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IMAGINE THIS...

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is all  
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# the ToneQuest

*The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone* Report™  
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## The Top Loader

*"Sometimes you have to play a long time to be able to play like yourself."  
– Miles Davis*

*A few especially, gloriously twisted players possess the power to spark an uncomfortable bout of soul searching when we experience their music first-hand. You needn't even find the music itself remotely approachable enough to attempt to play, but when we hear something that is conceived with extraordinary creativity and a unique signature that defies imitation, it is always hard to ignore. Melodic passages linger in the mind as an endless and persistent loop, constantly remind-*



*ing us of the sheer potential of the guitar, if not the very soul of man, and perhaps how little of it we may have mined ourselves in the time we have given over to the instrument. Do these savants of the 6-string hear things that are unavailable to mortal minds? Are their powers of perception so much wider and deeper, or have they simply sacrificed more time in diligently exploring what is not so easily unearthed through casual, if constant noodling?*

*The devoted connoisseur of tone is further insulted when seemingly brilliant minds eschew the pursuit of tone and any obvious obsession with gear – as if it were of no consequence whatsoever. But of course, inevitably, it is of consequence, even if the quest has been prematurely consummated. The object of our probe in this edition will be best known to those of you that, given the choice of owning*

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only one guitar (imagine that), would choose to play a Telecaster. Despite a prolific, remarkably varied and impressive body of work that encompasses seven solo records, the critically acclaimed 2006 release by the Little Willies with Norah Jones, a recent tour with Martha Wainright, and countless session appearances, Jim Campilongo has paid his dues in relative commercial obscurity that belies both his rare talent and his stature as one of the most creative and inventive guitarists of our time, or any time.



Indeed, upon much reflection while listening to his work, we slowly began to realize that Jim Campilongo's journey to a place where space reigns supreme was born from his desire to experience music created by a trio of musicians in which the guitar is perceived as one voice among three... where the existence of space lavished upon him the free-

dom to explore melodies, sounds, songs ... and perhaps the least-used, yet most effective effect available to guitarists... silence. We speak of the art of hanging a note, a chord, or a musical thought long enough to allow it to fully develop, bloom and decay, which seems so rare today. May you not be judged by the number of notes you play, but how and when you choose to play them. The result of Campilongo's exploration of space defies easy categorization. Although his influences were once readily revealed in the 10 Gallon Cats and the past work of Roy Buchanan and Merle Haggard sideman Roy Nichols, Jim Campilongo the artist now resides in New York fully matured, and any debts to his former heroes have been paid in full. Campilongo is his own man now, freely roaming the considerable musical landscape that can be traversed with an electric guitar as only a Telecaster can. Live from Union Square... Grant Greene meets Roy Buchanan, and oh, how you will dig it.

So, we invite you to log on to [www.tonequest.com](http://www.tonequest.com) and experience the music of Jim Campilongo as his story unwinds in these pages as told from a brownstone in Brooklyn – the perfect setting for a California dreamer, where all the leaves are indeed brown, the sky is grey, and the chances are quite good that Jim Campilongo has indeed been for a walk on this winter's day. Afterall, how else does one get around in New York? Enjoy...

**TQR:** How did you initially become swept up by music made with a guitar?

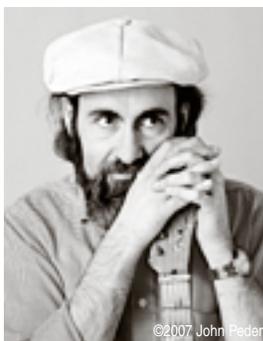


I was about 12 and it was my sister's music coming through the wall at first – the Yardbirds, Dylan and other stuff like Joni Mitchell... I never really cared for Bob Dylan to be honest, but I really explored

music on my own. If there was one song on a side of an LP, I'd buy it, sight unseen. I got John Coltrane Live in Japan with one song called "Peace on Earth." I liked really long jams... Then I got the Allman Brothers, and I heard Roy Buchanan on the radio, and that really moved me. I was also into Lonnie Mack, and I forget to mention him enough. I was into John McLaughlin's "Devotion" before I ever had an instrument. I'll always remember that because I was thirteen, and when I went to buy the record I was 10 cents short... the record was \$1.81 or something and the guy just let me have it. I felt very mature and old back then, and I would take these records home and listen to them on headphones. I was doing whatever I could to find a higher consciousness... this thing that I knew existed that I couldn't articulate.

**TQR:** That's very interesting – how you searched out the music before you had picked up an instrument... It's usually the opposite.

Yeah, I always read interviews where guys say they picked up the guitar to get girls, and I wonder if they really meant that? The sound of the guitar was so moving to me. I'm almost embarrassed to say that the music I dug then is still the music that I think sounds really good today... Duane Allman's guitar sound was great, and Roy Buchanan's tone on the first record was amazing.



**TQR:** How did you get your hands on a guitar?

I got a guitar from a kid across the street who had gotten it with green stamps, and he could play "Let It Be," which really impressed me. So I started taking lessons when I was 14, and it was really hard. I was amazed at how bad I was, but I stuck

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with it for a year. Eventually I quit, because my teacher was really into George Van Epps and Howard Roberts, and while they are really cool to me now, they weren't at all then. I began taking lessons from a local rock guitar guy in San Francisco, and he showed me Cream songs, which was like finding the motherload – having 20/20 vision into what I really wanted.

**TQR:** And you were growing up in San Francisco...



Yeah, we used to go to Winterland and see really great music. San Francisco was a different city then in the '60s, '70s and even the '80s, before AIDS and the dot com thing... It was a great town to play

music – a little chaotic and very liberal. I was making a living at 18 playing music in 1976. I say this with some pain, but I remember playing at least two wedding parties every weekend for years, and people still want the same music... "New York, New York," "La Bamba," "Twist & Shout," and I believe we did "YMCA." I consider myself an artist now who is trying to get better, but at 20 I was playing these songs that people still want to hear today, and that's sad. Why on earth do people still want to hear "Woolly Bully"? I don't understand why people aren't a little more adventurous...

**TQR:** How did your access to various instruments evolve? I know Roy Buchanan was a big influence, but how did you move beyond the green stamp guitar?



I saw Roy Buchanan about 45 times, by the way... That was a big part of my education. But access to different instruments evolved very haphazardly. I played an acoustic for several years, and we would stick a microphone in it. Then I got a Teisco that I played for awhile until I got a Gibson 330. From there I got a sunburst Les Paul, then a '54 goldtop that I played for about seven years. I really



thought it sounded like a Tele, and I had tried to get that tone out of every guitar I owned. That one sounded great, even though it had a replaced neck on it. Some old blues guy bought it from me in the early '90s when I needed the money. It had never played in tune, but my friends would hear it on a recording and think it was a Tele. Then I played a red Japanese reissue Strat for a couple of years, followed by a blue '62 Strat that I still have. But I still wasn't into a Telecaster. In 1988 I finally got a '72 Tele, and it was really hard to play... It was heavy and had that real sticky neck thing going on. I also had a Thinline Tele that was heavily modified with Bill Lawrence pickups, and I played a Bigsby copy built by Johnny Dilks, with my name inlaid

in the neck. At that time I had gotten into Jimmy Bryant, and the guitar was modeled after one that Hank Garland played. Then I got a Ransom Tele that was OK, before I got the '59 Telecaster that was given to me by a guy named John Jensen, who took lessons from me. I never felt that much of a bond with all the guitars I had played before – they all presented a bit of a struggle. The '59 was the first one that I really bonded with in a meaningful way. To be honest, I'm not obsessed with guitars – I'm obsessed with *music*. I don't mean to alienate anyone reading this, but I will see a band, come home, and someone will ask me what model of instruments they played and I won't even have noticed.

**TQR:** When did you get the '59?

Around 1993, and it's beginning to feel kind of worn out to me now.



**TQR:** How has your choice of amps changed over time?

Not much... *Fender, Fender, Fender, Fender, Fender, Fender* (laughing), and they have gotten progressively smaller. I remember going to Red's Guitar Warehouse in Cupertino when I was twenty-something and there was a Randall salesman there and he said, "Why do you want

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to play this Fender amp when you could play through a Randall?" I tried it, and what I heard just didn't sound like a guitar to me. Other than a Kalamazoo that I had for a minute,

I have always played through Fender amps. My first was a silverface master volume Twin. I used that for years and I thought it was a great sounding amp. Although people have run away screaming from them, I think the silverface Fender amps are really great. The 'red knob' series actually sounded pretty good – a good clean sound, and if you played a hollow body through them the sound was awesome.

After the Twin, I played a silverface Vibrolux Reverb for about ten years. I had bought it in high school for \$75, but I had been using Twins for so long that the Vibrolux never seemed loud enough or big enough. After a bit of a weaning period I finally became accustomed to the Vibrolux and played that one amp for years. It was all I owned. Then right before I moved to New York six years ago, I bought a blackface Princeton Reverb. I blew a speaker here in New York and I had to borrow an amp, but no one else's amp seemed to meet my standards. I have my amps serviced about every four months with new old stock power tubes and whatever else it might need, like if a cap needs to be replaced. I have a stash of unmarked military 6V6s. Bill Finnigan (Klon) told me I should get a few more amps instead of relying on just one, so I bought a silverface Princeton with a Celestion speaker that just sounds incredible. I used it on the Martha Wainwright record, among other things. I'll also take a blackface Vibro-Champ on sessions, and I've used it on my records.

**TQR:** You mentioned that you played a gig in front of 10,000 people with your single blackface Princeton...



Yes, with Martha Wainwright, and I also had the opportunity to play with Martha and Pete Townshend at Shepard's Bush. It was funny because older, experienced



guys were coming up to me and remarking about how strong the Princeton was. I mean, we had a rock drummer in the band formerly with the Black Crowes, and I used that amp with the Little Willies and sometimes it

was too much. I played a church in Brighton Beach and I had to turn my amp around. A Princeton on '10' that is totally tuned up with great tubes and a Telecaster that wants to make sound when it's unplugged...you'll move air and get into the mains and let a soundman do his job. If I go out again with Martha, I may take the Vibrolux, because there was one gig where I had to stand in one certain place to hear myself on stage. I couldn't really walk around. That date was awful, because it was at an outdoor festival, you couldn't hear anything and the sound was constantly changing, and I thought at the time I could have really used the Vibrolux. I was downstroking more to try and force it out because I couldn't hear, and it was changing my right hand. But I've been telling anyone who will listen about Princeton reverb amps, especially here in New York.

**TQR:** One of the very first articles we ever published was on the blackface Princeton, and how Dave Boze blueprinted them and replaced the baffle board for a 12" speaker...



I have one of those. It's not my favorite, but I like to use it with my ES225. The great thing

about living here is that there is a lot of work, and back in San Francisco, it got to where there wasn't any work, so every two weeks I'd play this kind of important gig where maybe 100 people would show up, and you gotta look good. You aren't gonna go, "We're gonna do this Duke Ellington song that no one has ever played, it's in B flat, fellas, and when we're finished let's talk about the arrangement." But you can do that in New York at these restaurant gigs and work on your craft. I've booked three next month at this little restaurant near Union Square, everybody ignores you, and it's almost like if you can

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hear yourself, you're too loud. It's a great opportunity to woodshed new tunes. I have to play maybe 35 songs... and that's when I'll bring my ES225 and the 12 inch Princeton.

**TQR:** You know, a lot of people would consider your '59 top loader Tele the least desirable ever made, and then you commit the unholyest of sins by replacing your pots, for God's sake...

Yeah... this is what I tell people. If I show up at a gig or a session and my rig is making noise, it's like showing up drunk. I tell my students to just play one of my guitars – don't bother schlepping your guitar across town. And the reason is that most of the time their guitars are messed up... they have bad jacks, or the pots crackle and make noise, and I don't want to spend five minutes on that.

**TQR:** And you use .009s... No "bigger strings, bigger tone?"

I've always used them, and I do think that bigger strings have a better feel and up the real estate of your guitar a bit. Sometimes the .009s feel like a thread, but I do get a really big sound, and I think a lot of it is related to how I set up my amps. I put the bass on '10,' and if there is a middle control, I'll set that on '10,' too. I'm flattered when people say that they are surprised that I get such a big sound with .009s.

**TQR:** Well, let's say your cutting tracks in the studio for one of your own records... How do you typically set your amp?



That depends on the room... On the last couple of records I've turned down, but before I was on '10.' I read somewhere that on his first album Roy Buchanan's Vibrolux was set on '6.' And I thought, "Of course! I know that sound... that is on '6'... it's not a Vibrolux on '10.' Engineer Daryn Roven has also been involved with all but one of my records, and he has an obsessive talent for getting great guitar sounds.

**TQR:** Your tone has covered a lot of territory – from spanky country tunes with pedal steel, to fat, roaring tones on *Heavy*, and very smooth and mellow



semi-hollow tones more recently on *American Hips* and *Heaven Is Creepy*.

Well, on the last two records I'm using space as a statement, and I can also really hear things, so I play a little more impressionistically. But I like the early stuff, too, because it doesn't sound dated. But now I'm playing things that sound more like Led Zeppelin than Wes Montgomery, and the

amp will definitely be on '10.' I've gotten into distortion and power chords, and with all that said, the .009s work fine. I just don't want to get tendonitis because I play so much, and my hands hurt a lot. I played all day yesterday and then a gig last night, and although I don't really have a problem, I don't want to *have* a problem, and the .009s help in that regard.

**TQR:** When you record, do you set up multiple mics?



Yeah, Daryn and I mic the back, the front, and then try to find a sweet spot somewhere, and we'll spend hours on it. OK, I hear a sound in the room that's really good... now, how can we get that sound *on tape*? I think mic'ing the front and the back of an open back amp is a great tip, even live – especially with a Tele. Another thing I like about the top-loader bridge is that it's a little more rubbery sounding. I didn't even notice it was a top loader at first, and I didn't know they were only made that way in one year.

**TQR:** Pickups... it's getting a little crazy with aftermarket pickups – at least some of the implied claims of 'vintage tone' are getting crazy – as if there was just one. Your original pickups eventually shorted and you had them re-wound by Seymour Duncan. How did that work out?

Well, the hype over pickups *is* ridiculous. I was *told* that my pickups were personally re-wound by Seymour, and I'll tell you a funny story. The original pickups on my Tele started to go... one began to sound real nasally, and then the other one went bad a few weeks later. I sent them to Duncan to be re-

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wound and meanwhile, I had a set of Duncan Alnico replacement pickups in the guitar, and when I got the old ones back re-wound, I was kind of disappointed. But I figured I'd get used to them, so I gave the other pickups away, and in hindsight, I regretted it, because they were the best sounding pickups that were ever in that guitar. Later on, I looked at all the Alnico Telecaster pickups on Duncan's web site and there were so many that I just didn't feel like going through all of that, you know? Everywhere I play sounds so different... If I place my amp on carpet it sounds completely different than if it's on a hardwood floor, which is my favorite sound. I've had my amp set up on concrete sometimes and the amp sounded broken – it was the concrete changing the tone so much.

**TQR:** Do you ever place your amp on a chair or other wise get it off the ground?

No, because then the bass disappears, and I'm all about bass. I never hear anyone plugging a Fender guitar into a Fender amp and saying, "Gee, I wish I had more treble."

**TQR:** Do you roll treble off with the tone pot?



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I do all kinds of stuff that I don't even think about. Generally, everything is dimmed, but sometimes I'll be playing and realize that I'm in the middle position. I'm constantly changing everything... Sometimes I'll switch to both pickups right before I hit a big chord. Depending on what the room is giving me, I may not use the neck pickup at all because it is sounding too muddy. Every room is different. I don't really think about it, but I respond to what I'm hearing. I remember ten years ago thinking that the middle position was jive, but now I'm in the middle position a lot. I change so much within a tune – volume, tone... I used to always love to hear that 'click' when Roy would go to the bridge.

**TQR:** Have you ever noticed how the neck pickup on a Tele can sound like a beautiful archtop in the right hands?

I think the Tele rhythm pickup is a very under-rated jazz pickup, and that's why the Telecaster is the greatest solidbody electric guitar, because it gets that sound. It does produce a very pleasing jazz sound, yet it has a little bit of Louie Armstrong in it. The wall of sound thing is cool, but I want to hear the pick rake across each string like a single coil tends to do. I often wish I could get the sounds I hear in my apartment when I'm out performing.

**TQR:** As much as we talk about it, what gets lost or overlooked in the discussion of tone is the drastic effect that the acoustics of each room impose. In reality, all of your tone-geeking can be thrown to the curb when subjected to the realities of the room, and that's the art of being an artist... You paint on the canvas that is available to you every night, and you must live with that.

The hardest thing for me is when the wiring is bad, and you can't even use the bridge pickup without all of this noise being introduced. Part of the nature of a Telecaster is that it really doesn't produce much harmonic content when you move away from the bridge pickup, so noise that prevents you from going to the bridge also affects the harmonic content of the guitar. Still, you have to go on.

**TQR:** Why haven't you put together a second Telecaster with noiseless pickups for those places?

Well, I don't really want to carry around two guitars, although I have been thinking about perhaps retiring the '59. The fingerboard is becoming really scalloped and it's increasingly difficult to play without the notes going sharp. Both E strings are also right on the edge of the fingerboard. Having just one guitar, if I broke a string, I guess it would be embarrassing, but that last time that happened was years ago in Sausalito with Peter Rowan and we got through it.

**TQR:** Have you changed the saddles?

No, they are the threaded steel saddles that would have been on this guitar new. I don't care too much for the earlier brass saddles.

**TQR:** You play some very complex chord structures all over the neck, yet you haven't mentioned any problems with intonation...

I may be a little out of tune once in a while, but I can usually make it work (laughing). There are certain chords I *won't* play, and sometimes you have to make an executive decision,

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like hitting the F sharp in a D chord, which is always a 'tell' if you're off a little. Hey, some nights I may have been a little out of tune on a song and I struggle through it, go home and think, "I've been playing 20 years, working on this every night, and what's the point?" I've played through brawls and lots of odd situations, and the one thing you just don't do is stop. The Beatles didn't stop at Shea stadium, did they? It took me about ten years to figure out that I need my tuning pegs lined up in a specific way to comfortably do those quick string drops on the E string, for example, without having to go through very uncomfortable contortions. It really isn't all that hard to figure out, but when they were lined up wrong, sometimes I felt as if I were about to break my elbow twisting the tuners for a song with a de-tuning solo.

**TQR:** You probably also have to change the nut on your guitar often given the amount of time you play.

Yeah, and I use dinosaur bone... Some people laugh when I say that. To me, it sounds better, but I certainly wouldn't want to go on record doing a blindfold test between bone and plastic.

**TQR:** Well, yeah, wooly mammoth tusk from Russia, probably... Ken Parker commented to me once that the material you use for a nut only influences tone when you're playing an open string. Obvious, and yet not always so... How do you feel about the musical landscape populated by guitarists today?

I feel very humble, and I don't think I know more or less than other guitarists. On some level I know less about equipment than a lot of players that have really thought about this. But I do think that the art of just playing a song is being lost. For example, when I go to guitar shows I always hear people playing the same lick (plays a short blues riff). You know... the standard "I'm a badass blues guy" riff." And I hear that same stuff all through a guitar show. Well, I like Eric Clapton's version of "Born Under a Bad Sign" too, where that lick was kind of outted to modern culture, but sometimes



Wes Montgomery

I wish people would play "Ain't Misbehavin'" or "Blackbird," or "Stardust"... even "Stairway to Heaven," maybe – at least it's a song. I just wish people would quit talking about sound, because I think it can be a security blanket that keeps them from really facing the hard work of self-improvement... learn-

ing progressions, scales, keeping good time, and the ability to connect with the audience.

**TQR:** Chasing tone is no substitute for learning your craft, and we often urge people to stop hiding behind distortion. We love distortion, but it is often used as a crutch that is inspiring too many new amps that basically offer one voice. Your analogy of the guitar show is perfect.



Well, I work hard at playing melodies. Somebody told me once that a musician is only as good as the number of songs he knows. Now, I wouldn't say that to The Edge, for example... He is a sonic artist, and he makes people happy, which is what you want to do, but I do think

that people should work more on making music, chord inversions, and playing songs. It really bummed me out at that guitar show because no one played any songs when they were checking out a guitar, or whatever. It's not like I'm Wes Montgomery and I can play anything without even knowing what key I'm in... Could I sit down right now and play "I Want to Hold Your Hand" note for note without having to work it out? Probably not, even though I know that song so well.

**TQR:** In many important ways, you've found your sound – the Tele and the Princeton Reverb... the rest is up to you.



But I'm not oblivious to tone, or done with it, and I am still curious about how, for example, Keith Richards got those tones on *Sticky Fingers*. It's not that I don't want to talk about

tone, as if it bores me and all I want to talk about are chord inversions and George Van Epps... I mean, how *did* Keith get that tone on "Can You Hear Me Knockin'"?

**TQR:** Ampegs. Grabbing an old Jet might well add another interesting color to your palette...

Well, that really interests me – makes me want to go out and get one right now. As I said, I'm not immune to tone... When I read about something that Eric Johnson likes, I'm motivated to try it. My friend Dave Boat is always sending me stuff to

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try, like the Vibro Champ, and even the ES225 I play now, and he sent me these Fulltone cables that are really good. I don't use anything between the guitar and the amp – not even a tuner, because it changes the sound.

**TQR:** You also appear to use jumbo frets...

Yeah, is there a disadvantage to them?

**TQR:** I don't know of one. I like to feel fret rather than fingerboard when I play, especially on maple.

I really like them, and I'm tempted to have them put in the 225.

**TQR:** Switching to the business of playing music, how do you maintain a viable presence and survive and thrive in the current music environment?



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That's a multi-faceted question... When I was growing up I went to the record store and bought records like *Derek and the Dominoes Live*, but we're not sitting on a bed staring at LP jackets as we listen to vinyl anymore. There is such a glut of free music available today, not to mention all of the instructional videos available to guitarists... I buy some of them, but my friends also give me copies they make.

**TQR:** Why is it that musicians are always the first to ask you to 'burn me a copy' when they hear about a great recording? How do we expect someone like you to continue playing and recording if we're not willing to support your work?

Good point. I wrote a letter about this today, but I didn't send it. I do these audio guitar lessons by mail that include tab and a CD, but people still want guitar lessons to be \$20. I have a lot of audio lessons that are tune oriented, rather than just riffs, and if you go to my site and go to 'lessons,' they are \$45. I actually get a lot of orders for them – either from fans that want my music, or people that have done web research on Bill Doggett or somebody and find me that way. I don't know what it is about music, but people often seem to want some kind of special consideration that comes down to money, and I don't know why, because these lessons are a great value. Once people get a lesson, they usually order more and really like them. I think they are "kind" in the way they are constructed. They don't make you feel like you're

not worthy or up to learning this, and they don't seem "hard." I think that voice of evil is silenced... you know, the voice that says, "You suck. You can't learn this." I try to be kind, because I'm conscious of that myself. It's like going to the gym, and you think, "Geez, look at that spare tire..." But if I'm sitting around watching science fiction and eating ice cream, I don't even care about my spare tire!" Isn't that weird? The same thing happens when I'm learning something on the guitar. I think that voice is the devil – I really do.

**TQR:** But you're not just sitting around waiting for someone to ask you to play a gig...

No, I do my own booking, I play gigs, I'm a bandleader, I sell the audio lessons and tab on my site as well as record on my own label, but it's a bit much, because I don't really feel like I do any one thing on the business side particularly well. Everything suffers a little bit because I have too much going on. I had a revelation about 15 years ago when I saw Charlie Hunter play... He can just do it all, and as I was watching him play I thought, "This man will make a living for the rest of his life." He could show up anywhere and play and find security because he can *really* play. That's when I started changing. I stopped thinking so much about tone or getting everything perfect and the stars aligned so I could be good. I concentrated on showing up and entertaining people. Back to the quote about "You're only as good as the number of songs you know..."

**TQR:** Let's explore your most significant influences a bit, because the music found on your recordings has undergone a significant change...



Well, many of my influences have remained constant... Roy Buchanan, Eric Clapton with the Bluesbreakers, Cream and Derek & the Dominoes... I was also really lucky to be exposed to Django Rhinehart by a ceramics teacher when I was in

high school. John McLaughlin, of course... I mentioned Coltrane's *Live in Japan*, and another one was this record by John Fahey called *On Christian Soldiers*. I was also really into a track on *East/West* with Michael Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield. I was also into Middle Eastern stuff and on Roy's first record, he goes Middle Eastern...

**TQR:** But you were also in a great city to see live music...

Yeah, I saw Jeff Beck, John McLaughlin, the Allman

-continued-

Brothers... I saw George Barnes, although I kind of didn't get it at the time.

**TQR:** Did you see Mike Bloomfield?



I'm so glad you mentioned him. I saw Mike Bloomfield and it changed my life... Me and my buddy saw him at this pizza joint in Mill Valley, and we were

just dying to hear Super Session...

**TQR:** And I'll bet you didn't hear that...

No, he was there with an acoustic guitar and a film projector. He showed film of Hound Dog Taylor and talked about players like Son House and Blind Lemon Jefferson. We went home kind of disappointed, but the next day I went out looking for the records he mentioned and I found the Hound Dog Taylor record, and it was the sleaziest, dirtiest stuff I had ever heard. I also really got into Muddy Waters, and that really changed my blues sensibility. I was no longer so enthralled by the more straight, commercial blues – I liked the weird combination of swing and straight rhythmic changes that Muddy played, and I internalized that without really understanding what it was.



Then I got into fusion – Stanley Clarke, and I saw Ray Gomez play. "Like Butter" is loosely based on a Ray Gomez solo. I also saw Jaco Pastorius several times, and that really blew my mind. And then I got

into Miles Davis... *Tribute to Jack Johnson* and *Agharta*... these long, extended groove jams that were like something I had heard in my head that were now becoming clearer to me.



From there I turned full circle and really got into the Sex Pistols. Yeah... it's funny, huh? I still listen to that record once a month. I just love it – one of the greatest records ever made... It's witty, satirical, political, energizing, and there is none of the pretension that you can detect in other great rock albums. The Sex Pistols had none



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of that, and I think Johnny Rotten was a very underrated rock vocalist. I think he was a genius. I also got into the Police a little bit, but I was really into a guy named Peter Bilt, who played in a band called Pearl Harbor and the Explosion. He played somewhat in the style of Andy Summers, but he wasn't copying him... He played weird jazz chords with a Tele Thinline through a Dual Showman – really clean tones. They put out a record on Warner's that kind of bombed.

**TQR:** And throughout this time in your development you were playing covers in the Bay Area?

Well, I was always doing something original, too... I played in this band called Nancy and the Neighbors – kind of a New Wave thing, and a guy named Benny Rietveld produced our album, who went on to work with Miles Davis. He lives in New York now and comes to The Living Room now and then.

**TQR:** You haven't mentioned any country music yet, but Roy Nichols must have been in the picture...

I really started to get into country music in the mid '80s. My cousin, Lou Firpo, played accordion in a country/wedding band, and he got me in and that's when I started listening to Merle Haggard and Roy Nichols. The record for me was *Merle Haggard Live at Muskogee*. I would nag people to learn which country albums to get, because I was in such a vacuum in San Francisco for country music. I was into Buck Owens, Merle Haggard and later, Speedy West and Hank Garland. Roy Buchanan also turned me on to country through "Lonesome Fugitive" very early on. This was a lousy period for me, because I would study these records, but there was no outlet – no place to play country music. Then I found Joe Goldmark through a great player named Doc West, who taught me a lot about country music and told me about this guy Joe Goldmark, who owned a place called Escape from New York Pizza. Doc told me to go see Joe because he had all this great country music, so I did, and he gave me an hour-long tape called *Country Guitar Plus* with Hank Garland, Chet, Joe Maphis, Jimmy Bryant, The Texas Troubadours, and I lived with that tape for about a year.

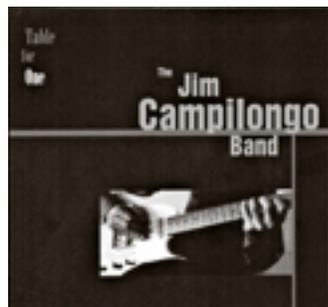
Eventually this all wound up with me putting together the 10 Gallon Cats with Joe Goldmark on pedal steel. For about a year or two it was perfect – everything I wrote that we played and recorded was totally in synch with my mentality. But

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after the second record, I began to get into Chopin nocturnes, Maria Calas arias, and this Julian Bream record of Spanish music. I was really into the slow, atmospheric stuff, and that's when I did *Table for One*. That's when what you're hearing on the two records

I've done since moving to New York first began brewing. I wanted that space in the songs, but I wasn't sure how to go about it in a 3-piece setting, and I was really insecure about it. One thing that happens with a band is that the band becomes bigger than any one individual – the band itself becomes a certain sound. The 10 Gallon Cats had become comfortable, and I wanted to do something else. So the new direction I took actually happened before I moved to New York... I got a regular gig in San Francisco at Gordon's Restaurant, and I could only use three guys – guitar bass and drums, and we had to play at a really low volume – everything was done with an upright bass and brushes, and I



played there for about two years. During that time, I began to conceptualize *American Hips*, and what I realized is that I don't have to be busy filling space all the time. I could hear the upright bass growl, I could anticipate the next chord and let it

ring prematurely... I was less busy. Some people said I sounded like Bill Frisell, and I guess I can see why. So the entire thing came together at this restaurant, and what I heard within the setting of a trio just seemed so delicious.

**TQR:** And you took that mindset to New York...



Yes, and when I came to New York I was fortunate enough to hook up with Tim Luntzel and Dan Rieser early on. All I had when I came here was a laptop, a

Princeton Reverb and my Tele, and I slept on somebody's couch. We had four Wednesday nights at The Knitting Factory and we played from midnight to 3 a.m., and it was so supported – all these things I couldn't do at a bar with the 10 Gallon Cats in San Francisco were possible. People smoked

and drank and listened, and that gig lasted almost two years. Sometimes we played until 4 a.m., and we created this thing some people call 'country noire,' others liken it to a David Lynch movie, and I've even heard it called 'music to shoot up to' by smart people with real day jobs (laughing). To me it's just beautiful, spatial music.

**TQR:** Maybe you should put a warning label on your next CD. So while the change in your music began to gestate while you were still in San Francisco, the experience of living in New York changed you as well.

It definitely did, but sometimes I feel like my playing improves and suffers at the same time here, because there is so much work *and* struggle. I mean, you can't get a whole lot of simple errands done in a single day in New York... *Everything* is harder, in a way, but there is also a lot of inspiration, and a lot of serious people that are here to play. One thing that stands out to me about New York is the upbeat attitude most everyone has about the gig, no matter how small or uneventful. There are no macho attitudes about "this shitty gig" or "misery contests." Most of the guys I play music with in NYC understand that playing music is a gift and a privilege. If one can realize that any musical situation can be done well, the chances of playing quality music are much greater. Before coming to NYC, I encountered certain situations where I felt it was inappropriate or naive to feel enthusiasm and musical hope, but that's not the case here at all.

**TQR:** And where do you go from the rather moody and low key *Heaven Is Creepy* CD?



I would really like to make a great album... There is *Live at Leads* and *Meet the Beatles*, and I would at least like to make a great 'Jim' record. I'd like to fuse, say, the sound of Roy Buchanan into more of a jazz context,

like Ben Webster meets Roy Buchanan. I've really been working on that. There is an MP3 on my web site under 'bootlegs' titled "Chelsea Bridge" that reflects what I'm talking about.

**TQR:** What was going through your mind after you had the opportunity to play with Pete Townshend?

Well, it was up in the air a little bit at first whether it would

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happen, but it *did* happen, and I thought to myself, “What an incredible journey my life has been, and how lucky I am. How the hell did an Italian kid from south San Francisco end up playing with Pete Townshend in England, and at 49 years old? For a moment, I guess I felt like I could be somewhat satisfied with my life. But, I still have a lot more that I want to do. **To**

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Review

## the BAJA Tele

*Rather than just throwing gear at you willy nilly with no rhyme or reason, we prefer to weave a common thread throughout these pages when it comes to reviews. But what could be gleaned from a borrowed '59 Tele top loader, if we could even find one? '50s Telecasters are far beyond our reach, and as Jim observed and we can confirm from our own experience with a '56 blackguard, a guitar that has been played for 40 years eventually requires extensive restoration to remain playable, and at some point they simply need to be retired unless you're willing to start replacing parts. We also know people who know people that own pristine, \$25,000 '59 Teles similar to the Campilongo top loader, but once we've spilled all the drueling ink we can muster for a review, what then?*

*So we set out to see what we might discover among new Telecaster models, and what we found is by far the most impressive “affordable” Fender guitar we have ever played, without exception. The Baja Tele was conceived by Fender Masterbuilder Chris Fleming and built at the Fender factory in Ensenada, Mexico. We forwarded a few questions about the Baja Tele to Fender Senior Marketing Manager for guitars, Justin Norvell, and Chris Fleming. Our review follows...*

**TQR:** Our understanding is that there is really no difference in the wood that is used for bodies and necks found in guitars built in the USA and Mexico.



**Justin Norvell:** The bodies and necks are made in Mexico, but we source wood from the same supplier for both factories and mill them out on the same equipment, so the main difference is about 75 miles (laughing).

**TQR:** When the Baja Tele is described as having been designed by Chris Fleming at the Custom Shop, can you elaborate on the details regarding

how the guitar was conceived and developed?



**Justin Norvell:** Senior Master Builder Chris Fleming had been working with the Ensenada factory on some general production techniques and process improvements for some time, and he had the idea of trying to create a feature set that pushed the boundaries of what that factory had produced to date (level-of-difficulty-wise). Being impressed with the scene in the factory, and seeing what great stuff they are capable of, Chris

put a spec together on the Baja Tele and brought it to me. He wanted to know if I would be cool with making a small batch as a limited run, but we quickly realized the potential was far greater than that. The Classic Player/Custom Shop Designed family of instruments came out of the Baja Tele as a concept. Value-wise, what you've got is unparalleled – when you buy a Custom Shop instrument, you are in large part paying for the ‘head’ (creativity and experience) and the ‘hands’ (workmanship) of the Custom Shop Master Builder. On these models, you get the ‘head’ of the Custom Shop mindset and a great, well-crafted guitar for under a grand.



**Chris Fleming:** The design is based on a popular set of configurations I have made over the years. The specs are based on my favorite neck shape, pickups, and colors, as well as features many modern players request such as 9.5 radius, American standard frets, and an S-1 switch in conjunction with a 4-way that makes available six distinct tones.

**Justin Norvell:** Chris didn't simply hand off a list to the factory – he stayed involved all the way through production, out on the line showing how to shape that soft V, working with the paint team to get the finishes thinner... all of the small things that make a huge difference in quality, feel, resonance and tone.

**TQR:** What is the background and origin of the Twisted Tele and Broadcaster pickups? Are they wound in the USA? Are they technically Custom Shop models? How do they differ in construction from a standard Tele neck and vintage Broadcaster bridge?

**Chris Fleming:** The twisted Tele pickup was developed by Allen Hamel several years ago and incorporates longer mag-

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