



Photo by Brandon McChesney

MARTY ASHBY

Pittsburgh Jazz Guitarist and Concert Promoter
by Joe Barth

Marty Ashby has a career that most people would long for. As Executive Producer of Manchester Craftsmen's Guild Jazz in Pittsburgh, he is able to invite some of the greatest jazz artists to perform during their year-long concert series. As head of the MCG Jazz record label, their CDs have won numerous Grammy Awards. As guitarists for the Dizzy Gillespie All Star Big Band, he performs around the world, and as a board member to a number of prodigious arts councils, he serves with some of the biggest names in the music business. I met Marty at the MCG offices in Pittsburgh for this conversation.

JB: How long have you been playing jazz guitar?

MA: I started when I was seven years old. My dad played the guitar. He also owned a music store. My whole family played instruments. I never had a summer

job as a kid because my family's combos were always playing weddings, socials and other casuals. We also had a Ventures-style band with two guitars, bass and drums. My dad exposed me to a lot of great music. He played records all the time.

JB: What were three or so of the most influential jazz guitar albums you heard, and why?

MA: The Barney Kessel Poll Winner albums. I was struck by Barney's ability to play in a trio setting and make it sound like an orchestra. Years later I had the opportunity to ask Ray Brown about those sessions, and he said that Barney wanted to rehearse thoroughly before going into the studio. Barney had ideas about the tunes and the three of them worked out those arrangements, figuring which of the three would be featured on what song. In the '50s that was unheard of. They were real arrangements.

Chet Atkins was a big influence on me—no particular record. Chet could really play a melody. And when he improvised, he played more music in eight bars than a lot of other guys play in eight choruses. His thought was very clear. I get the sense that Chet never played a note that he didn't mean.

Carl Kress and George Barnes playing "Stairways to the Stars." Those two were playing it all. As a young developing guitarist, Carl Kress was playing these chords that I have never heard before. As well as voicings that I tried to play, and still try (laughter). George Barnes swings hard on that recording, yet solos freely over those changes.

I was also struck by Stan Getz's recording of "The Girl From Ipanema." I was very moved by Joao Gilberto's comping. I had never heard bossa nova-style comping before. It affected me so deeply that I have focused on this style of fingerstyle playing, and it has now become my forte. I just love how Stan plays these soaring melodies over the bossa nova blanket of sound.

JB: You lead one of the top jazz venues in the country with its subscription concert series, record label and education program. How did you come to work for Manchester Craftsmen's Guild?

MA: Even as a young musician I soon tired of playing in smoky bars. So, I began to produce jazz festivals back in 1978 in the Ithaca (New York) area, where I grew up. I would secure the place, invite my heroes to headline the concert, and my band was always the opening act. It was a fabulous platform for my band. The singers of my group later on evolved into the New

York Voices. After college, I left Ithaca to move to New York City to become a jazz star (laughter)! I had never been to New York before, which was probably a good thing. My time there was so hard that I probably would have never come if I knew what it was going to be like.

I did some playing in some of the clubs, and I produced a few local concerts and festivals in the area, but I needed a day job to survive financially. So, I answered an ad in the newspaper for the New York Philharmonic to sell season tickets over the telephone. This was when selling tickets over the phone was really a new thing.

When I went to work for them, I soon discovered that there were three floors of people in Avery Fischer Hall who served the symphony musicians. They had a staff person whose job was to just put the music on the stands. So, here I am playing with some of the greatest musicians in the world on the streets and they are barely making a living, and the symphony musicians have an employee whose job is to put the music on the stands! This moved me so much I was then drawn to the management side of music. All the sales skills that I learned in my dad's music store I put to work selling tickets, and I have to say that I did pretty well.

I went from the New York Philharmonic to the Cleveland Orchestra ticket office. There I learned the business structures of the OPA Other Performing Arts: Opera, Ballet, Theater, etc. All the time I was learning the ins and outs of the business of the concert season.

JB: Where was the guitar in your life at this time?

MA: I was playing in local clubs, but not as much as a player would want to play. My focus was to learn this infrastructure for the business of the symphonic season so to later apply it to the world of jazz.

In January and February of 1985 I was planning to go to Europe with my band and the New York Voices, so I quit the Cleveland Orchestra two days before Christmas, and the day after Christmas the Pittsburgh Symphony calls me and makes an offer I couldn't refuse. They said, get started with us, go on your European tour and then come back to work with us afterward; we want you that bad. I moved to Pittsburgh and fell in love with the city. Here again, I did very well with the symphony ticket sales. Soon I met Joe Negri, Roger Humphries, and some of the other jazz musicians in town and fell in love with their music.



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My brother, Jay, who had followed me here to Pittsburgh, was dating Emily Remler. Emily was teaching at Duquesne University and performing but didn't have any formal management at the time. She called and said there was a concert venue on the northside of Pittsburgh called Manchester Craftsmen's Guild that wanted her to do a concert. She asked me to go with her and kind of represent her, like a manager, to the Manchester people. I said sure, pick me up at the office and I'll go with you.

So, Emily, Jay and I went over and met Bill Strickland who gave us a tour of the facility, which ended in the music hall. They do ceramics, photography and other arts, and had this music hall built for jazz concerts. They had done one jazz concert with Billy Taylor to open the facility, but the hall sat dark since, because they had no one to organize the concerts. I said, "Sir, can we talk?" He said, "Sure, meet me here at 9am tomorrow." So, I stayed up all night writing a proposal on what I saw potentially through Manchester and why they should hire me as a promoter. I met with Bill the next day and went to work for them at a 60% pay cut of the symphony but a lot of excitement and ideas. That was 22 years ago.

I took all the things that I learned in the OPA and put them to work here. We have one of the longest-running jazz subscription series in the country. When it comes to funding jazz music, we have been involved with all the major funding strategies. Our record label has done well and we have won numerous Grammys. All of my heroes in jazz music have performed on this stage. In essence, we have kind of set the bar for what can be done in the jazz field.

JB: You have done very well. All of the musicians I have interviewed who have played here speak well of this venue. When I was with Pat Metheny at his office in Times Square, he mentioned how Manchester is one of the finest venues he has played in the world.

MA: We seek to celebrate the music and the musician for the international treasures that they are. That is why this place works. Jazz music celebrates the experience of life. It celebrates and encourages the individual to improvise.

In the context of life, we improvise every day. Take a typical mother; she is improvising in some way everyday. The power went out the night before so the alarm didn't go off, or a kid wakes up sick, or she doesn't have all she needs to prepare a meal; she is impro-

vising as she is dealing with each of those unexpected problems during her day. Mothers are master improvisers, but everybody improvises in life. Jazz music is a way of celebrating that.

The jazz combo is the physical embodiment of democracy. Each is encouraged to use his/her individual voice under the context of a leader.

JB: . . . and it all works.

MA: That's right, it all works. Together these individuals make a stronger whole. That is what Manchester Craftsmen's Guild is all about.

JB: Talk about what kinds of work you would do for MCG over the course of a year?

MA: We do thirty nights of jazz concerts a year. By each December I set up a September to May concert season much like the other OPAs. When I think through the season I try to put together things that don't happen elsewhere, like Pat Metheny and Jim Hall together on stage or Earl Klugh in an acoustic trio setting playing standards. We record the concerts in both audio and video. Thus, we are celebrating and preserving this great and national treasure.

We have our record company, and as I mentioned, a number of our titles have been nominated or have won a Grammy.

I have the best of all worlds here. I produce this wonderful concert series. Often I get to perform with many of these greats. I am able to travel with some of those musicians. I was just in Europe with the Dizzy Gillespie All Star Alumni Big Band. I serve on some of the major funding boards for the Arts around the country. When working in the office, if I am waiting for a download, I can pick up my guitar and practice a bit. What a great way to spend one's time, and at the end of the month I collect a salary!

JB: You play on all three of Joe Negri's MCG albums. Talk about the newest, "Guitars for Christmas."

MA: There is no question that Joe Negri is one of the greatest jazz guitarists of all time. I am committed to do whatever I can to get that word out. It was an honor to do the duo guitar Christmas album with Joe. I played every guitar I own on that project, from my dad's old Country Gentleman to my L-7.

JB: Talk about two or three of MCG's albums that stand out.

MA: The one with Paquito D'Rivera and the New York Voices and Claudio Roditi, "Brazilian Dreams," is something that we first talked about twenty-some years ago when we did that first festival I produced where I, as still an undergrad student, brought Paquito in. That, too, was a dream come true.

Then I'd have to say all the records with Nancy (Wilson). She is so fantastic to work with and such an artist. Then, of course, the albums with Joe (Negri). I wish so much that my dad could have heard those, especially the Christmas album. I played things on that recording that I don't think I could ever play again. It was magical, in a way.

JB: What recording best represents you as a player?

MA: The Christmas record with Joe. On it I play my nylon-string, 12-string, archtops and the rest of my guitars.

As a player, I have come to realize that I am a great sideman. I'm not a great soloist, but I can comp really well. I'm cool with that. I don't need to solo for 16 choruses; I'll leave that to the guys who do that really well.

JB: Tell us about the guitar that you use.

MA: I just got a Gibson L-5. It has such a warm sound, even as a new guitar. In the big band I use my Ibanez Pat Metheny PM1 model. It's a great-sounding guitar and it travels well. I don't have to worry about something happening to it. It was a very early Metheny model. Maybe for a record date I'll use my L-7. I've retired my ES-175. I get it out only for the guitarists who perform here to sign it. Most of the great guitarists today have signed the back of it.

JB: Do you have many guitars?

MA: I have about twenty. I have some of my father's guitars. When Emily (Remler) died, her family gave me two of her guitars. She and my brother had dated for quite some time. For Brazilian music, I play a Taylor. I plug it right into the house system. It always sounds great and again, it travels well.

JB: What amp do you use?

MA: I have a couple of Walter Woods. I also ask the promoter for a SWR California Blond model. It is an acoustic guitar amp with one 12" speaker. It sounds just

great with my jazz boxes.

JB: Let me change the subject again. What career options do you see for the serious music student?

MA: You can be the greatest guitarist in the world, but if you don't understand the business, you will get eaten alive, because there will be guitarists who do know the business. I am not the greatest guitarist in the world, but I play a lot of gigs because I do understand the business. The diamond in the rough who thinks he or she just needs to showcase their talents doesn't work anymore.

JB: Talk about how one learns the music business.

MA: I believe you need to go to school within the business. Go to work for somebody and get yourself some practical experience. If you can, learn from the masters. I learned more about the business and psychological framework that a successful musician needs to have from having breakfast with Ray Brown, than from anyplace else.

Learn more about Manchester Craftsmen's Guild at www.mcgjazz.org or www.martyashby.com

(Dr. Barth is the author of *Voices in Jazz Guitar: Great Performers Tell about Their Approach to Playing* available at Amazon.com and elsewhere. He can be contacted at PJosephBarth@aol.com)

heeres guitars p/up p.140 aug. 2008