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GCUS01 – The First Guitar Craft Course
Claymont Court, Charles Town, WV
March 25-30, 1985

PREFACE

I am including a verbatim transcription of my journal from the first course as part of the History Project. It stands alone, quite self-sufficient as a day-by-day hour-by-hour recounting of events. Rereading those journal entries for the first time in a very long time, perhaps the first time since they were written, one thing that strikes me is that much of what stands out in my memory from that course is either omitted or barely alluded to in what I wrote at the time. And of course there are those things whose significance could only be recognized in light of the 31 years that followed.

So, some thoughts and lingering impressions to supplement the journal.

THE OPENING MEAL

In the dining hall, where we had congregated for tea, coffee, and conversation, as we waited for the course to formally begin, I remember looking up and seeing that Robert had appeared at the head table almost entirely unnoticed by us, and that he was simply standing there in Silence. My sense at the time was that he was taking in the moment. It took the room some time to settle down. After a few quiet moments (my appreciation of the presence of Silence was still a few years coming) he cheerfully announced that dinner was served.

CLAYMONT COMMUNITY

At the open weekend I had attended in December, the house was populated by a mixture of Claymont residents, students who were at Claymont to take part in the 3-month basic course, and us tourists just in for the weekend, all working together according to our capacity and experience. For the Guitar Craft course, it was just Robert and 18 guitarists in the Mansion.

For this first course, and for all of the early courses that took place at Claymont Court, the Kitchen was staffed by residents. As I was rereading my journal for the course, one of the things that struck me was how tight the schedule was: breakfast at 8am, first group meeting in the Ballroom at 9am. This was only possible because we, the students, were not responsible for the meals, for cleaning the dishes, or even as far as I can remember anything more than perhaps helping to clear the tables. We appeared at the Dining Hall at the appointed hour, and food appeared. When we were done, we moved on to the next thing on the schedule. Luxury!

There were a couple of residents who made specific contributions to the course itself: Barbara June Applegren presented opportunities to open up our creative channels through exercises in directed imagination and work with paper collages. Jerry Toporovski presented a talk on creativity, psychology and the body. And there was the yoga instructor whose name I have forgotten, or never knew.

But for the most part, the community was invisible. Which isn't to say they weren't there. The residents who were working the meals made a very strong impression on me from the very

beginning. There was a clear and active intention and care in everything they did. The food was simple, but the quality was high. Placing a slice of quiche, a potato, and some salad onto my plate at that first meal, was accomplished as if it meant something. It was not just the food and the necessary nutrition that it contained, but the entire experience of the meal that mattered. Although I am sure they were paid, I sensed that these tasks were really taken on as an act of Service. There was nothing precious about this. They were friendly and affable folks, going about their business in a manner that struck me as both remarkably intentional and completely natural. There was “something” there that was special. If these simple and necessary tasks can be undertaken with care and an attention to quality, what am I doing playing guitar carelessly?

If you had asked me a week later “how was the course?”, this is one of the things you would have heard me describe.

INTRODUCTION OF THE GUITAR CRAFT TUNING (aka the “New Standard Tuning”, NST)

In my journal entry about the opening meeting on the first night of the course, one of the last paragraphs has the sentence, “Next tells us to retune our guitars to C G D A E G.” No comment. And other than one casual reference to one of my personal meetings with Robert, it is literally the only time I specifically mention the Guitar Craft tuning in the entire course journal.

My memory contains a few more specifics. In his instruction, Robert was a little more specific than that about how to get to the tuning; “6th string down a major 3rd to C, 5th string down a whole step to G”, etc. There was also the slightly stunned look on the faces of a roomful of guitarists who considered themselves at least reasonably capable, as the import of this instruction sank in. He went on to remind us that it had been recommended that where possible we not play guitar for a week prior to the course, and that this request would extend until the following morning when we would get together and play guitar together for the first time. So... retuning, yes, but fiddling around and exploring this new tuning, no.

Around the mansion that evening after the meeting, the sound of high strings snapping was almost comical. Ting. Ting (a little higher). Ting (a little higher). Ting (higher still). **SNAP**. “Shit! Motherfucker!” Down the hall, the same drama occurring in other rooms.

The prerequisite for participation in the Guitar Craft courses offered that first summer included “at least three years experience.” Our skill and experience levels varied, but there were no outright beginners on the course. So for all of us, retuning the guitar had the same effect. Beyond the basic mechanics of the guitar, much that we had acquired in our at least three years experience was of no use. Scales... gone. Arpeggios... gone. Chord voicings... gone. Hot licks... gone. So what was left? Well, that’s kind of the question, isn’t it?

One possible reason the tuning may not have rated more than a simple mention in my journal is that it was not the first time I had heard about it. At the open weekend the previous December I had come across Robert’s guitar. Casually giving it a strum I had noticed the tuning, and reasoned out my best estimate of what it was. When I got home from the weekend I tuned one of my instruments in this peculiar way, and gave it a go... for about 3 days. Quickly judging that it was a stupid way to tune the guitar, I changed back to the standard tuning and didn’t give it another thought until about 10pm on the evening of March 25, 1985. In the months leading up to the course I had prepared diligently, as had we all. So when Robert gave the instruction to retune, the rug was pulled out from under me just like everyone else. The only difference was that I had a little voice in my head groaning, “Fuck me, I could have had a three month head start.”

I have always considered my quick dismissal of the tuning, after stumbling upon it months earlier, an act of Grace. I would have missed something important.

THE FIRST MEETING WITH GUITARS, TUESDAY MORNING MARCH 26, 1985

After breakfast, at 9am on the morning of the first full day of GCUS01, we gathered in the Ballroom of the mansion, with guitars. The description in my journal of the first part of that meeting is pretty sparse:

Group meeting with guitars. Tune up. Robert asks us to find whatever note we've chosen in the key of C, and to start playing it at will, any rhythm. Somewhat chaotic start relaxes into very pleasant continuum of sound. I hear isolated guitars and react or interact. Group swells and ebbs. Goes for perhaps fifteen minutes. (I chose middle C, feeling somewhat rudimentary)

Solid noncommittal reporting. Just the facts. What I actually remember is a little more involved.

We arrived in the Ballroom. It was what the name implies. A large room, wood floors, high ceiling, with no furniture save the folding chairs we would be using, making it highly reverberant. There was a fireplace on one wall, although a gas heater had been installed in front of it. It was probably once a very elegant room, in a very elegant antebellum mansion. In 1985, the entire house was in need of attention, but its heritage managed to shine through, at least to some degree.

I don't remember if the chairs were already set up, or if we did that ourselves. Whichever it was, 18 chairs were arranged in a circle. For the rest of the course, and for the rest of the history of Guitar Craft, sitting in a circle was our default working arrangement. The room was slightly chaotic, with people tuning and tweaking the tuning; dealing with a tuning that was unfamiliar, on guitars that weren't really set up for it, using string gauges that were largely inappropriate for the new range of tensions, and living in fear of an over-tensioned high string breaking. Once settled in and in our seats, Robert, who was standing outside the Circle, instructed:

"Choose one note from among the following: A, B, C, D, E, F, or G. C Major or A Natural Minor. When ready, begin to play this one note; for most of us, our first intentional note in one week."

In my memory, he added "perhaps in our lives" to the end of that sentence. But maybe that is just what went through my head.

The first thing I remember was how thoroughly wretched our collective tuning was. Wide variations from A440, and I found it instantly irritating. But at the same time there was something about this gentle tinkling and twinkling in more-or-less-C that was intriguing. For most of this first improvisation I took the instruction literally and stayed with my "one note", which was middle C. I listened to the others, gently isolating individual players in my ear, and responding to them rhythmically, in a form of conversation. It wasn't very long before I had the impression that we were getting a bit bored, or self-conscious, and people began changing notes and improvising. Trying to make it interesting? I experienced this as a wanking and noodling; self expression, and slightly frustrated self-expression at that, since in this new tuning we were deprived of the hot licks we wanted to show off. At least that was my judgment in the moment.

What happened next changed everything.

What I was hearing felt largely random and chaotic, but suddenly there was something else. I experienced it as the arrival of an old friend. It was a phenomenon I have experienced in live music periodically throughout my life, both as a player and as a listener. Since my youth I had been aware enough of it that over the years I had given it a number of names. In 1980s, and so on this day, I referred to it as the arrival of The Ghosts. It manifests as a sound that can't be directly attributed to what anyone is actually playing. That morning in March 1985, it appeared as the sound of a string section from an orchestra. Violins, violas, and cellos, sustaining long notes in one awesome megachord, ringing somewhere over our heads in this cavernous room. I remember looking up. It was as if the clamoring of 18 struggling musicians suddenly snapped into Order.

And then it passed, and there we were clinking and twanging and generally having a bit of fun until we let it go.

NASCENT VERSIONS OF THE PRIMARY EXERCISES

I do not have a strong recollection of the use of the term "Primary Exercise" on this course, and the it appears nowhere in my journal. But we were clearly looking at the most basic fundamentals of technique, and by the end of the week we had a list of specific techniques that we could take with us and work on in the future.

After that initial group improv the first morning, we began to look at guitar technique. While there is nothing specific in my journal, it is clear from entries later that same day that we must have begun with the basic issue of sitting on a chair. I referred to it as "posture". The Alexander Technique was not part of this course, and I really didn't know better. Robert also introduced the concept of bringing attention to, in this case, the left hand, and working with the idea of maintaining this attention while we address the work on the guitar.

He then introduced what would eventually be known as the FIRST PRIMARY. It is now typically presented as a rather specific exercise in 4-finger combinations, but on the first morning it was more of a general call to explore combinations of 2, 3, and 4 fingers. The basics of the left hand were demonstrated: the relationship of the thumb to the back of the neck, the angle at which the hand addresses the neck, the curve of the fingers bringing the tips of each finger to the string directly from above. The principles of succession and release were introduced, and we were invited to spend our time throughout the day exploring this as thoroughly as we were able.

We each had daily 15-minute personal meetings with Robert, and on the first day mine was at 3:30pm, so I had a good amount of the day to dive into this. At my individual meeting I presented what I had found. He offered some corrections/refinements to my overall left hand; the thumb's relationship to the back of the neck, and the way my fingers tending to contact the strings flat rather than with the tip. He asks me to play the exercise again, and to "freeze" (my word from my journal, but I don't know if that is precisely what he said) when he said "stop". I play. He calls out stop. I look at my left hand. My pinky is pointing straight out. After unsuccessful attempts to "not do that", Robert gives me a specific exercise to address the problem. In time this would become the SIXTH PRIMARY, aka "The Anchor". For this course, however, it was presented simply as a refinement of the basic left hand work, and in my memory it was never addressed in a group context or presented as a distinct exercise.

During the hour before dinner that first full day, another group meeting with guitars in which the fundamentals of the right hand are presented. My journal is notably uninformative on this, as well. Given that this was one of the questions I had arrived with, that is a little surprising. When I arrived at my first private lesson at Berklee in 1974, my very first question was about how to hold

the pick. It was met by a quizzical expression, as if to say, “what do you mean, how should we hold the pick? We hold the pick! Now moving on...” Here, we were given very specific instructions on the mechanics, as well as continued work with the fundamentals of the direction of attention, relaxation, and release. The exercise presented was what would eventually be the SECOND PRIMARY.

On the second full day, we again had a group meeting after breakfast, with guitars, in the Ballroom. In this meeting we began to address the actual notes on the guitar, as they are found in this new tuning, by looking at C Major. As with the First Primary, Robert was inviting us to explore and discover, rather than presenting answers (in my journal I end my entry with the words, “up to us.”). We looked at 3 and 4 note sequences on single strings, eventually moving both laterally (from string to string across the fingerboard in one position) and vertically (up and down single strings along the neck). In the following months, as the Seven Primary Exercises were codified, this was separated into two distinct exercises: the THIRD PRIMARY (lateral fingering), and the FIFTH PRIMARY (horizontal fingering).

One result of the work with scales at this point was that the perpetual din of ambitious guitarists madly guitaring all around the house began to take on a slightly more musical flavor. A good thing, since we were a day and a half away from heading out to a gig in Harpers Ferry.

At the after-breakfast meeting with guitars on the third day, we largely worked with group improv exercises. But one piece of guitar technique/mechanics is presented, and that is the Paganini Pivot, which would ultimately become designated the SEVENTH PRIMARY. In my journal, I refer to it as the “Paganini rock” until the Saturday recapitulation. I do not remember a specific exercise being presented for this technique, but it is clear from my journal that afterward I secluded myself in my room and began to explore its possibilities.

The next day was the “morning of massive hangovers” for many, having gone on a bit of a bender at the gig at Chianti’s in Harpers Ferry the night before. I had not done any drinking, and had returned to the mansion earlier than most. So I was relatively clear, and more than a little smug. At the group meeting after breakfast we again largely looked at group improv work. Only at the end did Robert talk about “cross picking” and send us out to explore 4-string combinations. In other words, the FOURTH PRIMARY.

On Saturday afternoon we had a meeting in the Library at which Robert recapitulated the exercises that had been presented. In my journal I recorded that list this way:

1. Four, three, and two finger combinations of the left hand
2. Alternate picking
3. The Paganini Pivot
4. Lateral and Horizontal scales
5. Cross picking

Some discussion and questions about those techniques. Robert says there are two more.

6. Stamina. He does not feel we are adequately prepared for this one.
7. ?. He will come to us in our group rehearsals and show us.

Speaking from the standpoint of Guitar Craft as it evolved, this translates as:

1. The First Primary
2. The Second Primary
3. The Seventh Primary

4. The Third and Fifth Primaries
5. The Fourth Primary

The Sixth Primary is not included, or subsumed in the First Primary.

I am not exactly sure what Robert was referring to in his reference to an exercise in Stamina. As Guitar Craft continued, there were a number of exercises and pieces of repertoire that we worked with that address this issue. But I don't know if any of those are what he was talking about in that meeting.

The seventh item on Robert's list was the Division of Attention exercise, which he presented later in the day. It is not a "Primary", but it is certainly at the heart of the matter.

THE "STOP" EXERCISE

Beyond the open weekend in December, I had no direct experience with the Fourth Way/Gurdjieff tradition. I had picked up bits of anecdotal information from cultural references. I knew that in 1974 Robert had quit the music industry in order to "clean toilets". When he reappeared a couple of years later, touring solo Frippertronics shows, he was including presentations about the nature of the musician's world that were distinctly different from anything I had heard before, and somehow this was connected. The name of this "Bennett" fellow popped up in his interviews, and Bennett's voice appeared as interstitial material on "Exposure". There was that "Stop" thing on "Under Heavy Manners". But that is about the extent of it.

So while I was generally wary of religious/spiritual/philosophical groups, it was clear that this Way informed Robert's understanding things, and what he said on the subject of music rang a satisfying bell for me. I was going to be the guest of a community of people working within that tradition. So it seemed courtesy alone demanded that I at least learn a little of what it was all about, if only to avoid faux pas. Fortunately, my local library system had a number of books on the subject, so by the time GCUS01 commenced, I had as good an overview of the general principles and practices as one can get from reading about something.

On the morning of the second full day of the course we had our 9am meeting with guitars in the Ballroom. We worked on approaches to fingering scales in the new tuning. At the end of that meeting, Robert talked about "shocks". My journal entry reads:

Robert talks about "shocks". Ways to dislodge ourselves from habitual (automatic) behavior and bring us "into the moment". Says that humans do not stay dislodged long, but drift back to a point of familiarity. Explains the mechanics of the STOP exercise. Says that during the day he might use it as a shock.

From my reading I knew that this was a big deal, but at the same time I do not recall going through the day waiting and watching for someone to shout "Stop!". I honestly don't think I gave it another thought. It came at lunch. I'm not sure if it was a shock, but it was definitely a surprise. My journal is typically blasé about it:

Lunch. Pleasant. Robert shouts "STOP..... CONTINUE". I froze per instructions. Suppose I observed myself. Lie in sun til 2:00.

When I put myself back into that moment, there is more detail.

- It was sunny.

- I was sitting at a table toward the back of the Dining Hall, facing east. In other words, oriented with the head table was to my left and the sun porch to my right.
- When the “Stop” came, one of the residents from the kitchen team was leaning over the table with a water pitcher to refill my glass.
- The volume, force and (what I interpreted as) vehemence of Robert’s delivery was alarming to me. My reactive interpretation was anger.
- I instantly froze my body as best I could, and what I was most aware of was the face of the resident. I had the distinct impression that if the “Stop!” had come while she was actually pouring the water, correct practice of the exercise would have required that she allow the glass to overflow.
- When the instruction to “Continue” came, she relaxed in position for a moment as she let it go, and then looked at me and asked, “Do you know about that?” My interpretation of her tone was that she had been completely taken by surprise, and was a little perplexed that the exercise had turned up in this context.

Our next group meeting was in the Ballroom right after lunch. Robert had already judged that the Stop Exercise had been a mistake. My journal reads:

Robert explains that the STOP exercise was a bad idea. Powerful exercise. Not appropriate. Feels no damage was done, but can’t erase it. Advises we just get past it.

Although it didn’t make it into my journal, he also said that he had formally apologized to the Claymont community. I remember this as part of what he said at this after lunch meeting. But it is possible that it was something he said to me in our conversation later in the day, or some other time. But my lingering memory of it is strong. I did speak to him about it in our personal meeting just before tea time. My journal records:

I ask him about STOP. Why bad. Says it was bad because he felt in his heart it was bad. Goes on to say what a powerful and far reaching experience it is and can be. That cannot be made smaller by merely narrowing the definition for use. Requires an understanding and acceptance of the rules beforehand.

MOVE TO THE LEFT, KEEP MOVING, DO NOT OVERTAKE

On the afternoon of the final day of the course (Saturday March 30, 1985), we had a meeting in the Library, where the guitar techniques (future “primaries”) introduced during the week were recapitulated. We then discussed the plans for the evening performance for the Claymont community. Nowhere in my journal is there a specific mention of when this performance was first announced; sometime after the Chianti’s gig, I presume. There *is* reference in my journal to new small groups having formed and new material written on Friday. So I suspect that we were already preparing for further performance by then. In any case, nothing in either my journal or my memory indicates that it was a “shock” to the course in the same way as the first gig. My sense, rather, is that we regarded this as a more “serious” performance, a new order of performance challenge. Where the Chianti’s gig had been a bit of a romp, complete with drunken silliness, this would be a performance in the Ballroom for people who knew how to listen. Robert’s description, paraphrased over 31 years of memory, was that the audience would be comprised of people capable of dividing their attention. I suspect this was something he said in the green room prior to our entrance, since the Division of Attention Exercise was not presented until after this meeting, and so the phrase would not have had a lot of meaning before that.

The decision was that we would perform sitting in a Circle, just as we had been working all week, with the audience sitting on cushions in the middle.

We gathered in the Ballroom with guitars to work out the setlist:

- A group improv in the spirit of our first meeting on Monday, with notes passed around the Circle (I don't believe the term "Circulation" for this practice had arrived yet).
- A series of small group performances, comprised of the pieces written on Friday.
- A series of small group performances, comprised of the pieces written earlier in the week as part of the Chianti gig challenge.
- A full group piece that had been presented earlier that day. This piece was, or would become, *Guitar Craft Theme I: Invocation*.

We tested our capacity to play the pieces in the Circle, and quickly discovered that given the acoustics of the room and the size of the Circle, it was very difficult for small groups when the members were not sitting together. Since the first and second sets of small groups were not made up of the same people, this posed a problem. We could easily arrange ourselves and enter the Circle with the first set of small groups sitting together, but how to deal with the second set of small group pieces? In addition, before the final piece was played I needed to end up sitting to Robert's left, as I was going to be bringing in the basic theme.

How we accomplished the choreography for this in a very short time remains a bit of a mystery to me. The concept was very simple: we found an arrangement for the second small group set that involved the least amount of movement. At the end of the first set, the people who needed to move would rise, and move to their new positions in the Circle. The rest would remain seated.

It wasn't a terribly complicated computation, but it was immediately obvious that accomplishing this without looking like a mob randomly galumphing around and through the Circle, risking the audience, one another, and our guitars, was a real challenge.

"Move to the left, keep moving, do not overtake."

Whether Robert had arrived with a plan, or it was an insight in the moment, I have no idea. But once this principle was articulated, it was really quite simple. Those who needed to move to a different place simply stood up, thus vacating their own seat for someone else. A turn to the left, and off they went. When a player arrived at their new seat assignment, they would immediately sit, allowing the players behind them to continue moving (without passing anyone ahead of them) until they arrived at their seat.

And so the principle was established, and understood. At the 15-minute blocking run-through just before dinner Roy informed Robert that we had a duet to add to the setlist. I have suppressed all memory of this, but my journal is quite clear. The piece was inserted into the set in between the 2 sets of small group pieces, and the choreography was amended on the spot. As long as each player was clear about where they were going, and was able to move with clarity, it was an easy and rather elegant maneuver. To this day, Frank Sheldon, who was in the audience, remembers this silent choreography as the most magical and amazing element of the performance.

PARTICIPANTS IN GCUS01

1. Roy Capellaro
2. Randy Chiurazzi
3. Chris Cousineau
4. Richard Drews
5. Chris Ebneith
6. Andrew Essex
7. Claude Gillet
8. Curt Golden
9. Mac Hart
10. Bryan Helm
11. James Hines III
12. Chris Kirby
13. Marvin Meng
14. Jeffrey Mercer
15. Peter Racine
16. Scott Robbins
17. Frank Simes
18. Mark Vermette