

# A Lost Lenny Breau Lesson

## *Harp* *H*armonics *and* *H*eavenly *H*armonies

*Each* generation yields a handful of guitarists who never achieve widespread public acclaim, but who are held in awe by peers, industry insiders, and knowledgeable fans. Guitar students of all ages and skill levels make the pilgrimage to smoky bars and cramped apartments to absorb 6-string lore from these shadowy figures. Swapping stories and tapes, students develop an informal, underground school

BY ANDY ELLIS

Breau and high-A 7-string in the early '80s. Note thumbpick.

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based on the ideas and techniques of such reclusive guitar gurus. High on the list of legendary, low-profile jazz-guitar savants are Ted Greene, Mick Goodrick, and the late Lenny Breau.

Lenny lived and played in relative obscurity. His bohemian and often self-destructive lifestyle prevented him from having a career commensurate with his abilities. Questions still surround his untimely death at age 43. Most who heard Breau perform felt his prodigious talent was never adequately captured on a smattering of commercial releases. His ideas, however, continue to be embraced and developed by others, and in that sense, his music and legacy live on. Listen to Steve Masakowski

and Philip deGruy to hear two contemporary players who acknowledge their debt to Breau and his 7-string.

On December 13, 1982, I took a private lesson from Lenny in his Nashville apartment. The following material is extracted from my 90-minute tape of the event. It explores how Breau used harmonics to convert standard guitar chords into piano-like clusters and how he handled quartal voicings. (We'll investigate Breau's intriguing single-note concepts in future Sessions lessons.)

Lenny possessed the rare ability to reduce complex techniques and theories to their essence. He was as gifted a teacher as he was a performer.

**Harmonic harmony.** A fingerstyle player,

Lenny was the undisputed harmonics champ. In addition to rippling harp-harmonic arpeggios—a technique he documented in his early-'80s *GP* columns—Breau was fond of revoicing chords by playing one of the lower notes as an octave harmonic. "Take *Cmaj7*, for example," he explained. "I lift *C*, the root, up an octave so it's a half-step higher than the 7. It becomes more of a cluster. If you don't use harmonics, clusters can be difficult to fret, especially when you're moving around the fretboard."

First play the *Cmaj7* in Ex. 1a, picking with your thumb, index, middle, and ring fingers. Next, using your picking-hand index finger, lightly touch the fifth string over the 15th fret. Pluck the note with your pick-

## Ex. 1

Ex. 1 shows chord voicings and fingerings for *Cmaj7*, *Freely*, *Dbmaj7*, *Ebmaj7*, *Dmaj7*, and *Dbmaj7*. The notation includes treble clef, guitar staff, and bass staff with fingerings (T, A, B) and fret numbers.

## Ex. 2

Ex. 2 shows melodic lines for *Cmaj7* with "let ring" markings. The notation includes treble clef, guitar staff, and bass staff with fingerings (T, A, B) and fret numbers.

## Ex. 3

Ex. 3 shows *Gm11* and *Cmaj7* chords with "let ring" markings. The notation includes treble clef, guitar staff, and bass staff with fingerings (T, A, B) and fret numbers.

## Ex. 4

Ex. 4 shows a melodic line with *Gm11* and *Cmaj7* chords. The notation includes treble clef, guitar staff, and bass staff with fingerings (T, A, B) and fret numbers.

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A young Lenny explores left-hand finger independence on the bandstand.

hand thumb. This yields a *C* harmonic 12 frets—one octave—higher than the original 3rd-fret *C* (Ex. 1b) and produces a close, piano-like voicing (Ex. 1c). Since two fingers are required to sound the harmonic, you'll need to use your pinky to pick the highest note.

Ex. 1d illustrates the stretch this major-7th chord would require if you didn't use a harmonic. While Breau's harmonic revoicing technique places less demand on the fretting hand, it requires more effort from your picking hand. To develop quick and accurate "point-and-pluck" harmonics and strengthen your picking pinky, practice transposing the new voicing as in Ex. 1e.

Breau advised, "You have to be careful not to pick the fretted strings too hard, or they'll cover up the harmonic. I like when the harmonic comes in a split second after the rest of the chord.

It stands out a bit. It's a way to balance things."

Here are three picking patterns Breau used to let harmonics breathe. In Ex. 2a, the root—now an octave harmonic—follows on the heels of the fretted 7, creating a ringing minor-second *melodic* interval. Remember to use your pinky to pluck the highest note. Ex. 2b is a quick backward arpeggio that ends with the harmonic. In Ex. 2c, play the minor second as a stand-alone *harmonic* interval. Work on each of these techniques while moving the major-7th cluster up and down the fretboard.

Breau liked lacing minor 11th chords with harmonics. "To get a *Gm11*," he said, "barre straight across the neck at the 3rd fret [Ex. 3a]. The 11 is *C*. I'll play the *G* harmonic on the sixth string with the next three notes—*C, F, Bb*. Then I'll repeat that on the next-higher string group.

You just go four, four, and four [Ex. 3b]. It's amazing all the different sounds you can get using this technique, things you could never reach. Like, it's tough to fret *Gm11* and get the *C* and *Bb* together. By going with the harmonic, you're playing a voicing that's not a guitar chord." Play Ex. 3b slowly. For maximum sustain, don't relax your index barre as you work across the strings.

"Not only do you get clusters from this minor 11," Lenny pointed out, "it gives you the freedom to play a line on top [Ex. 4]. Whenever you have a free finger, experiment by adding melody over a sustained cluster. There's a whole world in that technique alone." To strengthen your fret-hand pinky and develop independence, move Ex. 4 up and down the neck in minor thirds—*Bbm, Dm, Fm*, etc.

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"I'm always looking for unusual voicings," Lenny said. "For instance, I'll play an *Em11* like this (Ex. 5a) and arpeggiate it with moving harmonics (Ex. 5b). There's a *D* triad on top—isn't that a hip voicing? Let the intervals ring against each other. They sound like little chords in themselves. I got into this by listening to piano players, particularly Bill Evans."

**Open strings.** Lenny often used open strings to color his chords, as in Ex. 6. Memorize each bar's chord form, and then add harmonics for a real treat.

Certain open-string voicings automatically produce ascending and descending intervals

as you strum sequentially across the strings. Breau would take advantage of this phenomenon, as in Ex. 7's *Am9*. Notice how in beat two the minor second descends, even though you're moving from low to high strings.

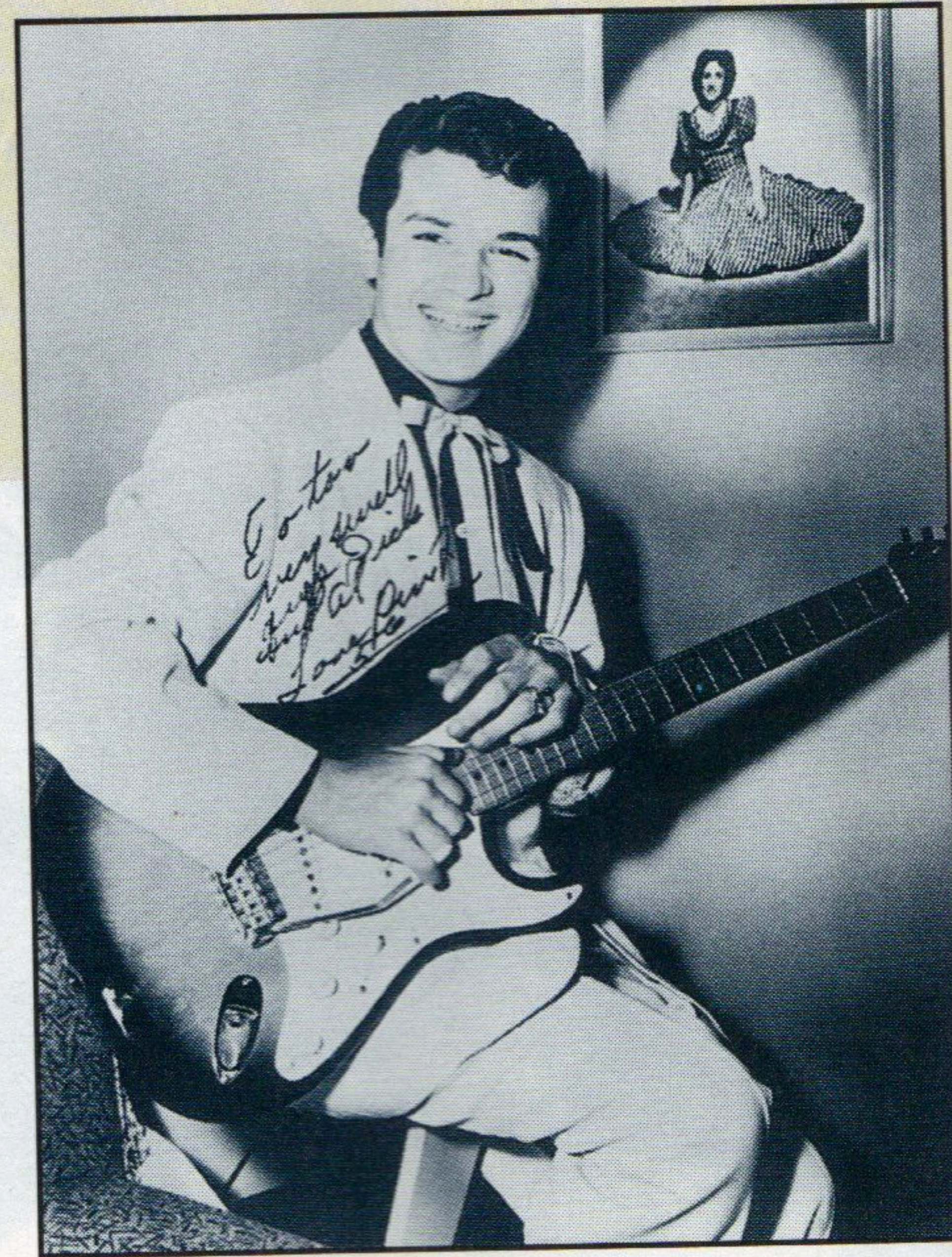
Conversely, Breau would often stagger his arpeggio to create jagged melodies and interval jumps. In Ex. 8, for instance, he skips from the fifth to the second string, leaping a major ninth. He follows this with a minor second—the smallest possible interval. Mixing open strings with harmonics, as in this example, offers a mind-boggling array of voicing possibilities and a lifetime of study. Asked if he developed his harmon-

ic approach scientifically or if it simply evolved from late-night treasure hunts, Breau replied, "Like hunting. I didn't write chords down or make any notes. I just keep it in my head."

Ex. 9 shows how Breau would combine a *G* major pentatonic scale (bar 1) with an *Em9*

## Ex. 5

(a) *Em11* (b) *Em11*  
Freely



Cool threads, cool Strat: In his teens, country picker Breau toured and performed as Lone Pine, Jr.

## Ex. 6

Slowly

*Em9* *Em11* *Em9*

## Ex. 7

*Am9*

## Ex. 8

*Am9*

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arpeggio (bar 2) to jam over an *Em*. Lenny suggested, "Instead of just running the pentatonic scale, use a pattern like this to make it sound good. Play slowly and listen to each note. Hear the effect each scale tone has against the chord. Ravi Shankar talks about the importance of one note. Know you're playing the 9. Play a nice *long* 9." Watch the slurs in this lick; strategically placed hammers and pulls provide momentum and interest.

"In jazz," Lenny continued, "you often hear pentatonics played against chords voiced in fourths. For example, instead of harmonizing a *C* scale in thirds [Ex. 10a], harmonize it in fourths [Ex. 10b]. You're playing the *C* scale along each string, but a fourth apart. McCoy Tyner plays chords like these with his left hand and solos against them with his right. That's what makes the sound. Sometimes he'd arpeggiate these chords to create

lines. If you're blowing over *Em*, play this to sound outside [Ex. 11]."

Ex. 12 demonstrates the kind of quartal (fourth-based) chords Breau would use for *G7* or *G13*. Chord tones abound, but in a harmonically ambiguous context. Without thirds, there's no major or minor tonality. This abstract setting lets you play non-diatonic clusters a half-step away from diatonic ones, as at the start of bar 4. "You can get away with it," Breau urged. "Fool around with half-step approaches to create tension."

**Ex. 9**

♩ = 72-88

G Pentatonic

**Ex. 10**

(a) In thirds

(b) In fourths

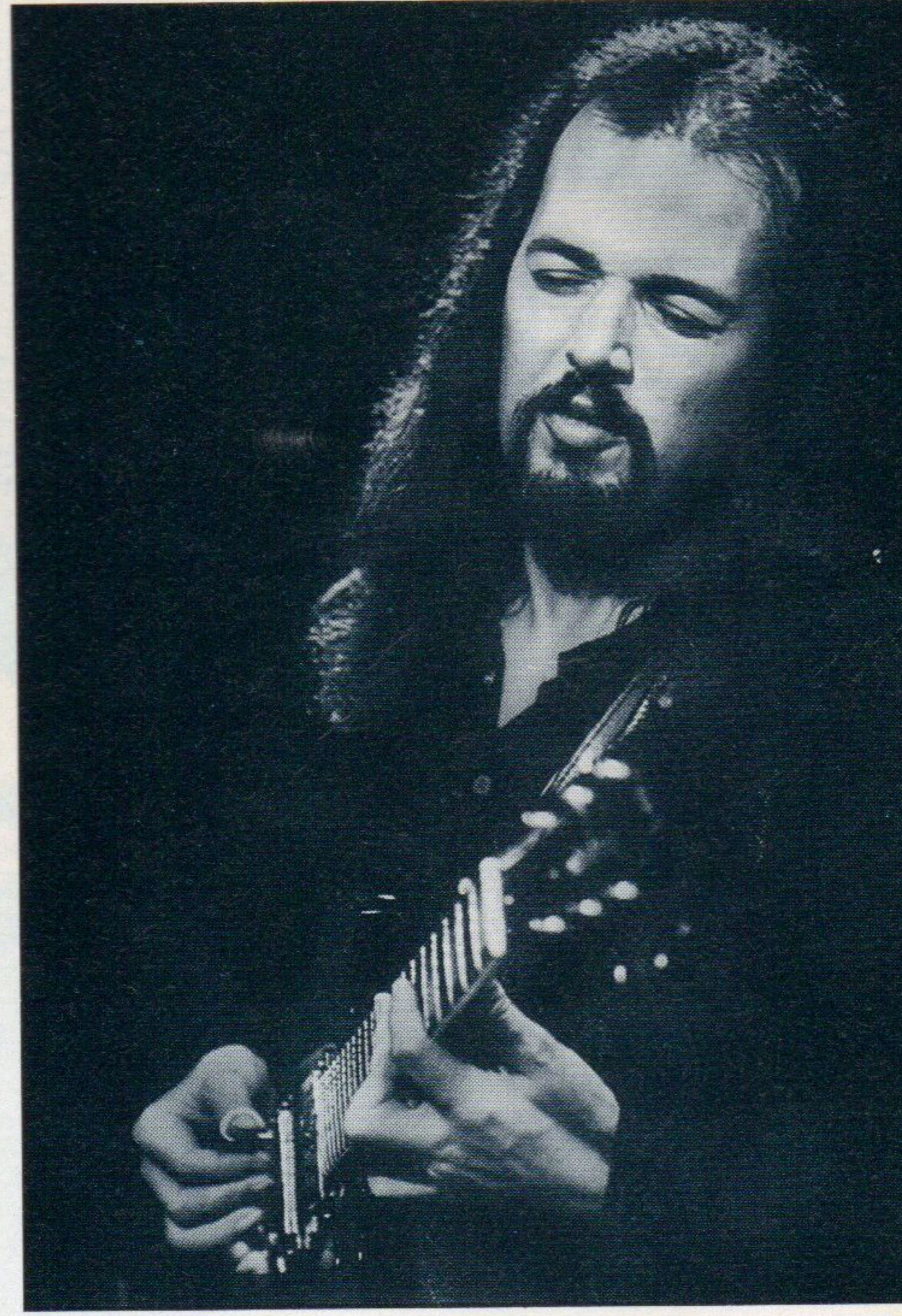
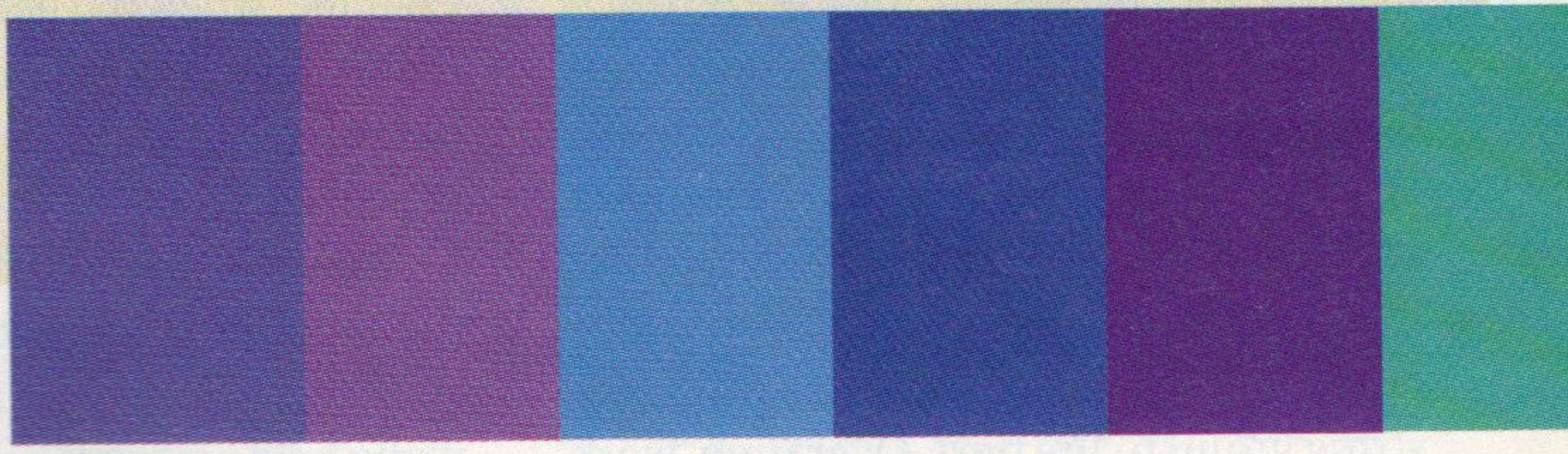
**Ex. 11**

♩ = 120-144

**Ex. 12**

(G7)

Briskly



Looking within: Breau lays down world-wise fingerstyle jazz.


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To become versed in quartal harmony, pick a key—say, C—and build chords in fourths from each scale tone (C-F-B $\flat$ , D-G-C, E-A-D, etc.). Work these chords out on the three highest three-string groups, i.e., 3-2-1, 4-3-2, 5-4-3. Listen for timbral differences when you play the same voicings on different string groups. Also notice how a voicing's shape changes from one string group to the next. Over time, work through other keys.

"Use fourths harmony in modal music," Lenny said. "Say we're in C again. Listen to those fourth chords against each note in the C scale. Like to play in D Dorian, make D the tonal center [Ex. 13]. The same chords

played against A put you in A Aeolian [Ex. 14]. It really starts sounding like Trane [John Coltrane] when you get into the E Phrygian mode. Try superimposing a G pentatonic pattern [as in Ex. 9] over this two-bar progression [Ex. 15]."

**New turf.** In three-note quartal chords, the top and bottom tones are a seventh apart. Using Breau's octave-harmonic technique, why not raise the lowest note, revoicing the chord so it has a second on top? Exploring this brave new world of octave-harmonic quartal harmony should keep you off the streets for at least a few months.

Thanks, Lenny, for your inspiration. Rest in peace. 



The early days: Lenny thumbpicks a Martin D-28 flat-top.

## Ex. 13

$\text{♩} = 104-138$  D Dorian

## Ex. 14

$\text{♩} = 116-138$  A Aeolian

## Ex. 15

$\text{♩} = 92-112$  E Phrygian

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