Frederick Noad, from TV to PC

In conversation with Ron Payne

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Ron Payne: *Can you give us a brief sketch of your career so far?*

Frederick Noad: Well, the guitar was a hobby with me. I started my working life in the film business when I got out of school and trained with the J. Arthur Rank Organisation. I found myself in Hollywood, as they were opened up a branch there. Through financial problems they suddenly closed the branch down. I'd been offered a job at Universal Studios, but not for a couple of months. So while filling in, I was lucky enough to get a job playing the guitar at a place on the coast – a little beach town where I played the cocktail hour. I found my salary for doing that was the same that I had been earning with J. Arthur Rank, so the appeal of working 2 hours a day and having some time to study was tremendous. I never did, in fact, go back to working again. (laughs) I decided at that point that I had to improve my skills a lot if I was going to make any sort of career of it. I had done quite a bit of flamenco up till then, moonlighting at night playing with a flamenco group. But really I felt I must hit the classical side at that point. The Romero family had just arrived in America at that time so I studied with Celedonio for a while; he was extremely helpful to me. In a way it was a nice environment; Angel was just learning the guitar; Pepe was playing a lot of flamenco. But Celin was the one closest to me in many ways. We were of similar age and he was the classical one of the boys, until Angel grew up and became a dazzling virtuoso. So I studied with Celedonio and then went over to Spain and met Joaquin Rodrigo through a most remarkable women, Marbellia. This women used to hold salons where there was music, dancing, poetry, everything you could think of. It was like the old Victorian salons. She said, "Oh you must meet Joaquin Rodrigo." So she called me from Madrid and took me to his house where I played for him; he was really very charming. He gave me some music and said "You should go to the Segovia course at Santiago de Compostela." He said, "I will recommend you for a scholarship if that will help." So, subsequently in 1962 I went on the Segovia course and that was really the only occasion I had any study contact with Segovia. People are rather liable to classify themselves as students of someone with whom they have had only a couple of moments.

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I went on a course given by Julian Bream in 1963, which was very dynamic and great fun – really enjoyable. He was someone who was very generous in sharing his views. I felt he was an excellent teacher and he really threw himself into it. There were many, many

things that I remember from just that brief period that have stuck in my mind. I was lucky enough to see two of our greatest guitarists of the century, really, within a period of a year and to get a comparison of their teaching methods. Back in the States I was lucky enough to come into contact with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco who lived at the time in Beverly Hills. I wanted to brush up on my theory because I really hadn't had formal musical training – I'd come into it as an amateur. In some ways I still consider myself as an amateur – somebody who really enjoys the guitar – a lover of it as it were. Tedesco was the perfect person to study composition and theory with because he had a tremendous enthusiasm for it. And he liked to teach, he didn't do it just because he needed to. In fact, he took quite a few students: Andre Previn had been one of them prior to my going to him. Letters would come in from people like Previn from all around the world. They were sending him music that they had written. You would sit on the piano stool with him and he would illustrate his points by singing the voices of a fugue in this terrible voice. His pitch was fine, it was just the quality of the voice that was not really there, but he made his points so wonderfully that everything was made larger than life.

R.P: *What influence did the courses have over your development?*

F.N: I didn't feel that there was any major trick or secret to be acquired from them. I think lots of people go on those courses hoping they will see something that's going to absolutely revolutionise their playing. Sometimes there can be little things in terms of tone production that you can perhaps get from playing a little more from the side of the nail or something that can make a big difference to you, but the thing we avoid most of all is practice, hard work and attention to detail. Segovia was certainly a perfect example of that, it didn't come easily to him – he worked for it. John Williams, I think, is very lucky in the fact that he started young and so on. He doesn't seem to have to work quite as hard to maintain his technique as most other guitarists do. But Segovia was certainly a worker right up till the end.

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R.P: *I heard stories that he would have 5 hours sleep then be back in the chair practicing before he shaved in the morning. His whole routine revolved around practicing.*

F.N: Yes, he told me that. He said he practiced for 1 – 1/4 hours first then he would go and get himself going, then go back and do another 1 – 1/4 hours and then probably have lunch. These 1 – 1/4 hour sessions were the basis of his practice times followed by a rest.

R.P: *From your travels over the years, what has been the most poignant feature of the guitar's development?*

F.N: Probably it's acceptance into the school's systems. That's the thing that has changed the most since I was first at it. Also, the invention of the nylon strings because

when I first started we were playing with gut strings. But as far as the actual development of interest I think that, far and away, the most significant thing has been it's acceptance into the university level and those sorts of systems. This has generated a lot of teachers, and those teachers have attracted pupils to themselves. The thing proliferates and gradually makes audiences for the Breams, Williams and Segovias. So it keeps the whole flag flying.

R.P: *Early in your career you completed a book, Playing the Guitar which was a best seller. Were you surprised with its instant success?*

F.N: I was indeed. It was very much a thing of timing actually. In the early sixties there was suddenly a tremendous interest developing in the guitar, largely through the folk guitar – from acoustic and finger style playing in general. There was a shortage of books at that time. *Playing the Guitar* was published not as a music store book but as a bookshop book by the McMillan Company. It went out in a series that died called the quick and easy guide system, and it was horrifying to me because I didn't know this. The title is only chosen right at the end just before it's published. So it came out originally as the *Collier Quick and Easy Guide to Playing the Guitar*. It had an appalling cover on it with a centre piece like, "Amaze Your Friends and Earn Extra Money," or something. It talked about the amazing chord clock which was the cycle of 5ths that I put somewhere in it. But for whatever the reason it sold in the hundreds of thousands during that period. In some ways, of course, it was a source of great regret to me because I had written it as a writer-for-hire for a couple of thousand bucks. The publishers have done very nicely out of it since.

R.P: *There are a multitude of tutor books around the world. Could so many diverse viewpoints eventually lead to a confusion to the pupil?*

F.N: If the viewpoints are very conflicting, yes. It is possible there are too many. I think they should stop publishing them and all use mine! (laughs)

R.P: *Should the study of composition be mandatory?*

F.N: I'm not really the person to ask on this because the teaching that I am interested in is for the person who is doing it for personal enrichment. And so I would never say that something was mandatory to them. I would say that if they could get some knowledge of theory it would be lovely. But I am thinking mainly of the person who has got maybe 1/2 an hour per day that he can give to the instrument and for whom it's just a great source of pleasure and change from his working life. And those are the people I really write for; those are the people I teach for. I have taught at the university level in a number of places but I don't do it now because, partially, I have a problem with the fact that they all want a career as soloist with the guitar and I don't think that there are places available for them. Whereas if you focus on teaching people who are learning it because of the joy of the guitar, they love it. They are having a wonderful time with it. I get a great kick out of

it and I get a lot of feedback from people. For instance, my video tapes and the TV programs, someone writes to you from rural Route 1 in Florida or somewhere (it's really off the map) and he has no chance of getting to a teacher; these types of teaching aids open up for some of them a whole way of life that they get very excited about. I think that if they can get a good book on theory then that's fine.

R.P: *You became very popular with the television series and it's still being viewed, I believe, across the U.S. What prompted you to begin such a huge task?*

F.N: It did occur again because of timing. That whole public broadcasting thing, PBS TV just happened to have opened up in the mid-sixties and they were looking for programming ideas. I thought why not try the guitar. I went to see one of the producers and talked to him about it and he said, "That's interesting, I've actually been teaching myself the guitar out of a book by ..." Then he looked at the piece of paper. He said, "It's you, your the one that wrote that book!" By this sort of coincidence things happened. He then became a great proponent for trying to get the series going. So we did a pilot and got a great deal of interest. I made 39 weekly programs and that went on for at least 7 years.

R.P: *Did it correspond with the book you had out at the time?*

F.N: Actually I wrote one for it because I wanted it to follow exactly what the lessons did and to give viewers the practice material for each TV lesson. So there is a separate book. That book was the basis for the new one that I did more recently in 1982. They are still going strong.

R.P: *During a later period you undertook to do research into early music. It must have been very enlightening, delving into all the early manuscripts in libraries throughout the world?*

F.N: It was a wonderful sort of educational course. The great thing was to have a target for it to justify you going to various places.

R.P: *Did you have a problem with selection, since there are so many?*

F.N: Yes, the throwaway percentage is huge! You can't play the music because you're not allowed to take your guitar into the music room so you have to mentally read through acres of music and fix on what seems to be interesting things. Then you have to get the library to Xerox or microfilm those and then go home and work through them. Even from the short list that I take home, I probably throwaway at least 90% of them.

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R.P: *So what was the basis of your selection?*

F.N: Melodic quality in most cases. I started in a very melodic era with the Renaissance and I was lucky that the English lute music, in particular, was so tuneful that I still think

that it was one of the best selections just because the lutenists had this gift of writing good but very melodic straight forward music. Also the idea behind the anthologies was to look after the people at the earlier stages and also to try to give something new to the hotshots.

R.P: *I came across some beautiful fingering in one of those books. With so many editions of the famous Bach* Bourree *around, I found your fingering to be probably the most sensible that I have come across, including Breams – his fingering is fairly unorthodox at the best of times. It's suitable for him, but for others, terribly difficult.*

F.N: I found that with John Williams too. People go up to him and say, "There is some very difficult fingering here, have you got any better idea?" And he says, "I don't find that difficult" – because he doesn't! But for mere mortals we do have to work out something. I'm really glad you said that because I took a lot of trouble on that *Bourree*.

R.P: *I believe there's a new volume devoted to contemporary music in preparation. Can you give us a preview of the contents?*

F.N: I've decided to divide the century into two, basically. The first book could almost be called the, "Segovia years." It will be the repertoire, very largely, that he brought in: Manuel Ponce, Tansman, Torroba, Villa-Lobos, Turina – all the people that, because Segovia was there, wrote for the guitar. And mix that lot up with the Leo Brouwers and the truly contemporary people. There was a sort of apples and oranges thing there, I felt, that didn't quite make sense. So the next book, in fact, is going to be the Neo-romantic. I'd like to call it the Segovia years, a kind of a tribute to his massive contribution. It will have something that says it's this century. At this point it becomes a copyright battle as much as anything else.

R.P: *You were one of the original founders of the "Guitar Foundation of America," so considering it's influence now those pioneering years must have been exciting for you, would you agree?*

F.N: Yes it was a very exciting process. I have to give credit to Thomas Heck at this point and Peter Danner who are both scholars and were both very anxious to have a Journal going. Their interest was more on the academic side and in some ways I was tending to try and be more of a popularist. I was trying to fight for the ordinary player. I didn't want it to become too much like the American Journal of Musicology. So I was perhaps in a slightly different camp to them. Although over the years I've welcomed the contributions of scholarship. As an example of that I'm currently doing a series of articles for them that are directed to the complete beginner. We're getting back to things like filing the nail, adjusting the string action and things like that because there's been so much on the more esoteric level that I felt it would be nice to get back to basics again. So we tried to keep a balance in that area and not make it entirely just a university outlet. I must admit, I think the recent issues are the best ever. Thomas Heck was very influential in the

starting of it, setting it up and getting the tax exemption status. He did a wonderful job in that area and worked tirelessly on it. Peter Danner, the present editor, does an absolutely fantastic job I think. Do you know we brought out a cookbook once? "Everybody's favourite recipes."

R.P: *Well that puts the fun back into it. It's publications like that which puts the light-heartedness back into it. Because it can get very serious, the whole subject of music.*

F.N: We still want it to be something that you're really happy to see when it comes to your mailbox.

R.P: *I'm thinking of putting a sign over my studio door – "If it's not fun, it's not the guitar." Because this often comes up with the serious student.*

F.N: Yes, I think that it is important that we don't get too serious about ourselves. I remember in one of the Toronto bashes someone was trying to get a sort of "United Teachers Pedagogy", where everybody could teach according to certain rules. There's no way that's going to happen and I don't think it's even healthy. We can't lay down these rigid rules, it stultifies progress.

R.P: *Your quest for improved music education has led to the introduction of music software. What part do you think computer technology will play in future guitar instruction?*

F.N: I'm planning, actually, to do a method on disc, an interactive one, and I think that it's main use will not be in technique but in learning the fingerboard. It's a wonderful tool to learn and you can get this thing where it plays duets and takes you step by step through the fingerboard and in a way that would make it fun like a video game. The wonderful thing about the computer is where it can make boring tasks into something that is quite fun. A typical example is my own cheque record for income tax purposes. I hate doing it and for years I've been in absolute misery before April 15th, trying to get the years accounts straightened. But I find that plugging it into the computer and being able to press a button and have everything totalled and sorted out makes fun out of something that was really a bore. I think to be able to have an interactive game where you're playing along and identifying a note as you're playing it could make quite an advancement and get really good results.

R.P: *You're working on this now?*

F.N: What I'm finishing up at the moment is the basic editor which is comparable, probably, to a program called *Notator* that C-Lab have put out.

R.P: *Is this the Atari system you're talking about?*

F.N: Well, I started it on the Atari but now I'm working on a Macintosh version and the final thing will probably be both when it hits the market. Translating from tablature is one

of the other things I'm planning to use it a lot for. I've already written one, experimentally, for myself with Elizabethan tablature. You have a tablature staff on the top of the screen – 6 lines – you just type in the letters, and as you type them in, the notes come up on another staff on the screen. I want to make it so flexible that all you do is have a dialogue at the beginning that asks, "How is the lute tuned?" Then you put in the tuning of the original lute and it will take care of the transcription after that. You don't have to have a separate program for Elizabethan and one for baroque lute and another for baroque guitar. You just identify the strings. I think one of the best remaining areas of music for undiscovered treasures is the baroque lute. I think there's quite a lot of stuff out there that hasn't been tackled.

https://guitarteacher.com.au/interview/frederick-noad-from-tv-to-pc/