this embrace of an antique instrument and the fictitious narrative set long ago that he concocted to frame the album...Johnson's music is not particularly old-fashioned. His reliance on outboard effects, most notable an e-bow, makes him sound at times like a pastoral Robert Fripp. His arrangements, accomplished via overdubbing, betray a sense of harmony that has more in common with post-Presley pop than pre-war blues. And Johnson's appreciation for placing novel sound effects within accessible melodies is at once less rigorous and more playful than, say, John Fahey's more outré excursions. The result is a record that flows from bucolic reverie to eerie fantasia with ease.”

–Bill Meyer, *Dusted Magazine*, March 19, 2006, [www.dustedmagazine.com](http://www.dustedmagazine.com)

“Johnson’s latest album is entirely played on a battered National steel-bodied guitar... The title comes from the name carved on the antique instrument – Johnson asked himself what sort of man Vernon McAlister might have been, and what kind of music he might have played... The results, recorded in his attic in 2005, are haunting in a way that could soundtrack a backwoods murder mystery.

“Quarter-Tone Soldiers Marching on the Mill,” on which Johnson plays some slide that sounds like he’s attacking the neck with a rusty steel sculpture of a violin bow, is close to terrifying. Other tracks, which mix the scrapes and pings one gets when finger-picking such an instrument with drifting, almost subconscious echo, are just as otherworldly without going overtly for listener goosebumps.

Johnson doesn’t limit his influences to the Delta and John Fahey, either. There are tracks on here that suggest Asian music, the steel guitar’s sharply plucked strings ringing out like a koto played in a darkened cave. But the track titles tell almost as evocative a story as the notes themselves, and it’s one rooted in the American frontier and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s: “Love and Trouble,” “Angry Angel,” “Boxcar Dreams and Dark Tunnels,” “Three Wishes Wasted,” “Eaten by Wolves at Midnight,” “Skin and Bones.” In its own unique way, this haunted, mournful album fits right between Ry Cooder’s soundtrack to Paris, Texas, and Tom Waits’ Mule Variations.”

– Phil Freeman, *Jazziz*, August 2006, [www.jazziz.com](http://www.jazziz.com)

“...Johnson’s style, characterized by complexity, exhilarating speed, and hauntingly unfamiliar harmonies created through ‘found’ tunings, marks this self-taught player apart. ...This is a CD of deep beauty and innovation, created with just this one old guitar and some simple electronic and tape effects, located in some sort of nether place between the old and the modern.”

– *Intuitive Music*, January 18, 2006, [www.intuitivemusic.com](http://www.intuitivemusic.com)

“...JJA 2006 Top Tens: PATRICK HINELY:

New Albums: Richard Leo Johnson/LEGEND OF VERNON McALISTER/Cuneiform” – Patrick Hinely, *Jazz House*, [www.jazzhouse.org](http://www.jazzhouse.org)