

Bio information: **RICHARD LEO JOHNSON**

Title: *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* (Cuneiform Rune 222)

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FILE UNDER: ROCK / ACOUSTIC GUITAR

The Legend of Vernon McAlister, **Richard Leo Johnson**'s newest recording on Cuneiform, is an astonishing and magical release – a sort of acoustic guitar equivalent to the classic **Lewis Carroll** novel, **Alice in Wonderland**. Early in the 21st C., Johnson's neighbor in Savannah, GA introduced him to a mildewed **National Duolian** steel-bodied guitar, dating from the early 1930s. Also called a resonator guitar because its uniquely shaped, steel body self-amplified or resonated sound, the Duolian was a mass-produced, inexpensive, and road-worthy instrument popular among blues, jazz, Hawaiian musicians who worked roadside taverns in the Depression years. Previously, Johnson 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 as soon as he heard the Duolian, and discovered the name “**Vernon McAlister**” crudely scratched into its side, Johnson tumbled deep inside the resonator's web, just as Alice had fallen down the rabbit hole. *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* was born, resulting in an all-instrumental CD that can serve as soundtrack or ‘aural’ history to a written tale (readable on www.vernonmcalister.com). It is perhaps the best and most certainly the most imaginative project that this highly imaginative guitarist has ever done.

Richard Leo Johnson is one of the most 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 America's deep South, 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, which featured **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 strings, 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 *Down Beat*, *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 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 that “...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.”

Early in the new century, Johnson toured extensively with percussionist **Gregg Bendian** (now leader of **The Mahavishnu Project**), playing to enthusiastic audiences and opening for such established acts as **King Crimson**, **Bela Fleck & the Flecktones**, and the **California Guitar Trio**. As a solo musician, he contributed a track to *156 Strings*, an acoustic guitar compilation released by Cuneiform in 2002 and curated by guitarist **Henry Kaiser**. Johnson began playing with local musicians in Savannah, GA, where he and his family had moved. In 2003, he formed his first “band” with two members of the recently disbanded **Savannah Symphony Orchestra**, **Andrew Ripley** (wind and electronics) and **Ricardo Ochoa** (strings and 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.”

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In *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, Johnson returns to solo work. Drawing from his own fertile imagination and fusing influences from American folk music, 20th C. minimalism, ambient music, progressive rock, and much more, he has created an extraordinarily inspired work that may well mark the birth of a new acoustic, instrumental Americana. Merging present and past, Johnson's new acoustic music shares affinities with the lyrical Americana that **Bob Dylan** forged; Johnson's music 'speaks' the harsh truths of the present with the heart and soul of America's past. *The Legend of Vernon McAlister* is a work of extraordinary beauty that nonetheless possesses a keen bite. The CD should appeal both to new generation acoustic music fans, attracted to the edgy solo acoustic guitar music of **Derek Bailey**, **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**.

In this new American legend, a rusted steel guitar is the key that unlocks hidden doors to reveal a bold new Wonderland, a new future, for acoustic guitar. Discussing *The Legend of Vernon McAlister*, Johnson says:

"It is my favorite thing so far that I have recorded. ...Stepping outside of oneself is a very enlightening experience.... The sense of liberation, during the process of making Vernon, is something that I will take with me from this point forward. Maybe someone will discover that Elizabeth Cotton and Charles Ives had an affair and Vernon was the result of that brief but passionate encounter."