

# Jim Bruno on The Jimmy Bruno Guitar Institute

By Gary Heimbauer



*Legendary guitar virtuoso Jimmy Bruno is one of the best of the best for many more reasons than one. First, he is one of the most technically advanced players, possessing the ability to play at un-godly tempos with ease, and rhythmic precision. Second, the clarity and tone he gets is crystal clear. Third, he has a deep sense of swing and is very creative. Fourth, he has great control of dynamics, like a horn player, and he can melt you on a ballad. And to top it all off, he is a very humble and friendly guy and a great teacher. His "No Nonsense Jazz Guitar" video (Hot Licks) was an instant hit, and he has recently taken his unique method to the World Wide Web. Two years ago, he created the Jimmy Bruno Guitar Institute, which features hundreds of video lessons from beginner level to advanced, as well as many extras such as performances, interviews with other musicians and guitar makers, and master classes. But the best thing about it, and what really makes it a school, is that all students can send videos of themselves playing to Jimmy, and within a day or two, he will send you a personal video response back, telling you what he wants you to work on. At only twenty dollars a month, it is a no brainer for any aspiring jazz guitarist to sign up. I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with Jimmy, and after an hour and a half interview he walked me through the inner workings of the institute. The full interview will appear in the Volume 8, Number 4 Quarterly edition of Jazz Improv Magazine (with companion CD, available at retailers nationwide and by subscription) and some video footage has already been posted to our YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/user/jazzimprovmagazine](http://www.youtube.com/user/jazzimprovmagazine)*

**JJ:** I know that the idea for the Jimmy Bruno Guitar Institute came about a couple of years ago when you started teaching David Butler, a retired AOL Executive. Can you talk about how this partnership and the school began?

**JB:** Actually, it was his fiftieth birthday party that I met him, I believe. He had been watching one of my hot licks videos and it was driving his wife crazy. So she hired my whole band to go play his fiftieth birthday party, and that's how we met. He's a retired AOL executive and from there he came to Philly to study with me. He moved here for about fourteen weeks and took lots and lots of lessons and he really liked the method. He thought, "Boy, how can we get this to more people?" So we tried doing online lessons one on one, but you're still only teaching one person at a time so its no different from ten o'clock to eleven o'clock some guy comes over your house, or from ten to eleven I come down here and teach one at a time. It worked, but it wasn't what we wanted, you know? So we brainstormed for many, many months about how to reach a bigger audience and came up with The Jimmy Bruno Guitar Institute and it's been almost two years now I think. In the beginning, each month we'd come up with a different idea, another idea, another idea, and he got it implemented with the technology necessary to do what we wanted and you'll see in a few minutes how it all works. We created a community. We have a master class sections and all kinds of stuff. It's easier to see it than it is to explain it.

**JJ:** Has it evolved a lot over the course of the last two years?

**JB:** Yeah, the technology has gotten better and better, and faster and faster, and we've gotten more and more students so we had to keep inventing ways to respond as efficiently and as quickly as we can and to keep adding new material and things like that. It's not like a tune encyclopedia site. It's almost easier to tell you what it isn't than what it is. It's not a lick site. It's not like, "Here, learn this lick," although if you take the course, you'll be able to do that on your own and that's always been my goal ever since I've been teaching—to always try to make someone find their own voice and not so much mimic, you know? I don't want them to mimic me. It's kind of flattering but you're not going to learn anything. I love Wes Montgomery, but there's only one Wes Montgomery. I know a bunch of his licks, but when I play them, it doesn't come out like Wes, although they are fun to play. I've been doing this for a really long time, and I think I found a way to let people explore their inner voice—their musical voice. First you have to get somebody to develop a voice or a sense of musicality which is not easy. So, I've always thought that the scale/chord approach was ineffective, or inefficient.

**JJ:** I love your idea of the five outside notes, which completely eliminates the clutter of terminology, and gets you thinking more in terms of sound. It's such a simplified way to look at things. And the five shapes

or positions will surely get a student exploring the whole neck right very quickly.

**JB:** Well, there are 12 tonal centers—there aren't any more. We call these different things areas, regions, pitch collections. Pitch collections is not a new term. The first time I became aware of that word was from Milton Babbitt, the composer. He would make pitch collections and it would be like, "Here are the six notes, and if you go down a third and turn them upside down, you get the other six notes," so it was like a twelve tone approach. So he called them collections, or mutually exclusive pitch sets was the other term. So it got me thinking, I learned how to play before I knew names. I visualize the guitar in my mind when I'm playing, so I also noticed, wait a minute, there is a visual thing here. I can't be sure about this, but I imagine that a saxophone player, or trumpet player, if they have a visual, it's different. A lot of saxophonists I talk to say, "Its not really a visual, it's the way the note feels in your head against the chord," and I noticed that saxophone players, when they did practice scales, didn't start from the root. There's a great teacher in Philadelphia, Ron Kerber, and he'd always have his students play from the lowest note of the sax to the top—from the B flat to the F. He'd say, "OK, play this scale—G flat harmonic minor, from the lowest note possible to the highest," so in other words, they're not starting on the G flat, because when you do that, start and stop at the same note, you get a cadence, whether you realize it or not. It makes a sound, but his idea, and I heart all sax players doing it, is to practice from the lowest, so they're not really playing the scale, they're playing all the notes..

**JJ:** They are playing through a pitch collection.

**JB:** Exactly. On the sax, there are twelve keys, so they have twelve of these things if we're just talking about a major pitch collection, but there's also the minor scale inside there. Now, if the guitar was five frets big, there's one saxophone, but you move to the next spot, there is another saxophone and I found that there are five places, and looking back on how I learned and started to play by ear, I was doing that anyway. In fact, every guitar player is doing it, whether they know it or not. Even if they are going horizontally, they are going from one picture to the next. They might find it completely different, but I found this universal thing that's underneath all guitar players, and I came up in the old school and when I talked to Joe Pass, he called them grips. Tal Farlow called them boxes. Everybody had a little different thing of what they called them and they knew what sound was gonna come out when they put there fingers down in certain spots and they also knew the chords and had a great understanding of harmony. It took me lots of years to actually formulate what I was doing. I always get that question, "What are you thinking about when you're playing?" and I can't answer it... ■

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