

THE RANT AND RAVE GAZETTE

A Music Newsletter

Issue 22

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

THE HOKEY POKEY

“AND YOU SHAKE IT ALL ABOUT”



"This shaking business is getting a little old."

When this little Rant and Rave came into being, lo’ those many years ago, it included an episode on meeting a few of my guitar heroes. Those encounters were re-worked in my book, “A Guitar Player On The Yukon Border”. I thought I would include a few abbreviated versions of those chapters here.

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS WITH MY GUITAR HEROES

Two guitarists I would dearly like to have met were Wes Montgomery and Baden Powell. Wes was huge in my musical life. Thousands of guitarists were influenced by the man - the melodic sense, the innovation, the sound, but more important than all of that was the ‘feel’. Nobody could touch him. Jazz guitarists all over the globe shook their heads when they first heard Wes play. I sure did.

Baden Powell was a major figure in the Afro-Samba and Bossa Nova of his time. Like Wes, he was unique, and like Wes it was the innovation, the sound, and feel that set him apart. While meeting these guys didn’t end up being in the cards, I was lucky enough to meet several other of my heroes in the flesh.

I have to say ... it’s a little strange when you find yourself hanging with one or another of these people and you discover they aren’t floating six inches above the earth - that they have arms, legs and heads just like you. Then again, I can’t say the feeling ever quite goes away.

HOWARD ROBERTS

Every musician seems to have a recording that, they say, changed their lives. Howard Roberts’ ‘Goodies’ was that for me.

As soon as the needle hit the surface on ‘Goodies,’ my jaw dropped. I picked up the album cover and, lo’ and behold it was guitarist Howard Roberts. I was smitten - smitten as surely as if the Queen of Sheba had beckoned from across the room. I wanted to play this stuff and that was that. So I put my head down and started to woodshed. But it wasn’t easy ...

‘This thing can’t be in the key of Db can it? ... how many flats is that? ... how can anyone play in the key of Db? ... and there’s four chords in one bar right here ... that can’t be right can it? ... what’s wrong with these people?’

Still, I kept at it and eventually reached the point where I didn’t get kicked off the bandstand. The following years were lean, but I found that if I played and taught a little on the side, I could actually stay alive as a musician. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Then one day fate stepped in, and I managed to lop off the end of one of my fingers playing silly bugger on my motorcycle - one of the fingers on my left hand - not a good thing.

The sheer stupidity required to ride up a scree slope in nothing but a pair of flip flops and cutoffs defeats the imagination. What was I thinking? Predictably, I ended up flipping out, landing on my side and sandwiching my middle finger between the clutch lever and a nasty sharp piece of scree. The severed tip dropped through a hole in the rocks, never be to seen again.

At the ‘Centre for Repairing Injuries Sustained by Idiots,’ the doc asked me what I did for a living.

“I’m a guitar player,” I grunted.

“You’re kidding me,” he said. “Well , I suggest you start looking for an- other line of work.”

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Well, that wasn’t going to happen, so I decided to try and find a way to compensate. After all, if Django could play with two fingers, who am I to give up? Still, all of a sudden, I was sidelined for several months.

Not being able to play was discouraging, and I was at a loss for something to do; so I took all of the stuff I’d been teaching and assembled it with the intention of writing an instruction book.

Eventually, the book, ‘Jazz Improvising For the Rock/Blues Guitarist,’ got written and shopped around. I got an offer from Oak Publications, a rejection from Mel Bay, and a really nice hand written letter from Carole Kaye (Gwyn Publishing). The whole thing was encouraging, but mostly, I was excited about the manuscript I’d sent off to ‘Playback Publications’ - Howard Roberts’ new company.

I heard nothing for the longest time, then one afternoon the phone rang. It was some joker pretending to be Howard Roberts. I was pretty sure I was getting my chain yanked by one of my perverse pals, but the guy was doing such a good job that I thought I’d give him enough rope to hang himself.

“I’m interested in publishing your book ,” the impostor continued, “and I’m just wondering when you can come down to L.A.”

I took a breath.

“Oh ... so you want me to come down to L.A. do ya? Well you know what? ... I’ve got your publishing company right here in the crack o’ my ...”

The words were on the verge of tumbling out when it hit me that I might be talking to the man himself.

I don't recall anything of that conversation, but I can’t have stepped in it too badly, because several weeks later I was climbing out of my car behind Donte's jazz club in North Hollywood, where I was to meet the man who recorded ‘Color Him Funky’, ‘H.R. is a Dirty Guitar Player’, ‘Goodies’ etc, etc.

‘I remember the evening well. There was a chill in the air, and the russet leaves of early autumn were quaking in a light breeze. A dog barked in the distance ...’

There I was - a young guitar playing punk, sitting at the bar at Donte’s with Howard Roberts, waiting for Joe Pass to start his set. I was vibrating.

Howard was excited. In retrospect, he always seemed excited about something or other. He was a brilliant man who was enthusiastic about everything he did, and tonight he was enthusiastic about his latest composition technique - using the guitar neck as a canvas, designing shapes on it, then sifting them for musical gems.

He was, at the moment, sketching excitedly in the dust on the top of the bar with the index finger of one hand, and ordering seafood with the other. Now, I love this stuff, and I guess he could see that. A couple of drinks down the pike and we were having a fine old time. Then Joe Pass climbed onto the stage and all conversation stopped.

Howard and Joe were huge in the guitar world at the time, both having series’ of hit Jazz albums. Joe started his set, played a few tunes, then took a break to introduce a special guest in the audience. I was expecting him to point out Howard but I was wrong. He asked, instead, someone right behind us to stand up. I turned and, lo and behold, there stood Les Paul!

It was a memorable night and one heady experience for an aspiring young guitar player. After it was all over, I walked back to the parking lot with Howard only to discover that the battery in his car was dead. We ended up having to jump start it. My last memory of the night was pushing that car down the alley behind Donte’s and thinking, ‘Man, it doesn’t get any better than this!’

Howard loved to share knowledge. He changed the way I approached technical writing, showing me exactly how to edit and lay out an instruction book in order to make it successful. You just can’t buy this stuff. Mentors. Bless their hearts.

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A famous guitar graces the cover of ‘Goodies.’ It is an Epiphone, Howard Roberts model - an arch top with an oval sound hole - unusual to say the least. Howard used very heavy strings on that guitar, and the the sound just popped out of the instrument. It was big fat and juicy. Of course, a lot of it came down to the man himself.

During the period I was working out the details for the book, I was visiting Howard’s writing/publishing partner, Bob Grebb, a great jazz guitar player in his own right. In his office, leaning against the wall, was a guitar I recognized immediately.

“Is that it Bob?” I said, pointing at the guitar.

“That’s it,” he replied, knowing exactly what I was talking about.

“Can I?” I said.

“Of course.”

I picked it up and saw the neck was warped beyond repair. I looked back with raised eyebrows.

“14’s,” he laughed. “He used 14’s on that thing,” (an extremely heavy set of strings for any neck). “It just couldn’t take it anymore.”

LITTLE GEMS

ADVICE THAT WAS WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD



“No man is an island” George Albert Lucas

THATS ALL FOR NOW FOLKS! SEE YOU NEXT TIME