

INTERVIEW WITH TAL FARLOW

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by Shane Hill



SH: *Apart from Charlie Christian, have there been any other jazz guitarists you have made an in-depth study of?*

TF: Charlie Christian was the first jazz player who caught my attention, and when I heard him I really didn't know there was a subdivision of popular music called jazz. However, I was familiar enough with the guitar to be able to follow what he was doing, that he was improvising on the chord changes. There were other guitarists I remember, Carl Kress and Dick McDonough, but Charlie particularly caught my attention because he was playing an electric guitar, and that was the first electric guitar that I heard.

SH: *Since that time, have you listened a lot to jazz guitarists, or would you say the bulk of your inspiration has come from keyboard players and horn players?*

TF: Well, it didn't matter too much what the person was playing, I was interested in the music. I tried, where possible, to learn from any instrumentalist by attempting to transfer the ideas to the guitar. If it was a keyboard, I

would have some restrictions, bearing in mind the guitar's amount of voices, and they are to a degree predetermined, so keyboard voicings can be difficult to apply to the guitar in certain cases.

SH: *Nevertheless, the great keyboard playing of Art Tatum was a considerable influence on your harmonic outlook at some stage.*

TF: Yes, I did hear Art Tatum at some time and was very attracted to his harmonic approach. What you must realize is that the songs we call standards now were at some time "pop" songs, they were played often on the radio and not just for jazz audiences. When I learned these songs; I would learn the basic harmony intended by the composer and then compare it with Art Tatum's treatment. He totally reharmonized the tune in some cases, and I was able to appreciate that distinction between the regular harmony and Art's version.

SH: *So you listened to Tatum's keyboard playing and tried to expand the guitar's potential in harmonic terms, such as certain interval formations, minor 2nds, poly chords and bass and treble separation.*

TF: I didn't have that destination exclusively in mind, but I was interested in finding the ideas he used.

SH: *It would appear that you have listened quite a lot to Lester Young, also incorporating him into your study.*

TF: I learned of Lester pretty early on, when I started listening to jazz, and became acquainted with the other musicians and all by way of records. Unfortunately, I hadn't seen any of them live. In the area of the country I lived in, the jazz musicians, to my knowledge, never came to play, as it was a rural area, and most of their activity was playing in Chicago and New York or other big cities. However, I listened to their music on the radio and I heard the same phrases in Charlie's playing as I did in Lester Young's, so I figured there was some connection. So whatever it was, whichever way it was going from Charlie to

Lester or from Lester to Charlie, I started to listen to them both very carefully, and after Charlie died tragically at 22 years of age, I continued to listen to Lester.

SH: *Obviously Charlie influenced you considerably, but since that time have there been any other guitarists who have had a similar significance in influencing your music and style?*

TF: Well, probably to a much lesser extent because I heard George Barnes, who was doing quite a different thing. He was from Chicago and was younger than Charlie, actually, and even as an eighteen year old was making some interesting arrangements of classical pieces for jazz guitar. He was a great player, but I suppose his playing didn't influence my playing that much compared to Charlie. It was a long time before I heard of Django Reinhardt because Charlie was in Benny Goodman's band, which was basically a popular band and was heard every night on the radio. However, Django's music was only heard on jazz music radio stations, and the area I lived in never got the benefit of those stations. So I learned about him later on in my career.

SH: *Do you still practice regarding technique?*

TF: Well, I suppose I wouldn't call what I do 'practice,' as such. Practice to me suggests maybe playing scales or exercises, and I can't remember if it was Wes Montgomery who said in some article I read, he practiced what he was expected to do on stage.

SH: *Jazz either happens in a venue, or despite the fact you are trying your best, if the other elements are not there, it does not happen.*

TF: I think in that context what can help a lot, if we bear in mind that very often I am playing with a different group of guys every night, and some guys are quicker to pick up on what you're doing because they have a good ear and knowledge of jazz language. It's as if the members of the band have listened to the same music, the same players.

SH: *Coming from the same musical direction?*

TF: Yes, the same musical experience, and when that is the case, you are not getting constant surprises from the bass player because he is coming right along with you and you don't even have to think about that. So you are able

to keep your mind completely on what you are doing if you want to, or be inspired by his constructive modification of the basic bass line.

SH: *How much of the year are you touring,?*

TF: I guess an average would be around six months, and I play the rest of the time around New York.

SH: *Which venues around New York are you playing in most ?*

TF: Well, I play mostly at a place called Zino's on West 13th Street, but I also play at Fat Tuesday (since closed) and Blue Note, as well as some others. Zino's is a place that you can go in for two weeks at a time, three or four times a year, and so I do that, as well as play locally around New Jersey.

SH: *Do you go to Europe much?*

TF: I go about three or four times a year.

SH: *Do you have any regular students, and which are the areas you find you are able to help them in most?*

TF : Well, different individuals are into different things. I will do what I can regarding what ever they feel they need, or in some cases whatever I feel they need. Often they bring me a record, or tell me about a record that I am on, and they want to know how or why I did certain things. So in such instances they are asking me specific things and I hopefully answer their queries such as chord substitutions, chord melody playing, as well as bass line construction.

SH: *What about overall arranging of a piece of music?*

TF: Yes, sometimes I have some arrangements of songs where I have written out the chords that I play. I usually write them using the chord boxes, as well as in full notation, and this helps the situation regarding fingering, because I have a pretty big hand and not every player is into using his thumb. In those cases we might eliminate one of the chord voices or maybe figure out an alternative fingering.

SH: *So you have to carefully modify some of your own fingerings to make them playable for other players.*

TF: I try to maintain the general sound of the chord.

SH: *Do you try to work with the player's technique?*

TF: No, not too much in that area because all my students are fairly accomplished, and it wouldn't do for me to force my way of doing things, because my hands are big and my way of playing might be awkward for somebody who didn't have such large hands. However, I like to investigate the cycle of fourths because, in many cases, the students are unaware of how important and how all-encompassing the cycle of fourths progression is. So many things can be broken down into that action; it is either that, or perhaps using some accepted flat five substitution if you're descending chromatically, and the mixing up of these two things.

SH: *So sort of weaving chromaticism into the basic progressions.*

TF: Yes, that and if for instance, you took the cycle of fourths and made the substitution to every other one, you've got a chromatic bass line. However, you can put that chromatic line not only in the bass, but in the higher voices of the chords or in both the bass and the treble parts or whatever, and get an infinite amount of variations as well.

SH: *I understand, Tal, that you are rather interested in visualizing what you play. Could you explain this process?*

TF: I think this is important because to me it does make a picture in my mind at the time I am playing. The pattern that fourths make or various substitutions is useful to me.

SH: *Would you say the fact that you are an artist, as well, has had any bearing on this concept?*

TF: Probably. I have gotten used to seeing certain things in a graphic way—lines, etc.

SH: *Have you been doing any workshops recently?*

TF: I suppose really just occasionally, but that's not really a very big part of what I do.

SH: *Are these workshops ever linked to any of the concerts you do?*

TF: Well, I am thinking of a place in Philadelphia that I go to from time to time, and there is a class of local students there who I get together with, and occasionally other towns on a similar basis. However, that's not as frequent as the private students that I help.

SH: *Do you find it fairly straightforward to convey how your music has developed, or do you find*

it rather difficult to describe what caused your progress in theoretical terms regarding line construction and so forth?

TF: It is sort of difficult, and again, I make the link with visualization. By this I mean certain interval patterns make a certain picture. The sound of a tritone, for instance, diagonally angled across the strings, whereas fourths are vertical.

SH: *Unless you are using the interval of a fourth, finding a G on the third string and a C on the second string, this looks like a tritone again. So you use these pictures to aid your knowledge of pitch and have found the visual side invaluable to your music.*

TF: In my opinion, it helps a lot. Perhaps it is just my approach because in other areas of my life I deal with pictures you know, design and drawing. I suppose I see these things in patterns first, and maybe I just apply that more than most people would, you know, people who don't make signs or whatever. However, to me it does make a lot of sense.

SH: *Generally speaking, do you avoid analyzing your own arrangements, being content with the fact it sounds good, or do you always like to know why something works and, therefore, break it down harmonically?*

TF: Well, I'm always curious about things. I don't avoid analyzing it; in fact, I think that it's a part of how we arrive at a lot of things. Something works that you've maybe come upon just by chance and you would want to see how it would work in another situation. I am always analyzing, even if it's music. I am always conscious of something unusual going on.

SH: *You always keep your ear tuned in.*

TF: I can't turn it off.

SH: *What originally attracted you to exploit harmonics in the highly individual way you do, literally playing single line improvisations in harmonics?*

TF: Well, I am also a sort of mechanically-minded guy and wanted to make the harmonic where you, say, play at the twelfth fret so that you could move it around. In other words, you use your fingers as a substitute for the nut, which is the difference between natural and artificial harmonics, and I figured that's the way to do it. You have then just got to follow

your fingering twelve frets up, but of course, you don't have to go very high before you run out of frets, so once again you're back to visualization. You have to visualize the chord formation, perhaps in the space over the pickup, or whatever. And, also, you can go up another octave by dividing into fourths. That's more risky, but it can be done.

SH: *Do you listen to classical music, and which composers are your favorites?*

TF: Well, I have always liked Ravel. His harmonies appealed to me in much the same way as Art Tatum's concept.

SH: *Are there any young established players who have particularly impressed you recently?*

TF: Yes. Mike Stern. There are others, but I don't know their names. I hear them, but I don't know who they are. Yes, there are some really hot young players around; for instance, the real popular guy who can also use all* the effects.

SH: *Pat Metheny.*

TF: Right. He can play jazz like an old time bebop player. I didn't know he could do that, but he does.

SH: *Tal, what guitars do you own?*

TF: Well, the one that I play most, as of now, I told you that Gibson is making my model again as of 1987. They made the first one for me, so I have that one. And also, the very first of the Tal Farlow models made in the early sixties, which basically, regarding the fingerboard and fretboard, is like an ES350. It has the dimensions of an archtop acoustic but with pickups; however, it is an electric instrument. I also have a three-quarter size guitar which the Gibson company made for me way back in the very early fifties for use on a color television program. This was perhaps the first color television program broadcast in America. The producers of that show wanted the musicians to have brightly colored instruments, and this was before Rock-n-Roll, you know. Then suddenly people saw thousands of brightly colored instruments. They were all traditional patterns though, and that instrument actually plays well. I also have the old one I used with Red Norvo which is a Gibson 250. It is an almost forgotten model and had no cutaway. That's the one I had the luthier

shorten the scale on by eliminating the first fret.

SH: *You then detune the guitar.*

TF: It's the same as putting a capo on the first fret and that makes it go up a half tone in pitch, and then you tune it back down. So the tensions on the strings are now as they would be tuned if the guitar was tuned a half tone flat. By losing the first fret, you gain space for two frets.

SH: *You mean you gain more frets before the neck meets the body?*

TF: Yes. In other words, now instead of 14 frets to the body on a non cutaway, I had 16 and I could really reach with my big hand even further. That wasn't the only reason, as it did also make the chords a little more compact. If, for instance, you wanted to stretch over many frets, it makes a lot of difference, perhaps meaning I could reach one fret higher, and the strings were also more slack.

SH: *Do you have an acoustic guitar at all ?*

TF: I do have one. I have a Gibson and it's a round hole guitar.

SH: *In the past, have you tried to avoid the necessity to play jazz in a musically uninspiring situation by keeping the sign writing profession option open as a second income?*

TF: Well, I don't think that way, and I can usually find something to enjoy about any music gig. I got into playing because it was something I enjoyed doing. To compare the sign writing business—well, there might be something pleasant about making a design or seeing finished work, but there is also some really hard work, like climbing and doing a lot of painting, or moving and things that really are not a lot of fun. So I have always considered that to be work and playing music to be recreation. So any time that I'm playing I can most always find something to enjoy about it. When I first saw that it was possible for me to be a professional musician, I went to New York and I was working really non-jazz gigs and I did not know that I would ever be eligible to play with real good jazz players. I envied those who did play jazz, but I made myself happy by doing more commercial gigs and always appreciated good players, no matter what they were doing. So it didn't, in those

days, have to be jazz for me to enjoy it.

SH: *Is there a definite period you look upon as being the halcyon years of your career, or are you enjoying music as much as ever nowa-days?*

TF: I am enjoying music. I don't think anything has really changed, and the answer would be that I'm enjoying music as much as ever.

SH: *Have you any tips regarding the business side of the profession; for example, agents, marketing, recording companies, touring, etc.?*

TF: Well, a good agent is a great help, but other than that I am afraid I don't really have any special advice.

SH: *You have just got to play it by ear.*

TF: Yes, get an agent you can trust, as well as a manager, and let them do that side.

SH: *Do you find it acceptable to create jazz in a recording studio environment?*

TF: Sure.

SH: *Do you find it fairly easy to get into a relaxed creative mood?*

TF: Well, it's not the same as playing a club, but generally a better product comes out of a studio, I think.

SH: *Why do you say that?*

TF: I guess I mean technically the engineer has better control over everything, setting a good balance.

SH: *So you feel more happy with the overall sound a band produces because of the equipment and balance?*

TF: Yes, I think so.

SH: *Do you have a regular trio or quartet back home in America, and which musicians are involved in this?*

TF: In America I most often play with bassist Gary Mazzaroppi since we are neighbors. In the other group I have, I just add to that. In other words, the next person we add, in most cases, is a drummer. However, the basic team is Gary and me, but not always, because he is a very busy guy. He works for Les Paul and a lot of other people, too. We have a lot of things that we can play—I mean, we can play for two or three hours with our own stuff because we have worked a lot together.

SH: *You are familiar with each others' styles.*

TF: Right, you know exactly what the other guy is going to do, and there is one thing different

about our duo when we work together. I have a frequency divider I use on my stool that I have at home. It has an octave divider inside it and I turn that on and play a bass line. Gary plays a lot of solo lines in the upper register. So what we do, just basically as a novelty, is Gary plays what I was playing before, and I play what he was playing. We switch roles.

SH: *Have you any feelings about certain qualities a jazz musician has to have; for instance, do you feel that there should be some humor in the music in some form or other?*

TF: That has always been a pretty substantial part of the players that I have admired. Tatum, for example, with his quotes and phrasing, I thought he had a tremendous sense of humor. Charlie Parker—well, everybody knows that he was always playing around with things like that. Yes, I really like that in music.

SH: *When you start to solo, is there any kind of plan you favor? For example, Wes Montgomery seemed to use three textures fairly often, perhaps starting with single lines, moving to octaves, and then perhaps finishing with block chords.*

TF: A presentation—well, not to that degree. What usually happens is I am probably responding when I start out playing to something that just happened. If I followed another soloist, I would probably take his phrase or something and start from there, or maybe not.

SH: *I often think about this because when I start a solo I make an effort to think of slow, melodic ideas. If you play all your technique in the opening bars, it is hard to follow yourself and have form.*

TF: Yes, it has got to build, but isn't that what Wes did a lot—I mean, the solo started out and then gradually built up. I guess that's a really good way to do it, and he probably did not do it in a calculated way. It just happened, and was very effective. Another player who did that a lot was Ben Webster on tenor saxophone. He would start off really mellow and cool, a richness in the sound, and it would build up to be really hot.

SH: *How is this tour going?*

TF: Real good, and I think that part of the success is because of the showing of the video. The first time I was here was shortly after the

video was shown and business was real good like it is now. Then I came back a couple of other times and it sort of began to sag a little bit. I might have been following myself too soon and that's not good, to do too many in a row, because it's the novelty business. So that may be something. It has been two years now since I've been over, but I really think that especially in Britain, since I had a showing on TV, it helped. You don't have that many channels; we have a million channels, and most of them have garbage. So, I mean, you get lost in that—even if they had shown it over there, very few people see it because there are just so many choices.

SH: *Do you ever listen to Ed Bickert? I'm very fond of his playing.*

TF: Well, I was in Toronto in the early fifties when he had just moved there from Western Canada. He was an excellent player then, and of course, he made more progress. I kept hearing him from time to time, and he always impressed me, and as you say, he is similar to Jim Hall in approach -very reserved and tasty.

SH: *Do you feel that sometimes it is the spirit that a person has in their playing that can influence one more than the actual notes in some cases? I feel that to a degree with your playing and Art Tatum's, that impetus that Tatum possessed.*

TF: Yes, but I would say I probably got more of that from Bud Powell, because his style was predominately eighth notes and very spirited.

SH: *A sort of fire.*

TF: Yes, and I really like that a lot, hopping and bopping along. He really had a great swinging touch. It seems to me that it is as well to listen to other instruments, perhaps even more than your own instrument. It tends not to encourage you to get into guitarists' licks, in our case, and they would probably fall real conveniently on the guitar.

SH: *Pentatonic scales seem to be very popular at the moment, and they fall very easily on the guitar. However, the wider interval jumps, and arpeggios that the be-bop players use tend to be harder to articulate because they rely on cross-picking.*

TF: I always like to play a mixture of scale lines and interval jumps, which may be extreme

ones sometimes.

SH: *Pro saxophone players inspire you to play in that way.*

TF: I think so. Charlie Parker I really listened to a lot, and so did everybody else. He was very much the stylist that really directed be-bop—and I also listened to Clifford Brown. He's a genius

SH: *He seemed to be very much a midregister player, as trumpet players go, not many high notes.*

TF: I don't remember him playing high notes, but he always played good notes. There was a man called Fats Navarro who I think was maybe Clifford's main influence. He was an amazing player, too, but he died quite young. If you could get some old recordings of Fats, you would hear the similarity. They were both excellent horn players. They got a good sound out of the instrument and were a joy to listen to.

SH: *It seems to me that it is very difficult to be an accomplished jazz player unless you have quite a good grasp of the blues element in jazz. Have you listened much to blues players over the years?*

TF: Not that much, but I agree with you and I did hear some early blues. I particularly like T-Bone Walker because he was sort of on the edge of jazz, and I think he was a great admirer of Charlie Christian, almost to the point of wanting to do that kind of playing. He was the one who really got to me the most, but I never made a great attempt to search those players out. I like B. B. King and I have done several concerts with him, over the years.

SH: *I find blues players are able to get a lot of mileage out of a basic riff or motif. They seem to find endless variations on a short phrase, gradually expanding the idea and building tension that way.*

TF: To me, T-Bone does a little more than that, more than just the blues. I think he really had more of a jazz message in his playing.