

Three Things I Learned from Ted Greene

By Adam Levy



I studied with Ted Greene intermittently in the early- to late-1980s. I may have only had eight or 10 lessons with Ted over that seven-year span. In that small handful of hours, though, I learned *so* much — because Ted had so much to share and really knew how to share it. To me, that was his gift. He could very quickly assess a student's strengths and weaknesses, tap into the musical things that they were passionate about, and find clear ways to help them achieve their goals — if they were willing to work hard.

Now that Ted is no longer with us, what's left behind are his published books, students' lesson sheets posted on tedgreene.com,

his *Solo Guitar* album, and some wonderful video clips. I'm grateful that all of these exist. They continue to inspire and enlighten anyone who takes serious interest. Still, I sometimes feel that Ted's teachings are misunderstood by those who didn't have the opportunity to know him. For instance, lots of guitarists seem to think that Ted only appreciated music that was rich and complex. In my experience, however, he loved triads and simple melodies just as much as he loved altered-dominant sounds and Bach chorales. With that spirit in mind, I want to share three things that I learned from Ted — things that you might never know if you didn't have the chance to spend some time with him.

Voice-Leading Can Be Wonderful, But it's Not Compulsory

In one of my first lessons with Ted, he noticed that I didn't seem to be giving voice-leading much consideration. He suggested that I work on it — giving me a few guidelines to follow and a worksheet or two to practice. When I came back for my next lesson, I was nearly paralyzed with fear. I'd taken his advice too literally. I thought he meant: *You must perfectly voice-lead every chord movement at all times*. When he saw how petrified I was, he gently talked me out of my terror. Properly voice-led chord progressions can sound exquisite, and I should continue working on voice-leading concepts, he explained, but I should cut myself some slack and keep making music. The rules of species counterpoint can be very useful, but they're not meant to supersede musical creativity or intuition.

Good Music is Good Music

For my first lesson with Ted, I asked him about modern jazz harmonies — specifically, some voicings I'd heard pianist Don Grolnick play. When I went back for another lesson a couple years later, I'd been practicing lots of jazz and was studying guitar at the Dick Grove School of Music. Modern harmonies were coming easily to my ears and hands. The primary gigs I was doing at that time, however, were with an old-school rhythm-and-blues band. We played hit tunes and some deep cuts from the songbooks of Motown and Stax. That music seemed like it should be easier to play than, say, John Scofield tunes, but I had very little idea how to approach it. Considering Ted's reputation as the jazz-guitar Yoda, I felt a little silly asking him how to play four-chord songs. When I did, though, I discovered that he loved soul music too! I remember spending an entire lesson with Ted listening to Aretha Franklin records and Bill Doggett's "Honky Tonk, Part 1." Ted saw that that was where my heart was at that time, and also appreciated that this was the music that I was regularly getting paid to play. He wanted me to play it as best as I could. I could reharmonize "Stella by Starlight" with rootless 5-note voicings some other time, if I wanted, but there was no need to spend all of my practice hours on music that seemed somehow more "serious." Good music is good music, and work is work.

Loose Sketches of Tunes May Be More Useful than Air-Tight Arrangements

During the time that I studied with Ted, I was just beginning to write my own solo-guitar arrangements — though I wasn't actually playing solo-guitar gigs yet. I sent Ted an arrangement of "Somewhere" (from *West Side Story*) that I'd been working hard at. (In 1989, after I moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco, Ted let me do a few lessons via mail.) When he wrote back, his feedback was very helpful, if a little surprising. Firstly, he said that it was hard to say a lot about my arrangement without hearing me play it. (I'd written it out on manuscript paper, but had not sent him a cassette.) Secondly, he said that my arrangement looked like it would be very difficult to perform. Rather than crafting things that were nearly unplayable, he said, I might be better off writing arrangements that were more open. That way, when I had actual gigs, I wouldn't be sweating bullets — and there would be room to play more freely and extemporaneously. Once I started playing solo gigs on a regular basis, I *really* began to appreciate Ted's advice.

Ted may have given very different advice to other students. I know he did, in fact, because I sometimes arrived at my lessons a little early. When I did, I got to overhear the last few minutes of the previous student's lesson — hoping to learn just a little more. I heard Ted teach other students differently than he taught me. As I said earlier, that was his gift. He genuinely connected with each student, individually. I hope that by sharing my own experiences with Ted, I can help those who never knew him to read between the lines — and dots, and X's — just a bit.

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Guitarist Adam Levy is a recording and performing artist, music educator, and journalist, well-known for his work with Norah Jones, Ani DiFranco, Amos Lee, Jill Sobule, Tracy Chapman, Allen Toussaint, Chely Wright, Vulfpeck, and many other artists. As a solo artist, he has a dozen original recordings to his credit. Adam has several instruction books and video courses, teaches at Los Angeles College of Music, and has a popular YouTube series, *Guitar Tips*. As a journalist Adam has written hundreds of feature articles for *Guitar Player*, *Acoustic Guitar*, and *Fretboard Journal*. You can visit his site here: <http://www.adamlevy.com/> One of his *Guitar Tips* videos is titled, "[Dig Ted Greene](#)" — check it out!