

Tal Farlow Interview Part 1 Conducted by Stuart Nicholson on 23rd September 1981

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Q: When you left Philadelphia for New York, I understand you roomed with Jimmy Raney, a fellow guitarist

TF: Well, we lived in the same apartment house in New York, we were there for the purpose of joining the Union

Q: The 802

TF: Right. You had to spend six months in the jurisdiction, you know? You had to become a resident of the city in order to qualify — we all belonged to other locals, but you had to establish residence for six months before you could work as a member of the 802, that's what we were all doing there together, trying to get by.

Q: What was the story of Sal Salvador's food parcels?

TF: His parents had a big store in Springfield, Massachusetts, and a big cardboard box would arrive with various things

Q: And you worked with Buddy DeFranco around this time?

TF: Yes, I worked with Buddy in Les Croupiers — he had Milt Jackson on vibes and John Levy on bass — John went with George Shearing

Q: Then came an interesting point in your career — working with Red Norvo and Charlie Mingus in Red's trio and then working with bandleader Artie Shaw, and back to Red Norvo. Those

recordings with Artie Shaw I've not heard, they're pretty rare — in the UK at least — so perhaps we could kind of contrast your experiences with Artie Shaw and Red Norvo. Can we start with Artie Shaw?

TF: That was 1954, I guess

Q: What sort of character was he?

TF: Well, he was a terrific musician, a stickler for perfection; he liked playing very clean, and no guesswork, so that involved a lot of rehearsing

Q: Could you read [music] at this time?

TF: I didn't have to on that gig because the things were pretty simple — they repeated, you know, riff type of things — it was no problem to learn them...there was music I think though...yeah, it was no problem. I could learn it as fast as we rehearsed it, very simple things, not that involved, and I had actually played several of the things that he had played in the past with the previous Gramercy Five — that's what he called the group — I had played them before with other groups, I had heard them before, I knew those lines

Q: I've read he had a good ear

TF: Oh *yeah!* He was very, very...you know...he knew what he was doing! I was with him about six months, maybe a little bit longer, I played with him all over the U.S.

Q: Did you enjoy that work

TF: Yeah, I was different for me because as you say, I had been with Red before that. Red played a looser style, and the tempos we played on average were much brighter. You see Artie, he got into the business when dancing was the thing, and he always continued to think of that when he counted off the tempo, he had that sort of in the back of his mind — or maybe in the front of it! He

would do these bouncy things, but they were a lot different — like with Red we'd play real uptempo, real fast, the instrumentation — not having drums or piano — called for a little more movement, so things don't drag, you know, with just guitar, vibes and bass

Q: Those things first came out on Discovery I believe

TF: That was the original label, they came out on other labels too I think

Q: Yes, Savoy put them out, that's where I got my copy. They were very fast, some of those things, quite a challenge I would think, those tempos

TF: Yes, at first. I had come from a society type thing, they played for dancing with no real fast things at all. Red had, er, well I heard him before I ever knew him, with Woody Herman, he was featured on things like 'The Man I Love' and 'I Surrender Dear', things like that where he would play it slow at first, at a sort of swing tempo then he would play at a real fast tempo, and we were doing trio versions of those things — I got along on the first two parts, but the last part I couldn't keep up! I was...I didn't have any choice, I had to do it, and the way I originally got by, before I developed the ability to keep up with him, there were things that fell real easy on the guitar, sort of gimmick type things, which you can play real fast and I would fall back on them until I got my speed up and be a little creative at the same time, but I worked on it, I guess I was at an age where I could sort of learn fast

Q: Sink or swim

TF: yeah, that's right, keep going or go back to New York! That was real good for me, you know when you are put in a situation when you have to do something, there was just no choice

Q: How did the gig come about

TF: I replaced Mundell Lowe in Red's trio. Mundell was working with him, I had never heard them so I didn't know they played that fast! Mundell had a commitment with Frankie Laine, he was

going on the road with him, and Red had been working around the East, but his home is in California, he wanted to go back there and I didn't have any reason not to go there, so...and I had wanted to go to California, and that was the ticket for me, and I went out there and spent quite a bit of time out there. I was with Red for about two years and we worked around California and we made a couple of tours and ended up with me being in New York and going all the way back to California!

Q: So you were settled in California at this time

TF: Yeah, I got so I spent more time there than any place else during that period, it was sort of strange after I had gone to all that trouble to get an 802 card — I had just got it and I left New York and stayed away. But it was fruitful in that Red got me a 47 card as we worked so much in California — it wasn't strictly by the rules of the Union; he went before the board and explained that I had been working with him and I was an essential part of his group, and he asked them to give me a card and they did without me having to put in the six months work, which I couldn't afford to do, which was a real bonus. There's real history there now 'cos since then they have sent me a Gold Card — sort of combination Senior Citizen and honorary philanthrope! I got it here, I don't have to pay any dues! Actually, I should have one from New York, I was in that one longer but they say you've got to go up there and ask for it — in other words, they'll accept your dues so long as you're willing to pay!

Q: When you came back to New York, you went into a club...

TF: Yeah, for there I went into a place called the Composer in New York with Eddie Costa and Vinnie Burke, Eddie played the piano and vibes, Vinnie on the bass and I worked around the eastern part of the country when they closed down

Q: What was your thinking then, because it wasn't long before you retired, or withdrew from the scene

TF: Not retirement, more out of the public eye, I was still playing

Q: You were married by then

TF: Yes, but still working. I didn't really miss that New York scene. Also, I'm a sign writer and I did some of that work, and then I would do the occasional jazz festival — Newport and things like that. But I stayed out of working in New York for about ten years, that took me to '68-'69 I guess and then I worked in a room called The Frammis with my trio — Johnny Knapp and Lyn Christie. It was a real nice gig, and then I started to do more jazz concerts, you know, George Wein things, Newport festivals — they got moved to New York in about 1970 or so, they got out of hand — he started putting rock groups in with the jazz and you've got the two elements there that didn't get along with one another.

Q: So, you've got your Gold Card, senior citizen, looking around today at the current crop of guitarists coming up in jazz, what are your impressions

TF: Some of them do real interesting things, I don't listen to enough of it to be any kind of authority on it, but a lot of them...I started teaching a few years ago, at home, and I got a lot of guys — if not most of them — out of the rock thing, they wanted to get into jazz, a little more harmonically involved

Q: Do you read [music] now?

TF: Yes, not real fast, I'm not a good reader but I can do it

Q: So you were self-taught, playing by ear to Charle Christian I understand

TF: All by ear, yes, I memorised the choruses of the record, I mean if you play it over and over — like learning a language you know!

Q: So things have moved on in jazz guitar since Charlie Christian, not least by you, so how does he now stand in the guitar pantheon

TF: He was the first one I heard, that's a little different to getting in and playing and later hearing someone, and I think just the novelty of hearing the electric guitar at that time was sort of attractive, because it had always been buried in the rhythm section in the jazz band or dance band. Dance bands were very popular then, most of the jazz came from the dance bands, the amplifier brought the guitar up to where it could hold its own with the sax and trumpet

Q: Have you worked in a big band

TF: No, the electric guitar is much more valuable in a small group

Q: You're back on the scene again, how have you found things away from your local scene in Sea Bright

TF: Well the last two years I've been really busy, almost too busy, mostly going around from one place to another, with local bass players and drummers — I'd sure prefer to have my own group but that way it's just a little bit unsure — putting up three guys instead of one and travelling by aeroplane and staying in hotels, it nibbles at the profit. They have at most every location I've played, they have a real good drummer and bass player and it works out well for them 'cos they're home, they're working all the time with different people coming through, that's the way it is. But I do prefer an organised group which I have at home, but I can't take them any place! There's several places I play, where I live — especially in the summertime 'cos it's sort of a resort area, a lot of people from the city come there

Q: You mention your own group, who is in that?

TF: Well, I have a bass player called Gary Mazzaroppi, I use him all the time, and one of half a dozen drummers if the gig calls for it

Q: But do you do seem to prefer working without a drummer

TF: It gives you a different kind of freedom, you're free to reshape the harmonies 'cos the bass player is going to play the fundamentals and you're not going to stray that much, that you know, you'll clash with him otherwise — a lot of things we have; we know where it's going, we've made the change in it and we both know it and without a drummer there it doesn't matter, then with the vibes I have to cue him in, so that's one kind of freedom. The other thing is that when you're playing with drums you sort got a rhythmic frame — with the bass and vibes, the bass is responsible for time, but with drums the bass player can play with me harmonically — in fact we've got a thing we do where I've got a frequency divider which drops the guitar down an octave when it comes out of the amplifier, and that puts me exactly in his range, he's very good at playing up high on the bass — almost in the guitar range — so we just swop roles, and with the drums it's like nothing has changed, nobody has to be told to do anything, we just change one to the other — it's different!

Q: Did you bring this device on tour?

TF: No, it's built into a stool and it's a bit cumbersome to carry, its not really that big, it's a very tiny little thing, I made it in about 1965. I first heard it with Eddie Harris but you couldn't get them for guitar; a horn can sustain — he can hold the note — so I did the obvious thing, I just amplified to where there was enough signal (not out of the loudspeaker), it was amplified to drive the divider, it has to have a signal so that it knows what to divide, so I just boosted it up real high and clipped the transient — the first part of the note — so that it did in fact sustain, and it worked okay.

Q: My goodness. It's funny, every guitarist I've known is also into electronics but this is another level, have you patented your idea so you can market it?

TF: No, it's not anything you can patent, it's called a flip-flop, er, that's the slang for it, it's really a bi-stable multi-vibrator, a circuit that picks out every other cycle. You have 440 cycles that represents A natural, you just eliminate every other cycle and you've got 220, which is down an octave — and they're the basis of computers and computers have been around for a long time, a

long time before transistors they had vacuum tubes for computers then. As you say, all guitarists...

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(Continued in Tal Farlow Interview Part 2)