

Curt Golden
GCUS09 – The First Guitar Craft Level Two Course
Claymont Court, Charles Town, WV
[unknown theatre], Charleston, WV
Marvin Center, George Washington University, Washington, DC
December 1-15, 1985

I was at Claymont on Friday, a day early, in order to rehearse with the pick-up band for the Saturday night Benefit Concert. My journal entries for those two days read:

11/29: Rehearsal w/Doug and Brian, mondo rock

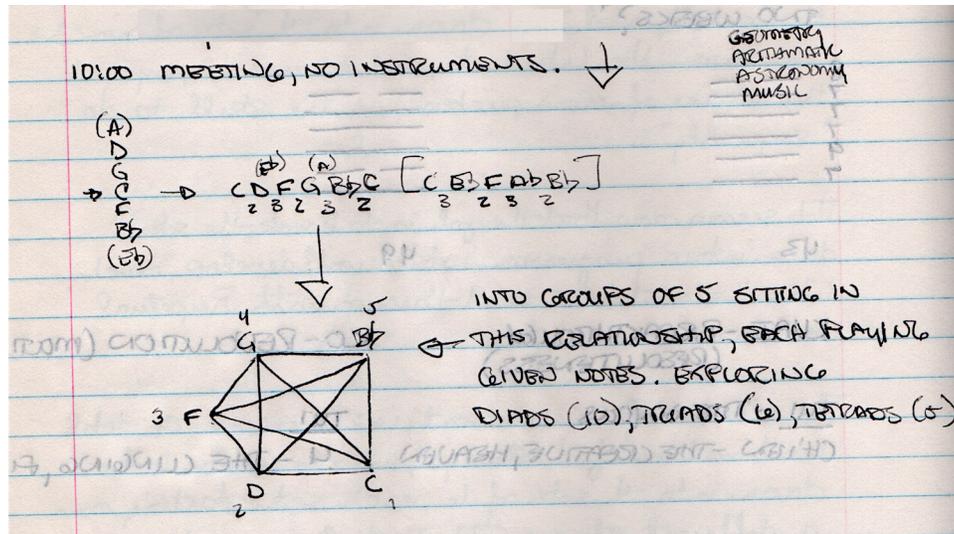
11/30: More rehearsal, loud gig.

I really have no idea how the event on Saturday night fit into Robert's plan for GCUS09. The November 4 letter outlining the arrival and departure schedule states that "The first Guitar Craft Level Two begins on Sunday, December 1st. Please arrive at the mansion in time for dinner on Saturday evening at 7:30." There is no mention of an event that evening. By the time November 30th came, and the concert seemed to have been downsized to a party in the mansion, I had a certain unease and I was wondering if maybe this frolic had bumped the beginning of the project. But no matter. We were asked to play, we came to play, and so we played. And had fun.

Then on December 1st my journal begins with the morning sitting at 7:30, breakfast at 8:00, and our first meeting with guitars in the Ballroom at 9:00.

In neither my journal nor my specific memory is there anything about an Inaugural Meeting. I have a vague recollection of Robert announcing at some point that the course would not begin until the morning. But the meeting? In Guitar Craft the form and function of the opening meeting of any course or project has always been pretty consistent. We introduce ourselves, stating "who we are, where we come from, what brought us here, and what our aim is for the course." It must have been on Saturday evening, because on Sunday morning we were off and running.

If we hadn't already figured it out from Robert's pre-course letters, beginning Sunday morning it was immediately and abundantly clear that this was not a Level One redux. After breakfast, the 9am work in the Ballroom with guitars was all about playing as a group. Circulation exercises and strategies. Rhythms and polyrhythms. Players learning to listen and connect with one another, and to hold a sense of the group as a whole, through challenges that could simply not be addressed any other way. At 10am, we moved to the Library, without guitars, where there was a presentation about the mathematical relationships in music. My journal has four words at the heading for this meeting: "Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Music". What follows are some diagrams: a segment of the circle of fifths stacked up and down, several 5-note (but not quite traditional "pentatonic") scale patterns with the intervallic relationships highlighted, and a Pentad with notes and numbers assigned to each point. From this meeting we moved back into groups of 5, with guitars, to explore all of the possible relationships within that form, as well as playing specific 5-note sequences in a kind of canon/displacement.

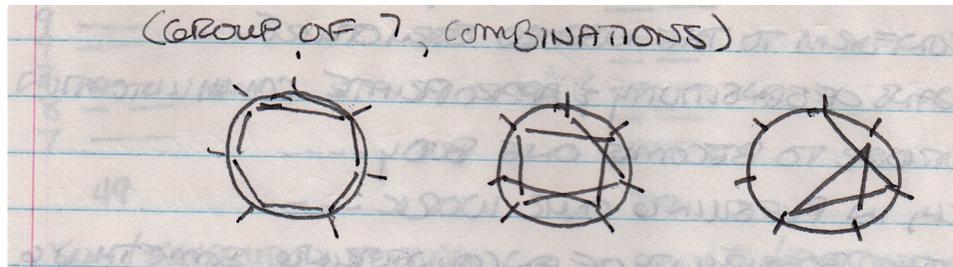


This was our work up until lunch.

At 2pm we resumed the group work in the Ballroom, again looking at rhythmic relationships, polyrhythms in chords and note clusters, and circulating specific note sequences in a defined rhythm.

After 3:30, all I have listed is “personal time”. I have no indication of how I spent that time. Overall, when I put myself back into that moment I am acutely aware of the realization of just how intensive this work is going to be. And that the standards were high. Not so much in terms of our guitar chops – nothing that we had done throughout that first day had been particularly challenging in that respect. Rather, it was about holding patterns in our mind’s eye, while listening and working with the players around us, and coordinating ourselves into a cohesive and collectively intelligent whole. One note, or one chord, played well, at the right time. Between several hours of applying this level of attention, and the late and loud evening the night before, it would not shock me if it turned out I had used that “personal time” for a nap.

The heat was on. My journal entry for the evening’s work simply reads: “Deserved abuse & berating”, followed by several diagrams of possible patterns for circulating within a group of seven players. We were in small circles – 5, 5, and 7 – all in the Ballroom. Each circle was working individually on strategies and patterns for circulation, but within earshot of one another, which within the wooden floors and vaulted ceiling of the Ballroom made for quite a cacophony. I was in the group of seven. Robert was moving from group to group, listening to what we were working on, making observations and giving directions and suggestions for patterns to work with. We struggled, as nothing seemed to be taking hold. Even the simplest of patterns would fall apart before ever quite coming to life. I remember Robert watching our group, with a somewhat distressed expression, and saying with an air of exasperation, “This is not complicated stuff, guys.” Before calling it a night, we returned to the full Circle and each group presented one of the patterns they had explored, the groups sequenced as if it was a small composition.



Day 2 began as usual, with the sitting, breakfast, and a 9am meeting in the Ballroom with guitars. At this meeting my journal only indicates that we continued to work along the same lines, and that my group was “making some progress”. At 10am we moved to the Library to work with Bob Gerber on the Systematics of Working in a Group. We looked specifically at the Triad of Individual-Group-Work. Bob’s method was moderately Socratic, in that he presented the basic ground rules and then elicited input from us in order to get where he felt we needed to get. By the end of the hour, this went up on the bulletin board:

Bob Gerber – Sys. Of Group Work 12/2/85

- 123 Take personal responsibility...
- 231 to conform to the needed structure...
- 132 by means of sensitivity & appropriate communication...
- 213 in order to become one body...
- 312 which, in pursuing our work...
- 321 has the possibility of encountering something that cannot be planned for

- 123 How can I participate fully ... and avoid being willful
- 213 How can I join in (one body) ... and be myself
- 132 How can I be sensitive outwardly ... & maintain contact inwardly
- 231 How can I conform ... and be vital
- 312 How can we attain our aims ... & I attain my aims
- 321 How can we be disposed to what may arise ... while working on what is planned

How can I conserve & contain our energy

Don't compromise ... Transcend

At 11am we were back at work with guitars. Lunch. At 2:00pm we met in the Ballroom to begin work on a “performance piece”. And that is the last notation in my journal.

At this point in the course, we had no indication of whether or not we were working *toward* anything in particular. We were just working. I can honestly say I had no specific expectations, at least nothing more elaborate than looking forward to two weeks of this kind of intensive work. There had never been a “Level Two” before. If there were hints or murmurings about what was to come, I missed them entirely. However, when the focus moved a little more to working on evolving compositions for 18 guitarists, performance of some kind seemed likely.

As far as works for the large ensemble, there was very little going in. We had the various circulation schemes that we'd been working with. We had the “Choose One Note...” improvs. “Guitar Craft Theme I: Invocation” had appeared on my Level One. “Theme II: Aspiration” had evolved out of the Fourth Primary at some point over the summer – it can be heard in the NPR “All Things Considered” segment about Guitar Craft, recorded during the November Level 1.5. As

far as a body of repertoire to draw on, that was more or less it. So for the next few days we found ourselves working on sketches of emerging compositions that Robert would throw at us, and then revise and expand on the spot or return with at a later rehearsal. Embryonic versions of “Jig”, “All or Nothing, Part I”, “Darts”, and Tony Geballe’s “Additive Synthesis” became our daily fare.

When an evening at the Iron Rail, a bar in Charles Town, was announced for Wednesday evening it was not a total surprise. My recollection is that the small groups for this gig were self-organizing, and that we would present the large group pieces as a kind of work-in-progress.

Andrew Essex, who had been on my Level One and was the composer of the little ditty we put together for our performance challenge, was also back again for the Level Two, and we agreed to resurrect that piece. This involved some reworking and tweaking. John Novak was drafted to join us. Perhaps one other player as well. We kept the basic groove and form, and John invented his version of the melody line. At the Iron Rail gig, I went into my goofy front man routine, announcing:

Good Evening! We are [I cannot remember the name we came up with for the group, but it had some sort of surf theme], here at the fabulous Iron Rail for our reunion tour, and tonight we are going to play a medley of our hit, “Party At Muscle Beach”!

By the end of the course Robert, with his love of (mostly intentional, I am convinced) malaprops, had twisted this into “Tight Muscle Party At Love Beach”.

The Iron Rail was small and kind of divey. A front room/bar, and a small back room where we performed. When 18 guitarists, their guitar cases, and their entourage, descended on it, there wasn’t a lot of room for much else. We had all experienced some form of this challenge on our respective Level One courses. So while it certainly had a touch of performance energy, it didn’t elicit the kind of panic that we had experienced in our Level One challenge. Only the level of difficulty of some of the pieces made me nervous.

If the stakes didn’t feel terribly high at the Iron Rail, that all changed on Thursday morning when it was announced that on Saturday we would be climbing into Claymont’s big old blue school bus to make the 8-hour drive to Charleston, the capitol of West Virginia, where on Sunday we would be performing in a theatre for the live broadcast on West Virginia Public Radio of a show called “Mountain Stage”. And we needed about 30 minutes of music.

We were in rehearsal mode, with Robert in the driver’s seat. The compositions on the table needed to be brought into a workable and reliably performable form, and our ensemble playing needed to be brought up to a presentable and reliable level of professionalism. The heat was clearly on. At every rehearsal, new developments in the form of the continually evolving compositions were presented, and needed to be incorporated. I can remember my frustration as the players in the lead section of “Jig” could simply not figure out how to play an 8-note repeating phrase in triplets in time over a rhythm section that was simply strumming a chord on the downbeat of a bar in 4/4. It all really did feel hopeless. When not with the full group in the Ballroom, I was in intensive personal practice and section work, trying to keep up. I’m sure we ate meals, and there were very likely other activities on the schedule, but absent a journal all that remains in my memory is work with the guitar.

One night after a rehearsal that had involved an early version of “All or Nothing”, which included long sections of harmonic “vamping” counted in 5, modulating in a pattern that required a great deal of attention, I lay in bed visualizing the piece. Holding its form, my parts, running the piece over and over again in my head, counting the bars of the arrangement, I drifted off to sleep. The

first thing I heard in my head when I awoke the next morning was a voice intoning, “277-2-3-4-5, 278-2-3-4-5, 279-2-3-4-5”.

On Saturday we were off to Charleston WV located at the southern end of the state. Charles Town, where Claymont is located, is in the northeastern panhandle and it is probably a 5 or 6 hour drive by car. In the repurposed and ancient blue school bus piloted by Eric Kahan, it was more like 8 hours. This was my first experience of working with the intentional conservation of energy. I doubt I was very successful at remaining still and quiet. I have one particular memory of a rest stop, where we assaulted the vending machines for junk food and sodas, and I had my opportunity to grab a smoke. We got a lot of stares from the citizens there. In my mind, they recognized us as rock stars on the road. More likely they just saw lunatics. At some point in the trip, either at a toll booth or perhaps at the guard gate at the college where the performance was taking place, we piled out of the bus with our guitars and serenaded the attendant with “Jig”. Anything to help us to inhabit the role of performer; always on and always ready to go.

We checked into a hotel for the night. I was roomed with James Hines, the only other smoker on the course. I practiced a bit, but mostly I remember hanging out in someone’s room with takeout food and watching “A Christmas Story”.

On Sunday we checked out of the hotel, got into the bus, and headed to the campus of West Virginia University where the performance would take place. A large and lovely theatre. It was a variety show running 2 hours, with all sorts of performers. We played two 15-minute sets:

First Set:

1. All or Nothing
2. Circulation and Chords
3. Darts

Second Set:

4. Invocation
5. Jig
6. Additive Synthesis
7. Aspiration

Up until this point, performances had taken place in the Mansion or the Barn at Claymont, or at places like the Iron Rail or Chianti’s. At Claymont the performers sat in a Circle with the audience in the middle. Performances at the bars and restaurants tended to be a bit more traditional, with the small groups occupying whatever space was established as the stage, with the full group spreading out and perhaps encircling the audience to the extent that the space allowed. This radio performance was the first appearance by the “League of Crafty Guitarists” in a traditional performance venue, with performers on stage and completely separate from the audience. For this, the Circle was opened into an arc. This compromise gave us some of the connectedness as players that we found from working in the Circle, while making us visually accessible to an audience. For myself, it helped to visualize the audience as part of the Circle. This had the dual effects of completing the circuit and including the audience as a partner in the event.

The affable host, with an easy going “good old boy” radio persona, did his best to read what sounded like a combination of stock EG press about Robert and early Guitar Craft course descriptions, as naturally as possible. The man knew his audience, and how long to hold after the phrase “goes by the name of The League of Crafty Guitarists” to allow everyone just the right amount of chuckle time. Recordings exist of this performance. Seven days earlier we had met in the Ballroom for the first time as a group. Any discerning ear can hear the shortcomings in this performance, and if one knows the material it is obvious that these were for us “works in

progress". But that we were able to walk on stage for the first time as a group, in front of several hundred people in the theatre, plus the invisible "millions" in the radio audience, and open with "All or Nothing I" remains a source of amazement to me to this day.

In the Green Room afterward, Robert gathered us together for an announcement.

On Monday morning a mobile recording studio would be rolling up to the Claymont Mansion. Tony Arnold of Arny's Shack, a name most of us knew from the League of Gentlemen album and other Robert-related recordings, was arriving from England to engineer. In the morning we would begin recording a "Robert Fripp and the League of Crafty Guitarists" album.

We were asked to sign a 1-page release, acknowledging that we would not be paid for our work on this album, and that any mechanical royalties were being signed over to the benefit of the American Society for Continuous Education as a contribution to the property at Claymont Court.

We were buzzing. But we also had the 8-hour school bus ride back to Charles Town ahead of us. We arrived quite late in the evening. There was very likely some of Doug's excellent beer available in the basement "commons", useful for working off a little nervous energy.

The next five days are a blur. On Monday the truck did pull up outside the Ballroom, and cables were run through the window. Microphones. DIs. A talkback system so that Robert in the Ballroom could communicate with Tony Arnold in the truck. Recordings were made formally. Recordings were made informally. We improvised. We rehearsed existing repertoire. We rehearsed newly emerging repertoire. We practiced composed circulations. We chimed improvised chords with each player contributing the "note of their choice", conducted by Robert, allowing the result to reverberate in the Ballroom for as long as possible. How much of this actually went to tape, I don't know. Performances were imperfect to be sure. But more than that, they felt flat. Tuning always dicey. Intonation for this tuning on guitars not set up for it, with string gauges still in the R&D stage, problematic. Nerves? Inexperience in the recording process? At one point I heard this exchange:

Robert: Tony, can you sprinkle a little fairy dust on it?

Tony's voice through the squawk box: You want me to piss on the tape?

I didn't know the Troggs reference at the time.

The seven pieces we had performed for the radio show remained more or less intact. "Tight Muscle Party at Love Beach" was back in rotation. Through the week, several new pieces appeared and were added to our working repertoire.

- The "five with seven polyrhythm", played on what would have been E Major-shaped bar chords in the old tuning, had been part of the "making a group" work the previous week. Now it was organized into the earliest incarnation of "Thrak". The full polyrhythmic cycle was played twice, followed by a short respite of unison 5/4 in between, and then repeated. On Robert's cue it moved up the neck chromatically with each repetition. Absent is the "rock and roll" section, which was added at some point after this project.
- A spin-off of "All or Nothing", dubbed "Part 2" (eventually they became "I" and "II"). This one brought back the 2-note bass figure and the vamping accompaniment, but the lead line was much more pyrotechnical, with a screaming line played in unison that I really had no business trying to play, but did anyway.

- A rocky rolly, rhythmic power chord number, in which the separate chords in the groove were each sounded by different groups of players. It was a part that could have been played by a single player, surely, but the separate groups interlocking to create the whole injected a certain vitality to the piece beyond the composition. And no small amount of hazard.
- While not quite “repertoire” in the traditional sense, a number of musical strategies, some that included improvisational elements, were identified. Among them:
 - The full group improv that had been part of Guitar Craft group work since the first morning of the first course. My recollection is that the closest thing we had to a name for this “piece” was Choose One Note, or (less formally) Pick-A-Note. Robert would call out, “Choose one note...” This might be followed by a little more detail; “from among the following...”, for instance. And there was often a subordinate instruction along the lines of “and proceed as the spirit moves”, or “and play that note *with enthusiasm!*”
 - Circulation. Improvised circulation never really quite took wing on this course. The alternative was a series of composed circulations in which the Circle was divided into three segments. Each segment had a different set of assigned notes ascending as we moved to the right. One segment would play their scale, up and/or down, and then play all of their notes together in a dense chord. Then the next segment, and so on. So while this was composed, and in a certain sense fixed, the effect was a kind of impressionistic musical gesture rather than a “composition”.
 - Conducted chords. We would each choose our own note, free to change it from chord to chord. Robert would conduct, with occasional musical directions implied non-verbally: high notes, low notes, loud, soft, sharp, picked with the thumb. Throughout the days of recording this would be called out of the blue. My sense was that they served the dual role of shaking us out of whatever stuckness or rut we had found ourselves in, and possibly giving Robert some material that might be pieced together in the mixing phase to create something coherent.

Often, the fundamental elements of emerging compositions would be introduced to individuals by Robert, and passed along, player to player, throughout the days, so that when the time came to begin assembling it into a form in our rehearsals and recording sessions, we would all be prepared. Other times Robert would introduce new material to the group as a whole, on the spot, and he would work with the group like a kind of living and breathing looper – getting something going, listening, making changes, listening. Composing in the room in the moment, with the players doing our best to respond.

At some point I began to hear a particular arpeggiated figure moving out virally through the house. It had a very specific flavor, and was catching the interest of many. I did not make a great effort to learn it, as I already had a lot on my plate. So when the moment came in a rehearsal to hear what this was and where it might be going, I was a little behind the curve. The piece unfolded over a couple of days. Robert would present the working form. We would play it back for him. He’d tweak it. We’d play the tweaked version back. He would add a new part. We’d play it back with the new part added. He’d drop it, until the next meeting when he would present the next incarnation of the working form. Clearly, this was a piece that was burning to find its way out into the world.

Once complete, the piece began with an Intro in 13, rhythmically divided as 3+3+3+4. The main theme which moved through a series of tonal centers, was similar to the intro but in 4/4

rhythmically divided as 3+3+3+7. It had a simple, but deceptively difficult, 3-note motif for the bass line. There was a repeating five note pattern that rolled through particular sections. And it ended with 4 and 5 polyrhythmic figure through an ascending series of tonal centers. Compositions that emerged during this course tended to get one syllable names such as Jig, Thrak, and Darts. This one was dubbed "Spikes". The rhythmic divisions were primarily at the top of short descending arpeggios, and so the first note of each tended to poke out creating this "spikey" effect.

We of course heard no playbacks on anything that had been recorded, but the overall mood in the house was that this was not going particularly well. On Thursday, a clipping from the Washington Post appeared on the bulletin board, without fanfare. Once someone had noticed and read it, the word spread very quickly. It was a short piece by Richard Harrington, the Post music critic, entitled "Fripp's Guitar Lessons". The first paragraph ended with the statement that "[Fripp] will conduct a unique concept/concert Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at George Washington University's Marvin Center."

Fripp is full of surprises, and this will certainly be one for his students. "They don't know they're giving a concert," he says brightly. "They won't know until a day or two before."

With less than two days to prepare, and a mobile recording studio still parked outside the Ballroom, we got down to the work of bringing the compositions we were working on into a suitable and musically satisfying working form, and our capacity to reliably perform the pieces up to a standard that they could honorably be presented to the paying public. Sometime on Friday Robert announced that the recording truck would be going to Washington DC with us, and would be recording the performances. My very distinct impression at the time was that this had not been part of the original plan, but that the recording sessions in the Ballroom had yielded very little, if any, useable material and so this was an improvisation taken in the hope that live performances might give them something they could work with.

On Saturday we were off in the blue school bus again for the 2+ hour drive to Washington DC. The show wasn't until 10pm, but there was a lot of set up to be done. Marvin Center is a large open space. We were set up in a deep horseshoe on the floor at one end. Our chairs were set, with cables and DI's under each for the recording. Mics were set up to capture the live acoustic sound of the group. We would be performing entirely acoustically, to an audience who would be sitting on the floor. We practiced the set, in order to become familiar with the sound challenges we would be facing, and to give the recording unit out in the truck an opportunity to check the signals, set their levels, and work out strategies for their own challenges. And perhaps to capture something useful. We practiced out blocking, entrances and exits, tuning breaks, etc. Dinner in the green room, and personal practice.

At show time we gathered, lined up in our assigned order, tuned up, talked through the set. Robert's words as we were about to make our entrance: "Mistakes will be made. But I shall recover superbly." And we were off. A full house, with people eager to hear what Robert was up to now. This was actually my first direct experience with what he had to contend with every day of his professional life. The expectations of "fans". The intrusion into his personal space and process by people looking for autographs or a moment of personal attention. All very peculiar to me.

My memory of the show is vague at best. I remember experiencing the energy that comes from an audience that is involved. Most of my performance experience over the years had been in clubs where for most the music is ancillary at best, and for some patrons simply bothersome. I knew what to do at the Iron Rail. This was different.

Robert spoke to the audience, without benefit of a mic. He invited them to engage. And we played. One surprise for all of us was when, on both Invocation and Aspiration, Robert rose and faced the audience directly as he played his solos. In the Ballroom, of course, we were accustomed to seeing him on his feet. But in performance this was not something I was expecting.

After the show, we were out the door and back to Claymont, arriving quite late.

The Sunday afternoon show was more or less a repeat of Saturday night, but the energy of an afternoon show was quite different. We arrived in the performance space to find padding installed under each performer's chair. Evidently audible foot tapping had made the recording of the previous show problematic.

This second show was videotaped by Tony Arnold, and eventually released on VHS in a small, private run. Based on that recording, the setlist was:

1. Introductory words: Robert Fripp
2. Improvisation [later: "A Fearful Symmetry"]
3. All or Nothing I
4. Circulation and Chords
5. Darts
6. Tight Muscle Party at Love Beach
7. Invocation ["Guitar Craft Theme I"]
8. [unknown]
9. Spikes [later: "Guitar Craft Theme III: Eye of the Needle"]
10. Jig
11. Additive Synthesis
12. All or Nothing II
13. Thrak
14. Aspiration ["Guitar Craft Theme II"]

Sunday was, technically, an extension day. The course had been scheduled to run through Saturday, with the caveat that Robert might either shorten or extend it a day or two, as circumstances dictated. So for some this meant that they would not be returning to Claymont after the Sunday afternoon show, but heading home directly from there. After the show, a final meeting, and we were on our way.

GCUS09 (Level 2): 12/1/1985 - 12/15/1985

1. Terry Blankenship
2. Roy Capellaro
3. Jon Diaz
4. John Durso
5. Andrew Essex
6. Tony Geballe
7. Claude Gillet
8. Curt Golden
9. Mike Gorman
10. Trey Gunn
11. Bryan Helm
12. James Hines III
13. Danny Howes

14. David Mazza
15. John Miley
16. John Novak
17. Mark Tomacci

18. Robert Fripp

- Barbara June Appelgren – Support
- Tony Arnold – Recording Engineer
- Bob Gerber – The Systematics of Performance
- Eric Kahan – Hero Bus Driver
- Toyah Wilcox – Reality Check and Trouble Maker
- Effanel Music – Mobile Recording