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**FRANK GAMBALE (RETURN TO FOREVER)**

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*At the risk of requiring a witness protection scheme or having to dedicate my life to charity work as penance, I can no longer hide. I need to come clean ... I was into fusion music in the late 70s. There ... it's done! My shoegazer friends and ultra cool acquaintances may disown me, but I feel at peace with the world now. I wasn't into all of it mind you, just the good shit. The Chick Coreas, the Stanley Clarkes, the Jean Luc Pontys of the world.*

*I'm thinking such anomalous thoughts as I sit in row EE, seat 22 at Melbourne's Regent Theatre awaiting the arrival of Return to Forever IV, a band which includes three of the aforementioned jazz rock superstars, plus the amazing Lenny White on drums and Australian-born guitarist extraordinaire, Frank Gambale.*

Earlier that day I had enjoyed a delightful chat with Return To Forever's new guitar player Frank Gambale. It was he who triggered my memories of the form and took me back to the days when I immersed myself in Weather Report and Miles Davis. It was the enthusiasm of which Gambale spoke of his new 'dream job' that brought the music back to me. "It's the jazz equivalent of joining the Stones," was the analogy Gambale used to describe sidling up on stage next to these jazz legends in version four of Return To Forever.

Gambale is no stranger to jazz rock legends. He has played with Chick Corea in his Elektric Band for 20 years and spent some time in Jean Luc's band too. Frank's own fusion trio is also a musical experience to behold, and of course it's important to mention that Gambale is a guitar pioneer himself, having developed the sweep picking technique of playing. On the morning of RTF IV's second ever gig, with macchiato in hand, Frank begins to reminisce about his first memories of the legendary band he now inhabits.

As a teenager what were your first memories of Return to Forever?

"When I was thirteen, I heard 'Hymn of the 7th Galaxy' and that was it ... I was away! I thought, what a perfect style of music. It appealed to me so much because it was interesting and intellectual. I was hooked. It was the best of both worlds ... rock power with jazz intellect. Perfect! I had about ten years of blues until then. As a cocky young man, I thought, I already had it figured out, you know, E minor pentatonic most of the time. It taught me how to bend a string and how to sustain a note and how to get emotion out of the guitar and strangle the bloody thing. But heart and intellect is the best place for me to be. I can't just live on the emotive side. I need to be stimulated intellectually as well. So I thought let's see what else is out there and that (Return to Forever) just timed beautifully. I was in a lot of really cool groups in Australia before I left ... playing pop, Grateful Dead stuff, Crosby, Stills and Nash. But there was something about Chick's music which juts grabbed me to my core. Then I went and bought everything of Chick's that had preceded that record. Some very experimental stuff that he did in the 60s, which I found interesting but I didn't understand it, but I got my first taste of the really hard jazz playing.

I read that you will be concentrating on the Hymn of the 7th Galaxy album on this tour?.

Well that's how it was originally billed before we did the rehearsals, but then Chick thought, why do we have to stick to that. There's a rich resource of four albums that some of the fans are going to want to hear. We are certainly doing tracks off 7th Galaxy, but also Romantic Warrior, No Mystery, covering the other albums.

I also read that you had all written new pieces for the tour. Is that true?

Stanley has a new tune. We have rehearsed it but haven't performed it yet (They debuted the tune 'New York' that night) . Lenny has one that we haven't performed. We are rehearsing today and I guess we'll try to bring those into the show. We have a lot of material to choose from. I prepared 18 tunes. A couple of tunes we play are medleys. That's the only way we get to through some of them. We're doing a couple of Jean Luc's tunes also as a medley.

When you got this gig and sat down to learn the guitar parts, how much respect do you have to pay to the original form of the tunes?

It's funny because I played the records to death. I know every squeak and pop, all the floors. I noticed even more things ... actual edits that were a bit rough on Romantic Warrior. We used to do a bit of that in The Elektric Band, tunes that were really long. To get all the way through it perfectly would be a miracle. So there were certain points where we could cut and edit. But I'm into keeping some of the elements from the original. It

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is funny because these guys haven't listened to that stuff since they did it. I was going, you know the notes on this chart are wrong. Chick goes ... 'Really!' I would say it is not what you played on the record and I would proceed to show them how it went, and Chick would say, oh I like that better! So I have become the librarian.

What does it mean to you to be coming back home with this band?

Oh man. I am floating on a cloud. I am in dreams awake as they say. My brother was in tears when I told him. My brother Nunzio is well known in the industry. He had Pro Audio for a while there. We're playing the Opera House for Gods sake! For an Aussie boy to come back and play the Opera House, with Return to Forever ... there just aren't enough adjectives. These guys are icons.

It's like you've joined The Stones?

That's right, it's the jazz equivalent of joining the Stones. Chick went through the possibilities. I think in his head he tried to keep The Elektric Band and Return to Forever as separate entities. Then he just thought, you know what, we know Frank, he's a known entity and he can play this stuff. So it was right time, right guy and I am having a ball standing there between Stanley and Lenny.

You've played with Chick for many years and many other jazz icons, I'm wondering when you are up on stage, how much of you is still Frank Gambale the music fan from Canberra?

That's a wonderful question. I see myself as an equal up on that stage, however there was a time in my youth with less experience, where I would have been a little nervous about being in the presence of such great musicians. But I worked through all that because it was musicians of this calibre that I wanted to work with. I remember the audition with Chick and the mental process I went through to balance the situation which went basically as follows; 1. Chick needs a good guitar player that is why he is holding auditions. I'm a good guitar player and I know I can do the job. 2. Chick is a master at the keyboard. I am a master of the guitar 3. Chick is NOT a master of the guitar! I rest my case!

I wanted to talk about your gear. I know a lot of it is documented on the net, but things date, so let's get current. You've just entered into a deal with DV Mark to play their amps ...

Yeah. DV Mark, the guitar side of Mark Bass, who have come on really strong over the last couple of years. A lot of it is because they managed to get into the Guitar Centre in the States, the biggest music retailer in the world. The founder of Mark Bass is a nice Italian guy, Marco De Virgiliis. Marco is where the Markbass comes from and DV is for De Virgiliis. "I spent quite a lot of time at the factory located near Pescara, Italy to work with this wonderful boutique company who make a really high quality product to develop the Frank Gambale Signature Amplifier Series by DV Mark, which will be released officially at the Frankfurt Messe in April 2011. I have always preferred to use solid state power amps ( PA amps 1000 watts, 500 a side running at 50% for huge headroom ) with tube preamps to get the tube tones both for distortion and EQ. In my opinion, this setup has the best of both worlds. What's exciting about the new line of amps we've developed is that we have taken the same concept into a 1x12 and 2x12 combo and an amp head also, that is, solid state power and tube preamp. As far as I know this has not been done before. The results I have heard are spectacular... so much power and clarity for the clean sounds and so much power and clarity for the distortion sounds. DV Mark also have developed their own speakers which don't use the traditional heavy magnet .... we have a signature FG 2x12 vertical slant cab in the range also, and all of these products weigh about a 1/5 of what you'd expect. Everyone's going to feel like Superman when they lift these amps ... which in most cases you can do with a finger! (this is only a very slight exaggeration! ).

Are you using this on stage at the moment?

No, unfortunately they are not ready yet. The big release is at the Frankfurt show. They had the one twelve combo ready for the NAMM show just gone. So I am chompin' at the bit. I can't wait to use it. So I am still using my old Carvin stuff. I developed a pre amp with Carvin called the Tone Navigator and I'm using that with a Carvin power amp. It will soon swap over

So all your effects are through the rack?

Yeah, a TC Electronic G Force. I have been using that forever and that's it. I love it. That's it very simple set up. MIDI pedal, volume pedal.

And what's the signal chain?

My guitar goes straight into the pre amp. Pre amp goes out to my volume pedal, so I have a volume that is in the front of the chain. From there it goes to the effects in mono, out stereo to the power amp and that's it. I love having either full distortion at any volume and I control the level of distortion from the guitar.

And your new guitar?

My new Carvin guitar is utterly beautiful. I don't know if they have actually released the signature model yet because we are still honing in on the details. Most of the things are very small aesthetic things I want to tweak.

What were the most important factors you wanted to take into consideration with this guitar?

I wanted a guitar this time that I could use for a lot of different situations. I have had semi hollow body guitars before and I always find they are a nice bridge between the rock and blues and jazz. Depending on how you string them up .. if you put flatwounds on this thing, it sounds very smooth and jazzy. If you put nines on it, to 42, you can wail away on blues and rock and it's got sustain and tone. It's the best of both worlds for me.

What are the pickups in that?

The back are standard Carvin humbuckers. The front one we worked on a little bit. It's not so high output and a little bit cleaner. Sometimes humbuckers in the front position of a hollow body get a little muddy. So I had less winds and a different kind of magnet. We experimented until we got it a little brighter than the standard humbucker.

Looking at the guitar on the web page, the neck looked quite thin. Is that what you are used to playing?

You mean fretboard width? This is one of the issues I need to attend to. I only just discovered it. I kept saying the neck is still not right. I had a conversation with one of the main guys at Carvin, Mark Kiesel right before I left the airport to come here and we figured out what it was. He said, well the neck tapers like old Gibsons, and I said 'that's it! That's why it still feels a little rounded at the back and it gets narrower going through the nut. That's why it is still not right in my hand because I am used to a consistent width.

Who looks after your guitars? Do you have a tech?

No. Not on this tour. There is not much to do. I don't mind putting strings on. I don't want to be detached from that. I don't need someone saying 'here's your guitar sir!'

It's a personal thing isn't it?

Maybe they are just fed up changing strings. A lot of players hate that process.

How often do you change yours?

Once every couple shows or I might just change the high E string. It might snap at any time. But these Carvins, the angle going over the bridge is so gentle. The old Gibsons have a wheel on the bridge that you raise and lower. These guys don't have that system and that blocks the bridge from going down further. The Carvin bridges are Tunomatic bridges and they don't have wheels. You can put the bridge flat on the guitar. So the angle from the stud tailpiece is very gentle. I never break strings. That pivot point at the bridge is where most strings break. If it is a really high angle like it is on most guitars, you're at risk.

I'm wondering with the type of improvisational music that you play, where bands go out on tangents ... how often have you been involved in a musical train wreck, where someone has lost their way? And I'm certainly not directing that question in regard to this band?.

Well, you could see it as there are never really any mistakes! What do you consider a mistake? There isn't any musical situation, if you have enough experience, that can't find a way out of. Even if it sounds like it might have gone into outer space, or somebody has stumbled, it doesn't take long to right it. If there were inexperienced players, that may help a disaster. But you know, there is pilot error. We have all played too many gigs to be concerned by something like that now. Mistakes are OK. To me it is someone trying to do something different. If you're actually playing a written part, well, you know, we are all human. Some nights your are on, some you're not.

Apart from this tour, what else do you have on the drawing board?

Well I am very excited to tell you about a new record coming out called 'Frank Gambale Soulmine featuring Boca'. I have wanted to make a record like this for many years with a combination of styles and elements I love namely jazz, pop, funk and R&B with cool changes, hook melodies and plenty of guitar. Up until now the missing link was Boca. She is an incredible singer/ songwriter/ pianist from Toronto Canada and also my soulmate. Together we wrote, arranged and produced 10 seriously cool tunes. The album has such an upbeat sound and sentiment I can't wait for everyone to hear it. We toured last summer with this new group and played some wonderful festivals in Europe. You'll be hearing a lot more from Soulmine. The CD comes out around May this year.

What about Return to Forever's future?

Well we are out from now through to June until November... USA, Europe, all the festivals, then back to the US and Canada .After that, it's Japan, South East Asia. They are even talking beyond that. They want to do a new record with this new material.

Meanwhile back at the Regent that night, there's Frank standing on stage between Stanley Clarke and Lenny White trading licks as one of the greats. But more than the complex notes, which were infinite, you couldn't help but marvel at the nuance, the feel, the musical camaraderie, the space, timing and intuition of a very special musical combination.

"I have worked hard all my life at the things I love most, namely music and guitar. All those years of practicing and playing and honing my craft have enabled me to be having the time of my life now playing in so many great musical groups from my Fusion Trio, my Acoustic Trio - Natural High, and my newest vocal group Soulmine, to the iconic Return To Forever IV. Life is good,"

[www.frankgambale.com](http://www.frankgambale.com)