

Dale Zdenek

by Eric Elias

Many of us have heard or seen Dale Zdenek's name before. As the man behind the Ted Greene books, Dale was also the publisher for Tommy Tedesco, Ron Anthony, Rich Severson and many other fine guitarists. He is a self-made businessman who set the standard for guitar education publications back in the 1970s. More than just a publisher, Dale is a professional guitarist whose career spans four decades. At age 21, Frank Sinatra hired Dale's band to play for Nancy Sinatra's 25th birthday party (Bobby Darin sat in on piano for the entire evening). Dale owned his first music store when he was 21 (Ernie Ball Guitar Studio). By the time he was 25 he had completed a college tour opening for Bob Hope. Dale has appeared on a number of talk shows including The Steve Allen Show, The Merv Griffin Show, The Mike Douglas Show, Woody Woodbury, and was also booked on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. As the founder of Dale Zdenek Publishing, Dale launched the educational careers of Ted Greene and many up-and-coming players. Dale sold the company to Belwin Mills/Columbia Pictures Publications in 1981 (which was sold to Warner Brothers and now Alfred). Dale still retains interest in the company and his books are still best sellers for Alfred.

Dale has recently launched a new web site to share information about Ted Greene's books and Dale's other publications (tedgreenebookeditions.com). From his home in Las Vegas, Dale spoke with me over the phone and shared his thoughts and insights in music publishing as well as some heartfelt memories of Ted Greene.

Eric Elias: I have lots of questions for you, Dale. How did you get started in the music business as a player and publisher? How did you meet Ted?

Dale Zdenek: Well, I've always had the desire to play guitar. I love music and melody, especially. I've been playing since I was little. I've also always been into the business end of things too, since I started playing professionally. Ernie Ball was my steel-guitar teacher when I was 11 (I met him when I was 8). When I was 19 I started working in one of Ernie's guitar stores. One day Ted Greene walked in; he was 17. We were just teenagers back then (this was the early '60s). At that time Ted was a rocker and had long hair. At first we

didn't get along. I was playing standards and he would plug in and play all of this music that I wasn't ready for, yet. Ted and Ernie would argue about government and life too. Eventually we became dear friends.

EE: That's funny. It's possible that you two might not have become friends and things would have been different.

DZ: Sure. The ironic thing that happened with Ted and me is that at first, I would tell him to turn it down. Then a couple years later, he would come out of his teaching room and ask *me* to turn it down, since I was playing rhythm through a B3 Leslie unit. When I first met Ted, he looked at the floor and didn't look at you (it didn't take long for him to get over that), but when you looked at him, you could see that his eyes were deep. Ted was the man. He'd come in with new ideas every week, and we all learned from Ted.

EE: Was this when you owned the store?

DZ: Yeah, we were all there when Ernie invented "super slinky" strings, and his business got so big that he decided to sell some of his music stores. Here I was 21 years old and Ernie asked me if I wanted to buy that store. I had no money at the time, but Ernie wrote up a little contract and I gave him a little money each month. I paid him off in a couple of years. He said, "I should have charged you more." (both laugh). At that time Ted was teaching just blues and rock licks there.

You know, a lot of great players came through those doors. I met Joe Pass there. One time Joe was in the store and one of our teachers came out and said, "Hey, Joe, check this out." and played a really complicated exercise up the neck and Joe said hey, here's how I play that, and played it just beautifully. It was pretty funny.

EE: That's hilarious. What year was it when you got the store?

DZ: That was around 1965.

EE: So Ted was a rocker, at first. I hadn't realized that. How did he get into jazz?

DZ: He really got into chord-melody and jazz when he heard Jay Lacey. Jay played with the Everly Brothers for years. I've known him since I was 11. He came out and played some chord-melody at the store and Ted said, "Man, what are you doing?" Ted took lessons from Jay for a few months and he was on his way.

EE: Wow, that was it?

DZ: Yeah, he was really amazing. Not many people know this, but Andy Summers (from The Police) was our classical guitar teacher there as well, and Ted really liked what was going on in classical music, so he decided to study it. He did nothing for three years but study classical music. Every day he played Bach. He was really learning harmony and counterpoint. That was just in the first few years of my guitar store days.

EE: You can really hear that influence in some of Ted's arrangements. He was great at adding counterpoint and classical harmony to any melody.

DZ: That's was Ted. He was so interesting and talented. Not many people know that he was really into pickups and wiring too. We had this long counter at the store with switches and parts in it, and Ted would come in and put his guitar on the counter and just start rewiring it. He was always modifying guitars. If you look at the photo on the inside of The Chord Chemistry book, there is a picture of Ted with all of these guitars. My 1959 335 is behind Ted. It has all of those switches that Ted put on it. He once sanded down a Les Paul and painted it up and put the third eye on it. He was always doing something.

EE: Of course, no one knew how valuable those guitars would be today. Do you still have them?

DZ: No, I never kept any of those old guitars. I always seemed to need money. The only person I know who kept all of his old guitars was Norman from Norman's Rare Guitars. I think he had an "in" at the paper because I'd place an ad to sell a guitar, and a day before the ad would run Norman would call me and come buy it.

EE: I think Norman's Rare Guitars is still open today.

DZ: Yeah, he still owns a couple stores. I think he's doing very well.

EE: So when did Ted decide to write a book?

DZ: Well, that took us all by surprise. But I guess he was always writing lessons down. He used to have a file cabinet full of lesson sheets in the store, and people would come in and he'd pull out a sheet for whatever they were working on. Then one day he came in with this manuscript (all hand-written) and said he wanted to publish a book. We looked at that and it was full of so much material, we didn't know what to think of it. It

had all of Ted's chord diagrams and notes in it. Andy Summers said to me, "You have to publish this. This is Ted Greene." He didn't have any interest or ulterior motive other than to help Ted. You can call it karma or whatever, but look where Andy went on to after that. So I'm not a publisher and I didn't know the first thing about publishing a book. I spoke to Ernie Ball about it. He was very successful. I think he was already doing about \$40 million in sales a year. He said, "Go ahead." So I did.

EE: Having no experience in publishing, how did you find printers and binders and all of the folks that you needed to get everything off the ground just to get the first printing going?

DZ: It's hard to remember all of the details, but we used friends and people who worked in the store. Ted would do all of the diagrams and the manuscript. So we'd literally cut and paste the text and diagrams on each page onto a piece of cardboard and the printer would photograph it and print the page from the photo. We had a pool table at the store that had a board on it that we used to put guitars on for display, like a little stage. So we would clear off the pool table and spread out all of Ted's pages and work them up one by one. This first book was Chord Chemistry. I still have that first handwritten manuscript.

EE: Wow, that is a labor of love, when everyone is working together to do that. It's great that you just followed your hearts, and look at how much opened up for you.

DZ: We worked very hard at it and the right doors opened up. For the first run I did a thousand books, and then another thousand, and then after that I did them ten thousand at a time. Early on, Guitar Player magazine did a review, and that helped launch some interest. So after we got the book published we went around to music stores to get them to carry it. We'd leave a complementary copy of the book. After we went to one store in Santa Monica, I got a note back that said, "I would never buy a book with a picture of a freak on the cover." Ted, of course, had long hair and a beard.

EE: Jeez, that's it? Nothing about the content or material?

DZ: Yeah, the guy at the store just didn't get it. This book really took off. At one point we were having orders coming in from all over the world totaling \$1000 a week. So after that we started going to the

NAAM show, and that's where we started meeting all of the other jazz guitarists like Howard Roberts and Joe Diorio. Then Ted wrote his second book. For this one we used a full, 4-color printing process, which was expensive. It's funny; Mel Bay said to me, "Now we're all going to have to do this." One more thing: After the first year or two, Chappel Music wanted an exclusive to distribute the first book. I gave them a two-year exclusive and they sold a couple thousand the first year and over 10,000 the second year, so after the 2-year contract was up I decided to take over.

EE: Is this when you decided to go into publishing full time?

DZ: Yes. I'd owned the store for 10 years, so around '74 or '75 I decided to sell and focus on the publishing. I sold the store the same way it was sold to me. I gave it to a friend of mine and told him to pay me a certain amount each month. We had published Chord Chemistry in '71 and by '75 I took a chance. At that point, I only had two books. I'm going to the post office and getting \$1000 to 1500 a day. By the time we got 4 books out, we were getting two to three thousand dollars a day. I knew I had to do something. At this point I was in my garage. I had four watts lines installed. These are phone lines where you can make a certain number of calls for a certain price. I had 5 or 6 neighbors working for me: my next door neighbors on both sides, the guy across the street and the lady next to him. So now we're in the garage and we're ordering 10,000 books at a time. We've got four books out and were printing three or four more. The printer loved me with that kind of volume and doing the full four-color process. So what we would do is order phone books from every city in the US (they were free) and we would call music stores in every city. We had a pitch and if they would order our books (we'd offer 12 books), we'd send them right out and they'd re-order. At that time we only had 2 chord books and 2 reading books. We'd offer them all at 50% discount to open an account with a 30-day billing.

I think we were the first to call every music store with this kind of discount. The music store had nothing to lose since they could return the books. Remember, at that time nobody knew of Ted Greene and Dale Zdenek Publications. Then all the music distributors started calling to carry our books. I gave them a 66% discount on certain quantities, sometimes 70% depending on the quantity. We would call the retail stores every 2 weeks. We would also give our salesper-

sons an incentive by taping bills in front of their calling station. When they reached a certain quantity of new accounts they would get the money. I had a sales manager walking the line to joke with our sales team to make them laugh and keep their spirits up. My wife Linda would sit at the typewriter with our 1-year old son on her lap and type invoices. She would laugh at the sales manager jokes more than anyone. I would package the books and go to the post office to ship them special 4th class (educational material). It got to a point that the post office would have me drop off the packages in the rear of the post office and would open up an extra window to stamp each package, since I would deliver a van load everyday. Within 6 months we had over 3,000 music retail stores as customers. I would wake up in the morning and there would be two ladies at my kitchen table typing invoices. There were at least 6 employees working in my garage. It all got so big we had to move to a warehouse. You can see pictures of the warehouse and our parties and the NAAM events with Ted Greene and Howard Roberts or Joe Diorio and Rich Severson playing. Things were really happening!

When we moved out of the garage into our new warehouse we continued the same process, except there was a chalk board on the wall, and when we reached 500 books sold that day, everyone received a bonus. We reached the 500 mark almost every day. Then Linda and I went to Europe to pioneer for European distribution, which we found.

EE: That's all really amazing. I can barely fathom all of that. When did Ted do the single-note soloing books?

DZ: 1978. I was reading the manuscripts when Linda and I went to Europe to find distribution. It was a huge manuscript—too much for one book. So you'll notice, book one contains the table of contents for both books. We had in-house writers-Rich Severson was one. People started sending us manuscripts. Rich would read through them and help edit them if we decided to print them. Ron Anthony wrote a great book on comping. We published Tommy Tedesco's book, Joe Diorio's books, Rich wrote four books for me. Twenty-five titles in all. So then we really had to move to the warehouse.

You know, it's funny, I remember when we went to Europe, we went to Chappel Music (they were in every country). They looked at the manuscript and

could see that it was all hand-written and they laughed and said, "Aren't you getting this printed professionally?" I told them that this makes people feel closer with the author. They didn't buy it.

EE: Laughing—it was a good idea to try.

DZ: I used that later on with the next book where we had a printer who type-set it, but Ted would always add these hand-written notes and the printer didn't like the way it looked so we couldn't give him credit. He didn't want his name associated with the book. Eventually I bought a music typewriter. Now, of course, you can do it all with a computer.

EE: Things have certainly changed. I'll bet the printer wishes he had put his name on your product now.

DZ: Yeah. Another thing we did is always put in the table of contents when we advertised a book. I would always ask the writer for a table of contents first, and that would tell us how we would move forward. Rich Severson might have told you this, but we were receiving a manuscript a day at one point. I still have those manuscripts. Some players just wanted to have something published. Some people would ask, can you publish my book, and they hadn't written anything. There are a couple of our books out there that Alfred (who owns the publishing now), can't even find, like the Pentatonic Guitar Guide by Tom Chase. They haven't even seen it. I have my original copy, but that's it.

EE: I have quite a few of your books as well. They are great, and played a big part in my own development as a player. You launched a whole series of really good guitar instruction. You also started putting recordings with the books with those vinyl sound sheets.

DZ: Thanks. Yeah, timing is everything. Those sound sheets were in for awhile.

EE: So you really jumped head-first into this fraternity of jazz guitarists and music publishers...

DZ: Yes, I met many great people. Mel Bay and Ernie Ball, Tommy Tedesco and Joe Pass, Howard Roberts—they were some of the people that I got to hang out with. I was very fortunate. I was very fortunate to have worked with Tommy and publish his book. From there I hooked up with Joe Diorio. He came out from Florida and Joe Pass told him to hook up with me. I worked with Joe Diorio publishing two of his books and releas-

ing his album, Bonita. They just re-released that on CD on Art of Life Records. He came in with the band and just played every tune twice and picked the best takes—just amazing.

Everything was just opening up back then. Howard Roberts called me and asked if I would be interested in purchasing his publishing company. I remember selling the "Howard Roberts is a Dirty Guitar Player" LP in the Ernie Ball Guitar Studio. I have a lot of respect for Howard but the acquisition never happened.

Joe Pass invited me over to his home. I believe this was 1973. Joe showed me all his unpublished works. The papers stood about 2 ½ ft. high. I believe he wanted me to publish his works, but at the time, I was so in awe. I thought he'd invited me over to hang out and we never talked about it. I had met Joe in 1963 when he played at a Christmas party for all the Ernie Ball employees. Also, in 1968, I played the Steve Allen TV Show. Terry Gibbs was the band leader and Joe was the guitar player. Joe also was a substitute teacher at my guitar store. You know, Terry Gibbs opened a music store around the corner from my store. I played vibes, and Terry would always come into my store and work out on my vibes. At that time, I did not realize how important the people I had met would be to me later in life.

When I finally sold the company, everyone wanted a part of it. Of course, at first no one believed how many books we were selling until I showed them my receipts. I still retain an interest in the company today.

EE: How did the sale of the company take place?

DZ: Everyone wanted to buy it. Columbia wanted it. Eventually Belwin Mills bought it and gave an interest in the company to me and my kids. The copyright was then sold to Columbia Pictures, then Warner Chappel, and now Alfred. Since Alfred got hold of it the sales have gone through the roof. Ron Manis put my name and logo back on the covers (which they didn't have to do). It's great. I remember Ted telling me, "When you want to sell it, go ahead. You never said you'd do this for the rest of your life." His royalties were 20 grand when he only had a couple of books out. He loved it so much he'd go buy guitars with the money.

Alfred is re-releasing more of the titles. They just did a four-book set as "Originally published by Dale Zdenek." which is really nice. I don't have control over what they republish though. They are really a big

publisher. They took over all of Warner Brothers and Cherry Lane. They have thousands of books. They just released Tommy Tedesco's book, too.

EE: I have that one—the one with the red cover. Tommy was great. He was a funny guy. I got to see him around 1990 at a clinic. It was a treat. I had him sign my book. He had such great stories.

DZ: Tommy did have great stories. You know, he always wanted Ted to record and play with him. Ted loved to play. He didn't play out a lot, but he loved to just play. Tommy asked Ted to play with him in a band and Ted said no. Of course Tommy asked me to convince Ted to play with him. Ted still said no. But one day we were at the NAAM booth and Ted sat down to play with Tommy and the two of them started pushing the tempo and Ted was having so much fun he just laughed. Tommy could play very fast, but Ted kept up with his chords and great ideas. It came naturally to Ted, but he still worked at it. He devoted his entire life to music. And he always wanted to improve. You know, Ted wasn't that happy with his first book. He was more proud of his Jazz 1 and 2 (single note soloing).

EE: Isn't that amazing. We're all our own biggest critics. Tell me about your new web site, tedgreene-bookeditions.com. It's a great web site.

DZ: You know, I started it to help people keep track of the editions of the books. Remember, I'm not a real publisher, so I didn't put which edition was which when we printed them. They all say the same thing (published Dale Zdenek 1971). So that's the reason we did the site. I've kept every edition. There are also some great tributes to Ted from old friends like Rich Severson and former students like Jay Graydon.

Also, Ted left such a legacy of stuff. This is a way to help organize and keep track of his work. We almost need someone to become like a caretaker of his work. Because you know it will last. Currently, the quality of the recordings and lessons that people have posted isn't that high. Ted was always concerned with the sound quality. When you listen to some of the material that's out there and you know Ted, or you've sat with him, then you are hearing him and remembering how he sounded. But if you've never met him, that recording is the only example that you have of Ted and his playing, and you don't really hear the essence of who he was. It would be nice for someone to remix or clean up the quality of what's being put out there

because this material is going to be around 100 years from now. Otherwise, if we don't do it right, you won't have a true sense for who Ted was.

EE: That's true. So what have you been doing with your time since selling the publishing business?

DZ: I got back into selling some guitars and amps, and that's when I sold the business and became a realtor/broker, which I've been for about 25 years. But I haven't gotten out of the music business. I still play and perform, and up until about 3 or 4 years ago I was importing guitars. We had our own company called Lindale Guitars (My wife's name is Linda.) They were inexpensive acoustic guitars and violins. And then I got tired of that. It was a lot of work. I couldn't let an instrument go out unless I'd played it and checked it out and it was just too much, so that was it. We still do real estate. I work out of my home. I show property. My wife has been with me in this business all the way from the start. We met when we were 14.

By the way, she actually bought one of Ted's last muscle cars: a '64 or '65 Chevelle, with big slicks on the back. In fact, once when I saw him, he was showing me a harmonica book that he bought. He had purchased two of them and I asked him why. He said, "I buy two of everything and I leave one in my car, so if I break down I have something to read until I can get help." He was such an interesting guy. I wrote a book about four or five years ago, and Ted edited it for me and he changed the name of it. He said, "That name's not happening." He certainly seemed to have a sense for what will sell.

EE: So are you doing any playing out in Las Vegas?

DZ: Yes, I still play. I have a couple of CDs. I have a little demo CD with some excerpts on it: blues, jazz and pop tunes. I'm not out looking for gigs every day.

EE: Are you rubbing elbows with Robert Conti? He's pretty amazing too.

DZ: Yeah, he's one of my favorite players. I had a chance to see him sit in on a blues gig a couple of years ago. He picked up a strat and played incredibly. I was amazed.

EE: You've played some extraordinary guitars over the years. What are you playing currently?

DZ: I have a strat. I also have a Johnny Smith that I bought from Johnny himself back in 1978. He ran a store out in Colorado and he used to carry our books,

so we became friends over the years. He told me to get the model with the curly maple. He gave me a lesson on wood and how the maple tree gets hit by the wind and it forces the tree to grow and it curls the wood a certain way. This guitar sounds beautiful. I'm thinking about getting a PRS now, too.

EE: That's great that you are performing. What an amazing career you had. How would you sum up Ted Greene and his work?

DZ: Whatever he did, he did it all the way, whether it was hot rods or baseball cards or music. He was also one of those people who never have anything negative to say about anyone. When I took lessons from Ted and became disappointed with my progress, he would take my guitar, put it into my left hand, and would ask me to play an open C or E chord—which was very hard to do. Then he would say, "That is how it felt when you first started playing." Then you would realize how much progress you had made. Ted would do this with other students who felt they weren't making progress. He's left a great mark on the guitar world, and I hope people will continue to learn from him.

EE: That's great, Dale. Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts and time with me.

DZ: Thank you, Eric, it's been a pleasure.

Publication Catalog:

Ted Greene

Chord Chemistry

Modern Chord Progressions: Vol. 1

Jazz Single Note Soloing: Vol. 1

Jazz Single Note Soloing: Vol. 2

Tommy Tedesco

For Guitar Players Only

Joe Diorio

Fusion

Single Line Improvising

Steve Lynch

The Right Touch

Ron Anthony

Comping

Rich Severson

Blues and Rock Guitar

Country and Country Rock Guitar Soloing

Guitar Technique

John Kurnick

Guitar Licks Made Easy

Tom Chase

Pentatonic Guitar Guide

Leon White

Sight to Sound

Styles For the Studio

Jay Friedman

Guitar Chords Arpeggios and Studies

Guitar Scales and Melodic Patterns (ed.1)

Guitar Scales and Melodic Patterns (ed.2)

Guitar Complete

Bass Guitar Scales and Melodic Patterns

Bass Guitar Chords and Arpeggio Studies

Bass Guitar Complete

The Manuscript Book

Dale Zdenek

Jazz Soloing 1st Tools

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