

The Magazine For Professional And Amateur Guitarists
MAY 1975

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GP GIVEAWAY #4

JAN AKKERMAN

By Jon Sievert

"You could call us a trade school for creative musicians. The end of the program is when you go off and make money. Your diploma is a paycheck."

ED Denson is describing Blue Bear Waltzes School of Genuine Music, a cooperatively-run, non-profit music school in San Francisco [2403 Ocean Ave., San Francisco, CA 94127]. Blue Bear, which was recently featured in *Billboard Magazine*, attracts those who wish to approach rock and roll, blues, Latin, country, classical, folk, and jazz as trained musicians. More than half the school's present enrollment of 140 are guitar players.

"Essentially, we try to teach people how to become

'Blue Bear Waltzes'



A Fingerboard class taught by Pat Littlefield (right).

complete musicians," ED, who is business manager, explains. "We want to teach them how to play their instruments and, at the same time, we want them to learn how to communicate with other musicians, and how to find their way in the music business.

"Most of what we do here is oriented toward playing in bands, though we do have a program for the solo singer/song-writer. The process of putting and keeping a good band together long enough to make it in the real world requires knowledge of many things that are not obvious at all."

ED's view of the real world of the music business is based on the past twelve years, during which he has been involved in many aspects of that business. He has managed Mississippi John Hurt, Bukka White, Danny Kalb, Country Joe and The Fish, and Joy of Cooking. He has also been actively involved in the recording industry: He ran Piedmont Records, and then spent five years helping John Fahey run Takoma Records. Today, he remains immersed in the record business as co-administrator (along with *GP* columnist Stefan Grossman) of Kicking Mule Records, a small independent American music label (see *GP*, Oct. '74).

ED came to Blue Bear in June, 1972. Though his title is Business Manager, he is regarded as the guiding force behind the school — at the meager, self-imposed salary of \$150 per month.

"We operate on the principle that the most important factor in any success equation is the quality of the music produced," ED states. "It's certainly possible to make good music without making good money, but it's seldom possible to make good money without making good music."

To that end, Blue Bear, in its fourth year of operation, offers an integrated three-part program of private lessons, seminars, and performance. First, a new guitar student is interviewed to ascertain his or her musical interests, ambition,

and level of musical competence. From that interview, the student is placed with one of ten private guitar teachers (including pedal steel and bass). The weekly one-hour private lesson forms the core of Blue Bear's program. The teacher works with the student to set up a program compatible with his or her needs and ambitions, and directs the student's overall development. Every attempt is made to place the student with the teacher best equipped to handle his or her particular tastes and needs.

Several of the private teachers have studied with professional musicians and all have some performance background. Doug Whitney, for instance, specializes in acoustic country-style guitar, and has played for nine years. Though he took a few formal lessons with Jerry Hahn, he describes himself as mainly self-taught. He has performed as a solo acoustic guitarist and with a number of jug bands. He currently heads Blue Bear's String Department and Curriculum Department and has been teaching for three years.

Mike McCourt teaches jazz and classical guitar. He has played for ten years and taught for three. One of his teachers was a former student of Andres Segovia, and more recently he studied improvisation with alto saxophonist John Handy. Currently a music major at San Francisco State University, he plays in a jazz ensemble which was rated among the top four in California in a recent Berkeley competition.

Dale Miller specializes in finger-picking styles in the tradition of Blind Blake, John Hurt, Bo Carter, Willie McTell, and Blind Boy Fuller, as well as advanced contrapuntal finger-picking, using moving bass lines. Dale has been featured on a Kicking Mule anthology, *Contemporary Ragtime Guitar* [KM 107 — Box 3233, Berkeley, CA 94703], and has a new album

Unique Guitar School



Photos by Jon Sievert

Ed Denson (with beard) conducts monthly all-school meeting.

of his own on the same label, *Finger-picking Delights* [KM 123], accompanied by a book with transcriptions from the album and instructional commentary [Guitar Player Productions, Box 615, Saratoga, CA 95070]. He has worked with such luminaries as Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Jerry Jeff Walker, and has been teaching for four years.

Blue Bear's program is structured in four-month modules, though there are provisions for attending on a monthly basis. A full-time student takes one private lesson a week, from one to four seminars, which cover theoretical information, and participates in performance practice through workshops or bands, which provide the vital experience of playing with other musicians.

"Most guitar players who come here have had some prior

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musical experience," says Keith Allen, 20-year old designer of Blue Bear's guitar fingerboard courses. "Pinning down right where they are takes some doing, because of the erratic approach to learning guitar that most have taken. Very few can pass even a simple written test dealing with basic music theory, though some have a lot of chops.

"There's this idea among rock and blues guitarists," Keith continues, "that if you find out what it is you're doing, you lose all the feeling — you 'lose the blues.' Those kind of people don't last very long around here. The people we want to attract are those who have discovered that they are musically limited by not having an understanding of the structural elements of music. Most new students start off with Basic Theory and Ear Training seminars."

The list of seminars to choose from is varied and ever-changing. In addition to the two above, courses include three levels of harmony, three of rhythm, and three upper levels of ear training, as well as classes in counterpoint, improvisation, hand percussion, and rhythmic dictation.

There are also seminars to meet particular needs, such as Vocal Alternatives and Interpretive Singing (taught by Terry Garthwaite [see *GP*, Aug. '71], former lead vocalist and guitarist for Joy of Cooking). Also offered are Songwriting (one for lyrics and one for music), Performance Lab ("Stage presence — how to come out and not freak,"), and Juke Box Jury (a twelve-week probe into the roots of rock and roll). There is also a standing policy that a seminar on any musical subject will be taught if at least five students request it.

Of particular interest to guitarists are a remarkable series of four eight-week sessions collectively known as "The Fingerboard Revealed," developed by Keith Allen to "illuminate the dark, mysterious world of the guitar fingerboard."

"Guitar players have generally achieved theoretical understanding more slowly than keyboard players," says Keith, "simply because the relationship between notes on the fingerboard are not as obvious as they are on a keyboard. The four seminars are designed to show that the fingerboard has an incredibly comprehensible logic of its own. Once a guitarist fully understands that logic, he has no limits. He can build any chord he wants and find any sound he hears in his head."

Keith begins teaching his system for the fingerboard by stressing the fact that, because of the innate structure of the guitar's tuning, there are five major chords that can be played in the first position without a barre — *E, D, C, A, G*. Each of these five chords can be barred and moved up the neck to play any other major chord on the chromatic scale. Furthermore, he adds, at least one major scale position lies around each barre chord type within a span of five frets. In the case of the *A*-type chord and the *G*-type chord, there are two positions for each, making a total of seven scale positions out of which all twelve major scales can be played.

The Fingerboard I class deals with the five basic major chord types, including their spelling in different inversions, their barred movement, and the scale positions that lie around each one. Scales are dealt with in terms of scale interval numbers — for example, *C=1, D=2, E=3, F=4, G=5, A=6, B=7, C'=1* — rather than note names. As Keith explains it, "First, we want students to understand that the relationships between notes are universal regardless of key. *C* always means *C*, but *1* can be any note. They have to learn note names too, but that comes eventually. Most students take theory along with the fingerboard classes."

In Fingerboard II, students progress to minor chords, and discover the concept of altering chord tones and modes. In the latter weeks of the session, triadic partials are covered, as well as scale tone chords off of each position.

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The Fingerboard III class takes up four-tone chords, including sixths and major, minor, dominant, half-diminished, and diminished sevenths. Later, the class deals with the other standard chordal extensions — ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths.

"The difference between III and IV gets a bit hazy," Keith comments, "because by then students possess a good understanding of harmony and have realized that all extensions beyond the triad are just manipulation of the same basic data. If you have a clear understanding of music theory, all you have to know are the five basic major chord-types and seven scale positions to unlock the whole thing."

Below are the seven basic major scale positions that exist within a reach of five frets around the five barre chord types. The boxed numbers above the frets indicate fingering. The partially circled numbers represent major scale tones not usually played in a chord's full 5- or 6-string inversion. The G-type barre chord scale 2 is a "missing link" scale between the G-type and E-type.

All minor scales and modes, and indeed, any other type of scale, may be derived from these basic positions.

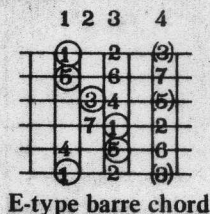
Figure I BARRE CHORD SCALE POSITIONS

Numbers above frets are fingerings

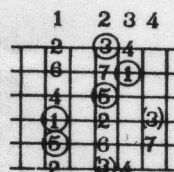
Numbers on strings are scale intervals

Circled numbers are major chord tones normally within reach of the barre position

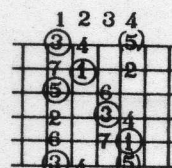
Numbers in parentheses are not normally within reach of the barre position



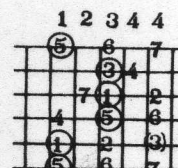
E-type barre chord



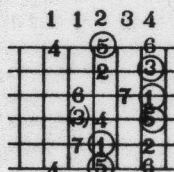
D-type barre chord



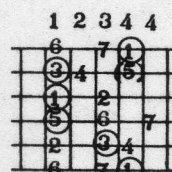
C-type barre chord



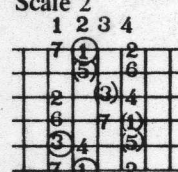
A-type barre chord



A-type barre chord
Scale 1



G-type barre chord
Scale 1



G-type barre chord
Scale 2

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Figure II, representing an infinite fingerboard, illustrates the thinking that lies behind the Blue Bear fingerboard classes.

The numbers bisecting the strings indicate scale interval numbers. If we arbitrarily assume that the nut is directly to the left of the diagram, we would be looking at the key of F and the numbers would represent the major scale tones of that key, i.e. 1=F, 2=G, 3=A, 4=Bb, 5=C, 6=D, 7=E, 1=F.

Circled numbers are the 1, 3, and 5 scale tones, the elements of a major chord. Isolation of these scale tones makes the five major barre chord types and their circular interlocking relationships visible. Thus, the E chord barred at the 1st fret sounds the 1, 3, 5 scale tones of an F scale (F, A, C), producing an F Major chord, as does a D chord barred at the 3rd fret, a C at the 5th, an A at the 8th, a G at the 10th, and an E again (an octave higher) at the 13th. The same three

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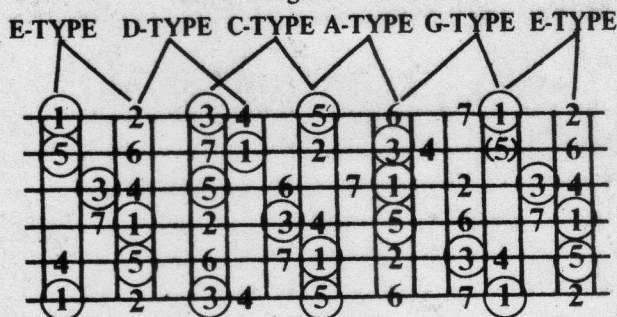
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notes are sounded at all these positions, differing only in the sequence and frequency with which they are heard, but creating a distinctive voicing for each position.

These chord types will *always* occur in the same circular order, no matter where the starting point is. If, for example, we wanted to play the five different 5- or 6-string inversions of Bb, we would begin with the A-type barre chord at the 1st fret, with the G-type at the 3rd, E-type at the 6th, D-type at the 8th, C-type at the 10th, and the A-type again at the 13th.

Figure II



© Keith Allen 1974

The theoretical knowledge picked up in seminars is translated directly into music in the performance part of the Blue Bear program — workshops and bands.

Workshops are six-week musical affairs aimed at people who have some ability on their instruments, but little experi-

ence playing with other musicians or in a particular musical idiom. "In the workshops, we try to create a non-paranoid playing situation where people can learn about communicating with other musicians," says ED Denson. "There's no heavy commitment to a band, because you only meet for a few weeks and then break up and form new groups. People can explore many kinds of music with a lot of different musicians."

Though Blue Bear's non-profit status makes it eligible for private and public education funds, it operates primarily on tuition (now \$320.00 for a full-time four-month program) and the willingness to swap tuition for nearly anything useful, including amps and instruments. Most teachers trade at least part of their services for tuition, which enables them to take advanced courses, and students do most of the office and maintenance work for free schooling.

The San Francisco Bay Area music community has also been a valuable resource for Blue Bear. The school sponsors a regular series of Tuesday night guest lectures featuring working musicians and key music industry people. Participants have included Stefan Grossman, bassist Mel Graves, blues pianist Dave Alexander, Country Joe MacDonald, Rick Turner of Alembic, and music critic Phil Elwood.

* * * *

ED sums up Blue Bear's philosophy: "We take the *Whole Earth Catalog* approach. We want the school to be an access point for all the tools that are necessary to produce good music."

"We call ourselves 'The School of Genuine Music,'" Keith adds, "and that means only that it has to be real — genuinely felt."

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