



TONY RICE
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BY BILL AMATNEEK

TEE

I remember the first time I picked with guitarist Tony Rice. The David Grisman Quintet's first gig, on January 31st, 1976, was in Bolinas, California, where I was living. At that show, Tony was on guitar, Todd Phillips played second mandolin to David's first, Darol Anger played fiddle and Joe Carroll was their bassist. Joe (may he rest in peace) was an excellent bassist — he recorded with Mose Allison, among others — but to my ears his roots were more in jazz than were the group's roots.

Listening to his playing, I said to myself: I can do that. So I tracked down Darol's phone number and hired him to play a square dance gig with me.

After the gig Darol said, "Hey man, I've gotta get you together with Dawg and us. I'll call you." ("Dawg" is David's nickname.)

A few months later the call came, and I drove over to the home David and Janis Bain rented on the shoulder of Mt. Tamalpais. On a warm afternoon, Tony, Darol, Todd, David, and I went into a basement room that overlooked a Manzanita-lined valley leading down to the Pacific, got out our instruments, and commenced to play.

Well, you could not overlook Tony's guitar pickin'.

I had never heard a steel-string acoustic guitar played so hard and hot. Tony whipped the rhythm. He was the rhythm, and his rhythm was ferocious, even as he stood stock-still and ramrod straight.

When I looked closer at his right hand, I realized I'd never seen this kind of flat-picking by an acoustic guitarist. His right hand was doing something jazz guitarist Howard Roberts called the "spin-drive" method. Tee held the pick between the upper side of his curled-in index finger and his thumb, like most folks. But most folks flatpick just from the wrist and forearm. Tee moved his thumb, flatpick and index finger as a unit. Squiggling this unit around furiously, like writing with pen on paper, Tee got all over the guitar, popping the strings with his tortoise shell pick.

Another thing: Tony's right wrist seemed arched out more than most folks'. He didn't anchor his wrist on the guitar. It was away from the instrument, putting weight behind an attack when Tee went full bore. Don't get me wrong; Tony was only loud when the music called for it. He had full dynamic control, from whisper to shout.

Playing with Tony was playing along with Tony, following him; rhythmically, he propelled the tune. His rhythms, interwoven, urgent, and precipitous, were far beyond the limits of bluegrass guitar as I had ever heard it. He finished his chorus with a flurry of right hand thrashing that left me breathless.

It was beyond commenting on. I stood there at the end of the tune, not knowing what to do. There was some shuffling of feet, some clearing of throats. I finally muttered something about the sanctity of poop.

Tee was awesome; he had rewritten bluegrass guitar.

Because Tony picks harder than anyone in the known universe — it must be physically wearing to play the guitar as hard as Tee does — his tone is unique.

So, Tee's first lesson on guitar is, "Attack the note."

Tee attacks the note.

He jumps on it. He lashes out at it. He rips it. He whips it. No one attacks the notes like Tee.

His furious attack makes the guitar sing out, pushes the instrument to its vibrational limits. In this I believe Tony brings sounds out of the flat-top Martin that have never been made before. He wails on chorded tone clusters, making the interval dissonances ring out so loudly against each other that the guitar roars with the clash of notes, overtones and difference tones, the clicking of the pick on the strings, and the slapping of the strings on the frets and the fingerboard.

One evening we had a gig at the Bear's Lair at U.C. Berkeley. Tony was standing to the side of the small stage, guitar strapped on, about to light a cigarette.

He held it to his mouth with his left hand, in the "V" of his middle and index fingers. He had the lighter *and* his flatpick in his right hand.

At this moment, as he was about to light up, I said, "Tee, hit me a G, will ya?"

There was a heartbeat as Tony set it. Then, without looking, Tee flicked his right hand down at the guitar and popped a G-note as clean and clear as I've ever heard played.

The note filled the room.

Then he raised his right hand and lit the stick.

What amazed me about this is what it says about Tee's relationship to his guitar. Here he was in non-playing mode, in lighting-a-cigarette mode. But he knew exactly where that guitar was and where the G-string was, and exactly how to move his body to hit that note hard and clean, without looking down. Tee was in a constant and intimate relationship with the guitar, no matter what he was doing.

It was also at this gig that I pulled a clumsy move. Tee's

Martin was lying on the floor, stage right. I picked up my bass, high, and moved it from one side of stage right to the other.

Understand that a bass is about as big as a person, a bulky, pear-shaped person. Over the years, you learn how to pick this person up, move him, put him down. After a while you think you know how to move your bass without touching it to anything, ... ever.

Well, I thought wrong. I picked up the bass, and as I floated it over Tee's Martin, I heard a tap. I didn't feel a hit — the bass has so much momentum — but I heard a tap. I looked down; I didn't see a blemish. But Tony had seen the transaction go down. He walked over, looked, and showed me the blem that my bass's endpin had just put in the finish on the top of his guitar, ... that *I* had just put on his guitar.

I was mortified.

It wasn't a ding; I didn't ding the instrument, I don't think, or I'd like not to think. It was a blem the size of a dime, on the finish of an already well-worn guitar. But I was heartbroken, and I apologized sincerely.

I recall that the bassist Buell Neidlinger was over at my digs one day. He accidentally put a blem on my century-old Czech bass. He was aghast at his move — no one wants to injure another man's fine stringed instrument.

Buell said this immediately: "I apologize. I always try to move an instrument carefully. I will pay for whatever damage I have done."

He had done no damage that warranted repair. The next time my bass went in for its periodic restoration, a six-month odyssey that takes place once a decade or so, this blem and all other blemes were sanded away and refinished.

But his response was complete: I always try. I sometimes blow it. And I pay up when I do blow it.

So Tee, I apologize. I blew it. And if there was a bill, please send it on over.

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In the spring of 1977, Tony and I drove down to Santa Cruz to pick up the first Tony Rice Model guitar from the Santa Cruz Guitar Company, run by Richard Hoover and Bruce Ross. The instrument was loosely based on the 1935 herringbone Martin D-28 that pioneering flatpicker, Clarence White, and then Tony, owned.

That D-28's most distinguishing feature was the oversize sound hole — the circular hole in the middle of the guitar's top. Clarence had enlarged this O-hole on his Martin, I guess, to "let more sound out." The SCGC Tony Rice Model had that enlarged sound hole as well. And another thing: there's a pellet gunshot hole in the Clarence White Martin, somewhere below the 18th or 19th fret, that was not replicated in the SCGC guitar. Legend has it that Clarence put it there late one night.

When we got back to Tee's home in Kentfield, Tony started playing the new guitar right away. And right away he heard something wrong.

"It don't sound right. It don't feel right," he kept saying. "Something's off."

It sounded right to me.

Then he'd be playing it and he'd reach to fret some first fret notes with his left hand, and he'd say, "Something's the matter, the notes ain't there."

They sounded there to me.

So he took out a yardstick and measured the string length from nut to bridge on the Clarence White Martin, and then he measured it on the Tony Rice model. The string length was 1/8th inch longer on the Santa Cruz than on the Martin. Tony could feel the 1/8th inch and the string tension that it added. He could hear the tonal difference.

That's when I knew that Tony had ears for days, and the guitar was a part of him. The folks at Santa Cruz made the

changes Tee wanted, and kept some of their own modifications and innovations. The SCGC Tony Rice Model is, I understand, their bestselling guitar.

Tony's famous Clarence White Martin was not being played for a spell, and there's a story behind that.

I visited Tee and his wife Pam in Florida, in the winter of 1991. He picked me up at the Tampa airport late one evening. We drove in the dark to their house in Crystal River, in the southern part of the state, on the gulf coast. Tony told me he lived right on the water, but when we pulled in I couldn't see a darned thing. They put me up in the guest bedroom. I was pooped from a day of flying and logged off instantly.

The next morning I was awakened by the sound of a diesel engine right outside the window, maybe fifteen feet away. I thought, OK, there's a trucker got his rig parked next door in the driveway. He'll pull out soon enough.

Sure enough, after he had warmed up, he did pull out, only it was not towards the highway. Near as I could tell, it was towards the water. Well, it was early, I was still dazed, ... so who knows. I went back to sleep.

Two hours later I got up, Pam gave me a cup of coffee, and Tee took me around outside. We went out the living room door to a gently downward-sloping lawn. Twenty feet out, at the edge of the lawn, was a five-foot drop to water and Tony's runabout.

We walked to the rear of the house, and it was on the water too, maybe ten feet from the bay. Then I looked around to the back of the house, the side where I had been sleeping, where the trucker had his rig parked. It was on the water too, fifteen feet away. It wasn't a diesel truck that had been parked there; it was an industrial tow boat. It was just pulling back in as we walked around.

Tee's house was on a small peninsula, a slim rise rimmed by water on three and a half sides. Only the driveway

connected it to land. At that moment of low tide the water-line was maybe fifteen feet below the floor level of Tony's one-story house. As we got into Tee's runabout to jam out to the Gulf of Mexico — Tee could only drive at full-throttle, or pick at full throttle — I turned to him and asked, "Aren't you concerned about flooding here?"

Tony said, "No way, Wild Bill. It would take a once-in-a-century flood to come up to the house."

Within two years, on March 13, 1993, the once-in-a-century flood hit. It was the combination of a tropical storm with a lunar high tide. At around five in the morning the fire department came around to Tony's neighborhood and ordered everyone to evacuate: no belongings, no nothin'. You get out *now*. Tee and Pamela split immediately, empty-handed except for their dog Pokie.

Three hours later, Tony paid sixty dollars to a guy in a motorboat to go over to his house and fish out the Martin. The man said the water in the living room was neck-high when he went in. He found the guitar after a few minutes, right where Tony had said it would be. It was floating face up in the water.

Tee says he got some advice from the Martin Guitar folks in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. They volunteered their services, but finally Tee called the Cincinnati luthier, Harry Sparks. Harry came to Florida and advised Tee on how to dry the instrument out, get it back into playing condition. Tony said it was two years before the dreadnought started sounding like it used to.

Tony has the Clarence White Martin back home in North Carolina now. He's playing it, taking it on the road.

I'm glad you're with that instrument again, Tee. You two share a soul.

And I'd love to have a look at it some time, Tony. I'm hoping that ol' blem I own got washed away.