Guitarists who grew up in Cleveland have been among the most important and most acclaimed in jazz history. They all drew their inspiration from the all-time grand masters of jazz guitar, Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian.

Fred Sharp

Anyone who was even a casual listener of jazz in Cleveland from the 1940s to the 1980s probably heard guitarist Fred Sharp. He played with some of the biggest names in jazz and was the man Jim Hall credited as his teacher.

In the mid-1930s, when Sharp was growing up in the Glenville area of Cleveland and listening to music on the radio, the guitar, with a few exceptions, was not a solo jazz voice, but a rhythm instrument. Then one day, Sharp heard a Cleveland guitarist on a local broadcast.

"At the time I started studying the guitar," said Sharp, "the only guitar you ever heard was in the big bands. My father used to run in and say, 'Fred, listen quick! Is that a guitar?' That's all I heard until Dick Lurie had a morning radio program and played some solos. He really got me started."

Sharp ran out and bought a guitar at a shop on Prospect Avenue. He remembered, "It was a Regal and cost $4.95. I bought it at Schubert's Music House on Prospect and I played it until my fingers started to bleed under the nails. I said, 'This is no good!' We took it back and my mother bought me a $30 Gibson. That same guitar today would probably be a collector's item. It would probably be worth $300."

He took his first lesson from Max Fischer at Schubert's. With his brother, Jackie, Fred began playing on children's radio programs on Cleveland's old WTAM.

"And I studied," he said, "with Jerry Stone, a buddy of (famous banjo player) Eddie Peabody. I learned very quickly with Jerry. He was in the old Hippodrome Theatre Building. I was with him at least a year. So, I had some formal training, much more than most guitar players today. Now, they pick it up, learn a few chords, and they're off."

It was Stone who introduced Sharp to the guitar music of Belgian gypsy Django Reinhardt, an all-time master of the jazz guitar. Later, Sharp accumulated the world's largest collection of Reinhardt records.

Sharp began playing gigs in Cleveland when he was still a teenager. He joined the musicians' union when he was 16. By 1940, when he was 17, he was playing at parties and country clubs around Cleveland. "I played with bandleaders Clint Noble and Jack Horowitz," he said, but he had bigger plans.

"In 1941, I went to New York to become famous. My father borrowed $50 on his life insurance policy and gave me the money to go. Joe Sharp never had money at all. In New York, I put in for my union card. You had to stay six months to get your card and I went to the union floor every day and started to get some club dates. The scale was $7 then for a club date, but most everybody paid $4."

When he was still in his teens, Sharp remembered he almost starved trying to become famous in New York. "I went broke in no time," he said, "and did not become famous! I lived in a small room with no windows at 18th Street and 8th Avenue, below a whorehouse and above a stable. I rented the room for about $5 a week. I went so broke there that I was down to pennies. I remember walking down 33rd Street to the main Post Office and going through all the pay telephones to see if I could find any change. I had almost no money!"

He found just enough money to take a cab back to his small room. He planned to clean it out and call his father in Cleveland to send some money for him to come home, but, in the cab, Fred suddenly got lucky.

"I put my hand down on the seat and there was a roll of bills. I think it was like $50. I didn't tell anybody. I put it right in my pocket. It saved my life! I had 50 bucks and I ate. That lasted two or three days."

Sharp paid $10.66 for a train ticket to come home to Cleveland. But he returned to New York at least four or five times later, still seeking fame and fortune in the jazz world. He struggled in New York off and on from 1942 to 1944 and finally decided to give up and come home.

In 1945, he met and taught a 15-year-old Cleveland guitarist named Jim Hall. Sharp also formed his own trio in Cleveland. They played at some of the best spots in the city and with some of the biggest names in jazz.

"I had Hank Kohout on piano," remembered Sharp, "and Walter Breeze on bass. We were at Chin's Golden Dragon on 105th Street. Alternating with us was the Art Tatum Trio."

The Tatum Trio included bassist Slam Stewart and guitarist Tiny Grimes, who later spent years playing at Gleason's at East 55th and Woodland. While playing
opposite the Tatum Trio in Cleveland, Sharp finally got the big break that had eluded him in New York.

“The Adrian Rollini Trio came to Chin's and played in the restaurant,” he said. “Their guitar player, Allen Hamlin, was going in the navy and Adrian needed a guitar player. He didn't know anybody. He came in and heard me one night and said, 'Can you come to New York?' I said, 'Are you kidding?!!'

Rollini had played with legendary artists like Bix Beiderbecke in the 1920s. By the mid-1940s, he had switched from bass saxophone to vibraphone and formed his own group.

Sharp went to New York with Rollini and toured with him for five years, playing mostly long engagements at top clubs around the country.

One time when the trio was playing at a theatre in Washington, Sharp remembered George Nyder waking up when it was fairly dark outside. He yelled to Sharp, “Hurry! Get dressed! We missed two shows!!” Sharp called the hotel operator who said it was 5 a.m., not 5 p.m.

Sharp made one album and several records with Rollini’s group and later played with Red Norvo’s big band.

By the 1950s, Sharp was back in Cleveland playing guitar with various groups. He remembered one time when he was working with pianist Chick Chaiken at the Colony downtown. Chaiken was busy performing almost every night somewhere and operating his Currier-Chaiken Music Store and school in Cleveland Heights during the day. “One night,” recalled Sharp, “we were playing a tune and he kept repeating the first eight bars. I looked around at him and he was asleep! He had been burning the candle at both ends. He was the only guy I knew who could play the piano while he was sleeping.”

But now, Sharp was playing guitar only on a part-time basis. He had become a successful manufacturer’s agent, selling electronic equipment.

He had first become interested in ham radio and electronics through a Cleveland friend named Al Gross, an unheralded Cleveland inventor. In 1938, while still in high school in Cleveland, Gross invented the walkie-talkie. During World War II, Gross invented a top-secret intelligence communications system for the government. In 1949, he invented the first wireless pager and later, the first wireless telephone and citizens band radio.

Sharp was also doing some electronic inventing. He developed a method of transmitting slow-scan color television pictures over ham radio. He also learned to speak French, toured Europe eight times, became an oil painter, and wrote about jazz and electronics for a variety of magazines.

In 1967, Sharp went to Europe and met Babik Reinhardt, the 23-year-old son of the Cleveland’s longtime guitar hero, Django Reinhardt, at the Disques Vogue recording studio in Paris. During that meeting, Babik gave Sharp the guitar his father had played during his American debut in Cleveland in 1946. “I took it to a special packaging company and had it professionally packed,” said Sharp, “and shipped to my home in Cleveland.” But, when Sharp got home, there was no sign of the historic guitar. About a month later, he went to the customs office at Cleveland Hopkins Airport and learned Reinhardt’s guitar had been sitting there, waiting for someone to claim it. The customs officer said they couldn’t make out the address and just held it.

For about 15 years in Cleveland, Sharp played with jazz flutist and author Mark Gridley, who said Sharp was one of the best rhythm guitar players in the world.

In 1990, Fred Sharp sold his electronics business and, with his wife Iris, retired to Sarasota, Florida, where he began playing with such jazz names as Bobby Rosengarden, Bob Haggart, Dick Hyman, Jerry Jerome and Al Klink. Other Florida musical neighbors included saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and bassist Milt Hinton.

The Sharps’ son, Todd, became a leading rock guitarist. He toured with Bob Welch, Hall and Oates, Mick Fleetwood and Rod Stewart. He also recorded several albums and composed movie and TV scores.

Bill de Arango

In the late 1940s, Clevelander Bill de Arango was one of the most respected jazz guitarists in the country, but he suddenly decided to give it up and come home.

Born in Cleveland September 20, 1921, de Arango grew up in Cleveland Heights. He said there was a lot
good jazz in Cleveland at the time. “When Duke Ellington came into the Trianon Ballroom on Euclid Avenue,” said de Arango, “the place was unbelievable. It was loaded with heavy energy. Everyone was smiling and sweating. There were 2,500 people dancing and 80 guys standing around the bandstand. Fifty-five of them wanted to be musicians.”

De Arango and a few non-musician teenaged friends went to see the Benny Goodman Orchestra at the Palace Theatre and went backstage after the show. “We were standing there with Goodman,” de Arango told me, “and my friends pointed to me and told Goodman, ‘He can do it (play guitar), he can do it!’” When Goodman returned to Cleveland, de Arango was there again. Bill recalled, “Benny was talking with some guys and he stopped, looked at me, and said, ‘Hey, don’t wander away!’”

The following year (1939), de Arango went to Ohio State University and began working harder on his guitar playing. Like almost every guitarist of the period, he listened to the records of the amazing young Charlie Christian who was playing with Goodman.

When de Arango came home from college, he was hanging around jazz clubs in Cleveland, particularly the Hot Spot on West 3rd Street near Superior. Eventually he was invited to sit in. De Arango told interviewer Stuart Kollar (in Northern Ohio Live, July 1987), “We had good local players in Cleveland and they showed me things. Playing with good people, you get better in a hurry.”

After playing in an Army band at Fort Sill, Oklahoma during World War II, de Arango returned to Cleveland in 1944 and resumed playing at local clubs. His technique and amazing speed began to attract the attention of national jazz musicians who came to town. He remembered, “Guys from the Goodman and Artie Shaw bands, when they were in town, kept telling me, ‘You ought to go to New York.’ So I went.”

He soon found himself on New York’s 52nd Street, a legendary strip of jazz joints between 5th and 6th Avenues where musicians and fans circulated from club to club. “After listening to some of those great artists, I decided I better go home,” said de Arango. “But drummer Morey Feld (from Cleveland) introduced me at a few places and I sat in. I guess they liked it.” Others said de Arango caused quite a stir on “The Street” with his ability to play at fantastic tempos.

Ben Webster, who had played saxophone with the Duke Ellington Orchestra for four years, “came up and asked me where I was working. I said I wasn’t. He said, ‘What’s the matter, don’t you want to work? Come on down tomorrow night. We start at nine.’” De Arango spent a year and a half playing with Webster at such 52nd Street clubs as the Onyx, the Spotlight and the Three Deuces.

One night when world heavyweight boxing champ Joe Louis walked into a club, Webster, who was nicknamed “The Brute,” playfully gave Louis a shot in the belly. The champ staggered and then returned the greeting. Webster was taken to the hospital with three cracked ribs.

De Arango said the jazz musicians did not make a lot of money playing at the 52nd Street clubs, but he said, “It was a good setting for the music.”

De Arango soon was recording with some of the biggest names in jazz. In May of 1945, the 23-year-old Cleveland recorded with Red Norvo, Johnny Guarnieri, Slam Stewart and Feld. It was almost the same group that had recorded just a few months earlier as the Benny Goodman Sextet. They recorded “A Bell For Norvo,” “Time On My Hands,” “On The Upside Looking Down” and even “Jingle Bells.”

De Arango’s style was evolving. He later told me, “I played for the moment – the music that reflected my thinking.” He was beginning to assimilate much of the new style of bebop and gravitated toward the bop movement. He said, “What they played was great and the more we played together, the more they put into me musically.”

He recorded with Ike Quebec in August 1945. Then came records with Sarah Vaughan, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. His 1946 records with Gillespie’s big band included “Night In Tunisia” and “52nd Street Theme.” On the basis of these recordings de Arango was considered one of the top jazz guitarists in the country. He won Esquire magazine’s New Star award.

But he was becoming dissatisfied. De Arango said the
audiences were largely inattentive. The Cleveland decided to leave New York. He returned briefly in 1948 and led his own group which featured a then-unknown young vibraphonist named Terry Gibbs, but he decided to leave the national jazz scene.

Years later, when he was asked why he left New York, de Arango was unable to explain it. He said, “I really don’t know. It was a great thing then, but I don’t know why I left.”

He lived in Florida for a while before coming home to Cleveland. He opened a music shop and studio at Cedar Center in University Heights. He studied, taught, and played a few local gigs in relative obscurity, except for a 1954 album, Alone Together, which he recorded for EmArcy Records. It included “Gone With The Wind,” “All God’s Children Got Rhythm,” “The Nearness of You,” “The Gypsy In My Soul,” “Dancing On The Ceiling,” “Summertime” and “These Foolish Things.”

In the 1960s, de Arango’s style continued to evolve. One reviewer wrote, “De Arango’s improvisations frequently bordered on complete freedom and some of the most complex jazz with probably the fastest fingering ability in the country.” De Arango said at the time he was being influenced by classical composers Schoenberg and Hindemith. He said it was Charlie Parker who had first introduced him to classical music.

Always outspoken, de Arango said, “Jazz players gave the scene away to rock ‘n roll players,” who according to de Arango, “worried about their importance and put themselves ahead of the music. They (the younger jazz musicians) wanted to play concerts without the heat and emotion that the old thing had. Jazz is not supposed to be cool. The last thing an audience wants to do is sit and intellectualize about the music.”

Ironically, in 1971, 50-year-old de Arango was playing with a local Cleveland group called Henry Tree which combined elements of both jazz and rock. In 1983, he recorded a completely different kind of album with fellow Clevelanders Jamey Haddad and Joe Lovano. It was a far cry from his early days in New York City.

Asked about his series of changing styles of playing, de Arango told me, “I don’t think of styles. I just want to play music.”

Approaching his 80th birthday and living in a nursing home in East Cleveland, de Arango said he did not like much of the jazz he was hearing in 2001. “It’s all simple and repetitive,” he said, “and they call it ‘jazz?!’”

But more than playing, de Arango was teaching. Among his students in the 1980s was Bob Ferrazza, who said, “It was like learning from a Zen master. Sometimes we’d just sit and think and talk about the music in a real deep and serious way.” Ferrazza said, “We would do things that you don’t do in school learning. He would put a record on and just say, ‘play!’ It was a more inductive kind of learning. It wasn’t really deductive at all.”

According to Ferrazza, de Arango never wanted to stay with one thing for very long. The young student believed that is why de Arango gave up the national jazz scene in 1948. “I think he was possibly looking for new things musically to do and might have felt a bit stagnated by that scene. He probably thought it was time for a change and came back to Cleveland.”

Jazz guitarist Bill de Arango played his way for more than six decades and taught countless students some of the lessons he had learned first-hand while playing with such all-time jazz giants as Gillespie, Webster, Parker and Ellington. No one ever questioned that the music de Arango played was jazz.

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**Bill de Arango Discography**

1945 - With Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Flip Phillips, Todd Dameron, & Max Roach: "What More Can a Woman Do?"; "I’d Rather Have a Memory; "Mean to Me"
- With Slam Stewart Quintet: "Honeysuckle Rose; "Mood to be Steward; "Voice of the Turtle; "Slammin’ the Gate; "Jingle Bells; "On the Upside Looking Down; "Time on My Hands; "Bell For Norvo; "With Charlie Kennedy: "I Can’t Give You Anything But Love; "Crazy Rhythm; "I Can’t Get Started; "Whispering; "I’ll See You in My Dreams; "With Ike Quebec: "Girl of My Dreams; "Jim Dawgs; "Scoffin; "I.Q. Blues.

1946 - With Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra: "52nd Street Theme; "A Night in Tunisia; "O! Man Repob; "Anthropology; "With Trummy Young Orchestra: "Don’t Be a Baby; "Lazzy Lullaby; "Try Try Again; "Tidal Wave; "With Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis Quintet: "Surgery; "Lockjaw; "Afternoon in a Doghouse; "Athlete’s Foot; "Bill de Arango Septet with Ben Webster and Sid Catlett: "The Jeep is Jumpin’; "I Got It Bad and That Ain’t Good; "Dark Corners; "Blues Mr. Brim; "With Ben Webster Quintet: "Frog and Mule; "Spang; "Doctor Keets; "Park and Tilford Blues; "Bill de Arango Septet with Ben Webster: "Goin’ Back to Washington; "Did You Ever Set to Thinkin’; "Suzie Bee; "I Ain’t Gonna Marry"

1947 - With Charlie Ventura Sextet: "Synthesis; "Sooth Me; "Blue Champagne; "Stop and Go; "Charlie Ventura Carnegie Hall Concert LP: "Ghost of a Chance; "Characteristically B.H.; "Ralph Burns Up; "Just You Just Me"

1954 - Bill de Arango Quartet: "Alone Together LP: "Alone Together; "Gone With the Wind; "All God’s Children Got Rhythm; "The Nearness of You; "The Gypsy in My Soul; "Dancing on the Ceiling, "Summertime; "These Foolish Things"
Jim Hall

Fred Sharp’s onetime student, Jim Hall, went on to become one of the most respected guitarists in jazz. Born September 4, 1930 in Buffalo, New York, Hall was only a few months old when his family moved to Geneva in Lake County, Ohio, where his uncle had a farm. Hall remembered the first music he heard was his uncle Ed playing country songs like “Wabash Cannon Ball” on the guitar. He said his mother “played the piano a little bit.” After spending a year on his uncle’s farm and after his parents had split up, he moved with his mother and brother to Cleveland where they lived in various rooming houses. Hall later recalled his mother supported her sons by working as a secretary at a tool company. When Jim was eight, they moved to a new WPA housing project, Woodhill Homes, at East 96th and Woodland Avenue, and lived there until he was 25.

His mother gave Jim a guitar for Christmas. It took a year for her to make the payments. The youngster was fascinated with the instrument and quickly learned to play it. He took lessons from Jack DuPerow and said his favorite song at the time was “Music, Maestro, Please.”

By the time he was 13, Hall was playing with a teenage band consisting of guitar, clarinet, drums and accordion. He recalled, “The accordion was big in Cleveland at the time.” He said the clarinet player in the teenage band loved Benny Goodman records and played “Solo Flight” for Hall. That record featured the solo guitar of Charlie Christian. Hall called it “instant addiction.” He rushed out and bought a 78 rpm album of the Goodman Sextet, and he didn’t even own a phonograph.

“I didn’t know for sure what that was,” said Hall later, “but I knew I wanted to do it. I started trying to learn how to improvise and how to become a jazz player.”

Hall was impressed not only with Christian’s solo playing, but with “the stuff he did with the meter. He turned it around. It was really brilliant. I suspect he was some kind of an incredible intellect because he had a combination of musicality and intelligence which I think is really rare.”

While they were at John Adams High School, Hall and saxophonist Tony DiNardo formed their own group and began playing gigs. Playing with Hall at the time was teenaged pianist Joe Howard who remembered, “We would camp out in Mantua, where my dad had a farm, and listen to Lenny Tristano records and try to figure out, ‘What is that song based on?'”

Hall’s mother was alarmed by her son’s enormous interest in jazz. Years later, he said, “My mom felt that jazz music was a little too sexy or emotional or something. She didn’t like me playing the nightclubs when I was 15, which I was doing. I can’t blame her for that.”

His mother called Cleveland guitarist Fred Sharp who later told me, “She said, ‘He wants to quit school and he’s only 15. Could you talk to him?’” Sharp said, “Hall wasn’t very good at the time, but he wanted to be a guitar player. He had heard me play and he knew that I had done some playing.” Sharp began giving guitar lessons to the 15-year-old Hall. “I talked him into staying in school, which I am quite proud of. I said, ‘Look, I can get you in a band, but you’ll be the kid in the band and you have so much time. Why don’t you do your school and then there’ll be plenty of time to play?’ He did.”

Sharp also introduced Hall to the records of such guitarists as Carl Kress, Dick McDonough and Django Reinhardt.

Hall said years later he still had never heard better guitars than those played by Christian and Reinhardt. He also listened to saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and pianist Art Tatum. He went to the Palace Theatre to see the Duke Ellington and Artie Shaw Orchestras, particularly when guitarist Barney Kessel was playing with Shaw.

In a videotaped interview, Hall remembered the first time he saw Ellington: “The band was behind a scrim, a sort of half curtain. You sort of knew there were musicians back there. And they started playing ‘A Train’ and about halfway through the piece, the scrim went up and there was the band. It was really a thrill! That experience stayed with me.”

After graduating from high school where he played bass in the school band, Hall enrolled at the Cleveland Institute of Music. “It was a great decision. I was there for five years and I majored in music theory. I had five years of counterpoint and music theory and I heard all kinds of music from Gregorian chants all the way up through electronic music.” Hall wrote a string quartet piece as his master’s thesis. The three-movement piece won a Danish jazz prize for a string quartet composition.

Other students at CIM at the time included modern classical composer Donald Erb, composer Hale Smith and Howard Roberts, a onetime member of the Evelyn Freeman Ensemble in Cleveland who later became an internationally respected choral director and arranger.
Hall believed he was heading toward a career in classical music, but while studying at CIM, he continued playing jazz on weekends. He frequently ran into the relatives of Joe Lovano. "I knew his dad, Tony Lovano, a tenor player," said Hall, "and his uncle, Carl Lovano, a trumpet player."

In 1955, after getting a bachelor's degree from the CIM, but not completing his master's, Hall decided to concentrate on jazz. With alto saxophonist Ray Graziano, Jim went to California "to seek my fortune." To get there, they agreed to deliver a car for somebody and paid only for the gas. They drove the lavender Cadillac convertible from Cleveland to Los Angeles and stayed at the Hollywood home of Hall's 90-year-old great aunt.

Hall got a job at a used sheet music store and eventually, with some help from Clevelander Joe Dolny, got a job playing with a new group being formed by Chico Hamilton. During his year and a half with Hamilton, Hall played on two LPs and began to impress a number of important jazz musicians. In 1956, he recorded All Night Session, Volumes 1, 2 and 3 with Hampton Hawes, Red Mitchell and Bruf Freeman.

In 1957 he joined the Jimmy Giuffre Trio and recorded two albums with the group. "It was a great experience for me," remembered Hall. "It really incorporated a lot of the stuff that I had been exposed to in music school."

Later, he toured South America with Ella Fitzgerald.

Hall was also influenced by Count Basie's longtime guitarist Freddie Green. "The first time I met him," said Hall, "was on the Sound of Jazz television show that Nat Hentoff helped put together. When everybody left the studio, Freddie was sitting there reading the newspaper. I was a kid and I said, 'Hi, Freddie. Would you mind if I take a look at your guitar?' And he looked at me and said, 'Yes I would.'" Later, the two guitarists became good friends.

Hall's first album as a leader was called Jim Hall Jazz Guitar. He made it in 1957 with bassist Red Mitchell and pianist Carl Perkins.

In 1959, Hall performed with saxophonists Ben Webster and Paul Desmond.

In 1961 he teamed up with Sonny Rollins on the now-classic jazz album The Bridge. In 1962, he recorded the Interplay and Undercurrent albums with pianist Bill Evans.

Hall was one of the rising stars of jazz when he got married in 1965 at the age of 35. With a new wife, he decided to get off the road and, in a sense, settle down. He took a job playing in the house band for Merv Griffin's television show. Hall later said it was "a factory job, a way not to travel. I did it for three and a half years and made a modest income, not a terrific amount of money." From a music standpoint, Hall said the TV work was like a day job. "It was like being out of music," he said. In one interview, he recalled the TV job as "the low point" of his career.

Valve trombonist Bob Brookmeyer also played in the TV show band. Brookmeyer was less diplomatic than Hall when he later said, "Short of putting a stake through my heart, I found out that I indeed had been in the world of adults before and I just joined the world of ungifted, untalented and angry children in television."

Gradually, Hall began moving back into what he called "creative music." He managed to mesh his career with his wife's. She was a psychoanalyst with a steady practice and did some teaching. She also worked in radio and had a sense of music programming.

He came back strong in the 1970s and began making a stir with a number of excellent jazz albums. Whitney Balliett, in his book American Musicians, said Hall didn't look capable of creating a stir of any sort. Balliet wrote that Hall had three principal expressions: a wide smile; a child's frown; and a calm, pleased playing mask—eyes closed, chin slightly lifted, and mouth ajar." Said Balliet, "He could easily be the affable son of the stony-faced farmer in the painting "American Gothic."

The guitarist who had lived on a farm in Geneva, Ohio and grew up and learned to play guitar in Cleveland, established himself as one of the leading guitarists in jazz. He was nominated for a Grammy and won the DownBeat Readers' Poll for Best Jazz Guitarist.

Writing in the March 1975 New Yorker, Balliet said, "Jim Hall has a grace and inventiveness and lyricism that make him pre-eminent among contemporary guitarists and put him within touching distance of the two grand masters, Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt."

In a 1992 interview in The Plain Dealer, Hall admitted, "It's never been easy for me to play fast. I feel if I were an athlete, I'd be a marathon guy rather than do the 100-yard dash." Explaining his spare and subtle style, Hall said, "I think silence allows the listener to get into what you're playing, to react to what you've just played and anticipate the next thing."

In the summer of 1992, Hall telephoned his old teacher. Fred Sharp said, "He called me especially to thank me for teaching him. He said he felt remiss, in all
the years that have gone by, that he never called me and thanked me for helping him get started.”

In 1993, Hall began recording for Telarc International of Cleveland. He said, “Telarc has been great and pretty much allowed me to record what I wanted.” The first CD for Telarc was Dedications and Inspirations. The second was Dialogues which included duets with such artists as Cleveland Joe Lovano and trumpeter Tom Harrell. With Lovano, Hall played one of his own compositions, “Bon Ami,” a song he composed to play at a Django Reinhardt festival. Hall said Lovano was “amazing with a great positive spirit.” Lovano said Hall “is one of the greatest improvisors of all time – on whatever instrument it happens to be.” According to Lovano, Hall has influenced all of the great guitar players of his generation.

In 1996, Hall made a third album for Telarc, Textures. It spotlighted his composing skills and included 16 strings and seven brass instruments on some of the songs. Hall’s daughter, Devra, said the seeds of Textures were planted years earlier when he studied composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

In January of 2000, Hall recorded live with Lovano at the Regattabar in the Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The CD, produced by Cleveland’s Telarc International, was with the quartet called Grand Slam. Backing Hall and Lovano were bassist George Mraz and drummer Lewis Nash. The compact disc included four Hall original compositions and three Lovano originals.

One criticism of Hall’s work was that he lacked a style. Hall admitted, “I’m not sure I have what’s called a style. But I have an approach to music that, in a way, is interesting. I try to consciously allow myself to grow – more of an attitude or approach to the music. I don’t like to be boxed in or to be labeled.”

Looking back on his career, Hall had some difficulty comprehending the world-wide acclaim he was receiving. “I played in a theatre in Japan,” he recalled, “and I was standing backstage thinking, ‘How did I get here from the housing project in Cleveland, Ohio?’”
Ferrazza began playing rock guitar, but quickly tired of simply trying to imitate rock stars. He wanted to add something of himself to the music. One day, he heard a different kind of guitar record. “It was a slow thing. I didn’t even know it was jazz. It was George Benson playing ‘This Masquerade.’ In fact, I think I was washing my dad’s car when I heard it on the radio. It was something! You know, when you hear music that just gets your attention, you can’t really describe it? It makes you feel something. It gets you excited! That was the first jazz that I heard, and I never thought much about it other than I liked that. So when I heard George Benson’s name, I wanted to hear what he had after that. I was interested.”

Ferrazza heard other guitar records by people like Wes Montgomery. “I started to get interested in jazz. A friend of mine suggested that I get in touch with this guitar player named Bill de Arango, a famous jazz guitar player. I was really gung-ho. I wanted to learn everything I could about the instrument. I called him up and he said, ‘Come on over.’ That was it. He played me some records and I was hooked.”

When Ferrazza went to de Arango for his first lesson, de Arango had him first listen to some jazz records by Miles Davis. “That was the first jazz that I heard that was mysterious. I didn’t know what it was. I’d never heard music like that. I’d never heard music like that. I didn’t hear that when I was a kid. It was just incredibly mysterious music to me.”

Unlike many other musicians who first played at very early ages, Ferrazza was 15. He never played in school bands. But, while studying with de Arango, he graduated from Brush High School and enrolled at Cleveland State University where he studied composition with Bain Murray and with Howie Smith. He said he was intimidated when he tried out for Smith’s CSU Jazz Band. “When I auditioned for it, you had to read music. I had resigned myself to not being able to make the jazz band, but I went to the audition anyway. I was completely intimidated, but they were auditioning on a blues. So I figured, ‘Well, a blues I could play.’ I could hear they were playing F blues so I just got up and played F blues when it was my turn to play. Howie wrote the tune so he knew I wasn’t reading the music; I was just playing F blues. There were certain things that I would miss that were in there. But I could play along with the band. He said, ‘How long will it take you to read that?’ I said, ‘I don’t really know.’ I really wanted to get in the band so I said ‘not long.’ I guess Howie liked it enough. I was able to play in the band. Ferrazza learned to read while playing in Smith’s CSU big band and continuing to study with de Arango.

At about the same time, he began playing gigs around town. “We played wherever we could, mostly at parties. I think my first real job was at Turkey Ridge on Coventry. I was 18 or 19. We got a little band together. The other things that followed were the inner-city type things, like for no money, but playing with some good people. I think they got me into the right type of music and got me steeped in the right sort of traditions, learning how to swing. I think that’s important. It’s real important!”

In 1986, the young jazz guitarist got the opportunity to play a Northeast Ohio Jazz Society concert backing singer Ernestine Anderson at Case Western Reserve University’s Harkness Chapel. Not long afterward, Ferrazza was saluted by DownBeat magazine as one of the country’s “Most Deserving Young Jazz Musicians.”

In 1991 he produced his first album, a compact disc called Personal. “It was a huge thrill,” he said. The album included two standards and five Ferrazza original compositions, including one song with the unusual title “Spiritual Funk.” “It is just a phrase,” he said, “that a friend of mine used to talk about being in a bad mood. I liked the phrase. So the next time I got in a bad mood, I thought about that phrase. Later, I wanted to have an aggressive tune that would express that.”

“My goals are musical goals,” said Ferrazza. “I have things that I want to do on the guitar, things I want to do musically. Those are my goals. I just want to play the guitar as well as I can. I have a sound in my head that after all these years, I still haven’t achieved on the guitar, but I’m always striving for.”

In September of 1992, Ferrazza played at New York’s famous Blue Note club, but unlike many other ambitious young jazz artists, he has no great, burning desire to move to New York. “Hey, music is the same no matter where you play it and I would like to stay here. I love Cleveland. This is a great town!”