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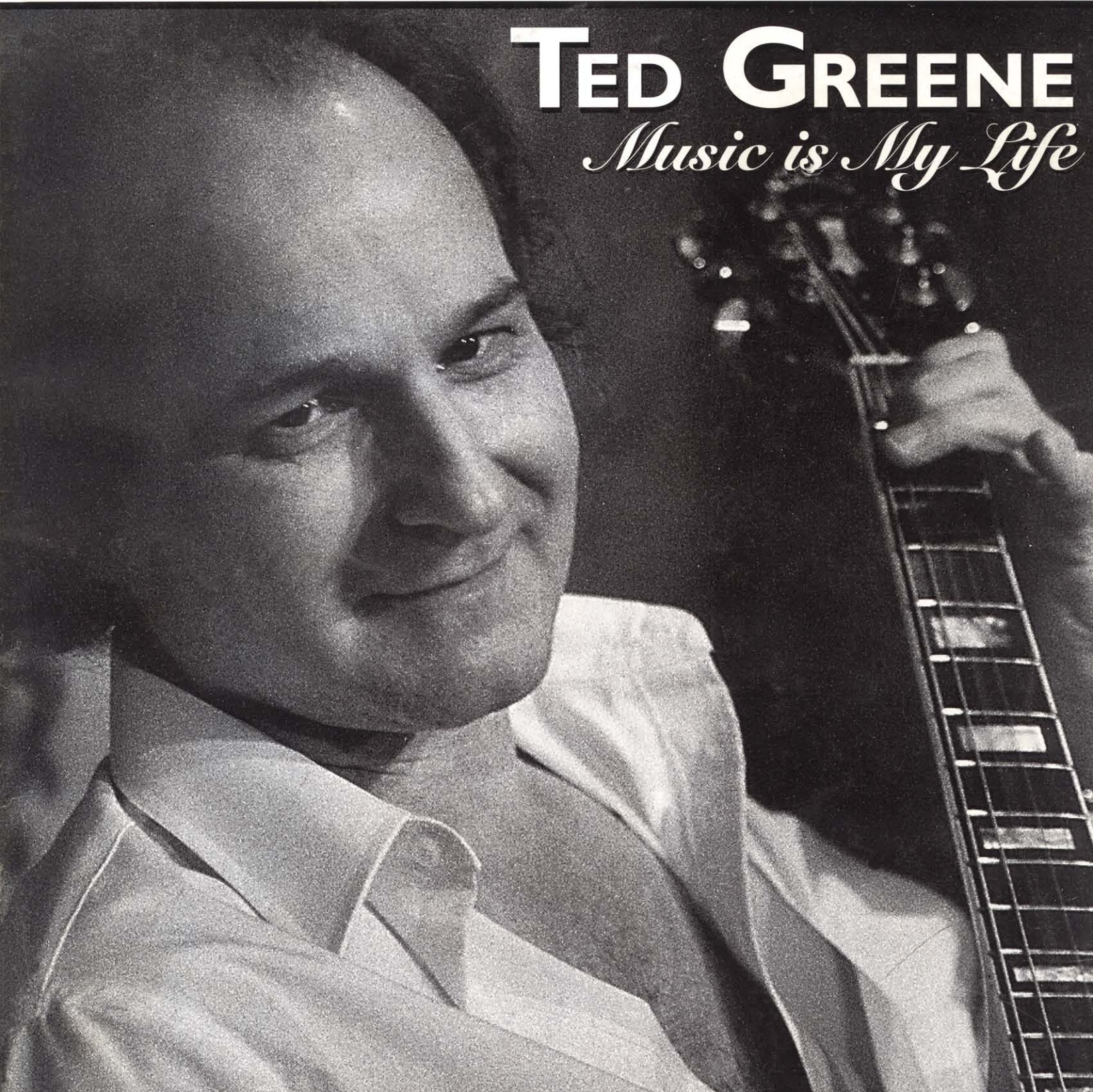
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TED GREENE

Music is My Life



TED GREENE

by Alexandra Adler [from a chapter in a book being prepared on his life in music]

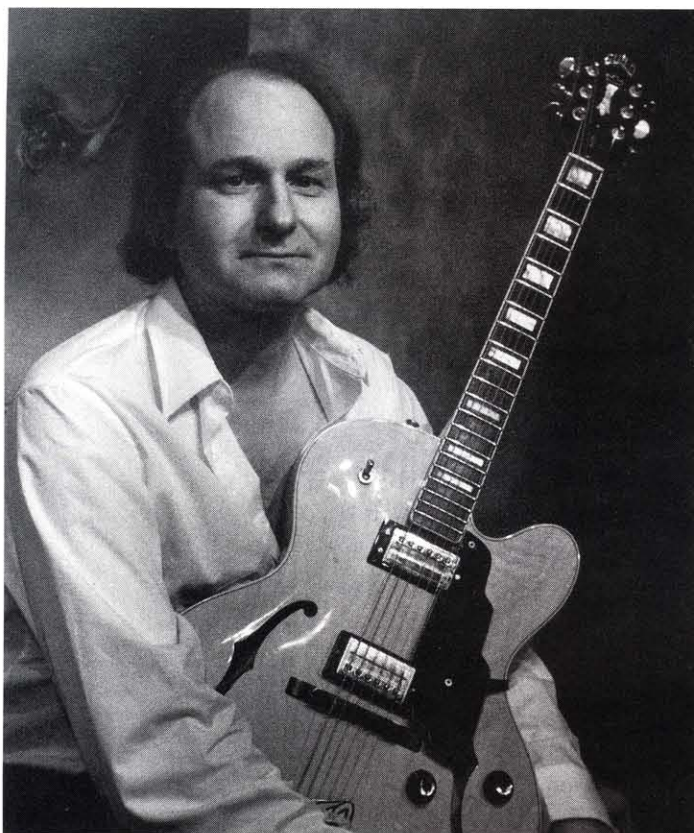


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Condensed down from two separate series of interviews where Ted discusses: what he values most in music, what he's most proud of, why he may likely never settle down to one style, ways of helping many different types of students. Also, reflections and discussions on choosing a direction, how he learned, how he acquired some self-discipline, the problems he faced and how he dealt with them, surprising words on his foundation being rhythm and blues, and rhythm guitar (jazz and otherwise), and some beautiful feelings about some of his favorite guitarists....

AA: *Ted, what is it that you feel you do best on the guitar?*

TG: That's it. Feel. I try to play with feeling. This is what matters most to me, how it feels.

AA: *Anything else?*

TG: I do strive to get a beautiful tone, most often involving a singing, sustaining quality. When I'm able to do this, everything seems to flow from there. When I can't find my tone though, I don't fare very well, so this one's a double-edged thing.

AA: *This is similar but different. What are you happiest about in your achievements as a guitar player, so far?*

TG: Being able to create certain moods or vibes that elevate the music to a goosebump level.

AA: *Can you do this at will?*

TG: No, I sure can't. (Smiling) But I love it when I can.

AA: *Elusive is it.*

TG: Indeed it is.

AA: *Have you figured out why?*

TG: It's a whole grabbag of things. But if I'm able to play with feeling and get a wonderful sound, then I'll usually be alright and have a real shot at it.

AA: *Is there anything else you're able to do as a player that makes you smile inside?*

TG: Copping the essence of at least some of the styles of music I love. On a good day, some of the nuances too. And of course mandatory for most of us musicians: playing for at least one other person who shares a love of that thing you're layin' down.

AA: *One last 'similar but different'--what's the one thing that makes you happiest to be a guitar player?*

TG: Kind of the same answer as before, when it does happen: being able to light up a room with music and basking in the glow of how wonderful it can make people feel.

AA: *If you could only listen to one guitarist during the rest of your life, who would it be?*

TG: [Laughing] You're comin' at me with some really great questions. Let me think about this one for a moment [serious pause..]. I'm so tempted to go with any of the following brilliant players: George Van Eps, Lenny Breau, Chet Atkins, Scotty Anderson, Danny Gatton. All of these guys have so much going for them that I might never tire of their music in just one lifetime. I can only choose one huh? Hmm [another pause]. Yeah, each one offers playing of such a high caliber that all are tempting choices--though each for widely (and a few wildly) different reasons, which is fascinating to think about by itself. And this had me stuck for a moment until I tried turning your question inside out: "What guitarist would make you the most miserable to never hear again Ted?" When I phrased it this way, I saw who my choice would be.

Before I say who it is, please allow me a brief explanation: for whatever reason, I had been trying to answer you by focusing on some of my favorites who all often play what I refer to occasionally as 'self-con-

tained' guitar, though all are certainly known for their ensemble skills as well, some more so.

But once I just tried to think of which guitar player's sounds, feels, tunes, recordings and so on would be the hardest to give up, I could see for me, it would be Wes Montgomery's.

AA: *Why Wes?*

TG: Because on his best stuff, he thrills me to the bone, thrills me like no other seems to.

AA: *Have you ever known why?*

TG: Well he did have what I like to call 'The 4 T's', and had them in such great abundance.

AA: *The 4 T's ?*

TG: Time. Touch. Tone. Taste. These are basic. Most of the players I seem to get the biggest thrill from have these pretty well covered.

AA: *Given your reputation in some areas, I'm surprised you don't have Knowledge as one of the qualities that matters most to you in other players.*

TG: No, I've heard too many of us guitar players with quite a lot of knowledge but not saying enough tasty things with it to keep me listening for more than a short time. It's a very sad thing, I think. Tastiness without much knowledge is not uncommon in great musicians. Knowledge without much taste...hmm, no. So, knowledge isn't quite a prerequisite. Of course if somebody has both, stand back.

Wes had knowledge in very noticeably high amounts from one perspective and very far less from another. The large amount area includes for instance, his highly developed ability to know where the things he wants to say 'live', where they are on his instrument. The lesser area would include knowing only the 50 to 100 chord forms he knew versus some top players knowing 5 to 10 times as many. But he used all his knowledge to serve the content of what he wanted to say, and this content was all in the service of those incredible tasty phrases that he made a career out of.

AA: *What you're saying seems real but I do want to think about it more later. How about a little more on those T's?*

TG: Sure. A player with high development in these 4 areas will generally always not only grab my attention but keep it for reasonably long periods. Of course running a very close 5th would have to be Technique because when a cat has great chops it can take your breath away at least for awhile. And technique covers a lot more ground than just speed of course--it relates back to touch for instance, and therefore tone too.

Now naturally, a musician with a high degree of inborn Talent would have a running start in most or all of these areas so that really would have to qualify it as a 6th member of the expanded version of this club of T's. By far the rarest member of this team, it seems to me, is a quality that maybe mankind will study more some day because it is such a gorgeous thing, for player and listener alike but barely understood at all by most any of us, and that is Transcendence. I know a little about it but not enough to discuss it very intelligently.

So that makes 7 T's, not 4. I mean, I don't think of all this junk very often. It's just that now and then subjects like these come up and you try to make sense of them. You know, why was Wes so great? How do we know he was? What qualities did his playing possess, did he possess, that made it so, that make us know? I don't mind thinking about this, these kinds of things sometimes. I wouldn't want to do it often--too tough to come up with this stuff. And takes too much time to test. But every once in awhile, it is just fascinating.

AA: *Do you use these concepts in your teaching?*

TG: They come up now and then--sure. But only if it feels useful or necessary. So much here depends on each particular student--how well they play and especially, what they want out of the guitar.

AA: *So you don't have a discussion with a new student about these things right off?*

TG: Oh no--I would've been banished to an unpleasant island by now if I had. The important thing first with a student, whenever possible, is to get them playing the things they love, the things they came to me to help them learn to play. They don't want to hear a discussion from me about what I think is important (most days I don't want to hear it either) [laughter]. If a person wants to be a really attractive player, then whether they're young, young at heart, or young to the instrument, in most cases they should, where necessary, be working on their time feel, the different ways there are to touch this instrument, their tone and at least as important, their tastiness. Not just learning to burn first 'cause how long do we enjoy listening to someone who can really get in the wind but sadly has just an okay tone or just an adequate time feel or nothing special in content--no special tasty things to say. Talent, of course, if it is sufficiently high and wide-ranging, will take care of all of these things naturally. And transcendence...I'm trying to think if I've ever had any student with this quality--yeah, I'm

remembering a few...hmm, more vocalists than guitar players here.

AA: *You teach singing?*

TG: I teach music, so any instrument's welcome. It is my good fortune that the stuff I know transfers well to many instruments. The mechanics part of each axe is out of my league though. Just the music is what I know.

AA: *Do you think the taste thing can be taught?*

TG: Some say no, you're either born with it or you're not. But I beg to differ. In many cases things can really improve here--people can usually make great strides in this area if they're really desirous of doing so. It does usually require a serious time investment for all concerned.

AA: *That's still encouraging to hear. And I for one, love what you are talking about but would very much like to also hear more of your thoughts on any of the foregoing now specifically as they apply to the playing of Wes Montgomery since you chose him as the hardest to give up. Fair?*

TG: Fair.

Time--Well, Wes' time feel on many grooves is so, so good. Time like no one else before him that I can find except maybe a few bass players (of all things). Exhilarating. Exciting. Unpredictable. Consistently never lost. I'm always lost trying to exactly catch his time feel in some spots on many cuts. Very humbling.

Touch--the man knew how to touch a guitar. And he created a whole new sound because of it...which leads us to the next area .

Tone--well he didn't always get a great tone on those early great records but from some of '63 on, he usually got a spectacular tone. "Movin' Wes," "Bumpin'," and "Smokin' At The Half Note" are some albums that come to mind if one is longing to hear Wes with his bigger tone captured well.

Taste--he's certainly one of the tastiest players I've ever heard. If you're a sleazebucket you can say that his playing reeks of rightness. If a little more elegant way of expressing things seems to curry favor with you, than we'll just say that his playing on his best records possess's rightness on almost every conceivable front. So often just full of great ideas--and his phrasing! Hmm mama. This relates back to his way with the areas of time and touch. Wes...so stylish, so creative, such a gas to listen to. You hear him on say "Besamé Mucho" from the very, very fine

album "Boss Guitar" where he just unfolds this thing from beginning to end, which besides the exciting content, has a construction to it, a true feeling of form--because of his beautiful sense of pacing, letting things build slowly, little by little. He was so superb at this. The jazz cats used to call it "really tellin' a story."

It's fair to say that a big feature also is that Wes is usually playing harmonically sophisticated music, and I love this. Juicy chords, great voice leading, clever progressions. Great songs--the fabulous tin pan alley 'Standards'. Also great originals--Jazz tunes--by others and especially by him.

Technique--this area gets pretty ridiculous when you're talkin' about Wes Montgomery. I'll leave it alone for now.

Talent--there's no one I know of, at least in his chosen field of jazz guitar, who manifested more talent than Wes Montgomery. How many others created a whole style all their own, a whole new way to play the guitar? Talk about an original voice. Not that that's a requirement for fine playing because if you think about it we all know that it's not. But it is often a wonderful plus to hear such an 'original' talent show up on the scene and just captivate--no--just shock everyone. Hasn't happened often, not in this field. If we're talkin' about talent; originality; and impact, short-term and long, we find our listings are not large. That's a real small hotel these cats party at. You peek in the window, you gotta see a certain C. Christian in there, and that's Wes sittin' across from him, beaming. And there's Eddie Lang. By tough, tough standards, the story's over. For me, I'd have to see Django at that table too on brilliance and originality alone--though I'm not sure he's playing jazz, per se, a lot of the time. Close enough--it is extraordinary guitar. And to be playin' all that with just two fingers most of the time...well--that's a story for the ages. From there on, all I can see is shadows.... But, if it were up to me, and if the issue of gargantuan impact could be taken off the table, then I'd have to see Barney, Tal and some other top-rank players of not inconsiderable influence in that room too. I mean there are some knowledgeable players who saw it all go down, who still say it all comes from Eddie. Could be their hearts talkin'. Could be their heads. Hard to say. Of course others have said much the same thing about Django, Charlie, Wes. Lively, good-spirited debates about all this continue to this day.

And then if there's another special room reserved for, what does it say, ah yes, Rhythm Guitar. Hmm, small seating arrangements in there too. But man, it sure looks elegant inside. What's it say on the back of those reserved chairs? Oh yeah, that Dutch-American brilliant fellow from Jersey who added some extra string or something. And wait a minute! Some guy with the same last name as me--whoa, there must be some mistake--oh, he spells it differently.....ah, of course....I heard he was, amazingly enough, the actual guitarist on the teenage hit 'Wipe Out'. Can you imagine? What if they had let him decide on the feel? "Say Freddie..., what would you like to see done to this song...?" O.K. everybody, check your smirks at the door. Hmm, I see they had the good sense to reserve a chair for Mr. Kress. Was his axe really tuned as wildly as they say? Hold it--they're showing some old footage of them playing. They all sure seem to smile a lot. I wonder if that's important.

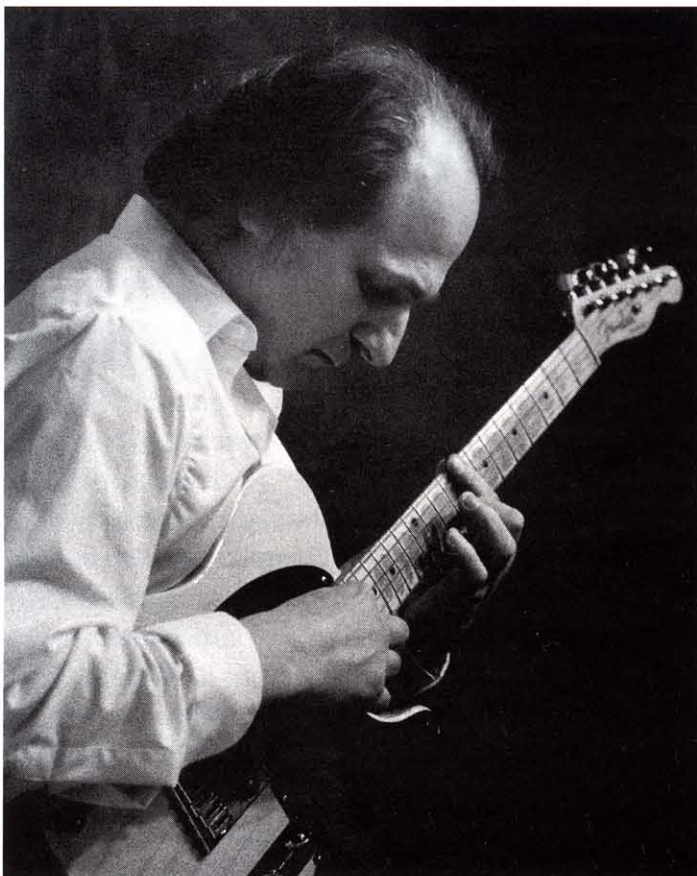


Photo © Bob Barry

Anyway, with Wes, when you start to realize what he's really doing, you do begin to sense that this is a man with an immense aptitude for the guitar. A level of talent that's hard to comprehend when you study it deeply and more so the more you study it. And yet we know that in his case, it was not fully-

formed in almost anyway for quite some time and that he had to work hard, practice hard to bring that talent ever more out of himself. It took a lot of years. His early recordings, about ten years before his first dates as a leader, don't sound that much like the fellow we would hear later. I find this, as my beloved grandmother would have said, most encouraging.

Transcendence--like I said, I don't know much here, but I know from talking to hundreds of musicians over the span of decades and reading everything I've ever been able to get my hands on about Wes Montgomery and having seen him perform live in '65 or '66, that it's pretty certain this man and his playing were operating on a transcendent level at times. And this was kind of often.

Let me make a left turn: forget all these T's. Just speaking personally, as a listener and maybe as a player too, I'm looking for beauty or excitement. Also soulfulness, freshness or surprise, creativity, versatility or range. And yes, great taste...knowing some fabulous notes to play or not to play at each moment; and knowing just how to play them to fit the desired feeling. I'll take humor, joy and occasional sorrow, also lightheartedness, or playfulness too, especially if the others don't show up.

One last thing on the man with the Zillion \$ Thumb--probably my choice is based a little on the image I hold in my mind about how he flipped when he heard Charlie Christian, how he went out and spent this horrific sum of money he could ill afford to because he just had to chase his dream. How he loved this music so, he just had to be closer to this beauty, had to become part of it, be immersed in it. And what greater way than to make the sounds himself. I love the romance of this. And how he expressed himself when he talked about it. The hipsters I used to run with--we used to say "that Wes...! He's one righteous cat. The hippest cat in town." If hip means exuding glowing warmth, beauty, sensitivity, buoyancy, happiness, as well as knowingness, confidence, passion, daring, recovery, resourcefulness, cleverness and uniqueness, then Wes is still the baddest cat to come boppin' along--the hippest cat in town. For me.

AA: *Your feelings about Wes shine through when you speak of him Ted, as I suspect they would if you spoke about any of the other players you mentioned at the beginning of your answer. And please do, if you're in the mood.*

TG: I'd love to-- though not at great length about any

one of them or we'll be here all night talking. So, your question really took me somewhere, I must say. And it also occurred to me that if you asked 100 guitarists this question, the real answer would be the same from the majority of them: themselves--each player would have to choose themselves--so they could continue as a musician. Except for a few wild ones who'd rather continue to be able to hear their favorite guitarist even if it meant puttin' the big freeze on their own stuff. But you weren't meaning for me to jump down that street, right?... no 'Themselves Ave.' for us, yeah?

AA: *Right.*

TG: So, in trying to answer your question I found myself naturally focusing on players who had influenced me in some profound way--also in some lasting way; due to not only the beauty of their music but also the feelings and memories of time spent with them--what I used to feel watching them up close, hearing those sounds they made, remembering what they taught me, how they changed my life.

This was the case with both George and Lenny. I used to go to George's house to study with him. Oh do I have great, fond memories of this. He was such a special guy. And what a player. I loved George. And was tremendously inspired by him. He was completely thrilling when he was in top shape. One time, he played a version of "Mountain Greenery" for me at about 500 on the metronome. I was speechless but do seem to recall laughing and laughing. And maybe thinking "O.K. boys and girls. That's it. Game over. Hand in your plectrums now, and turn in those guitars to the smiling older gentleman at the door." This was the summit of solo guitar playing. At his best, he was and is the greatest I've ever heard. Especially if it's about how the music makes you feel inside as you're hearing it.

Another one of the great thrills of my life was going to the airport to meet Lenny Breau for the first time, and also the memories of the times we were able to spend together. He was a super-talent but he also had to work damn hard on some things. I saw this because I would sit and watch him learn every now and then. As a person and artist, this man was 1/3 child, 1/3 street hipster, and 1/3 tone poet. Country boy long gone. A wonderful thing was to make Lenny laugh or cry, either of which were his reaction if you played him something he loved and didn't know how to do (he was pretty bored watching anybody do anything he could already do). Oh that little guy loved

music. I could talk for hours--with joy-- about Lenny Breau's innovations, the hows and whys of the new ways of playing the guitar, ways he sometimes discovered, sometimes invented. There was no one like him. He played so many things--some of these as well as we may ever hear them again in our lifetime. And so a large percentage of those who got a chance to hear him feel he was, and is amongst the very finest guitarists they've ever heard. This is when he was in medium shape. In top form, well...he was pretty much off the chart.

I was thinking of other players of dazzling versatility--certainly Lenny would qualify here as I was saying, and in the very top rank--but I was also especially thinking of Chet Atkins because of the hundreds of fine little arrangements of so many attractive pieces of music. A man who quietly just went and created a Fort Knox of incredible guitar albums back when I was a kid--one golden beauty after another. Where did he get the time to learn all this great music? And play it so tremendously well. Each piece a model of crystalline precision. For a guy like me who has to fight to play clean, I still marvel at this.

With Danny Gatton, the dazzling versatility and virtuosity takes on another dimension because 1) he's from 'a whole nuther side a town', a much rowdier character and musician and 2) he was a walking tape recorder. Able to imitate the sounds of the players he admired growing up, down to a 't', with stunning accuracy in all dept.'s. An encyclopedia of American guitar music on two wheels. Absolutely spellbinding command of the instrument. I don't know of anything he wouldn't have been able to play if he had set his mind to it. Completely over the top 'now and then' but would play some very subtle and intricate stuff a moment later. Roy Buchanan shared many of Danny's characteristics but a different kind of poetic streak took him to his own amazing place it seems. He was way ahead of the pack in a bunch of ways in the early '60's. There are a lot of people standing on Roy's shoulders, and a lot of them don't even know it. I'd love to see Roy get more respect. In his best days, he would have been the player I dreamed of becoming. He could make that guitar sing.

Then there's Scotty Anderson, from around the Cincinnati area. An incredibly wonderful and unique player most guitarfolk don't even know about,

but he is so exciting to listen to, even more to watch, has a 'million' ideas, and leaves other guitar players shaking their heads in disbelief. He has a whole bagful of techniques including one particularly innovative one. His technical prowess is just about unmatched and his talent is truly ultra-deep. If he's not one of the greatest guitar players in the world, nobody is.



Photo © Bob Barry

The wild thing is, now I'm remembering a considerable amount of other players whose particular skills would keep me listening for a long time. Jimmy Vivino of the Conan O'Brien television show. I never tire of watching him. What can't he do? Extraordinarily tasteful, perfect technique. A beautiful player. And Kevin Eubanks on the Tonight Show right before him. A stunning guitarist. Seems to be able to play anything he wants to. Which is crazy enough but then to do it while laughing and looking around. And how he's doing it--that impossible right hand..... Phenomenal. How do you do it Kevin? Tommy Jones who shows up at the Chet Atkins Festivals and thrills everyone--a gorgeous player with maybe the prettiest right hand technique of them all. Del Casher here in Los Angeles seems like a very special and wonderful player to me. Tommy Emmanuel from Australia--scary good, so much happening, so entertaining, one of the best. Richard Smith (of The Smith Brothers) from England. A

bonafide virtuoso. Too good--can't be that good--but he is. Completely compelling. I sound like an ad man--this is ridiculous--I don't mean to, it's just that these players really are this good. And again, with all of them the main criteria is that I be able to listen to them day after day, to the exclusion of all others, right Alex? [She nods yes]. I'm not changing my original choice but it sure is a kick to think about all these others. Please permit me just a few more.

AA: *I'm sure it's at least somewhat of an education for a number of us here to hear about all these wonderful guitar players. We don't exactly get this on Entertainment Tonight. Please talk about as many as you wish to.*

TG: The late Thumbs Carlisle was a guitarist I could watch for hours. He could rip the doors off a place but was also one of the few guitar players who knew how to add extraordinary beauty into a ballad. His use of rich, luxurious singing chords got the duckbumps going for many a person. Man, do I love great ballad players. They used to feature the great Tony Mottola on the old Tonight Show, and he would play a ballad like "Tenderly." It was some of the prettiest stuff I've ever heard. Tony's one of the warmest players ever. Johnny Smith was the ne plus ultra of beautiful ballad players for me while I was growing up in New York. The combination of his knowledge, those voicings, his hard to believe playing skills and that incredible liquid tone...one of the prettiest tones imaginable. I admired him so much. His uptempo stuff could be really terrific too--lots of these kind of bubbling lines--and those 3rds and things ! Wow.

You know, I haven't even brought up all the Classical guitar players--which has to include 'the man', Andres Segovia--those early records on Decca, forget it. No one loved the guitar more than he did, no one did more for the guitar than he did, and nobody played it better than he did in his prime. Other than that I guess it wasn't much of a life.... In his wake have come maybe 50 to 100 incredible players who've followed his lead. At least 4 of them are each considered by thousands of knowledgeable fans worldwide, to be among the greatest ever to touch string to wood. I'd have to agree but I'm going to skip over these--all these players--so I can get back on steel-string ground which is where I've lived most of my life. And where I've listened most. And so I can mention a few more favorites.

A name many of you probably don't know is Phil deGruy--a brilliant man from New Orleans who

is truly in a class by himself. One reason is that he invented a new kind of guitar. Another is that he has the imagination of a roomful of people. Still another is his love of chords that have no less than 8 to 10 notes in them. Oh did I mention that his guitar has 11 extra strings on it? Or is it 13? Shocked are you? Good, good.

We all need something else to keep us awake at night. His playing ranges from the greatest guitar version yet of Claude Debussy's beautiful and groundbreaking masterpiece of his youth, "Claire de Lune," where Phil sounds like a full orchestral harp--no kidding!--to a kind of Stravinsky scores the Andy Griffith Show take on things, you know the episode where Opie discovers dad's John Coltrane album collection while Aunt Bea is studying her Minnie Riperton video. Just howlingly nutty--stone crazy music. Of course his friend Charlie Hunter would understand all this since the sugar bowl was more than full at his birth too. What a stunner he is, sounding like a hip B-3 player with bass pedals flyin'--except Charlie's doing it all with two hands--which is just completely ridiculous, right? I suspect some of you have seen him by now, judging by those grins out there. I find him to be a revolutionary player and won't be surprised if a whole school of players come out of what he's doing. But I thought that was going to happen with the gifted Stanley Jordan too, and it hasn't yet...and Jennifer Batten's brilliant in a similar but still quite different way.

The late Michael Hedges was certainly a guitarist of formidable skills--a courageous, tough-minded, edge of your seat kind of player. Completely fascinating, and left a great body of work to study--one track alone of his can take weeks to study sometimes! And what about Tuck Andress?! He is in a league with the very best that I've mentioned--can knock you out of your chair with blinding skill whenever he feels like it. Lays way back out of respect to the song of the moment but when he jumps up strong, there's an army of stuff hidin' in there...that baby face ain't foolin' nobody no mo'--this sucker's a warrior. He's so good it's hard to believe. All these young players have so much to say and guitar aptitude galore. It's a new music for guitar--the stuff that they're doing--and that alone can make it exciting, maybe even to the kids of today or tomorrow. My hopes are high for all of them.

If you're in the Seattle area, don't miss a guy

named Klaus Lenzian. He's a player you can sit and listen to for hours and go on quite a thrill ride with. He sounds like nobody else which is always a treat. There might well be as many top players whom I didn't mention whose playing, and hopefully whose music, would 'send' me, much as those I did name. I've got to cut this subject off though or we'll never get home tonight.

But there's one last group I can't leave out. Having been in Los Angeles for so long now (35+ years), I know 100's of very good guitar players here, quite a few really fine ones, some downright incredible. But to listen to on a long-term basis, 3 stand out--Dan Sawyer, Jon Kurnick, and Tommy Kay--because of the range of music they could entertain me with. Each of them could play enough great music to fill 50 albums, maybe 100. No lie. Played on a very high level too. And in about 10-15 different styles. Blows me away. They don't agree with me, all 3 deny it, but each one is a colossal musician, each one a close to consummate player in so many areas.

I hold them up as models of all-around guitar skills. They think I'm kidding but I'm shootin' straight. And on that note, we'll move on to something else--whatever you like.

AA: *You're such a fan.*

TG: I always will be I guess. I like to keep the kid in me alive.

AA: *How does that play against the world's expectations?*

TG: It's a bit embarrassing, and people have put me down for it, but you learn to keep your mouth shut in a lot of situations. Apparently not this one [laughter all around]. To wrap all this up, let me say that all these players have their own brand of special depth; and I'd be sad to leave them behind, maybe most of all the first half dozen or so. Especially George. God, to never hear his sound again. Maybe I should have chosen him. I loved him so. He's probably running neck and neck with Wes the more I think about it. And Lenny...a world without Lenny...I could just about cry. And I didn't even include George Benson whose playing is so exciting that there'll probably be a national holiday or something someday. But, time to say goodbye, to go forward--too bad Ted--you made a choice--it's a good one, now stick with it. Yeah, I made a choice and I'd hate to leave them all behind, but I would do it for Wes. Hey, there's one of my 'fuelers', things I say to myself to fuel me up when

I'm ready to quit at something and feel that I shouldn't. "Do it for Wes," I tell myself, "he had 8 kids and worked 4 jobs a day and still found time to practice--and you want to give up" (just kidding a bit on those figures--but not by much).

AA: *I know you and I have talked once about the fact that you have been attracted to different styles of music for virtually your whole life. But I was wondering, doesn't the lure of possibly becoming super-great in just one beautiful musical field ever speak to you in any hard to resist way?*

TG: Aw, it does, it truly does. But.[quite a pause].hmm let's see, would you prefer the factual answer or a fanciful one this time?

AA: *Maybe some of both, if you don't mind.*

TG: Okay.First, don't think I haven't tried, tried to focus on just one area, sometimes for years at a time, tried to stay away from some things. But take cathedral harmony for instance. I don't know how to resist pursuing the overwhelming beauty of this. Or the stunner of stunners, the full orchestra. Like say Hugo Friedhofer's blue cues from 1946's "The Best Years Of Our Lives," the ones with the sax and orchestra. Doin' that American swampstone thing, just the coolest moanin' but now way uptown. When I hear this, I'm all flamed up, but with all those bumps of goose too. And while in this state I've found myself thinking that as much as any sounds I've ever heard, these are manifesting in music what or how I feel inside. Somehow, the feeling this music portrays resonates exactly to who I am biologically or spiritually or something. The same thing happens with some other things I listen to as well. Lots of trouble to get into.

It's so fortunate to be this moved, this thrilled. How can I possibly even think of giving this up? I must try to play these kinds of sounds on the guitar, that's all there is to it. And that's one thing I actually have been trying to do, though off and on, for a very long time now. So some things like these are just too compelling and keep, if I may use your word, luring me back to them. I think a person is supposed to

change certain things about themselves if need be. But in some areas, a man or woman for that matter, probably just has to be who they're supposed to be, pursue what they're born with. That's the serious answer Alex, the factual one as best I can tell.

AA: *And now, just for fun, and because I know you can, how about a really whimsical answer to that same question, a little fanciful diversion to entertain us Mr. Greene?*

TG: What was the question again?

AA: *[Laughing]Please!*

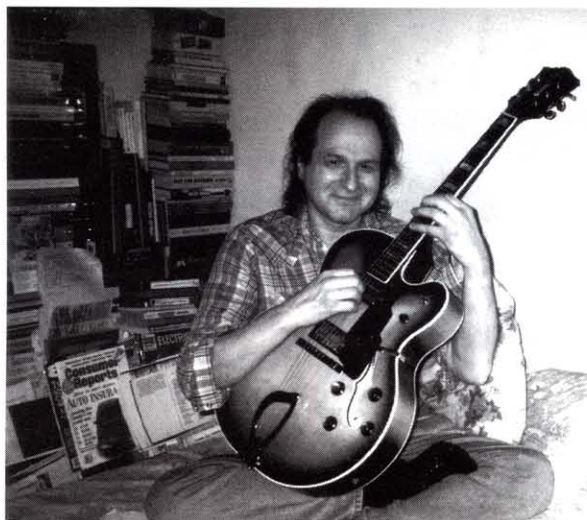
TG: Oh yeah...trying to become a really fine player in at least one style... .It sounds reasonable but..hmm, how can I put it...: Brother Ray's had my musical phone number for too long...still usin' it too, some-

times when I least expect it. J.S.Bach--he lurks around every corner--I could be in the ghetto doin' an R & B gig and suddenly get a call from him, and then there he is, grinnin' at me with counterpoint papers spread out everywhere. The sound of Gospel choir calls day and night, won't even let me walk to Horace Silver's house let alone go on in and learn something ("why dat boy wid da headphones fallin' down ovah dere?") "I don't know, mebbe da music done bowled him ovah.") I try to catch the last set at a jazz club but

instead, I get a collect call from the voice in my head, "You be back by eleven Teddy-boy,you gotta lotta film music beauty cues to study ...and we're throwin' out those Gershwin harmony sheets strewn all over your room if you don't at least visit 'em.... tonight."

AA: *[Chuckling] Thanks for the fun. So you think this is a good idea, focusing on so many styles or areas of music, yes?*

TG: It's certainly a fair thing to question..And whether I like it or not, there seem to be some good,some not so good, and some awful results from living like this. But none of this seems to matter all that much because maybe the choice was made for me at birth. When I've stayed with one style for a long time I've ended up feeling very bad inside. But when I spread myself out to the natural areas I've craved



Ted in a favorite playing position with a late '70's archtop.

ever since I was a tiny kid, I feel pretty good, sometimes even really good. So I've just got to keep all of my musical strands alive... or at least usually quite a few of them. Anything less and you're lookin' at the sad-boy.

AA: *Then this simply is the natural way for you.*

TG: Life sure would be simpler (though not necessarily easier), going after just one thing. But at least this kind of approach to music does give you more friends to call, so to speak. If Beethoven seems to be out for the day, maybe Jimmy Smith'll be home. You know, more ways to satisfy your moods.

AA: *So you'd recommend to your students that they diversify and explore various styles.*

TG: What a tricky area this is when you suddenly factor in the responsibility of advising others.



Ted playing a 1952 Gibson in 1994.

AA: *Is it something you could say a few words about?*

TG: If you like, sure. Without addressing the career or business aspects, both being areas where the pluses and minuses of diversification sometimes pretty well cancel each other out, and are probably not the all-time fun things to talk about anyway, let's go instead to the satisfaction bag. And here, one can't help but notice that many musicians do seem to find all the diversity they need within the spectrum of just one style or area. Some do best with two or three. Others, myself for instance as I've been saying, crave a life spent with widely different musical colors.

AA: *And you think people are born with these preferences and their taste for certain things already largely in place?*

TG: Ah, if I could only really answer that on its deep-

est level. Why one person will risk life and limb to attend a concert of their favorite artists', while that same artist's music causes someone else to literally become ill and throw up. Of course, it's not always only about the music though, is it. There's so much else going on here sometimes. What people love and why. It is my favorite subject and you knew it when you just asked me this, you sly one.

AA: *Care to say more about it?*

TG: Ooh, you're bad.

AA: *(Smiling): No, this is an interview, I want to hear you talk. You're supposed to.*

TG: Mankind just doesn't have this one sorted out yet, not enough hard facts that I'm aware of. But we do know that everyone has their own loves, needs, abilities and situations. To tie this back to whether I'd recommend that students pursue various musical styles, we also know that what is so rewarding for one to study, may prove to be a drag and a half for somebody else. So I seldom say anything about diversity (in the sense that we're discussing it at least) to a student. Oh, I may expose them to something new if it seems right, or guide them if they seem to need it or ask, but ultimately, really, the choice should be theirs. Let their own heart lead them. Let each person choose for themselves.

AA: *What styles of music do you teach?*

TG: Whatever they ask for--if I can. A bunch of different stuff. I don't push any agenda anymore in most cases at least.

AA: *Why is that?*

TG: "Let them have fun, the world's a troubled place, let them love the guitar," I say to myself. If they want to work though, really work, then boy do I have stuff waiting for them, if I do say so myself. You were asking me before, in a sense, what I was most proud of. It's my teaching material. The ego really shows up inside of me here because I feel so proud and honored to have been allowed the time, energy and motivation to come up with the systems and concepts I have, and to have been able to have taught these things to hundreds, maybe thousands of other people.

AA: *What are the systems or concepts you are most proud of?*

TG: Well these words aren't gonna mean much here without quite a bit of explanation I'm afraid, but I'll just say them anyway. Certainly my Systematic Inversion concept is one that students have loved over the last three decades. Also the Voicing System, The

Complete Chords of Nature, still dazzles my students, and I still get a thrill from it too. And an overview of The History of Harmony for certain students who crave this; as well as an alternative view, The Harmonic Solar System, which works really well in exciting some players who can then finally make sense out of the whole deal out there. A particular favorite of any student who gives it a chance has been The Harmonic Rainbow. There are some others. Listen to me--going on like that about my own stuff. I feel like a dad with his baby pictures at a party. I admit it--these systems and concepts are my pride and joy.

AA: *Allow me just one quiet...wow. How do students choose--what do they base their choice on with so much to choose from?*

TG: I don't mention any of these things to most students--

AA: *What?*

TG: Because they come to a lesson with their heart set on something already and that's what we'll work on. Sometimes these things do come up naturally though and then we'll go after one or more of them.

AA: *So then what do they base their choice on?*

TG: As far as I've been able to boil it down, their choice will be based on or at least reasonably related to love or need. That's what I advise too-- if they ask--you know, "What should I work on, Teach'?" "Work on what you love. If you can't, work on what you need." So something just about always seems to relate to these two areas as to what they'll choose to work on. Usually in a large way.

AA: *Being a music instructor, teaching so many guitar players, seems to have given you quite a window on some things. And before I forget, how many years of guitar teaching have there been?*

TG: Past 35 now and I'm a little shocked by it, apparently chasin' 40.

AA: *That's a lot of students visiting you.*

TG: It sure has been that.

AA: *So if you're teaching a lot of different styles, you've listened to a lot of music in your life, yes?*

TG: Not enough. Never enough.

AA: *I have my opinion from having watched you but I wonder if you think you are a good listener--to music.*

TG: [Chuckles] Good's a funny word sometimes; and this question invites different perspectives doesn't it. Let's try this: my listening ability ranges from very

poor to pretty fine. From near dreamstate-like intoxication where I basically float away and couldn't tell you doodley-squat as to what notes were played, all the way to molecular resonance, where the music burns inside me due to studying it over and over and over, until all the nuances are my friends, and I've earned the right to play it with authority. When I can. My limitations are more than I would wish but fortunately my desire is strong. I should probably stop here.

AA: *Are you serious? We're just getting started. We haven't even heard the story of how you went about learning to play, from when you were a child until the present. Please continue... unless you really don't feel comfortable talking anymore. Are you alright?*

TG: Yeah, thanks. I'm not sure how I feel talkin' about all these things. [Long pause].... I'll try. If it gets too painful hearing myself talk anymore I may have to stop. We'll see. Anyway, as you heard me say, my limitations are more than I would wish, but fortunately my desire is strong so it tends to melt away these hindrances as time goes on. And if one simple thing cuts through everything else in terms of both enabling and explaining human motivation, though admittedly sometimes only on the surface level, then desire is it. It sure has been for me. We all have our own way of looking at things and this is just a personal credo, side by side with, not in lieu of, my own spiritual belief in God which I refuse to bug anybody with but which does mean a lot to me. So, it seems to me that Desire is the Engine of Life. It's what makes people go. It's what creates so much of everything. And it's something I've tried to use to overpower the ridiculous pile of limitations I used to and occasionally still do find staring at me. It does not conquer so many problems on this planet, but sometimes it'll take care of one....

AA: *Another little 'conversation,' please?*

TG: [In reference to anything you want to apply this to where it seems to fit]: "How badly do you want it, Ted?" "Maybe not enough." "Then stop whining about it." "Well, maybe I do want it." "Enough?" "I don't know. I think I do." "Then why don't you find out. Chase it with everything you've got. Hard. Dig in hard." "That's what I'll have to do."

AA: *Excellent. You really got yourself into that. You seem very passionate about your beliefs.*

TG: Certain ones yeah, as are most people I know. It's the human condition to care about something.

And thanks for mentioning 'belief'. Because this too is important in learning a musical instrument or who knows what, probably everything. A person can't be sitting there saying "I'm dog-meat. I'll never get this stuff." Then they almost never will. I've been there, used to live there, it's a rotten place. A student must believe that it's possible to progress, to learn.

AA: *Were your limitations, as you perceived them, worse than the average guitar player's?*

TG: No moanin', but I had a heap of problems to deal with. But almost every guitarist I've met in the last 40+ years of being with this instrument has faced many challenges. Although guitar is a cherished friend, she's also a reluctant beast, tough to be really good at for most of us. So no, I wasn't complaining, just explaining. Maybe not so great.

AA: *May I ask you to discuss some of the particular limitations you faced, and how you overcame them, if in fact you did?*

TG: Ooh, huge subject... I don't want to bore you and this one for sure could do it. Let's move to something else.

AA: *Please tell your story Ted... You told some of it to me once and it's bloody interesting. Besides, somebody else may want to hear it [murmurs of support from others gathered there]...*

TG: [A considerable pause] Alright. You see, I was a dreamy kid, music just transported me to a place where I barely felt like I was touching the ground, shivers and rushes just powering through the body. Usually tears too. Complete rapture. My whole family had this, my girlfriend has it, and I still have it sometimes. Every now and then I also get it while I'm playing, if the music seems to fit the mood my body and soul are hungry for or attuned to. The right song, the right key or key change at just the right moment, the right rhythmic groove, the right room with good people sending you wonderfully right vibes, getting an ultra-righteous tone out of the axe. Oh, baby....

Anyway, I lived for this feeling. But this state of ecstasy is not exactly conducive to precise learning when you're a kid, lying there on the floor all aglow. You don't want to get up. And why would you want to anyway, since you didn't have the foggiest notion of what material to practice in order to reproduce the sounds you were so enthralled by. I say 'you' but this was me. 'Squint,' my friends called me because I was as nearsighted as Mr. Magoo at a microbiology convention. My students don't believe me now if the subject comes up, but I assure you, I was truly close to

clueless. And for so long. I started playing at age 11 and this inability to make much sense of the instrument went on until I was almost 19. I was cosmically nearsighted. Oh, I made many attempts; and I did learn to 'read', thanks to my first teacher, a wonderful jazz guitar player named Sal Tardella, who first came to the house every week and later had a store in Eastchester, N.Y., a suburb just outside of New York City. But guitar was hard for me. It was years before I could play the F barre chord cleanly. Part of the reason, maybe the largest part, was that I had a really tough-playing guitar. But I didn't know that. I thought it was just me. And while I had a very loving ear, it was a rather poor ear at being able to listen to something and then find it on the guitar. My teacher couldn't help me with this because he had me working on a lot of little even more beginning fundamentals since that's about all I was good for in this early period; and also, the prevailing wisdom of the day was "just keep playin' kid, do your studies, keep listening to great music, and your ear will get there. Yeah." And of course there was some truth to this, a lot of truth actually. But what to do in the meantime? What to do?!!

I always kept hope alive, secretly dreaming that one day I would find a way to play well. I went to a lot of dances where often I would see a live band. This didn't work. Again, I didn't pick up diddley as to what I should really practice to sound like these guys and all the cool guys I admired on records. Speaking of diddley, this was actually a big key for me. By this time, a few years into the guitar, I had manifested some natural ability in the rhythmic domain. My friends (who were all nuts over music) and I, discovered that I could play these hard-charging rhythms, our favorite being that of Bo Diddley. It was the ray of light I had been looking for; and it became a specialty. I blew up a few tape recorders doing that. We used them as amps back then because they got such an exciting sound. Equally momentous to us was when I got my first amp with tremolo. That was it. That was the sound---you needed that throb to really sound like Bo. My friends were really wild kids. Sometimes they'd drag me, my guitar, and amp to a party, plug in, I'd play, and the whole place would go crazy. I could only do a few things, little rhythm things, but it didn't matter. It was the feel and sound of it overall that everyone responded to. Many kids told me what a great guitar player I was but I knew, even though I let myself soak up their wonderful outpourings, that this was fairly bogus at best. My very



A very happy Ted with cheapo X-50 Guild 'Grannie'

hard-to-fool mom used to say “evaluate the evaluator, son.” These were 14-15 year old New York R and B kids. They didn't know great. O.K., I had a decent feel. And I thank God, because it was my way out of musical nothingness.

My dad played me Johnny Smith records. Now this guy was great. It would be close to ten years more before I could figure out those luscious chords he played on “What's New?” Ten years. But for now, I was grateful. It wasn't much, I thought, but at least I had something, a feel for driving, exciting rhythms. And so for years, I tried to build on that. I found I could play the George Van Eps/Freddie Green big band rhythm thing with a few little chords I put together out of books. I still get a thrill from playing this style today. But this remained pretty much the only jazz I could play for a long, long time. And I thought it was almost a joke that because I could 'read' and play a few little chord progressions with this pretty deep jazz feeling, I landed my first two teaching jobs. I was 18. And excited. Me, a teacher. I couldn't get over it, [now in Groucho Marx voice] “and apparently never did.” Again, I felt so grateful inside that I could play anything that sounded even half-great, but I knew enough to know that I barely knew anything about my instrument. As usual, feel was mostly all I had. And love. Inside, and comin' at me. Lucky kid.

AA: *I hope you see, Theodore Greene, that your story's not a bad one to tell. There's flavor to it. So what happened next? How did you learn? And what other problems did you have to overcome?*

TG: Thank you for your interest. Another thing was that I had completely fallen for the Curtis Mayfield gospel-influenced R and B guitar style, which he displayed so beautifully on records with his group The Impressions, 'specially during the years 1961-1965. Little by little, over the same period of a few years, I gradually got the feel of it. What a great way to play guitar. The style's not too complex, a few little chords--diads, triads, barred minor 7's, things like that--with these wonderful little elaborations, and full of nuance, fine touch. And as with many styles of

subtlety, you have to really love it to play it just so. An example: my friend Norman Harris who's well-known to many as one of the top vintage guitar dealers, barely ever plays guitar. But he plays this style very well in terms of tasty feel and tone---because he loves it with all his heart.

Anyway, mostly what I learned in those days, I backed into. Meaning, I still seldom could go looking for something and just find it. Uh-uh. Instead, I'd be playing something, anything and make a mistake. You know, wrong finger, wrong string, wrong fret, maybe all of them at once sometimes. And suddenly, there would be some sound there now and then that would be a sound I'd wanted to play so much, but hadn't known how to find. So I'd pursue this new friend as best I could. I usually learned very slowly--the train was barely leavin' the station. Years later, I would have occasional lucky bursts forward, but not in those where's-all-the-good-stuff-hiding years. I bought many guitar instruction books of varied types and tried like crazy to find great sounds in them. This helped, but was mostly a tip of the iceberg type of thing. I joined bands, took more lessons, and tried so many different ways to at least get a better tone, if my playing skill was going to move along so slowly. I quit college (where I had been majoring in business to please my parents and had been miserable) to make music my life since it was anyway, and my mom wanted to really clobber me. In fact, move the needle over to Mafioso extermination. “Let's just murder the middle kid honey,” she may well have said to my dad. “We'll still have two left and we'll be sparing him a life of pain since he's obviously on the road to misery and ruination anyway.” She was as angry as I've ever seen a human be, before or since, and my mom furious would have stopped Charles Manson dead in his tracks. Dead. But I knew her rage would come down in a few weeks or months, for the same reason she was so distraught now: because she loved me.

You see, she had a musically talented kid. My kid sister was an exceptional natural musical talent. She could just go to the piano and play tougher than average tunes, with the correct chord changes, all by ear, smiling this beautiful smile as she delighted herself and us. My brother and I loved music so much but we couldn't do that. And so when I quit school, my parents were very sad and deeply worried about my future well-being. Because as they saw it, I had shown lots of love of guitar, but much less talent, and

worse, even less self-discipline. They were right. They were always right. Except in this case, their words were in a war with my heart, and that's a war words seldom win.

Why not just stay in college and study music there, you ask? Wouldn't fly. Couldn't fly. Because in the mid-1960's they weren't teaching the music I wanted to learn. James Brown 101. Sorry, not offered. The History of Jazz in America. Sounds great, where do I sign up? Nowhere. Come back in twenty years. Organ Trio Jazz: Voicings. Haven't ever heard of that one either young chap, but we do offer an utterly delightful course on Ocarina Chamber Music. Get serious. Which is what I had to do. But didn't know how to really do, yet. Though it was either that or take up bass ocarina. Yeah, walking bass ocarina.

I remember looking at my dad, with tears in my eyes and saying something close to "It's true, I may not be much of a talent, but I'm going to keep working at this thing, Pop. And who knows, maybe something good will show up as long as I keep at it." That was my dream, that maybe by staying with it, I'd find a way to overcome my natural deficiencies; that the excitement of any progress would inspire me to create enough self-discipline to create more progress, and so on. And that is what happened.

The biggest key of all for me probably. A simple idea, nothing fancy, but it was the right way for me.

Something else I told my parents, "Don't worry. If I can't make it as a player, I've already got a teaching career underway a little and I'll try to build on that. It's not a bad life, helping others, even if I can't always quite help myself." And this is also what happened, since despite having played many gigs at certain periods of my life, it's easy to see now, that it's been teaching that has been my main career. So far.

AA: *Some story T.G.*

TG An old story isn't it. Parents who love their children and so desperately want the best for them. Kids with their own ideas about what's right. Parents with the wisdom years have brought, pleading that their young ones listen to reason, and meeting those children at a crossroad of love where those young hearts are far too aglow with their dreams to ever turn back. I knew I wasn't turning back and that in terms of fury, my mom would take us to hell and back. I loved her very much, but vowed that no matter how many times

she hissed venom at me or tried wailing with tears, threats and such, I would stand there and take whatever she threw at me, day after day. What should a child do--live their parents' fears? Or chase their own dreams? This can depend on many things but in my case, the answer was simple: unless she killed me, I was goin' after the music.

AA: *You're joking a bit about your mom's wrath and histrionics of course.*

TG: Sure, she would've enjoyed it since she loved to laugh and adored occasional sardonic humor and all kinds of whimsy. She was a great, great woman, a person who had many more outstanding qualities than poor ones. Likewise, my dad. I was so lucky to have them for parents. What a couple they were. You should have seen them dance. Dad was nuts about Mom till the day she died. And we actually became fine friends during her last years on this earth, Mom and I, an irony my dear dad still gets a kick out of, given all the rustlin' and tustlin' she and I went through for so many years.

AA: *Before we continue with the 'how you learned' story, may I ask, were either of your parents musicians?*

TG: Dad might as well have been because no one I've met loves music more than he does. If this were a world where one could choose one's death, we'd probably see him at the end as some wild growling riff from Wynonna Judd soared up into the stratosphere with him hangin' on to it, waving and laughing.

Mom was an outtasight pianist...well maybe not quite that, but she played outtasight stuff, used the pedals really well, so she got a fantastic tone. Just spectacular. I still hear it.

AA: *So, how do you feel about the level you've attained overall now as say, a jazz player? Would your Mom be proud?*

TG: Well I'm afraid not, 'Xandra--not if she heard me for a whole night [laughter]. Please don't get the wrong idea though. I'm grateful for the things I can do. It's just that I'm also aware when I hear the great players, of all the things I can't. But I try to stay cheerful about music. As the years move along, I find it to be too beautiful a gift to get down about for long.

AA: *So you don't see yourself as a fine jazz guitarist at all? The books, magazines and things on the internet--which all say you are--don't make you think you may have assessed yourself too harshly?*

TG: I have come close to fulfilling a few childhood



Ted with a D'Angelico copy, 'Carmelita' in 1998.

dreams in some small areas of this huge glorious thing we call jazz. So I'm floatin' high about that. And maybe I'll be able to cover a bit more of that 'J' St. turf as the calendar flicks her pages at me. I keep hope alive. As for those references in books and things, I know they mean well. And if I read enough of these things or if I'm playing and having some success on a given day or night in say at least mediumly imitating a big band or a B-3, two of the things I can sometimes do as a jazz player, I can even start to believe what they say. But I love and play many other styles of music, and this alone will prevent me from putting in the necessary time it would take in my particular case to turn me into a truly fine jazz guitarist in the best sense that this term honors those to whom it applies.


And again--I know they don't mean even a shred of harm--but y' know, throwing labels like that on guys like me isn't fair to the real jazz guitarists, those who've dedicated their lives to this beautiful art form. I mean if it's about feeling, I am in the game then, swingin' from the heels as best I can. But if it's about prowess, well-rounded high-level skills at the top of jazz guitar... like say John Pisano, Joe Pass, Howard Alden, Larry Koonse, John Collins, Barry Zweig...I mean Barney or Tal at their best make you smile just thinkin' about it (see, you're smiling Alexandra). Wes---a talent so huge none of us can comprehend it. But you've already heard me express some feelings about him. And George Benson--so extraordinarily gifted and at times just completely spectacular, truly stunning. Pat Martino, Billy Bean,

Jimmy Bruno, Joe Diorio, Paul Bollenback, Dan Armstrong, Jack Wilkins, Dan Faehnle, Clint Strong, all these guys in top form are right there with George. And Kenny Burrell--a lifetime of soulful phrases, he just eats that stuff for breakfast. Some years ago, I saw Frank Gambale eat up a really tough Chick Corea tune with ridiculous changes at a ridiculous tempo and make it look ridiculously easy, laughing and playing very musical stuff over it. Seemed impossible. Ron Eschete and Todd Johnson,whatta duo, just so absolutely great. Django playing "Blues For Ike" late in his career on that electric guitar album...what is this...probably sublime genius jazz guitar. If it's about playing at the level all these men have attained, then those in the know are just, in good conscience, barely able to let me out of the clubhouse..."hey kid, stop watching that Django video and get out here--we need you to comp behind George Barnes." Boy, would that have been some thrill! Except I probably wouldn't have been able to hold onto the pick. Something about George B. just busts me up...how much fun he seems to be having.

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Part 2 of Ted Greene's interview will appear in the next issue of JJG.



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