



Tomo Fujita This Teacher Can

YOU KNOW THAT OLD saying, “Those who can, do. And those who can’t, teach”?

The adage can be proven wrong in many cases, and in the world of guitar, proof lies in Tomo Fujita, who has worked as a teacher at Berklee College of Music for almost 15 years and recently released *Right Place, Right Time*, a showcase for his considerable talents on guitar. The disc is full of stinging jazz/rock licks, hard funk, and compositions that stick in your mind.

Tomo’s interest in guitar started in his home town of Kyoto, Japan, where a friend had a record collection that stirred his imagination.

“He had things like the Beatles, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Jeff Beck – almost anything you’d want to hear. I was about 13 when I started playing, but couldn’t play anything for about a year – not even ‘Smoke On the Water.’ I heard it so many times and I had no idea how to get those sounds. I later

found a friend and other guys who could play one or two tunes. Each one taught me a chord or a line. After that, things started to stick.”

Things then accelerated, and he started transcribing songs like “Stairway to Heaven” and “Hotel California.” The turning point in his musical life came when he discovered Larry Carlton. “It was, of course, a little different than what I’d been listening to and transcribing. I did a note-for-note transcription of ‘Room 335.’ That was a great experience.” Carlton’s music also started Tomo looking back. His study took on the blues and jazz and the music of players like B.B. King, Otis Rush, Freddie King, Wes Montgomery, and Joe Pass. It ultimately led to his move across the ocean.

“I was planning to move to Tokyo to become a studio musician, but then I thought ‘Why not go to America?’ All this music I loved came from America. So that’s what I did.”

There was a least one sidetrack. “Back home, my parents and everyone said music was not a great career to follow, so I decided to go to regular college. I went one year and studied Russian. At the time, I was planning to go to Berklee for a couple of years, then go back to Japan and finish. But I got a full scholarship from Berklee after I sent them a demo tape. At that point, I told my parents I had to go.”

While at Berklee, Fujita joined a blues band. “That’s when I realized I needed to study more. Most guys think ‘three chords and pentatonic.’

But once you get into it, it’s as difficult as any music, including jazz. You have fewer choices musically, and you really need to express yourself.”

After he graduated in 1993, he pondered his options. “I wanted to go to California to be a studio player, but studio work was drying up because of synthesizers and other reasons. I was gigging, and folks suggested I teach funk and blues. Berklee had a lot of jazz teachers, but not the other areas. That’s how I got the job.”

He now teaches two semesters each year. Among his more well-known students was a young John Mayer, who studied with Fujita in 1997. “He could play really well, but he was a little bit confused. He was trying to become Stevie Ray Vaughan. But he had lots of original ideas, so I just suggested not doing Stevie. I recommended to him to write songs and do what he wants. And that seems to have worked out for him.” He runs into Mayer on occasion, and they share a laugh about one of his suggestions. “I kept asking him not to rake the strings like Stevie, and when I see him now backstage at his concerts he always tells me, ‘See, Tomo, I don’t do that anymore.’”

Tomo’s favorite guitar is his Fender Stevie Ray Vaughan Strat. Laughing, he says he’ll always remember the guitar’s age. “When my first son was born, I got it because everybody told me, ‘If you want a guitar, you’d better get one right now because once you have a child, you won’t be able to.’ I went to the store and bought it, so, it’s the same age as my oldest son – 14.”

He also has a Rudy Suhr guitar and has become fond of vintage Fender Duo Sonics – he has a ’62 and a ’63. “I can’t afford an old Strat, and these are really inexpensive, they sound good, and have a small neck that makes them easy and fun to play. So I bought a few of them.”

His strings are D’Addario .010 to .046 and his amps include a blackface Fender Pro Reverb and a Fuchs ODS-50 run through a Bob Burt cabinet with Eminence Speakers, which he says are a very important part of his sound. Fujita’s pedal setup is simple, and his overdrive, made by Clay Jones, is key.

While *Right Place, Right Time* is Tomo’s first CD, he has done numerous instructional DVDs, with one series available in the U.S. and more than a dozen in Japan. He returns to his homeland a couple times each year, between semesters, to perform shows and conduct clinics. And he looks forward to playing more gigs with his trio, which has created the age-old musicians’ dilemma. “We’re playing around Boston and I’m trying to expand that. But there’s not a lot of money. I’m trying to save up!”

– **John Heidt**

