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BREAKING THROUGH TO PAT METHENY

Revelations from the legendary guitarist

By Josef Woodard

PAT METHENY, FRESH off the figurative farm of his hometown of Lee's Summit, Missouri, strode into a world of hype and transition with deceptive ease and a new strain of killer chops. It was the mid-'70s, and the jazz industry found itself seized in the electro-shock embrace of fusion, with a jazz mainstream tradition that had been reduced to a trickle. Guitarists were running rampant and turning their amps to 11.

Metheny was something else. His clean, bell-like tone on a fat-bodied Gibson, rendered extra dreamy with digital delay, created a necessary bridge between the worlds of Jim Hall, John McLaughlin and triadic, American folk traditions, with Brazilian pulses underscoring it all. Metheny was a rare bird from the beginning, combining melodic flair with virtuosity, harmonic sophistication with chromatic dervish dancing. And he served it up with a smile. For all the buzz he created from the start, working in Gary Burton's group and releasing the modest-selling but now classic ECM debut, *Bright Size Life* (with drummer Bob Moses and his pal, bassist Jaco Pastorius), Metheny turned into a phenom with his first Pat Metheny Group album in 1977, and he hasn't slowed down since.

This year's model from the official Pat Metheny Group is *We Live Here*, the first Group album in six years, and the first to embrace a more R&B–hued groove. Visibility is high. It is in "Group mode," as he puts it, that Metheny has earned a place as a best-selling jazz artist.

Many followers of *Musician*'s history have undoubtedly noticed Metheny's conspicuous absence over the last 15 years or so. It wasn't for lack of trying on our part, but rather it had to do with Metheny's long-standing refusal to be profiled until a living jazz musician graced a *Musician* cover (ergo, the John Coltrane cover didn't count). Metheny's appearance in this issue comes courtesy of Branford Marsalis's appearance on our cover in July 1994. As he put it, "Until *Musician* had a living jazz musician on the cover, I wouldn't do it. They finally had Branford on the cover, probably for the wrong reasons, but at least there was one of us represented as a member of the community."

So it was that he sat down in his West Hollywood hotel suite for an interview at long last. Over the course of our three-and-a-half-hour talk, he

– Photography by Chris Cuffaro –

often rose to his own defense, either implicitly or openly. Perched and alert on the couch, drinking Diet Pepsi, tanned and ever-ready for action, Metheny was the picture of health, a musician going along swimmingly midstream in his career. But he's not too reflexively polite to air his grievances or his feelings of being misunderstood. The fact remains that Metheny is sometimes unfairly written off or incompletely appreciated, even by his ardent admirers and mass base of fans—*especially* by his mass base of fans.

For every huge-selling accessible Metheny album there have been other dark horses that confound and enthrall, depending on who you're talking to. The fertile last few years have seen the release of *Secret Story*, perhaps his most unabashedly romantic album yet, followed by his sideman shot on Gary Thomas's great set of revisionist standards, *Till We Have Faces.* Next came Metheny's solid salvos on Joshua Redman's *Wish* in 1993. And with his plectrist colleague John Scofield, the resoundingly good *I Can See Your House from Here*. Most notoriously, the avant guitar lab experiment *Zero Tolerance for Silence* was released in a wee edition, by Geffen standards, before the next *real*, marketable Metheny Group album, being *We Live Here*.

Part of Metheny's image problem has to do with the company he keeps on radio. His patented lyricism and flair for infectious melody have earned him a golden spot on the lucrative, oft-reviled WAVE and Adult Contemporary formats. But clearly, Metheny's conscientious artistry has little or no kinship with the lame, pentatonic banalities of Kenny G and his ilk, though you may hear them back to back on the radio.

Basically, Metheny is unique in the jazz sweepstakes. Dismissed and beloved for a lot of the wrong reasons, he may well be the only jazz player of lasting significance for whom the term "visionary" isn't too much of a stretch, and who enjoys an epic box office as well. Lee's Summit, MO has every reason to be proud.

MUSICIAN: *Basically, there was a five-year hiatus with your Group. Was that a plan, or an unintentionally long break?*

METHENY: It just worked out that way. The Group has an 18-year history now, and we've had periods when, to keep it fresh and to just keep things moving, the best course has just been to cool it for a while. Also, more so than anybody in the Group, I've had other things that I've wanted to do.

This particular period is a little bit deceptive, because it looks longer than it actually was. We did *Letter from Home* in '89 and basically spent a year and a half following that. That ate up a bunch of time. It was during that time that we recorded the live record, *The Road to You*.

But then I started on that *Secret Story* project album, which was a very ambitious undertaking, a culmination of 15 years of musical and personal everything all in this one place. In the middle of all that, too, I did run into Joshua Redman, which wound up being a pretty sizable commitment of time and energy, just working with him—which was something I really enjoyed. Then I also did the project with John Scofield.

I think we've come back with a new appreciation of what the Group is. The possibilities are wider and more open for us to explore music together than they've ever been. Plus, we have this appreciation of what we've done together and how long we've been together.

MUSICIAN: *Your first solo album, per se, was* Bright Size Life, *right?*

METHENY: That's right. During that whole time, Jaco and I were playing together all the time. We had that trio with Bob Moses and continued to play with Paul Bley. He and I were best friends. From 1973 until the year after he joined Weather Report, we were like brothers. We had in common that neither one of us ever drank alcohol and had never taken any drugs. That was kind of our link. I'm still that way. I've continued that groove for my whole life, really. Jaco kind of went into another zone, as we know now.

We were always really tight, even near the end. We were always close, but never again the way we were in those early years. We spent a lot of time together talking about our careers and about the respective roles of our instruments in jazz and what we wanted to do. Thinking about Jaco's impact on his instrument, there was never any question in my mind that that was what it would be. When I first heard Jaco in 1972, it was there. In a lot of ways, he was better at that time than he ever was.

"When our first Group album came out it sold not 2000, which we expected, but 100,000. I had no preparation for that."

He got signed to Epic and joined Weather Report right around the time we did *Bright Size Life*. The writing was on the wall with Jaco. In addition to everything else, he was completely ambitious. He would call up Keith Jarrett and say, "Man, I'm the baddest bass player you've ever heard. You've never heard the bass before." He did that with everybody, so it was clear that that would happen. And he was right.

When our first Group record came out and it sold not 2000, which is what *Bright Size Life* sold, but 100,000, I had no preparation for that. That was the last thing in the world I ever expected to happen. And, in fact, it was a little bit disorienting for me. I was 22 years old. I almost felt like I had done something wrong. This was reinforced by ECM's reaction to it, which was not exactly favorable. Manfred's attitude towards me was very odd, because it was doing well. I almost felt like I messed up the hierarchy or something. On the other hand, I felt real good about the music we were playing. I felt like the combination of me and Lyle was a very viable one, musically, and very stimulating.

MUSICIAN: *How does it differ for you playing—in Los Angeles, for instance—at a sprawling venue like the Universal Amphitheater versus the Catalina Bar and Grill, where you played with Joshua Redman last year?*

METHENY: It's not really that different for me. I'm aware of the audience only as a matter of consideration. When it comes time to play—

and I don't want to say this in a snotty way—I don't really care at that point. Once the music begins, it's kind of between me and it. I've never been that affected by either the audience or record companies or critics or whatever. Having now 20-some years of experience in dealing with all these variables really helps. I'm much more competent at getting to the real deal nightly than I was when I was 18 years old and playing with Gary Burton. I understand a lot more about the process, particularly as an improvising musician, of what I have to do to be ready to face the music.

MUSICIAN: *Several years ago, you mentioned that you were in a heavy practice regimen of playing mostly major scales, as a way of traversing the fretboard almost without thinking. Do you still do that?*

METHENY: I avoided playing any kind of scales at all during the first 15 years that I played. I avoided any kind of pattern-related activity on the instrument, because, to me, that was the thing that killed most guitar players as improvisers. It's such a pattern-based instrument. I would see guys who wouldn't ever even move their hands. The worst culprits of this are blues guys. They even call these areas "boxes," and they just kind of hang there. Whatever notes happened to fall under their fingers, that's what they play.

As time went on, I found myself discovering that playing arpeggios and scales is a very efficient way to get a deep relationship with proximities on the instrument. It makes a whole lot of sense. Arpeggios, especially, are incredibly effective at training your mechanism to know where things are at all times in a sort of 3-D kind of way. It works, so I had to give up the ghost with that attitude.

When I get out there, the instrument almost disappears for me. It's this *thing*, this tool that enables me to manifest sound into the air. I try, as much as I can be, to be prepared for the moment, through understanding and being warmed up, knowing all about chords and scales, so I don't even have to think about that and I can get right to what it is that I want to say.

MUSICIAN: *But you must have times when you don't feel that direct connection between what you want to say and where your fingers go.*

METHENY: If you're going to go out and play a couple hundred gigs a year, yes, some nights are better than others. For me, the good news is that, after 25 years of playing almost every night, I feel like I can get to that zone much more regularly now, almost all the time. But when you can't, there are several approaches. One is to stop; you just don't play anything. The other is to rely on what you know is grammatically correct.

"I'm aware of the audience only as a matter of consideration. Once the music begins, it's kind of between me and it."

MUSICIAN: *Aha, the GC approach.*

METHENY: Anybody who goes out and plays improvised music night after night after night is going to have certain grammatical zones that they'll function in and rely on. From the Art Ensemble of Chicago to whoever you want to name, everybody has their world that they live in as musicians, and the language that they speak is what it is.

MUSICIAN: *On this new project, you're delving into some new groove territories. How did that come about?*

METHENY: I wanted to use the Group's history and collective aesthetic values as a lens to take a picture of what we saw in the contemporary pop music world. I don't know if I would have felt as comfortable as I do now addressing pop music in such a blatant way as using drum loops, for instance. I just felt like, at this point in time, like everybody else on earth, when I hear those grooves, I say, "Yeah, that sounds hip." I always wondered, though, why did it have to be one chord?

For the first time in about eight years, I stopped touring and rented a house to write. Also, knowing that this was the plan I had, I felt like I just wanted to get back in touch with what day-to-day life in America felt like and sounded like—what the pulse was now. I walked around a lot and listened to what people were listening to in their cars. I went to a lot of bars and clubs, places where people had music on, and I realized that those grooves are everywhere. They're in every kind of music you can imagine.

MUSICIAN: *Where was this house?*

METHENY: In Miami. I've had a long association with Miami over the years, and it seemed like as good a place as any to settle in and write.

MUSICIAN: *I get the sense that you don't call any particular, fixed place home.*

METHENY: I haven't lived in a place for five years now. I haven't had a residence anywhere. I just live in my suitcase. Wherever I have to go, I just go to this warehouse where I keep all my clothes, pick out the appropriate thing and go. I stay in hotels the rest of the time, or wherever I have to be. It's been that way since 1990.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDI ANGLIN

MUSICIAN: *Do you like that lifestyle?*

METHENY: It's cool. It's different. It's not something I'll be doing for the rest of my life, but for these years, it's worked. It's been the appropriate way to live.

But for writing, I really do have to go someplace. The process of writing music for me is the most difficult part of the three stages—writing, recording and performing is how my time gets divided. And the writing part of it is, for sure, the hardest. So I need to just go someplace with all my stuff to just work, and that's what this process was.

I made these demos and I wanted to get Lyle involved real early. He was really chomping at the bit to get back into the Group. He came down to Miami, along with Steve Rodby, who was sort of our adult supervision in the writing process. As much as Lyle and I have written together, which is a lot over the years, we both have our weird quirks. Lyle's thing is that he'll obsess over some minute compositional detail that probably no one in a million years would ever hear, that will completely paralyze him for two or three days at a time and won't get anything done.

My thing is that we could write the greatest piece of music, and after listening to it for an hour, I'll say it sucks and that we should start over again. So Steve stopped Lyle from obsessing over details, saying, "No, it's okay, we should just go on," and then he would say, "No, Pat, it doesn't suck. You should keep going here." He kind of produced the writing zone, which was very efficient.

MUSICIAN: *When you are in Group mode, you must have to suppress certain aspects of your musical personality.*

METHENY: It's more the other way around. The Group is the one place where I really feel I can play all the music that I like. Oftentimes I hear this about me—that I have the Group, which is the mainstream thing, and then I've got this other experimental side. Honestly, the Group is as experimental or more than anything else that I do. I have to say that it bugs me a little bit to hear that analysis of the two sides of what I do.

For me, that's kind of an easy way out for whoever is commenting on me or writing an article. There's not that much of a difference for me between playing with Josh or playing with the band or playing with Steve Reich or whoever. I get a little tired of people trying to

METHENY'S MACHINERY

METHENY still plays his beloved Gibson ES 175, "the first real guitar I bought, for a hundred bucks from this guy in Ray Town, Missouri." Of late, though, he has been using an Ibanez Pat Metheny signature model, which will be available commercially later this year. "It's more or less a traditional jazz guitar, but it's got its own characteristic sound." One of his newest axes is a baritone guitar made by Canadian luthier Linda Manzer. He strings the Gibson with D'Addario CG24 Chromes, the Manzer with D'Addario J16s.

While composing, Metheny says, "I still sit there with the [New England Digital] Synclavier in front of me, a [Steinway Hamburg Model B] piano on one side and a guitar on the other. I move freely between the computer, piano and guitar. A lot of people consider the Synclavier a dinosaur, which it is. They used to advertise it as the 'last synthesizer you'll ever need,' back in '77. It still does a bunch of things that I can't find anywhere else."

After using the same Acoustic 134 amp since 1972, Metheny switched to a Digitech GSP 2101 processor "with a whole bunch of digital effects in it and a tube. You're able to get almost any kind of a sound. It's the first device I've used where I can simulate my sound while using more modern gear. It solved a bunch of problems for me." He runs the Digitech through Crest 6001 and Ashley MOSFET 200 power amps with two Tiel cabinets, an Oakes 2x18, and the Acoustic 134's 4x10 enclosure.

Metheny uses his Apple Powerbook 540 as a virtual studio-in-a-box that enables him to compose on the move. Using Opcode's StudioVision sequencer-*cum*-audio-editor with Apple's Sound Manager operating system extension, the computer can play up to five eight-bit mono audio tracks in tandem with sequenced tracks. The sequenced tracks trigger sounds in the computer provided by QuickTime (the original video system extension that now handles soundtracks as well). "You can plug your guitar right into the 540 and play along," Metheny says. "It's limited bandwith and limited time," he says, "but you can do some pretty serious damage on it."

"I did all of the edit points for the new record on an airplane at 30,000 feet, which was really a mind blower," he says. Scaled down to mono eight-bit, the entire album fit onto the Powerbook's internal hard drive. The visual waveform display made it simple to try out various edits as he listened on headphones in the comfort of his airplane seat.

find easy solutions to complex problems. The whole issue of style in jazz bothers me. To me, jazz has always evolved through the efforts of individuals. It has rarely been through movements. There's a real danger in jazz to have it become something that's more like classical music. To me, that doesn't work. When Milt Jackson dies—and I hope it's a long time from now—there will never be another Milt Jackson. I suggest that everybody go hear Milt Jackson as much as you can now, because he's one of the best musicians ever. It's a rare and beautiful thing when somebody comes along with a particular way of hearing music that they're able to manifest into life for everybody else to hear. That's what, to me, what jazz is all about.

MUSICIAN: *But young players are encouraged in that direction by the marketplace, and the industry hunger for new young conservatives.*

METHENY: I encourage people to ignore the marketplace. I don't care if you're a new bebop guy or an alternative rock band, no truer words were ever spoken than when Public Enemy said, "Don't believe the hype."

If you're going to be a musician that is serious, the first thing you have to realize is that music is really hard. It's really hard to address music that in a complete, detailed and intimate way over the course of a lifetime. If you can't find a reward in music itself, you're better off not even bothering, because that's all there is.

To tell you the truth, I wish I got some satisfaction out of having a little bit of extra coin and getting some awards. It means nothing to me. My mom gets off on it. For me, if I get some fancy award and I go out and play that night and it's not happening, I go back to the hotel room and want to kill myself. It makes no difference whatsoever.

The only thing I get something back from is playing with certain musicians. The fact that Charlie [Haden] is one of my best friends and that when we play together, it's happening, that's something that means a lot to me.

MUSICIAN: *When I last talked to you, after* Secret Story *came out, you were restless about your guitar tone. You mentioned how you heard so many players with your sound, as if you had created a monster. How do you feel about that now?*

METHENY: One of the things that I've grown to love about the guitar is that it can be so many things. But there is this fundamental sound which I guess we're talking about—the Pat Metheny guitar sound—that, for whatever analysis I could give of it or whatever opinion I have of it, finally, it just is what it is. Whenever I pick up anybody's guitar, it sounds like that. I can go sit in on some weird jam session in Poland on some Russian-made guitar, and it sounds like me. Yes, there are aspects of what I do that I suppose are copied by people, with the digital delay and flat-sound strings and this and that, but those are the superficial aspects of it. The core of it is just the way I hear things.

MUSICIAN: *You laid down some exciting and unexpected stuff on the Gary Thomas album* Till We Have Faces *a couple of years ago. How did that come about?*

METHENY: Gary's great. I went to that date thinking that we were going to do one of his funk, *Kold Kage* type of things. I had a sense in my mind of what kind of a zone that would be fun to play with him in, harmonically. I got there, and he wanted to play all standards. I thought, "Oh my God, now what am I going to do?" Then I thought, "Well, I'll just play the way I was planning to play."

Also on Gary's date Terri Lyne Carrington was real inspiring. For me, that drums are always the most important thing, in whatever setting. I try to physically be near the drums and I try to get as inside the drums as I can. And she was dealing.

MUSICIAN: *And on "Lush Life," are you using a baritone guitar?*

METHENY: It *should* have been a baritone guitar, because I tuned it really, really low. I've always been interested in exploring what the guitar can do, sonically, besides just being itself. When I first started the band, the best way of getting to that was by taking guitars and restringing them, tuning them in different ways, and coming up with these sonic events that you could never get with a traditional guitar. When synthesizers showed, I stopped doing that. I started to find that my interests were quenched by being able to go up an octave or down an octave or retune everything at the touch of a button. But there is something about the strings actually vibrating together that you'll never replace.

MUSICIAN: *Do you feel like an alien when you are played on the radio formats such as the WAVE and Adult Contemporary?*

METHENY: I have real mixed feelings about that. Of course, like anyone, for whatever anybody wants to say about the word "alternative," the real alternative world is any of us who are trying to exist in this culture playing any kind of instrumental music. Those stations are a source for us. I don't cater to them. There are usually just one or two tunes that would fit anyway, just time-wise. I have to admit, I feel a little uncomfortable with that. But it's reality.

MUSICIAN: *It goes back to what you were saying about these shuffly grooves being used in a simplistic way, harmonically, whereas all of your songs are much trickier than they might seem on the surface. Deceptive simplicity is your thing, isn't it?*

METHENY: I think so. Finally, our music speaks better for itself than I can. Whether it's used for background music for a Roto Rooter commercial or an NBA special—all the weird places that I've heard tunes of mine—are fine. But the context that I intend for somebody is to put on headphones, crank it up all the way, and listen as hard as they can, because that's the way I hear it.

People tell me all the time that the song "Are You Going with Me?" is used for certain activities. There's a kid in Colorado named Metheny, because of that song. I feel terrible for him. People use that song to fuck by. For me, it's my tune that I've played a billion times. It's not about fucking. It's about that song.However people use the music is something that's beyond my control. All of those things wash away in time and what's left is the music itself.

MUSICIAN: *At least a subtle bossa nova pulse is evident in almost all of your music.*

METHENY: Well, Antonio Carlos Jobim was very important to me. That whole way of moving around harmonically had a big effect on me. I know Jobim is Brazilian, but it almost goes beyond that.

MUSICIAN: *Is there an analogy to be made between Brazilian music, with its merging of rural and urban musical values, and your own musical signature, from the heartland by way of New York City?*

METHENY: If there is, it is probably the guitar. Both of those musics you described are both largely guitar-driven. The Americana folkie thing has to do with that sound of open strings, which I've always loved. Brazilian music is a more closed version of the same thing, that involves at least one other note apart from the triad in the voicings.

Like a lot of guitar players, my first contact with a major seventh chord was on "Girl from Ipanema." [*laughs*] That was about the third chord I learned, because I couldn't barre those first two strings, so I thought, "Hey, how about if I just leave the top one open?" That was about the second day of playing for me, after learning the "Peter Gunn" theme and the theme from "Batman."

MUSICIAN: *Thinking about your long and twisting career, is this at all what you expected when you started on this saga?*

METHENY: I never really had much expectation. Any expectation I had, this has knocked it out of the ballpark, into the next county, into the next continent. The only goal I ever had was that I thought it would be great to play in Gary Burton's band. That was the equivalent of joining the Beatles for me. I got that gig when I was 19, and I realized during the time I was with Gary that there was a way I wanted to play that I wouldn't be able to play unless I started my own band. But that point, my goal would have been to play the Jazz Workshop in Boston and have it be half full on weeknights and maybe full on Friday and Saturday. Anything other than that would be gravy. And then if I could continue to do records for ECM, that would be fantastic. To tell you the truth, from then until now, it's been one big blur. It's 18 years later, and it's really been one long tour for me.