

# FROM TOKYO WITH LOVE

**MARTY FRIEDMAN** first found fame as the lightning-fingered guitar foil to Dave Mustaine in Megadeth. But a deep-seated love for Japan led him to give it all up and move to Tokyo in 2003. *Howard Johnson* talks to Marty at length about his entire career, following his muse, and his ongoing mission to introduce Japanese music to the world...

**MARTY FRIEDMAN MAY LOOK** like your common or garden shredder when we speak via Zoom from his home in Tokyo; long, dark, curly hair cascading down his shoulders and half a dozen guitars nonchalantly stacked in the corner of the room. Appearances can be deceiving, though. And it would be far too easy to make what would actually be a very lazy judgement. How do I know that? Well just listen to this, one of the many interesting things the American guitarist tells me during the course of our hour-and-a-half conversation.

"In the world of heavy metal and hard rock a lot of people's tastes are etched in stone," he says. "And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. But they're not the guys who are going to randomly hunt for new things on the Internet.

And some of us like to stumble onto new things, and then those new things send you down a rabbit hole that leads to other great new things, and it broadens your

enjoyment of music. I think that's my responsibility to myself as an artist, to find new things that get me excited. And just as a fan of music too. I want new. I want new things as much as I want old things. But you've got to make the effort. It's not going to just find its way to you... But it's there."

It's not hard to see that it's primarily the 58-year-old's unquenchable thirst for the musical journey that sets him apart from many of his peers. The early part of his CV doesn't raise any eyebrows. 1980s guitar prodigy plays real fast, gets discovered by the ubiquitous Mike Varney and Shrapnel Records, makes a record with another whizz kid player. He gains some credit at the nerdy end of the scale, joins a mainstream metal act – in his case Megadeth – and finally reaps commercial rewards for his 'best in show' skills. But it's what comes next that proves Friedman is so much more than just another technical whizz banger.

In 2003, and having become obsessed

with Japan's domestic music scene, he moves to the country and over the next 18 years carves himself out a career as a guitar player who is pretty much unique in understanding a wide range of both Western and Japanese musical styles. The culmination of this remarkable journey down a road less travelled is 'Tokyo Jukebox 3', Friedman's latest album that features primarily Friedman-ified versions of J-Pop hits. The playing still ticks all the boxes for people who want their guitar heroes to be dazzlingly, jaw-droppingly technical. But those shredder roots are put to the service of musical interpretations that have clearly been forged from life experiences that

are entirely outside of the norm. It makes the album fascinating and worthwhile, even for someone like me who isn't instinctively drawn to the world of shred.

**MARTY'S LOVE** of Japanese musical culture first took a hold way back when he was a teenager living in

Hawaii. But his musical journey had already started well before the Friedman family had moved to the Pacific island because of Marty's dad's work for the US National Security Agency. He'd seen Kiss performing at the Capitol Center in his native Washington DC and it was, by his own admission, "a lightbulb moment."

Before Kiss the young Marty had been obsessed by sport – "football, baseball, hockey, basketball, I played them all" – but after seeing the New York band he decided that rock'n'roll was way more wild and far more exciting.

"I went out and got a guitar immediately, and even though I couldn't play I started a band right away. Punk was a thing, so it didn't seem all that crazy. I was lucky that I didn't discover progressive music till much later, because that would definitely have discouraged me. But pretty soon I was playing Kiss and Ramones numbers, as well as stuff like Angel and Cheap Trick, Starz and Riot. I could get through some of that. It wasn't that I was all that good right away, but the bar wasn't set all that high either."

"WHEN THAT WHOLE SHREDDING STYLE BECAME A THING I REALLY WANTED TO KEEP AWAY FROM IT, BECAUSE IT BECAME THIS 'JUST PLAY AS FAST AS YOU CAN' MINDLESS WORLD. AND I'VE SPENT AN ENTIRE CAREER TRYING TO DISTANCE MYSELF FROM IT. I THINK I'VE DONE A PRETTY GOOD JOB."

Photo: Susumu Miyawaki