

Robben Ford: Soul Tones

Written by Joe Charupakorn



Miles Davis taught him that music was all about going out there and giving it all you've got. On his new album, *Soul on Ten*, guitarist Robben Ford honors his mentor's sage advice.

Among guitarists in the know, five-time Grammy nominee [Robben Ford](#) is an icon, a guitarist's guitarist who ranks among the instrument's all-time elite. He has played with a dazzling array of the biggest names in the music business including [George Harrison](#), [Joni Mitchell](#), and Miles Davis. But these credentials are not the reason why Ford fanatics spend untold hours searching for clips of Ford's playing on the Internet; it's the way he melds gut-busting blues with silky-smooth jazz phrasing all played at the highest technical level with unparalleled finesse and unmatched tone. Indeed, some would go so far as to say that Ford's is the Holy Grail of guitar tone, envied and emulated by many but attained by few.



On his new album, *Soul on Ten* (Concord), all of these attributes are on full display, and the fact that it was recorded live, without any slick studio tricks, makes his performance that much more impressive. We tracked down Ford at a hotel in Lucera, Italy, to find out just how he does it, dissecting his gear (right down to the pick), and snagging some helpful tips on guitar playing along the way.

Tell us about your new record.

The album was recorded live over two nights at the Independent, in San Francisco, with my current working band, which features [Toss Panos](#) on drums and [Travis Carlton](#)—Larry's son—on bass. We've been together for the last three years, so I'm really happy about finally making a record that captures what happens with this group when we play live. I'm proud to present this trio.

Were there any studio fixes or is it all live?

The record is live, but it's just about impossible to do the kind of playing that I do and get the vocals really right, so I re-did the vocals. The live shows work with the energy of the environment but I'm off mic some of the time and I make noises that you don't really want to hear on a record over and over again.

What gear did you use for this album?

I use my standard setup, which is a [Dumble Overdrive Special](#). I use a [TC Electronic 2290](#) for delay, a [Vox wah pedal](#). Sometimes I use a [Dunlop wah](#) but I recently found a Vox one that I like. Cheap and low end, bottom-of-the-line. And I use an [Ernie Ball](#) volume pedal. That's really it.

What kind of speakers are in your Dumble?

I use [Celestion 65s](#). They were discontinued but they've recently started making them again and I really like them. I consulted with them on those speakers and they finally got it right, so I'm using them all the time.

What about tubes?

They change, but they're always a matched set. Alexander Dumble basically says, "Hey man, you should try these," and I do it. I don't even know what's in there right now.

At a live show in NYC a few months back, you used Fender amps with a Zendrive pedal.

There are times when you're going out to play one or two shows, and it's gonna cost you \$1,000 to take your equipment, so I'll have the promoter supply gear. Whenever I have to use gear other than my own, I really like having two Fender Super Reverbs. Everything else is the same.

Do you request blackface amps or do the reissues suffice?

I don't think about it too much because it's not something I have a lot of control over. One of the crummy things you have to deal with when touring is that it's really expensive to take your own gear, so sometimes you do and sometimes you don't. Promoters will provide terrible gear, not-so-bad gear, and, occasionally, good gear. I don't have control over that.

What about your guitars?

I have a guitar that was made for me by a friend, [Taku Sakashta](#), a Japanese guitar luthier who lives in northern California. I also use a 1960 Fender Tele, which I've had for at least 15 years. It's been very important to me. I'm also playing a '57 Goldtop Les Paul that was given to me on long-term loan from Larry Carlton. My guitars have a switch to split the humbuckers into single coils.

How do you like your guitars set up?

I use [D'Addario](#) 10s and have been using them for maybe 30 years. I like a medium setup, high but not too high. I don't like it low. I use [6105 frets](#) so you need to get the strings a little up because the frets are pretty big. I use D'Addario heavy picks and their [Planet Waves cables](#).

How did the Zendrive end up in your rig?

Hermida designed the pedal with me in mind. He got a hold of me and said, "Would you be willing to try it?" So I tried it out and fell in love with it. There are countless devices that aim to duplicate your sound.

Have you played through any, and what are your thoughts?

I've plugged into a few things, and people are doing pretty nice things with amps nowadays. But I have two Overdrive Specials made for me by [Alexander Dumble](#), so I just don't need the others, and I'm not interested.

What would you recommend to someone who wants your sound but can't get a Dumble?

An alternative? I don't know well enough, quite frankly.

What about your Zendrive and Super Reverb setup?

Well, I use that all the time, but I use a [Zendrive](#) and two [Super Reverbs](#). I plug into the first input of the second channel, the one with the reverb. Then I put a cable in the second input of the second channel and that goes into the first input of the second channel of the other Super Reverb.

If you played an off-the-shelf, inexpensive guitar through a digital modeling effects unit into a solid-state amp, would you still sound like yourself?

It will never happen. I will never do it.

Shifting gears a bit, you actually started out on saxophone. Did that play a role in developing your jazz vocabulary?

I started on [saxophone](#) at age 10 and what little jazz I listened to, I was drawn to. Then, not too long after, maybe when I was 14, I heard [Chicago blues](#). I was really turned on by it, and that's what made me really start playing the guitar.

How would a blues guitarist go about developing a jazz vocabulary?

I did it by listening and listening and listening, and then trying to find what I heard on the guitar. The most important move I made on my own was to get the [Mickey Baker book](#) and learn chords. Of course you also have to know the scales that run through the chords, but it's not that hard to find.





How would a jazz guitarist go about integrating blues into his playing?

Listen to [B.B. King](#). Listen to any number of great blues guitarists. It's not hard to hear. It's largely pentatonic. You have to love it to take it seriously, and a lot of musicians think it's not harmonically sophisticated enough to be taken seriously.

Do you have any interest

in putting out a jazz standards album?

No, not at all. It's already been done way better than I'll ever do it. I haven't devoted myself to it the way that, say, [Jim Hall](#) has. I could never touch what that man could do with a ballad.



What do you think about all the Robben Ford and [Larry Carlton](#)

clones? Is that healthy, or should they try to find their own voice?

It's healthy in the beginning to emulate your heroes. I used to sound just like [Mike Bloomfield](#), and I still have more influences in my playing than I even care to admit—from [Eric Clapton](#) to [Jimi Hendrix](#). At a certain point you really need to move away from that, and this is why I listen to saxophone players and pianists, because you can emulate them and you won't sound like some other guitar player. I listen to jazz players like [Sonny Rollins](#), [John Coltrane](#), [Wayne Shorter](#), [Herbie Hancock](#), [Elvin Jones](#), and of course [Miles Davis](#), more than anything else. Most of them are dead. I listen to other instrumentalists to get input, not guitar players.

What lessons did you learn from [Miles Davis](#)?

I got a certain confidence from playing with Miles. It's a very important element in musical development and often what makes the difference between one musician and another. You have to have a lot of courage to take chances and be willing to make mistakes. Miles was all about that. The school of Miles Davis was just about going out there and giving it up. Give up all you got. Make mistakes and don't worry about them, but also be very serious about it, be very focused. Your concentration needs to be on "10," and your ears need to be wide open.

Are there any current guitarists catching your ear?

The one artist I heard recently is a guitarist named [Kurt Rosenwinkel](#). That is one amazing guitar player. He's one of those people who has a great sound, tremendous harmonic knowledge, and facility on the guitar. There are other guitarists that I admire, but I'm not too hip to the new players.

I heard you're a fan of [Allan Holdsworth](#).

I think Allan Holdsworth is the [John Coltrane](#) of the guitar. I don't think anyone can do as much with the guitar as Allan Holdsworth can.



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