

Frank Gambale returns to his roots with R2F IV world tour, new 'Soulmine' album

[Carol Banks Weber](#), Jazz Music Examiner September 28, 2011



“When I tell people that I never practiced technique, they scratch their heads. I only practiced musical concepts. These musical concepts may have been extremely difficult to play on the guitar, so they required enormous technique, but MUSICAL CONCEPT was the driving force! ... the huge desire to play a musical idea on the guitar that was in uncharted territory.” –Frank Gambale

[Frank Gambale](#) is a strange mix of star and fan, *Über*-confidence and wide-eyed wonder. In his 26-some-odd years as a legendary guitarist and role model, he's done a lot to advance the progress of play with his Sweep Picking Technique and Tuning System. He's played with only the best there is, touring the world several times over, hitting the finest jazz festivals, nightclubs and concert halls, and helping to put out albums that would mark historical territory, as well as shape young minds

who would then grow up to become stars themselves.

He's done all this as a member of an elite jazz-fusion club, *and* as a diehard fan of that club. In most circles, that's called living your dream.

Single-handedly, the Australian wonder changed the entire landscape for rising guitarists in 1975 with his Sweep Picking Technique. The technique enabled guitarists the world over – once they painstakingly mastered it through tons of practice – to play faster, better, but with more ease and freedom of expression. Many before him had tried, but could only pull off one or two licks before giving up.

A Guitar Institute of Technology (GIT) “Student of the Year” back in the day, Gambale used what he knew to help others through instructional books and DVDs, teaching gigs, and a line of his own guitars. To this day, he's still revolutionizing the industry, with his Gambale Tuning System, which allows guitarists to achieve chordal capabilities of the piano on their fret board.

Besides developing techniques and gear, Gambale always turned heads wherever he jammed and whomever he jammed with. He's collaborated with the Chick Corea Elektric Band, winning a Grammy and two Grammy noms in the process, Vital Information, Stu Hamm and Steve Smith, Billy Cobham, the Mark Varney Project, Maurizio Colonna, and GRP—not to mention his own critically acclaimed albums, about 20 of 'em.

And he's not done yet. By Valentine's Day next year, he and his wife BOCA will release “Soulmine,” featuring sexy vocals, positive lyrics, R&B jazz-funk stylings, and his signature racy guitar.

Currently, the man is on a world tour with Chick Corea's [Return To Forever IV](#) Band (Stanley Clarke, Lenny White, Jean-Luc Ponty). The world tour kicked off last February, and reunited him with many of his colleagues from past adventures – Gambale was on Corea's Elektric Band for a significant period in the '80s, and has played with Ponty. The band will conclude their world tour back in New York City, at the Blue Note, for a month-long birthday jamfest for Corea's 70th, which will give Gambale even more to do – playing RTF and Elektric Band material.

Chick Corea's Return to Forever IV kicked off in February of this year, with their world tour starting in Australia. How did you end up on this band and in this tour?

I got a call from Chick inviting me to play. I have a long history with Chick from the Elektric Band and I have been a huge fan of RTF for as long as I can remember. So it was a welcome call.

You've worked with Chick Corea in his Elektric Band. What's it like coming back to that environment, Chick's world?

In this group, I am seeing Chick in a different light. RTF is clearly a collaborative band with Lenny and Stanley and Chick all having written music for RTF and each of them giving input on the arrangements. In the Elektric Band, all the music was Chick's and so he was the clear band leader and roughly 15-20 years older than all of us. It's great viewing him in this light and getting to see him amongst his peers.

Playing with Chick Corea isn't a walk in the park. Describe his collaborative style—I imagine he has high expectations, is he a perfectionist?

As with any great, serious musician, the expectation is high. I am the same way with my bands. Music at this level is serious. It's the musical equivalent of the speed and precision of Formula 1 car racing, or skydiving, or intellectual conversation in the sense that, no one is fooling around. We love what we do and it's exhilarating at this level. Of course it's fun, too. We're all perfectionists and the performances reflect that.

Back in ... the '80s? Chick asked you to join his Elektric Band – after Return to Forever kind of folded – a jazz-rock fusion band. At the time, you were teaching and had several instructional books and DVDs out there. What in particular led to his picking you out of the crowd, was it the techniques you developed in those instructional books/DVDs, or did you do any shows where he caught your performance?

I already had two solo albums out when I auditioned for Chick — “Brave New Guitar” and “A Present For The Future,” which were gathering momentum, and being recognized by great musicians such as Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, amongst others. I had also just gotten off tour with Jean-Luc Ponty. I think one of the things that attracted Chick to my playing was that he thought I was unique. I originated a way to play the guitar that has become standard in the guitar lexicon of techniques. But technique is one thing, and musicality is quite another. When I tell people that I never practiced technique, they scratch their heads. I only practiced musical concepts. These musical concepts may have been extremely difficult to play on the guitar, so they required enormous technique, but MUSICAL CONCEPT was the driving force! ... the huge desire to play a musical idea on the guitar that was in uncharted territory. So when Chick heard me play, he understood immediately what he was hearing, he really got it. It has resulted in a very long and rewarding musical journey for both of us.

How did you react when Chick asked you to join his new band, which would go on to make history? It must have been surreal. Did you have any moments where you worried you wouldn't measure up? This is Chick Corea.

I was 26 years old when Chick asked me to join the Elektric Band. I was a little nervous before the audition, but I was so ready to play with him that the excitement far outweighed my nerves. I knew I could do the gig. I knew his music and had been a fan since I was 13. So, it felt a lot like destiny. I am proud of my contribution to the Elektric Band and am proud of my contribution to RTF IV. Chick helped get my career started and exposed me to the world. So too, Jean-Luc Ponty, with whom I toured before Chick. I have had a lengthy solo career with loads of solo albums, with so much more to come! I will always be grateful to Chick for giving me the opportunity; he really gets what I do!

How has it been working with Chick again for this tour?

It has been a lot of fun, a lot of shows the world over, a lot of traveling, and a lot of great music.

He's an inspiration on so many levels. People half his age couldn't keep up with what he's doing on this tour both physically and musically! He looks great and he's inspiring me to get as healthy as him!

Anything you're looking forward to in the world tour?

Yes of course. The early part of the tour took us to Australia, my home country, where I grew up listening to Chick and RTF. Now, that little Italian boy gets to play in that band that made him dream big to begin with...all of this coming full circle at the Australian iconic *Sydney Opera House*. I was so happy to play there with this band and have my family present...they have seen that part of my journey so clearly. I am also looking forward to November at the Blue Note, where Chick's having his 70th birthday bash. I will be playing with RTF IV at the beginning of the month and Elektric Band at the end of the month! Now that's what I call fun!

You've developed this sweep technique on guitar, basically using it as a keyboard (which is what guitarists like Stanley Jordan does with his own two-handed tapping thing). How did that come about?

Well, I'd say it's totally different to Stanley Jordan. I was greatly inspired by pianists and saxophonists and it was my desire to play the single-note solo lines from those instruments that led me to originate the Sweep Picking Technique. When I listen to a guitarist play, I can in most cases, tell exactly where it is played on the guitar, which string, which fingering, just by listening to it. So then if I want to play it, I will play it exactly as the other guitar player played it.

Listening to a keyboardist or saxophonist, there is *no* precedent for the guitar. I had to find ways to play phrases that were previously considered impossible on the guitar. I describe the technique with the following analogy: imagine a car on a freeway doing 80 mph in fourth gear. The car labors and revs high, and shakes and works very hard to do 80 mph. Sweep Picking Technique is like having a fourth or even sixth gear. You can go very fast, but it's relaxed and comfortable. Before me, this was thought to be impossible. Sweep Picking is a clear, concise way to express freely, limited only by one's imagination.

Does anything suffer from the sweep technique, in terms of chord flexibility and melody? What challenges are there inherent in this technique as a guitarist?

The technique is used for single-note lines. The biggest challenge is playing it in steady time. The tendency is to rush. It's very difficult to do it in time, not impossible, but very difficult. Another difficulty is to separate each note and not letting them run together. It can take many, many years to get it comfortable and accurate. But when you do, it is like flying. You can go anywhere.

Why not simply play piano or some abbreviated form of keyboard, instead of trying to use the guitar as a keyboard?

Hmmm, I actually do play the piano, but I think that would be missing the point, because I love the guitar, it's a unique instrument. However, I was excited by what the great jazz piano and saxophone players were playing, the note choices were cool! That's what led to developing the technique. I wanted to play those wild notes on the guitar, because that was where my musical intention was; it just so happened that it has never been done before on guitar. The marvel is at how relaxed the right hand picking is and how many notes are coming out. It is the most efficient way to pick on the guitar. There is no wasted motion and it's a really logical and graceful way to play the guitar. It allows for the greatest expression on the instrument.

You play piano, yet you've made your fame and fortune on guitar. What is it about guitar that trumps piano for you as a player?

I can't carry a piano over my shoulder! Guitar is an amazingly expressive instrument. It's all in your fingertips, all the expression... you are touching the notes and you can bend, slide, vibrato, artificial harmonics, dig in with the pick, pick and pluck with your fingers, or whatever your heart desires. You have all this right at your fingertips. Piano, you touch a key, which is connected to a very complicated mechanism that hammers a string and so on and so forth, you get the picture...

Synthesizers allowed keyboardists to bend notes and to the vibrato, but they still don't "touch" the notes like you do with a string. I love how deeply expressive and intimate the guitar is.

You've also got an album, "Soulmine," coming out in February. What inspired this recording? It's a return to vocals and working with your wife, Singer/Songwriter Boca for the first time?

I love vocal music and popular music and groove. I have had vocal tunes on various solo albums, but I always wanted to do an album entirely of well-crafted songs with cool changes, sophisticated vocal harmonies and melodies with serious grooves. The reason I did this now is because in Boca I have the perfect voice, writing partner and performer.

How would you describe "Soulmine" for the average listener (jazz-funk...)?

Sophisticated R&B pop with jazz and funk overtones.

What do you both hope for with the release of this album... cross-over hit into pop territory?

We're hoping to take over the radio waves and then buy a small island in the Caribbean. So yes, it certainly has the potential to cross over into pop territory. It's a very romantic album that is oozing with soul and grit along with really positive messages. We can't help but be sexy when we're together and I think that magnetism is all over the music.

Of all your success ... the Grammys, the monster venues, the great players, that Sweep technique ... what are you most proud of and why?

I'm proud of all of it. Creating a new way to play the guitar is no easy feat. I'm proud that I have been true to my expression no matter what! I'm looking forward to creating more music and featuring my newest invention, "The Gambale Tuning," which made its debut on the album "Raison D'Être." This, too, is revolutionary to the guitar and I am excited to create more music with it.

How would you compare your playing today to when you were younger and starting out?

There's no substitute for experience and maturity. It cannot be bought, rushed or imparted. It only comes with time on your instrument playing, practicing, doing shows, traveling the world and interacting with great musicians. So, I would have to say that my playing has matured and is more melodic, ferocious, precise and succinct than ever before.

<http://www.examiner.com/jazz-music-in-national/frank-gambale-returns-to-his-roots-with-r2f-iv-world-tour-new-soulmine-album>