

## The greatest guitarist that ever lived.

Tough one, my pupil had got me thinking.

His Maths teacher had set a quiz, it was the end of term and they had finished their exams so, “did they want more maths or shall we ride out the last lesson of week with a quiz?”

The answer was predictably “yes”.

My pupil, Ben, told me that the usual general knowledge things came up, and then the big guitar magazine selling point, “Who was the greatest guitarist ever?”

I sat and waited for the answer, which, nine times out of ten, is Jimi Hendrix, and it was.

Even Ben disagreed, especially after the hours of tuition I'd given him on the childproof simplicity of the minor pentatonic scale and that the whole blues business is really effect and not earth shattering creativity.

That night I got to thinking the question over, who could it be then? How can we evaluate any guitarist's hierarchical position if we haven't heard them all play?

Even the great Andres Segovia would say, “There's always a better guitarist that you living in the next village” and, having lived in Spain for the last fifteen years I can see his point of view.

I should put myself in to the game for you first. I have been playing the guitar for over forty years and have been pro for over thirty years, but how can I feel that I have any judgemental qualification?

I started playing the classical guitar at the age of eleven and half, gave my first recitals at the age of seventeen and, after getting a job in a music shop and ‘discovering’ the electric guitar, turned pro at the age of twenty.

After six years apprenticeship on cruise liner with much older and wiser musicians I took on a seven-year residency in a jazz club while doing session work for the BBC. I was resident guitarist at a twelve-hundred seat theatre restaurant while playing on radio and recording TV shows, so I know the theory of music and elements and history of the stringed instrument, in short, I know where to put my fingers.

So you could say that I'm a jack-of-all-trades and not bad at all of them. I play classical, ragtime, finger picking in general, blues, jazz and country. Also the classic banjo, but as that takes my technique away from the guitar a bit so I don't play too regularly.

Back to the issue at hand, (no pun intended).

In the early hours of a dark night in the early eighty's I was driving home from the jazz club listening to the radio in my car.

It was a late night music and chat show. I had forgotten that Joe Pass was touring the UK at that time and who should the guest that night but Joe Pass. I slowed the car down so I wouldn't get home too quickly and miss the great man talking.

Then usual chat went on, and then he picked up his guitar and played a piece, I don't remember what, and it was all very amusing. But here was a first, probably for them and me because I think it's the first and only time that they were ever together in the same studio, another guest, John Williams.

Seated at the microphone were my two most favourite guitarists on their respective instruments, but the same instrument.

Hen I first picked up the guitar the name of John Williams was everywhere. I was eleven and he was twenty-one. Now I was thirty-odd and he was the master of the classical guitar, and along side him was my new God. Joe Pass. My style had changed and moved on and my tastes had to move to that type of music and technique.

This is an exact quote, how could I forget it? They were both asked if they had, either of them, tried to play the other's style of music. John Williams immediately said that he hadn't hope of playing jazz, "How do you learn all of those scales", and he that he could never get used to playing with a pick. And Joe Pass said agreed, "Classical? Too technical"

Their sentiments were obvious to me as a classical guitarist who has crossed over to now make his living from playing jazz, and knowing the difficulties of each style, but where do we draw any lines at all when it come to the Rock guitarist.

Well, the rest of this thesis can only be based on my own opinion and upon 1, my years of experience as a guitar player and a teacher and 2, an outward perspective that I give to all music.

The first balance must lie in the personal taste. How many arguments have raged over whether Stevie Ray Vaughan could play the arse off Eric Clapton. Raised voices citing certain solos that were thought to be 'blistering' or 'awesome'.

Has anybody ever sat in a bar and ranted over Segovia's earth shattering arrangement and performance of Bach's Chaconne in D minor? I've never heard them, and you never will. But here is the crux of the issue.

I know how great all of these performances are. I've played them and analysed them and I can tell you that, at the end of the day, given the

appropriate, psychological climate and audience, there is nothing in it. It's a dead heat.

Segovia couldn't play jazz as John Williams so readily pointed out, and the great Joe Pass certainly could never have played the simplest of Fernando Sor's studies.

Why?

Because they didn't want to, they didn't need to, it wasn't in them.

Having played and made a living out of all styles of guitar playing, I know that there is a certain mind for a certain style.

The guitar has a mesmerising quality. It takes a certain mind to take the guitar on at a game of Jazz, that complex weaving of scales to fit some of the most demanding of chord sequences. It takes a certain, dedicated mind to be so mechanically correct and disciplined to try and master the animal on the battlefield of a Bach fugue where precision is the only winning formula.

And it is just as demanding to control the electric guitar, while going through 4000 watts of volume, in front of 50,000 people, and at the same be creative with your modes and rock hard wear and ammunition.

So where does that leave us, the guitar magazines that are out to capture your \$10, and the seventeen-year-old musicologists who won't know a minor pentatonic scale from playing 'London's Burning' on a school recorder?

Well I know where it leaves me. They are all great. Segovia couldn't do what Joe Pass or Barney Kessel could do. Steve Vai and Joe Satriani could never do what Ry Cooder can do. And Chet Atkins couldn't have done what Django Reinhardt could do. We could go on forever but I do believe this, when you get to a certain level, there's not much difference between any of us. I can still learn something from my pupils who have only been playing for a few years. We all have idiosyncrasies within our technique that are like fingerprints. You yourself could probably teach all of us 'old pros' a thing or two, remember that when you think that you're getting nowhere.

So, there really isn't a 'best guitarist that's ever lived', just a whole load of great ones that have come and gone, and if you practice, and listen to everything you can, and be honest with yourself about what you are listening to, who knows?

John Anthony

