



# Wolfgang Haffner: Straight to the point. Interview by Arturo Mora Rioja

One of the most important figures of European jazz, drummer Wolfgang Haffner is now a resident of Ibiza, a Spanish island in the Mediterranean Sea. Right after publishing his new work, *Heart Of The Matter*, on the German ACT label, and on the first stages of an European tour, Haffner spoke in length to Tomajazz contributor Arturo Mora in a Madrid cafeteria.



Arturo Mora with Wolfgang Haffner

ARTURO MORA: Why have you decided to live in Spain?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: I was never living somewhere else. I was travelling a lot and, when I was not touring, I was always going to Spain for holidays, either Canarias or Balearic [islands]. In 1995 or 96 I started to go to Majorca as a friend of mine lived in there. Then I went to Formentera and I met some people there and decided to make some music, and I always had to fly to Ibiza, because there's no airport in Formentera, and someday I was having a coffee in the airport of Ibiza and I thought: "Why not staying there?" That was in 2009. In early 2010 I went there in winter, looked for a house, and since then I'm there.

I love the Spanish mentality, it's very close to me. I'm German, of course, and I love my country, that's not the thing, but since the very first day I came here to Spain... There's something, I don't have to tell you [laughs]. The mentality, the climate... Besides in winter it's a little more difficult to travel from Ibiza because they don't have direct flights, just to mainland Spain, but I'd rather connect flights to Palma, or Barcelona, or Madrid. But it's great living there and not having big snow every winter and... I feel close to you guys. I also love to come to Spain for playing because there's great music listeners, music lovers, and it feels like my second home.

ARTURO MORA: *Willkommen aus Spanien.*

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: *Danke!*



ARTURO MORA: What can you tell us about your latest work, *Heart Of The Matter*?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: I think it is my number 13 album. I always wrote songs because I come from a classical music family, everybody's playing music in my family. My father was a classical musician who composed for choir in church, so I grew up with Johann Sebastian Bach, that's my main influence before Miles Davis and everything. When I was a little kid I was sitting next to my father on the organ or on the piano and I saw how he composed, so I wrote my first composition, a children composition, when I was 13 or 14, and I started writing. Then I had some songs and I said: "Ok, let's ask this guy, let's ask this guy, a bass player, a guitar player, a keyboard player and record it." And I've done this in every album, just writing songs and then record them.

With *Heart Of The Matter* I knew exactly, for the first time, who was gonna play, who would be in the band, but I hadn't written anything. So it was the other way around. Normally I write compositions and then I think: "Ok, who can play this?" Now I knew exactly I wanted to have Dominic Miller, the Sting guitarrist, I knew the trumpet player who plays with me in my band now [Sebastian Studnitzky]... I had the sound already but I hadn't written any note. So I was writing the music with the band in my head, which was new for me.



Wolfgang Haffner. Fotografía © Sergio Cabanillas, 2013

It has a sound which is connected to Ibiza in a way. My music has become more *tranquilo* over the years. I'm 47 years old and before I was touring around the world like crazy, playing sideman for a lot of people. Now I'm concentrating more and more on my own things. That's another part of why I moved to Spain: I wanted to leave my comfort zone. I was a session player for other people and I was touring a lot for other people, and now I said: "Well, I'm gonna get out of most of it, I wanna live somewhere else and start building a new life." And this means also I'm playing a little less because I'm concentrating more on my thing, so when somebody calls me and says: "Can you go on a big tour?" I first check whether there's anything I want to do with my band and, if not, I might do it. My own music is on the focus now, it's number one, and it wasn't number one in the past. It all started when

I moved to Ibiza with an album called *Round Silence*, which was also written in Formentera. So this was my main concern. I was spending a lot of energy for other people, which is great, playing with so much great musicians on the planet, and I still do that, but first of all it's Wolfie [laughs].

It was very new for me to have a sound immediately. Do you know Mezzoforte? Eythor Gunnarsson has been one of my main influences from the mid-eighties. He has these trade mark synthesizer sounds. Sebastian Studnitzky, the trumpet player, is very unique, and for Dominic Miller I wanted acoustic guitar, which I had never used (I mean, maybe one or two songs in the past, but now I wanted a lot of acoustic guitar). It's a very special sound. Something also new for me was to do cover songs: "Hello" and "Here's To Life". There's no commercial way of thinking like "I'm going to do «Hello» because I'm selling a lot of albums," because you don't. Maybe you sell two albums more, maybe. I believe you cannot fool people. And true music will always find a way to the heart of people, and if you do "Hello" just to make money people will recognize. I just did it because I loved the song, I always loved it, and I had a sound in my head. I was walking in the beach in Ibiza and they played "Hello", and I said: "Wow, it's so beautiful. This will fit perfectly." And then there's this beautiful ballad, "Here's To Life," which I heard by Shirley Horn. I'm doing music that I love, I'm not thinking like "I have to do Scandinavian mixed with Flamenco" or whatever, I just do what my heart tells me.

ARTURO MORA: The heart of the matter.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER. Yeah. The title is because... We recorded 16 songs, but there are 10 on the album. *Heart Of The Matter* means like going to the essence. I was listening very carefully, all the songs were good, but this is not as strong as this one... So from 16 I went down to 10. *Heart Of The Matter*. I also stripped every song down: "What is the important part of it?" Sometimes I took things off the

recording to leave more space. What is the essence of the song? The melody, the groove... And sometimes it doesn't need much. In the studio I took guitars away, keyboards, pads... just to leave space. That's a process I love to do, get to the essence. That's what I was looking for in life, there's too much "blah, blah, blah", bullshit, but...

ARTURO MORA: "Get to the point".

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Exactly, that's my main concern. And if you can't do it in life you can't do it in music. In my case it really goes along with my life, so *Heart Of The Matter* and leaving Germany for Ibiza is one direction: getting to the point. I never, ever think of what will people think. I mean, for *Round Silence* I got the German Grammy, which was a big thing, but I'm not calculating music. Of course I like that people like it, it's beautiful. I don't have to work in a gas station or a supermarket, I can play music and people come and enjoy it, which is a privilege I'm thankful for. So that's, basically, *Heart Of The Matter*.



ARTURO MORA: Precisely I was going to ask you if *Heart Of The Matter* is a continuation from *Round Silence*.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: It is.

ARTURO MORA: Was it like a kind of new path that opened?



Wolfgang Haffner. Fotografía © Sergio Cabanillas, 2013

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: I made a turn. In the mid-2000's I made an album called *Shapes*, in which I started using less harmonic stuff, as it was more hypnotic beats... 'Cause I was listening to a lot of club music, electronic music, and this reflects on that album. Then I did an album called *Acoustic Shapes* which wasn't "club" at all. We got touring with the *Shapes* album all around the world, like crazy, and I came home end of July 2007, and I needed a break. And then Nils Landgren called me, because I had played in his Funk Unit band, and there was a big tour in October, and he had booked an opening act, and the lady couldn't do it because she got pregnant. So Nils said: "You are playing with me anyway, so you will do the first half of the concert." I said: "Yeah, of course," and then I said: "Shit, what am I gonna do?" [laughs] And I don't know why I didn't think for more than 5 minutes: "acoustic *Shapes*." I left all the electronics away, I rearranged the songs a little bit and it was my most successful album, not in terms of sales, but of greetings from the audience. Everybody was telling me before: "You are doing an acoustic piano trio, you must be super crazy, because there are so many piano trios." I said: "Well, it doesn't matter." I told my record company and



my booking agency: "Trust me, it will do great." If you do something from your heart you will always have people.

ARTURO MORA: There is a very big contrast from your *Acoustic Shapes* to Nils Landgren's Funk Unit.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: It was a big contrast, we played very soft actually and then the Funk Unit was really hard. But then the next album was *Round Silence*. So *Shapes* was electronic, *Acoustic Shapes* was completely acoustic and *Round Silence* is basically acoustic with some flavour of electronic textures. I didn't think about it as like a trilogy, but now in retrospective it was basically like a trilogy. Electronic, acoustic and a combination of both. And so the new one is a continuation, but with new textures, because I have acoustic guitar, and it still sounds like Wolfgang Haffner, I think, because my music is defined through my way of playing; I'm not a drummer's drummer, I'm not playing a lot, sometimes I'm playing very little, and everything sounds supereasy, but it's not, that's the hard part of it. I don't like people having a calculator while they're listening to music.

ARTURO MORA: Amalgams, weird chord sequences...

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: I don't need it. And this goes back to my history, to Johann Sebastian Bach, his beautiful melodies and beautiful harmonies, moving, swinging... That's where I come from.

I never write a song just to show the harmonies I can do; they have to make sense. The new album is a little different, of course, because I always try to go in a different direction. A question a lot of journalists ask me is: "Wolfgang, you have some of the most famous German or European jazz guys on the album: Till Brönner, Thomas Quasthoff..." To begin with, they are all close friends of mine, we are buddies. So nobody is there just because I want his name, I don't care, I don't need it. This is another

privilege: I don't need any name to sell more albums, because I don't believe in that. The new album still sounds like Wolfie because it has my easy melodies, some of them are like children's... For me a criteria is that if I get out of a concert and I can whistle the songs, or if I hear people out of my concert whistling a song... To me it's a good criteria when you can remember melodies.



ARTURO MORA: In that regard, there is an outstanding song from the album, "Leo" [Wolfgang laughs], with its Pat Metheny tinge.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Yeah, this is a tribute to Pat Metheny, who is probably my main influence. I needed to do that [laughs]. I had the chance to play with him, 10 years ago. I have had some remarkable experiences with my heroes, but with Pat it was

still one level up. We're still in contact until today, he's a great guy. He is like a buddy; I mean, he's Pat Metheny, I know where he is [Wolfgang sets his hand above his head] and where I am [Wolfgang lowers his hand], but when we see each other it's like: "Hey, that was great!," and he's telling great things about me. Chuck Loeb just told me that Pat told him: "Wolfgang is such a great drummer."

But this is not why I did "Leo." I always loved this kind of [he sings a lyric melody] which transposes, which goes through the harmony like crazy, neverending, going on and on... That's Pat Metheny, of course, and I wanted to do a song like this, and it took me two months to write this song, every day. I had probably 20 different versions of where to go in the end. It was always like: "Ok, this is great; ah, no!" For Pat it is never like: "You could have done it like this." It IS like this. For me it's perfect.

"Leo" is also a tribute to Lyle Mays. We always say "Pat Metheny," 'cause it's the Pat Metheny Group, but the guy in the back is Lyle Mays

ARTURO MORA: What about your current live band?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: By now we've just played for one week and, after six shows, last night at Budapest was something different, already. So in one or two years it will sound really different. I don't know how, but it happens. Music has to develop, and I have strong musicians in the band, like guitar player Kosho, who is not known in Spain so far. He's beautiful, really, he's such a character, he's like David Gilmore [Pink Floyd] meets Pat Metheny meets Chuck Loeb meets George Benson, but in the end he's himself. Really. Take your five guitar heroes, put them in one and that's him.

Every note somebody plays in this band fits my philosophy of sound. It's all about a vibe, which is present in my new album more than in the previous ones. Every album reflects a moment

in life, I couldn't have written *Heart Of The Matter* two years ago.

ARTURO MORA: How long did it take from the moment you decided to do the record until the time it was finally produced?



WOLFGANG HAFFNER: As I have a record contract I knew when the record had to come out. *Round Silence* came out in September 2009, and they said: "Could a new album come out in early 2012?," but then I was touring. So the record company had the idea of doing a *Signature Edition* album, and I liked the idea very much, to pick up songs from old stuff I had done, and I think it's a very good mixture which shows a lot of things to people who know *Shapes*, who know *Round Silence* but didn't know other stuff. The album came out in 2012, or in the Fall of 2011.

It was good for me because I didn't have any clue about what to do. For *Round Silence* we were touring for two and a half years like crazy, and I needed to breath, to walk on beaches... I took a month off. I finished what I had to finish, I didn't do any more concerts, I was just in Ibiza.

Then the record company told me: "How about doing some Spanish music combined with Wolfgang Haffner?" I said: "Ok," and after half an hour I said: "Bullshit" [laughs]. I love Spanish music but, just because I live in Spain... What's the purpose? That would be not honest. There are many concept albums. Some of them are good, but I don't have to do something just to stick

out, because I'm sticking out anyway, like basically everybody who has a strong voice in music sticks out. It's me, no matter what I do... Korean music combined with German or Spanish... I was never a fan of these albums. There's a lot of business involved, I'm not putting any names down now, but someone playing the music of Burt Bacharach for the ten thousandth time... Why? I mean, there's so much calculation, that you put this blonde singer in a very little cloth... It's the music of the Beatles, it's the music of Burt Bacharach. You may like my music or not, but I do everything myself, I know what it takes, and you know it. Not that somebody has to like it, but I'm very proud that I make a good living with stuff that is created by myself. Ok, I did a cover version of "Hello, " but not because I don't have enough songs.

So I finally took a nice rest and started thinking about the album. In less than one day I had the line up. It was pretty clear then. And then I was writing for... [he takes a moment to think] five months. Writing is not only sitting there with the computer all the time, but it also means taking long walks, sitting in a coffee place, going around and vibing with it, you know? I had the music inside me, I just had to take it off. Actually two songs of the album I wrote them like in five minutes. I sat down at the piano and I played the song. One is called "Dom", which is for Dominic Miller, and the other one is "Island Life." They are very easy songs. I wrote both of them the day before the recording.



ARTURO MORA: That's jazz!

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: That's it, yeah. But I'm not spending any more time in my life categorising whether my music is jazz or not. There's a lot of jazz in it because many parts are improvised, but... Jimi Hendrix, was it rock, was it jazz? I don't know. I'm not categorising my music. Some people categorise my music like chill-out.

ARTURO MORA: ...As it is relaxing and it sometimes has a disco background.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Yeah, but then comes the whole thing like: Haffner, Ibiza. Ibiza is chill-out. It doesn't matter. But of course you have to find the record somewhere in the record store and you find my records in jazz and not in rock, but it has many influences. It has rock influences, you can clearly hear Pink Floyd in my music, in the ambient; and Pat Metheny also, not only on "Leo".

This ambient is coming out more than it did when I lived in Germany, in the city. Now you play one note and the sea is there.

ARTURO MORA: The environment is part of the music.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Definitely. I think I couldn't have written *Heart Of The Matter* in Tokyo or in L.A. It would sound different. But in the island, in Ibiza, I can play outside, I can even record outside and there's nobody. This reflects me as a person, and my life reflects on the music.

So if you're busy, in noisy places, and not resting... How can you write beautiful music? It doesn't have to do with Ibiza, or with an island. It has to start in you. I was never as relaxed in my life as I'm now, for many reasons. And one of them is I don't have to prove anything to anyone but myself. I'm still playing the biggest festivals in the world with some of the greatest musicians, I'm super thankful. My heart tells me it is the right thing to do. I don't need to be in New York ten times a year. I've done this for many many years, going to America, but this phase is over. I still love to go to America sometimes, but it's not like "I have to go to America." I've played in successful records, like the smooth jazz records, with Bob James and Chuck Loeb, Michael Franks. I've already done this, so where is me now? What I wanna do? Not "what other people want from me." Now I'm not as a crazy person as I was, when I did four concerts in nine days in four continents. The most busy schedule was in 2000. I was out for eight months and I had five tours, one after the other. Normally some agency asks you: "Can you do September 1 to 20?," then another one asks you maybe "Can you do 18 of September to October 20?," so you have to cancel either one because it doesn't fit. But in 2000 I started like in February, then I went home for one day, then I had like two weeks free between America and South Africa, then I got a call from a great band that went to Japan, and it was always my dream to be in Japan, it was the very first time, so I said: "Ok." I had a crazy transfer from



Rio de Janeiro home, I arrived in the morning at eight o'clock in Nürnberg and in the evening at seven I flew to Frankfurt and took a plane to Tokyo. That explains how crazy I was.

So everything you do, whether in your private life or in music, reflects in your lifestyle and in your music.



ARTURO MORA: What part have your record company, ACT, and its owner Siggi Loch played in the development of your musical product?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: They let me do what I want, except for the idea of the Spanish music, but that's fine, Siggi never told me "you have to do this," never. I wanted to go to ACT because I loved ACT. I love the philosophy, I love the guys, they are super dedicated and organised. Siggi loves the music, that's why he lets us do what we do, and there's something I really really love not only from Siggi Loch but from everyone. If I could have a wish it would be that everybody really told me



what they think, not only about the music, but in general. If somebody thinks I'm stupid, tell me. Don't tell me "oh, yeah, you're such a good guy" and then in the back: "This guy sucks," or whatever. And the music industry is like that. I'm not hanging around in many clubs and jam sessions, I've already done that, but not now. "Yeah, this sounds so great, you know that Miles record with Philly Joe...," and then I say "fuck you, leave me alone." [laughs] I'd rather put on a James Taylor record and a nice glass of green tea and have my peace. I hate that bullshit: "He plays with these sticks and those heads..." Music is life, that's my motto. And so, coming back to Siggi Loch, he has a very clear vision of what he wants, he wants to have music which moves him, and it doesn't matter if it's funk or whatever, but he always tells me. He told me, for example, about the piano trio: "You must be crazy, putting out a piano trio." I recorded two shows and told him: "This is gonna be in my next album," and he told me: "I highly recommend not to do it." He has a key point and he tells you, he's fighting for his honor, standing for his ideals, but he never ever deprives you, he's very clever, he knows he has to support the musician, that's why bands like e.s.t. [Esbjörn Svensson Trio] made it in the label. That's the greatest thing, ACT supports musicians.

ARTURO MORA: I was precisely going to ask you about the influence of e.s.t. in your music, especially in your way of composing.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: I was listening to a lot of e.s.t., of course, I mean, there are some influences, because I love Magnus [Öström], I love Esbjörn, I played on an album with him, the one by Viktoria Tolstoy [*Shining On You. The Music Of Esbjörn Svensson*]. There's a good story about that. It doesn't say it's Esbjörn on the album, it says that the piano player is Bror Falk, but it is Esbjörn Svensson. Bror Falk is his mother's name or something. It's clearly him, if you listen that's clearly Esbjörn Svensson, from the very first note.

Trust me, I was there [laughs]. They couldn't use his name. In the biggest German jazz magazine a guy wrote it was great, but too bad Esbjörn wasn't there because that would have been really good [laughs].

So Esbjörn was a great influence, but I never got into the electronics he used, because I don't believe in copying, I believe in inspiration. My trio sound is different from them, but still there are some similar song structures. The more I get to play with the trio the more I get away. Hubert Nuss, the piano player, plays completely different from Esbjörn.

Siggi Loch didn't think we'd make it, but it's been the most success I've had so far.



ARTURO MORA: What's your point on the existence of an European

jazz?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: For me the most interesting music has come from Europe, and not America, in the last ten years. A lot of Scandinavians, but you Spanish guys are doing great things, also in France. I still listen to a lot of American music, but... I really lost it when there was this stupid discussion about the Downbeat cover magazine when e.s.t. was on the cover and Branford Marsalis and other guys said: "They are stealing our music."

ARTURO MORA: It's a nonsense discussion.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Completely. He plays classical music, and his brother [Wynton] plays classical music. Who invented classical music, by the way? [laughs] That kind of things, I'm not following them. It's a senseless discussion and it shows a lack of respect from this guy. For me a really serious musician doesn't come out with something like that, because music shouldn't have borders. I think my life is so good because I don't care about that. I'd rather have a *cerveza* [beer] with some friends instead of sitting there analysing what Miles Davis might have done fifty years ago. It just takes energy.

ARTURO MORA: Are there any plans to record with Metro again?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: We're doing a big band production in Metro which is coming off end of the year. It's with the WDR Big Band of Cologne. We're doing this in September with Joachim Becker [producer]. It's exciting, we've already picked out the songs, there will be no new songs, we've picked like our highlights from our six or seven albums. They'll be arranged by Michael Abene. We'll have the bass player from *Heart Of The Matter*, Nicolas Fiszman.

ARTURO MORA: Are you ever going to use the same bassist for two consecutive albums?

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: [laughs] No, it never happened that. Wait, Victor Bailey was for two albums I think.

ARTURO MORA: *Tree People* and *Metrocafé*.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Yeah, but it's become kind of a habit to have a new bass player.

ARTURO MORA: Just to finish, which other future plans do you have?



Wolfgang Haffner. Fotografía © Sergio Cabanillas, 2013

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Touring, touring, touring, summer festivals in Europe, then going to Asia in mid-October, Japan, Hong-Kong, then back to Europe, Spain. I know the situation is difficult here, but we're gonna do it anyway. I want to present my music and I always have a strong following in Spain, so I'm very excited about that. Doing the Metro thing, playing with Till Brönner, the trumpet player, Asia again. Recording here and there...

I just did something for Chuck Loeb lately. I got home from the airport and it was like two in the morning and I just saw

Chuck was on Skype, so I Skyped Chuck and he was like: "I just wanted to call you." I saw daylight and I said: "This sofa I know, you are in hotel Okura in Tokyo," because it's where we always stay when we play the Blue Note. He was there. He wanted to record a song but he couldn't put the whole band together –it was the band which played last year with Andy Snitzer and Pat Bianchi–, so we had to record on different sessions. We kept talking for another ten minutes and, to make a long story short, ten minutes later I hung up, I played the song and fifteen or twenty minutes later I sent the file to Tokyo. Chuck and I always play a duet in concert.

ARTURO MORA: Yes, you play on a stool.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: Yeah, exactly. We were still on Skype, Tokyo-Ibiza. He set a tempo, I played it with brushes, "let's do it a little faster." And I said: "I'll just do it now." By then it was three in the morning. I just played, imagining the theme, in sixteen bars, like "Stompin' At The Savoy", AABA form...

ARTURO MORA: D flat.

WOLFGANG HAFFNER: [laughs] So I did like a solo break, I turned to sticks, I did like trading, just imagining what lines Chuck would take, because I know him very well. I repeated three times the last four bars, how we do in standards. I sent the files and done! It's gonna be on his next album.

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