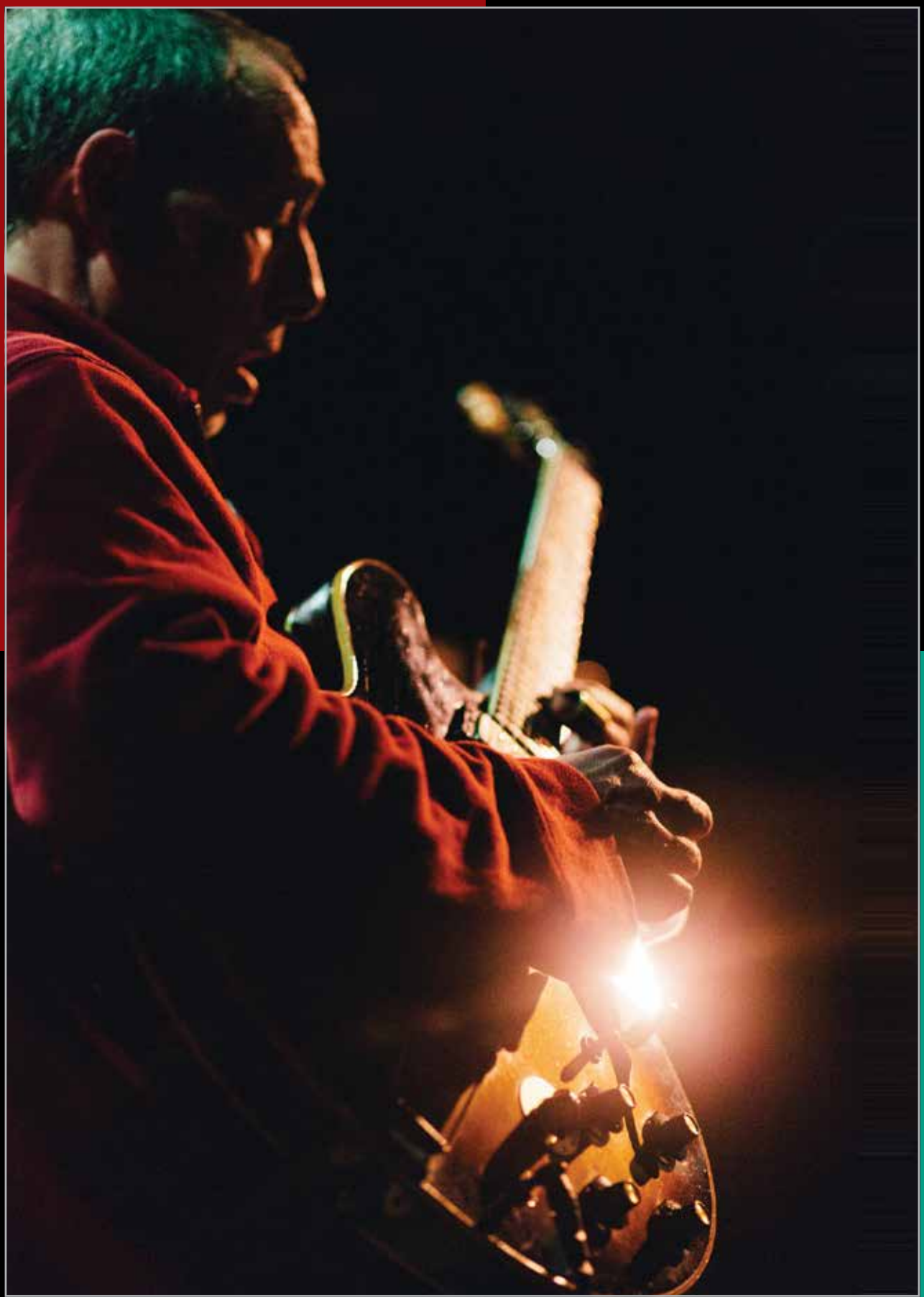

JASON QUIGLEY

JazzTimes®

work & progress

BY TED PANKEN

Over a long, searching, circuitous career, JOEL HARRISON has sought to reconcile his ingenuity as a composer and conceptualist with his deep-rooted love for the guitar. Now 57, he's nearly there

"I can't tell you how weird it is to have made *Mother Stump* when I was 56," Joel Harrison says of his 2014 release, an 11-track program culled from an array of American music genres—and the first of his 20 or so albums that he could call "my own guitar record." Spurred by keyboardist Glenn Patscha, bassist Michael Bates and drummer Jeremy Clemons, Harrison imbues each performance with a specific tonal and emotional identity, singing through a half-dozen prized guitars with a tone analogous to a raw, unfiltered voice.

Harrison extracts harmonic skronk from a 1999 Gibson Les Paul Deluxe to create a speaking-in-tongues effect on the spiritual "John the Revelator" and a first take of Paul Motian's "Folk Song for Rosie." He bends notes on an overtone-rich 1930 National Steel "Style 'O'" guitar to transform the second version of "Rosie" into an acoustic blues. On a 1960 Fender Telecaster, he howls on the original "Do You Remember Big Mama Thornton?" and projects desolate pathos on the Blood, Sweat & Tears/Donny Hathaway vehicle "I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know." His lustrous-toned 1960 Epiphone Sorrento underscores the message on two takes of Buddy Miller's "Wide River to Cross"; his pristine articulation on a Jerry Jones baritone of indeterminate vintage illuminates a simplicity-itself reading of Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne." He deploys a 1967 Gibson ES-345 to render George Russell's "Stratusphunk," the elegiac Luther Vandross hit "Dance With My Father" and his own original "Refuge."

"I believe that my music is an American story, in the sense of America as a gathering of tribes," Harrison summarized in the tidy studio of his Fort Greene, Brooklyn, apartment on a late April morning, slightly jetlagged after a week at the jazzahead! conference in Bremen, Germany, where he'd hobnobbed with various promoters, bookers

and agents in hopes of leveraging his most recent recordings into tours. A dozen or so immaculately maintained guitars hung on the walls and stood on the floor, sharing space with a large desk, containers of neatly stacked gear and several large shelving units stuffed with CDs.

"I wanted to reflect my country and blues roots, the rock and jazz and outside avant-garde influences as one seamless thing, not self-consciously patched together," he continued. "I wanted to play some of the greatest songs I know, with powerful melodies that I could open up on, free of style or genre in the context of wild and open improvisation. I did not want to make your typical straight-ahead jazz guitar record. I can't possibly play jazz without putting in country licks and slide-guitar licks, because so many of the guitar players I love come from that American story."

The narrative thrust that Harrison describes is of a piece with such albums as 2003's *Free Country*, with its epic readings of "Tennessee Waltz" and "I Walk the Line" by an on-the-cusp-of-stardom Norah Jones, plus a blistering Harrison feature on "Folsom Prison Blues." *So Long 2nd Street*, released the following year, sees Harrison address a roots mix of blues, hymns and spirituals in the public domain, alongside tunes by Merle Haggard, Carter Stanley and Jimmy Webb. These discs—and the 2005 George Harrison homage, *Harrison on Harrison*—offered the guitarist an opportunity to reimagine popular repertoire through his personal sensibility, and through the interpretive skills of virtuoso improvisers like David Binney, Dave Liebman, Uri Caine and Gary Versace. More recently, Harrison has applied his impeccable craft to charts for a dozen Paul Motian songs on *String Choir* (for string quartet and two guitars), jam-packed with counterpoint and rhythmic play, and on recitals of long-form originals for double quartet and guitar (*The Wheel*), jazz septet (*Search*) and 19-piece big band (*Infinite Possibility*).

On separate 2014 and 2015 releases, Harrison has created space in which to balance the performative and conceptual elements of his musical personality. He plays acoustic guitars on the conceptually ambitious *Leave the Door Open*, establishing East-West common ground with *sarod* virtuoso Anupam Shobhakar, whom Harrison met as a result of his 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship. A similar balance informs the suite heard on his new Whirlwind release, *Spirit House*, recorded after a 2013 West Coast tour featuring trumpeter Cuong Vu, bassoonist Paul Hanson, electric bassist Kermit Driscoll and drummer Brian Blade. "I was very clear about writing for that ensemble, their personalities, their sound," Harrison said. "When you compose for a jazz group, you want the people you're entrusting with your music to sound fantastic, so you write in a way that hopefully brings them alive. Here I was thinking about how soulful and lyrical everybody is, the beauty of their tones. Some of the music is 'pretty,' some is very gritty, but it's all about their improvisational interplay."

Harrison discussed the anthemic leadoff track, "An Elephant in Igor's Yard," timed for the centennial of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and titled as a nod to George Russell's late '40s opus "A Bird in Igor's Yard." "My idea was to incorporate material I'd transcribed from *Rite of Spring* into a much more complicated piece," he said. "But I felt I'd overwritten, and kept simplifying until it has almost nothing to do with *Rite of Spring* except in evoking the urgency and feeling of the power of the bassoon, which begins the work."

"Old Friends," he continued, opens with a poignant melody, its sentimentality offset

JAMAALADEEN TACUMA

with counterpoint and fast-moving chords that "express another side of a friendship." Similar imperatives drive the somber "Some Thoughts on Kenny Kirkland," whose emotional center is intensified with a searing guitar declamation that stands in for Harrison's lyrics: "Once I heard him play solo on the radio, so sure, so young, so emotional, I felt old for the first time. He described the beauty I couldn't find. Now I hear he's gone. I see him blowing out his own flame, leaving his crutches and flying away, ditching this place."

The latter work gestated when Harrison, "driving late one foggy night" in Oakland, Calif., his home from 1988 to 1999, heard Kirkland on Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz*. "He played with such beauty and lyricism that I almost cried," Harrison recalled. "I had rededicated myself to uncracking the jazz code, practicing and studying, returning to things I wished I'd done earlier. I felt, 'OK, this guy is my age, he's 10 times better than me, and I'll never be able to play my instrument close to this well.' It makes you wonder [about] your own mortality, your own lack of ability and somebody else's genius. What am I going to do about that? That question has been with me my whole life since."

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"I have a complex relationship with the guitar," Harrison said. "I always was insecure about my playing. Perhaps I felt that I wanted the band to be my instrument, which is a noble cause. At the same time, the guitar is me! I grew up with it. We're so inseparable you can't tell us apart. So to finally do *Mother Stump* was cathartic, and just plain fun."

Harrison noted that his programming at last February's Alternative Guitar Summit—the sprawling program of performances and clinics he founded five years ago in New York and has directed ever since—mirrors the aesthetics that he documents on his recordings. "Improvisation is always my focus," he said. "I don't care about the style. I love country and bluegrass improvisation. I love the blues. I love noise improvisation, so-called. I love the way some people incorporate Indian and African music, and I like jazz of all different stripes.

"The one thing you'll probably never hear on my festival is straight-ahead, bebop-inspired jazz playing. I love it, but it's already well represented in New York by great practitioners. It's incredibly hard to play bebop on guitar, harder than on saxophone. Guitar wasn't built physically and structurally to do that, and it's stratospherically amazing that people can. It's great at open chords. It's great at funk. It's a rhythm instrument, and it's good at processing electronically. It was inevitable that all this information would become part of the whole sound of jazz today, because that's what guitar does."

It's unclear if Harrison's curatorial prowess descends from his father, Gilbert Harrison, who owned and edited *The New Republic* between 1953 and 1974. That the fruit didn't fall far from the tree in regard to writing skills is apparent in Harrison's well-wrought liner notes for *Mother Stump*. There, he describes how the inclusive, efflorescent musical culture of early '70s Washington, D.C., shaped his sensibility. The capital city's geographic position on the Mason-Dixon line made it a place where "all streams of American music met," most notably "in the river that was Danny Gatton," the polymath D.C.-based guitarist Harrison followed with near-religious fervor during his teens. He had a more formal student-teacher relationship with Bill Harris, an authoritative African-American master of classical, blues and jazz guitar. Through his mentorship, Harrison said, "jazz began to take hold of me."

"The idea in Washington was to know something about everything," Harrison said. "I didn't feel I could express who I was, nor did I want to, by playing the kind of jazz I grew up hearing—Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, Joe Pass. I want to hear notes pulled. I want to hear volume. I'm still

"I have a complex relationship with the guitar. I always was insecure about my playing. Perhaps I felt that I wanted the band to be my instrument, which is a noble cause. At the same time, the guitar is me! I grew up with it. We're so inseparable you can't tell us apart."

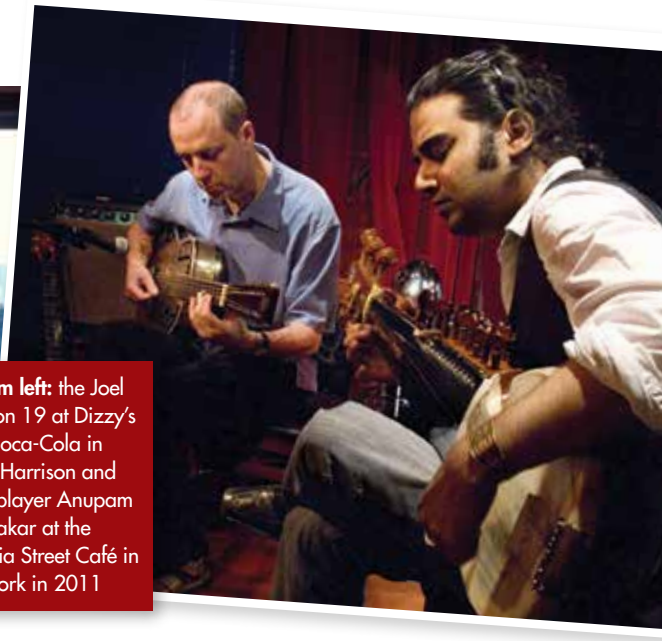
➤ **Clockwise from top left:** with bassist Michael Bates (left) and drummer Jeremy "Bean" Clemons in Mother Stump; in the basement c. 1974, playing a Les Paul and a Marshall he wishes he still had; Harrison's String Choir, featuring Christian Howes, Sam Bardfeld, Mat Maneri and Hank Roberts (from left), plays the music of Paul Motian in the Netherlands in 2013

hearing Hendrix. Guys just a little older than me—Metheny, Frisell and Scofield—figured out ways to create these new sounds on guitar, but somehow I was still searching for my voice. To find it, I had to be a composer first. I didn't go to Berklee and master the art of playing jazz guitar at an early age. I took jazz lessons in Washington, but played all this other stuff as well. When I stopped dabbling in jazz and made it my foundational principle from which everything else springs, I realized what I'd been lacking."

Harrison describes himself as "always very much an autodidact," and his path toward embracing jazz was "discontinuous and zigzagging." At Pomona College, in Claremont, Calif., he met the harmolodic trumpeter Bobby Bradford, who persuaded the teenage Keith Jarrett and John Coltrane devotee to expand his listening. At loose ends after his mother's death in 1977, Harrison moved east to Boston for a year. He studied privately with guitarist Mick Goodrick, trumpeter Avram David and pianist Ran Blake, whom he credits with sparking his interest in re-composition—"to take seed feelings and ideas and folk tunes and create a whole universe out of them." Then he transferred to Bard College in New York State, where students were encouraged to create their own curriculum. "There's a limit to how much lack of structure one should have in any institution," Harrison remarked. "There wasn't a moment spent on fundamentals. But I learned a lot about how to think about and listen to music."

After graduating in 1980, Harrison spent the next seven years in Boston "trying to develop who I was"—working construction, taking classes, playing in reggae and funk-rock bands and "trying to be a better jazz player." He embarked upon several epic cross-country hitchhikes that he described as "improvisational journeys." "The point was to see what would happen and what you'd meet," Harrison said. "It sounds grandiose, but I literally felt that my destiny lay in trying to understand America, its music and its people. I felt that, like

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LESLEY MCBURNEY, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



➤ **From left:** the Joel Harrison 19 at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in 2014; Harrison and *sarod* player Anupam Shobhakar at the Cornelia Street Café in New York in 2011

some of the artists who were important to me, the truth to whatever music I would create lay somewhere in this idea of the democratic principle of all existing in one country under one roof."

More directed were frequent Monday expeditions to Greenwich Village, where he'd walk back and forth between Gil Evans' orchestra at Sweet Basil ("you could see every way of approaching music in one night") and Mike Stern at the 55 Bar. "I loved the energy and vitality of New York, and I knew I had to live there someday, but I went to the West Coast instead," Harrison says.

Once transplanted, Harrison played groove music and wrote songs, did journeyman rock and blues gigs, engaged in a full spectrum of jazz and honed his composer chops via lessons with Boston teacher Charlie Banacos (correspondence) and pianist William Allaudin Mathieu (in-person). Mathieu "got what I was trying to do—reconcile notated music from the classical world, the rock and roll and roots music I grew up with, and the great jazz tradition all in one—and spent hours and hours with me figuring out ways to do that, as well as teaching me a lot about harmony and Indian music." By the end of the decade, Harrison was scoring films and had generated original music for three recordings, including his orchestrally expansive 1997 album *Range of Motion*, which includes Hanson and oboist Paul McCandless, and "a freaky, noisy, psychedelic" program for three guitarists and three drummer-percussionists titled *3+3=7*.

Upon moving to New York in 1999, Harrison recalls his initial response to the city as "My God, I've got to get to work. You'd show up at a session, and someone you never heard of is playing unbelievably, and then the same thing next place you go. After being here for so long, you forget what a wonderfully shocking experience it is to be surrounded by the greatest players in the world."

Inspired by Dave Douglas' penchant for "putting out really different records every time," Harrison started assembling diverse projects, many of them with David Binney and musicians in Binney's orbit who were just starting out, like bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Dan Weiss. "Joel is intense and direct about his feelings, and I liked him from the start," Binney recalled. "His writing was beautiful, and he listened to everyone's opinion, as a good leader does, and made things work in a cool way. As a guitarist, he's really good when he gets away from chopsy guitar stuff and plays things that are open and sound-oriented."

Under Binney's influence, Harrison moved more and more toward composition. "Dave encouraged me in a direction I already was on, [a direction] that contained my own voice and background," he said. "I'm not a guy who's going to blast through super-fast standards or play crazy technical things like the guitarists Dave was playing with. In our early days, he'd sometimes get mad and tell me not to do something because I wasn't good at it. He'd say I was trying to play jazz and should instead just work hard at all the other stuff I do. He was right. Yet I was so worshipful of jazz history, so impressed by people who specialized in the refined realm of bebop and developed so much technique that I didn't have, that I was forever looking over my shoulder, saying, 'You should be able to do that.'

"Bill Frisell has been very important for me for this reason. He has an amazing background and technique that he makes invisible through his mastery, but some other sound world is there. Dave was encouraging me to embrace that, and not try to be something I wasn't. Over time, I finally got it. Making *Mother Stump* was sort of like embracing a long-lost lover—to celebrate what it is I can do, and not try to do what I can't."

Toward that end, Harrison is preparing music for a 17-piece big band, completing new work for a string quartet and trying to find a home for an already-recorded songwriting project. "My favorite quote about myself is 'I have more ideas than common sense,'" he said. "I've been lucky to make a lot of records in succession. But I've been thinking how easy it is to question spending so much time on something that will slip away before anyone really pays attention to it, because there's so much product out there. And as I get older, I only want to do projects that feel critical, that are so important to me I can't not do it." ***JT***

FROM LEFT: LESLEY MCBURNEY; SCOTT FRIEDLANDER

WILD STRINGDOM

JOEL HARRISON, FOUNDER OF THE ANNUAL ALTERNATIVE GUITAR SUMMIT IN NEW YORK, CHOOSES ESSENTIAL ALBUMS BY GUITAR EXPLORERS AND INNOVATORS

Singling out five recordings that are "alternative" mileposts raises more questions than answers. I purposefully avoid defining what the catchall phrase "alternative" means, in hopes that my programming will speak for itself. (Furthermore, I am not a fan of "Top 10" lists.) Still, there is no harm in celebrating a few of the adventurers, knowing that scores of other choices could be substituted. Whether famous or obscure, the commonality is this: These artists pushed away courageously from the beaten path, offering a new perspective. The through line is a commitment to ceaseless exploration.

FRED FRITH

Guitar Solos (Caroline, 1974)

Recorded with almost no overdubs, this recording still astonishes with its textural breadth. Frith discovered far frontiers of sound that no one knew a guitar could explore. This idea of the guitar as an abstract noise generator rather than a lead or rhythm instrument has become much more common today in part due to his breakthroughs.

JIM HALL

Live! (Horizon, 1975)

Jim Hall managed to treat the archtop guitar like a small orchestra. He conveyed multiple layers of drama in a most understated, idiosyncratic way, with unending curiosity and masterful instincts. His highly evolved rhythmic acuity led to alliances with a wide variety of icons: Gunther Schuller, Sonny Rollins, Jimmy Giuffre, Art Farmer, Bill Evans. This trio document featuring Jim with bassist Don Thompson and drummer Terry Clarke is Jim at his best: relaxed and free; long, intricate solos with tons of interplay; a summation of the history of swinging jazz guitar up to that point.

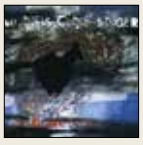
BILL FRISELL

Have a Little Faith (Nonesuch, 1992)

Frisell's ability to establish a point of view from one gorgeous note or elliptical chord has been revelatory. I single out this CD for its groundbreaking array of "covers," where an American story is told through the connectivity between John Hiatt, Sonny Rollins, Muddy Waters and Ives. The way Frisell's guitar sits at the center of this panorama is mysterious and sublime. Of course, I could have chosen the albums Bill made with Paul Motian too, where the playing field seems almost infinite.

THE NELS CLINE SINGERS

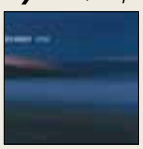
Instrumentals (Cryptogramophone, 2002)



Here is a guitarist for whom outrageous noise, hilarious electronic weirdness, poignant melody, heavy rocking, hair-raising technique and heartbreaking harmony exist side by side. He's an improviser with no boundaries, a judicious composer, a sound innovator, a generous bandleader and a thinking man's guitarist with a heart. It's difficult to single out one Cline record, but I chose *Instrumentals* because the trio format seems like Nels' home base and highlights his outsize sonic inventory. This CD ranges far and wide and includes one of his most moving ballads, "Slipped Away."

BEN MONDER

Hydra (Sunnyside, 2013)



That he has blinding technique is known. But as evidenced on this CD, Ben is also a composer with a profoundly advanced sense of rhythm, texture, counterpoint and gorgeous melody. His chordal vocabulary is shockingly advanced, yet he knows the value of one screaming, sustained note. Want a treat? Catch Ben playing a tune from the Great American Songbook. His toolkit is huge.

➤ Monder

Who have I left out? Oh, everybody. The North Star, Hendrix, the singular Pat Metheny, the groovacious John Scofield and the inscrutable Robert Fripp—not to mention many players who have performed at the Alternative Guitar Summit. Let's include some additional under-the-radar records that members of the artistic advisory board feel are important. Most choices reflect an older generation, which is not to dismiss the younger magicians who are stepping in.

DEREK BAILEY ***Improvisation*** (Cramps, 1975), ***Pieces for Guitar*** (Tzadik, 2002)
LARRY CORYELL ***Spaces*** (Vanguard, 1970)
DANNY GATTON ***In Concert 9/9/94*** (Big Mo, 1996)
MICHAEL GREGORY JACKSON ***Clarity*** (Bija, 1977)
HENRY KAISER/FRED FRITH ***With Friends Like These*** (Metalanguage, 1979)
THE MAHAVISHNU ORCHESTRA WITH JOHN MCLAUGHLIN ***The Inner Mounting Flame*** (not so under-the-radar!) (Columbia, 1971)
MARC RIBOT ***Spiritual Unity*** (Pi, 2005)
ELLIOTT SHARP ***The Velocity of Hue*** (Emanem, 2003)
SONNY SHARROCK ***Black Woman*** (Vortex, 1969)
SONIC YOUTH ***Sonic Death*** (Ecstatic Peace!, 1984)
DAVID TRONZO TRIO ***Roots*** (Knitting Factory Works, 1994)

JOHN LABBE