

COLLECTIBLE GUITAR

then and now

Greg Martin

A KENTUCKY HEADHUNTER ON HIS PASSION
FOR COLLECTING AND PLAYING GUITARS!

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- JERRY MCPHERSON
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- THE DOBRATO



George Freeman: *Don't Fret... Just Play*

by Guy Arseneau

The year was 1960. The average cost of a new house in the United States was \$12,700, gasoline was priced at a quarter a gallon, and a loaf of bread sold for the princely sum of twenty cents. For children of that era, Huckleberry Hound and The Flintstones were the reigning cultural icons on that magical device known as the television set. Adult viewers understood themselves and society through the homogenized blandness and stark whiteness contained in the vanilla frothiness of such television fare as Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet. "Grass" was something to be cut, "gay" referred to a state of happiness; the fractured syntax of "multi-tasking" and "conversate" was mercifully absent from the English language, and the thought-numbing mindset of "political correctness" was still over half a century away.

Yet in this year of naïve insularity, one that was to pre-figure convulsive changes at all levels of society and punctuated by a subliminal smugness embodied in adherence to "truth, justice and the American way," an extremely talented young man named George Freeman bought a guitar; after that things got a whole lot different.

"I paid about \$200 for my Gibson 335 guitar when I lived for a time in New York City, way back in 1960," Freeman recalls. "It was brand new and bright red in color. Back then, \$200 was a lot of money, but



over the years this guitar turned out to be one of the best investments I ever made." Born in 1926 on the hard scrabble south side of Chicago, George Freeman came of age during the time of Prohibition, the early days of organized crime and the growing popularity of urban jazz, which was rapidly becoming a uniquely counter cultural American musical art form.

The younger brother of the late jazz legend and saxophonist Von Freeman, George credits his older sibling for his current success as a musician. "Von was my best friend," he notes, "He taught me how to play the guitar and make it talk my language and tell my story. After a while, it got to the point where my guitar and I could 'speak' to each other,

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you might say. That's when I knew I was ready to let an audience in on our conversations."

Today, over sixty years later, his Gibson 335 guitar still defines George Freeman as a jazz musician and entertainer extraordinaire. Dubbed the Jazz Musician of the Year by the Chicago Tribune music critic and columnist Howard Reich, he continues to use his Gibson 335 for appearances at Chicago's Jazz Festival at Millennium Park, duets with his partner Mike Allemana at Chicago's Tuley Park, and numerous appearances at jazz clubs in the Windy City such as the history-

laden bistro and former speakeasy, The Green Mill Jazz Club, a onetime hang out for celebrity gangster Al Capone. In September of 2014, after a thirty year absence from New York, George Freeman and his guitar made a much anticipated return to the Big Apple at the Harlem based Smoke Jazz and Supper Club, located on the upper west side of Manhattan.

"My guitar is kind of like an automobile," Freeman says half-jokingly. "Have you ever noticed that when your car is nice and clean it always seems to drive better? That's how my guitar is. I use or-

dinary furniture polish on it to keep it bright and clean, and I have to tell you, the cleaner my guitar is, the better it plays."

Having logged over a 100,000 miles for his concert and club appearances throughout the United States, George Freeman's Gibson guitar always traveled with him and occupies a prominent role in his recording sessions with such jazz legends as Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Illinois Jacques, and Gene Ammons. At an age when many men are in retirement, George Freeman is in a recording studio.

"After my brother Von died in 2012," he recalls, "I lost interest, or at least I thought I did, in playing the guitar, except around the house for family gatherings and such. I really didn't expect to play professionally again." But thanks to his nephew and Von Freeman's son, Chico, George is now center stage and in the spotlight. In May of 2015, George Freeman, along with his trusty guitar and jazz saxophonist/nephew Chico Freeman released a new CD called *All in the Family*, recorded on the Chicago-based Southport Label.

With a playing time of 78 minutes and consisting of 22 songs written by George and Chico Freeman, this highly attractive (some would say seductive) musical adventure also contains the songwriting talent and recording skills of Swiss-born jazzmeister Reto Weber, the piano dexterity of Kirk Brown, and the haunting drum beat of Hamid Drake. Fleshed out by the nuanced playing and subtle riffs of George Freeman's guitar and Chico's skill as a saxophonist, this CD represents a new chapter in an old story that is as fresh as it is eternal. A family affair that is now shared as a public event, the musical virtuosity and talent of George and Chico's CD, along with that of their band mates, gives the listening public an opportunity to understand a new concept of family that serves to underscore a dynasty of talent.

Speaking barely above a whisper, in a voice that is at once quietly reassuring and as smooth as an angel's ass, George Freeman shifts himself on a stool as he deftly tunes and adjusts the stings of his ever-present guitar. "Don't fret—just play," he says with a self-mocking smile.

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