

Curt Golden
Before the Beginning, Part 3
Alexandria, VA
January-March 1985

On February 2nd, a letter arrives with the ASCE return address:

January 30, 1985

Congratulations Curt,

From the avalanche of applications Robert plucked your name.

The course begins March 26, the exact time of day is as yet undetermined. Tuition fees are \$475.00. Room and board is \$125.00. We are requesting a \$50.00 non refundable deposit now. The balance of \$550.00 is to be made payable to the order of the A.S.C.E. and should be received no later than March 15th.

If you have any questions regarding the Guitar Craft seminar please call me at (304) 725-4437 or write

Paul Zuccarello
c/o Claymont Seminars
Rt. 1, Box 279
Charles Town, WV 25414

See you in March
Paul Zuccarello

This arrived on Saturday. I don't have a strong memory of my reaction. I was certainly excited. My wife was excited. Roy was excited – he ultimately attended the same seminar, but I don't know when his acceptance letter arrived. Clearly, my decision had already been made. On Monday I mailed my deposit, holding my place for the March 26th Seminar.

February 4, 1985

Dear Paul,

I was delighted to receive your note informing me that my application had been "plucked" for the March 26 seminar. Enclosed please find my \$50.00 deposit which I understand is non-refundable. The balance will follow.

I am looking forward to the seminar. If you have any need to get in touch with me, please don't hesitate to write or call.

Thanks again,

Shortly thereafter, a follow-up letter arrived with a message from Robert, simply dated "February 1985". It began "Dear Potential Crafty Guitarist". This was the first time I heard this expression used, a sobriquet with which I have had a 31-year love/hate relationship.

Claymont Court
February 1985

Dear Potential Crafty Guitarist.

The response to the guitar seminars has been very strong and includes a number of questions which prompt a reply.

The exact details of the courses I am leaving open, so that each can find its own level and take on something of a life of its own. But generally each course will have between 15 and 21 students, and we will all work both in groups as well as on our own. I am planning to spend some time each day with everyone to focus on personal needs, while introducing exercises that we shall all be working with in group context. The experience of students seems to be varying between 3 and 18 years, some of whom are highly qualified and professional, and some who are highly qualified by their commitment and unprofessional. My intention is not to concentrate on music or music theory, or to show a particular style of playing, but to address the mechanics of playing the plectrum (pick) guitar. This can be as intensive as the student can handle, and at a certain level our state can change. My own experience is that music as a quality, almost with a life of its own, only becomes available to us when our state is other than the one we normally wander around in. So, relaxation is fundamental: nothing is possible if we are tense. Classes in Yoga, bodily movement, and direct exercises in relaxation are planned daily. The direction of attention is fundamental: if we can't direct our attention we can do nothing. So, this is also part of what we shall be working with. There are exercises available to us of a deeper kind, and addressing specific psychological work, but of this it is difficult to say more because expectation about them would spoil something, they may not be appropriate for any or for all, and I shall have to judge at the time what seems to be the best for the person and the course.

For the first two courses Vic Garbarini editor of Musician Magazine, will be giving talks on musical subjects. In this we are fluid and prepared to adapt ourselves to the needs of the individuals and the group. There are other possible events.

The accommodation is funky but adequate. All work will be done on acoustic guitars, so students should bring an acoustic instrument, spare strings and picks, a guitar stand, footstool and metronome. I recommend that where possible you not play for a week prior to your course. Additional courses are being planned but the response is such that we may not be able to meet everyone. Flexibility on time of attendance will help enormously in getting you involved, and please include your telephone number so we can expedite our planning.

This is an experiment I have been anticipating for several years. I can promise that something is possible here for students, in the way conditions are arranged. But a warning must be made: please do not come here if you wish me to give you something. The work can only be done by you, and it would be dishonest of me to promise you more. Nevertheless, I shall be here working myself in the same conditions.

Very best wishes,
ROBERT FRIPP

I don't think anything I have heard in and around Guitar Craft has affected me the way that final paragraph did. Over the years and through the evolution of Guitar Craft this has remained the truest description of how it works.

Meanwhile, I was having ambivalent feelings about this whole Claymont - some kind of spiritual work - could be a cult - thing. It sprang in part from a long-standing mistrust of organizations in general, and organizations with a religious, spiritual or political agenda in particular. Once, at the tender age of about 16, I went to a planning meeting for one of the antiwar marches on Washington, DC. My conception of the "Peace Movement" changed irrevocably when I entered the house and got a glimpse of the ordnance stored there to be moved out through the underground. There was something in the 1960's that was truly hopeful and unique. And swiftly decimated, in part by individuals and groups with agendas who saw this energy as something to be exploited. Political idealists and hacks, charlatans, egomaniacs or simply maniacs, drug pushers, religious frauds and deluded and overzealous followers of legitimate paths, and retailers. Oh, retailers. Didn't we all kind of know that hippiedom was over when bell-bottoms and Nehru jackets were available at Montgomery Ward?

So, what I'm saying is I don't much trust organizations and mass movements.

In the Guitar Craft House Rules, which are presented before the beginning of any course, participants are asked to "adopt a position of healthy skepticism, while participating in a spirit of critical goodwill." At this point there hadn't been any Guitar Craft courses, and no House Rules had been presented. So I was wrestling with the issue of skepticism vs negativity on my own and without a lot of foundation. It was hard work.

At the open weekend I had encountered a couple of things that struck very close to home:

The first was the use of the musical octave as a representation of universal laws much deeper than mere physics. I had, over the years, developed a way of looking at the world in musical terms - harmony, dissonance, resolution, counterpoint, pulse and rhythm. It was just the way I looked at things. I had never tried to organize it into a system. It was functional and haphazard. Now, here was a system, well established with roots in tradition (perhaps even antiquity) that accepted these notions as a matter of fact and not just coincidence or convenient analogy.

The second was the "movements." In my preparation for the open weekend I had read descriptions of the particular exercises referred to as the "Gurdjieff Movements", "sacred dances" or simply "the movements". On the surface they sounded like exceptionally complicated versions of rubbing your belly while patting your head. Since the skill of guitaring requires a certain left-right independence-coordination, they intrigued me.

What I was not prepared for was power of the "doing" of them. To begin with, there was the music used. It was for me like encountering an old friend. When I was very young I would sit at the family piano and create songs based on pulsing left hand pedal tones and right hand melodies using scales I invented (and later recognized as pentatonic and modal as well as a few "exotic eastern scales"). I had an entire repertoire and was happy to play any one of them for hours, and in these long repetitions I had my first encounter with what I would later start to call "the Ghosts"; the presence of something tangible that cannot be accounted for in the notes being played. I suspected it drove my family crazy, so it became the thing I did when no one else was home. Here in the Octagon of the Barn on the property of Claymont Court in West Virginia was someone reading the sheet music of my childhood.

Then there was the effect of the kind of effort and concentration of attention required to do the movements. My naïve assumption about these exercises was that this was a way of testing and

strengthening my coordination, and so I applied myself as rigorously as I could. Then I discovered two unhappy facts: first, that even in my best moments most of this was beyond me; and second, that I wasn't having many "best moments." In fact, I wasn't sure where I was most of the time. My ego was taking a beating for performing so badly, and I was beating myself up for letting my ego get involved. Occasionally I would catch a little flash of a glimpse of what it was like to let go and just *be* the movements, but even acknowledging the glimpse was enough to distract me again. The hour passed and the class came to a close and, disheartened and discouraged, I did whatever I had to do to get to the next thing on the schedule. But something was different. I do remember thinking that the value of the exercise seemed not in the acquisition of a new skill, something to be carried away like a prize, but in the effort made in the moment.

Whatever I felt or understood, the experience stuck with me. As I was inflicting my demo tape on Robert at the end of the weekend, it was the relationship between my experience of music and what I had seen in the Octagon that I tried, hopelessly and inarticulately, to communicate.

About the time this letter from Robert arrived I started up a journal. The first entry is dated February 28, 1985 and begins with the words...

I have in mind that this will be a journal of musical and related events. The first entries will be less timely since this cycle began 3 months ago.

From here I go on to recount the whole story beginning with the Claymont open weekend. Once current, I began to articulate my thoughts and plans for the upcoming course. A lot of the verbiage has to do with my mistrust of spiritual groups and ways of maintaining my distance while remaining open. I then go into my plans for getting my chops ready for Guitar Craft. It was methodical and calculated. Rigorous, involving long repetitions of difficult repertoire - *Perpetual Motion* by Paganini, *Fracture* by Robert, and a long list of classical studies for the guitar by Carcassi, Sor and others. Each of these I played every day for discipline, stamina and strength. I had a program for increasing my speed with targets to be reached by the time the "Guitarless Week Before Guitar Craft" arrived.

On March 4, I mailed in the balance due for the course. My cover letter still references the March 26-30 dates. Two weeks later, a letter arrived instructing us to arrive on March 25, in time for a 7pm dinner. I have always assumed this constituted a last minute change in plans.

On Monday March 25th, Roy and I loaded our guitars and gear into his car and made the 90-minute drive from Alexandria to Charles Town. I was carrying my 1959 Gibson L5CN, a beautiful archtop, F-hole, non-electric number. It was the only acoustic guitar I owned.