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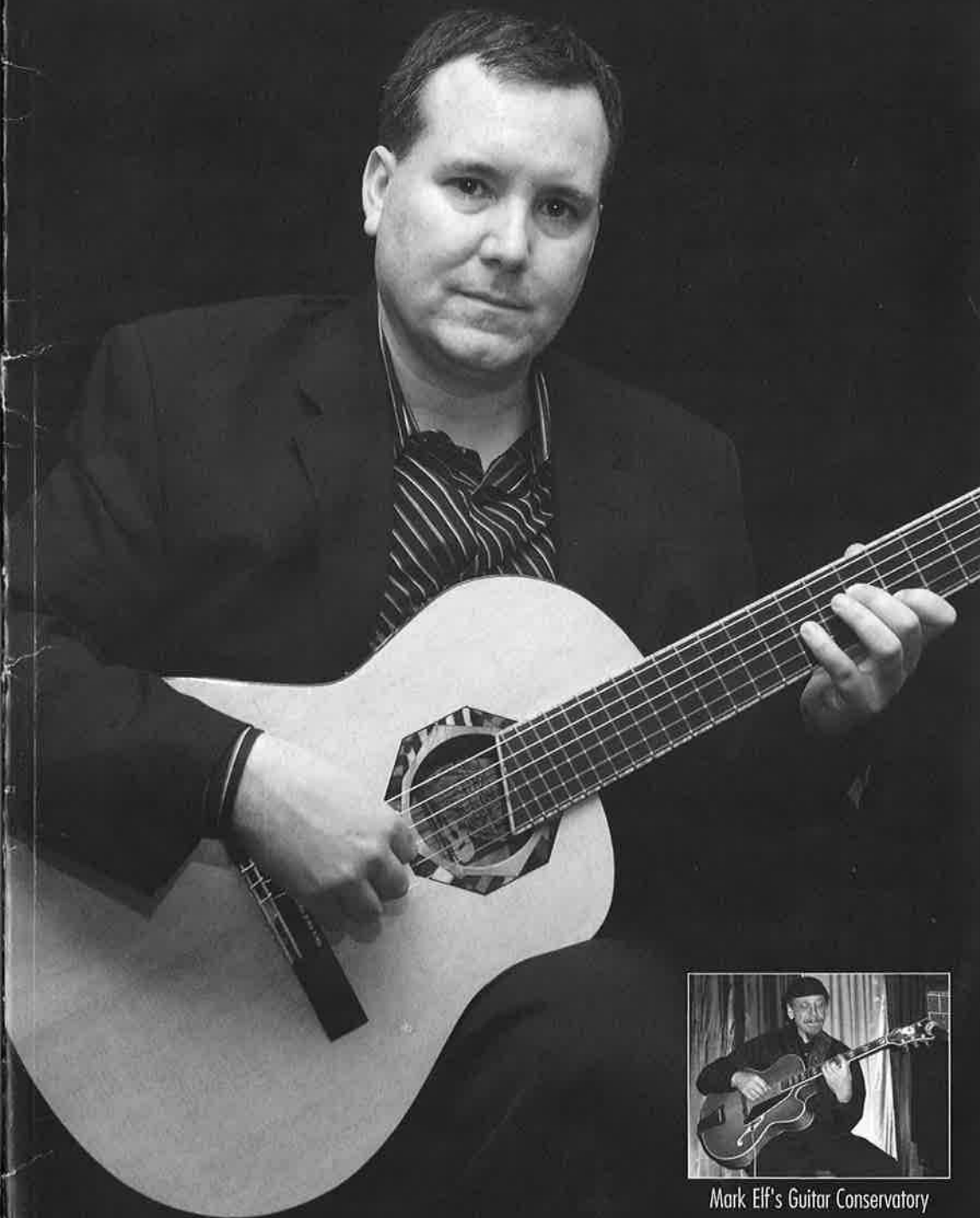
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Jeff Barone



Mark Elf's Guitar Conservatory

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TOM WOLFE

by Rod Nowakowski



Tom Wolfe serves as the Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences as well as Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He was selected as a 1998 USIA Jazz Ambassador, and toured several countries of North and West Africa under the auspices of this prestigious program, including a performance at the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage. He has also performed throughout the U.S., El Salvador, and France, and serves as a clinician and adjudicator at college and high school festivals and jazz camps. He has served as President of the Alabama Chapter of the International Association of Jazz Educators, and is a former faculty member at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Kenyon College and Otterbein College. He has been a faculty member at the University of Alabama (UA) since 1994. Wolfe's first CD, entitled "Simple Peace," has received critical acclaim and was made possible by a fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. "Simple Peace" features all original compositions by Mr. Wolfe. He recently released "Floating on the Silence" (Summit Records), a new CD of jazz guitar duets with

Gene Bertoncini. This interview was held on the campus of the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

RN: First of all, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Let's start with what prompted your initial interest in the guitar.

TW: I think I was maybe 5, watching TV, and a woman was playing a guitar—it might have been Joan Baez, Judy Collins or someone like that—and I said, "I want to play that thing." I didn't even know the name of it.

RN: Do you remember your first guitar?

TW: I do. For Christmas my parents bought a cheap \$10.00 guitar from Bargain Barn, and I started on that. In fact, I still have it.

RN: How old were you then?

TW: I started playing when I turned six.

RN: Who was your first teacher?

TW: I only had one teacher until I went to college. His name is Charles Taylor. He had retired from the old Revco Company. He was in sales but played guitar for years on his own. He was a good teacher and sight reader. He didn't play jazz. He didn't play anything but classical guitar, but he did so on an electric guitar in the style of Nick Lucas. He was really into that style. He taught me how to read and interpret music and I studied with him until I graduated from high school.

RN: It is good that he taught you how to read music. Many people don't learn that skill. He must have been a good teacher.

TW: He was, and he knew the value of learning to read music. If it wasn't for my ability to sight-read, there were a lot of gigs I would never have been hired for. It wasn't because I was the best guitar player; it was because I could read, and when there were shows with traveling artists, they would contact me if the regular guitar player wasn't available.

RN: Were there other musicians in your family?

TW: Yes, my mom was church organist and church pianist and my brother played trumpet. He took trumpet lessons and cornet lessons, and my Dad really loved to sing. He didn't play any instruments.

RN: Did you play any other instruments?

TW: I played the tuba in the high school marching

band. I even minored in tuba when I went to college. I did some wind ensemble and brass group performances.

RN: When did you get interested in jazz?

TW: When I went off to college. Mr. Taylor had taught me to play the electric guitar, and at that time I didn't have any interest in being a classical player. I had never studied it before. I had always used a pick and had never used my fingers. So when I auditioned I said, "I want to be a music major and I want the electric guitar to be my instrument; what can I do?" The reply was, "You can be a jazz major." I said, "Okay; just show me what I need to do."

RN: Where was that?

TW: At Capital University. I had a lot of great teachers at Capital, but as far as guitar goes, Stan Smith was my primary teacher. Also Tom Carroll, who taught at Ohio State. I studied with him a little bit too when I was there, and then there was Ray Eubanks, Director of the Program. Vaughn Weister directed the jazz ensemble and Bernie Rucker was another faculty member who taught improvisation. There was a group of great teachers who were open-minded about what jazz was, and when I eventually went to Eastman I knew that jazz performance was exactly what I wanted to do.

At Capital, Stan also taught me how to be professional: how to handle myself, how to deal with gigs, and how to deal with people in a professional music environment. Stan was great about teaching me all of that, turning me on to classical guitar and helping me learn tunes as well as teaching me how to write tunes. Having that great foundation and then moving on to study with Gene Bertocini, one of the most outstanding players I have been fortunate to know, was wonderful. Gene could tell what really needed the emphasis and where you needed to fill in those gaps to balance out your overall abilities on the instrument.

RN: So, you went to graduate school at Eastman?

TW: Yes. My mentors there were Bill Dobbins and Ray Wright. I was Ray Wright's graduate assistant. Ray passed away back in 1990. He was the consummate educator, and that opened my eyes to education as a future direction.

RN: Was your master's degree in guitar studies?

TW: No. At the time at Eastman, they didn't have a gui-

tar track. They had two tracks at the master's level: one was a performance skills track and the other, a writing skills track. I went into the writing skills track but I did study guitar during the summer with Gene so that I could meet my requirements for that degree. I took a lot of performing classes. I played in the jazz ensemble for the two years I was there and really got the best of both worlds. I was studying writing with Ray Wright and studying performance with Gene and Bill. I was very fortunate.

RN: Let's talk about your current position. You have an interesting mix. You are an educator and now an administrator as well as a performer, so what is your official title or titles?

TW: I have a couple of titles now. When I first came here I was hired as Director of the Jazz Studies Program, and now I am Associate Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, while still maintaining the Directorship of the Jazz Program.

RN: Has moving to administration helped or interfered with your music career?

TW: When I first started I tabled a lot of my playing and a lot of my club work. I did that to get my feet solid on the ground with the administrative role, but now I am starting to find the groove and I understand a little better how to manage my time and responsibilities. Now I am back to doing some club and concert work again.

RN: Tell me about your students and how they compare to when you were at that stage?

TW: It is changing and technology especially influences them. Because of technology everybody can put out a CD, and recordings are so prolific that the students' grasp of all kinds and styles of music is very wide and very eclectic. I have been getting some very hungry students here who really want to play.

RN: Any unique challenges associated with being a college professor, like things that you hadn't anticipated?

TW: The time investment in designing a course. All of a sudden I had to learn how to sit down and figure out how to teach a subject. Another challenge is developing a curriculum for jazz majors to get them out in four years and still give them a very well-rounded and strong foundation in jazz.

RN: As you look back on two paths, performer or educator, has education offered any opportunities you might not have had as a performer?

TW: It has opened a lot of doors, especially since coming to the University of Alabama. I have had great performance opportunities playing at the Handy Festival with great musicians, and opportunities to meet a lot of musicians that I admire: Bill Goodwin, Mundell Lowe, Holly Hoffman. I only got a chance to play with Holly a couple of times, so unfortunately I don't know her as well as I would like to. Hillary Jones, another drummer, Tommy Cecil, a bass player, Delbert Felix, a bass player, both from the East Coast. The Redd Brothers, Chuck and Robert from Washington DC. Just an incredible number of great players. Gary Motley from Atlanta. They all come to the Handy Festival and we would play together for about a week in different configurations. The past two years I performed and taught in Romania at the Romanian Jazz Education Summit and some festivals there. I am getting more and more calls from other places to come and give master classes, or to perform at their institutions, playing at festivals, so it actually opened a lot of doors for me.

RN: I know you have done a lot to promote interest in jazz by young people in local and state high schools. Would you describe that program a little?

TW: We have a program here at Alabama [University of] called "What is Jazz?" It is sponsored by the Tuscaloosa Arts Council. Our jazz majors go out to elementary schools in the area and give a concert of varying jazz styles and talk about what jazz is. We break it down so they will hear what a ride rhythm is, and what a walking bass player does, and we will apply it to a song that they already know. So I say, "We are going to start playing a song, and as soon as you know it, you start singing with us." We will do something like *Santa Clause is Coming to Town* or something else familiar. We have jazz changes and a real nice groove and they say, "Whoa, I heard that on TV and it was completely different, but now I am beginning to hear what is happening jazz-wise." As they are singing I will have the horn players begin to improvise while one of them continues to play the melody, so those listening get an idea of what improvisation is. We really try to broaden their background.

I do a lot of clinics with high schools. I served as state president for IAJE (International Association for Jazz Education) and now I serve as web master. We facili-

tate the All-State Jazz Band so we are really trying to reach out and work with the band directors and serve as a resource for those band directors who may be interested in starting a jazz program. I also work with our MENC (Music Educators National Conference) student chapter here for music education majors. I usually do one or two workshops a semester/year and talk with them about jazz resources, where they can find publications from very elementary to very complex, what to do to learn improvisation and things like that. We are trying to spread the word.

RN: I think some JIG readers might be surprised at the jazz tradition that exists in Alabama, and I wonder if you could elaborate on that and maybe talk about how that ties into what students learn.

TW: Yes, there is a great tradition here. Sun Ra is from this area, Erskine Hawkins and Cleve Eaton, who was the Count Basie Orchestra bass player for a number of years. There is the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame; Tuxedo Junction is still standing and was made famous by the Erskine Hawkins song. We have some fabulous musicians here who are from that early time period. We have a lot of tours that come through Birmingham. Frank Adams, who is Director of the Jazz Hall of Fame, is one of the saxophonists who played with all kinds of jazz greats. I understand he played with Duke Ellington at one point, and with all these other musicians touring around doing the regional circuits here in this area. There is just a tremendous wealth of fabulous players and musicians, and not just in jazz. Here we are, we have had the 4th American Idol just win from Birmingham. There is a wealth of music here in Alabama.

RN: Let's talk about your family for awhile. You have a lovely wife, Sandy, who I know is an accomplished flautist. Do you ever perform together?

TW: We do. Not as much as we used to. We used to play flute and guitar duets a lot, and that is kind of what really pushed me further and further into the classical realm, too.

RN: Your son, Zachary, is he 15 now?

TW: Yes - going on 16 soon.

RN: If he says at some point he might want to be a jazz musician what would you tell him?

TW: Go for it! But I am not going to push him in that

direction. You know, I went to undergraduate school to be a music major. I had parents who would have been disappointed if I had not chosen music. They were very supportive of what I was doing even though I didn't know what I could do with it. Sometimes parents of students who have chosen music as a profession express concern about whether the kids will be able to support themselves. I have been very blessed. I have had a lot of great things happen to me because of choosing guitar as my life. I never would have gone to Africa or Romania if it wasn't for my guitar, and I would never have been in Alabama if it wasn't for my guitar.

RN: Tell us about the instruments that you own and play.

TW: I have a few. I have the electric guitar that my parents bought me many years ago. I was in the 4th grade, maybe 10 years old. It is the Gibson ES 335 you have seen several times. Then I have the Foster 7-string that Jimmy built for me. I am using it primarily and really like it. I have a Cort sitting over there. It is an archtop and has a real nice sound. Joe (Beck) really did a nice job designing that. I have a Strat but it is not a vintage model. I have one of the Japanese-made Strats, which are lighter than the vintage American-made. I didn't want to buy a vintage model because I didn't want to damage something as nice as that, so I just got a new Japanese version, yanked out the pickups and kind of hotwired it. I have a couple of classical guitars. One is a Dauphin that I got years ago that I got a real good deal on. I don't even know if they make them anymore. I have a Tacoma Electric Acoustic/Classical that I use a lot. I've got a steel-string Goya for which I traded an old Gibson J45 plus \$80 bucks, and, of course, the one you know, the beautiful Santa Cruz that you gave me. It is a great guitar and I still use it quite a bit. [Author's Note: I actually traded it for lessons – lots of them!]

RN: What made you want to have a 7-string guitar?

TW: I met Jimmy Foster (Luthier in Louisiana) in late 1998 when I saw him playing one of his guitars down in New Orleans. I was there doing a couple of gigs, and Terry [a drummer friend] introduced me to Jimmy. He said, "You need to meet this guy. He is a great guitarist and makes his own instruments." I started playing that 7-string and it kind of intrigued me. I thought I would like to explore that a little more, so a couple of years

later I called and had him build one for me, and that is the primary instrument that I use now.

RN: So is there another special guitar you want to have one day?

TW: I wouldn't mind getting a 7-string archtop from Jimmy [Foster], but right now I have been enjoying the one I have. It is light, has a smaller body, a great sound and a beautiful finish.

RN: Is there a particular sound you try to achieve?

TW: When I am doing my own thing with my trio I like a light chorus, a very light chorus. I don't like a heavy vibrato chorus. I like a deep depth but a very slow rate so I can hear the shimmer. I do enjoy a little bit of delay and a warmer sound.

RN: Any particular likes or dislikes with respect to strings?

TW: I've been using D'Addario for years-both flat- and round-wound. I also use the recording strings for the Tacoma electric classical.

RN: How about picks?

TW: I use the Dunlop or the Jazz 3, those real thick ones. I like the thicker bite to it. If I am playing steel string acoustic, I use a bigger triangle, but it is thinner, so you get that "pick click" against the string, which is part of the sound.

RN: How about amplifiers?

TW: I really like the Yamaha DG-80. It has all kinds of sounds programmed into it that I've tweaked. It is MIDI-capable, so I have a MIDI pedalboard and can change the patches instantaneously.

RN: You have played with many of the top names in jazz guitar and you have mentioned some of them already. I know a lot of the time groups are put together without time to rehearse. How do you approach being ready for something like that?

TW: You know, when I go into those situations I feel honored to be able to play with those guys. They are musicians that I have really admired, and so right there I have this trepidation that, you know, I am "just me." But, I have enough experience now that I know I can trust to a certain level of musicality, so when I go into those situations, I've learned to trust myself, take my chances when I am improvising, and do the best I can. I try to be as musical and attentive to the people I am

playing with so that I make it a musical experience for them, too. I want them to say, "I really enjoyed playing with you." That is my goal now, so I give it 110% and whatever happens, happens. I can walk away from the gig knowing I played the best I could at that moment.

RN: Do you have any particularly good, bad or humorous experiences that you care to share?

TW: One is pretty funny. It was at the Handy Festival. I was playing at the Guitar Summit with Mundell Lowe and several others, including Lloyd Wells from Nashville and Jack Pearson, also from Nashville. Before the gig Mundell said, "Let's talk about tunes." Whatever tune Mundell wanted to do I would say, "Yes I'll do it." Well he said, "I think I would like to do *Darn that Dream*." I replied, "You know, Mundell, I know it, kind of, but it has some weird changes in it and just the way it moves, I don't feel all that comfortable and you don't have a lead sheet, so if you could pick out another tune I would really prefer it." He just looks at me and says, "Not a problem. Don't worry about it. We'll do something else." The second tune of the concert Mundell announces, "We are so happy to be here and glad you're here too, so we are going to play a beautiful ballad for you called *Darn that Dream*." He then leans over, looks at me and says, "And Tom is going to take the first solo." It turned out great and it was probably one of the best things he could have done for me.

RN: Do you ever hit a plateau, and if so, what would you do to work past that?

TW: Yes – many times. You feel like you are playing the same thing over and over. So I just try to listen to music, and a lot of times I will listen to old recordings that I always find inspiring. I really love to listen to Keith Jarrett's trio. Just the way he interprets jazz standards - it is just so beautiful. I like to listen to Jim Hall and Kurt Rosenwinkle. I saw Kurt up in New York recently and he is just a fabulous player. It doesn't have to be a guitar player to give you inspiration. I listen to other musicians as well, and draw from them.

RN: Do you feel like you have established a style you call your own, and is that a goal?

TW: I would like to think so. I am tickled when someone tells me that they hear the influences of some well-known guitar player in what I do, but I am always striving to really be my own voice. I try to be fresh, creative and take chances, but still be true to the music. I have

not been as successful with that as I would like to be yet, but maybe some day.

RN: You have been a Jazz Ambassador. Tell us about that.

TW: It was in 1998 when they were sending duos to Africa. Rick Condit, saxophone professor of jazz over at McNeese State University in Louisiana, and I met years ago when I was teaching in Louisiana. Rick and I were visiting with each other at the IAJE conference in New York. He said, "I saw the Jazz Ambassador program and they are calling for auditions. Do you want to audition?" I said, "Sure, let's do it!" We were very fortunate to be one of the 7 duos chosen. They sent us on a five-week tour of five different countries in Africa. We performed concerts and taught clinics and just kind of served as cultural liaisons while performing with other musicians in the region. It was very enlightening to see how they interpret music. It was a great opportunity.

RN: You have a CD of duets with Gene Bertoncini called "Floating on the Silence" (Summit Records). Please describe that project and your collaboration with Gene.

TW: We have known each other for years-I studied with him in graduate school, remember. He has since become a very close friend. While on sabbatical in New York City I would go to Le Madeleine's, a restaurant that Gene played at on a weekly basis. I would sit in and play and it was a lot of fun. So we began to talk about recording. A year or two later, he and I performed a concert together and we had a day free so we went to a recording studio here in Alabama and laid down some tracks. It was very informal – we just played some tunes, and after the session we felt we had some good material. Gene came down one more time to lay down a few more tracks. After that I mixed it and Summit Records picked it up. I'm very pleased with the final outcome. It was a real treat and honor to record with Gene.

RN: Your first CD was called "Simple Peace." It has received some wonderful reviews, so tell us about that.

TW: I received a fellowship from the Alabama State Arts Council, which made that recording possible. It was something that I had wanted to do for a long time – recording original compositions, bringing in some musicians I really enjoy playing with, and getting in a good studio with some great engineers. As you said, I



At the Handy festival concert last August: Tom Wolfe on guitar, Tim Goodwin on bass and Bill Goodwin on drums.

was just trying to make my own voice and put it out there a little bit. It had some good reviews and it has gotten me a lot of gigs. It also had a good response from fellow musicians.

RN: Are all those tunes your own compositions?

TW: Yes.

RN: What inspires you to write a tune?

TW: It could be anything, and I think any composer would tell you the same thing. It could be a rhythm or a harmonic progression. It could be just a little melodic theme that kind of catches your ear that you take and develop.

RN: Do you have a goal as a composer?

TW: I just want to keep writing. I enjoy writing and continue to work on things. I have my notebooks, and when a theme or rhythm comes up, I just write it all down in my notebook. I will revisit them later and then

all of a sudden I can see where I want to take an idea and go on developing it. Some tunes write themselves almost overnight and some tunes evolve. You write them and little by little you change something or tweak it a little bit and they take on their own personality. I perform my own tunes and little by little, small quirks and characteristics emerge in the performance that become part of the composition, although not necessarily the way it was originally intended. It is really interesting to see this evolve.

RN: I recently heard you accompanying a young female vocalist (Debbie Barnes, Birmingham, Alabama) who was singing both country and jazz tunes. You provided really interesting and tasteful backup. How do you approach playing with a vocalist?

TW: With vocalists especially, I want to make sure I am sounding harmonically so that they really hear the changes and where the progression is going. Usually, singers are more accustomed to performing with a

pianist rather than a guitarist, and it is certainly different. When they hear the guitarist at first they may not always be sure how they are going to pick up the pitches and so forth, so I have to be very conscious of that. I try to make them feel comfortable knowing that we are all there for the same goal: to have a good musical experience.

RN: You have made several trips to Romania. Tell us about those.

TW: That is the brainchild of three gentlemen. Johnny Bota, a teacher at Tibiscus University in Timisoara, Romania, Rick Condit, a Fulbright Scholar who was my Jazz Ambassador partner, and Tom Smith, another Fulbright Scholar to Romania. Rick was in Iasi for about six months, and then trombonist Tom Smith came and spent about a year there. Tom and John got together and decided that the next step would be to create a jazz camp, and they called it the Romanian Jazz Education Summit. The focus is more on educators rather than students. Students are welcome, and they come, too. Rick was aware of my travels with the Ambassadors Program and wanted to know if I would be interested in doing the Romania tour because it kind of has the same idea as the Ambassador Program. I agreed and went over there for about two weeks for the past two summers. We talk about how to teach jazz, we coach combos and give clinics.

RN: So is there a big jazz movement in Romania?

TW: There really is. They have some great jazz musicians who are well known. Romania is not a very big country and they broadcast on national TV and radio programs so they are pretty much known nation-wide. In 2006 I went back and spent almost three weeks.

RN: Any thoughts you would like to share for young musicians seeking a career in jazz?

TW: Yes. The biggest thing is to listen, listen, and listen. Check out recordings, practice wisely and work on learning tunes. Get with a teacher who can point you in the right direction and just continually work on developing your skills. There is no reason why you can't do something in jazz. I am very fortunate to be able to do what I am doing because of playing jazz guitar.

RN: What about for Just Jazz Guitar readers who I am sure represent a broad mix of young and old enthusiasts? Any comments or thoughts for them?

TW: Just keep getting out there and play, be willing to

put your own spin on tunes and develop your own voice on the instrument. Transcribe all the great players and learn to play their solos, but ultimately be true to your own voice on the instrument and your own approach to the tunes. An old standard that everybody plays doesn't have to be a tiresome old tune – it can be fresh, new and exciting every single time you play.

RN: Just Jazz Guitar magazine is a unique development for those that are interested in jazz guitar. There has never been anything like that before. Any thought about JJG?

TW: Yes, it is great to see this magazine spreading the word to everybody. I wish I had it when I was younger, because when I was first starting in jazz guitar, I didn't know whom to listen to or what recordings to look for, and it took me a while to find my way. It is a great resource and I'm glad it is available for all – young and old.

RN: Final thought, as you look back: You could have gone in so many different directions. Any regrets?

TW: No. You think about those choices. We make some mistakes and I sure wish I could take back some of them but as far as the major life choices I've made, I have been very blessed. I applied to different colleges when I was looking, and ended up at the right places. I had no idea when I accepted the position here at the University of Alabama what it would lead to. A lot of great things have happened that I never expected. I don't have any regrets.

Rod Nowakowski Birmingham, Alabama
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CD credits

Simple Peace

Tom Wolfe; Guitars/Guitar Synth

Mark Lanter; Drums

Oteil Burbridge; Bass (tracks 2, 4, 7):

Robert Dickson; Bass (tracks 1, 3, 6, 9):

Roy Yarbrough; Bass (track 8)

Bill Peterson; Piano (tracks 1, 3, 6, 8)

Floating on the Silence (Summit Records)

Tom Wolfe - Guitar Gene Bertoncini - Guitar

Contact: Tom Wolfe • E-mail: twolfe@as.ua.edu

Web site: bama.ua.edu/~twolfe/wolfefbio.htm