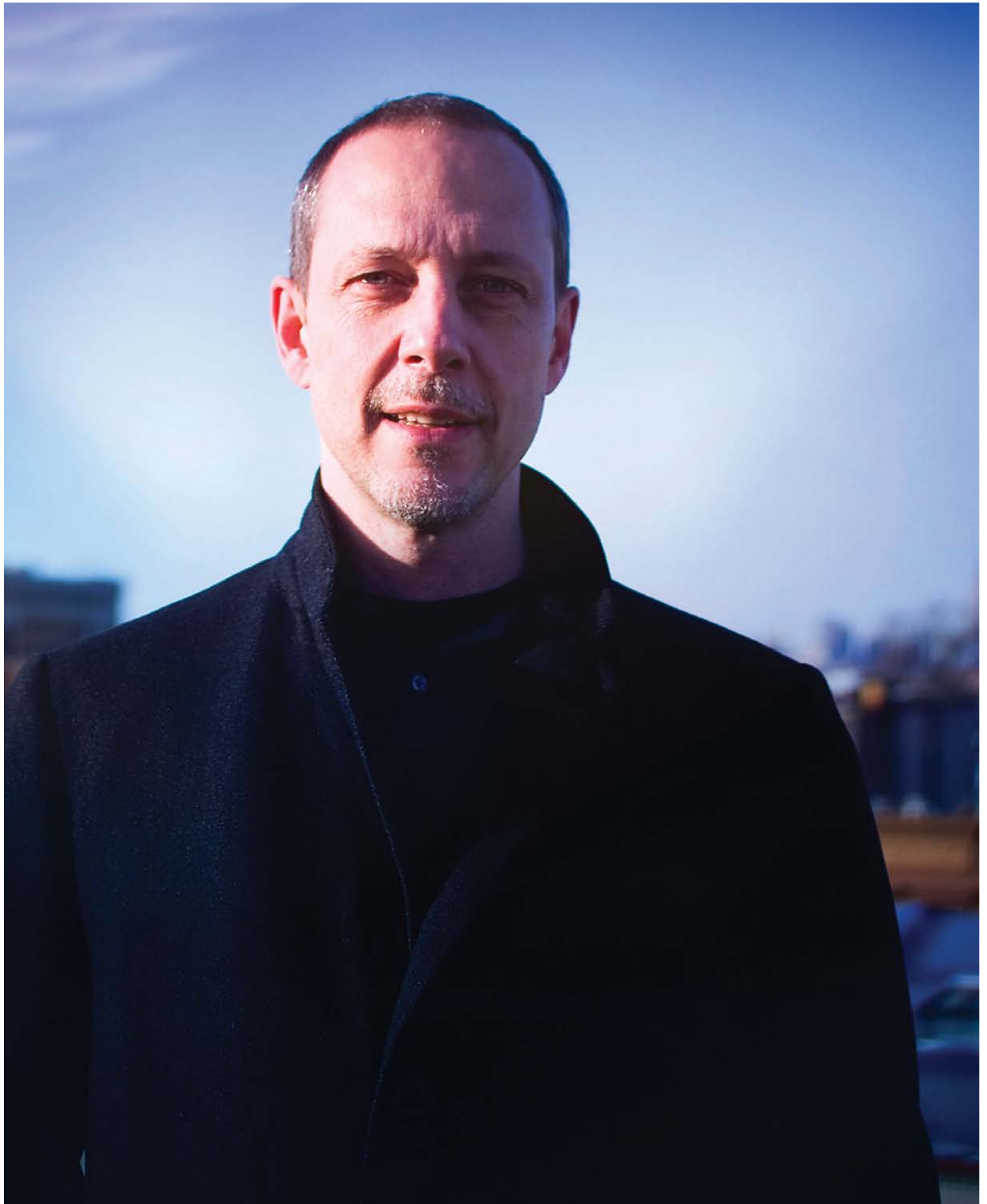


# Deeply Unsettled

Guitarist Joel Harrison and the art of constant reinvention.

By Bill Milkowski





A close-up, profile view of a man playing a saxophone. He is wearing a dark red or maroon jacket. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong light source from the right creating a bright glow on his hands and the instrument, while the rest of the scene is in deep shadow. The background is dark, with some blurred lights suggesting a stage or club environment.

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**The first time I encountered guitarist Joel Harrison, he was playing in a Soft Machine tribute band. It was shortly after his arrival in the Big Apple in 1999 from a fertile Bay Area music scene that**

had also produced such cutting-edge talents as Charlie Hunter, Vijay Iyer, Peter Apfelbaum, Will Bernard, Elliot Humberto Kavee and Liberty Ellman, all of whom are now his fellow residents in the New York City area. Energized by the local jazz and improvised-music scene in those relatively carefree days before 9/11, Harrison's mind buzzed as he considered the many projects he might pursue with the talented musicians he encountered and befriended at intimate downtown venues like Small's, Bar 55 and the Cornelia Street Café.

Ever searching, always thinking, Harrison was a man on a mission during those early years in New York. I saw him often in the audience at gigs. He was a ubiquitous figure on the scene with a discerning eye and the temerity to share his opinions, popular or not. After an all-star jazz concert at Carnegie Hall in 2005, for example, he sent an email to a handful of New York City jazz critics, excoriating two legendary musicians who had performed at the concert. Harrison felt they were resting too heavily on their laurels. I remember the terse three-word review Harrison offered me just before storming out of the hall at the end of the show while the rest of the crowd gave the performers a standing ovation: "That was crap!"

Harrison himself has never been one to simply go through the motions, not during his performances nor on any of the 16 CDs released under his name. A restlessly creative spirit, he constantly pushes boundaries, seemingly intent on avoiding artistic ennui at all costs. But during the process of practically reinventing himself from project to project — be it 2003's *Free Country* (his radical re-imagining of country classics by Johnny Cash, Woody Guthrie, George Jones and Merle Haggard along with traditional numbers like "Wayfaring Stranger" and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken"); 2005's *Harrison on Harrison: Jazz Explorations of George Harrison*; 2008's chamber-jazz outing *The Wheel* or 2011's brilliant *The Music of Paul Motian* by his String Choir (two guitars with a string quartet) — Harrison has apparently confused club owners and festival promoters.

"One of the things that bothers me is that promoters say, 'Well, we can't quite get a handle on him. He does so many different things,' Harrison says. "But I always thought that was the point. My idea of being a creative musician and a jazz musician is to keep people guessing and keep surprising people and keep coming up with new ideas. I find that that's what interests me about others in the music that I like, and it's what interests me in my own work. It keeps me interested in my own process."

In 2012, Harrison managed to combine covers of Olivier Messiaen's "O Sacrum Convivium" and The Allman Brother Band's "Whipping Post" on *Search*, a genre-bending septet recording. Last year he released *Infinite Possibility*, an ambitious 19-piece big-band project that had J.C. Sanford conducting a stellar crew of fellow downtown New York renegades. The band's record-release showcase at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, located uptown in the prestigious Jazz at Lincoln Center complex, was something of a coup. Here was a jazz iconoclast playing on

Wynton Marsalis' home turf, earning hearty ovations for his adventurous big-band writing. It was a triumphant and gratifying moment for Harrison, a sign of acceptance beyond the confines of the downtown scene.

This year Harrison has already released two albums — *Leave the Door Open* (Whirlwind Records) and *Mother Stump* (Cuneiform Records) — that, predictably, defy easy categorization and that are as different from each other as one can imagine.

*Leave the Door Open* is an exotic Indo-jazz-blues recording that pairs the guitarist with North Indian sarode player Anupam Shobhakar. A small-group outing that also features keyboardist Gary Versace, bassist Hans Glawischnig, percussionists Dan Weiss and Todd Isler, alto saxophonist Dave Binney and Indian vocalists Bonnie Chakraborty and Chandrashekar Vase, the disc features Harrison, often on steel guitar, and Shobhakar running through fare such as the Bengali folk tune "Kemne Avul," the American heartland-ish "Devil Mountain Blues" (with Shobhakar affecting bluesy slide guitar on his North Indian lute-like stringed instrument) and an East-meets-West take of Willie Dixon's menacing Chicago-blues classic "Spoonful."

"We tried to connect the folk music of India and America on this project with more elaborate compositions," Harrison says. "And that's a wide playing field there, so the record goes from fairly elaborate compositions to these very simple pieces. But that's us. We wanted to reflect the different aspects of who we were and how our pasts and futures could converge."

*Leave the Door Open* betrays the profound influence that John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra had on Harrison's musical development, which is evident on chops-busting workouts like "Madhuvanti" and "Turning World."

"McLaughlin had such a tremendous effect on anybody my age," Harrison notes. "If you talk to Bill Frisell, for instance, he's a huge Mahavishnu fan. When we were growing up and McLaughlin came along, it was hard to believe how mind-blowing he was — hard to express just what a shock his playing was to the guitar world. It was so super-sonically technically brilliant in a way that couldn't possibly be copied, so you had to put it in your back pocket and not really look at it and just absorb it through osmosis."

"Certainly I hear his influence in the music I made with Anupam, but I had to consciously force John from the front of my mind in the course of doing this recording because I'll just pale in comparison. So Anupam and I very consciously said, 'Look, we've got to stay away from that Mahavishnu-Shakti sound because we can't possibly do any better than that. So let's take our own direction compositionally as much as we can and also bring out the folk element in the acoustic instruments.' And so I really purposely did not listen to any John McLaughlin while I was working with Anupam on this album."

On *Mother Stump*, Harrison further addresses his roots as a guitarist. The first of his 16 CDs to prominently feature his trusty axe in the foreground in a variety of stylistic settings, the album serves as a tribute of sorts to some of the guitarists he admired while growing up in the musically rich environment of Washington D.C. during the early 1970s. The album proved to be an antidote to the grueling, large-ensemble recording he had just finished.

## Five Worth Hearing

**Like clockwork, guitarist-composer Joel Harrison has released a CD just about every year since his recording debut in 1996.** Here are five of the best.

▲ *Range of Motion* (Koch Jazz, 1997) — Harrison crafts long, sinuous lines, stacked harmonies and jagged counterpoint with an octet featuring oboist Paul McCandless, bassoonist Paul Hanson, trombonist Marty Wehner, saxophonist Eric Crystal and pianist Dred Scott over churning African-, Balkan- and South American-inspired grooves.

▲ *Free Country* (High Note/ACT, 2000) — Highly impressionistic interpretations of classic Americana like “This Land Is Your Land” and “Wayfaring Stranger,” featuring saxophonist Dave Binney, violinist Rob Thomas, pianist Uri Caine and accordionist Tony Cedras. A pre-famous Norah Jones delivers a moody take on Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line” and a beautifully expressive balladic version of “Tennessee Waltz.” And Harrison unleashes his guitar chops on a raucous “Folsom Prison Blues.”

▲ *Harrison on Harrison: Jazz Explorations of George Harrison* (High Note, 2005) — Dave Liebman, Dave Binney, Uri Caine and Dan Weiss lead a stellar crew on inspired jazz interpretations of the music of George Harrison, including “Here Comes the Sun,” “Taxman” and a spacious, droning “Within You, Without You.” Joel Harrison also sings passionately on “Isn’t It a Pity,” “My Sweet Lord” and “The Art of Dying.”

▲ *Urban Myths* (High Note, 2009) — For his most overtly slamming, beat-fueled offering (courtesy of drummer Jordan Perlson), Harrison gives a nod to Herbie Hancock’s Mwandishi and Headhunters bands from the ’70s. Outstanding soloists here include violinist Christian Howes, alto saxophonist Dave Binney, trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and Harrison himself (who wails with nasty intent and distortion set to stun on “High Expectation Low Return”).

▲ *The Music of Paul Motian* (Sunnyside 2011) — In this drumless sextet, which includes Harrison and Liberty Ellman on guitars and a string quartet of violinists Christian Howes and Sam Bardfeld, cellist Dana Leong and either Mat Maneri or Peter Ugrin on viola, Harrison pays tribute to the master drummer-composer with gorgeous arrangements of such Motian classics as “Cathedral Song,” “Etude” and “It Should Have Happened a Long Time Ago.” —**BM**

“After the big-band project almost killed me, a friend of mine [trombonist Chris Washburn] said, ‘You should just do a trio record, like this week, without thinking about it,’” Harrison recalls. “And it immediately hit me that it made sense. It was such a smart thing to say, ‘Just play guitar. Don’t worry about it. Don’t write anything that takes more than 10 minutes to compose.’ And I didn’t do it the next week, but I did it a month later with barely any preparation. I just put together a list of songs that I’d always wanted to record, went into the studio and did it. And it was so liberating to just play guitar on this recording.”

Featuring bassist Michael Bates, drummer Jeremy Clemons and keyboardist Glenn Patscha, *Mother Stump* is an eclectic outing that showcases Harrison’s potent six-string work on Buddy Miller’s “Wide River to Cross,” Paul Motian’s “Folk Song for Rosie,” George Russell’s “Stratusphunk,” Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne,” Luther Vandross’ “Dance With My Father Again” and six additional selections. Harrison’s use of volume swells on an ultra-slow reading of Donny Hathaway’s emotionally charged ballad “I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know” signals the unmistakable influence of the late guitarist Roy Buchanan. One of Harrison’s original compositions on *Mother Stump*, the string-bending “Do You Remember Big Mama Thornton?,” reflects the heavy impact that Danny Gatton had on Harrison during his musical development in Washington D.C. during the mid ’70s.

“Basically, Danny Gatton was my idol growing up,” Harrison says. “He was playing in every bar in town. And back then they didn’t really card people, so you could just walk on in. And I’d just sit there, sometimes with a cassette recorder, and just scream my brains out listening to him. I couldn’t believe I was seeing this stuff. It was like he was Charlie Parker on the guitar, and we discovered him, and nobody knew who he was. It was like our secret in D.C. In an age of horrible excess in the rock world and pretentious guitar divas like Jimmy Page and Peter Dinklage, Danny Gatton was the definition of unpretentious. He was definitely the man.”

Despite the diversity of his projects over the years, Harrison thinks that all of his recordings as a leader have something in common. “I guess what ties them all together is that American roots music and the music of the ’60s and early ’70s is present in a lot of what I do,” he says. “I’m always trying to think about new ways to orchestrate and new instrumentation, whether it’s in the big band or the string choir or writing for the sarode. I’m not always going back to the same sounds that I’m writing for, so I find that new sounds create new ideas.”

When I interviewed Harrison for this story, he was ensconced at the McDowell Artist Colony in New Hampshire, writing new big-band music as a follow-up to *Infinite Possibility*. “My issue for that has been, ‘How do I approach a sophomore effort?’ I’ve learned to avoid the sophomore curse by never repeating myself with projects, so I had to think a lot about what I wanted to do to set this one apart from the first one in my own mind. And I think that my concept for this is to focus on dance and to really embrace the groove of this music. So I’m planning to make it like a huge funk-rock band rather than a more Third Stream type of affair, if you will. Like if Gil Evans had arranged for Miles Davis’ electric groups of the ’70s — more nasty rather than slick, along the lines of George Russell’s *The African Game*, which had some funk to it, or his *Electronic Sonata*. I want to capture that raw feeling that you get from Sun Ra’s band or from Duke’s band when they’re really wailing or Count Basie’s band, and try to bring that feeling into a modern context with modern harmony and modern approaches to rhythm section. And, of course, try to play a little more loud electric guitar.” ▲



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