

## Sky Delta Article

It wasn't until Friday night, when Frank Gonzales belted out a monster version of "Double Vision," that everyone realized the significance—the true beauty of the first Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp. Gonzales, 27, a tall, beaky-looking television audio director from El Paso, Texas, who bears an uncanny resemblance to actor/director Tim Robbins, had been bumping around camp for several days without staking his claim. He sat in the back rows or cringed behind edgier players during daytime lessons. In various jams, he clung to the fringes, grinning mechanically, like some rock artist's old man who showed up unannounced. The chances of his ever stepping out into the spotlight were a long shot at best.

Gonzales was the first fellow camper I met upon checking into the Eden Roc Resort & Spa, one of the grand old meccas from Miami Beach, Florida's heyday. He was eyeing an official camp tour jacket with a garish logo stitched across the back. "There's so much to buy," he sighed, eyes bulging at the bumper crop of camp paraphernalia: T-shirts, sweat shirts, polo shirts, tank tops, hats, cups, posters, duffel bags .... "It reminds me of the Warner Brothers store," I said. Frank had come specifically to meet foreigner's Lou Gramm, who was one of the camp's featured stars. "He's my main man," Gonzales told me. "I'm not really in a band, but I sing and play keyboards and a little drums. I just thought this would give me a chance to see what the life's all about." He glanced at the guitar case slung over my shoulder. "What's your story?"

My story . . . was more complicated. Though I was originally hired just to write about the event, my objective had taken a strange turn on the road to Miami. The night before, I had decided to restring my guitar, a late model Fender Stratocaster with its diagonally cut head and sleek surfboard body lacquered to perfection in two shades of white. The ax had been an integral part of my life, never more than a few feet out of reach. I'd played it in any number of rinky-dink bands (and a few not-so-rinky-dink ones) in another lifetime. But since my daughter's birth, it had been relegated to a corner of the living room, where it had attracted a fine layer of dust. Now, slung low across my knees, the Strat put me right back in the groove. I waited until everybody was asleep, then loaded a CD into the stereo and went through the-motions. In a boxy New York City living room, it was difficult finding enough space to move in, but I cleared a path between the couch and the coffee table, grinding to the music, throwing my shoulder into power chords, with my teeth clamped tight and eyes squinting into the imaginary spotlight. I played to 20,000 fans at the Garden, even yelling "Thank yewwwwww, thank yewwwwww" during the fade and taking a few bows. Unfortunately, I got a glimpse of myself in the living room mirror, looking shadowy and every bit of 47 years old. The pose seemed ridiculous, even grotesque. I can't let myself be intimidated, I thought, and I must lose 20 pounds. I look like Elvis at the end of his career.

"I'm here to get in touch with something . . . unexplainable," I mumbled, sounding slightly pathetic, but Gonzales was already nodding; he knew just how I felt.

So did the other 46 people who turned up for the camp. They drifted in over the next couple hours, juggling luggage and beat-up instrument cases as though they were embarking on

The Last Gasp Tour. It was a fabulous mix of middle-aged wannabes: doctors, executives, housewives, teachers, middle managers, nurses and truckers. Some came dressed in sleek black leather; others were betrayed by expense account bellies and faces streaked with exhaustion. We'd all been lured by the promise of playing alongside our aging idols for a week, yet no one who shared this fantasy thought, *I'm too fat, I'm too bald, I'm too old.* **Only:** *I'm in the wrong profession.*

*I should have given it a shot.* This was the chance we'd been waiting for. Later that afternoon, a group of bikinied coeds, the last stragglers from spring break, lounged languorously by the hotel pool. Periodically, one of the old-geezer guests shuffled by in bedroom slippers, lowering his bifocals to ogle their well-oiled bodies, and security had him dead in their sights except the old-geezer guest happened to be Leslie West, persistent firecracker and tie-dyed lead guitarist from that Woodstock metal throwback band Mountain.

"Lesson No. 1: You want to be a rock star, you gotta have groupies," West cackled, echoing a sentiment that has inflamed rock 'n' rollers since Bill Haley unlocked the first backstage door. West was on the camp's lineup of front-line instructors, along with Rick Derringer, Nils Lofgren, Felix Lavalere, Clarence Clemons, Mike Love, Liberty DeVitto and Mark Farrier. It was an all-out seniors' scene, inasmuch as Lofgren was probably the only one who wouldn't qualify for an HARP card, but no one lacked for chops. The stars were more than legitimate players; they were real flame-throwers who could burn any snarky upstart with a video in MTV's current rotation. "I handpicked these guys myself," the camp's musical director,

Mark Rivera (Billy Joel, Hall & Oates), told me. "There are no duds here." True enough. In fact, most of the participants were initially wary of crowding their rock gods. At a "welcome" dinner, the class lines appeared drawn. Campers looked on enviously from across the room while a cluster of pros sang Beatle songs with routine simplicity. Their fraternity seemed exclusive, the airtight harmonies equally forbidding. To make matters worse, Gramm segued into a gorgeous rendition of the hit Foreigner ballad "Waiting for a Girl Like You," backed by a pickup band that really cooked, dashing any fantasies of our kicking out the jams.

On the bus back to the hotel, there was palpable dejection. "You think any of us are up to this gig?" asked Richard Brill, a 46-year-old computer consultant from Los Angeles, who collapsed in the seat behind me.

He had a good point. If this were to turn out like an antiques show at which you could look but not touch, everyone would fare badly. I'd survive, but I felt sorry for guys like Brill whose expectations ran high. "You don't know the hell I went through getting here," he confided. "My wife is giving me grief. My girlfriend is taking care of our three kids. And two clients threatened to bolt. But I don't care." He slumped against the seat and grinned raffishly. "I'm in Rock 'n' Roll Camp. Nothing was going to stop me."

That was the general consensus of the campers I met. Most had gone to great

lengths to attend, some concocting elaborate covers to avoid the boss's ire, others blowing off obligations or abandoning their families for a few days of R 'n' R. Sure, the price was high-almost three grand, plus airfare-but practically everyone here could afford it. Most participants earned as much as the rock stars, making the camp another yuppie indulgence. But absolutely no one begrudged it its slick premise. As one of them explained, "You go to baseball camp, Jerry Grote's gonna be throwing underhand to you. Here, you can actually get up with these guys." For his sake, I hoped he was right.

Back at the Eden Roc, Brill invited me to participate in an informal midnight jam he was organizing in the hotel ballroom, but I passed.

Big mistake.

"You should have been there, man-all the walls came tumbling down," Michael Waldman told me at breakfast the next morning. "Five of us were horsing around onstage when Nils, Lou, Clarence, Liberty and Bobby [Mayo, keyboardist for Peter Frampton and Hall & Oates] showed up. The next thing I knew, we were backing Clarence on 'Unchain My Heart.'"

He shook his head disbelievingly. Waldman was a fair-skinned, middle-aged management consultant with disturbingly limited musical range from Haverford, Pennsylvania, whose *Fortune 500* clients voiced concern that he was grappling with a midlife crisis. To some extent, they were right. By day, he huddled with bean counters from Armstrong, Merck and Dow Jones-then ran home, changed into jeans and struggled to learn the opening chord passage to "Dancing in the Dark." A chronic Bruce Springsteen fan, Waldman was disillusioned with the rewards of his own bloated success. He had the big house, the hot car, the power image and all the yuppie accouterments. He just couldn't corner his dreams. Until now.

"It was the first time I'd ever played with a band," he said. "Nils was calling out chords to me, and I was keeping up pretty well." They went through a set of garage-band standards that included some Buddy Holly and Ray Charles songs; they covered "Midnight Hour," "Hold On! I'm a Comin'"--the type of babies you could hang with all night long. "There was a point when we were playing a blues thing," Waldman recounted, "when Clarence pointed at me and yelled, 'Take it!'"

Man, I just froze. Then I yelled, 'No!' It was terrifying for a second or two. But afterwards, I went back to the room, looked in the mirror, and screamed, 'THAT WAS THE MOST AMAZING MOMENT OF MY LIFE!'"

After breakfast, everyone hustled off to workshops held in an underground warren of conference rooms. Intermediate Guitar Instruction sounded like a pretty good bet, and inside Nils Lofgren waited, cradling a '61 Strat that looked like an old tree stump in his hands. Lofgren, as it turned out, was a natural teacher. Wearing a headphone mike so he could keep his hands free for demonstration, he lectured eight of us about getting a *sound*, as opposed to just strumming chords, then demonstrated a nifty little riff for us to practice.

"Just find your own groove and keep it going," he said over the appreciable racket. "Stay with it."

Afterward, he invited Waldman to play along with him on another, fairly simple riff. "Great, keep it going," Lofgren implored, playing a tricky counterpoint. Then he nodded to another camper. "OK, Gary, you double Michael. Just find a little groove that works. And, then . . . watch this."

He slid his hands up a few frets and played a simple but eloquent lick. "See how funky that feels? OK, everybody, here we go: *one-two-three-four . . .*"

All of us tried it together, with varying degrees of success. Meanwhile, Lofgren circled behind our chairs, making adjustments and providing encouragement. "Great-lean into it a little more," he told the guy next to me, before craning over my shoulder. "Keep it steady. Don't get ahead of yourself."

Later, while we vamped the parts he'd taught us, Lofgren plugged in and launched into an elliptical lead. Talk about an ego booster! Suddenly, our arthritic chugging sounded sly and mean. One by one, we started cutting each other glances, struggling to swallow dopey grins.

It proved futile, however. Unbeknownst to us, Clarence Clemons had slipped into the room, and he began growling a sax part that diverted our jam into a bluesy call-and-response. By the time it was over, the room was awash in wall-to-wall smiles.

Across the hall, Billy Joel crooned over the speakers, "*1 love you just the way you are . . .*" It was only a tape, but Joel's longtime drummer, Liberty DeVitto, broke his part down efficiently for Gary Brown, a camper, enthroned behind an identical trap set. They worked at it for 15 minutes before Mark Farrier wandered in, clutching a candy apple-red Parker Fly guitar. "You know `Some Kind of Wonderful?'" he asked Brown, which was like asking Michael Jordan if he knew how to shoot a jump shot. Without answering, Brown broke into the thunderous bass drum intro.

"*1 don't need a-so much a-mon-eyyyyy. 1 don't need a big fine car,*" Farrier groaned into the mike. It must have functioned as a mating call, because within seconds campers flew in with their instruments in hand. Bobby Mayo handled bass chores, a trio of campers backed up Farrier on rhythm, a writer from *People* magazine banged away on a synth, tambourines were pulled out of gunnysacks and passed around like smokes and everyone in the room, now numbering about 30, answered his plaint. "*Can 1 get a witness,*" I howled at the top of my lungs. "*Can 1 get a witness . . .*"

Afterward, Brown practically had to be scraped off the ceiling. "What could be more fantastic?" he asked, accepting slaps on the back from the gracious Farrier and DeVitto. "I was jamming last night until midnight.

I didn't get to bed until 2:30 and couldn't get to sleep until 4 because the energy was so high. This morning I took a guitar lesson with Lofgren, and now-this!"

The jam that night, following dinner, took care of anyone who still harbored doubts. Underneath a mammoth chandelier, a mixed band of campers and stars took the stage in a show of blazing solidarity.

Nineteen musicians worked through a set of "I'm a Man," "Feeling Alright" and "You Can't Do That." Three guitars, including Brill and Waldman, backed Grand Funk Railroad's Farnner on the band's '70s hit Dash, a Florida internist, was on bass, directly across from Felix Lavalieri on synth. Nick Lowery, the former National Football League kicker who had just been released by New York jets coach Bill Parcells, played respectable congas. Brown and DeVitto provided the beat, and eight campers encircled a mike, handling background vocals. Even a few local ladies stood

The real payoff, however, came when Rick Derringer stepped forward and said, "How about `Sloopy'?" Other than perhaps "Louie Louie," no song is more revered, knocked off or butchered by would-be rock stars than "Hang On Sloopy"; it's their national anthem. I'd played it hundreds of times over the-years, but never with as much firepower or true passion. With Derringer on guitar (for those who don't know, he played and sang on the original with The McCoys), the place rocked out. "*Haaaaaang* on Sloopy, Sloopy hang on . . . ." Voices sanctified the chorus like a Baptist spiritual. And the three-chord mantra kept looping while Derringer took a five-minute lead that owed its mazy circuitry to John McLaughlin. When it was over with the last "hang on" still echoing off the chandelier-the room erupted in ecstatic cheers.

"Sloopy" was reprised the next night, too, and again during a morning jam ("because the song is so good"), after Derringer's challenging guitar class for beginners. In a modest conference room, he assembled a few musicians, including Bob Birch-Elton John's bassist-and four or five campers, and rocked the place, segueing into his signature "Rock and Roll, Hoochie Koo." Wandering into the hall for some air, I found Mark Rivera directing traffic there, steering campers into rooms where they'd find activities suited to their needs. In the Starr Room, Felix Cavaliere was giving a vocals seminar; Lou Gramm and Bobby Mayo were teaching melody development to aspiring songwriters in the Palm Room; and Leslie West convened a guitar workshop in the deli across from the newsstand.

Rivera was pleased and relieved that his rock-star teachers weren't behaving like, well, rock stars. "I leaned on these guys a little to come here," he admitted. "We're not paying along the back wall, dancing in place and giving the wannabes a taste of the perks. them much; they don't need this. But some of them are actually having a better time than the campers."

More than anyone, Leslie West imbued the spirit of a hard-bitten performer who refused to soften his edges. He berated campers repeatedly for "playing like a clock" and their "sloppy fills." Interrupting a beginner in the middle of his solo, he explained, "It's more difficult to play simply than to do that crap. And learn your chords before you start soloing. Then listen. Everything sinks in; you'll sound like a genius."

West made good on his promise during Friday night's jam, standing behind a camper and walking him through the lead on "Mississippi Queen." There were no geniuses in the crowd, not even a fledgling virtuoso, but by midnight, the raggedy camp band began to cook. A spontaneous version of "Honky Tonk Women" stretched into "You Can't Do That" and expertly rolled into "Knock on Wood." All of us chimed in: "*Like thunder, lightnin', the way you love me is frightenin', you better . . .*"

The only low point, in fact, came when Madeline McFadden, downtown doyenne of television's "Inside Edition," jumped onstage with a tambourine so her crew could get footage of her gigging with the campers.

She tried to take over the event-in knee-length leather boots and granny glasses perched on her nose in an unnaturally hip manner until everyone got good and fed up with her grandstanding and had her yanked.

It was right about then that Frank Gonzales stepped to the mike and announced, "I've got Lou's permission to sing 'Double Vision.' Hey-it doesn't get any better than this."

I looked for the nearest exit. First off, Gonzales had been a ghost around camp the last few days, and I figured he'd finally gotten up the nerve to take one quick hit, something he could tell the gang back home about and keep for posterity. Never mind that "Double Vision" is no waltz in the park. It has a tricky vocal figure that takes real chops; even for a crooner like Gramm, it's a stretch. This had all the makings of a howler that I'd rather not witness.

The band struck up the intro, and I headed out, thinking that it didn't matter anyway-Frank had chickened out. They were already well into the first verse with Gramm handling the vocals . . . except . . . it wasn't Gramm.

In the mirrored wall, I picked up the reflection of Gonzales bent awkwardly over the mike, giving the most dead-on, wicked performance of the week. Man, it was everything "Double Vision" should be-and more.

Somehow I made it back to the stage as he finished the first verse. Everyone was on their feet, moving forward. And then Gramm materialized. He'd been wandering around behind the musicians, playing a cowbell, and now Gonzales ceded the mike to his idol. They traded verses, then sang a duet on the chorus, as the song pushed into supercharged territory. What's more, the band felt it, too. Everyone was playing way over their heads, stoked by this amazing performance. When Gonzales cut loose on a vocal vamp, at the end, he was on fire, and even Gramm, open-mouthed, was completely digging it.

The applause that racked the ballroom was nothing compared to the hug Gramm threw on Gonzales.

Afterwards, a seriously adrenalized Frank Gonzales told me: "Man, it was unreal. I just put my head back and did it-without thinking."

The others slapped him on the back with real esprit. He'd done it for all of us-he'd lived out the rock 'n' roll fantasy.

"Monday morning is gonna kill me," said one, with a jubilant grin that said just how far away "Monday" was.

I knew just how he felt.

*Frequent Sky contributor Bob Spitz has been called "the fifth Beatle. " By his inner child, anyway.*