

JUST JAZZ GUITAR

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Mark Cally

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Jay Roberts



MUSIC

When I Fall in Love Improvisation

What Are You Doing

The Rest of Your Life ?

An Affair to Remember

You Stepped Out of a Dream

Squid's Blues

Clouds

FEATURES

A week in Italia:

A Diary of an Itinerant

Pedagogue by Sid Jacobs

George Benson "Songs & Stories"

Jazz Guitar/Classical Guitar:

A Symbiotic Relationship Part III

(A Conversation with Johnny Smith)

9 LESSONS

Product Review: Frick archtops

INTERVIEWS

Andy Brown

Jay Roberts

Mark Cally

Dale Zdenek

Susan Weinert

Phoenix Guitar Company

LISTENING  TEST

with John Pizzarelli

ANDY BROWN

by Thomas Cray



I've lived in Chicago for 20 years, and over that time I've had the fortune of meeting some great jazz musicians. I've especially treasured the conversations I've had with guitarists, some who were visiting this great city and others living down the block. I've attended in-store appearances/workshops by Doyle Dykes and Herb Ellis (compliments of Terry Straker's Guitar Works, LTD.), I've met Gypsy stylist Stephane Wrembel, in town performing with local sensation Alphonso Ponticelli at our annual Djangofest. I've heard Fared Haque practicing on his backyard patio, and I've enjoyed many conversations with Neal Alger between sets at the legendary Green Mill, where The Patricia Barber Quartet packs the house on Monday nights when not touring overseas. More recently, though, I've found a kindred spirit in Cincinnati transplant Andy Brown, whom I initially discovered performing with his wife, vocalist Petra van Nuis, at one of my favorite Chicago bistros, Katerina's, where I was having dinner with my daughter.

I hardly noticed the pasta arrive as Andy began playing some cascading chord changes and harp-like artificial harmonics on his ES-175. His wife Petra joined him, and from the first song I knew I'd stumbled onto something special. We spoke between sets, and through the conversation it became abundantly clear that we shared a love of jazz history, vintage archtop guitars,

the Great American Songbook, and all the jazz guitar greats. When we began discussing books, I wasn't surprised that we had both read the biographies of Bucky Pizzarelli, Wes Montgomery, Lenny Breau, Les Paul, Martin Taylor, Tal Farlow, Steve Jordan, and even Billy Bauers (we also both picked up copies of the Summerfield book on Barney Kessel when it was published last year). He also read "Raise Up Off Me: A Portrait of Hampton Hawes," which I happened to be finishing the week of our interview. He's performed with Howard Alden and Marty Grosz at a jazz festival.

How long have you been performing in Chicago?

Close to 6 years now. Previous to that I lived and played in New York for a couple of years, and before that, Cincinnati for about 11 years. I started playing professionally when I was 17--the summer before my senior year in high school.

Were you playing jazz from the beginning?

Initially I was playing blues: Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray. From there it was Albert King and B. B. King, and then it was T-Bone Walker and Charlie Christian, and from there, a leap over to Wes Montgomery. It was Wes who first helped me make the transition to jazz. I had heard Charlie Christian, but I wasn't ready yet... I wasn't aware of what it was yet... how to listen to it and how to relate to it. Looking back, I'm really happy that's the path I took - from the blues, because blues really teaches you to play from the gut.

How many days a week do you perform?

Six or seven..

Do you follow any sort of practice regimen?

I don't do a lot of warm-up calisthenics. I do that a little bit, but for me, practice is more learning tunes, or licks, or new chord voicings that I may have heard. I might set up my recorder with a goal of playing a few tunes on solo guitar and see if I can get through them. I'm into playing my instrument by itself and having it be a legitimate musical performance. So I think it's good when you're practicing to work on what you actually do on a job, as opposed to trying to cover all your scales and arpeggios and so forth. I take a song like "Sophisticated Lady" and play an intro, a nice ending, maybe a modulation, and practice that.

Is your "Sophisticated Lady" of June, 2009 different than your "Sophisticated Lady" of June, 2007?

For sure. I don't have set arrangements. That's what I practice. I may pick a key where a song lies well, but I try to improvise the voicings and counterpoint and the treatment of a tune so it's different each time. You know, another thing I consider as practicing is *listening* to music. I might turn off my cell phone and other distractions and listen to a particular CD or, for instance, a Ted Greene or George Van Eps concert. The more I do that, the more my palate grows, the more colors I'll have to choose from.

Do you ever hear something that causes you to stop and rewind it, and try to work out how it's played?

Yeah. I keep a little notebook where I write licks, phrases, intros and chords. It's full of those things. The hard part is opening it again and revisiting things rather than just turning the page and writing down the next thing. Sometimes I go back, but I should do that more. It just takes time to go back and drill it into your playing. Imagine how many things we could get into our playing with more time.

Do you think the act of writing things down helps you learn?

I think that the act of writing it down means it doesn't get lost... and maybe the half hour it took you to figure it out helps... but I also think, sometimes, that writing something down is contrary to learning something, because if you write it down, you think, "Oh yeah, I got that," but then you never actually go through the process of learning it and being able to call upon it and play it.

Many famous guitarists have been known to advise younger players to listen to other instruments for ideas and to reference as they learn. Do you subscribe to that thinking?

That's an interesting topic because you hear that all the time but I feel there's merit in both. There have been many guitarists over the years who have contributed with chordal playing and single note playing that you could certainly just listen to guitar and be fine. I think it's somewhat of a cliché. Maybe it was applicable when there was Charlie Christian or Jimmy Raney and Tal Farlow, and that was it for single-note playing. Even that would have been enough. But nowadays you can get all the harmony you'll ever need from Ed Bickert and George Van Eps and all the single-note

lines from Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass. On the flip side, of course, I have gone through periods where I didn't listen to guitar, and it takes a minute for your brain to adjust. You might be listening to solo piano, for instance, and at first you might feel you can't relate to it, but then, all of the sudden, you start to hear it as if it were a guitar, and you start to wonder, "Well, what if this weren't Dave McKenna or Hank Jones but instead it was Joe Pass or Ted Greene pulling off all this stuff," and you start to realize this pianist is pulling off way more than the best solo guitarist who ever played. If you can get into that mode it'll blow your mind.

How so?

There are still things at the disposal of pianists, like basic everyday vocabulary, that have yet to be worked out on the guitar. Time, for instance. Time/feel/groove can be the hardest to achieve playing unaccompanied guitar. To be successful you need to create something that feels as good groove-wise as a band or a solo pianist. As a rule, pianists seem to achieve a better groove than guitarists. They seem to be able to create a better relaxed, yet forward propulsion.

What is an average week of your schedule like?

It varies. Chicago is a great city to play the kind of jazz I play. There's a fair amount of work. Much of it falls under the category of Service Industry--we play a lot of restaurants, parties and events where the music may not be the focal point of the evening--but Chicago has a lot of great jazz clubs, too, where I can bring my group. I recently broke down gigs into four categories: Concerts, Jazz Clubs, Restaurants/Bars and Hotels, and Private Events (weddings, corporate parties). It's like a pyramid, too: the private events are at the base and pay the most, then the bars & restaurants, which might be a little more musically interesting but pay a little less, then the jazz clubs, which allow for more creative focus, and then at the top are the concerts--theaters, halls, university concerts. The ideal is to draw from three or four of those every week.

What have been some of your career highlights?

Definitely, playing with Harry Allen this past year (twice actually - in Chicago at the Jazz Showcase, and then in Europe). Anytime you play with a world-class player it's a great experience. Playing with Kenny Poole, who was one of my mentors and favorite musicians, was always a highlight. Playing with Cal Collins was always fun as well, early in my career. There have

been a lot of players who have been inspiring to play with: Howard Alden, Joe Cohn. Moving to Chicago was good too. When I first got here I went to see a lot of great musicians, and before I knew it I was on stage with them at places like The Green Mill. Playing there every week is definitely a highlight. That's a club with a lot of history... a place that I knew about before I moved here, where lots of great people played, and where I dreamed about playing someday.

Have you released any recordings?

I've done one album under my own name called "Trio and Solo," which I'm proud of. I have done an album with my wife Petra, and some great Chicago horn players, featuring arrangements by bass player Joe Policastro. Right now Petra and I are working on a new duo album that I'm really excited about because we've been performing together for 10 years so it's about time we did a duo record. We have some good stuff in the can already, so I'm looking forward to releasing that this year.

How does working in Chicago compare to New York?

I love New York. I lived there, my dad lives there still, I grew up near there... but I don't really feel there's an epicenter anywhere right now for what I'm interested in. New York may have more marquee, showcase-type gigs, but Chicago has more of a grass roots working scene. I play 5-7 gigs per week, 52 weeks a year here, and I don't have to go completely out of my mind to get those gigs. I think at this stage in my life the best thing I can do is to work all the time. New York might be a better place to launch an international career, but Chicago is a much better place if you're looking to play, and not have to supplement your income doing other kinds of work.

What do you think international musicians/guitarists should know about the Chicago jazz music scene?

I think they should know that Chicago is a healthy, functioning American city, which is, unfortunately, rarer than you might think these days. Chicago is a real hotbed of culture; art, theater, writing, visual arts, and music all thrive here, much like in New York.

Do you play anywhere outside Chicago?

Yes, I'm lucky to be able to travel a bit. This year I will have played in Europe twice, as well as traveled a fair

amount regionally. I play in New York once or twice a year, and I always enjoy playing clubs like the Blue Wisp in Cincinnati, the Firefly in Ann Arbor, and NightTown in Cleveland.

Do you have any students?

Not really; the main student I'm teaching right now is myself. It's enough effort to find time to do my own homework and complete the work that my teacher has assigned me (laughs). I suppose that if a student approached me and loved the music and seemed to think I had something I could give to him, I would consider it, but I'm not necessarily interested in opening shop at a guitar store, or even a university. I'm more interested in it as an oral tradition that's passed down. I was lucky to learn in this way.

Would you describe the kind of jazz that you play?

Sure. The title I most prefer is "mainstream." It's that core that runs from Lester Young, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Art Tatum, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster... all the guys that I love. To me, it's the heartbeat of all jazz. I remember reading Nat Hentoff's liner notes for the first Poll Winners album. He said no matter what style of jazz you listen to you will always find at the heart of it what Barney Kessel, Ray Brown, and Shelly Manne did on that album. These days it's a very specialized, smaller sub-genre, but it reaches a large audience and is what many think of when they hear the word Jazz.

The repertoire is largely from the Great American Songbook and jazz compositions written in that era. It's played with a certain feel and approach to playing. There's a swing to the music. It's less brooding and self-conscious than other genres. Happy, maybe... it's accessible. I like playing for audiences and interacting with people who like music. I think it's in our job description--making music for people. I think when you see me or others playing this kind of music, you get authenticity. We, as artists, have found our medium. We've put honesty and authenticity above versatility and I believe our audience benefits from it.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What do you think is or will be your contribution to this genre?

I think if you pursue your career honestly, you can't help bringing something new to it. I don't, however, feel any need to reinvent the medium. There seems to be the idea that you have to do something new these

days, not only in jazz but in other mediums. I don't feel that way. I think there's already plenty to work with, plenty for me to play around in. I just want to do it the best I can. I think being "good" is vastly underrated... buried under what's new or never been done before... but I think it's underrated.



With all the accompanying you do, you must know a lot of songs. How many, do you guess?

Probably 1500, more or less, in varying degrees. Some I might know the changes to but not the melody. Sometimes I'll use sheet music, though I prefer not to read on stage because I think you use a different part of your brain to read than to play. I took piano lessons as a kid and learned to read music early on (my dad encouraged me), but I think it's better for improvisation if you have the chord structure of a song internalized because you'll use that other side of the brain to play.

Tell me about your gear.

My two main guitars are a Tal Farlow reissue from 1999 and a 1981 blonde Gibson ES-175 that I tune down a whole step for solo and vocal accompaniment. It has heavier (14-59) strings on it that allow for a fuller sound and more sustain. I learned that early on from Kenny Poole, George Van Eps and Ted Greene. Both guitars are plywood, which I like because I can play them loud and they won't feed back. I usually play through a Peavy Bandit; it seems to give me a warm, rich sound that I can't get out of a tube amp of the same size. A Vibrolux I sometimes use seems to distort at too quiet a volume for me. I've tried Evans and Polytone; they're great, but the Peavy gives me the most tube-like sound, with the extra headroom, plus it's only worth like \$60, so I can keep it in the trunk of my car, which actually makes a big difference.

What advice can you give young guitarists who might be interested in a career as a mainstream jazz guitarist?

Well, the word "career" is an interesting term. One thing I've learned over the years is that there are two things: your music, and your career--and they are almost separate. Your music, your passion, the material, your musical goals... they are really separate from your career. I mean, they can help you--you need to learn songs, in all the keys, and that will help your career, but you need to love the material if you're going to pursue this. Many teachers will tell you, "You gotta learn the tunes..." but not if you're not passionate about the music. Having a career in music is something in and of itself. Business, politics, ambition--it's really a separate thing, and should be treated as such. Most of my favorite guitarists' careers were really secondary to their music. Even Wes Montgomery--every time you saw him play he had a big smile on his face. A career is a serious undertaking. It's important to balance your career, your passion for the music, and your life.

Thanks for taking the time to share your experiences.

Thanks for the interest.

Andy Brown Interview, May 28, 2009, Evanston, IL

Thomas Cray • www.thomascray.com • tc@craydesign.com