

Portland Guitar Society newsletter - Dec. 2002

Interview with Ben Bonham by former student Mark Harpainter

For a start, lots of people teach and study guitar, what distinguishes your individual approach and how has it evolved?

My teaching background is primarily in Athletics Coach education, helping the UK National Coaching foundation ease their senior coaches into assimilating some of the newer philosophies and practices in learning. This has been extremely helpful in my guitar tuition as a lot of people I work with have a fair bit of guitar playing experience. I seem to spend a lot of time helping people change habitual ways of doing things that may be impeding their progress. I work hard to keep my input positive and encourage my students to 'find' their own answers. I also believe in developing a rounded approach to playing at whatever level students are, that is, working on stuff like dynamics, tone and presence, along with the more obvious song and riff learning.

Most teachers inevitably, at least to some degree, adopt some of the methodology of those they themselves have learned from. Who have you learned from and how?

I am self taught - originally as an aspiring 14 year old wannabe punk, thrashing on a home made electric guitar, mostly to annoy my sisters and parents. I was given a Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee tape when I was about 19 and that changed everything. From then on, I have been absorbed and entranced, first by early blues and more recently by other traditional music from the 20's & 30's. I learn by listening and watching others play, and now I learn loads by teaching others. Whenever I can, I get help from the current crop of great acoustic players, recently I've studied with Bob Brozman and Stacy Phillips, amongst others. I always get a lot of personal insight out of those sessions, and also pick up great teaching tips.

Do you prefer a more formulaic or structured approach, or an intuitive go-with-the-flow approach? How do you "read" a student or know how to reach them?

I am structured in as far as I ensure that the student leaves with achievable goals and material to work on at home, but I like to let the lessons develop organically - ending up where we need to be rather than where we thought we wanted to be. Pitching the level right is simply a matter of really listening and paying attention to the student. All the information is there.

I know you play and teach Hawaiian steel guitar, especially the vintage, acoustic material of the greats like Sol Hoopii, King-Benny Nawahi. What is it about this music that intrigues you?

The sheer brilliance of those musicians is irresistible, and that music makes me very happy. The combination of the Hawaiians' beautiful traditional sense of melody and harmony, and their reaction to and treatment of 1920's hot jazz is just great. Since the Hawaiian Steel Guitar is fretless-as with bottle neck slide- the freedom for expression is limitless. There are very definite techniques that can be learned to produce good intonation and tone, and the fact that one is confined to using the steel bar- either slanted or straight across the strings- to make 'chords', forces the player into making very creative musical solutions. Playing the guitar flat on the lap in an open tuning is a really good way to break out of ruts and give inspiration to your regular guitar playing. The other thing I like is, all these great older solid top acoustics with warped fingerboards and dangerous frets, once equipped with a \$4 nut raiser make perfect acoustic steel guitars - a very economical solution.

Who can learn this style of playing?

Well, of course, everyone. The lap steel or dobro is associated with Blues, Bluegrass, Hawaiian, Western Swing and Country but you can play anything you want. For a beginner at first the instruction is very - 'do this, try that' , and the results are immediate, which is very gratifying. As playing improves I become much more of a coach and really help people discover what they want through the guitar.

So where can we learn?

I am currently teaching privately at my studio in Hood River or I give classes online for people who live farther away.

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