

Recollections From a Level One Course

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Guitar Craft course

GCUS29

Level One

March 8-11, 1990

Claymont Court, Charles Town, West Virginia

Prelude

1. How did you hear of Guitar Craft?

I received an announcement from Claymont about the first Guitar Craft course. Being broke and a pretty horrid guitar player, I was too intimidated to even consider attending.

Two events help solidify the need to attend a later course. I read an interview with Robert in 1986 where he said skill level was not a barrier, and when spending a few days at Claymont in the Summer of 1987 I heard someone playing distinctly Crafty pieces in their room and talked to them about Guitar Craft. It became obvious to me that the elements and intention of Guitar Craft could translate to other crafts.

2. Describe your preparation for your Level I.

I attended the March 1990 Level I at Claymont. My first preparation was to apply for the course and to do that I had to consider what my aim for the course was. I know I wasn't able to articulate it well, but it had something to do with trying to become a better player and using the techniques as a practice for cultivating more attention.

Not being a very good player, it was easy to not play the guitar for the week before the course, as had been indicated in the acceptance letter. I spent the couple of months before the course trying to solidify my aim and to practice a lot.

As a personal send-off to the course, I attended a Peter Hammill concert a couple of days before the start of the course.

3. What brought you here?

I've been trying to reconnect with the community, but obligations have prevented me from attending a course. I'm hoping to gain insights from other's experiences

as well as from articulating mine.

Arrival: GC29, March 8, 1990

I drove to GC29 (Level I) at Claymont from Connecticut alone. I had turned 26 the day before. I arrived in the late afternoon and there was already a large group of folks mingling around the dining room, where tea and coffee was available. The weather was very mild for March: it was sunny and warm. In other parts of the building I heard some guitar playing, which clued me into the fact that there might be a more advanced course already in progress. I chatted with a few people; none of whom I remember.

I made my way over to the end of the room, opposite the kitchen, where room assignments and a schedule had been posted. I found my name and took my guitar and bag to my room.

I think there were three other people in the room, but I only recall two: J from Vancouver and R from Santa Fe. The accommodations were, as has been said many times before, adequate. I had been to Claymont before so was already acclimated with the surroundings. Some folks grumbled about the amount of people per room.

After finding my room, which was on the second floor about halfway down the hallway, I went to the library to pick a book to read during the course. I found Bennett's autobiography, which I had started during my last Claymont visit, and headed back downstairs as more people arrived. I had the clear sense that GC was moving from small courses to somewhat larger events; it was almost five years old by this point. By dinner, there seemed to be close to 30 Level I's such as myself, and a handful of veterans.

Despite that the dining room had dark paneling and was filled with wooden benches and tables, it seemed to grow larger as the sun went down and everything was reflected in the darkened windows. By the time I got my food, the only place to sit was to Robert's left. I didn't say anything during the meal. I wasn't paying attention as dessert was being served when Robert turned to me and said, "unless you like ice cream as soup I suggest you start eating."

Shortly, he rose, clinked a glass to get everyone's attention, and went through the rules for the course (no drugs, no violence, smoking only outside) and made a few comments about what to expect during the next few days. He mentioned that the only mistake is not realizing your mistakes, and announced that there would be a meeting in a room off the dining area in an hour.

The meeting started a little before 9:00. There seemed to be about 30 other folks in the room and we all sat in chairs that were arranged in a large circle around

the perimeter. I remember many faces, but not many names. Robert declared the beginning of the course, and had each person introduce themselves and state what their aim for the course was. I was halfway around the room and tried to pay attention to the others' comments, while trying to formulate what I was going to say. When it was my turn I said something along the lines of wanting to deepen my relationship to music, as well as learn how practical techniques and exercises of Guitar Craft could translate to other instruments and creative endeavors. Robert said it was unlikely that I could get all that from a four-day course, but that at least I could start. The rest of the circle introduced themselves, and with that, the course had begun.

Day Two: GC29, March 9, 1990

The one element I was not intimidated about attending a Guitar Craft course was the sitting exercise. I was looking forward to sitting in a group, something I had not had the opportunity to do for a few years since the Bennett group I had been involved with had gone into hibernation.

The first morning sitting was sparsely attended. There was an announcement that those who needed a "guided" sitting could go to a different room. Sunlight filtered softly into the room, warming the space. There were some pillows on the floor and a couple of chairs. I sat on the floor, something I hadn't done in years. Although when I first started meditating I had assumed the traditional cross-legged position, ever since I was involved in groups I had done the sitting in a chair.

It took a few minutes to quiet my mind that first morning. Even though it was not related to the sitting exercise, something J.G. Bennett once said kept going through my mind: "We need not be sitting cross-legged to transform energies." I let this go and began to move my attention slowly to different limbs. There was a definite energy spike I felt about 10 minutes into the sitting where I felt a connection to the others in the room, the building and the space around me. It was only a fleeting second or so, but enough to see what was inner and what was outer. It was a taste of freedom, a realization that most of the time I was sleepwalking through an illusionary world. But there, for a moment, I saw it was possible to live in a world of real experience, where even the smallest efforts were not lost.

I was able to support this state for the rest of the morning. After we had tuned our guitars to the NST, I understood that playing that first note with all the intention I could muster was the most important effort I could make for the entire course.

After breakfast, we gathered our guitars, went into the Claymont ballroom, and seated ourselves in a circle. I looked around to see many Ovation, but a lot of other brands as well. I was using a Washburn. As its top dug into my arm, it

dawned on me that this was not necessarily the right guitar for extended playing in a chair.

At this point, Robert asked everyone to tune up, but not play. Panic set in. Many of the other attendees already had their guitars set for the new standard tuning. Unbeknownst to me, the NST was already public. However, I was unaware of what it was and it took a few seconds to get my bearings and listen for the notes of the tuning. As the tuning progressed, I heard a few strings breaking from around the room and terror began creeping over me. Thankfully, an experienced craftsman was nearby who explained what the notes were and I was quickly able to tune up. Thank you, Ralph Gorga.

Once a reasonable semblance of mass tuning was complete, Robert told us to pick any note from a particular sequence (which I can't remember). Suddenly, the ballroom filled with a cacophony of notes, like some lost Glenn Branca symphony. It was hard to hear what I was playing over the din, but it was exciting to hear so many guitars at once. Soon, Robert stopped the playing and asked us to try again, this time considering the note we were going to play and to play it with intention. Our collective try did not sound much different from the first attempt. For the first time since arriving I was no longer concerned about my guitar playing abilities.

The Middle: GC29, March 10, 1990

As in most processes, I have clearer recollections of the beginning and end to the course, while the middle is a bit fuzzy. It's more memory flashes that touch all centers. Vivid moments playing in the circle, the performances at mealtime, personal meetings, walking the grounds, and the smell of the soon-to-be-blooming orchards. Three stand out more than others.

No one sat in the same place for the primary exercises, but I did sit on the same side of the room for most of them. For one exercise we stood in a circle. It was the second full day. We were learning one of the Themes. Robert was going around the circle, standing in front of each player to assess their technique. There were two or three more seasoned Crafties at different points around the circle as well. At one point, notes began to drift away from each other, and Robert ended the exercise. There was a pause as everyone waiting for the next instructions. Silence entered the room at this point briefly.

I had two meetings with Robert. The room was not that bright. There was a small window, but the sun was on the other side of the building at the time. There were a few pictures leaning on the window sill. I brought my guitar, but it just reinforced the fact that my Washburn dreadnaught was too bulky for extended playing. We spent both meetings discussing the applicability of Guitar Craft ideas to other crafts. The outcome was that, as Robert said, "there are analogies." I was

teaching writing poetry at the time, but it was clear that the analogies were more than how one held a pen or sat in a chair. My mind was full after these meetings and I had a hard time thinking straight. I went back to my room for a short sitting to clear my head. One benefit of the intensity of the course was that the sleeping rooms were empty for most of the day. It became clear during the sitting that I was not going to realize any “breakthroughs” while the course was in progress. I decided the best course of action was to just concentrate on playing the guitar and assimilating as much as I could for the rest of the week.

In the middle of the course, it was announced that merchandise was going to be on sale before lunch. There were shirts, picks, strings and some literature. There was a mad rush to buy shirts and the Get Crafty cassette. I bought a few things, but mainly picks. I was intrigued since the start of the course by the triangular picks that some were using, and for some misguided reason I thought they would immediately improve my technique. Instead it took a while to get used to the gauge and to determine the right amount of pressure to apply. When I first started using them they rolled to the side as played them. I finally discovered that you could vary the gauge, and thereby the effort needed for attack, by how much of the end angle the came in contact with the string. I still have two unused picks, vintage 1990, waiting to be used.

Performance Challenge: GC29, March 9-10, 1990

It was the second or third full day when we were given the performance challenge. It didn't take long to morph off into our respective teams. The team I was involved with had five players. I only remember one of them. There were two who were of a much higher-caliber than the rest of us, even though we were all new to the NST. However, this was irrelevant. The group was working together, often practicing on the big rock in back of building. Everyone contributed parts so each of us found our own level. For myself, I had realized that I was identifying with my own conception of what my skill was, and this was keeping me from pushing myself beyond a habitual place.

There were six or seven groups total. On performance day, the final morning, each team played two pieces if I remember correctly. It was warm and sunny as the groups assembled in the ballroom along with the audience. I don't remember who organized the schedule, but everything went smoothly. We went on close to the beginning. I played bass parts for the two pieces, as well as a chord here and there. I have a vivid memory of one of the pieces because I used the bass line as the central figure for an entirely different composition I've released since. I still remember scanning the audience during one of the pieces. The faces are fuzzy and most of the names are forgotten but I know what it felt like, awoken from my usual slumber.

The audience was courteous; not what we were led to expect. In the end it was fascinating, and fun, to hear what all the groups were able to write in the short period of time. The only disappointment was that everyone came up with music that seemed cut from the same template: interlocking guitar parts that hopped along rhythmically. No surprise really, but afterward I wished there were some more chords played. Either way, it was an effective exercise to harness all the energy that had built up since the beginning of the course.