

Patto's Ollie Halsall



Some players are hugely influential among the guitar elite yet taste meagre success themselves. **Paul Bielatowicz** examines the criminally undersung genius, Ollie Halsall.



Ollie Halsall with his three-pickup white SG Custom

short list when they were searching for a new member. So why have most of us never even heard of Ollie Halsall?

Peter John 'Ollie' Halsall was born on March 14, 1949 in Southport, England. He started his musical life on the drums and vibraphone and, at the age of 17, moved to London to play the latter in a band called Timebox. It wasn't until 18 that he finally took up the guitar, taking to it so quickly that he switched instruments in the band almost immediately. Within three years of playing, he'd become regarded as one of the world's leading guitarists. The band changed their name to Patto and recorded their self-titled debut album live in the studio, in an attempt to capture the virtuosity of Halsall's playing and lead singer Mike Patto's voice. Although not a commercial success, the album brought Ollie's playing to the attention of some big names in the music scene.

Naturally a lefty, Halsall's guitar of choice was a 1967 three-pickup SG Custom. The instrument began its life as a right-handed guitar but was converted by one of Patto's roadies. Interestingly, there are

numerous reports of him playing an unaltered right-handed guitar with the same breathtaking results; it's also worth noting that Allan Holdsworth used a similar guitar in his early years, possibly influenced by Halsall.

After three albums, Ollie began to feel disillusioned with Patto's musical direction and so left the band in 1973. The years that followed saw him work with contemporaries such as Holdsworth, Brian Eno, Robert Fripp and John Cale on various projects. Some of his best-known work at this time received no official credit; although not publicised, he was a key member of the Beatles parody act, The

Rutles. Halsall played guitar, keyboards and bass for the band, as well as singing the McCartney-esque vocal parts attributed to Monty Python's Eric Idle. Although Idle played his character in the Rutles movie, Halsall did play a small cameo part as the fifth Rutle who got lost in Hamburg!

Halsall continued to record and perform, both as a solo artist and with other musicians throughout the 70s and 80s, clocking up dozens of albums in his discography. Ollie's prodigious talent and the high standards he set, meant he struggled to settle in any single line-up, although he continually enjoyed working with his friend Kevin Ayers.

Halsall died of a drug related heart attack in 1992, aged 43. You can hear his influence in the playing of many top guitarists, yet sadly his own name has remained in the shadows. ■

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GET THE TONE



The sound we're trying to emulate is Halsall's SG Custom going through a classic 70s valve amp (Fender). Ollie's Custom was heavily modified and he later used an SG Standard, so as long as you aim for the classic rock sound, any humbucking guitar will put you in the right ballpark. Select the bridge pickup but go easy on the gain and treble, and check out the suggested settings for more detail. The tone we want is one that sustains the longer notes without losing the clarity of the sound.

MICK GOLD/PEPERS

EXAMPLE 1 DORIAN TONES

CD TRACK 57

Halsall mixed blues phrasing with fast repeated licks. This is minor pentatonic, with the exception of A Dorian F#s in the first bar (A B C D E F# G).

EXAMPLE 2 PUSHING AND PULLING THE TIMING

CD TRACK 57

Here we start off with some Chuck Berry style bends, which then transform into straight 8th-note bends.

EXAMPLE 3 RECURRING THEMES

CD TRACK 57

The phrase in beats 3 and 4 of the first bar is repeated in the second bar, after which the opening phrase of the example is repeated an octave lower.

EXAMPLE 4 CHANGING GEAR

CD TRACK 57

Here's another example of how Ollie might have changed the timing of a lick mid-flow, to add excitement.

EXAMPLE 5 CHROMATIC TENSION

CD TRACK 57

Halsall would take phrases and move them chromatically to create tension – if you end on a strong chord tone this approach can be extremely effective.

Ex 1

$\text{♩} = 140$ A

Ex 2

D A

Ex 3

E A

Ex 4

A D A

Ex 5

E

ABILITY RATING

Moderate

INFO WILL IMPROVE YOUR

- KEY: A
- TEMPO: 140bpm
- CD: TRACKS 56-58
- Legato phrases
- Rhythmic ideas
- Use of dissonance

THIS MONTH WE'RE looking at a hugely innovative guitarist, a major influence on Allan Holdsworth, Alvin Lee and scores of other household names; someone so well respected that he was on 'The Rolling Stones'

TRACK RECORD Halsall's innovative playing and experimental chord progressions on Patto's 1970 self-titled debut caused an underground stir. But if you're looking for out-and-out wow factor then check out the band's live album, *Warts And All*, released in 2000. As the name suggests, it's not the best recording quality, but it captures Halsall's raw talent perfectly.