

# JAZZIZ<sup>®</sup>

art for your ears

A photograph of Pat Metheny playing a yellow and red hollow-body electric guitar. He has long, curly, light-colored hair and is wearing a dark, patterned shirt. He is looking down at the guitar with a focused expression. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the guitar and his hair.

**PAT  
METHENY**



# Pat Metheny Covered

Though I was a Pat Metheny fan for nearly a decade before I launched JAZZIZ in 1983, it was his concert, at an outdoor band shell on the University of Florida campus, less than a year before, that got me to focus on the magazine's mission.

As a music reviewer for several publications in the late '70s and early '80s, I was in touch with ECM, the label for whom Metheny recorded. It was ECM that sent me the press credentials that allowed me to go backstage to interview Metheny after the show. By then, Metheny had recorded around 10 LPs with various instrumental lineups: solo guitar, duo work with Lyles Mays on the chart-topping *As Wichita Falls, So Falls Wichita Falls*, trio, larger ensembles and of course his Pat Metheny Group. Critics recognized him as a great young jazz guitarist/composer with a transitional/traditional style.

Metheny's concert that night in Gainesville changed my life. The show was not what I expected. The jazz guitarist pivoted musically into a high-energy stage production, mesmerizing a few thousand students and faculty, most of whom had never heard his name or his music. Metheny and his band (Mays, Steve Rodby, Paul Wertico and Pedro Aznar) played an entire set from a yet-to-be-named album in a musical language that was then unknown. Acoustic, electronic and synthesized sounds mixed to create an ethereal ambiance, a type of world music that featured Metheny's own brand of swing.

Metheny and I hung out in his trailer for hours after the show. We spent much of that time discussing his approach to jazz and the preparation that went into presenting it. I didn't mention that I was just then conducting my first interview or that the article I planned to write about Metheny would be my first stab at a full-length feature story. At that point, I wasn't even sure if and when JAZZIZ would ever launch. Nonetheless, I soon began transcribing the recorded interview and writing the story during rare downtime during my first-year medical-school studies. My aim was to run the piece as the cover story in the premiere issue of JAZZIZ.

When the time finally arrived to produce the first issue, we didn't have a decent photo of Pat or a budget for a photo shoot, so we went with a different cover. Still, my poorly written feature ran in that premiere issue (and is included in this

special edition, so go ahead and make fun if you please).

In 1985, we published a cover story that included Metheny, but the feature was about the growing use of guitar synthesizers in jazz, and we ran a photo of John McLaughlin on the cover. Strike two. The first JAZZIZ cover that featured Pat ran a few years later, when he recorded *Song X* with Ornette Coleman. When the time came to design the cover, only photos of Metheny alone worked, and Pat was unhappy with that because he felt Ornette should have shared the spotlight. Strike three.

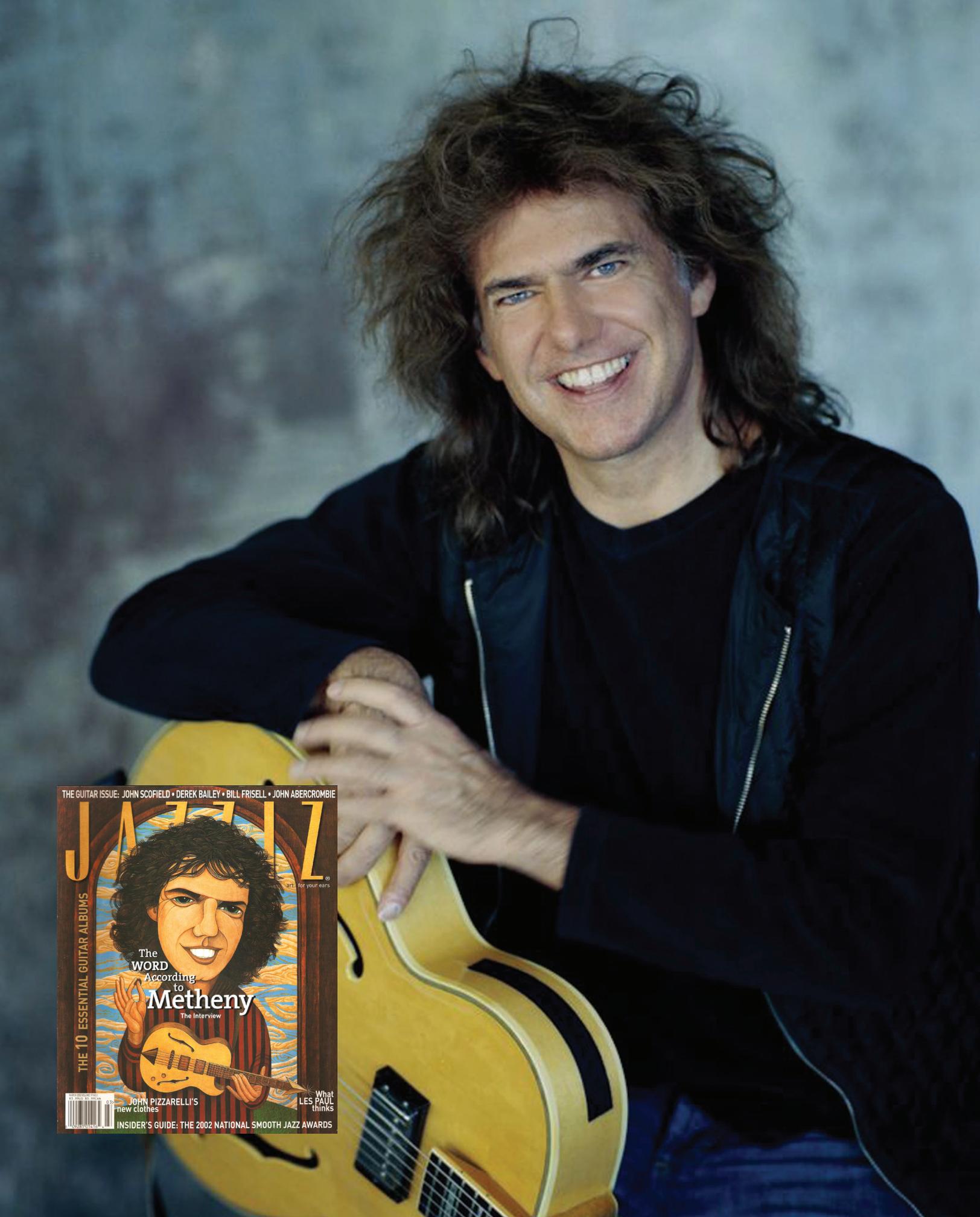
A few years later, I commissioned *Rolling Stone* photographer Deborah Feingold to do a Metheny shoot for a cover story that would delve into his latest album at the time. I recall waiting anxiously for the photos. When the FedEx package arrived, there were only two shots included; normally, I received all of the photos from a shoot. When I called Deborah, she told me that Pat only approved the two shots she sent. She said that she understood why I was annoyed but that she didn't want to get "in the middle." I decided to take it on the chin, and ran a cropped close-up of one of the shots.

We decided to do another Metheny cover in conjunction with his 2005 release *The Way Up*. That time around, I didn't want to deal with another photo ordeal, so I assigned JAZZIZ magazine's original art director, Daniel Nevins (who by then had become an accomplished fine artist), to illustrate Pat. When the issue launched, Metheny's management was furious that we ran an illustration instead of a photo. In response, I sent an email venting my frustration about Metheny to my co-publisher who crafted a kinder, if not more politically correct, explanation. Inadvertently my rant was forwarded to Pat and his associates.

You might think at this point that Metheny and I are at odds. Not so. He's still one of my favorite artists. Over the last 35 years, he's been the musician we've covered most. We had a chance to reconvene in Washington D.C. last year after the Jazz at the White House event, and I made it a point to again express my gratitude for his contribution to the jazz world. In that spirit, we present you with a few of the Pat Metheny stories that have run in JAZZIZ. Enjoy.

—Michael Fagien





THE GUITAR ISSUE: JOHN SCOFIELD • DEREK BAILEY • BILL FRISELL • JOHN ABERCROMBIE

# JAZZ

THE 10 ESSENTIAL GUITAR ALBUMS

Art. for your ears

The WORD According to Metheny  
The Interview

JOHN PIZZARELLI'S new clothes

What LES PAUL thinks

INSIDER'S GUIDE: THE 2002 NATIONAL SMOOTH JAZZ AWARDS

# the Pat Metheny

JAZZIZ 2002

# Metheny

## interview

by Michael Fagien

*History will likely be exceptionally kind to Pat Metheny. The guitarist, after all, is one of the most innovative, influential, and versatile musicians of his generation. During the last three decades, beyond his endless touring, he's recorded an astounding lot of music in a stupefying array of contexts. His most enduring - and commercially viable - vehicle is the Pat Metheny Group. With a lineup that currently includes vocalist Richard Bona, trumpeter Cuong Vu, drummer Antonio Sanchez, as well as longtime Metheny collaborators keyboardist Lyle Mays and bassist Steve Rodby, the Group recently recorded *Speaking of Now* {Warner Bros.}, the band's eleventh studio album. With the record safely in the can, a relaxed Metheny sat down for an interview with JAZZIZ publisher and editor-in-chief Michael Fagien. Over the course of a sprawling conversation, Metheny was unfailingly blunt and articulate, whether discussing life on the road, the sounds in his head, or the mechanics of his art.*

**MICHAEL FAGIEN:** You seem to have always managed a rather hectic tour schedule. I remember meeting with you in a trailer 20 years ago for our first interview. You were on the road then and it seems like you've never let up. Do you enjoy being on the road so much?

**PAT METHENY:** I love playing so much. And you're right, I don't think I know of anyone who has done as many gigs as I have over the past 20 years, at least not in the jazz world. For me it hasn't really been hectic as much as it has been really fun - and an incredible opportunity to learn about music and playing. And it was always a dream for me, the thing of getting out there and playing

a lot, night after night. It is what I always wanted to do more than anything else. As much as practicing and thinking and working on music can benefit a player's progress, I don't think anything compares to the impact that just getting out there and playing night in and night out has. It all becomes real onstage; there is nothing theoretical about it. Having said that, the past few years have been somewhat different for me. It's not that I don't still love going out and playing hundreds of gigs at a clip - I do. But I have to admit that I have been putting more attention and energy into different things, including the thing of taking the recorded medium

“Especially in the very early years, I felt the records were really more just like an ad to get people to come to the gigs when we would show up in their town.”

itself a little more seriously by taking more time to try to make better records. Also, composing has become much more consuming for me as the standards of what I really accept melodically keep going up all the time. But, beyond that, the most significant change is that I now have a wonderful family life with two beautiful little boys at home and I love being with them so much. I certainly will still do a lot of gigs, but I don't think [the tours] will be of record-breaking lengths anymore.

**Does your music translate better live than it does via, say, a compact disc?**

In many ways I see records and live concerts as being connected but somewhat unrelated activities - especially where improvisation is involved. They functionally occur at such distinctly different temperatures that they are bound to bring out different aspects of one's musical personality. I have always had a hard time with the way that recordings seem to be perceived as the defining evidence of a player's career and music - although objectively, I suppose I can see why that is so. Especially in the very early years, I felt the records were really more just like an ad to get people to come to the gigs when we would show up in their town. And it seemed like during that period, there was much more of a difference between the records and the live thing, especially since so many of those early records were really recorded in a day or two with not much opportunity to expand on what they actually were going to be beyond just being a documentation of that particular band on that particular day. As time has gone

on, I have been able to take the records themselves much more seriously and feel much more reconciled with their taking a more definitive place in things.

**Baseball great Cal Ripken once said, "Practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect." You used to be a practice fiend. Did you practice perfect?**

It's funny when I look back on my early fanatical period - basically from when I was 13 until I was 19- it wasn't that I was that interested in practicing per se; it was that I had a lot to do, a lot to digest. And I really practically and functionally needed to get it together as soon as possible because I was actually working a lot - probably several years before I should have been. When I would get on a stage with older musicians around Kansas City, when I was 15 or 16 or 17, and they would call a tune that I didn't know, in a key that I wasn't that comfortable in, at a tempo that was not that great for me, I would get the message in a very clear way that that is what I better get together -and hopefully by that same time tomorrow! These days, I am sorry to say, when I am not on the road, I barely touch the instrument. If I had more time, I would continue to practice a lot - but it seems my time now needs to be spent addressing compositional and melodic issues in order to keep coming up with things that are inspiring to me. It has been many years since the guitar itself was kind of an end-all thing for me. However, I really hope that one day I will again be able to really focus on the guitar more. I love the instrument in a way now that I just simply didn't in the first 10 years or so that I played

it And I do think that if I could spend a year or so now really working on it with the information and general maturity level that I have now, that I didn't have 25 years ago, I could make a lot of real progress.

**You talk about your more “out” playing in terms of “density.” Could you expand on that concept?**

Actually, I don't think I would qualify out and density as qualities that are necessarily connected. For instance, I have always thought that both *Secret Story* and *Zero Tolerance for Silence* were both more or less explorations of sonic density - at least compared to some thing like *Bright Size Life*, for instance - yet, stylistically, they are pretty far apart. The whole idea of “filling up the canvas” is one that came much later to me in whatever evolution has occurred in my thing. Early on, it was always as much about space and silence and the spaces in between the notes as the notes themselves. But as time went on, I really wanted to try for a sound where there wouldn't even be one speck of white left on the canvas. Those two records I mentioned before were probably the apex of that period in their different ways. Since then, I would say that I am more interested in a kind of case-by-case approach.

**Are people who appreciate your dense music better listeners?**

One of the things that is different in the post-Internet world is that I have a lot more information now than I used to about what people listen to and for in our music. It used to be that you would put a record out and in the six-months or so that followed you would get your 100 or so reviews from around the world that would kind of trickle in and a few dozen letters from people with whatever opinions they happen to have and that would be that. Now a record comes out, and within a few days of its release, there are literally hundreds of

nearly real-time appraisals from all over the planet of every aspect of the playing - the tunes, the production ... everything. More than anything, what this has done is render all music critics obsolete - a condition that was already pretty much in evidence anyway through the dearth of even rudimentally qualified music writers, but one that is, nevertheless, welcomed by performing artists everywhere. Where there may have once been some influence or importance placed in those quarters, any remaining remnants of that have now been effectively eliminated.

**You once told me that a musician is really a good listener who's capable of hearing what's inside his head and bringing it to life. What's inside your head these days?**

I would say that for me it has always been a pretty continuous road right from the start. The things that I used to like and study and respond to are all still there, and I still feel close to the kinds of sounds and ideas that I suppose most people have perceived me working on during the various records and tours that I have done for the past 20-some years. I think there are some musicians who totally reevaluate their whole thing on a regular basis, throwing everything out and starting over with an entirely new version of themselves, using all new materials and everything. I'm not like that at all. For me, what I hear in my head now is similar to what I have heard my entire life, even going back to when I was a little kid. The big difference is that now I have a greater capacity to make things sound closer to whatever kind of thing I am trying to get to happen through the manifestation of that particular idea into actual musical sound. The whole thing of getting better, to me, ultimately does revolve around listening skills and I'm proving them. But it is also directly enhanced by just living one's life and getting more experience and maturity as a person in a kind of general sense.

“These days, I am sorry to say, when I am not on the road, I barely touch the instrument. ... It has been many years since the guitar itself was kind of an end-all thing for me.”

**I hear that on the new album. There's bits and pieces of the styles you've explored over the years, more so than on your other albums: Was there a conscious effort to incorporate your older sounds on the new record or were some of these songs simply written year ago?**

I don't know. Certainly not intentionally, but I think also it may be impossible for me to really see it objectively. I can see the connection with everything that I have done over the years in ways that are based more on specific musical issues. Paul Motian once said something that I thought was great; that every musician is born with one song and they spend their whole lives spreading the seed of that one song in many different ways, but that the core of that one song is always the same. I think that's true. There is an essence that I feel in most of my favorite artists that is in everything they do, no matter how different or similar it is on the surface to other things they have done. I can't help but think of my favorite visual artist, Paul Klee. He did so many different things, but they always had something that obviously and immediately attached them to him.

**You have a diverse and possibly segregated fan base. Some love your more accessible works like *American Garage* or *We Live Here*, but don't necessarily care for your denser material - *Song X* or the project you did with Derek Bailey, *The Sign of 4* to name a couple examples. At this stage of your career, are you ever concerned about someone who goes to buy an album by the Pat Metheny Group, sees**

**another Metheny CD in the bin - say, *Zero Tolerance for Silence* - buys it, takes it home, and can't believe it's the same guy?**

Honestly, I don't worry too much about people's perception because it is something that I have no control over and, truth be told, very little interest in. I really just try to play the music that I love and that I feel strongly about. If I were to start worrying now about what I thought someone else likes - first of all I would be guessing because I simply don't know. Also, whatever success I have had has been really built on just following my own musical instincts and by reacting to the things that I found to be true in music itself. Somehow, I have been allowed to continue and get gigs and play a lot by doing just that. It is something I feel very fortunate about too, and something that I consider a privilege. And with that privilege comes a responsibility that I take very personally. I feel that the ultimate honoring of that privilege is the creation of good music - that is the place where every thing resonates or not for me - and it is sort of at that altar of sound that I worship, you could say.

**You said that when you did one of your earlier soundtracks, *Under Fire*, in the early '90s, it was a great experience to collaborate with the master of film scoring, Jerry Goldsmith. You mentioned then that you picked his brain about scoring and supporting films without intruding on them. You've scored a half-dozen or so movies since then, most recently *A Map of the World*.**

**With those in mind, how would you say your approach to film scoring has evolved over the years?**

Writing music for films is something that is quite distinct from the day-to-day life that I have as an improvising musician, but there is an overlap. In both areas, you are dealing with a sort of moment-by-moment unfolding of narrative ideas, and the sense of a larger purpose in the way things add up over time is important. I really enjoy film scoring for the collaborative aspect of it. It is really exciting to be around people who are from quite different disciplines who are all working together to try to make something great happen. But it is a rough life, and the people who do it full-time have my utmost respect. In my case, I am happy to do one every four or five years and I hope to do others every now and then. If you are lucky, it all comes out great and it is a positive experience. For whatever reasons, I think many film composers may agree that that is often not the outcome. Each time I do one, I learn a lot but at the same time, what you learn on one project may or may not apply to the next one. Each one is its own world, literally, with its own cast of characters both on-screen and off. Flexibility, both personally and musically, is probably the single most important quality that you can bring to the table.

**Let's talk about some of the musicians you've worked with. I know that Gary Burton was a huge influence on you in the '70s. Back then, you played in his band and recorded three albums with him. But in the early '80s when your career really began to take off, you kind of lost touch with each other, and it seemed that the likelihood of collaborating with him again had diminished. What was it that changed that situation and brought about Burton's later works like Reunion and Like Minds, where you played and even toured with him?**

Gary Burton's influence was huge for me, in so many

ways. When I first met Gary, and started playing and recording with him, I was really young. I was 18 when we did our first gigs together and I stayed in his band until I was about 22. The early years were great for me because I was able to learn so much just by being around him - and Steve Swallow and Bob Moses and Mick Goodrick as well. To me, Gary is one of the greatest improvisers of this era. There are very few musicians who have the capacity to truly invent new melodies each kind of harmonic ingenuity that he has at his disposal. And there are only a handful of players on any instrument who have a time feel that is as steady and developed as Gary's. I am especially happy that we were able to reunite years later for the Reunion record and, in particular, Like Minds, where I guess I feel that I was able to contribute more effectively to Gary's thing, being a little bit older myself.

**Lyle Mays seems to be your main collaborator. What would the Pat Metheny Group be like without Lyle?**

How would the group have evolved had Lyle never been there or if he left after a few years? Many things would be different, but also many things would be the same. The original conception of music and the kind of band I wanted to have and the kinds of sounds and chords and solos and instrumentation and forms that I wanted to explore were already pretty fully formed by the time I heard Lyle for the first time. By then, I was already recording on my own and touring around the world with Gary Burton and already pretty active on the international scene. When I heard Lyle at a Jazz festival in Wichita in 1976, he immediately and totally knocked me out. I had a feeling that we would play great together, and it was just exciting for me to hear someone more or less my own age who had a sense of the music that was that advanced and the ability to improvise at that level. It has turned out that hooking up was one of the best things that could have ever happened for both of us.



Lyle brings things to every musical situation that he is involved in that are extremely sophisticated and really beautiful, and I always welcome the chance to get on the bandstand with him or work on a new piece or a new record. We really enjoy working together and seem to have more and more fun each project, even after all these years. And for me, I could never in a million years have hoped to have found such a fantastic piano player who would stick with me for all these years, where we could both continue to grow and develop our things together. I feel very lucky that we still are going strong and still have so much to talk about, on and off the bandstand. He is simply one of the best musicians in the world.

**The different bassists that you've used over the years - Jaco, Eberhard Weber, Mark Egan, Dave Holland, Larry**

**Grenadier - have lent distinct flavors to each project During the last few years, Steve Rodby seems to have assumed a greater role in your productions. You've done collaborative albums with Charlie Haden and Marc Johnson. Have you ever considered doing a project with just you and Steve, and if so, what might that project entail?**

Steve's increased presence over the years behind the scenes in the studio has been a huge factor in the way the records have been recorded and organized. From Still Life Talking onward, he has had a major voice in the making of all the records, including many of the records I have done outside of the Group that he doesn't even play on, like the recent trio records, the duet record I made with Jim Hall a couple of years ago, and others. He is one of the best producers out there and an incredible ally in the studio who makes the difficult process of

recording so much easier and efficient. And yes, he is an incredible bassist who has allowed me the possibility of putting a number of interesting and fairly far-flung bands together over the years by providing a rock-solid rhythmic and harmonic platform to build them on. Steve and I have done occasional duet gigs over the years, and I have always enjoyed them. You're right, we should do more. He is a really great musician.

**Most of the drummers you've worked with are considered the best in jazz: Jack DeJohnette, Bob Moses, Danny Gottlieb, Paul Wertico, Joey Baron, Billy Higgins, Roy Haynes. Are there certain criterion you use to employ select drummers in certain situations?**

As I have said many times, the drummer is the most important person on the bandstand, no matter who else is on the stage. If the drummer is sounding great everyone usually sounds great or at least pretty good. I have been so lucky in this area; I love the drums and have gotten to play with all of my favorites a lot. Yes, each situation has a certain vocabulary, and I would say that the first major decision about any project is who is going to play drums?. Everything else follows from there.

**Richard Bona sings and plays percussion in your new group. Like Nana Vasconcelos, Pedro Aznar, Armando Marcal, David Blamires, and Mark Ledford before him, he brings ascertain sound and voice to the group. I predict that Bona is going to be a major recording artist in his own right. Do you foresee working with him outside the group?**

Richard Bona is one of those rare musicians that comes along every now and then that is pretty much unprecedented. There has just never been a guy like him on the jazz scene . His talent is truly multi dimensional, but it's his singing that really takes me to some place

special. After I hired [drummer] Antonio [Sanchez], I knew that I wanted to find a few other new musicians who could offer some thing really unique. And I thought of calling Richard, not because I thought that he would do it himself (since he has this pretty active career going on his own), but because I thought he might know someone who would be good for us that I may not have heard about. When I described what I was looking for, he said, "I've got the perfect person: me!" It turns out that he has been following the PMG thing for many years and had always wanted to do it. The prospect of writing for that voice and having him join us for a tour was so absolutely inspiring that music just started pouring out at the thought of it I love Richard and admire him so much. And, yes , in whatever form that we can work together, I have a feeling we will whenever we can. And I totally agree, he is a major talent

**You often take on the persona of a pop/ rock artist more so than a jazz art ist. And yet when you're placed in the most serious jazz settings, you fit right in. How do you live comfortably in both worlds?**

I don't think about personaI really just try to find the good notes, try to find the right sound, the right spirit. It doesn't matter who I am playing with or for. It matters even less to me what the mythology around a particular setting is supposed to be.

**I'm going to mention a few guitarists. You tell me what comes to mind. Ready? Wes Montgomery.**

One of the most inspired and consistent improvisers of all time and one of the most transcendent inventors of melody ever. My favorite guitarist and one of my major personal heroes. His music sounds better and better as the years go on. I listen to the same records I have listened to hundreds of times and hear details I had never noticed before.

**John Scofield.**

I love everything about John – his phrasing, his touch, his harmonic sense, his sense of humor - everything. And the best part of his playing is how it is such a natural and beautiful extension of who he is as a person.

**Derek Bailey.**

Derek is someone who has a melodic sophistication that is unique and very deep. His ability to maintain a certain kind of melodic tension for long periods of time is totally singular. His touch and sound right off the instrument are instantly identifiable, and his genuine curiosity about sound and music is informed with a profound sense of what I think he would term “more conventional” playing, which gives it a special kind of weight and insight.

**John Abercrombie.**

A guitarist who excels at everything he does. Besides being constantly engaging as a soloist, he is one of the best accompanists in jazz. His work with Jack DeJohnette, Enrico Rava, and recently with Charles Lloyd's quartet settings are some of the greatest examples of what a guitarist can offer as an alternative to a pianist as a primary comping instrument that you could find in recorded jazz history. John always finds something special and central to each of the many situations that he finds himself in.

**George Benson.**

The sleeping giant. If George made a guitar-trio record every year, the world would be a better place. As far as I know, he has never even done one. We really need him. He is one of my favorite guitar players of all time, right there with Wes, Django, Kenny Burrell, and Jim Hall. In addition, he is one of my favorite singers. If I could sing like that, I probably wouldn't play that much

either. I don't think I would even talk; I would just sing all the time!

**Jimi Hendrix.**

To me, Jimi was a lot like Albert Ayler or Dewey Redman or Pharoah Sanders - a genuine storyteller that could use raw emotion in extended doses, for extended lengths, with a core that was always natural and real. Like Wes, he is another musician who sounds better and better in retrospect. Everything he played was so true.

**Django Reinhardt.**

Along with Wes, the best pure improviser ever on the instrument. And the sound! Just glorious, and so personal. Again, like with all of my favorite players, it all comes down to improvising melodies. It is the most difficult thing about being a jazz musician, and there are very few players who can generate melodies that approach the level of the songs that they are improvising on. Melodic playing is one thing you can't simulate or fake; it has to be real. Django had the kind of conviction and power in each phrase that made his solos add up to more than just a string of ideas. They all seemed to be of one piece.

**Any young players caught your ear?**

I have not really been with my ear to the ground that much in the last couple of years. Most of the guys that I would call young are not really all that young anymore. I am even a little bit concerned. Practically from the dawn of jazz, there were teenagers and people in their early twenties really putting the pressure on the music by keeping it changing and overtly challenging the status quo of jazz. For a couple of generations now, the young guys have been playing great but more or less adopting the fundamentals and sticking with the tried-and-true, messing with things around the edges

rather than going right at the core. The good part of this is that we have so many more fundamentally solid improvisers around. There are now hundreds of guys around the planet who can play well on changes and really deal with form and structure with a kind of fluency that was, while not rare, not found in previous eras in the abundance it is now. But I keep waiting for some kids to come along and really make me, for instance, rethink everything I know. And that hasn't happened for me since I first heard Jaco. But I bet it will soon. I just have a feeling about it.

**There are few artists who manage their own companies. You of course control Metheny Group Productions and all of your business dealings - the imaging and positioning of Pat Metheny as a product. I know this requires a lot of discipline, vigilance, and organizational skills. Most musicians don't like dealing with the business side of things. What's your story?**

Actually, compared with the thing of dealing with the music itself, that aspect of things is just barely a blip on the radar screen of the activities that occupy my time and energy. I don't mind talking about music or working on the details of how music is presented at all. And taking responsibility for how things go down in all of the aspects of how the music is finally put out into the world is a big part of what the stuff you are talking about entails. It is just kind of natural to follow through on everything.

**There seem to be a lot of Pat Metheny live bootlegs floating around. Obviously, piracy is alive and well with your fans. What's your take on piracy and bootlegs?**

The fact that people care enough to tape and trade and catalog all the live things that they have that I know are out there is equal parts puzzling and flattering to me. The bootlegging and piracy things

are fairly major irritants. However, there are a few instances where pirates have peeled the soundtrack off of video performances and put it out as things that appear to be sanctioned albums that are just out-and-out theft.

**Do you see any difference between traditional bootlegging and the Internet technology that allows for free distribution of music?**

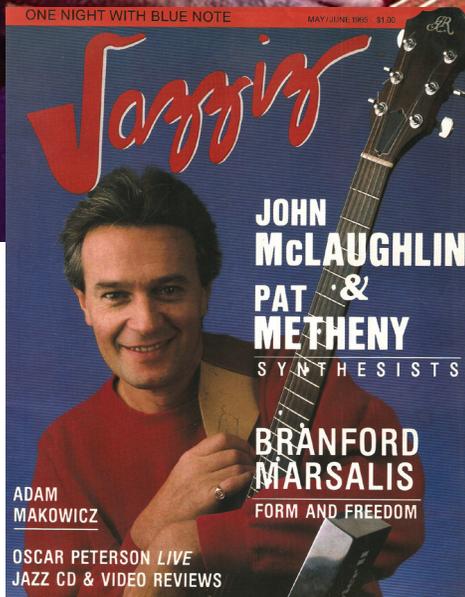
Honestly, they are basically the same thing. Having said that, like everyone else, I am having to relearn the social context of what it is to be a musician in this new culture: what our function is, how people do or do not value what it is we do, and what purpose we actually serve to the communities that we live in as musicians, or artists, or authors, or whatever.

**It's possible that you've covered a wider range of styles in your career than any other jazz artist. With that in mind, I can't imagine what you'll do next. Any desire to go where no Metheny has gone before?**

Again, I don't exactly think in those terms. There is a place you go every time you improvise that is essentially a journey of discovery. You really don't exactly know where you are going to wind up. You have done a lot of research, maybe you have a plan or a map - some changes or a vibe or something that you know is going to be an element leading you towards a goal - but you still are ready and willing for anything to happen in your quest to bring sound into the air for other people to check out as well. That process is the most fun thing there is. I just want to spend as much time as possible in that search for those moments where the question morphs into the answer as it is being posed, where the idea itself takes you to a place that you always knew was there but had never quite been able to get to before. That is what it's all about for me. ■

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# John McLaughlin & Pat Metheny



## GUITAR SYNTHESISTS

More or less in the jazz tradition

BY CHARLES LITTLE

**T**hirteen years ago, John McLaughlin formed the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Rockers and guitarists wholeheartedly embraced this musical experimentation while many jazzers shook a finger at McLaughlin and proceeded to don earplugs. Little did purists know that McLaughlin was destined, through the Mahavishnu Orchestra, to change the course of guitar and jazz forever.

Pat Metheny, an accomplished jazz guitarist for over a decade, has also made an undeniable contribution to the music with acoustic and electric playing, disregarding criticism as he also expressed a multitude of new sounds. Like McLaughlin, he has crossed over several music markets, playing fewer traditional styles with paradoxical acceptance.

The concurrent exploration of the guitar synthesizer - the instrument of the future - by these two players seems only natural, considering that both have done more for the conceptualization and popularization of guitar and contemporary jazz than practically all other artists involved in this tradition combined. They have been continually praised as innovators and, at the same time, scoffed at as experimental refuse. But it is important to remember that both were developed, consummate artists long before they chose to integrate the technological revolution into their ever-evolving styles.

A new era for improvisation is emerging. Keyboardists have long had access to the world of sound creation, but only recently have guitarists been afforded, through guitar synthesizers, this same ability. The technology behind these instruments is so complex and novel, though, that they have inherent problems. McLaughlin actually abandoned his first guitar synthesizer 11 years ago due to its complexity and limitations. Consequently, ignorant philosophies overshadowed its significance and concentrated on the

guitar synthesizer's faults rather than its achievements and potential.

Recent technologic advances have eliminated many of the past quirks of the guitar synthesizer, which now provides a wider range of color for the palette of the musical artist. One of the newer guitar synthesizers, Roland's GR-700, has sophisticated, versatile functions on a floor pedal control panel that is relatively easy to use. Consequently, it is getting much attention from both amateur and professional players.

The relative lack of popularity of this futuristic instrument lies in the paucity of role models who play it. McLaughlin and Metheny are once again in the innovator's chair and therefore are subject to ridicule by those who hate to see tradition redefined and enriched.

The guitar synthesizer is by no means a mere sound enhancing accessory. Rather, it is a complete computerized instrument capable of duplicating the sounds of most other instruments and even sounds as yet unheard while playing a "standard" guitar. The potential is endless, considering that once the synthesizer is properly programmed, the guitarist can use established abilities and technique on a familiar and comfortable instrument to render such new sounds. Some even believe that the synthesizer has a jazzier quality than the standard guitar and that this will expand the use of guitar in jazz music.

But technology is simply technology. What really matters most are the artists and the way in which they choose to incorporate it into their art. Technology will never replace human emotion and creativity. Although Metheny and McLaughlin are the two best known guitar synthesizers, many other jazz guitarists are diving into the domain, too, including Tommy Tedesco, Al DiMeola, Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour, Steve Lukather, Ryo Kikunasaki, Paul Ashford and Randy Bernsen. But at the pinnacle of this new frontier are McLaughlin and

Metheny, two acclaimed jazz musicians who know a good thing when they see it and are uniquely prepared to approach it responsibly. JAZZIZ conducted separate interviews with Metheny and McLaughlin -asking parallel questions -and discovered that musical attitudes, not shiny new toys, underlie the philosophies shared by these two artists.

**JAZZIZ: Both of you are using the guitar synthesizer to relay your music. In addition, your music is at present an experimental type that is at the same time very accessible.**

**METHENY:** John and I, I think it's safe to say, both have fairly strong musical personalities that were developed in a large part before we even got guitar synthesizers. And it's more or less a new color -it's something different, it's a new voice -but on the other hand it's puzzling to me, extremely puzzling, that we're the only two guys.

**McLAUGHLIN:** Well, first of all, I have a great admiration for Pat as a musician, as a guitar player and as a writer, too, but at the same time we are very different, different kind of people, musically different and conceptually. So naturally the approach to the [synthesizer] is different. I think we look at it necessarily differently. The thing is, about music, everything is experimental. I think the only music that's not really experimental [for the most part] is pop music -it's non-experimental, it's formula and geared to be sold to a particular kind of market. The thing is that when you get out of that world you go into more of an experimental domain. An artist is in constant search for the development of his craft -even to the extent of seeking new forms to express himself. And there's no other way, other than by experimentation, to discover where things can work or where they can't work. The fact that you find it acceptable is great. Every artist in the world would hope that everybody finds what he does acceptable

-not only acceptable, but [that listeners would] love it, because we all want to be loved and adored; it's just basic human nature.

**How do you feel about the negative attitudes held by so-called "purists" toward the guitar synthesizer?**

**METHENY:** Well, quite frankly, a lot of jazz people have negative image about the guitar, period (laughs). It runs the whole gamut. There are a lot of major jazz players who, not on the record, would tell you they don't want a guitar player in their band. I think that there are a whole bunch of people who maybe wouldn't be interested -I'm talking about hardcore jazzers -in somebody who was coming from a Jim Hall or Jimmy Raney or Wes Montgomery or Tal Farlow kind of approach, who might be interested in somebody who was playing a guitar synthesizer. In fact, a guitar synthesizer has the potential quality of a kind of vocalness or a kind of human cry-type sound that the traditional jazz guitar player has an incredibly difficult time trying to simulate.

**McLAUGHLIN:** The question would be more relevant if it were what are my feelings toward purists. And I don't like any of them. I don't like purists in any form because they're necessarily self-opinionated and very, very narrow-minded. The purist, in fact, is the worst kind of listener because they know a little bit and they think they know a lot. They become terribly self-opinionated and this is really unfortunate. And anybody who tries to do something different suffers for it. People could say, "Yes, well the purists are the guardians of tradition, etc., etc.," which I think is a lot of hogwash because the musicians themselves are the guardians of the musical traditions.

I could give you many examples; I'll give you just two from very different fields. Miles, a classic example -I remember, this is going back a few years, a guy came up to Miles saying, "Listen, why don't you play like you used to play?" And [Miles] said "Well, how did I use to play?"

*“There are a lot of major jazz players who, not on the record, would tell you they don’t want a guitar player in their band. I think that there are a whole bunch of people who maybe wouldn’t be interested -I’m talking about hardcore jazzers -in somebody who was coming from a Jim Hall or Jimmy Raney or Wes Montgomery or Tal Farlow kind of approach, who might be interested in somebody who was playing a guitar synthesizer.”*

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which is a typical puritanical approach to him-I mean so, so, so far off it’s amazing.

Another one is Paco De Lucia, who is a flamenco guitar player who belongs to my generation of musicians. He wants to broaden his musical base, enrich his tradition, make a contribution to the tradition, because the tradition’s not gonna die; one day we’re gonna die, but the traditions go on, the music goes on.

But the thing is, during your life what do you contribute to the overall tradition of music, your music, be it jazz, be it flamenco music, be it classical music? That’s really the question in mind, and of course Paco gets criticized by some of the “purists,” flamenco purists, because he’s influenced by the experiences that he’s had with Al DiMeola and myself or that he’s had with Chick Corea, and of course this affects the way that he looks at flamenco music, not in a detrimental sense, but in an absolutely positive sense! But of course, it’s not seen like that by the purists because they think, “Oh no, he’s breaking the rules, he can’t do that, he’s not playing like he used to. This is something that everybody who tries to expand the norm will be subject to, and that’s just a fact of life; there’s nothing you can do about it.

**Expanding the traditions through creativity, particularly in regard to guitarists and guitar synthesizer seems to be somewhat at a standstill.**

**METHENY:** We’re so, as a generation, conditioned to the guitar as being one particular thing. And when it’s a non-guitar-type sound it’s not so attractive to a lot of guitar players who are looking to get an Eddie Van Halen thing or a Hendrix thing or something. It’s really different, it’s a new thing and the fact is that there are very few guitar players who are looking for a new thing. Almost all guitar players are looking to create an older thing, they’re looking to recreate John McLaughlin or Jim Hall or Wes Montgomery ... clearly influenced by one person more than anybody else. And that’s wild. That’s something you can’t say about a lot of others-why that is, I don’t know.

**McLAUGHLIN:** There are not a lot of artists generally who are trying to create a new thing; I think it’s not limited just to guitar players. In fact, what is “trying to create something new?” -it means that they’re looking inside themselves for a way to articulate what they feel and the way they feel today is not like the way they felt yesterday. And so, of the forms that were valid five years ago, we find some can be developed and will be useful and some can’t.

So, what happens is that you have a state of frustration in the mind and spirit of the artist -a necessary part of life. (This] will stimulate the artist to look for a new form in which to articulate what he’s really feeling, and without that we have no creation whatsoever.

*“I don’t like purists in any form because they’re necessarily self-opinionated and very, very narrow-minded. The purist, in fact, is the worst kind of listener because they know a little bit and they think they know a lot.”*

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I think what’s happened, particularly in America, is that the hamburger philosophy of pop rock & roll is out there -super dominant. It’s the money, it’s the thrill, it’s what makes the kids happy and all the other arguments, and why not? My only regret as far as that’s concerned is that people unfortunately are not exposed to some newer kind of creative art -in any kind of plane -but we’re speaking primarily about music. They just will not have the chance to be exposed to it, and so, if they’re not exposed to it, they don’t know it exists; they don’t even know if they like it or not. Unfortunately, a lot of people won’t be exposed to a lot of creative music that is going on today.

#### **Just exactly what can be done with the guitar synthesizer?**

**METHENY:** Oh man, it’s so complicated. I’ve done these seminars where it takes two hours, without even picking up the guitar, just to talk about the Synclavier and what it can do. Basically, what it boils down to is anything you can imagine in your wildest dreams, anything you can think of, it’ll do it’

There’s a new kind of term going around in terms of computer type people where they start talking about computer user-friendliness and all that. The new term is a very real thing; it’s called “option anxiety.” When you start talking about any kind of synthesizer, especially as they get more and more sophisticated, that’s quickly becoming an issue. You know there are so many things it can do that it’s just overwhelming.

**McLAUGHLIN:** A synthesizer, whether it’s a keyboard synthesizer or a guitar synthesizer, will allow you to

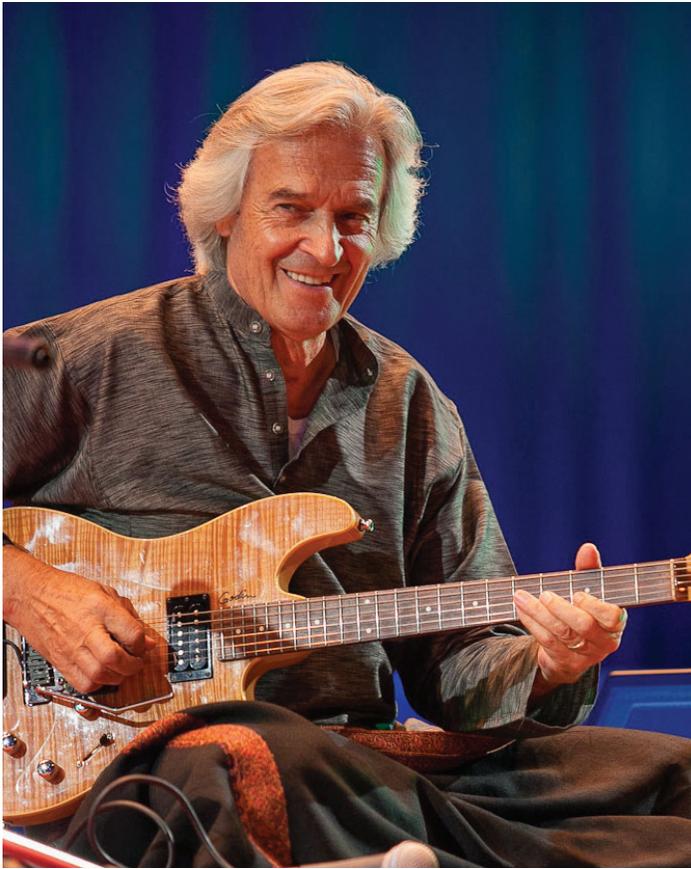
explore the realm of creation of sound. For example, you can be involved in the creation of just a sound, that first of all has never been heard before and you can create a sound that can really function like a key. It can evoke something in you, like a key; it can just open something up that would not have, in fact, been able to be opened without that, or perhaps (only) in some other time, some other place, but in some other way, and I think that’s a very good thing.

#### **It sounds as though the increased technology brings with it increased responsibility.**

**METHENY:** Absolutely! People had better get over their fear of technology. In the last two years there’s been progress that is absolutely unbelievable and in the next 10 years anybody who denies the value and the aid that this stuff can be to a musician - any kind of musician, I don’t care if you’re a country and western musician -is out of their mind. Even if it’s just a composition level, you can write your whole piece on a Synclavier and then go have it played by acoustic players.

The whole idea of going into a studio. in a very short time. is going to be an antiquated one. I’ve already done one film score literally, in my bedroom, that when you go hear it in a theater it sounds like it was done in a multi-tracked studio.

Also, with guitar synthesizes, the fact is that it’s still a guitar and you still are going to have to learn how to play the guitar first. I’m still consonantly amazed, considering how many guitar players there are out there in the world how few really good ones there



are. Everybody thinks their instrument is difficult, but I think in jazz or improvised music, guitar is an exceptionally difficult instrument. It's got a lot of weird, bad habits built into it that encourage pattern playing and lick kind of playing -all the kinds of things that as an improviser or a jazz guy you want to avoid. Few people can manage to overcome that hurdle.

**With the advent of sequencers and polyphonic synthesizers, it seems like you can put in a little and get out a lot. In that respect, do you think that this will “take over” the way people write music’**

**McLAUGHLIN:** It's quite possible that there will be a wave of that, but I can't believe in its durability because there's only one thing that can really hold out, and that's the human heart and soul. But I think the attitude towards computers needs reeducation because computers are an amazing tool -whether it's an artist

or whether it's an architect, or whether it's just a writer working with his word processor.

I think we should have a more positive attitude towards the computer; it's true, for example, you can put a few notes in, invert it reverse it, arithmetically retrograde it. pitch retrograde retaining the key signature -you can do a ton of things with it. But I think that's necessarily good. I think we discover things about the music we're writing that we wouldn't have discovered before, but I don't believe in the durability of computers writing music, preparing music, and it being of human significance.

The essential part of music is some movement. some creative thought, some feeling that happens in the imagination, in the heart of the musician, that he articulates to the listener.

**Do you think that the Synclavir guitar enables you to reveal more of your musical personality than ever before’**

**METHENY:** No, I wouldn't go that far because I've always been a big contender that different instruments don't really change you as much as you change them. Even if I had to play the rest of my life on a funky old Sears and Roebuck guitar and a Pignose amp, I've got the feeling that I could find a way to get what I had to say out through those things. It's a wider range; I think that's the term you used, a wider range of sound that's exciting to me.

**Will this new technology drastically affect the music that we will hear in the future?’**

**McLAUGHLIN:** Throughout my life as a musician, I can't see things changing too much; it's a life of experiment, a life of research into music and into the development of forms that I've discovered. To perfect them as much as possible, I don't think it's gonna change too much (laughs). ■

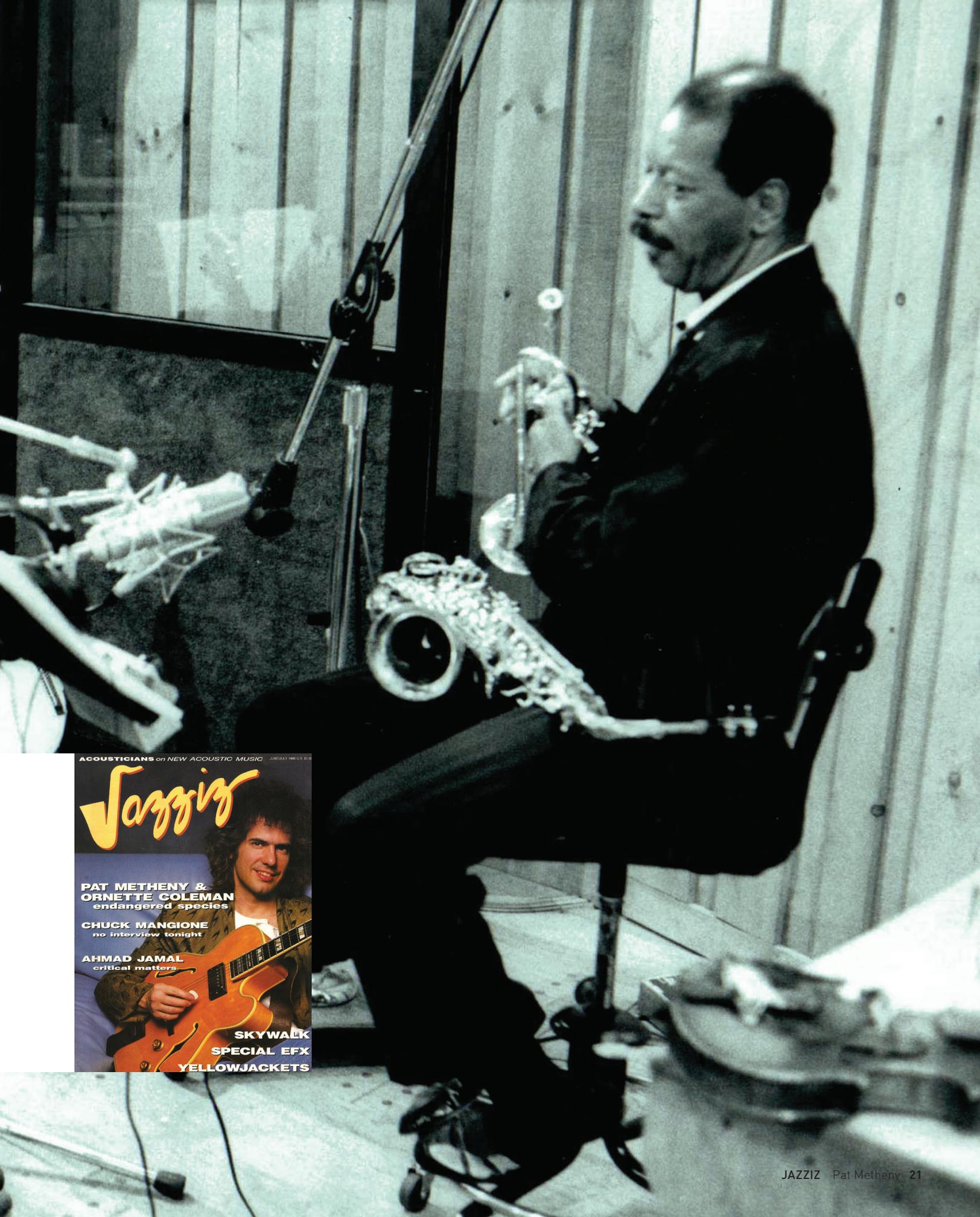


JAZZIZ 1986

# PAT METHENY & ORNETTE COLEMAN

By Eric Snider





ACOUSTICIANS on NEW ACOUSTIC MUSIC JUNE/JULY 1988 \$5.00

# Jazziz

**PAT METHENY & ORNETTE COLEMAN**  
endangered species

**CHUCK MANGIONE**  
no interview tonight

**AHMAD JAMAL**  
critical matters

**SKYWALK**  
**SPECIAL EFX**  
**YELLOWJACKETS**

It was a daring move - but it wasn't really. Not for Pat Metheny. He leaves ECM Records after about ten years and sets up a production/ distribution deal with a pop label, Geffen. For his first project he decides to a fantasy album with one of his long-time heroes, seminal avant-gardist Ornette Coleman. The result is intense, highly freeform improvisational music; the likes of which has not been heard on a major label in many a year. He calls it Song X and takes the finished tapes to his new company before the final contract is signed; says, "hey guys, you'd better listen to this," and lo and behold they dig it. But that's the way it's been for Pat Metheny - call it a charmed life, call it genius. With no compromises, he plays the music he wants to play - the way he hears it. He doesn't pander to the audience but instead tries to expose them to the new and exciting. Along the way he's collaborated with legends and gotten universal respect from his peers, received mountains of critical plaudits, and been one of the most commercially successful of jazz artists. It's the big trifecta only a scant few have managed.

And there's no let-up in this guy either - no resting on laurels, no fat-cat syndrome for Mr. Metheny. The ideas and projects keep coming, the road constantly beckons, and he's still just tickled to death about it all. As he says, "This is the most fun thing in the world for me."

**JAZZIZ:** You just put out what I guess could be considered a "dream album." And, obviously, you've got every right to do so. But do you have any sense at all going out on a limb with Song X - that it might jar some fans who like you for "Phase Dance" and "James."

**METHENY:** As far as my relationship to the audience goes, I have always worked under the assumption that the audience is at least as hip as I am, and probably hipper. The evidence I have to go by is having played hundreds and hundreds of concerts and looking at what the albums

have sold. And they've all sold more or less the same - give or take a few; like 40 or 50 thousand records. They've all done well.

**That surprises me. I thought a record like Rejoicing might sell half of what First Circle did.**

Maybe two-thirds. And I'm talking world-wide. In the States it would be closer to half. What that tells me is that the best thing I can do is play the music I feel strongly about. That's what I've always done and it's worked for me to this point. Personally - and this is only me talking - this record is not that different from playing "Phase Dance." The difference is that the players are at an extremely high level. The vocabulary is different, but the spirit is exactly the same, or there's more of it. When I'm listening to music it has less to do with the notes and more to do with the sound and attitude of the players toward what they're playing.

**I noticed in preparing for this interview, and listening to Song X and Ornette's new Prime Time album a lot, that the more I listened, the music sounded less and less unconventional; less weird. I wonder if a musician such as yourself gets immersed into a project like this and your reference points change. Because I firmly believe the bottom line is that if I played "Endangered Species" (From Song X) for my mother she'd think it was some godawful screechy noise.**

I know what you're getting at. Then the question becomes a much larger issue, which is why do you play music. If the idea of playing music is to (pause) pacify an audience into a state, or some thing - then I wouldn't want to be a musician. I think musicians have a responsibility also to trust their instincts. The musicians that I have responded to most as a listener have done that. Not to say that I'm inconsiderate of the audience - cause even with this record I spent a lot of time getting it

to sound as good as I could. And I personally, again, have to say that to me it's obviously of a different style from some other music that I've put out, but the people who are gonna listen for the prettiness factor or whatever, those people are gonna be jumping around anyway, from artist to artist. They're not gonna be the long-term audience that I'm playing for.

**That's a good point - the prettiness factor. You 've got casual fans and intense fans, and certain of us are along for the entire ride.**

To me, okay, the prettiness quotient, or whatever, I mean that in a negative way. Cause I don't want music to be pretty, I want it to be beautiful. I think the music on this record is in many ways the most beautiful music I've been involved with. Because it goes beyond the obvious in to the next . . . it's beautiful on a much more profound level- the top one. What we're essentially talking about with all of this is style, which is something that I've resisted pretty violently all along and will continue to. And what's on this record, and what we're doing now live, when you listen to it 30 years from now the style will be much less important than the spirit of the playing and the way we play together. And, man, that's gonna stand up. Like even for me, some of the early [Pat Metheny] Group records, I listen to them now and they're paling to me as a listener. There's some music that has more to do with the time that it's made in than - and this is starting to sound very philosophical - the eternal nature of what music is. But I also feel that jazz musicians or improvising musicians have a responsibility to function as a reporter on the times that we're living in. Every now and then a musician comes along like Ornette who can do both - who has the ability to play in a way that's timeless and at the same time make commentary on the current events of his life. I'm not saying that music has to be stylistically like Song



X to achieve that feeling. In my work, "If I Could," on First Circle and "Endangered Species" come closest to what I'm talking about.

But on a certain level, "Endangers Species and "If I Could" have a lot more in common with me than with your mother. That probably has a lot to do with the fact that I've spent a lot of time developing my skills as a listener and have considered what music means to me on a pretty much 24 hour day basis since I was ten years old. Admittedly, some of the stuff on that record will be complicated to some people and difficult to listen to— but there's nothing wrong with that.

**In regards to your collaboration with Ornette—he created his very personal music and paid all the requisite dues and took all the necessary abuse to see that his vision was carried out. With Ornette having approached it from such a roots level, where does your understanding and feel for the music come from?**

(Pause) I have no aspirations to sound like Ornette, 'cause I'm not Ornette. My reasons for wanting to play with him are very simple—I love his tunes and the way he plays, and I thought it would be a good sound. And I thought I'd learn a lot from the experience. As far as the specifics, the notes that you play, and how you play this relative to playing bebop or whatever, that again becomes a question of style. And I've finally come to



the point where I can admit it to myself—and it doesn't matter whether I'm gonna play in this environment or with the Group; whatever the situation, somehow, I have an intuitive feeling about what to play. I've been playing for 15 years now almost every night in a variety of settings and it's gotten to the point where [the style] doesn't matter that much—the idea is to make the music inspiring to myself, the listeners and the other musicians. That's something I've always gotten from Ornette too—is that he always aspires to be the highest level regardless of what the context is.

The other thing about Ornette is that he defined his one concept and that he really knocked me out more than anything. Going into the project it would have been ridiculous for me to try and cop licks or something. I've never done that with him or his music. He sets up an atmosphere for me as a player that makes me trust my own instincts more than play notes that seem to fit. That's really what inspiration is all about – the ability to know that you're going to come up with the right thing.

**It must give you tremendous amount of satisfaction to have achieved the level of playing and feeling that you just spoke of.**

And maybe the most significant thing about this project for me is that the level of trust among the musicians and the level that we're all trying to reach is admittedly several notches higher than any environment I've found myself in before. I've never been around a musician at the level of Ornette. And I'm humbled by this experience—not in a tail-between-my-legs way, but in an incredibly positive way.

**Could you recreate the session for us, some of the particulars.**

To give a little background, Ornette and I spent about three nights together and New York just playing together

about seven, eight hours a day; and talking and really trying to define what it was that we were looking to do. It definitely wasn't the kind of situation where either of us wanted it to go into the studio cold and kind of sight read through a couple tunes, which often happens on jazz dates. We were looking for a more than that. At that period of time I worked on finding a guitar sound that would fit best with his sound, and we wrote the tunes that we wrote together—we really became acquainted both musically and personally.

Then after a week [Ornette's son, drummer] Denardo [Coleman] came and the three of us played the rest of the time until Jack [Djonette] and Charlie [Haden] came just a couple days prior to the sessions; during which time we had two very intense rehearsals. I think we all felt real prepared. We had about 17 tunes. I was the producer of this one and I wanted to do it in a different way, 'cause I've kind of always suffered from read light fever to a degree—when the recording light comes on. I wanted to eliminate that as much as I could for my own personal groove because I knew I was gonna need every ounce of concentration to get as close as I could to the level that I knew Ornette would be.

So we did the first tune and we came in (to the control room) and listened to it. We had Jan Erik (Kongshave) there, who is a great engineer so that gave us confidence. The first take sounded fine, and we never went back, never listened to another take. We only played. We would usually take each tune, play it between five and eight times, and I kind of make quick notes in between takes. "Ornette sounds great on this one" which was virtually every case (laughs)—maybe it rushed or dragged, or we didn't play it quite well. And then after the fact, I went back, listened to it all, and picked out the stuff. As a result, we have enough for about three records—if we pick one take of each time. That's six hours' worth of music.

It was also for all of us one of those sessions that was incredibly fun—I don't mean in a party vibe because that's not exactly the case, but everybody was having a great time while it was still very concentrated. The fact that we played straight through and didn't listen back—where one guy might get a phone call or something—we were all kind of on the same groove all the time.

One thing I did on this date too which I'm gonna do in the future, is that I didn't wear headphones. Usually in the studio you have headphones on and everything sounds like you're making a record. This time I had everything in the room set up, so I could just play. It's like we were just playing in a room. And I'm gonna do that from now on, because with headphones on you hear all this reverb and everything is too loud or too soft or it doesn't sound right.

**On a couple of the tracks you're playing guitar synthesizer and it sounds like there's a number of independent lines going at once, not just a doubling effect, but wholly different parts. Yet the record says it was recorded live.**

There were no overdubs or edits except for one little thing on "Endangered Species" – we shortened it a little bit, so it could fit on the side. As far as guitar lines I kind of know what you're talking about—and it's something I've been working on lately in the area of octave displacements where you take a simple line and then play the different notes in the line in a different octave—back. That creates that kind of effect. The whole record is done on Synclavier guitar except for "Endangered Species" Which is the Roland and "Mob Job" where I play an acoustic guitar which triggers the Synclavier.

**You said something to me in an interview a couple years back—that when you hear your own playing in your head you hear it on your regular (Gibson) I75. (A) Does that still hold true and (B) what is the future of that guitar sound**

**that endeared you to a lot of people initially?**

It's true, it's been awhile. That's still the basic sound for me, but in the context of working with Ornette it just didn't fit. I had it there [in the studio] and I still have it on stage every night, but it's too round (sounding). I recently hooked up the I75 so I can play the Synclavier from it, so maybe there will be a way to get somewhere in between the two.

**Could there be a time that you would warm back up to the sound and feature it more?**

Well, it's always a matter of time. The tune seems to ask for one thing or another. The I75 is still my preferred instrument. That's the one that feels best to me, but it's better for some tunes than others. And the fact is that I've already done a lot with that sound. I'm always inclined to do something new that to redo something I've already done.

**I think I can speak for more of us when I say that we wouldn't want you to get totally bored with that warm sound, or think it was outmoded.**

No. I don't see that happening.

**Your sound has become so influential. How do you feel about the copiers out there? We won't call them clones, but copiers.**

I know what you're talking about. There's a hip station in Boston, WERS, where I hear that kind of thing. Generally, when I hear somebody trying to sound like me, almost all of them don't sound good. That's what bothers me. That's what makes me think, "God, is that what I sound like? Is that what they think I sound like?" [laughs] It's like I remember when people would try to sound like John McLaughlin, some of 'em would sound pretty good. But most of the time guys imitate the part of my style that I would rather get rid of. There's a certain

kind of phrasing that I do sometimes but it's like a slang word that has to be used in context. And I hear guys imitating that kind of slang phrasing but using it as a basis for a style. I suppose there are things about my style that are worth imitating but those are the things that I never hear imitated.

They imitate the other stuff, or they use a digital delay or something. That sound, even the way I do it, is mainly a straight sound with a little digital delay. I hear some guys do it and it's mostly digital delay and it just sounds out of tune.

**My perception is that a few years back you took the sound of the contemporary electric guitar, which at the time was being dominated by the Larry Carlton/Al Di Meola wail, and you changed the tonal trend to more of a warm, jazzier sound. That seems to be what's happening, and what everyone wants to get, when I suppose they should be trying to get their own sound.**

Either that or I think if a young player is gonna pick a player to emulate, I'm not a good one. Because my stuff is so idiosyncratic. I would always recommend that if a young player is gonna pick a role model they're better off with Pat Martino or George Benson - or in terms of current players, even John Scofield is a much better model overall.

**You've told me that you listened to a lot of types of music when you were growing up. James Taylor, Wes Montgomery. When did the Ornette-style music come in? Were you listening to (Taylor's) "Sweet Baby James" and then putting on [Ornette's Free Jazz]?**

Well I was about 11 when I first started checking Ornette out. It wasn't Free Jazz - that was a hard record for me, even now - but it was the quartet stuff. Again, I'm perfectly willing to admit that I'm weird or whatever. Even at that time I had no big problem listening to a

lot of different kinds of music. I saw it then, and still do, as essentially melody music - just different kinds of melodies. I see a lot of things in common between all good music. There's a certain rhythmic confidence that everybody plays with; there's a point of view that the artist or singer has. The things that I took for transcend style. I never liked jazz just because it was jazz, or rock 'n' roll because it was rock 'n' roll. I always tended to like particular things for reasons that are related to each other. And it never had anything to do with style.

**Comment on this observation: you're one of the very few musicians who has managed to simultaneously achieve the respect of your fellow musicians, get critical respect and sell a ton of records - a major set of accomplishments by any standards.**

**METHENY:** [Pause] I mean, that's real nice for you to say that [Pause] But it's funny 'cause it's not that I don't think about it. but I don't think it's that important to consider what it means The fact is - if what you say is true - the way it got to be true is because I've always kept my eye on the music and I'm trying to play the music that I feel strongest about and trying to present it in the way that I would like to hear it. I don't know, it's hard for me to really respond to it, I'm so close to it.

**You seem so energetic and so centered all the time.**

It's not like I sit around all day just smiling to myself. In fact, I spend a lot of time just thinking about things in a very critical way. As happy as I am with things the way they've gone. I'm still nowhere near satisfied. And I'm pretty hard on myself when I don't play at the level that I think I should be playing - which is most of the time [laughs]. On one hand I'm real happy to be given the opportunity and I think I'm doing the best that I can do given my abilities at this point in time, but I'm also not satisfied by any means. ■

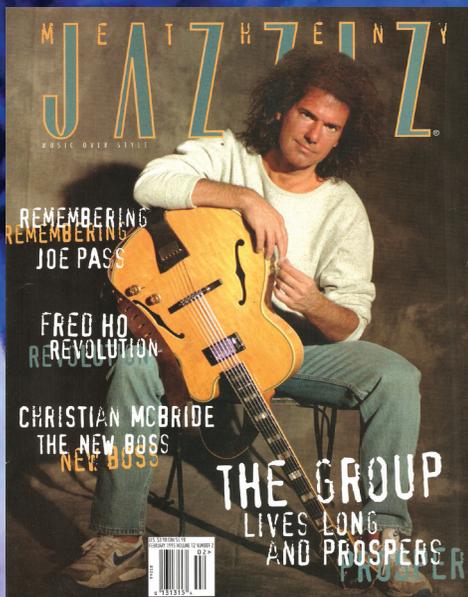
JAZZIZ 1995

# A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

BY LUCY TAUSS

There's an almost palpable atmosphere of anticipation among the members of the Pat Metheny Group. They're in the process of completing *We Live Here*, their first studio album in over 5 years, and the four core members of the band – guitarist Metheny, keyboardist Lyle Mays, bassist Steve Rodby, and drummer Paul Wertico—have inaugurated their return with a fresh new sound that tips its hat to the present without bidding farewell to the past.

"I think most of the stuff in the Group is a continuation and a departure at the same time.



We don't really throw things out. We just kind of add," says Metheny. We're sitting in his New York City hotel, high above the frenetic streets of midtown Manhattan. Still putting the finishing touches on the album, Metheny looks tired but exuberant as he considers his new creation. "My preference is to participate in the vibe of what's happening right now and sort of put our two cents in about it, rather than pretend it's not happening."

*We Live Here* is a vibrant conglomerate of musical sources, many of which are commonly associated with hip hop, R&B, or Go-Go music, such as samples, drum loops, and funk beats. But don't jump to the conclusion that the Group has leaped onto the "acid jazz" bandwagon. As Mays explains, "We're not really content to take elements of pop culture and not sort of pick them apart or rearrange them. So I think the music still has a sense of drama and a big palette and a lot of interesting orchestration. It still has our feel—our kind of sheen—to it. It's a remarkable combination, because I couldn't really imagine this music until we came up with it."

Unusual melodic and rhythmic combinations, unexpected musical inspirations, and a spirit of collaboration among the four group members infuse the album. On "And Then I Knew" crisply percolating funk rhythms are overlaid by Metheny's fluidly lyrical melodicism. The guitarist observes that the eloquent ballad "Something to Remind You" has "got a real Earth, Wind and Fire reference point to it." In the album's centerpiece, a 12-minute opus called "To the End of the World," Metheny's aggressive soloing, Mays' cascading piano, Rodby's gently muscular bassline, and Wertico's delicate drumming seamlessly intertwine like threads in a fine tapestry.

*We Live Here* marks the first Group recording in over a decade that's without references to South American—especially Brazilian—music and without a South American band member. Rounding out the line-up on the

album are longtime Group vocalists David Blamires and Mark Ledford and its newest member, the Los Angeles-based percussionist Luis Conte. According to Mays, the shift to a more "American" sound for a band that's well-known for its receptiveness to global music isn't really that radical: "We've always been into that music. It's just never found expression in the context of what we were doing. But any particular record is never going to be the whole story. It's always just one piece of the puzzle."

The new musical direction evolved from Metheny's decision to take some time and evaluate what was going on musically around him. The peripatetic guitarist had spent a great deal of time traversing the globe—which included several years living in Brazil—and last winter he finally decided to call a halt from his constant travels in order to assess the current American musical climate. He went down to Miami where he "spent several weeks just walking around. I really wanted to sort of take a look at the way things were to me right now, just in terms of what I was hearing and feeling in the air." He checked out what people were listening to, and he put together a rough demo tape of his impressions. He admits being nervous when he sent the tape to the rest of the Group— "Are these guys gonna think I've lost my mind?" He needn't have worried; they really liked what they heard. Shortly thereafter, Mays and Rodby joined him in Miami to start the process of creating the music. In the past, according to Wertico, the band generally tried out new music in front of an audience, using the stage as a kind of laboratory for the tunes before recording them. This time around, everything was composed in the studio with a creative give-and-take that Mays feels was like the way he and Metheny wrote in the Group's early days. They weren't even sure in which direction the music would go. "I guess it started with Pat playing around with some loops and samples and getting into drum programming— which he's very good

at,” explains Mays. “And that led to an idea of trying to graft our music onto a more modern sort of drum sound involving loops and high-tech manipulation of rhythm. Which doesn’t really suggest a record. It’s a starting point, but we all kind of went from there. I guess the album grew out of that intent to try to make that work with our sense of composition, form, drama, whatever. “Rodby believes that this organic approach to composition was what made the music work. “If we had taken tunes that were already written- that Pat, or Pac and Lyle, or Lyle had written ahead of time- and said, ‘Okay...we’ve got these leftover tunes from *Leuer From Home*, but we want to change our sound, so we’re going to take these old songs and kind of put this funky groove on them,’ it would be totally embarrassing. It would be completely contrived, and it would suck. And what was so smart about the way this all went down, and the way Pat worked it all, was that he had a bunch of ideas and then Lyle came up with some ideas, and they got together and wrote all this music. “There’s more than a passing reference to the world of fine arts in Metheny’s music. Like his panoramic solo recording *Secret Story*, *We Live Here* is filled with subtle details and musical nuances that give each track layers and dimensions. “There’s a million little things on this record,” observes Metheny. “In the last few years, I’m much more interested in the idea of density as a factor in music than ever before. And that was so me thing about the *Secret Story* thing that I wanted to continue with the Group.”

He calls the twentieth-century artist, musician, and thinker Paul Klee is “hero,” and says he “think[s] of things ...more and more all the time in terms of light and dark and texture and shading and all that stuff. “Metheny likes to draw, and he approaches his music’s interplay of structure and improvisation from a painterly point of view. ‘We basically make these big canvases for these particular images to happen on, and within that canvas there’s certain borders and certain events that

happen. But then there’s these big chunks in the middle that are open, and then within those chunks there’s things that are open too.”

The result is something like a piece of sculpture, in the sense that great sculpture should create interest for the eye regardless of the angle from which you happen to be viewing it. Metheny says that when he’s completed a tune he deems successful, “you can do a 360- degree walk around it and you can find stuff from a melodic standpoint that you wouldn’t hear the first time. You can find structural things that you wouldn’t hear the first time. There’s arrangement details- stuff that we almost bury in the mixes that will emerge after the thirteenth time that you hear them. They won’t be obvious at first, and that, I think, is part of what we have to offer that’s unique.”

None of the Group members had been idle during the five-year hiatus. A couple of years ago they released *The Road to You*, a Grammy-winning live recording, as well as an accompanying home video, and everyone worked with Metheny on *Secret Story*. Metheny teamed up with Roy Haynes and Dave Holland for their straight-ahead trio outing *Question and Answer*. He’s performed on albums by Gary Burton, Bruce Hornsby, Jack DeJohnette, Gary Thomas, Joshua Redman, and Milton Nascimento- to name a few- and he contributed a track to the Jimi Hendrix tribute album *Stone Free*. Last spring, he released two albums of very different stripes: his duet recording with John Scofield, *I Can See Your House From Here*, and his oft discussed manipulation of sound texture, *Zero Tolerance for Silence*. As if those projects weren’t keeping him busy enough, he and Rodby produced the debut album by the Israeli vocalist Noa (an album that Mays and Rodby played on), and he scored a short film without dialogue called “The Silent Alarm” that was directed by actor Rob Morrow.

Mays released his acoustic trio album *Fictionary* a couple of years ago and composed music for several

# “ANY PARTICULAR RECORD IS NEVER GOING TO BE THE WHOLE STORY. IT’S ALWAYS JUST ONE PIECE OF THE PUZZLE.”

children’s recordings, including *The Story Of Moses* and the animated holiday film *The Lion and the Lamb*, both of which were co produced by Rodby. They also worked together on the score for a Britis

h documentary about the Kingdom of Mustang in Tibet. He also devoted time to one of his favorite compositional pastimes, writing chamber music. When Rodby wasn’t working with Metheny and Mays on their respective projects, he was collaborating with guitarist Ross Traut, and they released two duet album s. He also produced albums by the group Montreux, virtuoso bassist Michael Manring, and multi-instrumentalist Paul McCandless. Wertico worked with his longtime band, Earwax Control, and recorded *The Yin and the Yout* on Intuition and a duet album with New York drummer Gregg Bendian called *Bang*. He co-produced newcomer singer Kurt Ellion’s album *Close Your Eyes*, and recorded an instructional videotape called *Soundwork of Drumming*, while managing to juggle teaching responsibilities at North Western University and drum seminars around the world.

When they reconvened in Miami to work on *We Live Here*, the ensemble’s members naturally brought all of this accumulated experience, and influence with them, but they had no trouble returning to Group mode. The four members have been together well over a decade, and all acknowledge that the time spent traveling,

writing, recording, and performing together has provided them with a shared musical vocabulary. Mays jokingly likens the team to the “bridge of the [Starship] Enterprise, where everyone is very well-behaved and very good at what they do. There’s a high level of professionalism and respect for each other.”

They’re inspired by the music they create with the group, because it’s music they themselves enjoy playing. This may seem obvious, but, explains Wertico, that’s not always the case with bands. “A band can be made of any kind of members, and sometimes you might use musicians you have to force to do a certain thing, and that’s when you end up with problems. But with us, this is the way we play, this kind of music, and we’ve been doing it a long time and we’ve been able to cultivate that sound and expand on it and let it grow.” When they’re in the studio, consensus is often implicit. Says Metheny, “In a lot of ways, there’s not a whole lot of discussion about things. It’s more like we all know what it is we’re going for, we know when it’s there and we know when it’s not there. And we’re just working, working, working. We’re all extremely critical- not in a negative way, but we’re all skeptical of not just ourselves, but of things in general. It takes a lot to convince any of us about music, because our standards are very, very high.”

There’s an irony in the fact that a group that tours constantly would call its first studio recording in half

# “WE ALL KNOW WHAT IT IS WE'RE GOING FOR, WE KNOW WHEN IT'S THERE. AND WE KNOW WHEN IT'S NOT THERE. AND WE'RE JUST WORKING, WORKING, WORKING.”

a decade *We Live Here*. “It’s funny, in a way,” muses Metheny, “the whole thing of calling the record *We Live Here*, because there are so many ways you can look at it. In my case, I don’t live anywhere.... The truth is, it’s like when I lie in bed at night and think, ‘Okay, where do I live?’ my mind literally covers the whole world, because my world is about going everywhere. On the other hand, I mean, whatever aspects of music that have originated even in a superficial way- outside of American life or whatever, that have found their way into the music that I’ve offered, have always been completely drowned out, in my opinion, by the sort of general American-ness of what it is I do as a player and as a writer.”

Rodby considers the title in terms of the Group’s shared musical tastes: “We’re talking about the common musical geography that we all share, saying, ‘This is the area we live in, this is the musical world that we live in, this is where we live,’ and we’re referencing all these different things that we share.”

Over the course of its 17-year history, the Metheny Group has attained the kind of superstardom that’s more commonly associated with rock stars than jazz artists, packing houses with wildly enthusiastic fans for multiple nights at large venues around the world. Yet the Group is kind of an anomaly in the music

industry: an ensemble that has achieved superstardom without placing importance on the traditional means by which achievement is measured. To the Group, it’s not about having hits or winning Grammy Awards. It’s not about being stars; in fact, Mays is more than willing to hand the spotlight over to someone else, preferring to make a less obvious compositional contribution. “People don’t tend to pay attention to composition. They tend to pay attention to the messenger more than the message, especially when you’re on stage and there’s a spotlight on the messenger. But for me personally, I’m more interested in composition and I’ve kind of written myself out of the Group- in terms of soloing- in a lot of cases. I have no desire to be someone flashy, to have the spotlight on me, to draw attention to myself in a soloistic way.

I’ll be glad to solo when called upon and feel that I can deliver, but I’m more interested in the whole impact of the and I put [in] everything I know about music and everything I know about life and all the things I feel and all the things I think. It’s not just thinking and it’s not just feeling.’ People make the mistake of saying it’s one or the other, and music only works when it’s both. We put it all into the music. It’s all there for you. Now, you go write your own story, with it. ■

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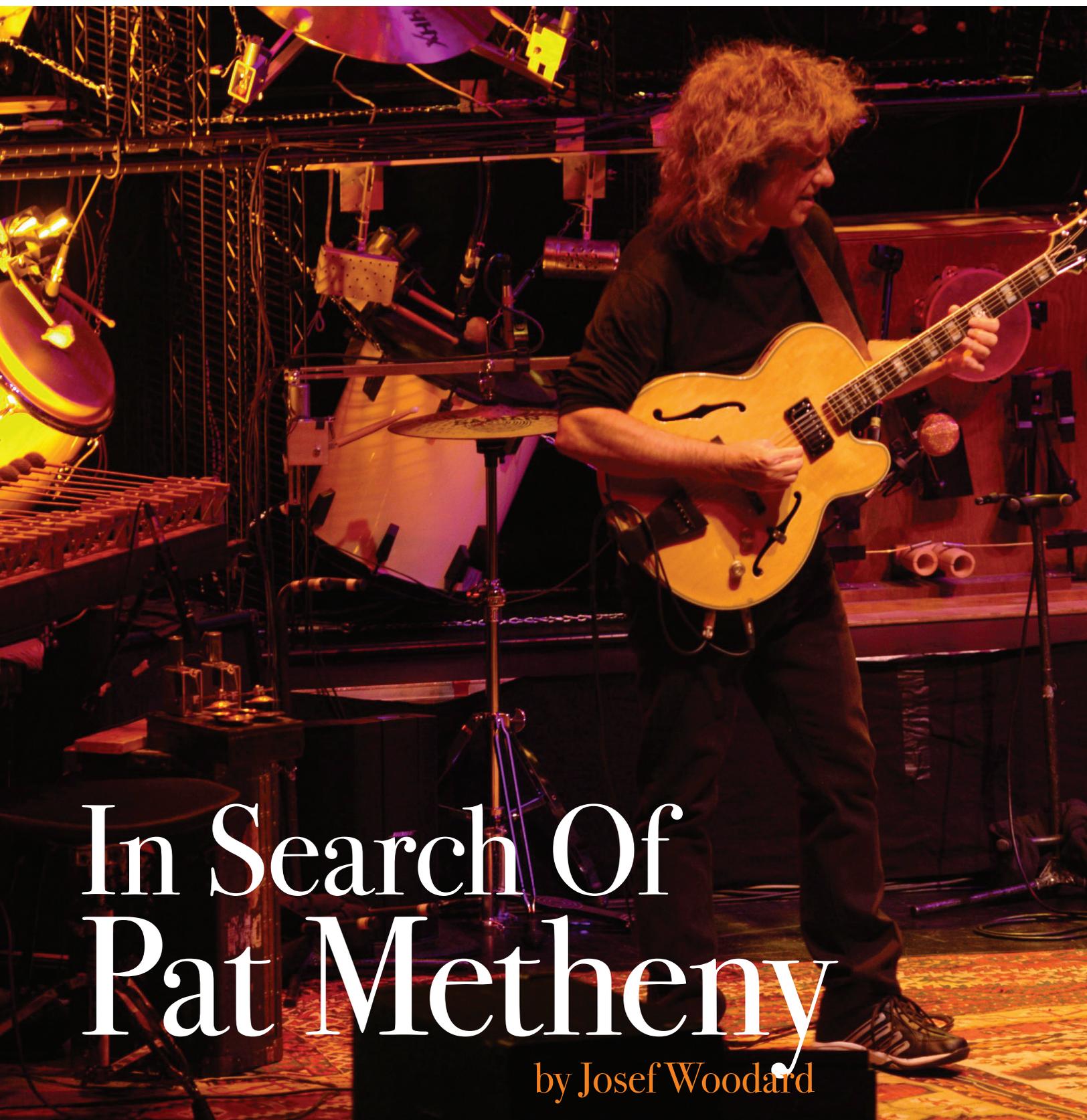
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# In Search Of Pat Metheny

by Josef Woodard



The Montreal Jazz Festival has been very good to Pat Metheny, and vice versa. Few editions in its 18-year history have gone by without the guitarist's presence. Take, for instance, the 1989 fete, when the Metheny Group played a free outdoor concert to an estimated 120,000 people.

Last summer, though, Metheny was less of a main attraction than a calculated fringe dweller, tucked away in plain sight. There he was as a side man with Michael Brecker. And in a tiny nightclub mile away from the festival grounds, doing a limber three-night trio stint with Roy Haynes and Marc Johnson. And in a special concert not on the official festival schedule, a duet with his old pal, bassist Charlie Haden. Had it not been for the untimely illness of free-improv guitar guru Derek Bailely yet another planned appearance would have teamed Metheny with Bailey and drummers Paul Wertico and Gregg Bendian.

What this gaggle of activity added up to be was a composite portrait of the Pat Metheny mainstream America barely knows. Metheny sits in his hotel room in Montreal after the East night of his Haynes-Johnson stint, looking slightly ruffled but as usual, alert. "This is one of those cities," he says, "and there are a few of them around the world, that have really supported everything that I've tried to do. I love playing here in a way that I can only compare to Italy and this weird pocket somewhere in the New Jersey-Philadelphia area, where there are a bunch of people who really get it. Spain and Portugal are like that, and I would also say Brazil and Argentina. These are pockets where I can say, 'O K they know what it is that I'm trying to do, aesthetically.'" And to hear Metheny tell it, what he's trying to do is more about a search for unity than for diversification.

“I resist the characterization of being schizophrenic or multi pronged,” Metheny says. “I don’t see it that way. To me, it is one thing. Yes, there are different dialects and different vocabularies, but more and more, I resist the whole idea of idiom. It’s a shame that jazz is now being turned into dried fruit. It’s being quantized - sliced and diced and defined. It’s becoming an idiom. To me, if it’s anything, jazz is a verb. It’s more like a process than it is a thing.”

Of late, Metheny has been a high-profile sideman on Kenny Garrett’s Coltrane tribute, Pursuance (Warner Bros.), and on Michael Brecker’s Toles From the Hudson (Impulse!). He recently made a long-awaited duet with Haden, Beyond the Missouri Sky: (Short Stories) (Verve), one of the year’s finest albums. He’s recorded Sign of Four (Knitting Factory Works), an elegant three-CD wall of noise with Bailey, Wertico, and Bendian, and he did the sound track for an Italian film, Passagio per ii Paradiso.

Hitting stores this month is Marc Johnson’s The Sound of Summer Running (Verve), a bright, witty album that matches Metheny with guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Joey Baron in a pageant of warped Americana, a logical extension of Johnson’s old group, Bass Desires. Like the Metheny- Haden project, Johnson’s connection with Metheny had a regional spin. “I hate to use geography as a denominator,” says Nebraskan-born Johnson,” but we’re both from the Midwest. We reference a lot of the same kind of tunes from that generation, from Glen Campbell to the Beatles to John Coltrane and Miles Davis.”

Does Metheny’s diversity confuse his public image? “I don’t know about that,” Johnson opines. “It shows how gifted an artist he is, to be able to co-exist in so many musical idioms with such authority. He’s like a modern Picasso in that he can handle so many forms.”

**Side projects shift to the back burner though when Metheny is in “Group Mode.”** Just now, the Pat Metheny Group is back with another successful album, Imaginary Day, its first in three years, and the kick-off to a new deal with Warner Bros. In its 20 years, the Group has earned a unique place in jazz as one of the longest-lasting ensembles and most quantifiably popular acts around. “In the Group;” Metheny says, “we all value the musical and personal relationships that we’ve achieved over the years we’ve spent together. That’s the base under everything else, before we play a note. It’s a good feeling to know that we’re going to do a Group record. Having said all that, it’s in credibly difficult. It’s literally a three month chunk of your life. We’re talking a minimum of 14 hours a day, oftentimes as much as 20 hours, and six or seven days a week from the time we start to when it’s finished. It takes a lot out of all of us.” For the new project, songwriters Metheny and Mays came together early in 1997 with respective satchels of ideas. They wound up throwing most of them out, knocking conceptual heads together to create something fresh. A third voice in the writing process is that of bassist Steve Rodby, a valued mediator in the loop since 1985’s The Falcon & The Snowman. “It’s nice for them,” says Rodby;” to have another person involved who shares the same aesthetic and speaks the same language but is still enough of an outsider to help give them perspective.”

All that tinkering, and brainstorming conspired to generate the Group’s most elaborate and diverse opus yet. Within these fastidiously produced tracks, even if the basic artistic vocabulary is identifiable, you sense some creative and stylistic stretching going on, beyond the implied Brazilian of old, for instance. The title track taps into a number of world-music sensibilities, while featuring the slightly surreal timbre of the fretless guitar. The album’s range includes an odd metered,

vaguely Middle Eastern perspective on “Heat of the Day”; raucous rock-inspired sonorities on “The Roots of Coincidence”; and a touchingly pensive ballad, “Too Soon Tomorrow.”

As for Metheny; for his bandmates, the group’s recording dates afford unique opportunities. “I’ve made records that are like documentary movies,” Mays says. “Luckily, we can make feature films. It’s a choice and an option that not everyone has. It has less to do with jazz than it has to do with other things.” So, is the Pat Metheny Group, by this juncture, a jazz band, per se? Mays pauses, “As long as there’s improvisation at the core of things, it’s kind of a moot point. It depends on how people defend styles of music, whether it’s the way it sounds or makes them feel, or in terms of what’s behind it I think most people would choose the first two before they choose the third one. For me, jazz is my background; I can’t help it. We want to change the stuff up live. But I also have had a lot of influences from all kinds of music. We have the opportunity to explore these things, and we’re just taking advantage of that.”

### The upward and outward opportunity spiral was perhaps inevitable for Metheny the resident kid prodigy from the small town of Lee’s Summit, Missouri.

Turned onto jazz by his older brother, trumpeter Mike, Pat went through an intense, “jazz-snob” phase, woodshedding on guitar. He cut his teeth in Kansas City as a teenager, playing with organ trios and making occasional avant-garde gigs with the local branch of the MCM. The academic trail proved fortuitous, too. At the University of Miami, he met the now-legendary bassist Jacob Pistorius, who played on Metheny’s first album, *Bright Size Life*.

“I was always very aware,” Metheny says, “that having a strong, individual voice was one of the most important and most essential qualities that all of

my favorite musicians had in common. When I made *Bright Size Life*, I was 20, but I had offers to make records starting three years before that. Thank goodness, I resisted.” At Berklee School of Music, Metheny linked up with Gary

Burton, in whose band a bushy-haired Metheny first gained broader recognition. By 1977, he had established his own group, with Mays, drummer Danny Gottlieb, and bassist Mark Egan. Their lyrical, folk-flavored, yet often-complex fusion caught on immediately. Several albums on ECM affirmed the group’s upwardly mobile, accessible profile. But in the midst of the louder, faster fusion of the day; Metheny says, “We were reactionaries. We were worse than Wynton and those guys. It’s so ironic that we’re now considered part of the fusion movement by those people. That’s show biz, I guess.

### First off, we wanted to not have backbeats. Or if there were backbeats have them implied.

That’s no big deal now, but at the time, in the context of electric music, it was like rock-and-roll drumming, and then everything else was built around that. We said, ‘No, no, the ride cymbal is going to be the time. And there was no distortion or fuzz tone, no lead synth, and we used dynamics, on that first tour; it was us against the world. We had this dogma: We’re going to show people you can play with dynamics. I remember someone yelled out during one of Lyle’s solos one night: ‘Lyle, you’ll never die. Fucking subtle!’ ‘

“When I first heard Lyle in 1975,” Metheny recalls, “he was the first guy I heard my age who could play bebop but who obviously wasn’t interested in doing that. Even now, it’s rare to find a good bebop player who says, ‘OK, but I want to play something else. That’s always been a dilemma for me because the kind of player I want to find to play with is someone who has got all that stuff I want to be able to talk about whatever I want to talk about,



musically. But then, like now, I don't really want to play 'Giant Steps' I like playing 'Giant Steps' and always have. It's so fun if you can do it. I just ultimately feel like there's not a whole lot of point in doing it. If I want to hear 'Giant Steps; I'm going to listen to Coltrane playing it. I've always been intuitively drawn to music that fits in the time that it's in and resonates with the culture that has caused it to exist. It's been hard for me to find players who have that. Jaco was one, and Lyle, in a way, is the other. "Judging by record sales and sold-out concert-hall engagements, Metheny and company's music resonates deeply - and not just with any one cultural outpost, one indication of their odd, demography-busting appeal is its audience makeup. "I look out there some nights, and it's a trip;" Metheny says. "I see four or five Phish fans sitting next to a family, sitting next to a 50-year-old jazz. buff and his wife. There's also this incredible racial mix that's always been there for us. That has really gotten pronounced in the last 10 years :: As is usual, popularity presents its share of paradoxes. "We do suffer a little bit," Metheny says, "from one of the things that has helped us build our audience, which is the smooth-jazz stations, who play four or five tunes. Three of them, they fade out on. They don't play any of the solos. But they find that the melodies fit in with their format. I can't really afford to tell those stations, 'Don't play our tunes: We need every source of getting our music out to sustain the band. That doesn't change

anything about the music. We've been relentless in our effort to refine our aesthetic world. But for some people, the fact that we're even mentioned in the same breath with some of the people who are played on these stations voids it on principle. That's also show biz;" he laughs.

"I have major problems with that radio format. The fact that they use the word 'jazz' is insulting. On our new record, the song 'Follow Me' is a nice

tune with some cool harmonic stuff I was told that it won't be played because of the 'atonal section' in the middle. I was saying, 'The atonal section?' There's one spot where it goes to C# sharp-minor after E-minor. I hear so much atonal stuff on those stations, with guys playing wrong notes and playing sharp. It's inscrutable to the point of irrelevance."

### Developing fruitful collaborations, in jazz or any music, is hard enough: Seeing it through more than two decades is a feat.

The Mays- Metheny pact is clearly the glue in the group. As Mays recalls, "I knew instantly when I heard Pat that I was impressed with him. He had incredible range and a natural way of making music that just seemed to incorporate every thing from the jazz tradition to the Beatles, and I resonated with that powerfully. I had no idea that we would have a band with this kind of a career or anything. I thought maybe that we'd be able to get some gigs and maybe drive around like Gary Burton did, in a van. That was as high as the sights were set. Maybe Pat was more ambitious. The whole thing has come as something of a shock:'

Other Group members have chalked up years with the organization: Bassist Steve Rodby joined in 1980, drummer Paul Wertico joined in 1983, and trumpeter/vocalist/guitarist Mark Ledford joined in 1987. Vocalist/multi-instrumentalist David Blamires joined in 1986,

but bowed out of the current tour to pursue his solo career. As Wertico recalls, “When I first got the gig, people would say, ‘What’s Paul doing playing with Pat Metheny? Paul’s an avant-garde player.’ I wasn’t, but I am. I’ve been in this band Earwax Control for 20 years. A few years ago, I played with Charles Gayle, and people said, ‘Why’s he playing with Charles Gayle? Doesn’t he play with Metheny?’ People like to pigeonhole you. But for me, it’s not even a matter of putting on a different hat. It’s just using a different part of your personality.’”

“The Group is a kind of an anomaly,” Mays says. Rodby agrees. “Most people wouldn’t believe how little - or - no commercial scheming there is in this organization. It is truly not only a labor of love, but a labor of art. After a record like *We Live Here* [which scored well at smooth-jazz stations], it was great to go back to just playing with the Quartet record [the Group’s loose, improvisational 1996 release, the last in a 10-year relationship with Geffen]. That record has some collages of free music put together from just playing and letting the tape recorders run to see what came out. It was very cathartic, in a way, and it also drew us together.”

Another coming together of sorts can be heard on one of Metheny’s recent projects outside the group. On *Sign of Four*, Metheny unleashed a voice normally kept in reserve or expressed only in small doses. Blame it on the drummers: Bendian, a player whose resume includes stints with Bailey and Cecil Taylor; made a drum-duet album with Wertico, *Bang* (Truemedia). Hearing that and the Bendian-Bailey duet, *Banter* (o.o. Discs), Metheny expressed his admiration for this icon of guitaristic outness. Metheny was ecstatic about the hook-up. “As soon as we started playing; he recalls, “there were lots of things to talk about.” Lurking below the musical verities, though, was the question of how the project would be received. Bendian says, “Pat and I were talking about what we thought would be the

fate of this record when it came out. We were assuming the worst. Everybody was going to hate it, take Pat totally to task on this. That hasn’t been the case. Maybe the third time is the charm. It’s the third time he’s done a record of this type, and people are starting to realize that he means it. He’s interested in a large range of musical endeavors, and he’s sincere that music can consume both consonance and dissonance. Music can be made just from consonance, the way some of the Metheny Group stuff is, and that music can also just be made from noise. If you look at it in terms of a big picture, it’s so much richer and has so much more depth to it.” Metheny still takes his critical lumps from purists who balk at his inveterate pop instincts, and from conservative listeners who scratch their heads over his more left-field endeavors: 1986’s *Song X* (Geffen) with Ornette Coleman, *Sign of the Four*, and *Zero Tolerance for Silence* (Geffen), a pleasantly chaotic solo project that drew the most divided response of all.

**His secret story has to do with tuning out static.** “There has always been pressure from jazz critics and record companies to do this, that, or the other thing,” Metheny groans, “which I’ve pretty much ignored. I don’t think I’d ever change anything because I would have to admit that I would be guessing. I don’t know what you think. I don’t know what the guy in the fifth-row thinks. I don’t know, sometimes, what the drummer in my own band is thinking. You must play what you know to be true, what sounds right to you and what you love. If you’re doing anything other than that, you’re presuming, and that’s never a strong position to make an argument from. “I think I have also obliterated the idea of idiom in a different way because it’s the opposite. It’s a 360-degree expansion and sort of going straight down instead of along a course.” Straight down to Pat Metheny. ■



Special Issue and CD The colorful journey of jazz guitarists and the next wave of players

# JAZZIZ

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illustrated

Les Paul, Lee Ritenour, George Benson and Pat Metheny

BY STEVE BRONSTEIN  
BY STEVE BRONSTEIN  
MARCH 2005

J A Z Z I Z 2 0 0 5

# Sweetening up the pot

B Y J O N G A R E L I C K

It's easy to see the career of protean talent Pat Metheny as divisible into clear categories.

There's Metheny the enthused straight ahead jazz virtuoso who's fronted guitar trios and collaborated with the likes of Omette Coleman (a continuing influence), Dewey Redman, Joshua Redman, and Charlie Haden. And there's the jazz-pop fusionist of the Pat Metheny Group, based primarily on the writing collaboration between Metheny and keyboardist Lyle Mays. And this doesn't even account for the occasional one-off soundtrack project or solo guitar records like 2003's acoustic *One Quiet Night* (Warner Bros.) or the 1994 grunge-era electric guitar skronk-fest *Zero Tolerance for Silence* (DGC).

Jazzfans might see the "jazz" Metheny as the edgier musical presence, but Metheny clearly sees his career as all of a piece. He's said that the Pat Metheny Group is actually a greater challenge: Whereas a guitar-trio format finds him working within an established tradition, the PMG confronts him with a blank page.

Metheny, the former boy wonder of jazz guitar, is now 50, and even the PMG is working in a tradition - its own. *The Way Up* is the group's 12th studio album since its founding in 1977. Metheny is still working with

folk, rock, and "world music" influences, but this is the group's most ambitious album in terms of form - a single 68-minute piece that avoids programmatic titles in favor of an introductory five-minute "Opening," followed by "Part One," "Part Two," and "Part Three" at 26, 21, and 16 minutes, respectively.

Metheny and Mays develop their material with - as you might expect - strong, pop-flavored melodies and long arcs of harmonic tension that build and resolve. "Part Three" swells to a furious crescendo of electric guitar, trumpet (by Cuong Vu), and a rhythm section (credit to bassist Steve Rodby and drummer Anonio Sanchez) before coming to a full stop and a pause, then resuming with a charming, lyrical harmonica solo from Gregoire Maret.

Throughout the album, Metheny layers multiple guitar voices: single-note electric lines over acoustic chording, synthed-up melodic passages, and fuzz-drenched rock guitar. There are constant change ups in rhythm and texture (including some prominent agitated cello bowing by Rodby). And there are satisfying virtuososolo passages all around in jazz swing time. And if the going gets too sweet for you, you can always go back to those trio records - or *Zero Tolerance for Silence*. ■



VOL. 1, NO. 1    JAN/FEB 1984    COMPLIMENTARY ISSUE

# Jazziz™

**PAT METHENY**  
INTERVIEW

**FESTIVALS:**  
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KILIMANJARO  
American Gramophone

JAZZ ALIVE  
salutes  
Art Blakey



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J A Z Z I Z 1 9 8 4

## The First

# PAT METHENY

## interview

**Originally featured in the premiere issue of JAZZIZ.**

by Michael Fagien

At the age of 14, against all odds, Pat Metheny was inspired by the early works of Gary Burton to learn to play jazz guitar. “My family was into band music, marches ... John Sousa and that sort of thing. ‘Cause out in the Midwest, there wasn’t that much cultural activity. So, when the time that I was getting into music, the guitar was the one instrument they didn’t want me to play. So being a rebellious 14-year-old, that was the one I definitely wanted to play.”

In a short span, Metheny won a Downbeat scholarship to their National Stage Band Camp and taught there two years later. After attending the University of Miami, as a student for a few

months, he began teaching guitar on the faculty. At 25, he was teaching on the faculty at Berklee. Performances with Paul Bley, Hubert Laws, Clark Terry, Louie Bellson and others, led to Metheny finally becoming a member the artist that originally inspired him to play.

Metheny toured and appeared on three albums with Burton; Ring, Dreams So Real and Passengers. Before the Pat Metheny Group was founded in 1977, the guitarist had already recorded two solo albums, Bright Size Life and Watercolors. The original Metheny Group included Lyle Mays on keyboards, bassist Mark Egan, and drummer Danny Gottlieb. In 1981, Steve Rodby took over on bass and Paul Wertico stepped in on

drums. Collectively, the group released four albums; Pat Metheny Group, American Garage, Off ramp and Travels. Percussionist Nana Vasconcelos joined the group for the latter two.

Apart from the group, Metheny has also recorded New Chautauqua, a solo guitar album and 80/81 with Charlie Haden, Jack DeJohnette, Dewey Redman, and Michael Brecker. Right after recording 80/81, Metheny went back into the studio to record As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls with Lyle Mays and Nana Vasconcelos. Along the way, Metheny also toured with Joni Mitchell and can be heard on her album, Shadows and Light.

Though it is rare to find Metheny guest starring these days on other albums (exception: Ross Levine Band on Headfirst Records), his most recent work is a collaboration with composer Jerry Goldsmith for the soundtrack to the movie Under Fire; another example of Metheny's versatility where he plays classical guitar. He explains how he got involved in the movie: "A year-and-a-half ago, I got a call from this guy out of the blue who was the producer of that movie. His name was Jonathan Taplin. It turns out he's a big fan of the group, seen us play a whole bunch of times. He wanted to know if I would be interested in writing music or working on music for some of his films. They were considering having us write music for Under Fire. Our thing wasn't exactly right for it, I mean it's a pretty serious movie ... There are long stretches in it that are kind of classic movie-type things; lots of chase scenes and stuff that are almost more craft than anything, and I didn't really feel like we should be doing the actual scoring. They came up with the idea having Jerry [Goldsmith] write the music and feature me as the soloist playing classical guitar since it needed a lot of guitar texture. It was especially great because I got to hang out and sort of watch Jerry for three weeks, and to really see one of the great masters

in action. There have since been a whole bunch of other movie score offers and I feel much more confident and qualified to do it; after having gone through the experience with Jerry and kind of picking his brain. It was fun. I am curious to see what the reaction is to it. I think most people, if they didn't know, would never know it was me. There's very little improvising ... it's all on classical guitar; there's no electric guitar at all. In a way, I tried not to put too much of my own personality in it, because the main thing was to support the action of the movie. It was a very different experience for me. I have never done anything like that. The way they do movie scores is that you sit there, and sight read everything and go right to two tracks. It was very intense. You are sitting there in front of about eighty people and if you mess up, that's it, you can't stop. But it was a great experience. I loved it.'

The album 80/81 was another challenge for Metheny. Here, for the first time, Metheny recorded a double album, filled with expressions of the other artists involved, setting aside his more popular signature sound. His fans had mixed reaction and Metheny explains: "I think you can find that on just about every record, there are people who think that New Chautauqua is the greatest thing I've ever done, and people who think it's the weakest of them all. A lot of people feel that way about American Garage. It's a lot of peoples' favorite but there are a whole bunch of people who think that it's by far the worst. None of them seem to get a neutral reaction. I don't know what to think. When it comes to making a record, I just try to do what I can to make it musical for whatever kind of thing it's going to be. My musical interests are varied. My policy, whether it's with the group or whatever, is to play things that I like as a listener and try to present it in a clear way. Having grown up playing mostly music that was based on the jazz tradition, as it was established in the '50s

and '60s, I feel very comfortable playing with people like Jack [DeJohnette], Charlie [Haden] and Dewey [Redman]. In a way, I feel much more comfortable playing with them than with rock musicians. With Joni Mitchell, I didn't really know how to relate to her ...with 80/81, we never had played together as a group until we got in the studio and we recorded both albums in a day and a half. Everything on there is first takes. It was a very easy record to make. I have another record that I am working on. It's not exactly like 80/81, but it will probably be more like that. It's going to be a trio record with Charlie and Billie Higgins."

Naturally, since radio stations most often play Metheny's more melodic compositions, there's a bit of a surprise with his more adventurous live shows: "Even though we're not playing rock and roll, we're playing music on instruments that, maybe if they've never heard any jazz before, they can at least recognize the instruments from their rock background. And they're hearing sounds and a way of playing that they very likely have never heard before ... a lot of people maybe had heard my name or the group or something on the radio but didn't really know quite what they were coming to hear... and they are shocked that they really like it. I enjoy turning on new listeners probably more than anything. In a way, that's more fun than playing for 8000 people who know every tune. That is fun in a different way. People surprise themselves that they can really get into something other than the stuff that they hear every day on the radio and think that they like [that kind of music] exclusively."

Metheny's live shows reveal a man who visibly enjoys hearing his own music "My theory is that you have to play for yourself, you have to play stuff that you like, and that you feel strong about, but I don't feel like I want to get up there and play only for myself. I play for myself first, but at the same time, I try to keep an eye

out for the people that are hearing it. I think I can play anything I want to play as long as I present it clearly. I go to a lot of trouble to get a really good sound system, and really nice lights, and we spend hours trying to work out the set, the order, working on rehearsing the tunes and all that stuff, to make it so that what we're gonna play is hopefully apparent. On the other hand, I would never play something just because I thought somebody would like it. And I would never play something just because I thought someone wouldn't like it. I feel every musician has to be a listener and play for himself.

Basically, all a good musician is, is somebody who is a really good listener who's capable of listening to what's inside their head and rendering it into life. I think being a good listener is very, very, difficult. Especially these days when there's so much music that is mass-marketed, and on the radio. Also, most music has a very strong, clear beat, so you almost don't even have to listen to it, you can just kind of groove. I feel that the art of being a good listener isn't as obvious as it once was; when music was quite a bit subtler."

Metheny works hard at perfecting his shows, "I feel that one of the reasons that jazz is not as popular as it could be is not at all because of the music. It's because of the way musicians present it. It is not unusual at all to go to a jazz concert and see the musicians tuning up on stage; they haven't rehearsed, and they make no effort at all to communicate one way or another with the audience. I think the days are over when musicians give out the vibe that they're doing the audience a favor by even showing up. I've never liked that. As an audience member having gone to see a lot of musicians, I've always found that real offensive. I mean, even the greats: of the great musicians aren't that great it's got to be together, and the fact is that the greatest of the great musicians are together."

One of Metheny's latest passions is his use of guitar



synthesizer. "I love playing that thing. Having spent eleven years playing the regular guitar and spending a lot of energy checking out the phrasing of horn players trying to get that kind of sound out of a regular guitar. When I found that particular guitar synthesizer, I could get into the soprano range. It was like a gift from heaven. It was really a breakthrough for me, because all of a sudden things that I'd been hearing for years I could play."

While Burton was certainly an early influence on Metheny's playing and career when they met about 10 years ago backstage while waiting for a concert to begin. It was in Wichita, Kansas and Metheny was virtually unknown back then, but told Burton that he was familiar with the group's tunes and wanted to sit in on guitar. This obviously had an effect on Burton (especially after he heard the guitarist play) and Metheny was invited to join the band just a few years later. They have not recorded together since Passengers which begged the question, why?. "Since the time I left his group, he's [Burton] gotten quite a bit more conservative, as far as what he wants to do as a musician. He's settled back into more of a straight-ahead kind of thing which I am interested in doing, but I think it would be unlikely that he would pick me as someone he would like to do that with. It's funny, he has a sort of strange attitude towards me. He sees me as a rock star or something. During the time I was in the band, he had that feeling regarding Larry Coryell, who actually was much more of a rock-type player than I was or ever will be. But he lumps me into that thing of somebody that was once in his band and who is now playing rock. He heard us play once, and it was a horrible, horrible gig. I mean maybe the worst gig we'd ever played. An outdoor gig, he opened for us (1978); the crowd was out of control and we sounded awful. I'm sure this confirmed his worst suspicions. I would actually like to

play with him again 'cause I feel like I play a lot better now than I did at that time ... it's possible I guess, we're still friendly but it seems like we've gone in pretty opposite directions in a lot of different ways."

Mike Metheny is Pat's older brother by five years. A flugelhorn player, Mike has an album on Headfirst Records titled Blue Jay Sessions. This straight ahead recording of original material as well as tunes by Paul Desmond, Nat Adderley, and one written especially for Mike by brother Pat. "Mike started as a jazz player late, and I think he's developing at an incredibly fast rate. Even since that record was recorded, he has tripled in his jazz abilities. He is planning another record. We play together sometimes, which is really fun because we can phrase almost identically, because I grew up listening to him practice. Stylistically we're interested in very, very different things. I think he would epitomize the stuff he likes as like what Chet Baker plays or Art Farmer. I like playing that occasionally, but my interests tend to be quite a bit more, you know ... I like to really crank it out sometimes. I think that would really be a problem for us in a working-type situation."

Metheny is clearly a successful band leader. He had some interesting comments about being a guitar player and a band leader. "In jazz, there haven't been many really good guitar players as leaders. I can think of John McLaughlin, Django Reinhardt, John Scofield, Jim Hall. Guys who I think are really good stylists like Jimmy Rainey or Alan Holdsworth ... I don't know if they are complete in the sense to eventually become a band leader. Running a band is different than what instrument you play. A lot of it doesn't even have to do with music. A lot of it has to do with business and organizational skills . . . like running a company. Even the ability to have to talk on the microphone, which for most musicians is a nightmare (myself included for a long time). Being the leader depends

on the individual involved. I have played in groups where the drummer was the leader. I played with Jack DeJohnette and when you're playing his music that makes sense. I played with Sonny Rollins and no one else could be the leader in that band. I played gigs where Bobby Moses was the leader. This band could be a completely different band if Lyle were the leader. We could do a gig tomorrow and call it the Lyle Mays Group and play all different music and sound completely different. It's a product of what [the leader] has in mind. I probably wouldn't be a leader had I not been around Gary, who was an incredible leader, and still is. A lot of what I did, especially when the group started, was more or less imitating his approach as far as being a band leader, putting sets together and all that stuff."

Musician magazine quoted Keith Jarrett as saying: electronic music "is a kind of poison something that takes your connection from the soul away." Metheny plays "electronic" and "non-electronic" music and responded with this, "I would say that [Jarrett's claim] is a possibility. I'm not 100% pro-electric music by any means. I feel like, as a musician who's living in this time, I can't ignore that fact that there's incredible technology that's developing right now. I don't think I could stand to not explore the possibilities, because it's so fascinating and it's so new. There is something to be said, though, that if you sit there, and you just play the piano, like Keith, or if I sit around and just play the acoustic guitar. There's a certain power, that has, what no electric instrument can ever have. There's a certain reality to the physics involved when a string is vibrating in the air and you've heard it right from the string, or if you hear somebody playing a trumpet, and you hear it coming right from there, or a saxophone, or somebody singing ... But the sad reality of it is, and I hate to even say this to

Keith, is that Keith is an electric musician; Keith makes records. When Keith does concerts, there's mikes all over the piano. He's dealing with electricity, for better or for worse. I can't buy that particular theory coming from him because it's hypocritical. I mean, if that's true, don't make records. My feeling is that if you're going to deal with electricity, deal with it in a responsible way, which is what we like to do. Besides all that, I have to say that, being a guitar player who likes to play with drummers, the fact is you cannot play with a drummer like Jack DeJohnette, because nobody would ever know what you're playing. That's a problem that he doesn't have, being a piano player, it can be done. I respect Keith a lot; I've had this conversation with him, too."

Metheny is proud to announce the newest member of the band, multi-instrumentalist singer/songwriter Pedro Aznar from Argentina. They met at Berklee. Like so many musicians, Aznar gave the band leader a demo tape and clearly Metheny was impressed. The Argentinian's style spills over into some of Metheny's latest compositions (and are to appear on his next ECM album) inspiring a rich orchestral backdrop for Metheny's guitar synth. The sound is bigger, and the songs stretch out sometimes over several movements and intricate time changes and will be recorded and released as Metheny's next "Group" album in the Fall of next year.

Possibly the most popular musician today playing honest jazz, Metheny's appeal from an audience with wide musical taste may in fact result from his attitude about making music. "If I had to use one word that I'd like to be associated with what I do, it would be that it's musical. Whether it's something really out, like playing some Ornette-type music, or playing some really pretty stuff, I would like to think that people thought I was playing in a way that was appropriate to the music." ■

# PAT METHENY GROUPED

Back in 2002 we highlighted Pat Metheny's discography to date. Check more recent issues of JAZZIZ to learn about albums from his past 15 years.



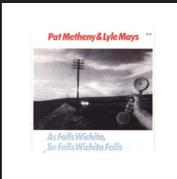
**Bright Size Life** (ECM, 1975) – Metheny's first album as a leader. His trio projects—each a guitar/bass/drums affair—have proved to be his most critically acclaimed. Trio members have included Jaco Pastorius and Bob Moses (*Bright Size Life*), Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins (*Rejoicing*), Dave Holland and Roy Haynes (*Questions and Answer*), and Larry Grenadier and Bill Stewart (*Trio 99-00 and Trio Live*).



**Watercolors** (ECM, 1977)—Precursor to the Pat Metheny Group's first two recordings—*Pat Metheny Group* (a.k.a. "The White Album") and *American Garage*—this album defined the Group's classic sound, which still lingers today.



**New Chautauqua** (ECM, 1979)—One of Metheny's two solo-guitar albums. Stylistically, the discs are worlds apart. While *New Chautauqua* revealed an acoustic heartland sound, *Zero Tolerance for Silence* was an experimental journey to the edge of electric-guitar noise.



**As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls** (ECM, 1980)—Metheny's first duet album is with longtime collaborator Lyle Mays. Seventeen years later, he recorded another duet, *Beyond the Missouri Sky*, with bassist Charlie Haden. His two other duet discs are with guitarists John Scofield and Jim Hall.



**First Circle** (ECM, 1984)—A turning point and an extension of the sound first explored on the Group's successful 1981 release *Offramp*. For *First Circle*, Metheny enlists Argentinian multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Pedro Aznar and forges a new trademark sound for the band that combines vocalese and chants. Arguably, the Group's latest release, *Speaking of Now*, is *First Circle* born again.



**Falcon and the Snowman** (EMI, 1984)—Metheny's first soundtrack included a tune sung by David Bowie. For 1992's *Under Fire* soundtrack, Metheny collaborated with legendary film scorer Jerry Goldsmith. Later he wrote and recorded soundtracks for the Italian film *Passaggio Per Il Paradiso* and, most recently, *Map of the World*.



**Still Life (Talking)** (Geffen-1987)—Metheny becomes one of the few jazz artists to prove that commercial albums like this one, *Letter from Home*, and *We Live Here* can be substantive. The band earns respect from critics and gains popularity on jazz radio.



**Secret Story** (Geffen, 1992)—Though often perceived as overproduced and schizophrenic, this masterpiece is perhaps Metheny's finest hour. Though distinct from the less accessible *80/81* and *Song X*, these albums steer away from the Group sound and, with a little help from his friends, drive confidently through tortuous terrain.

Michael Fagien

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