

\$900 and 4 Days Later **(My first National Guitar Workshop)** **by Tom Ray**

I recently had the opportunity to attend my first weeklong National Guitar Workshop, at Judson College in Elgin, IL. As a 50-year-old former bass player, (hadn't played since the 1970's) I wanted to get back to playing and I saw this as a good way to "get my groove back" and maybe improve my timing because there was an opportunity to actually play on stage with others. So I signed up for the Core Bass 1 level, thinking that after 30 years I would need all the help I could get.

The National Guitar Workshop sponsors several week long workshops across the country, usually at a local college campus. Mine was at Judson College in Elgin, IL, just west of Chicago. The campus was small enough to that we could walk between the dorms and classes. National Guitar Workshop puts together a nice handbook, about the classes, expectations and a short list of what to bring along (www.guitarworkshop.com). As usual, I over packed, expecting a dorm type room, we were actually housed in the college's executive center (a former Ramada Inn) and each room had air conditioning and a private bath. This was continentally located just at the campus entrance.

About 100 students, ages 12-65, and evenly dispersed between young and old, were present to learn about Acoustic, Blues, Jazz, Rock, Metal Guitar, Drums and Bass. The bass players were fortunate as there were only four for the two instructors. Our group started with two of us signing up for Bass 1 and two for Bass 2. After the initial class session the instructors decided we would be combined into one class, as our experience level seemed about the same.

The daily routine started in the morning with breakfast at the commons and followed with morning sessions where we were teamed with other drummers and guitar groups, learning to play together. As part of the core group, we had to perform on stage together the last evening of the workshop. Several core groups played all the different styles of music according to their core class subject. Needless to say, the bass players were in high demand because there were only four of us, and about 10 different core groups needed to present their song on stage. I eventually played for two groups.

Afternoons were spent in class with only the bass players and the instructors. We went over scales, chord structure, how to build bass lines, modes. We had both instruction (read "taking notes!") and hands on playing in the classroom. It was important that we didn't just learn different bass lines, but actually learned how to build different bass lines for different styles of music. Learning how to "chart" a song correctly and apply the correct line. This was more than I was expecting and it brought to light the reason for several things I had been doing as

a bass player but never really understood why. I think the bass group had a great advantage of having two prominent instructors, John Reid and Lynn Daniel.

Later in the week there were several times where we could attend minor seminars on various topics outside of our core. I took the opportunity to attend a field trip to Buddy Guys in downtown Chicago where many of the blues group students got to play on stage. Other sessions dealt with bass chording, repair, voice, etc.

Evenings were not free. After dinner, the core groups got together to practice their song for the final evening. All of us bass players were shuffling between our core groups, hoping that we all learned the song in time for the final performance. It was a great opportunity to meet other guitar players and drummers and get to play with all levels of experience. We had Core groups that were just learning rhythm playing, and lead playing, to groups that actually wrote original songs to perform for the finale.

The last thing each evening was a concert. The first two evenings, the staff put on a stage show in each of their different styles. The next two nights were concerts from the advanced students in the Blues, Rock, Jazz, Acoustic and Metal classes. And the last evening was the Core group songs, ranging from Blues to Jazz to Acoustic to Metal. So the days were filled from morning to night.

The bottom line is that the people were great, both the instructors and the students. All the instructors I met were very open and eager to share their knowledge. Food was good, and the staff kept everyone and everything in control. All those students under 18 were required to sign in and sign out for the various evening functions, and the staff was adamant about this. I would like to see the Core groups get on stage on day one versus day 3, as that experience can be intimidating for some. Certainly I took away much more than I expected. Overall, we just had fun with the playing. Did I get my groove back? Time will tell.