

with Jim Campilongo

Sittin' on Top of the World (in Brooklyn)

"It is the provenance of a precious few who can so beautifully mine the harmonic depth of a Telecaster with the grace and fluid fantasy of Jim Campilongo. Orange offers another vivid glimpse into the mind of an artist who paints masterpieces with the guitar..."
 —The ToneQuest Report



We wrote that little blurb at Jim's request for a press release, but we'd have written it here easily enough, and you can take every word to the bank. Actually, you should buy the Orange CD and send a little love to Jim Campilongo's bank. When in New York, catching the always dapper Jim is essential, and no matter where your personal musical leanings may take you, hearing

him will rearrange your idea of what can (and should) be done with a guitar. Jim is also on a bit of a roll, having just released his new CD, and Fender has honored him with a signature Telecaster inspired by his original '59 toploader. We spoke with him about Orange, his signature Tele, and how he makes those Princeton Reverb amps sound so good. Listen...

TQR: You played a string of dates in Italy last year... How did that go?

It was amazing. People went nuts over my music there... The promoter hooked me up with a really good bass player and drummer, and I sold sixty CDs at the first two shows – completely sold out.

TQR: How did you work out the details playing with two completely unfamiliar musicians?

I sent them simple charts and MP3s and they learned two sets of music, we had one rehearsal the day of the first show and it was really good. We played all over Italy, and we were comfortably busy... Every venue was in an outdoor amphitheater setting. It was super-humid and hot, and on a lot of days our instruments just felt like wet rags, but still, it was great – we played for a lot of people and they loved the music, so, what more could you want?

TQR: What gear did you take?

I had my signature Telecaster prototype that had these really



great Curtis Novak pickups in it that a student of mine told me about, but the production signature Teles have our signature Fender pickups in them, and they turned out really well. They initially sent three different sets and between John Peden and I we narrowed it down to a set that is unique to my guitar, and I'm really happy with it.

TQR: We haven't talked about your signature guitar – tell us about it?

It's got my original '59 top-loader's neck shape, and we've gotten rid of the ledge around the edge of the bridge plate – I wanted that to be gone, and we worked on the pickups a lot to combine the best qualities of different vintage pickups. The frets are jumbo as God intended, and there is plenty of room at the headstock for behind-the-nut bends. That guitar was in the most humid weather and I did a lot bending behind the nut as usual and it completely stayed in tune... When I finally got home from Italy after flying from Bologna to Amsterdam where I had a four hour layover and then a nine hour flight to JFK, I got into my apartment in Brooklyn, looked at that guitar and said, "You did a damn good job!" Talking to it like it was my cat (laughing). That guitar is really in the family now – it really did the job. As I understand it, they will initially only build fifty, and they can be special-ordered in orange, in keeping with my new CD.

TQR: And did they supply you with a reissue blackface Princeton Reverb in Italy?

Yeah, and it was just great. They've built a reissue Princeton Reverb in orange tolex as well.

TQR: It seemed as if they introduced that amp in association with you, as they should.

It did seem that way, and it's worked out well. My original blackface Princeton has a C10N in it, and that's probably



why I've never blown it up when I drop the low E string down an octave, which is the equivalent of shrapnel for an amp. I think the C10R and C10N are two of the best speakers ever

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made... The reissue Jensens are brittle sounding and evidently they take forever to break in, because they take so long to

lose that brittleness. I do have one that is finally breaking in and it sounds OK, but that's why I like the Celestion G10 – you put it in and it sounds the best it's going to sound. You don't get the Jensen brightness, but you also don't have to spend \$300 on an old Jensen that you're going to blow up the first time you hit an E chord... If you get that speaker reconed, then you have something, but it gets expensive buying old speakers and reconing them. I just really 'agree' with the C10R, C10Q or C10N.

TQR: Let's talk about *Orange*... How did you record the sessions?

I used Anton Feir as a producer. I've played with Anton and he made a record in the late '90s called *Dream Speed* that I have always really loved. It's nothing like the music I play... it's kind of like techno-music but inspired more by Miles Davis than some other kind of bullshit techno-thing. He has a Japanese woman speaking over the record and Bill Lazlo plays these really evil bass lines over a really infectious groove, and I just wore that record out. Anton was in the Golden Palominos and he's played with Jack Bruce.... He's a New York guy and a friend of mine, so I asked him if he wanted to produce *Orange* and he wanted to so bad – he loves my music. At first I thought that he'd be in there just telling me when we had a good take, but he was a really good producer. He tweaked some stuff and we talked about the sessions for like three months before we started it, which I had never done before. Usually, I just go in and play and hope for the best. One of the things we did was find a really good room – a good, *live* room at Brooklyn Recording, and we



decided to use magnetic tape. Call me crazy... the last non-Pro Tools album in America (laughing). But we really wanted the recording to sound warm. I played Anton a lot of stuff, including some material from Roy Buchanan's first album, and we had so much music that we recorded... Anton said that he really wanted to do a 'Jim Campilongo' record, and I wasn't sure what

he meant by that at first. For example, he heard me play "Awful Pretty, Pretty Awful," – that kind of Chet Atkins/Jimmy Bryant thing, and he told me I *had* to do it. He also wanted me to do a solo track, which I had never, ever done before, but I had "When You Wish Upon a Star" floating around, so I did that. He also got Leah Siegel to sing on "No Fun," and the record wound up being "the sides of Jim Campilongo," rather than *American Hips*, which was the trio from beginning to end. In my mind, you can hang with this record... It's sixty one minutes, and that's a long time to hang out with this guy that plays a Telecaster... That's a long time for *any* record, and I was afraid of that, because I come from this place of keeping half an eye on the audience, wanting to leave them more... wanting to please. I come from a country mentality more so than how I actually play, because some of the music I play is kind of avant, but even in that realm, to a fault I have one eye on the audience, and I want them to be *connected*. I feel like we were successful in not making a record that slaps you in the face on every other track by how different it is. There is a continuity to this record, and it hangs from beginning to end.

TQR: The mood swings are all agreeable, and there are very few people that can cover the ground that you do in sixty minutes.



Well, I appreciate that. I'm really happy with it, and the way we did it was not really my original intention. I play the Gretsch on it, the '59 Tele, and a Thinline Tele through this amp that the guy at the studio designed – it's on the first track called "Backburner" where the guitar sounds like it's going to explode. I wasn't getting the sound I wanted and this

Thinline was just laying there, and I thought to myself, "I think that guitar is the one to play..."

TQR: Was it the one with the twin Fender humbuckers?

Yeah... it was. We were having some noise problems with my '59 because someone upstairs was using a blow dryer or something (laughing), so I picked up that guitar, and the engineer said that Matt Wells, the guy who owns the studio, had built ten of these amps and somebody had just offered him \$20,000 for one of them. I think Joe Satriani has one... So we plugged into it and whatever it was set on, it was just the right sound for that song. I was in the control room playing the track and I never even looked at the amp – I have no idea what it looks like. But I love that guitar sound, which doesn't

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sound entirely like me, but I liked it so much that I placed it first on the CD.

TQR: Remind us which Gretsch you used?

It's a black and silver 6120 with TV Jones pickups and a modified Bigsby so that you can mount the strings right through that roller bar like a top loader, which saves years of your life when you change strings.

TQR: And did you literally record enough material for two CDs?



Yes. For me, the hardest part were the out-takes. Like on "Blisters on My Fingers" we had twelve different takes, and they were all really, really different. Sometimes I'd play Sex Pistol chords, on others I'd play something else, and to this day I'm still not sure if I picked the right one.

TQR: Aside from that one studio amp, what else did you use?

I used my Blackface Princeton Reverb with a Jensen C10N that had just been reconed the night before, and that speaker sounded fantastic. You can hear it on "Blues for Roy." I have a couple of blackfaces, but that's the one that pretty much changed my whole sound. On a couple of tracks we used a blackface Vibrolux Reverb with the silverface Princeton Reverb with the Celestion G10. We took a Y cord out of the Princeton into the Vibrolux, and we also had a lot of spring and plate reverb.

TQR: Among all your Princeton Reverbs, how much do they vary?

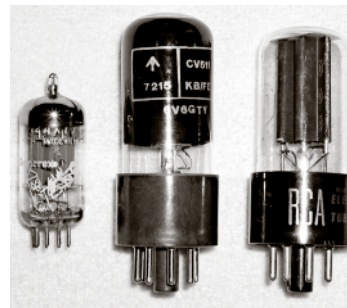


They are totally different to my ear. The Vibrolux is like Malaysia compared to Florida, but the Princeton with the Jensen produces a very clean, clear distortion, like the sound



of the first Roy Buchanan record. I do this thing where I detune my E string to either an A or an E and I hit a harmonic on either the 4th, 5th, 7th, 9th or 12th fret extremely hard. You don't hear it, but then you push on the string behind the nut and the harmonic appears and makes this really trippy sound. It sounds like a vibrato on a Strat. The Celestion G10 won't pick that up... but the Celestion does other things. It compresses really nice... it's mellower... kinder and gentler, and it gets this great ZZ Top sound. I can crank it a little more and it's just right. By comparison, the blackface with the Jensen is more self-indulgent, because you might be hurting people on the front row rather than entertaining them. The guitar might not be on '10,' but the amps are always on '10.' I also use the Celestion G10 amp if I want to do a Chet Atkins or Jimmy Bryant sound, because it's warmer. They are totally different amps to me.

TQR: So it's not just that the speakers sound different...



I think the Silverface amps are not as bright, and even when I've done the blackface mod for \$40, for \$600 less I've gotten essentially the same sound. I love the Silverfaces because they are just way cheaper and

you've still got something that you love. They just seem like there is a little less high-end, and throatier. I've put the Jensen C10 speakers in them and they still sound mellower to me. They are both great amps, and I couldn't imagine playing through a silverface and being bummed out about it, and if you are... perhaps you should reassess your priorities (laughing). It's kind of like staring at the moon... you're standing there taking in the moon with someone and you're thinking, "Well, I've seen better..." At that point you're not enjoying something for the miracle it is (still laughing).

TQR: You've also said that you always use great NOS tubes in your amps...

Oh yeah... definitely, and I bias them really hot... in the 30s (mA). Enter at your own risk, and some people don't like it, but they are friggin' loud, and in a way, that's *the secret*. I mean, some people can't imagine playing in a band with a Princeton, but if you bias that thing in the 30s and play the

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amp on '10' with a Telecaster, it's gonna cut like knife. And if you play Woodstock, just mic it.

TQR: Well, this is a revelation coming from you, biasing in the 30s... You have also tried using a 12" speaker.

Yeah, and it can really move some air, but it's different. I need to find an old Jensen and then it will be great, because I've tried other new 12" speakers and I didn't like them.

TQR: Aside from the release of *Orange*, the new signature Telecaster, your Monday night residency at The Living Room in New York and gigs at Barbes in Brooklyn, what else is happening?

I may be going to Finland, and the Little Willies recorded about half a record five or six months ago that's just great, but I don't know if it's going to get finished... Nora (Jones) is making her next record, and Lee the bass player is living in Nevada... It's kind of torturing me because we did half a record and it's just killer – I think it's way better than the first Little Willies record, which could be big. I don't know how many times I'm playing and people bring the Little Willies CD for me to sign, so I'd like to get that record out.

TQR: Meanwhile you're doing your thing in and around New York, living in Brooklyn – a great life for a guitar player.



Absolutely...

It's a lot of work living here, though. For example, I played with Martha Wainwright in Central Park and the New York

Ballet troupe performed during a 17 minute piece she wrote for the event, and that was amazing. I felt totally lucky to be there, but it was 95 degrees, you can't get a car in the park, I'm hauling equipment around and there are no cabs, then it starts to rain... There's this total love/hate thing going on. Nothing is ever easy in New York. I mean, you go to the post office to get stamps and you get back to your apartment exhausted. The last night at the Martha Wainwright thing I was so tired that I thought I was going to throw up. Seriously. We finished our second and last set, and I pack up all my stuff, but we're in Central Park and you can't get a car in there. So I have this little hand truck thing for my amp and guitar and I'm trying to walk out of the park and the cart keeps capsizing, I'm soaking wet with sweat, still feeling like

I need to barf... and I finally get to 5th Avenue, hail a cab, get all my stuff in it, and the driver can't get his meter to work. I'm sitting there (his air conditioning wasn't working, either) as he's banging on the meter and he finally tells me that I have to get out. I tell him, look, I know the trip is \$22... *no, no, no, no* he says. *You have to get out.* How about \$30? *No, no, no, no...* *Get out please.* So, yeah, living in New York can be hard, but it makes everything else seem easy by comparison, and you develop really good calluses, mind, body and soul.^{to}

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the '68 Custom



Believe it or not, throughout the '60s most guitar players had little interest in what would have been viewed as a 'vintage' guitar. Indeed, the term 'vintage' had yet to migrate from the vineyard to music stores and pawn shops. Old guitars were just that... used, often abused or badly 'customized,' and most of them were routinely passed over for shiny new ones, which is exactly why a '50s Fender or Gibson sold

for next to nothing circa 1968. We can even recall walking into Gruhn's in Nashville in the '70s and turning our nose up at the Fender and Gibson beaters covering the walls of the back room – grotesquely checked and greenish goldtops, stodgy cherry red 335s with skinny necks and rusted strings, and scores of battered Fender Strats and Teles with worn out fingerboards, frets and tuners... We always suspected that Gruhn kept the really cherry pieces locked away upstairs, and the idea of spending heavy dough on a worn out guitar was simply impossible to fathom. By 1982, however, the 'vintage' bug had bitten us, too, when we scored a 1956 'G-brand' Gretsch 6120 for \$800 at Rhythm City in Atlanta.

As far as the Gibson Les Paul is concerned, Gibson of course scrapped the original Les Paul models produced from 1952-1960 in favor of the 'SG' Les Paul. The executives drones in Kalamazoo briefly regained their senses long enough to build the 1968 goldtop with dual P90s, and a traditional black Les Paul Custom loaded with humbuckers before skidding off

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