

# OPENING CHORUS

( ( Stay in tune ) )



## Given the Gift of Life

GUITARIST FRANK VIGNOLA TURNS A DEVASTATING ACCIDENT INTO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MUSICAL GROWTH

One evening in May of 2017, at home in rural Warwick, N.Y., guitarist Frank Vignola, then 51, made a fateful decision: to go out for a quick pre-dinner spin in the all-terrain vehicle parked in his half-acre backyard. It was something he'd done many times in the past, usually with one or more of his four sons, but this time—luckily, as it turned out—he was on his own. Somehow the ATV went into a skid and hit a tree. The impact was so forceful that it threw Vignola into the air. He blacked out.

“When I woke up,” he recalls on the phone nine months later, “there were a zillion people over me, including my family, saying, ‘Don’t go back to sleep.’ They put me in a helicopter and brought me to St. Joseph’s hospital in Paterson, New Jersey. And thank God they did. My right shoulder was broken in two places,

along with my right arm and four ribs, and both of my lungs had collapsed.”

Vignola—known for his work with everyone from Wynton Marsalis and Bucky Pizzarelli to Jane Monheit and Donald Fagen, as well as his many instructional books, videos and online guitar courses—stayed in the hospital for a week. That, however, was only the start of a long recovery that required four surgeries and was hampered when he developed an infection in his right arm. “I remember lying in bed in agonizing pain,” he says. “I thought the arm might have to be amputated. Luckily, it was a simple infection and it did eventually respond to antibiotics, but even after that there was a lot of doubt. I’d always had an aggressive approach to playing, using my shoulder to kind of throw my arm at the guitar. I just wasn’t going to be able to do that anymore.”

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Chuck Hammer

After having to cancel 100 concert bookings in the wake of his accident, Vignola toyed with the idea of taking an indefinite break from music. But that lasted only as long as it took for him to be able to lift his right arm over a guitar. By October, he was playing again. “I started picking out melodies I liked,” he remembers. “You don’t have to be a speed demon to play ‘All the Things You Are.’ Then I was like, ‘OK, maybe I can get into one thing I’ve always wanted to do, which is learn more Charlie Parker heads.’ And I mean *learn* them—not just kinda play through ‘em, but really internalize them. So I did. I finally can play ‘Donna Lee’ correctly for the first time in 40 years!”

From learning heads, Vignola quickly progressed to rearranging them. Within a few months, he’d put together about 25 challenging new three-guitar arrangements of compositions by Parker, Duke Ellington and others. “Because I wasn’t touring,” he says, “I had the time to refocus on what I want to do musically.” In November, his string-picking friends David Grisman and Tommy Emmanuel

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invited him to a concert they were playing in New Jersey; he ended up staying for hours, talking and playing with his pals backstage, and even going onstage for a few numbers. It was a sign that he was ready to get back to work.

In preparation, he played a couple of low-profile gigs close to home. Then, on Feb. 12, came his first big post-accident engagement, with pianist John di Martino's trio at the Iridium in New York—standing room only. (Vignola told me afterward, with customary self-deprecating humor, that his initial reaction to the sellout was "Wow, I have to hit a tree to pack this place!") As everyone assembled onstage, the guitarist picked out his first notes and ... nothing happened. The amplifier wasn't turned on. Vignola turned to the audience with a big smile and said, "How do you like it so far?"

Such wisecracks continued for much of the next two and a half hours, interspersed with crisp takes of classic tunes. "Moonlight in Vermont," for example,

began with a slow, bluesy statement of the theme before launching into a solo section that ran at a finger-taxing gallop. Although Vignola moved around the stage a bit gingerly, his playing sounded as fluid as it ever had. "I'm not all the way back to where I'd like to be," he said when the show was over. "I could have a little better control. My fingers are still tingly sometimes, but that's improving. The best therapy is to practice as much as I can."

The high point of the evening was when Vignola brought out longtime creative partner Vinny Raniolo and 19-year-old wunderkind Jan Knutson to help him play some of his new three-guitar arrangements. (They've recorded a bunch for an upcoming album, one of two studio projects Vignola's been working on; the other is an album with Di Martino's trio.) A dizzying run through "Donna Lee" sounded like Django Reinhardt, Jimmy Bryant and Les Paul having a late-night jam.

Speaking of Les Paul, that Iridium

show was meaningful to Vignola for reasons that went beyond his accident. "It was the second Monday in February of 2000"—exactly 18 years earlier—"when I started playing with Les Paul at the Iridium," he says. Paul, a good friend of Vignola's, had a legendary Monday-night gig at the club for many years, which continued until his death in 2009, at age 94. "And I know this sounds a little nuts, but I really felt Les' presence. He went through an accident like mine [a 1948 car crash that left his right elbow permanently bent], and it was like he was there putting his hand on my shoulder, saying, 'You got a second chance—go get 'em.'"

"When I was in the hospital," Vignola adds, "the first thing I remember thinking was 'This sucks.' And then I said, 'You know what? I'm going to make this the best thing that ever happened to me.' I don't know how that's going to happen, but I do know that if I was given the gift of life again, it's got to mean something."

MAC RANDALL

## What's in a Name?

SINGER MICHELLE COLTRANE OPENS UP ABOUT HER RECENT ALBUM, HER SURPRISING BIRTH FATHER AND THE JOYS OF JAZZ'S WEIGHTIEST LEGACY

She has been singing since childhood and shares one of the most illustrious names in jazz. But, putting family commitments first, Michelle Coltrane, daughter of Alice and stepdaughter of John (who died when she was 6), waited until her mid-30s to record her debut album, *I Think of You*. It has taken almost a quarter-century for Coltrane, now 57, to shape her sophomore release, *Awakening* (Blujazz), a fine collection of covers and originals that honors the Coltrane legacy while remaining true to her own musical vision.

**JAZZTIMES: YOUR JAZZ LINEAGE ACTUALLY GOES DEEPER THAN THE COLTRANES. YOUR BIRTH FATHER WAS VOCALIST KENNY HAGOOD.**

**MICHELLE COLTRANE:** Absolutely. I really didn't know him or have a chance to make a bond with him. When I was 15 or 16, Alice told me I had another father. I didn't know what to do with that. Should I be happy or sad? Turned out he was a singer, and he was one of the few Miles recorded with; he sang "Darn That Dream" [from the live *Birth of the Cool* sessions, in 1948].

**A FAMOUS NAME CAN OPEN DOORS, BUT IT CAN ALSO SET UP UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS—A BLESSING AND A CURSE.**

