





In the
creative
world of
bestselling
novelist
Greg Iles,
the ax
is as
mighty
as the
pen.

CROSSROADS *of Destiny*

story JIM BEAUGEZ
photos ROB BAYLOCK

GUITAR AFICIONADO





SITTING ON THE WIDE VERANDA OF HIS FRENCH COLONIAL MANOR OUTSIDE NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI, OVERLOOKING A VERDANT, PASTORAL LANDSCAPE, AUTHOR GREG ILES IS HOLDING ONE OF HIS MOST PRIZED GUITARS—A MCCOLLUM BARITONE ACOUSTIC. ILES ACQUIRED THE INSTRUMENT, WHICH WAS ONE OF LATE CALIFORNIA LUTHIER LANCE MCCOLLUM'S PERSONAL SIX STRINGS, AFTER PUTTING TO REST HIS MOST RECENT NEW YORK TIMES NUMBER 1 BESTSELLER THRILLER, **MISSISSIPPI BLOOD**.

He admires McCollum's handiwork—the gorgeous and haunting combination of ultra-rare Andaman padauk and Italian spruce tonewoods, the tasteful rosette, and machine heads that resemble a *fleur de lis*—but his eyes light up even more when he shifts to a 12-string baritone that the maker crafted for him a few years earlier.

"It's even better than his personal guitar," Iles says, head cocked with a slight, knowing smile.

"When you string that thing as a six, it's a playground that never existed anywhere. The sound is just from God."

The manor is located deep in the Loess Hills east of the Mississippi River, well off the main highway to Natchez, amongst a canopy of hardwoods and Spanish moss that cloak the worn blacktop in shadows.

Here, Iles finds solitude and inspiration to conjure the stories and characters who inhabit his fictional version of the region, from the centuries-old city's antebellum mansions to secluded swamps and sloughs, and the ways in which their lives entangle.

The bestselling novelist lets his characters inhabit a

world every bit as nuanced as the tones in his favorite guitars. Since his debut thriller *Spandau Phoenix* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1993, nearly all of his 16 novels have followed suit. His most recent blockbuster, *Mississippi Blood*, centered on his popular protagonist Penn Cage, is his second to hit Number One.

Although the world mostly knows Iles through his successful books—they've been published in no fewer than 20 languages—for years he dreamed of a career in music. His 40-acre estate is now home to a personal recording studio—a man cave stuffed with dozens of guitars, amplifiers and music-making ephemera where he blows off steam by indulging his first love.

Iles played in acoustic groups throughout college, then shelved his diploma and hit the road with the band Frankly Scarlet, playing clubs and college towns throughout the Southeast armed with U2 and Led Zepelin covers and a handful of original songs.

During the first year of Iles' first marriage and the final year of Frankly Scarlet, he was on the road 50 out of 52 weeks, the band making upward of \$3,000 a gig. The grind took a toll on the group, though, and it all ended with a near-brawl after a New Year's Eve gig in Mobile, Alabama.

"All we could play was, like, four originals because that's the point we had gotten to," he remembers. "We just had to do the show we were doing. I thought, This is going nowhere."



Something as familiar and instinctive as playing guitar brings you right back to the center. You remember who you are."

Iles called his wife after the show and told her he was done with the gigging life. He admits his next ambition, becoming a bestselling novelist, was just as unlikely. Even though he hadn't written since his final paper in college nearly a decade earlier, he gave himself a year to complete his first novel.

"When I look back from this side I often think what



Iles in his home studio playing the custom McCollum 12-string baritone. A Composite Acoustics dreadnought is on the left.

were the odds against that?" he ponders. "Man, they were about a billion to one."

As a young child, Iles spent time abroad in Germany until his family settled in Natchez, where he hung around mostly older kids who turned him onto music. He initially gravitated toward the layered vocal harmonies and organic, acoustic stylings of Crosby, Stills and Nash and The Byrds.

The playing of guitarists like Stephen Stills and Neil Young caught his ear, and once he pinned down the Martin D-28 herringbone as the source of the tones he loved so much, he saved money until he could buy one.

"My life regret is selling that Martin D-28," he says. "I've missed that guitar my whole life."

When Iles enrolled at Ole Miss, where he studied under literary great Willie Morris, his worldview expanded considerably. With the help of a friend, he discovered a Muscle Shoals, Alabama, session musician and songwriter named Mac McAnally, whose delicate fingerpicking and lyrical insight on cuts like "Opinion of Love" floored him.

One night Iles and his friends piled into a car for a two-hour drive to catch their new hero—the future eight-time CMA Musician of the Year, songwriter for Kenny Chesney and sideman to Jimmy Buffett—play an

acoustic opening set for Louisiana's La Roux.

After they watched McAnally perform, they ditched the headliner's set and found McAnally with his manager loading gear in the parking lot. When Iles and one of his buddies landed a ride with them, Iles broke the awkward silence by playing one of McAnally's most difficult compositions, note for note, on a challenge from the manager.

"Mac told me I was the first guy to ever play his stuff to him like that, the real stuff," Iles remembers. "So we start singing his songs, we start singing other songs, and Mac is singing while he's driving. We're hearing his voice bounce off that windshield, singing harmony."

On the drive Iles also got to play McAnally's personal guitar, a Martin D-45 with a slotted headstock. Over the next summer, Iles worked on a crew laying sewer pipe in a 14-foot hole to scrounge money for a D-45 of his own, which remains one of his favorite guitars.

"Once I played Mac's D-45 in the van, I just had to have one," he says. "I had to order mine from Martin, because they were rare even then. But the sound...it may be the best guitars ever made. They say it may be one of the loudest Martins ever made, too."

An accidental collector, Iles stresses that he is a



↑
Iles' Telecaster, covered in signatures by his writer-musician friends in the lit-rock group the Rock Bottom Remainers, is made of swamp ash harvested only 30 miles from his home.

player first. His instruments are strewn about the household, all laying in wait for him to pick them up and strum a chord or pick a note. He jokes that he's never more than 30 feet from a guitar—a gig-worn Strat with EMG pickups here, an eight-string Taylor there. A nearby stand cradles carbon-fiber models by Emerald and Composite Acoustics that he can play outside in the humid southern summer.

But the instruments Iles cherishes most have a deep personal tie. "It's almost always the sound," he says, "but sometimes it's a sentimental connection."

To illustrate this point, Iles grabs a 2000s-era natural finish Fender American Standard Telecaster, adorned with post-gig Sharpie signatures from his writer-musician buddies in their lit-rock group, the Rock Bottom Remainers. He points out Stephen King, Roger McGuinn and a Bart Simpson drawing by Matt Groening.

"I found out that it's made from swamp ash harvested only 30 miles from my house," he says. "Here I am writing a novel partly set down in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, and here's a Tele made of wood from there. I just couldn't resist."

Iles is familiar with the lure that draws collectors to famous instruments. Branch Davis, the obsessed protagonist in his short story "Robert Johnson's Flat Top," stops at nothing to get his hands on the legendary bluesman's Kalamazoo. When Davis discovers the guitar itself is the source of the talent, it's already too late. An energy connects inside him the moment he puts his hands on it and won't let go. Although he goes to daring lengths to get the guitar, the instrument instead possesses him.

In a standoff with the Devil himself, Davis faces the classic Faustian proposition Robert Johnson accepted at the crossroads, according to lore: What would you give up to get what you want?

Fortunately, Iles didn't have to follow Johnson's fate and compromise his soul to acquire his prized guitars or writing talent. But the road hasn't always been smooth. In 2011, as he pulled onto the highway toward town, a truck speeding 70 mph plowed into him, sending his Audi S4 skittering 100 feet across the asphalt. After waking from a coma, he learned he had been inches from death.

“I had broken everything,” he says. “I can’t even count the broken bones. My right arm was broken in three places. Even so, in the first load of stuff that people offered to bring me from my home in Natchez, I asked them to bring me a guitar.”

They brought Iles his weathered Takamine flattop, which was restrung with light gauge strings to compensate for his diminished arm strength. Iles says that playing guitar put him back in touch with the world and himself while struggling through a condition known as ICU psychosis, brought on by painkillers.

“Something as familiar and instinctive as playing guitar brings you right back to the center because it’s mechanical, but it’s also internalized,” he says. “I don’t know if it’s your soul or whatever, but you remember who you are.”

After the fog of hospitals and rehabilitation began to dissipate, Iles turned his focus once again to his work and started writing.

With renewed energy, Iles pushed to make *Natchez Burning*, a tale that tackles the legacy of race in America and was nearly complete at the time of his wreck, into a trilogy. When his publisher balked, Iles walked and landed a new deal. Earlier this year, *Mississippi Blood*, the final installment after *Natchez Burning* and *The Bone Tree*, topped both the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists.

Down a flight of stairs, past shelves of still and video camera ephemera—a hobby Iles is exploring with his son, an aspiring filmmaker—lies a basement recording studio and writing room.

Surrounded by gear arranged in a semicircle, between combo amps and a rack of guitars, Iles cues the playback on his Mac. Bluesy guitar licks join the sound of flowing water followed by a deep, soulful voice. The track, a collaboration with producer Kevin Dukes, is for a proposed TV series based on Iles’ *Natchez* trilogy.

Iles reveals that music is integrating with his writing career more than ever these days. He stills plays occasional gigs with his fellow famous writer friends in the Rock Bottom Remainders, and he often treats book signing crowds to impromptu acoustic performances. Although Iles is happy he never made it in music, he still harbors a love for playing, performing and recording—and maybe even keeps a candle lit for the dream he left that night in Mobile.

“If you would’ve given me a baritone acoustic in the Seventies, I would’ve never quit playing music,” he attests. “It would’ve affected my songwriting, and I would’ve said, ‘Yeah, I’ll go to L.A. and try to make it.’”

Iles picks up the 12-string baritone McCollum, strung with six strings, and picks through McAnally’s “Opinion on Love” and “It’s My Job,” singing the poignant lyrics and pausing for effect. Then he transitions to a darker passage with rich chord voicings, allowing



If you would’ve given me a baritone acoustic in the Seventies, I would’ve never quit playing music.”



the final chord to resonate.


Iles first saw McCollum’s personal guitar for sale online about a year before he finished *Mississippi Blood*. McCollum reportedly built only about 250 guitars in his lifetime, and Andaman padauk became incredibly scarce after a tsunami devastated the Andaman Islands in 2004. The particular wood used in this guitar came from the same log McCollum used for fingerstylist Alex de Grassi’s instrument.

“I thought, Do I really need that? I have two already,” he says. “But I knew when I read that it was Lance’s personal baritone that I just had to have it.”

As Iles neared completion of *Mississippi Blood*, he thought more and more about the guitar. He kept tabs on it online and watched a video about it. The \$13,000 initial asking price was steep, but then the price dropped once, then twice, until one day it disappeared from the listings. Iles panicked, thinking someone else got the guitar. Fortunately, the seller had only removed it while he was on vacation. As soon as it was listed again, Iles pounced.

Owning the master luthier’s personal guitar, seen through the eyes of Branch Davis in “Robert Johnson’s Flat Top,” is like possessing his singular masterpiece, a connection to his inspiration.

For Iles, the way a guitar’s tone and resonance connect with him, the way the neck feels when it fits perfectly—the intuition that a guitar is exceptional for reasons perhaps outside of reason—are beyond the realm of dollar signs.

“It’s why I wanted Lance’s guitar,” he says. “He built my guitars. He played that guitar when he played. I’m glad I have it.” 



Iles in Natchez with the baritone guitar that was the personal instrument of luthier Lance McCollum.