

THE RANT AND RAVE GAZETTE

A Music Newsletter

Issue 14

Welcome to the fourteenth issue of the Rant. NOTE: the most recent rant comes up first with the past issues following. Cheers!

THE HOKEY POKEY

“YOU PULL YOUR LEFT FOOT OUT



"Mm Hmmm."

I don't know how many guitar students I've taught over the years, but it's probably in the hundreds. While I've taught for various institutions, the majority of the teaching I've done has been one-on-one.

You learn a lot about people when you teach. And you learn a lot about yourself. You also end up meeting some amazing individuals. While personalities and learning styles are all over the map in any student body, there are some interesting correlations between what a person does for a living and how they approach learning. It tickles me no end to see how other people view the world, because in the end of course, how they view the world is exactly how they are going to approach learning new music.

Guitar students come from all walks of life. Apart from the obvious musicians wanting to become better guitarists, I've taught firefighters, police, lawyers, ladies of the realm, bikers, cowboys, businessmen and professors in various fields. There are plenty of tales to go round, but let's start with four remarkable characters from the medical profession. Meet Sal, Rico, Bill and Rick.

Each profession seems to have its 'moccasin telegraph' - its internal intelligence system. People talk, and stuff gets around. For a period of time I ended up teaching a number of doctors and dentists. I guess the word got around. And I have to say, these folks were a lot of fun to teach. What they had in common was extreme intelligence and, in most cases, exceptional small motor skills, the reasons for which will become immediately apparent.

All four were specialists. Rick was a cardiologist, Sal a reconstructive surgeon, Bill a psychiatrist, and Rico a DDS. They were at the top of their professions and, by gum, they wanted to be better guitar players. Along with some heady conversations, the time we spent together was often full of laughter. Still, these guys were focused (as you might expect) and learning was first and foremost. And that's where it became interesting, because what each did in his professional life deeply affected how he approached music.

Predictably, Sal and Rico were the ones who exhibited the small motor skills from hell. It's a pretty safe bet that if either of them had decided to focus on becoming professional musicians, they would have kicked my ass around the block in a bare few years. Technically at least.

While I didn't get to know Rick or Bill all that well, both Rico and Sal became friends. Most weeks when Sal came in, I would ask him if 'anything interesting' had taken place the previous week. Well 'interesting' means something entirely different in the world of a surgeon. Stories of facial reconstruction necessary due to a shotgun blast, replacement of a non-functional esophagus with a section of small intestine, and the transplant of both hands on a patient were only three of these tales.

Rico's stories were equally jaw dropping. One of the mavericks in the then new world of laser dentistry, he invented the laser tip that would eventually be used to clean out the organic material filling the tiny capillaries in the roots of teeth during preparation for a root canal - the main cause of infection in this process. I saw the whole thing play out on an electron microscope video. He was also a hell of a golfer, winning the amateur Phoenix open and getting to play with Camilio Villagas. No flies on these guys.

As far as learning guitar went, the approach with all four tended to be, 'I want to do this particular thing or other on the guitar. What do I need to do to get the job done?' With Sal, Rico and Rick the focus was on the guitar and the song, followed by enough music and theory to allow them to move forward on their own. They all learned fast, but Rico was particularly adept at learning by watching me play.

His signature request was 'show me', after which I would play the passage I wanted him to learn (very often a Travis picking thing), then he would promptly play the damn thing back at me. 'Wow', I thought, 'how does he manage to do that so easily?' Then I realized: As a dentist Rico found himself working upside down and backwards all day long. And that was exactly what he was translating as he watched me play. Wonderful!

Unsurprisingly with Bill, the psychiatrist, the order of guitar and music/theory was reversed. Bill wanted to know the reason for doing what he was about to do. Great fun for me.

Sal, Rico, Bill and Rick had no trouble digesting structure, theory, complexity and the like. They were all easy candidates for MENSA. These are fellas with big brains. And it's a good thing too. I don't want some bozo wingin' it while he's working on my spleen. The areas of music that prove more challenging for the docs, lawyers and professors of the world tend to be improvisation and 'digging in' while playing. It involves letting go of the intellect to some degree, and that ain't easy.

Now, I'd like to introduce you to Wylie, a retired military guy who, late in life, fell in love with the Blues. He learned with his instinct. He felt things out and grabbed stuff that sounded good - 'Like you 'posed to' as the Blues masters say. With the necessary tools, I just got him to write Blues pieces, sing 'em, play the rhythm parts and the lead parts and record the damn things. By the time we were done, he had a full album of tunes. Again, great fun.

Somewhere, these two worlds come together. But it takes time. We're all on a road.

LITTLE GEMS

ADVICE THAT WAS WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD



"The art of improvisation is the expression of who YOU are. If you're playing licks, you're not playing."

THATS ALL FOR NOW FOLKS! SEE YOU NEXT TIME