



Pat Metheny: the way up to maximalism. Interview by Arturo Mora



XXV Festival de Jazz de Vitoria-Gasteiz, España.

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On mid-June 2005 the **Pat Metheny Group** was in the middle of the European leg of their *The Way Up* world tour. **Arturo Mora** had the chance to talk to **Pat Metheny** while the guitarist was in Nice (France). Here's the transcription of the interview **Pat** gave to **Tomajazz**.

Arturo Mora: First of all, what about your illness? I heard you had a problem in an ear.

Pat Metheny: Yes, I had a kind of ear infection thing that has been aggravated by flying. It's not bad, it's just that anytime I go flying it gets really worse, so I'm trying to not fly. That's kind of what it's about and that's why I couldn't come now.

Arturo Mora: OK, but it's not affecting you playing.

Pat Metheny: If I don't watch it it can affect my playing a little bit. It's actually something I had to deal with for a long, long time. I had an ear problem when I was a kid. It's not a big deal. That's what prevented me from coming to Barcelona, but I'm glad with you talking at the phone.

Arturo Mora: I hope you recover soon.

Pat Metheny: Thank you.

Arturo Mora: What about the current tour. How does it feel to play the whole record live in a row?

Pat Metheny: It's great, I mean we've been having such a good time and it's funny to hear the record now because we were really of course having to learn the record, sort of learn the music while we were recording the record and now we can really play it, I mean, we've done seventy shows or something like that and the piece has evolved, quite it did as you can imagine and everybody, you know, really understands their role in it and what they can do to make it as good as it can be each night and we've just been having such a good time playing and it's been specially fine to watch the audience reaction, it's been a very exciting tour.

Arturo Mora: Was it difficult to choose the other tunes which were going to be part of the tour, I mean, the classical tunes of the Pat Metheny Group?

Pat Metheny: Well, it's true, you're talking about a band that has a 27-year history, so it is a little high to figure out which are the best things to play but that's part of the fun of it for me each time, to put together a program that makes sense, that seems to tell the story of what needs to be told after The Way Up, because that's challenging actually, to find things that balance out with The Way Up. I think it's a program people are really liking.



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Arturo Mora: Let's talk about the recording. It's obvious that there's a strong Steve Reich influence in *The Way Up*, there are two or three note melodies that appear in different parts of the CD, there's a lot of motivic development involved, the real sensation that something really complex is developing from minimum sketches, in the way that other composers like John Cage, Michael Nyman or specially Steve Reich use to do. To me jazz and minimalism are opposite musical visions, but it seems that you've really put them together in *The Way Up* in a certain way. Was it just an experiment, or do you think that minimalism can be a new path for jazz?

Pat Metheny: Honestly, for getting really specific about the piece, I would say that Steve Reich's minimalist element is very very small. It's more a sonic reference than a structural reference, and the level of harmonic activity that's going on would be way way beyond anything in any of the composers that you mentioned, just in terms of the amount of key changes per minute (laughs), it would be like ten times more than Steve Reich or Philip Glass or something like that, in the sense that we're also very probably more strongly away from, let's say, the sort of post 1900-way of thinking about harmony, which is all over the record too, and you kind of have to add

to that the idea of using harmony as a sonic place for improvisation, which is something that again has really no connection to the minimalist movement. Yet at the same time I recognise that when Steve discovered those process, like around 1970 or so with records like Drumming or whatever, it was almost like he identified this shift that happened in the world, with the whole world shifting from triplets to duplets (Pat sings in triplets), and somewhere in the late sixties or early seventies the world went (Pat sings in duplets – the The Way Up motif), it's like there was a dramatic shift in the rhythmic sort of magnetic pulse of the world. My feeling for wanting to put that reference in this piece was, like I said, more a sonic one. The actual structural make-up of the piece is, I would say..., I would agree with you, it's almost the opposite of a minimalist kind of approach. Or "maximalist"... (laughs)

Arturo Mora: What about other classical influences, I mean, I can hear some Stravinsky in your way of creating the textures for the whole record and I can even hear some Claude Debussy at the start of the third part.

Pat Metheny: Definitely. Stravinsky is the big one for form, no question. Specially the transitions from section to section. I think Stravinsky is an incredible model for that. But, you know, harmonically the things that started happening in the late 1800's and early part of the 20th Century I think everybody's still addressing. Certainly Wayne Shorter, Herbie (Hancock), kind of the whole modern jazz language is in many ways built on what was happening with Bartok and Debussy and others in terms of the kind of voicings, the kind of utilizations of odd twelfth notes and odd chords at odd times, that really define so much of what has happened in modern, contemporary jazz guys in harmonic language, and I'm definitely affected by that too.



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Arturo Mora: It looks like every five or ten years you're making a great, ambitious project. It first happened with Secret Story, five years later with Imaginary Day and recently with the release of The Way Up. Is this becoming like a cyclic way of working?

Pat Metheny: Well, I think that there's different levels of scale I work here, for sure, but honestly in terms of ambition, from my perspective probably the most ambitious one was One Quiet Night, there was a guitar and I played it (laughs), in some ways there's more of a search than anything that I would ever imagine that I would do, I mean, each thing like even playing in trios or playing a sideman in somebody else's band, every musical activity has really deep challenges and for me I just love being able to say that I've been given these opportunities to do all these different things and each thing that I do I really try to do it as good as I can, and I really work as hard as I can to try to get good musical results.

Arturo Mora: Let's talk about the record industry, now that you've changed your record company. People are now buying CD copies in the street, copying the records themselves or

downloading them from the Internet, something which is obviously bad for many commercial musicians. But which do you think is the influence of that on a jazz musician, who's based on live gigs and a long musical career? Do you think that a little illegal CD copying may be, let's say, free advertising for a jazz musician?

Pat Metheny: Could be, I mean, like many musicians...I mean for me the records have never...I mean, I think in the pop music world the record... like getting somebody to buy the record it seems to be the goal, like everything leads to that, like get them on your tours so that people buy the record. It's like the whole idea is like let's get people to buy the record. For me that was never the goal, to me it was more like kind of what you said, which is: you make records sort of as an ad so that people come to the gig, because the gig is the goal, that's what you do it for, you make records so that you can get gigs, so that you can go play. In that sense, yes, we're like everybody else, we don't sell as many records as we did ten years ago but we still get to play gigs, so as long as we can keep playing gigs that's fine with me, and the records have always to me been a reduction of what we do live, just to cram all that stuff into two speakers is almost impossible (laughs), so it's the other way around for me.



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Arturo Mora: You said before that the PMG has gone through a 27-year career. If you listen closely to your stuff or study

the compositions on your songbook you can hear a lot of jazz tradition involved in this music. Many tunes are blues forms, or modal, both Lyle and you make a wise use of pentatonic scales in your improvisations. Otherwise some people, specially jazz purists still say that what you do with the Group is not jazz. Is this a big burden to cope with or you just don't care about it?

Pat Metheny: I've never heard anybody make a serious critical argument that supports that. If someday I hear somebody actually make a case that has some integrity.... It is jazz! There's really nothing to say, it's like when somebody say "well, the sky is up there and it's not blue.....", but it is! It's blue! (laughs) There's really not too much to worry about.

Arturo Mora: Fine. In 1992 just after the release of Secret Story, Roy Firestone interviewed you and he asked the question if you had hit it yet. Your reply was something like in a certain way, there were parts in Secret Story which really suit you fine, which made you think that you had really hit it in a certain way. Do you think you've hit it again with The Way Up? Or maybe you've hit it in other way?

Pat Metheny: It's very difficult for me to have any genuine perspective on my own thing. I'm so deeply involved in it that I really just ...I mean, I do my best to answer questions but in reality I'm like just trying to find the good notes (laughs). It's pretty simple, it's a struggle to do it. I don't mean a struggle in a bad way, but it's not an easy thing to do once, but it's a harder thing to do 150 nights a year on the road or for 30 years, so really my concentration and my effort are really almost singularly dedicated to that quest, trying to find the good notes, trying to find the best solution to each musical problem as it comes out.

Arturo Mora: I think next month you will be playing at Montreal Jazz Festival with a reunion of the original Gary

Burton Quartet you played with in the seventies.

Pat Metheny: Well, it's kind of a parcial reunion.

Arturo Mora: Are you excited about it?

Pat Metheny: I'm very excited about that. Gary and Swallow were main huge influences and very important figures in my life and I'm as excited about getting the chance to play with them now as I was when I was 18 years old.



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Arturo Mora: What about guitars? You've brought to life many guitar prototypes like the guitar synthesizer or the Pikasso guitar or the bunch of guitars that appear on Imaginary Day. Are you working on new instruments right now?

Pat Metheny: I'm always working on some new stuff with the guitar. One of the great things about the guitar is its seemingly infinite capacity to be so many different things. You say guitar, I mean I can be (Andrés) Segovia or I can be the guy in Metallica or I can be John Scofield, you know I can be anything. And that sort of unlimited flexibility is one of the things about the instrument that I love, so yes I'm always working with ideas of new things. Sometimes it takes me many years. I have a couple of things I have been working on now for a few years and it takes a while for them to colorise into something.

Arturo Mora: I would like to speak about the current state of jazz, especially regarding European musicians, many of whom you've played with in the last years. I recently read a sentence I really liked from Sonny Rollins, which was: "No one is original, everyone is derivative". This makes me think that maybe new paths for jazz may be found in a musician's background (like the folk background of European or African musicians) more than in mainstream jazz tradition itself. What do you think of that? Which is your vision on jazz coming from Europeans, Africans and musicians from other places?

Pat Metheny: Well, the one thing I know for sure about jazz is that it has to be real. It has to be honest and it has to be true, and I think it's a form that demands that each individual player offer something very personal and something that they know for sure about who they are, and in that sense I think that if a European jazz musician is trying to make a contribution they're obligated in fact to represent the truth of their existence. There's people who sound really good but they sound so much like... fill in the blank, so much like Wayne Shorter, or so much like this guy or that guy that you go: "that guy sounds really good", but you keep eating your tapas, you know, you don't really pay much attention to it, because I think it has to be true, it has to be something unique to that person's view to have that. So yeah, I think for European jazz musicians it's not just an option, it's essential that they bring to the table the things that make them who they are.



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Arturo Mora: Which is your advice for young jazz musicians?

Pat Metheny: Well, my main advice would be to make sure that they're in groups with musicians who are better than they are (laughs). If somebody ever asks me my advice that's what I always tell them: to try to be the worst guy in every band you're in.

Arturo Mora: You said that about decades ago, I think.

Pat Metheny: Yeah, that cause it's a good one. You want to be around musicians who are able to challenge you. So often what I see with talented musicians is that they form a situation where they are the most talented one and then they can shine above their peers or whatever. But to me it's much better to be in a situation where everybody is functioning on kind of the same level.



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Arturo Mora: What about your upcoming projects? I heard you were going to release some Geffen Records stuff now on Nonesuch and that by next year you were going to release a trio record with Christian McBride and Antonio Sánchez.

Pat Metheny: It's challenging to absorb all those Geffen records and put out new stuff out at the same time, because it's a little bit much. The next big thing which is happening is a remixed and remastered and expanded version of Song X. It's gonna come out in September, I believe, that's got twenty minutes of music that nobody's heard before and the whole record is remixed. It doesn't even sound like the old record, it sounds so much better, and I'm very excited about that, so that'll be the next thing that's coming out. It's gonna be Song XX, because it's twenty years...

Arturo Mora: XXL (laughs)

Pat Metheny: Well, XX is the roman for twenty.

Arturo Mora: Oh, twenty, OK. What about your musical plans for the future in the medium term? What would you like your career to develop into from now on?

Pat Metheny: There's a bunch of things floating around that

are gonna happen, that are really cool that... when they happen I'll call you.

Arturo Mora: Oh, perfect! (laughs)

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