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Level I to Level II
Alexandria, VA
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APRIL 1985 – MOVING FORWARD FROM GCUS01

My course journal for GCUS01 ends with the meeting Saturday night after the performance. All I wrote was:

10:00pm Group. Some words about the completion of course. Robert says that he has decided that there will be a Part II. Thank yous all around. Cheering and crying.

When we first heard about and signed up for Guitar Craft, all we were offered was an opportunity to take part in one of three one-off seminars with Robert. But at a meeting on Friday someone had asked him, “is there a future for Guitar Craft?” Robert’s answer in the moment was not a definite yes, but he spoke of possibilities. At this 10pm meeting on Saturday, that had changed. Over the years I have heard the story from Robert of what he saw, as he was soaking in the bath contemplating the question, repeated often enough that I no longer have a definite memory of whether or not he spoke specifically about it at this meeting. But “Robert says that he has decided...” sounds like my journalistic shorthand, and not the way he would have phrased it.

In any case, I departed Claymont on Sunday morning with the distinct understanding that there was more to come, if I had the inclination to pursue it. In terms of what we could do following on from the course, there had been two things that Robert presented in meetings on the final day.

The first was a very practical suggestion at the Saturday afternoon recapitulation meeting, and something that I would later recognize as a version of “The Exercise of Qualitative Endeavor”. The suggestion as I understood it was to choose one of the exercises that had been presented, and to focus on that.

The second came at the late meeting on Saturday. When asked how to hold onto all of “this” after the course, Robert’s response was a joyful “Don’t! Let it all go!”, his hands into the air as if tossing confetti, and his head and eyes inclined slightly heavenward. I’m not sure I grasped it at the time, but over the years it has become something of a guiding principle for me.

My only journal entry for the entire period between the end of the first course and the beginning of the Level Two the following December comes about two weeks after my return home, and it details my work with the array of exercises, as I go through the selection process for the one I would focus on. I am taking the challenge seriously. I go through a fair amount of detail about my thinking in this choice. I throw out the Paganini Pivot almost immediately, it seems. No reason given. I consider the left hand finger combinations (First Primary), but reject it because “it seems to me that it’s like falling back on the familiar rather than concentrating on weaknesses.” I reject horizontal and lateral scales, for the same reason. Focusing on the exercises for the right hand, I ultimately settle on cross-picking (Fourth Primary). In the journal I refer to:

...the choice of cross picking as the skill to do “superbly”.

From my use of quotation marks around the word, superbly, it is clear to me that Robert had used the word in his instruction. It is not something I would have pulled out of the air. The direction for the Exercise of Qualitative Endeavor is “choose one small task and discharge it superbly”, and Robert’s suggestion for how we might move forward was a form of that, even if it wasn’t a formal

presentation of the excise itself. As I applied myself to the task, I was struggling to understand what this might mean, and how I was to measure my success or failure.

MAY/JUNE 1985 – INKLINGS OF STAGE TWO

On May 18, 1985, the third Guitar Craft course at Claymont Court came to an end. I was invited (or I invited myself, I'm not sure which) to come out and sit in the audience for their final performance that evening. Of course I was not aware of it at the time, but among the players were more than half a dozen people that I would be spending a the next few years working closely with. I have no lingering memory of the music, or more than just a vague impression of the performance at all.

After the performance, there was a bit of socializing, and I had the opportunity to sit with Robert and talk. I asked about his sense of what the next step might be, and he articulated a couple of possibilities that he was seeing, including something that might involve a fairly substantial challenge for the first two weeks in December. Safe to say I was buzzing as I drove home that night.

Three days later Robert sent out a letter to everyone who had taken part in the first three courses, laying out in some detail what we had spoken about. The two possibilities he was seeing were:

1. To "extend the time period to two weeks and limit numbers"
2. To "concentrate the program to just the members of a particular seminar or seminars, for example a Stage Two for GC 1 and 2, and another for GC 3 and 4 players"

He asks those who wish to remain in touch to respond, and to include their preference regarding the form of Stage Two. But the fix was in. The final paragraph read:

Please consider this: would you be willing and able to attend a two week Stage Two between December 1st and the 14th? It is fair to say, "I have something in mind".

On May 27th, less than a week after receiving the letter, I responded with a longwinded "Yes!".

The first confirmation of the December Stage Two course appeared discreetly buried in a scheduling update. The letter is undated, but the context indicates it is probably June or early July; definitely before the beginning of GCUS04 at the end of July. It enumerates the additional courses that had been added, including the Music for Non-Musicians weekend at the beginning of August. The final paragraph is one sentence:

A stage two seminar is scheduled for December 1-14 in response to those Crafty Guitarists who wish to take their Guitar Craft further.

This did not escape my notice. I began to make plans. I worked for the family business, so I knew that getting the time off would not be a problem. On the other hand, I wasn't independently wealthy either. And it was right before Christmas.

JULY 1985 – LEVEL TWO ANNOUNCED

The formal announcement came in a letter dated July 29, about two days into GCUS04.

This was the first appearance of the term “Level” in a course description. Up to this point, courses had just been “courses” or “seminars”, and all discussion of a potential follow-up course referred to “Stage Two”. In this letter it is now “Level Two”, and the first courses are now called “Level One”. This gave me pause. The hierarchical implications made me uncomfortable. I reasoned that the use of the word “level” had to do with the level of challenge, rather than a judgment or ranking applied to the guitarists taking part. But it felt to me like a can of worms. Throughout the subsequent months leading up to the December course, I quite deliberately continued to refer to it as Stage Two in all of my correspondence, hoping that perhaps the terminology of levels might fade away.

Something that stood out for me was the overall tone of the letter. The heat is being turned up in a big way. Robert begins with:

The response to Level Two at this date is twice the number of students I consider appropriate.

After laying out the schedule he is proposing and some sobering words about the financial realities of putting together an event like this, he comes back to this theme with a little more specificity:

The work will be harder, longer and much more demanding than the Level One. Not everyone who has applied is, in my judgment, able to make the effort required for these two weeks. So I suggest you re-examine what it is you hope to achieve from this.

And this:

The course will finish about Saturday 14th, but I reserve the option to finish earlier if the efforts of the students are inadequate.

And the final observation on this theme:

The first level, for some, might reasonably be viewed as a holiday in the country. The second level can in no way be viewed as a holiday, and I must dissuade anyone from returning with fond memories of the easy times on their first course from believing that the second to be as casual.

Some final words about finances and the fact that he is not being paid for his role in these courses, and the gauntlet has been thrown down. This is serious. And the first challenge, even before we affirmed our wish and intention to take part, will be to conduct a rigorous self-examination and personal assessment to determine if we are up to the challenge.

Whether or not I was good enough to make the leap to “Level Two”, whatever that might mean, was a real question. The thing that ultimately convinced me go forward was a single phrase in this letter. He had stated that in his judgment not everyone who had applied was “able to make the effort required”. The “effort required”. I really had no clue what these two weeks would specifically entail. But nowhere in this letter did he mention anyone’s skill as a guitarist. What was being asked of us was the capacity to respond to a challenge and to make honest efforts.

I could do that.

And if my guitar skills were not up the necessary standard, I’d trust Robert let me know.

AUGUST 1985 – TIME MARCHES ON

GCUS05 took place from August 5-10, 1985. I was contacted by someone in the ASCE front office (my memory is that it was Truus) to see if I would be willing to put up some posters at DC area record and music stores. The final performance was going to be opened to the public. A package of simple posters arrived in the mail. "An Acoustic Evening with Robert Fripp and the League of Crafty Guitarists*". A footnote explained that "*LOCG=Mr Fripp's guitar students".

Opening the Mansion up to the general public struck me as a significant raising of the bar. As far as I know public performances up to that point had strictly been of the Iron Rail/Chianti's variety: bunch of guitarists pile into a bar, play some peculiar music, get a bit silly, and then leave. For the few non-insiders who happened to be there, a story to tell their friends the next day. This, however, was the final performance of a course, taking place in the Ballroom of the Claymont Mansion. For GCUS01, and for every Level 1 I was ever part of thereafter, this was the redemption performance; the event that reconciles the week.

Also, to the best of my knowledge this was the first public appearance of a group known as "Robert Fripp and the League of Crafty Guitarists".

Once again, I have only a vague memory of the performance itself.

In a letter dated August 12, updating the course schedule, the addition of a "Level One and a Half" is announced:

Not everyone who has applied to the L2 is ready yet, in my opinion. Also, a lot more care is involved in selecting the group of individuals, and finding the appropriate challenge. So, for those who wish to refresh their Guitar Craft, taking it further but without facing the rigours of a L2, this Guitar Craft IX is available.

I never considered it. I had my eyes on the Level Two, and that meant, among other things, getting my home and financial responsibilities arranged. Plus, I needed to buy a real acoustic guitar. The Gibson archtop was a stunning instrument, but it was not made for this.

SEPTEMBER to NOVEMBER – ONWARD TOWARD LEVEL TWO

To this day, I do not remember formally applying to the Level Two. It is entirely possible that I have just lost or misfiled my copy of the application letter. Or, it may be that with the steady stream of correspondence with Robert, the visits to Claymont, and my initial response back in May to his inquiry about interest in taking things further, I just assumed that my wish to take part was understood. In any case, a letter dated September 25 informed me that I had been accepted. I was thrilled, and more than a little nervous. Robert had given no clue of what the course was going to involve, so in a sense there was nothing to prepare for. Keep up my practice so that I'm as sharp as possible on December 1, and hope for the best.

I did not respond with my deposit until two weeks later. I suspect ongoing negotiations on the home and work front. One funny element of my October 12 acknowledgement letter was in the final paragraph:

Having experienced "Claymont in December" once last year, I would appreciate some information about suggested clothing to bring. Will we be working outside?"

For all I knew, we might well be weeding the vegetable garden for two weeks.

Guitar Craft was getting a little attention. NPR's "All Things Considered" made a visit to Claymont Court during the November "Level 1.5" course. The 10-minute segment features the sound of Frank Sheldon's voice guiding a student in the Alexander Technique as applied to the task of playing the guitar, observations from Tony Geballe and Toyah about their experiences in Guitar Craft, interviews with Robert both one-on-one up in Room 5 and in the Library with the students present. A short demonstration of the Circle at work in the Balroom at the end of the story has Robert building what would become *Guitar Craft Theme II: Aspiration*. Around the same time, The Washington Post ran a couple of column inches in the Arts and Entertainment section about Guitar Craft. For my relationship with people in my life who were wondering what exactly I was doing with this peculiar "guitar program", this was both helpful and not. On the one hand, it lent a certain air of legitimacy. On the other hand, I'm not sure the descriptions of the Guitar Craft process, and of the Claymont community, did much to dispel the concerns of those who found the whole "mysticism and music" vibe a little suspect.

At some point, the idea of beginning the December Level Two with a concert to benefit the Claymont Children's School was floated. I was rehearsing with Roy Capellaro off and on with a band in the DC area, so we decided to put something together. Bryan Helm from GCUS01 was going to be returning for the Level Two, and was recruited for bass and vocals. Doug Londraville, a Claymont resident (and their beer brew master) was a drummer and agreed to fill out the quartet. Roy and I made one trip to Claymont to work with Doug, but Bryan was from out west. So most of the work of putting together a detailed set list was done by phone and mail (pre-internet days). The full band had two rehearsals at Doug's place, the day before and the afternoon of the gig. It would be an hour of rock and roll covers. Electric guitars in the old tuning. I don't think I ever considered using NST for this gig.

I was not organizing the event, just providing a band. In the end it wound up being kind of a party in the basement of the Claymont Mansion. The audience was Claymont residents and the players arriving for the Level Two. I don't think the school netted much. As I remember, there were just two bands. Tony Geballe and Debra Gavalas and a couple of others did a set of amplified acoustic/vocal stuff, using guitars in the Guitar Craft tuning. Then a raucous set from us. I remember having a bit of fun. I also remember kind of wondering why we were doing this instead of getting down to work with the Level Two. But it wasn't my call. My journal for that day:

11/30: more rehearsal, loud gig.

There was one moment in the set when the thought flashed through my mind, "What the hell? I'm playing 'Baby's On Fire' with Robert Fripp in the house." In my defense, it was more along the lines of the "801 Live" version than "Here Come The Warm Jets". Still...