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## Interview with Flipper guitarist Ted Falconi

By Greg Prato

One of the most underrated punk guitarists is undoubtedly Flipper's Ted Falconi. As one of the first-ever bands to slow down punk's furious energy to a drunken, Sabbath-y crawl, the group – which also includes singer Bruce Loose, ex-Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic, and drummer Steve DePace – has been listed as an important influence by numerous bands over the years, including the Melvins (who are known to cover the Flipper classic "Sacrifice" live) and the aforementioned Nirvana (Kurt Cobain wore a homemade Flipper t-shirt on Nirvana's first-ever Saturday Night Live appearance in January 1992). And in the process, has issued such all-time punk classics as 1982's 'Album: Generic Flipper' and 1984's 'Gone Fishin''. The group has been playing live shows for the past few years, and are preparing their first all-new, yet-to-be-titled studio album in 15 years (and first with Novoselic on bass). Falconi recently took the time out to discuss the group's past, present, and future, as well as his guitar playing.

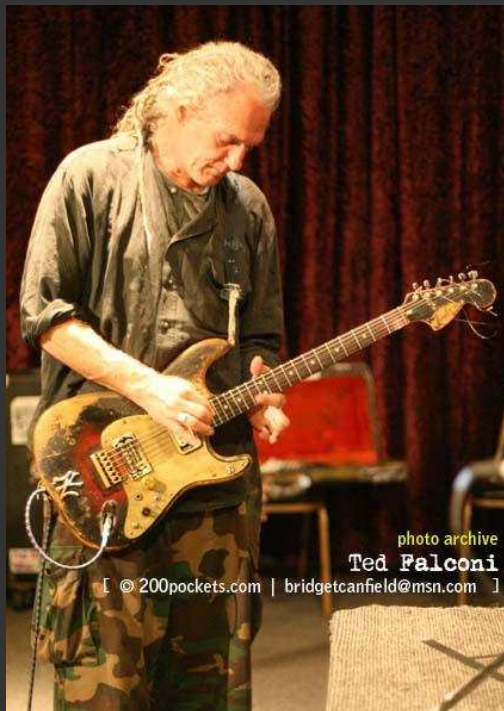


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**Ted Falconi**

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**How did you get started on guitar, and who were your influences?**

Let me talk about guitar as electric guitar. I was visiting Joe Reese from Target Video - he was working one of the Mutants videos – anyway, John Gulack [guitarist from the Mutants] asked me if I wanted to try it. I had never been attached to something that loud and responsive to the touch. In a week, I had a guitar and amp, and I was looking to start a band. Never looked back - I never have been a note player like Satriani. As far as that type of single note [style] - starts with Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Robin Trower. I love the notes don't get me wrong, I'm just not wired that way. I like chords, so starting with Ramones to PiL, I never learned any of their songs, though I like to listen to death metal and thrash. I started with piano, came in on the end of Jerry Lee Lewis, and went to Monk and McCoy Tyner, etc. Went to guitar - Costa and Carelli. Went to Latin, got into synthesizers - Bucla and Moog with a four track. Diamanda Galas, Throbbing Gristle, Chrome, Sonic Youth, etc. Then the electric guitar. Target was my first exposure to electric guitar - just me on the stage with all of that power. Responsive, electric, loud, cool.

**Flipper was one of the first punk bands to slow down the speed of punk - any idea how this happened?**

The first bands that I was in were note for note structured exactly the same every time. When Will Shatter [Flipper's late original bassist] and I got together, we just enjoyed jamming around bass lines. His last band, Negative Trend, was pretty well structured and the chance to jam was a much sought-after change. Anyway, Will was kinda of an Anarchist - they played faster/fighter - exactly the same every time. So we jammed, it was kinda messy - relative to how much we were drinking! But with the distortion boxes, we were getting into these big rhythmic volumes of noise, so we were trying to develop an environmental thing - not just to pluck out a song. The structure came with the vocals and the repeatability factor locked it in. We really got into the sound of distortion – long, big chords. Effects were coming onto the market and from month to month, the sound changed with the addition of a new effect. It was nuts. All of these boxes. Bruce would stop singing, walk over, and start playing with the knobs.

The lyric content shaped the sound also, or at least the timing anyway. Will was into Lou Reed. We weren't straight edge, although we were definitely punk. I guess that this also answers how I was different. Instead of a 3 minute song and a 1-4-5 pattern in E, it was a 1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2 for ten minutes. I never got the guitar to do sax riffs - I was more into jet engines. Drums tell what dance you do, personally, I tried to lay down the background behind the bass. Guitar traditionally replaced the horn section when electricity came along - before that it was never used in bands. It just wasn't loud enough. Guitar players replaced the horns, but in the arrangements, they copied the sax and horn solos. I like jet engines - there is a sonic element to

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what strings can do. Hendrix was the man - the first guy to play 'electric guitar' - not just amplified guitar.

#### Please fill us in on the band's history.

When and where it came together, our first show - Golden Gate Park, sunny afternoon, the band shell. It was the first time that we hooked up all of Jim Hungry's equipment speakers, board, mikes, and power. We got it all working. We did the show with the Verses - it was the only show that Jim did with the band. Later, I saw him at a Ramones show and never again after that. Stealer - the Offs' drummer - played drums at that time. Will Shatter on bass and Ricky Williams on vocals, and me on rhythm guitar - Jim on lead. We went in as a 'John Doe band.' While cleaning up after the show, we were looking out at all of the people standing in line at the DeYoung museum for the King Tut show. It was a hot day and the line exuded sweat and anger waiting in line. At the same time, the band shell is next to the aquarium - all of these kids were coming out all hollering about how they wanted to go back and see Flipper. Will thought that it would be a great name for the band, and it was a name Ricky would remember. He had about 7-8 pets - rabbit, bird, fish, etc., and their name was Flipper...all of them! I think that it started with his fish...anyway, that is where the name came from. Will liked it because it wasn't an 'in your face' punk name.

When I did the graffiti of it, I did the fish with teeth and the crossed out eyes - drunk, stoned, comic book look. Steve DePace joined as a permanent drummer after that show. And there it was - Ricky, Will, Steve, and myself. It was like that for about 6 months. Ricky started having drug problems - two O.D.'s - and one night, he missed the show. So we opened the mike for auditions. Bruce had just gotten back from Portland, and came on stage and started singing. We did a bunch of things that he rehearsed in the beginning before he left, he has been there ever since. Bruce, Will, Ted, Steve. We did a lot of vinyl, a bunch of singles, a lot of compilations, 3 albums - a couple of others that weren't pressed - 7-8 U.S. tours. The truck tours. And that is the way it went until Will died [on December 9, 1987]. Heroin kills. That put the band on hold. I started jamming with a bass player, John Dorey. That finally led to the band coming back together. We got another album out, a bunch of U.S. tours, and a couple to Europe. We built up another album's worth of songs that never got out...and that is the way it went until John died. Heroin kills.

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#### How did the band start up again after Will and John died? And how did Krist Novoselic become the band's bassist?

That stopped things until Hilly from CBGB's called and wanted us to do a benefit show for CBGB's. Steve Demartis - our long time stand-in bass player - came to the call. One thing led to the next, and we did a couple of tours, and opening for stuff like [the film] 'American Hardcore' at the Toronto Film Festival. What a gas - played with D.O.A. up there. They were always one of my favorite bands. We also did the opening in New York for the movie release. Steve Demartis, as good of a bass player as he was, was actually a guitar player with his own band, Goofball.

He also was tied to his business, and just couldn't do the time on the road, which sent us looking again. Andy...forget his last name, who once auditioned for Nirvana, suggested to Steve DePace that Krist Novoselic wasn't doing anything, and that we might want to give him a call. So it started...again. We don't play as much as I like. With everyone spread out across the west coast - Hollywood, Oakland, Garberville, Washington State - we do a week, once a month; either here in Oakland or in Washington. We have been out touring to pay for rehearsal time! Transportation is a bitch.

#### I heard Flipper has a new studio album ready to go.

We have a new album ready, recorded, done. We have another U.S. tour coming up, and then Europe. We are doing an Obama campaign rally show in Seattle next month. Who would have ever seen that coming!

#### What equipment do you use?

So with all of that, the equipment list fits in there somewhere. After my twin was stolen from the Guitar Center repair shop, I got the Marshall - originally a 50-watt. I was never concerned about the model number, I don't remember. I have an added gain stage and it actually tops out at about 80 watts. Stereo 4x12 cab. That, along with my Mitchell with two tubes, running a 2x12 Fender cab modified with a 12 and 15 EVM. Kicks ass. I usually run two amps - one set for full distortion, one set a little cleaner. I pick into chords - you can hear that clearly on one amp but not as clear on the other. Besides, you get a natural chorus with two totally different sounding amps. You can play a kind of 'duet'...in tone anyway. The last album was recorded up at Krist's, using his Fender Twin and Super Reverb 6x10s - both are 4 tube 6l6 running on two tubes. It is the only way to play both without being too loud. I had been using the Nady guitar tube pre-amp and a Fultone distortion pro for added boost/distortion. The Twin doesn't have a master.

On the first singles, it was my PA monster - distortion boxes/tape recorder pre-amp, Altec power amps. I also used an Orange during the 'Single days,' so that might of been also used some. On 'Generic,' a Traynor 4x10 with a custom tube preamp added. On 'Gone Fishing,' the hot rodded Twin and a Bassman through the 12/15 Fender cab. On latter stuff, the Bassman was replaced with the Mitchell head. On 'American Graffishee,' the Twin was replaced by the Marshall and used together with the Mitchell. Also used on the new album a old vintage Twin and a custom reverb together. I have a hot rod 50 watt Marshall and the stereo 4x12 cab along with an early Mitchell.

#### Which guitars have you used throughout Flipper's history?

My set-up when we played with PiL in San Francisco - Standard Gibson SG. Pick ups - changed to DiMarzios, Shallahs, brass nut, Leo Quan mass brass bridge. That went to a Rat Distortion that went into a portable tape recorder mic. Input and headphones out to two Altec bi-amps modified to 100/30 watts, lo-hi frequency. That was put into a couple of horns, hi-mid, and the bass into 2x12 on one side and a 12 and a 15 on the other - also with the matching two horns. It was like a mini P.A. system. It looked patched together as it was, but sounded great. I got the Strat about '84, after the Gibson gave out for the last time - the neck kept breaking. I like to play the guitar - some sounds are only made when you are shaking the hell out of it. And the repairs never held up. The Strat that I have is indestructible and it is only a 3 bolt. 4 bolts are better if you are either clumsy or throw your guitar - I like them better.









I practice a lot unplugged, and the Strat just fits in to the curve of your body. The Strat that I use is a '73 3 bolt hard tail. Grovers, brass nut, DiMarzio duel sound. I had the pickups hot waxed and impedance matched from John Carothers in Venice, California. Wired single/double coil switch on each pickup and a phase switch between them. Standard pots for volume and tone, the bridge is a stars guitars billet brass bridge, the pick-guard is brass. A little flat black paint and that is what it started as. Hard tails have a better acoustic sound than the ones with Wangers - I don't use them. If you want to bend it, bend the neck - the strings are high and the neck is low.

Kurt Cobain was a big-time fan of Flipper and your guitar playing. How do you feel knowing that you were an influence on important bands, and Nirvana in particular?

Kurt...hmmm. I had a friend call me the night he wore a hand-made Flipper shirt on 'Saturday Night Live.' Yeah, I thought that was pretty cool. I don't remember ever meeting him. We had over the years played a bunch through the northwest. I like it when a little rubs off - that is inevitable, and it goes both ways. We weren't on the field at the same time, well, maybe overlaps. I really liked the video of the acoustic set he did [Nirvana's 'MTV Unplugged in New York'], sorry to have never seen them live. Too bad heroin leads to death - too bad I know as many dead people as I do current famous ones. The tragedy of his death, what a fuckin' bummer. That is one thing he didn't learn from our mistakes.

For more information:

<http://www.myspace.com/flipper>

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Great interview! We love Ted

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