

What's That Dude Play

September 30, 2011

size: full page rate: \$140

value: \$350

Circ: 20,003

The Fusion Soul of Frank Gambale

Return To Forever guitarist talks gear, new project



For going on three decades, Australian sweep picking and fusion guitar master Frank Gambale has honed his craft across a litany of musical genres – fusion, jazz, R&B, rock and so on. A prolific writer and performer, Gambale has been involved with several bands over the years and has recorded or taken part in recording well over three dozen albums. Today, he is the guitarist in the current tour version of the classic jazz/fusion

ensemble Return To Forever with old friend Chick Corea. Gambale was an integral part of Corea's Elektric Band. Beyond the current tour, Gambale also is prepping the release the debut of a project called Soulmine, a R&B/Funk mix with his wife Boca on vocals. WTDP? had a chance to catch up with Gambale on the road to talk a bit about being back with Chick, his new signature gear and the future with Soulmine.

WTDP?: You and Chick obviously have history with the Elektric band work during the '80s. How did your involvement with the new Return To Forever come about? Did Chick just pick up the phone and ring you up?

Frank: I was just coming back from an Asian tour with my fusion trio and I hit the US soil and there were some messages from Chick. So I called him back and he invited me to come up to LA to sit in with the band and jam. It was really an open invitation to join the band. I was very excited. Obviously, I've had a good history with Chick from all of those years with the Elektric Band. I was excited about the proposition of playing with this band. Return To Forever is a group that inspired me tremendously as a young man playing guitar. Jean Luc Ponty, who is in the group, also was telling me this. What a fantastic group. I'm having a ball playing with the guys.

WTDP?: We heard you say in an interview recently that being in Return To Forever is like a 'magic carpet ride'. Can you explain and expand on that analogy?

Frank: That's what it feels like to play in this group. I mean, Lenny White and Stanley Clarke... I'm right in between those two guys... just an amazing, powerful rhythm section. And with Chick comping for me, that's what I would call a magic carpet ride!

WTDP?: Next year you have the Soulmine project coming out. From the clips we've heard, it appears to have more of a funky, R&B flavor to it. How did this album come about and how did Victor Wooten become involved?

Frank: This is the album I've wanted to make for about 30 years. I'm really excited about it. The missing link was Boca. Just incredible vocal and writing skills... we wrote all of the music together, arranged it and produced it together. We ended up with a very beautiful, strong and wonderful album. The players... Victor Wooten got involved because I'd been working with him in the Elektric Band and got to know him. I can't think of a funkier bass player or a bass player with a bigger groove than Victor. So he was the perfect choice. My buddy Joel Taylor on drums... what a perfect rhythm section for this incredible record.

WTDP?: What has been the motivation behind the new social media push... like the Frank Gambale You Tube channel?

Frank: I have new management that are excited about embracing all of these new technologies... and I am also 100% behind backing these new social media outlets that can bring together all of my fans to a central point where they can really stay connected and I can stay connected with them. It's a wonderful place to share a lot of footage and performances that are in my personal archives that I can share with my fans directly. It is a wonderful, wonderful technology.

WTDP?: One history question... We've always been a sucker for trios and were just recently turned onto GHS by a friend who told me it was the 'loosest tight' band he'd ever heard. We shook my head at that, but after listening to the material on the Greatest Hits record I kinda understood what he meant. We later called it 'composition with freedom.' Do you think that's a good description of what the band had going on?

Frank: We made three records together and, especially the first one, we got together and had no material before we went into the studio. We composed, rehearsed, arranged

and recorded a tune a day. It was an incredible spike of creative energy. In fact, all three records ended up being pretty much that way. The trio format... it was really the first time ever I recorded in a trio format. It's a wonderful format for guitar... wide open, and it leaves me able to create incredible textures and really showcase the guitar, although the whole trio was heavily featured on every tune because we all arranged the tunes together. It does really have a loose type feel to it. I think that is a wonderful description about how those records are.

WTDP?: Schooling has obviously played a key role for you both early on and as a professional. What would you say to a budding guitarist today who was trying to decide between learning more about his/her craft in the classroom versus the rehearsal room or the road?

Frank: There's an expression... education is power. I'm a firm believer that is the truth with music as well. The more you know, and the more you study, the broader I think your possibilities are, your opportunities. I think there is no substitute for playing in a band, and playing with other musicians. Educating yourself is always a wonderful thing to do. There is no question about that. I love knowing what I'm playing, and there is no guess work to it. Although, a lot of people say if you do all of this schooling you lose your feel, or your heart. I think that's not really true. It's like having a great story to tell, but you only have 17 words in your vocabulary. It's hard to tell the whole story with only 17 words.

WTDP?: When it comes to composing a song, do you tend to keep a library of riffs/vamps that you can revisit when inspired or does a mostly completed tune usually all come out in a single sitting?

Frank: I do tend to keep ideas in my computer that are started and not finished. Other tunes definitely all roll out in a single sitting. It really varies tremendously. Inspiration can come anywhere at any time. I tend to like to write or jot down my ideas... I usually do. Usually in manuscript form, especially when I'm at the piano. I can revisit and continue on once I get the opportunity to finish it or when I need to finish songs for a record. All and any good ideas are worth jotting down and keeping and revisiting to complete at a later date.

WTDP?: You're new Carvin signature guitar is quite a stunner. What made you go with a semi-hollow and why was Carvin the right choice?

Frank: Yes, it is truly a spectacular instrument. It took us about a year to get it

absolutely right, and I decided to go with a semi-hollow this time because I find that semi-hollow guitars are very, very versatile. I can string it up with flat wound strings and it's got a really nice warm tone for clean jazz guitar or I can put 9s on it and wail away playing blues, R&B, funk, rock, fusion... anything. Carvin, I must say, I've always had a great admiration for this company. We did a pre-amp several years ago called the Tone Navigator, which was a great product and I had a really great experience with the company. So when I was looking for a guitar company to build a new guitar model, Carvin was absolutely the best choice. They are making some of the finest instruments out there. I love them to bits. Great people.

WTDP?: We know you have amassed quite a collection of guitars over the years. Can you give us a few highlights of your collection? What was the last guitar you purchased?

Frank: Yes. I have to say, I've got quite a tidy collection going these days. Naturally I have a lot of my various models that I've been involved with. I have many of my classic Ibanez models, and also the Yamaha models that I was involved with. And now obviously the new Carvin models. But besides that I am particularly fond of vintage Gibson jazz guitars... mostly mid-60s. The most recent purchase was a... and I've been in touch with Trini Lopez regarding this model. He lives in Palm Springs with me. The same town, I should say (laughs). I recently e-mailed him about a black Trini Lopez Deluxe. It looks like a double cut-away 175. I have a black one and he says he has never seen or heard of a black one. So when I get back to town after all of this touring I'm going to take it over to him and show him (laughs) to prove that it does exist! That is a wonderful instrument. I've been playing that guitar with the Natural High trio recently. You can see pictures of it on my website... on the cover of the home page. I have a nice old Johnny Smith from 1968. I have some beautiful ES-350s... a lot of vintage ES-type guitars. An old L4CN, which is a very beautiful, kind of like a 175... just to name a few. I've also got quite a bunch of Les Pauls. I'm quite into the model called the Catalina. It was one they brought out in the late 90s I believe. I'm rather partial to those. It's like a chambered Les Paul... very light. But of course, my favorite guitar is the new Carvin FG-1!

WTDP?: There also is a DV Mark Frank Gambale signature amplifier in the works. Why the decision to go with solid state and not tubes for the power section?

Frank: There is a whole line of amps coming up... signature Frank Gambale models – coming very soon. We have a 1x12 combo and we have a head, which I think is going

to be 1,000 watts... I'm pretty sure. There is also speaker cabs... 2x12 slant, vertical cabs and 4x12 cabs. They're light as a feather. This stuff is incredibly light and sounds amazing. With regards to tubes, I like the idea of a tube pre-amp, but I prefer solid state powerage. I like it for good, clean power and I like to get the tone from the pre-amp, so that's why we use tubes in the pre-amp. I'm very excited about these. DV Mark is probably best known for their Mark Bass bass amps. They are in 60 countries around the world and they're also in Guitar Center, which is quite an achievement for an Italian amplifier company. They are following along with this DV Mark guitar amplifier line. I'm probably the first signature amp endorser for their line. They are a wonderful company and they have tremendous products. I'm using them on the road right now with Return To Forever and they sound awesome. You can check out some clips on FGTV.

WTDP?: Do you use any effects pedals/racks with Return To Forever? If so, what are they? What about your solo work... do effects play a role there?

Frank: I've been using a TC Electronic G-Force for many years now. I love the device... it's a multi-effect. It is really the only effect device I use. It has so many high-quality effects built in I find that it is all I really need. I'm using it with Return To Forever. I've got some Roland volume pedals that I use for swells and that's about it.

WTDP?: So you're out with Return To Forever, and the Soulmine project with your wife comes out early 2012. Will you be taking that project on the road next year? If not, what does 2012 hold for Frank Gambale?

Frank: Next year will see the release of Soulmine. We will be touring next year... solidly. The best place for that info is the website or my You Tube channel. Stay tuned! It is going to be a big year. I'm already writing new music for Soulmine, so there is more to come!

<http://www.whatsthatdudeplay.com/2011/09/the-fusion-soul-of-frank-gambale/>