

19TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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Gray Sargent



Frank Potenza



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## GUITAR REVIEWS

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## East Meets (Mid)West

### How Howard Alden came to record an album with Andy Brown in Chicago

Interview by Thomas Cray



Andy Brown and Howard Alden

Initially planned on approaching this article as a “New York meets Chicago” themed piece. Howard Alden is your quintessential New York guitarist, pushing time and melody to its limits, and whose technical skills enable him to play at lightening-fast tempos, even on a guitar with an extra string. He’s recorded four albums with master guitarist George Van Eps and even taught Sean Penn enough guitar to look like he was really playing in Woody Allen’s 1999 *Sweet & Lowdown*. Chicago’s Andy Brown, 17 years Howard’s junior, is one of the most versatile of the Chicago guitarists. He plays solo guitar and leads his own groups, as well as being a first-call accompanist for singers, an ensemble player in a 7-piece traditional jazz combo, and the guitarist in an organ trio who played a weekly gig at Chicago’s legendary Green Mill for nearly 7 years. Once I began my research, however, I learned that Howard’s formative years were actually spent learning and playing in southern California, where he was born. Andy largely developed his playing style while under the tutelage of Cal Collins and Kenny Poole, two world-class but lesser known guitarists, in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was there, while just out of high school, that Andy first heard Howard play.

**Andy:** I was hearing Cal, and then I got turned on to Kenny Poole, and Kenny was a Van Eps disciple. And

through Kenny I came to realize Howard had recorded several records with Van Eps. He also played the 7-string like Van Eps. So when he came to town I was eager to hear him. He came to Cincinnati and played in a trio, with a bass player and drummer.

**TC:** Did Howard and Kenny know each other?

**Andy:** I believe they met that night. Kenny brought his guitar and sat in the front row, and Howard asked him to sit in. I think they did a whole set together. Cal was in the audience, too. He kept looking at me and smiling, and saying things like, “Did you see that?” and “Check that out!” So Kenny went up and played and it was a good combination.

**TC to Howard:** Do you remember playing with Kenny?

**Howard:** I do. I had heard his name from various people... Michael Moore, the great bass player who had grown up in Cincinnati, had talked about him and I was delighted when he came in and introduced himself. Playing with him was very enjoyable. He was a great player with a comfortable sense of time.

**TC to Andy:** How did you start playing with Howard?

**Andy:** Well, I didn’t really meet Howard that night. It was actually a few years later. My dad lived in New York and I would visit. One time when I was there a friend of mine who had played with Howard gave me his phone number so I called him up.

**TC:** Just cold-called him?

**Andy:** Yeah. I told him I knew someone he played with and told him I was interested in a guitar lesson. He said, “Sure, come over” and so I went to his place. After about 10 minutes it was clear to him that I was into a lot of that same stuff – we played together all afternoon. He didn’t even charge me (laughs). He was really encouraging and said the next time I was in town he’d have me sit in with him.

**Howard:** Andy came over and we had such a great time that we just sat and played for most of the afternoon. We tried to exchange a few ideas but mostly just enjoyed a nice guitar rapport.

**TC to Andy:** This was when you were still living in Cincinnati?

**Andy:** Yeah, this was when I was in my early twenties. So, anytime I would go to New York I would let him know and he would tell me where he was playing and

let me sit in. Sometimes he'd have me come over to his apartment and join in when he was playing with friends. He was really giving and generous with his time and knowledge.

**TC:** Were those first times on stage with him pretty intimidating?

**Andy:** I was nervous, for sure, but my playing was together enough where I was able to keep up.

**Howard:** It's not a matter of keeping up, though... It's a matter of having the same sense of time. He might have asked me a few questions about some chord voicings or harmonies or something like that...

**Andy:** I still do that. Every time he comes to town (laughs).

**Howard:** When I first got together with George Van Eps I had been listening to him for a long time and I knew a lot of the music. It was a thrill and I had my eyes and my ears open all the time but we just felt very comfortable playing together right away and that's kind of the way Andy and I work together, too. It's an ongoing thing – people getting together and continuing the tradition of playing together.

**TC to Andy:** Would I recognize the mid-nineties Andy Brown as the Andy Brown I've seen and heard in Chicago over the past 5 years?

**Andy:** (Without a pause) Oh, definitely. (laughs) I haven't learned anything in twenty years – I've just gotten better at what I knew already (more laughing). Anyway, I moved to New York in 2002, and Howard was a really great resource. I would go and hear him, and he would throw me gigs – he probably gave me more gigs than anyone else.

**TC:** Why New York and then Chicago?

**Andy:** I was a fan of the blues early on and used to come to Chicago to see different blues artists, and Petra (Andy's wife, singer Petra van Nuis) and I wanted to move to a big city. Since I had grown up around New York, and my dad was there, we figured we should try New York first. We were thinking we would get that out of our system (laughs). I don't think either of us had that kind of "we gotta make it in New York" drive. I had seen Cal Collins and Kenny Poole playing in Cincinnati and I guess I learned from them that if you were going to do it, what I wanted to do, you could do it anywhere.

**TC:** How long did you stay in New York?

**Andy:** I was there about a year and a half. In retrospect we probably should have stayed longer. It was our first home outside of Cincinnati, and we didn't realize, at the time, just how much of an adjustment period there is in a move like that. Being a professional musician is a lot like running your own business – you have to "set up" that business, and that takes time.

**TC:** Did Howard have any opinion about your decision to move to Chicago?

**Andy:** (smiles) I think that he was pretty much like, "Do what you think is best." He basically gave me the same advice a few years earlier when I asked if he thought I should move to New York (laughs). He's a very laid back guy.

**Howard:** I remember I was really disappointed because Andy was one of the few people I could recommend whole-heartedly for a lot of gigs I couldn't make so it cut down on my sub list significantly (laughs). But seriously, Chicago is a real nice town, and there are a lot of great musicians there. It's worked out great for Andy.

**TC to Andy:** When did you come up with the idea for a two-guitar quartet show with Howard at The Green Mill?

**Andy:** It was like a lot of things in life – if you sit around waiting for things to happen, they might never happen. I really liked hearing Howard play, and playing with him. We had played together at the 2009 Jazz at Chautauqua weekend, and it was so much fun I wanted to do it again. So rather than wait for Howard to come to Chicago I decided to try to make it happen myself. So in 2010 we played our first two-guitar quartet gigs together at the Green Mill with bassist Joe Policastro and drummer Bob Rummage completing the quartet. Howard had been through Chicago before with packaged tours and played Orchestra Hall and places like that, but I don't believe he had ever played a smaller jazz club like the Mill.

**Howard:** Yes, that was my first time at the Mill. I loved it. It's a great, relaxed room, and the audience was really attentive and everyone was having a good time. The last time I played a jazz club in Chicago would have been in 1987, when I played the Showcase with Flip Phillips, the tenor sax player, when it was located in the Blackstone Hotel.

**TC:** What kind of preparation was necessary to play three sets of music, two nights in a row that first weekend?

**Andy:** No preparation. (shakes his head)

**TC:** So the two of you were able to just call songs and keys and have at it?

**Andy:** Howard has a humongous repertoire and mine is pretty big too. We both love a lot of the same songs – even some obscure jazz guitar classics. There is sort of a tradition of guitarists playing together; Herb Ellis and Barney Kessel, Charlie Byrd, Tal Farlow... there's a lot of recordings with two guitars, bass, and drums so it kind of made sense. That first year I had everyone over to my house before opening night and we picked a bunch of tunes. Since then we've just emailed back and forth song ideas. We wanted a good blend of standards, songs that have lines we can harmonize, some Brazilian songs, maybe feature Howard and Joe on a song, maybe just he and I together, maybe a solo tune or two somewhere in the night...

**TC:** I was lucky to catch the very first night in 2010 and I'm wondering; did you ever feel any communication problems as a result of your different approaches to jazz guitar, or your difference in geography or anything?

**Howard:** Andy and I speak a common language that we both understand and can relate to. A great friend of mine, cornet player Ruby Braff, used to say, "When I play with someone for a couple minutes I can immediately hear if he's dined at a lot of the same restaurants I've dined at." Our material may come out in a different way but we have a lot of the same reference points and an appreciation of the same values.

**Andy:** I felt with Howard, from the start, that we had a special connection. That's why I've tried to keep doing this with him every year. I can play anything I want and know he's going to get the joke (smiles). Sometimes I feel like I go through all the work of booking the gigs, the airplanes, the hotels, and everything, just for that moment where it's like, "yeah, this guy's getting my jokes!" (laughing) There's times when it's just so right. He'll say something about my playing, or make reference to something that tells me he got the joke... and he might be the only guy in the world who got that joke! And I guess I hope it goes the other way, too.

**Howard:** It's all worthwhile when we play a couple of

things and someone will hear something in a certain way and respond to it, or perhaps it points you in a different direction than you might have headed otherwise.

**TC:** Was it easy to pick up from where you left off, a whole year later?

**Howard:** Each year is like a continuation of our conversation. It's like it's going on in our subconscious and then we'll get together and things will be even better than the year before. That's one of the things I love about these ongoing partnerships that I've had with Andy, and various other musicians.



The quartet at the Green Mill

**TC to Andy:** I know you record all your shows so I'm wondering; what did you think listening back to the performances the first night?

**Andy:** I felt like we balanced each other pretty well. We're both coming from the same sources – we just have our different takes on it. When you play with someone on your own instrument I think it's actually good for you, musically. They are always going to have stuff that you don't do, or you didn't think of. It's inspiring – seeing what the other guy comes up with using the same ingredients. When I listened to the recordings there were things I liked more than others but I didn't feel I was making a fool out of myself or anything like that (laughs). And I think the other guys held their own as well – it wasn't like we were backing up Howard – we felt like a band.

**TC:** At the time you set up your third annual weekend, were you already thinking about touring and recording?

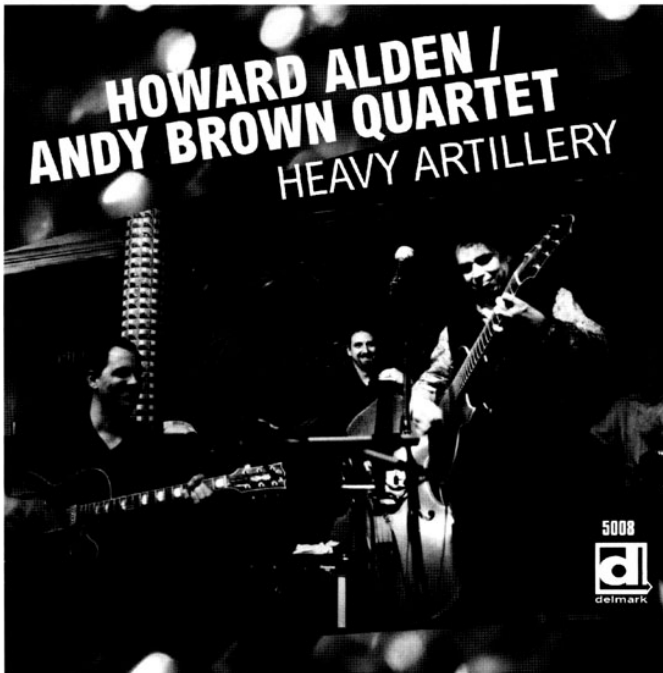
**Andy:** I wanted to do more. I figured since he's going to be here, let's have him here longer, and he was up for it.

**TC:** How many shows did you play?

**Howard:** We played six or seven more shows in addition to the nights at The Mill. We went to Cincinnati, Madison, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Lafayette, and we did some workshops. We did one workshop with Fareed Haque at Northern Illinois University, and one at the Conservatory in Cincinnati.

**TC to Andy:** What was it like being on the road with Howard?

**Andy:** It was great. Howard is a real road warrior. He's been on a lot of trips with a lot of great players so it was interesting to see how he managed his time and his life on the road, and how even-keeled he was. He was always working which was so inspiring. In the van he'd be trying to learn the new version of Sibelius, and he was writing out Van Eps' transcriptions. From memory! He was always using his spare time wisely. The rest of us play a large amount of our gigs in Chicagoland. Occasionally we do a couple of days in Iowa or go up to Madison, but Howard is on a perennial trip. It seems he's always flying to London, or to Germany, or going to Seattle, or whatever. He's much more at ease traveling because it's the norm for him.



**TC:** How about the recording?

**Andy:** We did one day of recording at Studio Media in Evanston. The recording was on a whim, really. I knew I wanted to record with them so we just found a day we weren't traveling. I didn't know what we would get but I just said, "Hey, we're here so why not?" We'd been touring and we had worked up some things and we

were pretty tight. We recorded "Louisiana," which is an old standard. Bix Beiderbecke and everybody played it. It was kind of a blowing tune for the quartet. "Chuckles" is a blues that Tal recorded years ago and it has a nice fast arrangement that we play. "You And I" is a bossa that we do. "I Had The Craziest Dream" is a standard ballad that he and I play as a duo. "Three And One" is a bebop tune by Thad Jones where we all play the melody with the bass. "No One Else But You" is an old Louis Armstrong thing from the twenties that Howard used to play with Ruby Braff, and we use that arrangement when we play it together. "Brigas Nunca Mais" is another bossa, by Jobim. "Heavy Artillery" is a Django tune. "I Brung You Finjans For Your Zarf" (smiles) is a Red Norvo/Tal Farlow up-tempo tune. Howard actually worked with Red early on. And then "If Dreams Come True" is another standard played by just the two of us.

**TC:** Thanks to Howard and Andy for taking time out of their busy schedules to talk with me. The CD was released on Delmark Records in August of 2013 and Howard will be back in Chicago on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> for the CD release party at The Green Mill.

For more information:

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[www.andybrownguitar.com](http://www.andybrownguitar.com)

[www.delmark.com](http://www.delmark.com)

### **Bob Barry/Jazzography**

Bob Barry has created a new web site;  
[jazzography.com](http://jazzography.com)

Check out the GUITAR NIGHT section which is a complete, up to date collection of everybody who has ever had GN, as well as those significant players who have sat in from time to time. There is also a section for GN special events, a bit of history, and an article on John Pisano.

Bob has also posted links to his EXHIBITS, CONCERTS & EVENTS sections, where he has both slide shows and musical quick time movies posted of events he's chronicled.

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