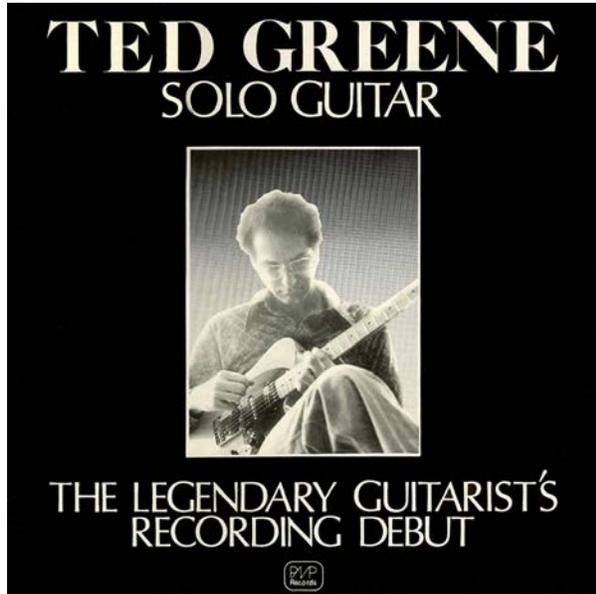


# Ted Greene's *Solo Guitar* - About the Recording

By Leon White

Leon White here. We recently received several questions about Ted's *Solo Guitar* album and how it was recorded, etc. There have been several *Forums* posts that answer specific questions, but it has been suggested I try to put it all together. Since we've never discussed how the DECISION to make the album was made I thought I'd start with that. Bear with me through some history.

Ted was born in 1946. Fast forward to the early 1970's: Ted is 25 or so, and has already reached legend/guru status as a player and teacher. By 1974 or so he had a two-year waiting list



for students. And if a student was going to miss a lesson, he or she had to send a sub. He had experimented with various Gibsons and Fenders (345, 355, Les Paul Jr., Jazzmasters, Teles, etc., etc., etc.). When playing he was almost always seen with one or two blackguard Telecasters - sometimes modified to mars, sometimes stock, and some kind of big Fender amp (Twin Reverb for example). Ted gave names to most of his guitars. According to Barbara Franklin, the blackguard Tele he used for the album was called "Lucky." In an interview Ted says he "used" two guitars. I never saw him do that. The guitar on the album cover, which looks like a predecessor to his last main guitar, "Banana Crème," is the only guitar I recall him recording the album with.

## Playing at the Smokehouse

Flash forward to 1975. I'd been a student of Ted's for one or two years, and we had become friends. He got a regular gig working at the Smokehouse restaurant in Studio City for one night each week, and I was living in Studio City at the time. This gig ran for almost two years, and every time he played the place was packed full of musicians. The first night Ted played there the place was jammed with studio players. If someone had tossed a bomb in there, there would have been no studio guitarists for the next day. Also attending was a smattering of Hollywood actor folks, and of course, Ted's students. I'd guess 100+ people minimum that night, as the space was configured a little differently then I think it is now, and the bar area was larger. Ted had trouble tuning at the start. No kidding.

I went almost every time Ted played at the Smokehouse. (It was an easy drive for both of us, and the restaurant is still there at the corner of the Warner Brothers lot.)

Ted and I, and William Perry and Ted, were in the habit of discussing what you might call "philosophy." Unlike the later Ted, this Ted was very 'cosmic' in his interests and views. He had already started his diet of lettuce and diet coke, was curious and undecided about everything outside of music, and was given to changing his mind or rethinking something about every 12

seconds. He considered everyone's point of view on everything. This made it impossible to pin him down on anything, accept musical ideas. And even those had multiple points of view and explanations (as you can see by his revisions on his teaching sheets). I would say he was ambivalent about ambivalence. Of course he was his wonderful and generous self.

I make this point because as hard as it was for Ted to improvise the performance on the album, it was just as intense and draining for everyone dealing with all the decisions, discussions, worries, and the potential to just stop with no album.

### **Convincing Ted to Record**

After Ted's first night at the Smokehouse, I asked him to make a record. He said, "No." Two years later I had convinced him that he owed it to his students and to the people who had never heard him play, to make a record. He said, "Yes, but No, but Yes." Ted had done some studio work with William, and so William pulled the location and mixer together. (Bob Summers, an extremely accomplished guitarist was the mixer, and knew the room and the board well.) Ted then said, "Yes, but maybe, but no, but maybe." I agreed to pay for it, and Ted would have total artistic control over everything on earth. If we finished and he didn't like it, we'd toss it all out.

William made some suggestions on song choices which Ted embraced, and thus this saved the album from having 19 slow ballads! We agreed to record straight to mastering tape – no edits (a so-called "half-track" recording). We made sure we had a LOT of boxes of recording tape on hand, as we were recording at 30 ips (inches per second) which was the maximum fidelity back then. But recording at that speed would eat up a lot of tape, so we stocked up.

### **Amp Noise**

Night one: Bob Summers, William and I are in the empty studio. I'm wondering if Ted will show up. He finally does, and brings along several guitar cases and one amp. He goes back outside and gets his Fender Leslie speaker and hauls it in. (I start to worry that he might have hurt his hands.) He hooks it all up in the center of the room where we have a deluxe stacking chair for his comfort. He sits down and warms up, noodles, listens to his sound, and William and Bob look at me like I'm crazy. The amp is providing its own sound track of odd noises, pops, hiss, and clicks. Ted hears it too. William talks to Ted about the sound/noise. Ted goes outside and gets another amp. The first was a black face Vibroverb (as I recall, I know it had one 15" speaker), the second a Twin Reverb. At least that's the amp situation as I recall it. Ted wanted that great Fender Reverb sound of course, but again the three of us are in the booth cringing at how much noise that great tube reverb is creating in the studio.

Bob mics the Leslie speaker with two mics, and the Vibroverb with one. We made a test recording and Ted came in and listened. He heard the noise, although the amp had quieted down somewhat. Ted and all of us went back and forth for a long time. A direct box was added to the signal chain and the sound is "set." By "set" I mean that we started recording, but then we got ready to make more changes, deal with switch noise on the guitar, and with the amp noise.

## The Music

Now the hard part began. Ted played and then asked William and I what we thought. Imagine for the moment that you are there in person. The most knowledgeable and accomplished guitarist in the world (IMHO) is asking *your* opinion. What would you say? “Hey Ted, you were a little rushed around 4 minutes or so.” “Ted that one pickup change pinned the levels in the studio.” “Ah, Ted, do you want to take a break?” (Not that those specific things happened, but you can’t imagine how intense the listening had to be.) But Ted had serious questions and wanted serious answers. “Should I leave out the section over here?” “Did we like the ending?” “I felt it was a bit too ‘loose,’ could we listen to it?”

Now, here’s the challenge: Are you going to try and convince Ted Greene of what YOU want to hear? Uh, NO! It has to be him. “Mr. da Vinci, that Madonna you’re painting? It really needs a big red nose and clown shoes. Really. TRUST ME.” Even as I write this I can feel the intense pressure and exhaustion of trying to help him hear, but not impact his musical direction. And as I found out on the second night, he was really depending upon us to be audience as well.

Try to keep it light . . . watch the fatigue . . . keep it moving . . . help him hear. Point out things you think HE should hear on playback . . . answer questions . . . be supportive . . . and remember this may be the ONLY thing the rest of the world may hear from him for a thousand years.

And so, the recording went for two nights. And then it was over. We’d been saving all the out-takes, and had a pile of 1/4” tapes on the floor. Those were all erased....as we promised Ted.

## The Gear as I Remember It

For the recording sessions Ted used a Blackguard Telecaster. Ted swapped necks, bridge pickups, etc., so exactly what pieces of wood were there is a bit of a mystery. Here’s the gear:

1. One humbucking pickup in the neck (probably a Gibson at that instant, later to be changed to DiMarzio) lowered into the body. No cover. May have been a PAF, but just as likely not-could have been a T-top or one he just liked.
2. One older Strat pickup in the middle, also lowered.
3. One vintage blackguard Tele bridge pickup but with NO baseplate.
4. An original blackguard Tele bridge plate (1954 I think), drilled to hold 6 saddles and hardware. (Ted did it himself of course.)
5. Extra switches on the pickguard to allow some single coil sounds out of the Humbucker (and other secret stuff not being shared).
6. The Fender Leslie with footswitch, AKA the Fender Vibratone. (Ted liked to stop and start it to affect the speed of the rotation of the speaker. I think he did that during the recording.)
7. The Fender Vibroverb. I do not recall ever changing to the Twin Reverb. (A twin reverb was 80 watts RMS, while a Vibroverb was about 40 watts, if I recall. Ted did his own servicing, but didn’t mod the power supply or things like that. The key was the 15” speaker. I do not recall if it had a JBL speaker or some other make.

As I have just re-read Ted’s letter to Phil Brown and his comment regarding using multiple guitars, I’ll have to defer to his statement that he did use several guitars. Regarding the signal chain, we did take the guitar direct, but we did take the acoustic sound of the Leslie, and we did

have some ‘presence’ from the amp mic lightly in the background of the composite sound (At least at one point...). The Leslie was split right and left, and the guitar was in the center of the ‘mix.’

### **The Aftermath**

Ted was pleased with the recording for half a day. Then doubts and questions started. For weeks he asked all kinds of people what they thought. He listened to it on different tape machines, with different speakers, etc., etc., etc. Eventually he concluded that he liked it enough to release it. And for the next 28 years he would accept the many compliments, but always add a little, “Well, sometimes I think it has too much/not enough blah, blah, blah.” (The “blah” changing from one thing to another.) He was very appreciative and seemed to understand just how much his fastidiousness and uncertainty cost all of us who were involved in the project. But he never apologized for it, because he felt it was a necessary part of the process.

The tape was leadered and delivered to Bernie Grundman at A&M Records Mastering lab. Bernie did his usual legendary mastering job. Then on to pressing.

As I mentioned elsewhere, when Ted decided to “improve” the equalization to make a new master for the CD release, I didn’t like the result. And after hearing that ‘mix,’ he didn’t like it either (per Dan Sawyer). But that’s what made Ted, Ted. In hindsight I think the record conveys everything I had hoped for. He improvised off of arrangements he’d played, but essentially was making the whole thing up in the studio. He drew upon all the emotions he wanted to express, acknowledged great film composers who delivered the emotion he loved, and did it two nights.

~ Leon

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### **Additional Commentary from Our Forums and Elsewhere:**

**From Mark Thornbury** (Mark transcribed the Ted’s album a few weeks after he heard it, and was a student of Ted’s at the time):

I also bugged Ted about the gauge that he was using at the time [that he recorded *Solo Guitar*], and he wrote it out for me: .015, .018, .026p, .036, .046, .058.

He went down as far as a minor third in tuning, as used on “Summertime”, “Ol’ Man River”, and “Just Friends.”

#### **From Dan Sawyer:**

Ted had a few Teles like that, but the whole record was definitely played on one of the Teles. Ted preferred Teles from the 1950s with maple fingerboards. As Leon said, the Humbuckers were dropped almost level with the top of the guitar. Ted did this to minimize magnetic pull which causes unmusical overtones, especially above the 12th fret. Another reason is that Ted felt chords sounded more musical when the pickup is farther from the strings.

#### **From William Perry:**

Wow, regarding Ted’s amp and sound on *Solo Guitar*: I don’t want make this too long. Ted is Ted. Ted’s desire was to make the album sound as he wished it. (Do I hear some, kind, loving

laughter that fills our hearts when we think of Ted?) Ted NEVER found the sound he liked! He was always searching, and this recording was no exception.

**From the 1996 *Vintage Guitar* magazine article, “Ted Greene – Solo Guitar” by Jim Hillman:** Solo Guitar was originally issued in 1977 in a limited edition.... Ted used two instruments on this project: a modified 1951 Nocaster/Telecaster, and a ‘60s Telecaster.... The ‘51 has a Gibson Humbucking pickup in the neck position and as Strat pickup in the middle position. Ted went straight into the board and used a Fender Vibratone [Ted’s written comment: “Wish I hadn’t”] (for a Leslie effect in a few spots). [The rest of this article/interview can be found in our “Articles & Interviews” section, and Ted comments on each song on the album.]

**From Barbara Franklin, in *My Life with the Chord Chemist*:**

...The most momentous event to occur at this time was the making and recording of his album *Solo Guitar*. Encouraged and produced by his friends, Leon White and William Perry, this project took many painstaking months to perfect and was released in 1977. There were many stories surrounding this tremendous effort, and this was purported to be a very trying albeit ultimately rewarding experience for all those involved. The album was re-released in 2004 on CD through Art of Life Records, and is still available.

**From *Just Jazz Guitar Magazine*, May 2000 article: “Classic Jazz Recordings: Ted Greene – Solo Guitar” by Adrian Ingram:**

[*All the tunes on this album*], while sound to have been double-tracked, were in fact recorded with no overdubbing whatsoever. Ted used his faithful old Fender Telecaster through a Twin Reverb for the entire session. His sound was enhanced by the addition of a small Leslie rotating speaker. The crystal clean sound was taken directly from the board, as well as the ambience of the Twin, resulting in a magnificently pure tone. Greene, as is his usual custom, also detuned his guitar by a whole step (a tone) which again added to the depth and fullness of the sound.

**And finally, from Ted Himself** – excerpts from a May 5, 2002 letter from Ted to Phil Brown:

Dear Phil,

Please excuse the huge, months-long delay in answering your note. I won’t even bother to explain. But to respond to your questions [*about my album*]:

- 1) String gauges, and
- 2) Tuning:

As best I can recall: on the songs “They can’t take that Away from Me”, “Send in the Clowns”, “Watch What Happens”, “A Certain Smile”, and “Danny Boy” I was definitely tuning down one 1/2 step (or within shouting distance) and using:

**13, 16 (or 15), 22 plain (or 24), 32 (or 34), 42 (or 44), 54(or 56).**

All in standard tuning, just down 1/2 step – except on “Danny Boy”, following Johnny Smith’s lead, the bass string down to D, i.e., an additional whole step (to Db concert).

On the tunes “Summertime/Not Necessarily So” (fragment), “Ol’ Man River” and “Just Friends”, the pitch of the guitar was down a small 3rd [3 1/2 steps] or again, within sight of same. And the gauges were now (expressed here a bit more formally),

**.014, .017, .024 plain (or .026), .036, .046, .058 (or .060 single-wrap, not the much quieter double-wrap strings).**

The guitars were all beloved Fender Telecasters: a '53 for the 1/2 step down tunes, and both a '51 and a '66 or '67 for the really low ones. All had Gibson Humbucker pickups in the neck position, usually sunk down pretty damn low, with the screw pole pieces extended up at various heights (for nice string balance). I like to hear the wood of a good Tele, and lowering the pickup "hides the magnet" from the strings quite a bit – warmer tone, less signal (2 coils is a tough call for an amp when combined with big strings). Raising the pole pieces also gives back some of the definition you lose by lowering a pickup so far.

...They did record me right into the board – I fought with them, but their board did the job and let my Teles speak with the voices I had worked all those hours to find them. They (the engineers and producers) were right and I was not. My amps were too noisy, so we had to go this route. I still play and cherish the '51 and '53.

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