

# The Maze

Invoking the country spirits of Buddy Emmons and Lloyd Green

## **Susan Alcorn**

plugs the pedal steel guitar into the nexus of free improvisation. She discusses her first album as bandleader and the power of sliding notes with **Peter Margasak**. Photography by **SHAN Wallace**



Susan Alcorn at home in Baltimore, October 2020

**Susan Alcorn** named her new quintet album *Pederal* after the New Mexico mesa where Georgia O'Keeffe lived nearby, frequently painted, and had her ashes scattered when she died in 1986. Alcorn spent May of 2019 in a rented apartment there in near total isolation, drinking in the gorgeous vistas, taking hikes and writing some of the music that ended up on the new record. "It was out of the way," she says. "So every day I would go walking around, sometimes I'd walk down the side of the mesa and just sit there staring at the Pederal, I went once every two weeks for groceries, the nearest grocery store being an hour and a half away."

Based in Baltimore, Alcorn has rarely had such an opportunity to leisurely contemplate, compose and explore for an extended duration – that is, until earlier this year when the pandemic shut down nearly all performing opportunities in the US. She's been working steadily as a gigging musician since 1980, when she moved to Houston, Texas to play country music. But the album, made with a stellar jazz ensemble including guitarist Mary Halvorson, violinist Mark Feldman, bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Ryan Sawyer, suggests the experience in the South West was profound, as it contains some of the most ravishing, multilayered and dynamic music she's yet released. Incredibly, it's the 67 year old musician's first record as bandleader.

The album arrives as the pedal steel guitar has been enjoying a resurgence, particularly outside its native home in country music. Whether the ambient soundscapes of Bay Area musician Chuck Johnson, the noisy improvisations of the Glasgow based Heather Leigh – who got her first pedal steel from Alcorn – the atmospheric rock grooves of Chicago's Mute Duo, or the cosmic twang of Norway's Geir Sundstøl, the singular, unwieldy instrument has been applied in new ways and in unexpected contexts more than ever in recent years. Yet no one has forged more avenues of expression for the instrument than Alcorn. For many of these newer practitioners the pedal steel is but one part of their musical arsenal. In her early years, Alcorn fooled around with cornet, viola, guitar and other string instruments, but ever since catching a country rock band featuring Chicago journeyman musician Rick Mann back in the mid-1970s, she has displayed an unwavering devotion to the pedal steel.

If some of Alcorn's key country influences – Buddy Emmons, Lloyd Green and Maurice Anderson – were technical wizards with a mastery she modestly says she lacks, none pursued so many disparate possibilities for the pedal steel. Alcorn's curiosity has always cut across genres, bleeding together interests as disparate as Indian classical music, tango, free jazz and 20th century composition through her own sensibility. Her playing can be dreamy, atmospheric or slashing, but it's almost always rooted in melody,

articulated with the liquid sustain and microtonal detail the pedal steel is famous for. "The difference between me and some of these other pedal steel players is that I came up through the pedal steel. I learned how to play playing country music, and for pedal steel you pretty much have to study country to get the technique. Technique for an instrument is extremely important. A good kind of technique is working with your instrument, and a wrong-headed view of it is to treat it like you're trying to whip a dog or a horse to get it to run for you."

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1953, Alcorn spent her early teenage years near Orlando, Florida, where she began drinking in music, eventually discovering the blues in the midst of the folk revival. She fell in love with the slide guitar, as practised by prewar bottleneck players like Robert Johnson and Son House, through the electric style of Muddy Waters. When her family moved to Chicago's Arlington Heights in 1970, the lure of live blues began pulling her into the city to hear the music in person. "I saw Muddy Waters at Alice's Revisited a couple of times and I loved the feeling from the slide," she recalls. "There was a certain energy and an electrifying sound."

By the time she was attending Northern Illinois University – where she studied political science and history – she earned money driving a taxi cab while playing in local blues rock bands, but her listening habits also included country, particularly in its more rustic form. For reasons she can't remember, she sold her electric guitar and began playing mandolin, banjo, acoustic guitar and dobro, which provided a closer link to her slide obsession, which now included the pedal steel sound she heard on records.

"I had heard the instrument and I had tried to emulate it on the dobro, which I was playing at the time," recalls Alcorn. "I would try to stretch the strings behind the bar to get them to sound like they were sliding, like a pedal steel would, with one string moving while the rest stayed still."

But her true course was set after seeing Rick Mann on pedal steel at a bar in DeKalb. Obtaining a pedal steel guitar of her own was one thing; finding lessons how to play it proved more difficult. "There were some men who played, but the culture around that instrument and country music, especially in the Chicago area, was those who knew, didn't want to share it." She took a week of lessons in Nashville in 1978 but otherwise she's largely self-taught.

Eventually she grew frustrated with the lack of playing opportunities in the Chicago area and in 1980, as a country craze driven by the John Travolta film *Urban Cowboy* took root in the US, she contacted Houston pedal steel great Herb Remington, a veteran of Bob Wills & The Texas Playboys, who also built and sold his own instruments. "He said if you can play at all, you can work down here," says Alcorn. "I had a gig the second night I was there and I worked for a

week before my first day off. There were really good steel guitarists in Texas. To work, I had to up my game. Embarrassment is a strong motivator for me. The musicians in Chicago were really good, but they didn't necessarily know the ins and outs of that genre, the unspoken rules."

Immersing herself in the local country scene, she worked mainly with local bands at area dance halls – and sporadically with higher profile acts like Asleep At The Wheel, Hank Thompson and Johnny Gimble. As the decade progressed work opportunities became erratic. "Its economy was tied to the oil business and when oil prices were down the city would kind of fold, and when they came back up, it was like boom or bust. In the late 80s there was a big bust and I think there was a cultural change in a lot of country music. There were more trios, so instead of having a fiddle or a steel, you'd have a synthesizer player who would do all of that." Since 1980 she had worked part-time as a substitute teacher, and a decade later she went full-time, although she continued gigging when possible. Her innate curiosity led her to play in different settings including ad hoc jazz combos, for example, but most folks she played with were far more conservative in their tastes. "Music that we take for granted, like [Ornette Coleman's] "Lonely Woman", that sounds absolutely beautiful and lyrical, a lot of people are just, 'Uh, it's out of tune', or whatever."

"What I was listening to more gradually in my free time was other things – qawwali music or Bulgarian folk music or Cecil Taylor – and I think free jazz was the biggest part of it back then, and that's what I was working on. I would just take the steel guitar and do country music for the gigs. I think that once you stop growing with a certain genre of music you lose touch with it."

In the early 1990s she attended the first ever Deep Listening retreat with Pauline Oliveros, a Houston native whose mother gave piano lessons to Alcorn's two daughters. A burgeoning friendship further opened up her mind about music, and in 1997 she experienced a breakthrough performing at a Houston series called 12 Minutes Max. "I played for 12 minutes and people sat there and didn't throw things at me. It was the first time I improvised freely solo. The reception was decent, but more importantly something inside my head said that this can work, musically."

In *The Wire* 203 in 2001 Oliveros championed Alcorn's first solo album *Uma*, which in turn launched her international career. Later that year she was invited to perform at the London Musician's Collective Festival of Experimental Music, and she slyly included a version of Loretta Lynn's "Coal Miner's Daughter" in the middle of a freely improvised set. As a solo player she began making regular trips to Europe; often she'd be paired with another improviser for a second set. Meanwhile, her opportunities as a country musician in Houston declined precipitously.

# Runner





“I played for 12 minutes and people didn’t throw things at me. It was the first time I improvised freely solo. The reception was decent but more importantly something said that this can work musically”

She devoted herself to improvisation, and when the LMC’s *Resonance* magazine asked her to write an article about playing country music in Texas (“The Road, The Radio, And The Full Moon”, later republished by *Counter Punch* and included in Da Capo’s *Best Music Writing 2006* collection) her disillusionment was palpable: “During the second set, Brian leaves the stage after the first song to dance with his new girlfriend, and his brother Kevin comes up to sing. His voice blares through the monitor, ‘...I’m proud to be an A-me-ri-can where at least I know I’m

free. Where the fighting men who died...’. blah blah blah, the Lee Greenwood song. I try turning my head to different angles so that the volume won’t hurt my ears, but nothing works. The smoke is now so thick that I am playing with my eyes closed.”

Although opportunities to improvise in Houston were scant, Alcorn’s larger network expanded. In the early 2000s she released more solo recordings and a collaboration with fellow country and improv adherent Eugene Chadbourne. In 2004 she was invited to





With Mary Halvorson in Berlin, 2018

Baltimore's High Zero Festival, and three years later she landed a teaching gig in the city. "The thing with Baltimore, to an extent, is there's an aesthetic that's the weirder the better, so I didn't have to worry about that compared to Houston," she recalls. "Their minds are open, although I don't know if that always makes for compelling music as much as it does for comedy and social comment. When I would do solo gigs people would come out and hear me and sometimes they would clap at the end, which I never got in Houston. Houston people would think what I was doing was so weird that they would laugh. In Baltimore I met people like Mike Formanek and Dave Ballou and I started getting invited to New York to play. Moving up to Baltimore kind of helped me grow a bit in a ways that I wouldn't have if I had stayed in Houston."

While improvisation was her primary musical practice, she continued exploring other ideas, including interpretations of Olivier Messiaen, Alban Berg and, on her 2015 album *Soledad*, tango nuevo pioneer Astor Piazzolla. She had seen the bandoneon master composer in 1987 and the music haunted her. "The thing about his music is that it has emotions," declares Alcorn. "It changes every five seconds. There's this sweet sorrow and then there's this kind of anger and then there's this hurt bravado. Also, his instruments have lungs, which mine does too."

Forging her own arrangements took years of work, and in 2012 she quit teaching to concentrate on the project. "A lot of it was chipping away at it. I had always wanted to record a Piazzolla record solo and I wanted to do justice to his quintet arrangements: a quintet of virtuoso musicians playing virtuosically all at the same time, and to try to put that and play it on one instrument is a bit of a challenge, or at least it was for me. Basically I learn everything by ear. I'll read the scores to double check what I'm doing, but that's what I got from playing country music – everything's by ear."

In 2012 she was given a brief residency at New York's Issue Project Room, where she worked

with musicians like Sawyer and Formanek to play Piazzolla's music as well as some of her favourite country music. Another evening the cellist Janel Leppin created arrangements for a number of Alcorn's compositions, leading an exquisite chamber ensemble featuring violist Eyvind Kang, clarinetist Doug Weiselman, bassist Skúli Sverrisson, guitarist Anthony Pirog, and vocalist Jessica Kenney, the results of which were released this year as *The Heart Sutra* on Stephen O'Malley's Ideologic Organ imprint. The recording reveals the tempestuous grandeur, dramatic scale, and lyric splendour of her compositions – rippled with traces of Indian and Arabic overtones – which had previously been used only in her solo performances.

A key step in getting to *Pedernal* was forming a bond with guitarist Mary Halvorson, whom she first met at a gig in 2009. They finally performed together as a duo at the 2014 instalment of the Vision Festival in New York; the following year Halvorson invited her to join a new octet that she was forming. The pair's rapport was evident on the group's 2016 album *Away With You*. "She can go wild and I think I can kind of go wild too. I don't consider myself on par with her as a musician, but I think we can both hear the places we're going to and I think we're both able to adjust what we're doing very quickly. She just has such an ear and such an effortless imagination, that she just pulls it out of thin air, the ether, nothingness, whatever."

Alcorn received a grant in 2019 to make *Pedernal*, which led to her New Mexico retreat. "My instrument is capable of an orchestral quality, which is maybe why I mostly play solo. And, oddly enough, sometimes, because of the specific nature of the instrument, it is a hindrance for writing arrangements. Unlike a piano where everything is laid out, the pedal steel guitar is more of a maze, maybe a Rubik's Cube of positions and notes. I find that with the steel. My arrangements are all based on the abilities and limitations of my instrument. So, I went out and bought a guitar to

write Mary's parts, especially the counterpoint, in *Pedernal*. And I used a piano to write Michael's bass parts. For the violin, I figured out his parts by playing a MIDI controller into Pro Tools which would make it sound like a violin."

The interplay between her pedal steel lines, Halvorson's swooping guitar lines and the crystalline purity of Feldman's violin presents a kind of triple slide effect, with each instrument suggesting microtonality in the counterpoint of her writing. The members of the quintet improvised extensively, but the general sound feels like a sui generis composite of Alcorn's many influences. It's the most ambitious and accomplished piece of work in her vast oeuvre, but the most exciting thing about it is that it feels like the first page in a new chapter.

Since landing in Baltimore, Alcorn has solidified musical relationships with an ever-expanding pool of collaborators including Joe McPhee, Chris Corsano, Ellery Eskelin, Evan Parker, Ken Vandermark, Mike Cooper, Bill Nace, and more. Over the last couple of years she's also worked with Halvorson as a member of trumpeter Nate Wooley's Columbia Icefield quartet, which also features Sawyer. She's become a key component of Wooley's longrunning Seven Storey Mountain project, especially on the phenomenal new *Seven Storey Mountain VI*. "I like hearing people play and I like music that hits you somewhere, that goes deep, which is something I love about Nate Wooley. He's really intense in that way and that's what I want out of music. I want to feel something and I want, maybe in some ways, to be a different person. That's what I aspire to bring out in the music I make. You have one life to live, supposedly, and there's that Mary Oliver poem that says, "what are you going to do with your one precious life", whatever, and that's kind of the way I feel, so don't screw around, don't waste it screwing around with other things. Get to what speaks. Get to some profundity in what you're doing." □ Susan Alcorn Quintet's *Pedernal* is released by Relative Pitch. *The Heart Sutra* is released by Ideologic Organ