

## Tal Farlow Interview Part 2 Conducted by Stuart Nicholson on 23rd September 1981

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Continued From Part 1

TF: ...are into electronics! I guess I got interested in all this because with an electric guitar you're involved with an amplifier and that's what gets you interested, and I guess others too. [Bassist] Red Mitchell was into electronics, this was back in the fifties, he sort of got me interested. I bought a couple of those kits you put together, they give you all the parts and you make an amplifier or whatever. I built a couple of those things, this sort of learned me the very basic things, about voltage, resistance, capacitors and things like that, but I really had to get a little deeper into it to make the divider — I burnt some holes in the rug with the soldering iron!

Q: You've had a remarkable career...

TF: Well, I guess for me I would say having known guys that I consider as real remarkable performers was remarkable for me. I just enjoy what I'm doing now, playing. I mean, I haven't done any writing speak of, other than a couple of riff tunes for an album, er, I'm just happy playing, you know, trying to keep that going

Q: Can we back track for your thoughts on Red's trio with you and Charles Mingus, as Mingus...

TF: Mingus got known for being sort of volatile, but that was after he left us. We didn't have anything like that, he was a very sensitive guy, you know? He was in a sort of vulnerable position at that time, but I thought it went pretty well between us

Q: And again, contrasting that with Artie Shaw, did he socialise after the gig?

TF: Somewhat, yeah. At the time he was married to Doris Dowling — an actress — and she was with him most of the time, so the rest of us, we didn't have our wives with us, we were sort of, you know, hanging out in twos and threes. I got to be with Tommy Potter most of the time, the bass player, and he got interested in electronics, and we were playing in Chicago, we found a place that would provide a kit to build a radio, and he and I put one together in the hotel room! We had one of my favourite pianists in the band, Hank Jones, and it started out with Denzil Best on drums..

Q: So a lot of guys who, for want of better words, were from the modern school, then, while Shaw was from the previous generation, the swing generation — did he adapt to modern trends with you guys?

TF: Yeah, he could do it. But I think he had such a big success with what he had done before that I think he couldn't help but show a little allegiance — this whole thing was put together with the help of a guy named Ralph Watkins who owned The Embers — a club. Before that he had owned different clubs on 52nd Street — like a ghetto of jazz clubs — and he knew the business inside out, and he knew Artie Shaw and I guess they talked about Artie making a return. He's been off the scene for I don't know how many years, but it was a long time. So, actually Ralph helped get the band together, and every one of us who worked in that band had worked in The Embers — we were all Embers alumni 'cos I had been there with Red about three different times, and stayed a long time each time. In fact, I wasn't even in New York when I read in *Downbeat* that I was in his group! When I got back to New York they said they had been trying to call me, so I then went to a rehearsal, and we rehearsed — to show you what a perfectionist he was, The Embers was sort of a spotlight place, you know, all the celebrities came there, and so he took the group prior to the Embers engagement, which that was what it was put together for, he took us to Boston, like they take stage shows to break them in out of town, get them cleaned up, make little adjustments, fine tuning and get it just so for New York, and that's what we did in Boston and played a couple of other dates elsewhere and then we had the grand opening night at The Embers in New York. The first night there the young lady was playing cocktail piano there, and then they announced the great Artie Shaw was making a return to the nightlife, and the place was just packed with celebrities — everywhere you looked there was a face you'd seen on television or in the papers or

something, and we had to get on the bandstand first. I went over and reached over and turned the switch on the amplifier so the tubes would warm up and he had his clarinet sticking on a peg, and I knocked the clarinet over and it fell against the base of a microphone, so I just set it back up there and forgot about it. And we got on the bandstand and then Art makes his entrance to a standing ovation and he gets up on the bandstand and he picks up his clarinet and asks Hank Jones to give him a A and he goes 'ding' and Artie goes 'parp'! So I went the colour of purple and so he turns to me and says, 'Has any anybody been messing with my horn here?' — only not quite so nicely — and so I said, 'I bumped it when I turned my amplifier on, it fell over'. He went quiet for a couple of seconds and then he said, 'It sure as hell won't play!' But he had another on on the piano, and he took that one and went on and played it, and I sat there thinking come the end of the set he's gonna to wrap that clarinet around my neck or else he's gonna go off for another 15 years and nobody will know where he is! So after the first set I was talking to him and he said, 'You made nightmare come true for me tonight, I've often been asleep and woken in a cold sweat and dreamt that I'm on a concert stage and a key falls off my clarinet — you made it come true!' He was real nice about it, after...But later on we played Chicago where all the music companies are based — most of them, anyway — the Gibson company, who make my guitar — so that when you work with a guy with a name as big as Shaw, they sometimes give you an instrument so you can endorse it and they use it in their advertising, so they gave me a brand new guitar from the man who was head of artist relations at Gibson — a nice man — and so I invited him to be my guest when he came to see Artie Shaw. His wife was curious to see this guy who had married all these film stars, they didn't go out at night, but they did a matinee Saturday afternoons, so they decided to come in then. So we were playing this first set on this Saturday afternoon, and I saw them come in, and they sat down in front of me, so we finished the set, and I put this new guitar on the top of the piano — and it was still plugged-in and the amplifier was still on, and Artie — I had walked off the bandstand — Artie was swabbing his clarinet out, and he put it on the piano and as he walked away he tripped over my cord and pulled the guitar down on the floor, it hit the floor with the amplifier still on and it went WHAMMMM and the guy from Gibson just kind of looked at me in a real pained way! But it didn't damage it! Artie said, 'I got even with you didn't !!'

Q: When did you develop your personalised guitar for Gibson?

TF: In about 1961-62. They started doing what they call an artist series — Barney [Kessel] did one, Johnny Smith did one and a guy not on the jazz scene, Trini Lopez did one

Q: Did you have any say in the design or any features you wanted to incorporate?

TF: I did the design, actually. But they didn't follow it very closely, in fact the guitar I have with me is the prototype of the one they produced — it's not like the one they produced, my copy of that got stolen at an airport, I think that's where it went anyway, somewhere between San Francisco and Newark, so I've been playing this prototype, it's a different colour — basically — as far as the dimensions go, it's the same thing

Q: What did you incorporate in your model

TF: The only thing novel on it they couldn't do, they declined to do it because they felt sure they would get them back for repair, was instead of having two stationary pick-ups on it, I suggested they make one on a track that could be moved into the finger board and the bridge, and that would cover all situations.. I proposed they use one pick-up and move it from one place to the other, but they said they were pretty sure it would develop rattles or whatever, all that circuitry that was necessary would pick up a lotta noise, interference, and so out through the amplifier and they would get them back in great quantities to the factory to be repaired, and they said they wanted to avoid that if they can. So they went ahead and put two pick-ups on it, so there's not really anything novel about it, except maybe the colour!

Q: One thing I notice about your style is that, perhaps more than most guitarists, you use harmonics in playing the melody sometimes and in your improved line...

TF: Yeah, well I started doing it with Red, we had a couple of tunes that were well rehearsed where he and I played as if were written, together, and by playing harmonics it puts me in his register, it blended well with the vibes and it attracted people's interest. It's not really hard to do, I guess most guys can do it, Chuck Wayne can do it...

Q: And Johnny Smith on 'Moonlight In Vermont', that big hit he had...

TF: I'm sure he can do it, there's not much he can't do! We both came to New York about the same time — he wasn't with us — he had just gotten out of the Army — I knew him when he was in the Army, he was stationed near Philadelphia, I was working there and he used to come in and jam, he used to play my guitar, tuned the strings down...

Q: Do you still see him, he seems to have disappeared from the scene

TF: He still shows up at concerts in the western part of the country, like Concord and down in Texas and Oklahoma. But see, he has this big music store in Colorado Springs in Denver, he's very successful, he's got his own aeroplane — he flies his own plane — he's got a fishing boat in California, really doing well. I remember when he went out there, I was still in New York when he left, and he had a daughter that had an asthma problem and he told me he was going to move out there for her health, it seemed like a strange place for a musician, but he sure made it work for him, he's really a genius type of guy, he can play any instrument and he has perfect pitch — he can listen to that music and tell you what key it's in, what notes they're playing — he really is an unusual guy, a real nice guy too, a lotta times he has helped guys around New York, including myself, he was a staff musician for NBC for a long time

Q: In what way did he help you?

TF: Just answering questions, I was interested in some help in learning how to read, and gigs he passed me

Q: If you were talking to your students what would you say about the importance of reading, notation, as opposed to chord symbols, although plenty of arrangements still use chord symbols and a small amount of notation

TF: Well, more is expected of a guitarist now. When I was starting you could get by — as you say — just by reading chord symbols, and that's not very hard, and of course, at that time — as well as now — there were guys playing classical guitar, so reading is really one of the essential things. See, I haven't been qualified to do studio work, so I'm sure that's made my life different 'cos that's where the money is, for a lotta guys, i mean it keeps you home

Q: You sound if you'd have liked to have done studio work

TF: Sure, but now I don't think I would, 'cos er, well, I don't really know, it's never been possible for me to do it, so I'm sorta still looking at it from the outside

Q: Your association with Red goes way back to the late forties, early fifties, but you're still working together now, so can you bring us up to date?

TF: Well, his home is in Santa Monica, California and we sometimes used to run into each other on the road, more often at jazz festivals, like the Newport Jazz festival, or something like that; if we were working on the same day they would always put us together, give us a bass player and call it the Red Norvo Trio. But I don't know where the idea to play are regularly with each other really started, I was for it, and I guess Red was too. I think it probably started with Concord records about getting back together, we were going to get Red Mitchell, but he wasn't in the country. When we started again Red [Norvo] had been working with a guy from Washington called Steve Novasel, he had been working on and off with him for about five years and he liked the way he played, I do too, so we got him and we rehearsed for a week at my house in Sea Bright and went into Michael's Pub, but things come up that he's been doing through the years and things that I've been doing, which doesn't include each other, but it eventually works out so it looks like we'll keep it that way for the future — he's 73...

Q: A recent release here by Concord called *On Stage* had you both featured

TF: Yeah, that came out not too long ago, but it was taped in '76 with Jake Hanna on drums and Hank Jones on piano. But I'm not proud of that record, I didn't play well on that! But there's

another in the works with my group called *Chromatic Palette* with Tommy Flanagan on piano and Gary Mazzaroppi — my friend from Jersey — on bass. It's the best Concord one I've done anyway. I don't know who fixes the name for these things, but it's okay...

Q: I'm surprised at what you say about *On Stage* — there's some nice moments in there

TF: I don't remember what it was, but it was an uncomfortable scene and I don't remember for why, but er, also, taping a concert you...anything that is individual is lost in recording, people react and you hear them and you can't figure out listening what they are responding to, it's something they are seeing, not what they are hearing, you know? For instance, if I play, you can hear if I'm playing harmonics, but sometimes I play a chord [picks up guitar] and I put this finger over and play with this finger and pick like that...you know? And you might or might not know what I'm doing by listening to the record, and if you hear people react you don't know that's what I'm doing — you wonder what's happening — maybe my pants fell down!

Q: Well, Jake Hanna, the old Woody Herman drummer from the sixties wasn't he, plays well in small groups as well, which is not always the case for big band drummers

TF: Yeah, that's true, but I think he's got a position with Concord, as well as playing...really what got me this busy was er, that Concord opened up a big office in New York — it does more than just distribute records — they are putting packages together, like this thing now with Red, that's one thing. The other thing that got me into New York was, er, a TV documentary on me an hour long, TV show, it hasn't seen TV yet but it's in the theatres in New York and Carnegie Hall Theatre, done by a guy named Lorenzo DeStefano, he produced it, raised all the money for it, I didn't get to see it for a long time, working all the time, finally, we got out to California, when I got out there, he borrowed or rented a theatre and showed it to about 150 of us...so...it's okay.

Q: Is a retrospective thing or does it cover your 'comeback', if that's the right word...

TF: Everything. They even got me painting a sign on a boat, the stern of a boat, all kinds of things, and its got a lot of interviews with people I know — it starts with George Benson saying how big my hands are!

Q: So you enjoyed the TV thing but you don't like listening to your records??

TF: It's hard to be objective. But I have records I made some time ago and not heard the playback on them, and played them years later and not known who it was! My style, though, hasn't changed over the years, I don't think, that's real hard to do, I think you grow into a style and at a certain age it sort of becomes set. But in a small, limited way i have tried to change, and it doesn't really change that much, maybe a little different approach to harmony, I've also tried to develop the technique so that, say for instance you can play intervals as fast as scales, things like that [pause, picks up guitar again] it mean jumping around a bit [demonstrates] ...I always tried to play not entirely scale-wise and not entirely wide intervals but just completely at home with any kind of harmonies, which is sort of what you do when you improvise, making new melodies instead of changes...

WIND UP

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