

## **An Interview with Pat Metheny**

**When did you discover you had a passion for composing music? Who would you consider the five most influential composers on your work, especially in your formative years?**

In many ways, my main occupation over all these years, even before being “a guitar player” has been that of bandleader. Coming up with a concept for a band or a project, finding and hiring the right people and then writing music for it and finally getting it to become a viable live performing unit have been the consistent elements of my focus over all these years regardless of whatever context the music winds up in. Because I have also been the primary composer of the music that my various bands have played, I have always had specific needs to fill to get that particular set of music to sound the best that it can. In a lot of ways, I see the whole thing from Bright Size Life until now as one long trip, one long record, one long composition with a varying cast of characters that come and go to create a kind of exposition on the evolution of the basic premise that I laid out a long time ago on that first record.

My first early experiences writing music were really enlightening to me in this process. There was a way I wanted to improvise that I found difficult to get to when playing standards or blues or even modern composers like Wayne Shorter or Herbie Hancock. When I wrote my first tunes, I found that not only could I set up a situation where I could play the way I wanted to play finally, but it also gave me a kind of authority to ask certain things of the other musicians. Probably at that moment I realized I might have a knack for being a leader at some point for the first time - it all came out of the compositions.

For me, the composers I admire the most are the ones who write things that are robust enough to withstand almost any interpretation and still retain their essence. The all-time champ for me in that department would be Monk - if you play the right notes of his best tunes, and someone is playing the right bass notes, you will sound good, and Monk will be right there in the room with you. You can do it 500 nights in a row and you will never get tired of it. For me, that is the standard.

Others that were huge for me in this general way would be Steve Swallow, Horace Silver, Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett and Herbie Hancock.

**You have a huge body of work starting in 70s with no slow down in sight. How do you stay disciplined on a daily basis, to continually create work at such a high level? How do you map out your routine and how has it changed over the years?**

One thing that rarely gets mentioned; music is really hard. Being a musician and retaining a high level of creativity year after year is difficult - but it is also one of the most rewarding ways I can imagine to live a life.

For me personally, there is the conceptual aspect to things that is dreaming up the frameworks and details that define the music a particular period or band. But there is also the day to day aspect of what it is to be an improvising musician which is a much more pragmatic thing.

I often talk about this with musicians who join me along the way. There is a certain kind of thing that happens if you do 10 to 20 gigs, a very different thing emerges as you get into the 30 to 100 gigs and then yet another kind of energy (and the required discipline/awareness that comes with it) needs to be there for gigs 100-200 or so.

There is a kind of mythology that surrounds improvisation. I often think of those scenes in the film "Round Midnight" where the French jazz fan comes up to Dexter Gordon after a set saying "Tonight you played like gods..."...well, maybe, but that was the 4th of 6 sets that they played that night and had done that for the past 6 nights in a row. From the musicians standpoint it is literally impossible to re-invent your entire vocabulary every time you play - no matter if you are the Art Ensemble of Chicago or Oscar Peterson or whoever. That is particularly true if you do hundreds of gigs.

The point for me is more the "how/why" than the "what". At a certain point, you are playing for yourself, the other musicians and maybe whatever else there is that makes up your personal universe, hopefully with an awareness and (hopefully) consideration of the audience - but, honestly, they are the least of it. But not in a bad way. Their energy can be a real boost, but is rarely a major factor in the "how/why" quotient. Music is unusual in this way. At least a certain level of music seems to demonstrate this to me. I have had some bands along the way that are able to get to that level with a consistency that is what I am always dreaming about. This current band seems to be one of them.

**You often alternate between writing and performing for and with smaller quartet sized groups and writing for larger groups or works that include deep orchestrations with many sophisticated parts. How do you balance the two approaches?**

For me, music is one big thing. Although there certainly are distinctions between conceptions of this band or that band, or this instrumentation or that, each setting is a variation on my personal sense of what music is and what it means to me.

All of the recordings and projects I have put together over the years are like one long record, or one long story divided up into different chapters, with different tones, different characters coming and going and sometimes wildly different temperatures represented. And I have never seen any one aspect of any of it being more dominant than any of the others. When I see people refer to one or another project of mine as being a "side project" to something else it tells me that they really don't have an understanding of the whole point of it all - I never ever think of it like that.

I always try to follow my instincts and to let the music at hand decide what direction I go in in terms of orchestration. I am pretty happy to play or write in a really dense way, or a really sparse way, or really loud or really soft or all over the dynamic range, really inside the chords or outside the chords...it kind of doesn't matter too much for me - it is whatever seems to sound best for what is happening at that particular moment in my general interest zone.

Every record or period of exploration that I have entered has been offered with the idea of trying to reconcile the things that I love about music and that have had resonance to me with what I perceive are my favorite aspects of the musicians that I have brought along to join me on this or that particular part of the journey.

### **How has the use of technology played a role in this process?**

Each era has unique musical opportunities that often juxtapose in an interesting way with what the culture demands at the time. Over my life as a musician, there has been a revolution in terms of what music technology can be - this has to be the best possible time in history to be a musician in terms of tools. That said, a good idea is a good idea - and, it must be said, the inverse is also true - and that happens in the timeless and rather unforgiving reality that there once was a musician like Bach (for example) who with much less "tech" wrote the greatest music of all time. Whether music shows up in this guise or that guise, and whether it is super modern technology or a kazoo is pretty much beside the point - if you have a really great idea, it will work hi-tech and super lo-tech. To me, I am pretty happy playing an acoustic guitar just by itself or inventing entirely new ways of presenting music using the revolutionary technical opportunities of the time - but good notes are always the priority.

**Speaking of writing for larger ensembles, I have to ask about your continued work as a film composer. How do you view this aspect of your career? And I have to rave a little bit about your work on the wonderful film, Living is Easy with Eyes Closed. I can only imagine how much fun that must have been, especially knowing how important the Beatles (and John Lennon) are to you. Can you describe that project, briefly?**

I kind of "retired" from doing scores about 20 years ago. I just felt like my time was best spent on writing music, doing tours and records and focusing on those aspects of life. I get lots of requests, and while I never say "never", there are not a whole lot of things that have come along where I felt like I was the only one who could do a good job with the material.

However, a couple of years ago, I did help my friend Charlie Haden out - he was too sick to write a score that he had agreed to do, so I stepped in at the last moment and very quickly wrote the

music for “Living is Easy With Eyes Closed”, a Spanish film. It won the Goya that year (the Spanish Oscar) for best score. So, it seems I still can do it every now and then. There are a few directors I would jump at the chance to work with. But mostly I am pretty happy to just write and play.

**You mentioned some of your favorite composers and why they inspired you. You seem to be constantly evolving and exploring new areas along the way. What other artistic or broader disciplines do you draw from to inform your work at this point in your career?**

Music is intrinsically inspiring to me. I know there are musicians who look outside of music to find meaning and then bring it into their work, and I almost envy that. For me, it is all built into the sound. Everything I need is all right there.

That said, I have lived a rich life and have traveled all over the world playing music for more than 40 years. Everywhere I have been and all the people I have met over that time have enriched and enhanced every aspect of my life. It all comes out in the music in the end.

**We’re in St. Louis and you are about to (or just did) perform with some remarkable musicians. Linda Oh on bass, Antonio Sanchez on Drums, and Gwilym Simcock on Piano. How did the idea for this project come together?**

This is a bit of an unusual thing for me. The standard thing for quite some years now has been the *a) write some music b) make a record c) do a tour* thing. But actually, I didn’t used to do it that way. When I started, I would often tour for a long time before I recorded the music. This time I decided I would find some favorite musicians who I knew could hang with me in the territory that I kind of inhabit at this point in time and sort of see where it goes. I have written a bunch of music for them, but we can also play everything from every step of my thing along the way - in fact they play it all great. So it is an exciting thing for me.

I can’t ever say enough about Antonio. As I often say, he is the drummer I thought would never be born. He has certainly been my most important collaborator over these past 15 years or so. I feel like he can contribute to almost any project I launch. And again, his personal maturity and lack of personal drama is a huge thing for me - he shows up to play every night. He is one of the best musicians I have ever known and is really one of the all time greats on his instrument. I love playing with Antonio.

For about 10 years now I have had my eye on Gwilym Simcock. He is one of the most talented pianists to emerge in a long time in my opinion. And he shares something with another one of my favorite piano players, Brad Mehldau, in that both he and Brad claim to have been very

inspired to take up this music from hearing some of my records as young kids. Gwilym has a really deep understanding of the sensibility of what my thing invokes and requires. But beyond that, he is just an fantastic overall musician. Piano is an odd instrument to me in general - for the most part I have always kind of preferred a very open environment where the melodies express the harmony in an intrinsic way. But with the right player and the right sensitivity, guitar and piano together can be a fantastic combination.

With Antonio signed up and Gwilym, it was an interesting opportunity to explore who was out there to make it a quartet. There is a rare abundance of players right at the moment in NYC. I made it point to go out and check everyone out that I could or play with folks that had been recommended to me.

After a pretty extensive search, Linda Oh really rose to the top as the best choice. She is something special. She has all the requisite skills; great time, deep harmonic knowledge and a great sound on the instrument and technique to spare; but there is something else going on with her. She has a kind of presence as a musician that invites her listeners to follow the details of her story as she spins it. There is a narrative depth to her soloing and her lines as she accompanies the musicians around her that is particular. Additionally, like Gwilym (and Antonio too actually) she comes with a real deep knowledge of my thing from her early days as a musician. She told me she came of age listening to my trio record with Dave Holland and Roy Haynes, *Question and Answer* and she really understands that area as well as the broad view of music that is reflected in her own work and all the bands she has played with around NYC. I am really excited to have her join this group - I love playing with Linda.

**What part of your work surprises you the most and what part is the most fun?**

Every day is really different. Each venue, each audience, each musical challenge has unique qualities that never, ever become routine. It is not only fun to get to do all this, I consider it a real privilege.

**What advice would you give for young, aspiring jazz composers?**

Learn as much as you can about the music you love the most. Then try tell us something we don't already know.

*Interviewer Dan Rubright is guitarist, composer and member of The Sheldon's educational program, "The Sound and Science of Music."*