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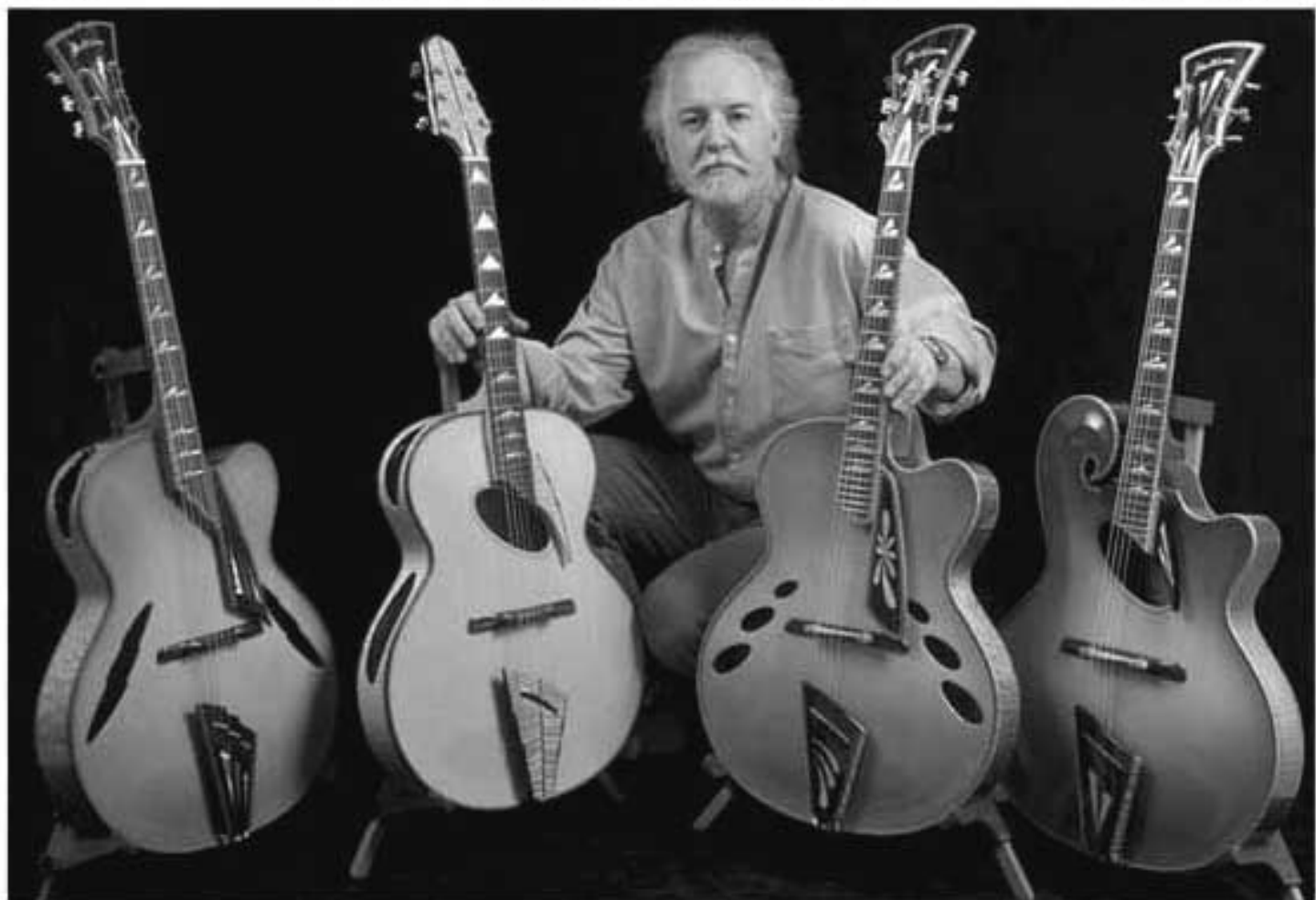


Ralston VL Guitar

U.S. \$11⁹⁹

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John Monteleone with his Four Seasons Guitars

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FRANK PORTOLESE

by Thomas Cray



Frunk Portolese is a jazz guitarist with a voice uniquely his own. His guitar playing reflects a deep respect for tradition while being rooted firmly in the present. After hearing Frank's trio and quartet recordings on CD and seeing him perform in numerous configurations, I was excited when he approached me last year to help with the artwork for his latest album, *Plectrum Jazz Guitar Solos*, released in early 2011. While working with Frank, I learned we both were inspired to pick up the guitar by the same four musicians...

Frank: I remember seeing on the evening news that a group called the Beatles was coming to America. They were arriving at the airport and people were freaking out. The next morning my friends and I were on the playground where we were forming a band and we were deciding what instruments we were going to play. That was the order - band first, then instruments.

TC: *So you didn't play an instrument at that time?*

Frank: No, nothing. I was told I could take piano or guitar lessons just prior to this time. I ended up taking 6 months of guitar lessons at the local music store from Denny Sierens. He had a big Gibson archtop.

TC: *What did you have?*

Frank: I was using an acoustic flat top that I borrowed from my friend Chuck McKinnis. It had a big quarter note painted on the top. I played that guitar until

Christmas, when I got my own. One thing I learned early on was that I had a good ear for chords. I found that I could find the bass notes by going up and down the 6th string. I could work out the bass lines. I realized that if the bass player was playing an A, then the chord was likely some kind of A chord. Almost just as quickly I could tell the difference between the major and minor chords. Then I started to realize that songs in the same key would use the same chords. All I had to do was wait for the next song on the radio to test the theory. Without knowing it, I was getting an ear for harmony.

TC: *Do you remember when you started playing in front of people?*

Frank: By the freshman year of high school I was playing in the YMCA and private clubs. And I remember there were these two girls who decided they were going to organize a dance on Friday night, and by this time the band could play. We played *The Sound Of Silence*, *Rain*, *Farmer Brown*, *Little Latin Lupe Lu...* And all of the sudden it seemed like I was this big deal; people I didn't really know were coming up to me at school on Monday and wanting to talk to me. *GIRLS* were wanting to talk to me. And what was interesting is I wasn't that impressed by my performance. I didn't think what we were doing sounded enough like the record. I felt people were ascribing a greater ability to what I was doing than what I felt was really going on. I was surprised and basically learned very early on that people were easily impressed. I found that a little disillusioning. At the same time, I was realizing that much of what I was doing was coming pretty easy to me.

TC: *When did you begin considering playing jazz on your guitar?*

Frank: Junior year of college. There was a saxophone player in the dorms, and he sat me down and said, "I'm gonna play Charlie Parker for you." While I was listening, I said, "Which one's Charlie Parker?" I had no idea. I heard a whole bunch of stuff going on, but I couldn't particularly relate to it. I could relate to things on the guitar. A little later on, I heard the George Benson album, *Bad Benson*. I thought it was the greatest thing I ever heard.

TC: *What about it?*

Frank: It was real music. It seemed to have a whole lot more going on. It wasn't one-dimensional. The

chordal motions were different. It was more sophisticated. This album had a real strong impact on me. Apparently there was always something missing. Most music was somehow... incomplete. And shortly thereafter I heard Virtuoso. Now at this point it's all over. I pretty much completely lost interest in what I'd done up to that time. (Since then, I suppose, I've come back to some of that...)



TC: Oh, sure...

Frank: I wasn't interested in The Allman Brothers. I continued to play it, but I knew that everything had changed.

TC: What was your path now? How were you, as a guitarist, going to get where you wanted to go now?

Frank: I had no idea. I heard certain things. I knew people like Santana, Duane Allman, and of course Jimi Hendrix were aware of, for example, modal music, of free jazz in the 1960s, and it was going both ways. The jazz people were picking up on the rock thing, too. There was a lot of cross-fertilization going on. I just knew that there was a form of music now that seemed to answer something for me that, I guess, had been unanswered from the start. I'm hearing Joe Pass and I'm thinking, this is it. I had no idea where I was gonna go with it. I mean, at this point, I was still studying journalism in college. Towards that end it was important to finish college. You know, family responsibilities...

TC: Of course.

Frank: So I got my degree in June of 1975. In September I moved to Chicago, got my first apartment in the DePaul neighborhood, and got my first job selling guitars at Jack Cecchini Classic and Modern Guitar Studios on Wabash in downtown Chicago, in the basement of the Wurlitzer Piano building. I was selling guitars, making \$90 a week, and paying \$15 of that for guitar lessons with Jack. I had my own place, but was living very simply.

TC: Tell me about Jack.

Frank: He was a well-respected educator. He was known for his studio work and as a classical guitarist, but his passion was education. He's as great a guitar player as you're ever gonna meet in every area, but he's a very brilliant teacher.

TC: Did you tell him you wanted to be a jazz guitarist?

Frank: He asked me what I wanted to do, and I said, "I want to make a living playing music." And he said, "Learn tunes." I studied with him for 5 years. I studied guitar technique, scales and harmony.

TC: Sight reading?

Frank: A little bit. He showed me how the guitar neck is organized. He showed me how to figure out scales and intervals, and he showed me how to organize harmony... triads and 4 voices.

TC: But reading wasn't a priority?

Frank: It was a priority, but there were priorities and there were *PRIORITIES*. What he did show me was how rhythm works. He showed me how to recognize time. Jazz musicians understand sound and jazz musicians understand time. I suppose Jack chose the thing that was the higher priority, because I had a long way to go.

TC: It was okay that you couldn't sight read?

Frank: I had a long way to go. I couldn't function yet as a professional musician.

TC: And that was your goal.

Frank: Yes.

TC: And sight reading wasn't at the top of your list.

Frank: It was up there, but not the top. I did work on it - duet books and such - but he said, "Know tunes and you'll work," so I don't think it was his highest priority. Maybe if I had told Jack something different or even

phrased my goal differently... but what he taught me was what I needed to learn to make a living as a professional musician. Let me tell you, outside of my dad, he's the most influential man I'll ever meet, no question. He's an original thinker, he's intensely creative, he has an unceasing curiosity and a very courageous curiosity. He follows something to its conclusion, regardless of the consequences. That's rare. So I suffered the slings and arrows of studying with the maestro for five years. Within that period I started going to a jam session on Monday nights. John Wright was the piano player, Corky Roberts and later on Eddie De Haas played bass. Marshall Thompson was the drummer. I went to Monday night jam sessions with these guys from 9pm-3am for 3 or 4 years at The Pickwick in Palatine. I learned a whole lot of whatever I know about jazz today there with those guys. They were experienced, they were active players starting in the late fifties (maybe earlier with Marshall) and they had played with all the eminent people who came through Chicago. They were a primary source.

TC: *Did they take you under their wing?*

Frank: They did. I went to the jam session with a friend who wanted me to go, and they asked me up, and I played *Bluesette*. They did what I found out later is what you do with inexperienced players: they said, "You come back. Next week you be here." And that's what we do - we pass it forward. At the time, I was very grateful that people who played like that and were of a different upbringing and of a different culture were so warm to me. I'm not sure what they saw in my playing... maybe they saw my respect for what they did.

TC: *Did they know you as a student of Jack Cecchini? Did they know Jack Cecchini?*

Frank: Oh yeah. Everyone knew Jack. I'm sure I told them I was his student. I met a lot of people whom I know to this day for the first time at that Monday night jam session. It was a great jam session. Good players that played good music; it always swung like crazy... it was the real deal, so people would make the drive. That's where I first started learning my tunes.

TC: *What guitar were you playing by then?*

Frank: I bought my Barker guitar at that time from Jack. I had a Gibson Charlie Christian before that.

TC: *The ES-150 non-cutaway?*

Frank: Yes. It had the sound. It had the pickup.

TC: *Well, Barney (Kessel) kept that sound his entire career.*

Frank: The guitar was ruined in a flood but I still have that pickup, and one of these days I'm gonna do something around that pickup. So anyway, I got my Barker around 1978.

TC: *Tell me about that.*

Frank: I had been saving my pesos, I was ready to get a real axe, and I remember at that time, I was really enamored with a Koontz guitar. Jack played one and it seemed all the jazz guys had Koontz guitars, and all the classical guys played Velazquez.

TC: *Really? There were that many Koontz guitars around?*

Frank: A lot of teachers had them. By this time I was teaching at Jack Cecchini's shop.

TC: *So you were now a student and a teacher?*

Frank: I was a student, working in his store. I was teaching. I was doing a five to six-night-a-week lounge act. I got a job delivering pizzas...

TC: *Wow!*

Frank: So anyway, I was gonna buy a guitar, and Jack had some great guitars, so I was going to buy it from him. He had a Koontz and two Barkers, which I had never heard of. So I sat in a room for a few hours with the three guitars. They were all priced around the same - \$2800-\$3000.

TC: *Was there much difference between the Barkers?*

Frank: Hmmm, well, they were both 17inch archtops; one had the more standard headstock. I played those guitars for a few hours, and then I came back the next night and did it again. The one I ended up choosing had the best acoustic sound. I think I was going through a bit of a learning curve there because I wasn't positive what I was listening to or listening for. I had to take my time. I played the same chords, the same tunes, over and over again, and decided on this one.

TC: *Did the necks feel the same?*

Frank: Not exactly, but they were all the same scale; they all had DeArmond pickups on them so the electric sound was gonna be largely consistent. I came in wanting the Koontz, but I tried to be objective and to try to listen.

TC: *That's pretty mature.*

Frank: It was a lot of money.

TC: *Did Jack tell you which guitar he thought was the best?*

Frank: No, he wouldn't tell me. I'm sure I asked him.

TC: *I find it fascinating that you have played your Barker for over 30 years. I mean, I can think of only two guitarists, offhand, who have done that. You and Barney Kessel. I find that fascinating.*

Frank: I have two great axes: I have my Barker, and I have an old Strat, for pop playing. And I got the old Strat about the same time.

TC: *So you were done with the whole "buying guitars" thing pretty early.*

Frank: I didn't need another guitar - I was good to go. I did go through a lot of amplifiers, though (we both laugh). I'm still kinda doing that (more laughter).

TC: *Tell me more about that time.*

Frank: Well, I mentioned the jam sessions. If there weren't any going on, we'd just meet in someone's basement at 10 at night, play for 3 hours, go down to El Presidente and get some Mexican food, and then go back and play until almost dawn. I was single, there was a community of musicians my age, and we would just do it. And then, around 1981, a couple of things happened: I got married, and I got a teaching gig at The American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. It had been a very eminent institution for many years. Lennie Tristano graduated from there; a lot of notable classical musicians graduated from there. Jim Dutton taught there (the founder of Birch Creek), and I ended up teaching there for a few years.

TC: *So by this time you had completed your studies with Jack?*

Frank: Yes. After studying with Jack, I studied for 9 months or so with Joe Daley, a tenor sax player here in town. Many musicians who were active at that time in Chicago studied with Joe. He taught any instrument because he didn't teach the instrument; he taught jazz improvisation. When I called asking about lessons, he asked, "Well, can you play your guitar?" and I knew what he meant.

TC: *Would it be correct to say that improvisation became the natural focus at this point in your*

studies/career?

Frank: Yes. But I really liked harmony. I would study tunes, and I would see how a bass line would instigate a certain chord progression, and you'd get to a certain point in the progression. A chord would come up, and you'd see how everything was leading to it. Then, when you have that chord, it functions as one role in the old progression but also functions as a different role in the new progression. That's going on, and then there's this parallel thing going on in the melody. I'd study a Cole Porter tune and recognize his ingenuity, and I'd think, "how clever" before I'd even try to play it on the guitar. I was aware of it, almost like a game. I'd "get it." And once you learn a song like that, you don't forget it. If you're memorizing a sequence of chords, you're not gonna learn a lot of tunes, but when you see, for example, that not only does Cole Porter like those half-diminished chords in *Night And Day*, he uses them all the time. That's what he likes to do. He likes that harmonic minor sound resolving to A major. That's his thing. And Gershwin has this sort of jazz-age blues sensibility, and all of his verses modulate to the three chord. One way or another he will find a way to do that. Just being able to hear these things gets you into the mind of the composer. You're beginning to understand his intention. And then, hopefully, when you're playing, you know enough on your instrument, so you have those resources. Those sorts of pursuits and those rewards were an affirmation that I was doing the right thing. It is, to this day, intensely satisfying.

TC: *Playing jazz?*

Frank: Yes. I feel like it's a link to a great musical tradition, and I think it's a link to a great artistic tradition in Western culture, like art, theatre or literature. Sometimes you're studying musical concepts, but sometimes you're studying artistic concepts. One day I went to study with Joe, and he said, "Today we're gonna study the ornaments." He said, "Here's Charlie Parker's ornaments," and we studied them.

TC: *(a lost look on my face)*

Frank: An ornament is a rhythmic figure that begins or, perhaps, interrupts a phrase. A typical mainstream jazz phrase will be a line of eighth notes, and a typical Charlie Parker phrase might be where he starts with an eighth rest, an eighth note, and then three eighth-note triplets. It sounds like this (hums the mentioned phrase). That thing at the beginning - that's the ornament. That is a rhythmic doodad, which serves to begin

the phrase. Now you realize that ornaments - that's an artistic term. Architecture. Corinthian columns, Doric columns, Ionic columns. The eighth note is the column itself, which is just a smooth pillar. The decoration at the end - that's the ornament. These are terms that are of greater artistic value and apply to other arts. This helps to understand the world we're living in better. And when all is said and done, and it comes time to make our own contribution, it's of a value and a level that are commensurate with the contributions of others in the culture in which we live. I don't want to be another Wes Montgomery - there's already one of those. If I want to hear him, I'll put one of his records on. I don't see the point of tribute albums. I don't see the value in anything else other than searching your whole life to find and develop your own voice. And for me, it has to be based on tradition. Not for others - there are people who are iconoclasts... who strike out on their own, and there's value in that, but not for me. Something resonated very deep when I heard George Benson that day, and Joe Pass that day.

TC: Were George and Joe the "tradition"? Or was what they were doing based on the tradition?

Frank: It's a linear concept. It can exist in any of the arts; it can even exist in sports, I suppose. Any human endeavor. People, typically, will begin their pursuits based on some ongoing thing that has preceded them. When they develop their craft they do so in respect for that, and their contributions will reflect that respect. But, as you mature, you reflect the times that you live in, and that's where your individuality is. Charlie Christian sounds like 1941. Wes Montgomery sounds like 1961. Jimi Hendrix sounds like 1966. Your vision and your ear are formed by a collective set of accomplishments by those who precede you, but the times in which you live determine your expression. It's not your call.

TC: Did studying with Joe Daley help you develop your contribution?

Frank: Studying with both Jack and Joe did. I learned how to play the guitar from Jack, but I got plenty of artistic insight, too. Like the fact that there *is* such a thing. Joe's thing was much more centered on jazz and the jazz tradition, but by the same token he urged me very strongly to listen to 20th century classical music - orchestra, chamber music, music other than jazz - because that was in the air at the time that bebop was happening. Just like the modal players were influenced

by the rock musicians and vice versa in the 1960s, in the 1940s there were all kinds of things happening at once, especially in New York.

TC: So you studied with Joe for 9 months?

Frank: Yes. He had a specific outline, and when you were through with it, you were done. Near the end of it, he encouraged me to study free jazz (the Joe Daily Trio was one of the early innovators of free jazz). He didn't give me a lot of direction; he just said, "Do this and see what you come up with..." so I would play things for him for a couple of weeks and when I finished I would look up at him and he would always say, "Oh, man, you stopped. Why did you stop?" I said, "Because I was finished," and he'd say, "No you weren't," and I would have to figure out what that meant. I'd go home and play and come back and play longer, and he'd say the same thing. So one day I was driving home from my lesson and decided the next time I wasn't gonna stop. Ever. *EVER.*

TC: Until he stopped you...

Frank: I don't think I was ever gonna stop then. I went home, and I practiced, and I tried to play-you know-all afternoon.

TC: Were you playing chord melody? How free were you playing?

Frank: It's hard to say what I was doing (laughs). You would try to play music, and you would try not to edit yourself in any way by any preconceived notion... even though that's probably impossible. So I went into the lesson, sat down in his basement, and started playing. I closed my eyes and just played forever. After a while, I lost track of time. It felt like I didn't know where I was. I could have been anywhere, or nowhere. It was pretty spiritual. It wasn't relevant where I was or what I was doing. I was producing sound, and I was following my muse. It went on like this for a long time. I wasn't even thinking about time. I kind of lost my mind a little bit. And then, very faintly, I heard the door open. Thomas, it was like being in a coma. I did not respond to it at all. I was in that extreme narcissistic state that catatonic people must be in, except I was playing. I don't know how long it lasted, but I started feeling, somehow, that I better wind this down because this is really, really weird. It felt like waking up from a nap. I opened my eyes and Joe looked at me and said, "(snort) all right..." I packed up the guitar, and a week or two after that he said, "I think we should stop now."

TC: So you graduated!

Frank: I graduated from the University of Joe Daley.

TC: I'm going to jump to the present. You are a performer, a recording artist, a private instructor and a teacher working at several colleges and universities. You're a husband and a father and a homeowner. You are "living the dream."

Frank: (hesitant) Sounds like it...

TC: I think there are a lot of young jazz guitarists out there who might like to know how you got to this point.

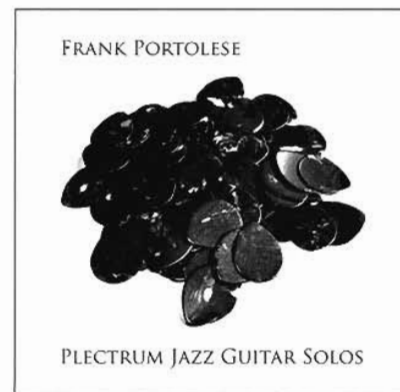
Frank: Hmm. Well, I think I made a lot more good choices than bad ones. I move slowly. I think about things for a long time before I make a move. I made a couple more good choices. I married a great woman, I took care of myself, I tried to make good investments, I tried to recognize and take advantage of opportunities when they arrived. I tried to be a good father and modeled myself after my own father, but also realized I needed to be a 1990s father and not a 1950s father. My son is 28 now and is a classical violinist living in Kalamazoo, MI. He calls me and asks my advice about things, and follows it! (smiles)

TC: Sounds rewarding.

Frank: Jack always said, "You play what you are, and if you want to play well, be somebody." It's true; you can't turn it on and off. You can't be one kind of person and be another kind of player. And so I'm not gonna follow a myth that gathers around a certain image of what an artist is... or what a teacher is. I'm just gonna try to make good choices day after day, and keep my eye on the prize, and see where it leads. I'm 58, I've played the guitar since I was 11, and I haven't let up. Not in a significant way. I remember watching Joe Pass near the end. His playing evolved over his entire career. It was more poetic near the end. He played more relaxed. There wasn't anything to prove, and it was deeply profound on all levels. It was historic. Epochal. Those kind of lessons are not lost on a guy who plays the guitar and doesn't have a lot of other options in his life. You're supposed to sound like you. You have to master your instrument, you have to master your music, and you have to know who you are. That takes effort. Scales and chords take effort, but so does knowing yourself. Becoming a person who has something to say takes effort. You have to think about the meaning of your life - not life, but *YOUR* life. You have to lose anger. You have to embrace things and reject other things. You have to try to grow up.

Frank Portolese doesn't sound like anyone I've heard in person or on record. He "digs in" in a way that can be both ferocious and delicate at the same time. He can take time to the edge to create tension, but never at the expense of the melody. Frank learned from some great teachers, and now finds himself continuing this tradition as he teaches future jazz musicians in the classroom, from the stage, in his recordings - by helping them find their own voice with respect to both tradition and the world they live in today.

Frank Portolese's latest release, *Plectrum Jazz Guitar Solos*, is available on iTunes and at Amazon.com



To learn more visit him at:

<http://www.frankportolese.com/>

Frank Portolese was interviewed by Thomas Cray on November 17, 2011

tc@craydesign.com

www.thomascray.com