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## **[INTERVIEW: Frank Gambale](#)**

March 26th, 2011 | Author: [Peter Hodgson](#)



Australian fusion legend Frank Gambale has always been good. Damn good. This writer's dear Auntie Barbi has often talked of seeing Gambale play around his native Canberra during his teens, before he moved to LA and became known as the ultimate sweep picker and one of the most unique guitar voices in fusion. I spoke to Gambale while he was in town performing as the newest member of Return To Forever (going by the name Return To Forever IV). Gambale is in good company in RTE, with Chick Corea, Jean Luc Ponty, Stanley Clarke and Lenny White.

I saw you at NAMM in January and you were playing through a new [DV Mark](#) signature amp.

It's been a bit of hard work to get it right, but good things take their time, and the DV Mark amps are on their way now. The official release will be at the Frankfurt MusikMesse. We've created a line of amps which are different. DV Mark have wanted to venture into guitar amps after their very successful bass line. They made their own amps and I played them and I thought the build quality and everything was good, but they weren't to my tastes. So they wanted to come up with something for me because they wanted me to endorse their product, and I said that to do that we had to get it to where, obviously, I'm gonna love them! I really want to only endorse product that I love, and that's been the way for me ever since when, so we worked quite diligently on something I've always preferred with guitar amps, which is not something that guitar amps always do, which is I've always preferred a preamp and power amp rig. I've always loved clean power. Guitar players often like tube power amps, and to me they just don't *sound* good! The low end is

very muddy and I just don't think I need distortion from an amplifier. Certainly from a preamp, and I love having a tube preamp, but not a tube power amp. If you go to a big concert and you see a giant PA that's pumping out incredible sound, you'll never see a tube power amp in the racks. Never, ever ever! You just need good solid state power. So we've made a series of combos and an amp head that combine this idea. The 1X12 combo was ready at NAMM, and it's about 150 watts. It's clean solid state power with a tube preamp and a massive amount of sound! And it's clean, clean, clean, unless you want it to distort.

**Yeah, I heard it at NAMM and it actually managed to cut through the din of the show floor!**

Oh you heard one! Good! Well they're quite extraordinary. I'm surprised that this idea hasn't really been done as far as I know.

**Well there have been some amps with tube preamps and solid state power amps but they typically try to emulate the sound of a tube power amp anyway, sometimes even with a preamp tube included within the circuit. They always seem to add their own phrasing on top of the player's, and if your playing is good enough you don't need that from an amp.**

Well any tube power amps that I've tried, I always don't like. Is it my taste? I don't know, because guitar players do use them, you know? I've always been a bit contrarian, but I like the sound I get. The speakers can get to distort when they need to. I'd rather have preamps and speakers distort, but never the power amp. So I'm sticking to that philosophy.

**And you have a new [Carvin](#) signature model guitar.**

At this point I wanted to pursue the semi-hollow thing, mostly because I've always thought that semi hollow guitars were the best of both worlds. I can string this guitar up with flatwound strings, for example, and get a very beautiful jazz tone out of it because it's semi hollow, it has the warmth from the hollowbody aspect of it – to get a very acceptable and real jazz tone out of it. Or I can string it up with .009 to .042 strings and play blues, rock, fusion, latin, anything. It's very useful, very... what's the word... I always say the Italian word: utilissimo! It's a utility instrument, y'know? It's great. I love it. Plus, the craftsmanship. The instrument is absolutely, gobsmackingly beautiful. It's one of those instruments that is a complete joy to play.

**A Carvin was the first guitar I ever reviewed. To this day, the smell of a Carvin guitar case is the smell of career advancement.**

Haha. They've come a long way. They've always made curious instruments and they were obviously searching, but I think they've really come into their own now. In fact, my guitar came in as number three best new release product of NAMM this year, and that's a real honour when you consider all the new products coming out. That was a very good nod in our direction. And a lot of it was, Carvin wanted to release this ages ago but I said "It's still not ready, man." I would rather wait until it's absolutely perfect and there are no issues, and then release it. They were very patient to work with me. It's funny, sometimes you go head-to-head with some companies because they have their way of doing things. I would say "Can you change this, and move this slightly over here?" And they'd go, "Well, we don't usually do that. *Most* guys..." that's the quote: "Most guys wouldn't do it that way." And I said "Excuse me, I'm not most guys. That's why I am where I am!" And as soon as I make that point they go "Right. Okay. Right." Why else do you want me here? Do you want to listen to my ideas? I'm the one playing the bloody thing! I've been playing it all my life. If you don't trust my opinion, who are you going to trust? I think they need input from players. Together we can make an incredible instrument. If you compare my Carvin model, there's a standard version of this guitar, and it's a nice instrument, but this and this and this and this and this needs to change. Because it's nice, but not great. It looks beautiful, but it's like a beautiful woman: on the surface she looks great, but it's what's going on inside, it's not just the aesthetic. And I'm glad Carvin were listening.

**So how's the Return To Forever tour going?**

It's going great! This is the first tour and it started in Australia, which is fine by me! What can I say, It's a fantastic group, iconic players, and I feel like I'm the right... no, I *am* the right man for the job!

**Well obviously you don't get asked to join a band of that level unless you bring something really special to it. I imagine you're not just there to reproduce Al Di Meola's parts note-for-note.**

Those records are very ingrained into my head because I've listened to them since I was 13 and I love the music. I think what Chick likes about me and the reason he hired me in the first place in the Elektric Band is that I'm a stylist. I have my own voice. There are a lot of guitar players and it can be really hard to distinguish [between them] sometimes. I created an entire way to play the guitar, really, or brought it to the forefront – the sweep picking technique – and it was a means to an end to play the musical concepts that were going on in my head. I didn't know it when I was 13, putting this style together, that it would be adopted into the lexicon of guitar techniques. Now everybody uses it. Just like when Van Halen came along and started tapping, people were going 'What the hell is that?' and it was the same when I came out with my sweep picking. People were going 'How is this possible? What is it?' It's one of those spark points in history. And now, 25 years, 30 years later it's an accepted technique that all virtuoso or good players will use to some degree. Before that it didn't exist, really. When I auditioned for Chick back in 1986 he heard something that was very different. And everybody's like that in this group. [Jean Luc] Ponty is absolutely recognisable anywhere for his beautiful lyricism. His soul and style is very unique. Same with Stanley [Clarke]. And everybody in this band has this incredible identity. That's why I think I fit in, and have done

for years with Chick. I have a very distinct way of playing that is part of the charm of the band. [Note: scroll down to the bottom of this article for a great video of Frank talking about joining Return To Forever

**Well my auntie used to know you back in the day in Canberra and she always told me that you were really great even back then.**

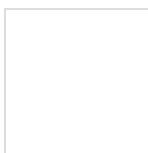
Really? Back in Canberra? Haha. My brother keeps saying “You were the hot kid in Canberra” but I wasn’t thinking about it. I wasn’t thinking about it. I’ve never thought of anything other than being the best possible guitar player I could be. Being mediocre just wasn’t an option. I didn’t want people going “Oh, y’know he’s good, but... y’know.” I’m either going to be the absolute best I can be or I’m going to take up something easy like brain surgery.”

**And aside from Return To Forever, this year you’re releasing your Soulmine project, which is R&B, funk and soul influenced (with Victor Wooten on bass, Joel Taylor on drums and Gambale’s wife Boca on vocals).**

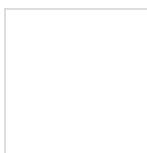
Yeah! Boca is a wonderful singer/songwriter and talented pianist. She’s just a fantastic talent. I’ve wanted to do vocal music. Back in Australia I was always in vocal bands and it’s something I’m returning to – although I’ve done vocal tunes on my instrumental records too. Before, I was doing the lead singing, but I wanted a wonderful, talented singer to front the sound. We wrote ten songs together. I’m really excited about it. Four part vocal harmonies... I love sophisticated harmony. It’s got it all. It’s the best of all worlds, and I will be touring it.

**LINK:** [frankgambale.com](http://frankgambale.com)

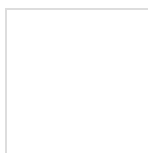
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