

An Interview with Jeff Golub
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Interviewed by Shannon West

There is a large but seemingly underground contingent of fans who came into contemporary instrumental music on the strings of guitarists that rocked. Jeff Beck's *Wired* and *Blow By Blow* and Al DiMeola's work with Return To Forever were pivotal experiences that flipped a lot of ears toward songs with no words. Jeff Golub has almost singlehandedly kept that flame burning in the smooth jazz realm. His live sets bring the energy and chops from the days when jazz and rock intersected into an era where the genre has jettisoned that part of its roots. Seeing crowds go hushed and cling to every note of his Beck inspired soloing in "Stockholm," then stand and scream for more when one of the Guitars and Saxes aggregations tear into a funk/rocker like "Play That Funky Music" shows how much people still love it when they get to hear it. I caught up with him a few days before he took a break from the New York winter to deliver just that to fans on Warren Hill's Smooth Jazz Cruise.

SmoothViews (SV): *You have been one of the few high profile guitarists in smooth jazz to keep rock and blues influences upfront but you also studied jazz at Berklee and that has been an integral part of your work too. How did you end up mixing influences from both those genres?*

Jeff Golub (JG): I guess my career started mostly in rock. I moved to New York to be a jazz musician in 1980 but I got a job playing with Billy Squier right off. He was going to Europe for a tour and I had never been to Europe. I grew up playing that kind of music so I thought that would be fun and I moved into the rock world.. I'm really glad that happened because it helped me develop my own style. It reminded me that I really do like rock guitar. I had been studying jazz guitar and I think going back to playing rock made me realize that I really do love all of what that brings to the guitar and I shouldn't forsake it because I happen to like jazz now also.

SV: *You grew up with rock then went to Berklee to study Jazz? How did that happen?*

JG: I heard Wes Montgomery and I knew I wanted to play Jazz. So I started working at that and ended up going back and kinda combined the two.

SV: *You were in Rod Stewart's band for quite a while. How did you hook up with him?*

JG: It was 1988. My first solo record had come out and the people in the band recommended me to Rod when he was looking for a guitar player. I was such a fan of his that I didn't want to blow the opportunity to be able to play with him. We played together for 8 years. It was a great collaboration. We wrote a lot of songs and did a lot of recording and touring.

SV: *Seeing you live always reminds me of Jeff Beck. Then the little light bulb goes on. Jeff Beck played with Rod Stewart, Jeff Golub played with Rod*

Stewart!

JG: That clicked in my head as soon as I started doing it. I knew Rod Stewart originally because of the Jeff Beck Group. I was a big Jeff Beck fan, I think anyone who played guitar was. I was a Yardbirds fan and if you played guitar there weren't a lot of places to hear guitar like Jeff Beck plays. We were all waiting for that Jeff Beck Group album when it came out. I was actually waiting at the music store for that album to be delivered! I picked it up, heard Rod Stewart singing and I was like "Wow! who is that guy?." The first tour I did with Rod we had a section of the show where everyone would leave the stage except Rod, me, the bass player and drummer. We would play Jeff Beck Group songs, the real rock stuff. That was a real thrill for me.

SV: *Rick Braun was with him at the time too wasn't he?*

JG: That's where we met. The first day of rehearsals. Rick was on that tour and we obviously hit it off as friends and musical collaborators. We started working on Rick's first record (***Intimate Secrets***) during breaks in different cities while we were on tour. That's when we co-wrote the songs and did a lot of the work on it. Then he left to pursue his solo career but it was a few years before I did the same

SV: *When did you start working on the first Avenue Blue project?*

JG: We did it during an 11 day break I had from the Rod Stewart tour. Rick produced it. I was in Los Angeles and we went in the studio and finished in in a week and a half. It was really just a way to play some other music I had written. It was a labor of love. Then it happened to be successful (laughs).

SV: *You didn't expect that?*

JG: It was nice but that wasn't the reason we did it, it was cool that it happened. I started to tour to support that music and when it became time to go back on tour with Rod it felt like I was going back to work. I had so much fun playing my own music and being an instrumentalist, being in charge of what was happening, the arrangements and everything that went on. It was like being a kid again. You're just supposed to move on and do things when it feels right, and it felt right. I felt like I had done what I was supposed to do with Rod and it was the right time to move on.

SV: *You did two more as Avenue Blue, then **Out of the Blue** came out as Jeff Golub CD.*

JG: I was the only one signed to the record deal. I was writing and co producing everything. The guys in the band still play in my band. We just changed names. That was more about the way concerts were being promoted, with all the package tours where there are a number of artists on the same bill. I could do that as Jeff Golub and I couldn't as Avenue Blue. It made more sense to make the records under my name.

SV: ***Out of the Blue** is my favorite because it sounds the most like the way you play live.*

You worked with Phillip Saisse on that one...

JG: Phillippe doesn't do anything that's not from the heart which I think is fantastic. That's why it was great to work with him on that record. He has the facility to do anything he wants to do, but when he takes on a project he doesn't think about formats or accessibility. You're just working on making it the best music you can create. It wasn't an accident that ***Out of the Blue*** sounds the closest to the way I play guitar when you see me live. Phillippe and I had just finished doing a tour together. While we were playing together every night he pointed out that I had this whole other aspect of the way I play guitar that wasn't on my records. He wanted to do a record that captured that, to plug the Stratocaster in and play too loud. That's what we did and I think it's really a cool record because of that. As a point of interest, out of my catalog that is my least selling record.

SV: *If it came out now it would have had a better shot. It had a lot of fusion and rock overtones and it came out when the focus was really on being unobtrusive and relaxing so it didn't get a lot of exposure. Back then listeners weren't restless for something else. Now they are. You should tell people at your concerts that if they like your solos that's a CD they should pick up on.*

JG: The band that did those tracks was Steve Ferrone, Phillippe, and Tony Levin on bass from Peter Gabriel's band. That's definitely rock. He blew me away with how good he was with the R&B and Latin stuff too. We just kinda set up and played loud. Phillippe and I still do a fair amount of collaboration. He lives in New York and when I do east coast dates he will come out with me. I'm very fortunate to have so many great musicians as my friends that will come out and play gigs even though I could never afford to hire them as sidemen.

SV: *You worked with Paul Brown on **Temptation**. He was working on his CD (**The City**) while you were working together and it was interesting to hear them both because there was almost a symbiotic effect. Yours sounds more produced, and has a lot of the nuances that show up in his work. His sounds more energized and raw. It seems like you brought out new facets of each other's work.*

JG: I was collaborating with Paul because I wanted to do something different. I like to keep the music changing if I can. He's a really talented guy and I wanted to take some different avenues. I loved working with him and I really like what came out of it. It's different for me, it's more of a sophisticated sound than I typically do.

SV: *Even though it was stylistically different for you original guitar voice was upfront. But the first time I heard "Space Monkey" from Paul's CD I thought it was you.*

JG: I think something that did click with him is that you can play blues based guitar in smooth jazz. So many guitarists are coming from the George Benson type sound and that whole approach is fantastic but you do hear much more of that in smooth jazz. After Wes Montgomery, George took it to a different level and it hasn't really moved on from there. That style is what

is thought of as Smooth Jazz guitar. I think it liberated Paul a little bit to see that you can throw in these other influences and get away with it.

SV: You did **Soul Sessions** and **Do It Again** almost totally live in the studio. What about this one?

JG: We did a couple of tracks pretty much live. You can tell the ones we cut with the band. We dubbed in the horns and percussion on the opening track, "Uptown Express", but the rest of it was live, so was "Metro Cafe." The ones that have the guys that I typically play with were the ones we did live for the most part.

SV: You've been playing with that core group of musicians for a long time haven't you?

JG: Ever since the third Avenue Blue album, the **Nightlife** CD. That's when I started working with Mitch Forman and Steve Ferrone. Usually it's Lincoln Goines playing bass but Dave Carpenter's done the last few as far as acoustic bass because Lincoln lives in New York City and if I record in L.A. I can't get him out there. That was the band that did **Dangerous Curves**. They are the core recording group and they do most of the live gigs, the band changes all the time though. That's one of the advantages of having it be Jeff Golub instead of a band name. The the musicians can keep changing. Steve Ferrone can still play with Tom Petty and that's how he can afford to play with me (laughs).

SV: For **Temptation** you also worked with Brian Culbertson and some of the guys who do a lot of sessions with Paul Brown.

JG: Paul introduced me to a new circle of writers and musicians which is what I wanted. I already had the songs that were with the guys I typically work with.. It was great having Paul there to throw in his influence but those are the ones where we just went in and played. The other songs are the ones that have more of his influence. He connected me with different people to work with and different ways to work.

SV: How was it different?

JG: Paul embraces modern recording techniques much more than I do. He's a great producer and engineer. Besides being introduced to some different people and the different music that came out of it, what I enjoyed most is that he did a very good job of producing me as a guitarist. I think he really listens to the artist. He pays more attention to what the artist is playing and locks in on whether you are saying something, how you are expressing it musically, and what is unique to you.

SV: You did your previous CD, **Soul Sessions**, with Bud Harner and it's a totally different ambiance. They are both excellent but totally different as far as the way they sound.

JG: Bud thinks along the same lines that I do. The "set up and play" school of making music. Whenever I make a record that's what I do and that's why I wanted to do something different with this one. On **Temptation** most of the

guitar playing was overdubbed, that's why I was talking about Paul really paying attention to what I was playing. On the other ones I played with the band live and that was pretty much it except for fixing places where I played the absolute wrong chord. Other than that everything was cut with the band. I don't like to overdub very much. I like to have my one guitar, so it's rare that there's rhythm guitar on my records. I'm glad we did cut some songs like that for the new one because that's a big part of what I do and it has separated my records from a lot of the records in the genre.

SV: *When you and Craig Chaquico were doing Guitars and Saxes together that was such a perfect example of the other directions smooth jazz guitar can take and the audience ate it up.*

JG: That was obviously fun because we are coming from the same place, he's just doing it on an acoustic guitar and somehow he makes it sound like a Stratocaster anyway. I did some work with Bob James too, right after the first Avenue Blue record came out. I'm a real fan of his, especially after working with him.

SV: *You worked with him on the CD he did with Kirk Whalum, **Joined At The Hip**, didn't you? That one had a very out of the box, jazzier approach.*

JG: Which I really loved. His approach was never to play to fit into whatever format was trendy. His feeling is that you can't do that because things like formats and what is popular come and go but if you are true to yourself as an artist that doesn't come and go. That is what is always there and the people who come to listen to you will always appreciate that. I look at it like you can go to a party and you can try to pretend you're somebody else who is more popular than you are (laughs) and try to win people over by being somebody that you're not, but it doesn't do you much good. You have to be yourself. You try to be the most charming version of yourself but you still have to be yourself or it won't be any good when you meet them again.

SV: *You've been collaborating and touring with Rick Braun for a long time. On your website you said something about how when you work together you are like brothers who fight with each other then make up over and over again.*

JG: He's my best friend and I have extreme respect for his talents. It does drive both of us crazy. It probably drives him crazier than it does me because I'm prepared for it. He produces a lot of records and I think he's accustomed to producing the record and calling the shots and it doesn't work that way when we work together at all. We fight like George's parents on "Seinfeld". We become fairly disrespectful to each other (laughs). We are family and we know our friendship's not in jeopardy. It is a whole different approach to doing it and I think we've come up some great stuff out of that irreverence for each other.

Its really about being family. I think that's what makes the difference between friends and family. No matter how much you fight with your family you're still going to love them and they're going to be in your life. When you

fight with your friends you risk losing them as friends. I think Rick and I are past that at this point and musically we are able to express the same thing. He can say his point, I can say mine, we can disagree and fight about it. Part of it is who can wear the other one down. As an artist it doesn't matter who is producing your record it ends up being yours. You have the final say about what goes on because this is your life. At least that's how it works as far as I'm concerned.

SV: *You're very blessed that you've been able to work that way.*

JG: Producers will never have the final say. I don't think anybody should. It's up to you as an artist to decide if what you've ended up with expresses the reason you are making a record. Rick will argue with me a lot about this. Paul was a little bit different too, but it all comes down to the same thing. The final say is from you as an artist. You have to be able to say "I'm happy with what this is." When Rick fights me on something I will think about it and a lot times I will reevaluate it. If I end up giving in to him on it that means I didn't have confidence in my idea. It didn't mean that much to me and it was better to let that idea go.

SV: *It may have been the catalyst for your realization that that was the case?*

JG: Yeah, it wasn't something I would realize on my own. Sometimes it's about the perfection of a performance. I would think that's probably most of what people end up fighting with producers about because it is the producers job to make sure the performance sounds cohesive. As an artist it's your job to make sure that if you played something that is out of time or out of tune but it expresses your personality not to let that get put aside, to keep the flaws in there.

SV: *I love that idea because we have the technology today to make things too high gloss and sterile if the people using it don't actively work on maintaining the human touch..*

JG: Look at Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You (A Little Too Long)." He cracks a note so bad in that song, but if he didn't do that it wouldn't be the same, that's what makes it so expressive. That's why I'm still listening to it today, all these years later. It wouldn't have had that impact if it was just another person who sings well. It would have just been another person singing well.

SV: *Speaking of expressive singers, you've used some interesting ones recently that are off the traditional smooth jazz path? You had Steve Perry singing a few lines in one song and a brilliant performance from Marc Cohn. How did you end up recording a Jesse Winchester song that is more familiar to singer/songwriter fans, "Isn't that So," and how did Marc end up singing it?*

JG: Marc and I are old friends. We go back. The cool thing about New York is that there are so many clubs where musicians can hang out and jam. You can still just go hang out and play with other musicians that have national or

international notoriety. I play these clubs because that's how I get better. One night Marc sat in and sang that song. We came up with that arrangement on the spot and I said lets put that on the record. We went in the studio and recorded the song with that band, just like we did it in the club. Marc sings like a jazz singer. He can really improvise. I don't know if it comes out as much on his records but I thought it would be cool to have him show that off some.

Talking about rock music and coming to jazz through different avenues, when I was a kid playing rock music was so much of it was jazz. If you listen to the early Cream records, especially their live ones, that's jazz. They're not doing anything different than starting off with a head and then improvising. It's the same thing with Traffic, Santana, the Allman Brothers. I'm not happy about the way that music has to be pigeonholed and categorized with words. You have to say what bin it's going to go into in the store, which radio station is going to play it because it fits this description. The things that inspired most of us to play had no description of where they were coming from. It was just a lot of different influences coming together.

SV: *It looks like we are getting back to that because the sites like iTunes and song samples on internet retail sites give you a chance to hear and buy such a variety of songs. You look at playlists people post and they are getting into music and songs more than categories. They're building collections of songs that include a lot of different types of music.*

JG: This is what I'm hoping will be the shining star in this world that we have now where the way to make a living playing music is really strange because of the downloading, not the legal downloads but the file sharing. I don't think it's anything that can be controlled anymore and I think it's a waste of time to try. This is just the way the world is today. I'm hoping that the shining star in this is that people are exposed to more music, people are listening to more music than ever and it might open up more avenues when it comes to finding and hearing music.

SV: *Do you think that being in New York and hanging out and playing with musicians there has kept you from getting into the more prototype sound that is associated with the California session people, what was called the "Woodland Hills Mafia" sound for a while.*

JG: Without a doubt. Here, you're not judged on your success. You're judged on the music you play. There are so many guys I know who are just great that aren't really well known. It's more of a straightforward town as far as the respect you get. California is more of an industry scene. It's more about success in the industry and thinking about what the next move is, whether you're a musician, an actor, a filmmaker. New York is more about people doing art. If I do anything that is totally selling out I still have to face my friends here and they won't have dinner with me (laughs). When you are hanging out with guys who are such strong artists and stick to their guns and you can't go to guys of that caliber and say "(apologetic mumble) uh...I'm doing this cause it works." You have to have something for them to listen to

where they say "I dig it" or it's embarrassing. It does keep you focused on trying to do your best job.

SV: *Then there are people who are just instinctively drawn to what works and they get accused of selling out when they were actually following their own musical instincts, which just happened to naturally lean toward a really commercial sound.*

JG: People always rag about the Wes Montgomery records in the '70s where he would do pop songs with a lot of orchestration. They were more commercial than the jazz records he did on Riverside but he was still playing more guitar on those records than anyone has played since. If that's called selling out where do I sign up!

SV: *So are you thinking about your next project yet?*

JG: I've got some new ideas I've been working on that I've got to put together a little more. I don't really want to go into it because I'm not good at articulating in words what I can do in music. I've been hearing a lot of music in my head lately and some good acoustic music has been influencing me. I think Norah Jones' approach is really great and I think there's a romantic acoustic thing that can somehow become funkier than that. There's something in my mind and I hope I can capture this in the studio. Sometimes you hear something in your head and when you start recording it doesn't come out the way you heard it in your head at all. But sometimes it comes out even better. That's one of the reasons I typically like cutting live with the band. I really like their playing and their input and I don't tell them a lot of what to do. I set up the direction of the song and we start playing. A lot of times what comes out of it isn't what I envisioned when I wrote the song and put it together, but typically I like where it went better. There's been new energy thrown into it. I like what happens when I can add a group of people's collective experience and soul. You end up with a more satisfying piece of music.

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