



Fingerstyle Guitar

THE GENIUS OF LENNY BREAU

By Chet Atkins

The state of Maine produced more than one great guitarist whose career was cut short. Ironically, Clarence White (see page 12) and jazz great Lenny Breau [Frets, Mar. '82] were born only a few years apart in the neighboring cities of Lewiston and Auburn. Like White, Breau came into a musical family; he was the son of country entertainers Hal Lone Pine and Betty Cote. But while White grew up to revolutionize flatpicking, Lenny Breau became one of fingerstyle guitar's most innovative talents. His principal producer, his mentor, and one of his closest friends was Chet Atkins.

—Editor

NEARLY TWO YEARS have gone by since Lenny Breau left us for that guitar convention in the sky. I thought in this column I should tell you some stories about him before they are forgotten.

Paul Yandell [Frets, Jan. '82] first brought Lenny to my attention around 1966. I immediately knew that here was one of the great players of this world. He had taken some of my fragmentary ideas, and gone on and on into musical areas I had never dreamed of. With each tune I found myself thinking, "Yeah, yeah, *that's* what I meant! That's the direction I wanted to go, before I got bogged down into producing records."

At Lenny's first RCA session, I innocently thought he might be more inspired if I sat next to him, like an audience of one, as he played. After a while, I asked if it bothered him for me to watch. Tactfully he said, "Well, like, man—it's an *experience*." (As I think back, that is the period when he was playing with the greatest technical facility of his career.)

In the late '70s, when Lenny was living in an apartment on Music Row in Nashville, I went by to check on him one morning. Obviously I had awakened him, because he came to the door sleepy-eyed, wearing only his pants, with his little round belly hanging over his belt. After a short greeting, I asked



Lenny Breau's 7-string guitar had a high A string on the treble end.

him if he had sent a certain tape to A&M Records, concerning a recording contract. But he couldn't understand me, because as I talked a cat was rubbing up against his leg and meowing loudly.

After asking me, "What's that, Chet?" several times, and being interrupted by meows, he suddenly threw out his arms, twisted earthward to the cat, shook his hands, and yelled, "*Cool it!!*" The cat disappeared into the hedge, and I broke out laughing. Lenny looked at me like I was crazy; and then he started laughing, too. It was one of those funny moments which you vow to remember always.

He would come by my office almost every day. When someone was around I would have him play, and he never ceased to amaze me. If he played "The Way We Were" three days in a row, he

would play it differently every time.

I remember that once we worked up an arrangement of "Danny Boy." Later on, after he had moved to California, he did "Danny Boy" for one of his columns in *Frets'* sister magazine, *Guitar Player*. I anxiously looked it over—and it was an entirely different arrangement. Playing a different single-string chorus each time you do a tune is something; but playing completely different accompaniment as well is unbelievable.

When we made our duo album, *Standard Brands* (RCA, AYLI-4191), over a two- or three-year period, Lenny was going through one of his worst times of methadone and alcohol abuse. The methadone left him lethargic and slow. In spite of it, he could astound you on the guitar, and he was still the best. I tried to keep him straight, but it was a battle I couldn't win. Not long ago a friend confided to me that during that whole time, Lenny always kept a bottle stashed in my garage. I had a good inward laugh at that, thinking, "You clever little Frenchman, you did it again!"

I didn't want Lenny to get married a second time because I was concerned about his ability to support a wife and handle all the responsibilities of family life. I made him promise he would call me before taking the plunge. A little later I got in from a few days on the road, and Lenny came by the office. He was laughing. "Well, Chet," he chuckled, "I tried to phone you but you were out—so I went ahead and got married."

Lenny was a spiritual man. One day in my office, as the phone was ringing and folks were talking, he sang a little prayer while strumming some beautiful chords. People used to switch on cassette recorders whenever Lenny was around, and I'm happy that Lew Potter had a recorder handy at that moment. Lenny sang:

*Dear Lord,
Won't you help me,
Please help me to understand.
It will make me a better man.
All I know is I play this guitar
The very best I really can.
Dear Lord,
My life is in your hands.*

There are many, many more stories about Lenny Breau. Sometime we should collect all of them and write a book about Lone Pine Jr., my little friend that I loved and admired—and miss—so much. ■