



*By Carl Verheyen - GJD Contributor*

I studied jazz with Joe Diorio in the late 70's and to this day feel a great debt to him for setting me on my own creative path. Much of the success I've had as a solo artist can be attributed to his teachings 30 years ago: I used many of his harmonic and melodic concepts and applied them to rock and blues. This made my music sound different, which was the number one lesson Joe taught: Make music sound different.

A couple of years ago I had the pleasure of seeing my longtime mentor and friend do a guitar workshop. Joe had suffered a stroke the previous year and hadn't been able to play guitar since then. Therapy has helped, and he's working hard on regaining his amazing chops but it will be another year before he can effectively play again.

On the day of the workshop, I feared the worst and hesitated to come.....stroke victims can be pretty messed up. When I arrived and greeted him back stage I was relieved: the sense of humor and soulful camaraderie was still in tact. I couldn't help thinking of Yoda as he hobbled up to the stage with his cane (his left side is still paralyzed) but once he got on the mic it was astonishing. Joe is still sharp as a tack.

Speaking for an hour and a half straight he talked about how being a musician was the highest form of humanity possible. He spoke about the limitless creative pool we can all tap into no matter what level our technique is. As an example: BB King, making us all cry with one note even though his technique is limited and he's 82 years old. He spoke about Hendrix, and the connection between heart, mind and hands. He said that for most of us that begins to come in to focus after the first 20 years of playing, and that is something I often remind younger players to give them hope. He told stories about hanging out with Wes, Tal, Joe Pass and his own musical upbringing with the awestruck enthusiasm of a kid.

That happened almost two years ago, and since that day I have often reflected on what a joy it is to be able to make music with my hands. It's a simple thing I know, and I'm sure most of us take it for granted. But here was one of the most brilliant improvisers on the planet completely shut down in one day. That thought makes me appreciate my ability to play and get better with age even more, and to enjoy these years of making music with respect and gratitude. I've even

taken up working on my speed (something that always came naturally for me, something I never had to practice). I also now practice mentally, like picturing a "snapshot" of a particular key all over the neck.

Here is an example: Take the major pentatonic key of C. Using just the root, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th of the key, try playing all the notes in C major pentatonic from the lowest possible note in the scale ( G on the 6th string, 3rd fret) to the highest possible pentatonic note ( high C on the 1st string, 20th fret). I go up this scale choosing when to change strings randomly and then back down the neck, and I try to keep it in time. When I get to the bottom I do it again in F, then Bb, the Eb and right around all 12 keys in the circle of 5ths.

After this I switch to major scales and do it all again. You could call it a warm-up exercise, but I prefer to look at it as a mental warm-up. It causes you to think about negotiating the scale or melodic line across all 6 strings from one end of the guitar to the other. You begin to see things differently very quickly. You begin to tap in to the creative pool Joe spoke about.....

That day I left Joe's clinic feeling I had just witnessed the heaviest guitar workshop I have ever attended, and the man never even played a note. Like a preacher or a motivational speaker, Joe gave us all a deep sermon in our religion, with passion, humor and soul. I wish him a speedy rehabilitation and look forward to the music when he's back on the scene. Thanks Joe, for the inspiration. I promise never to take it for granted.....