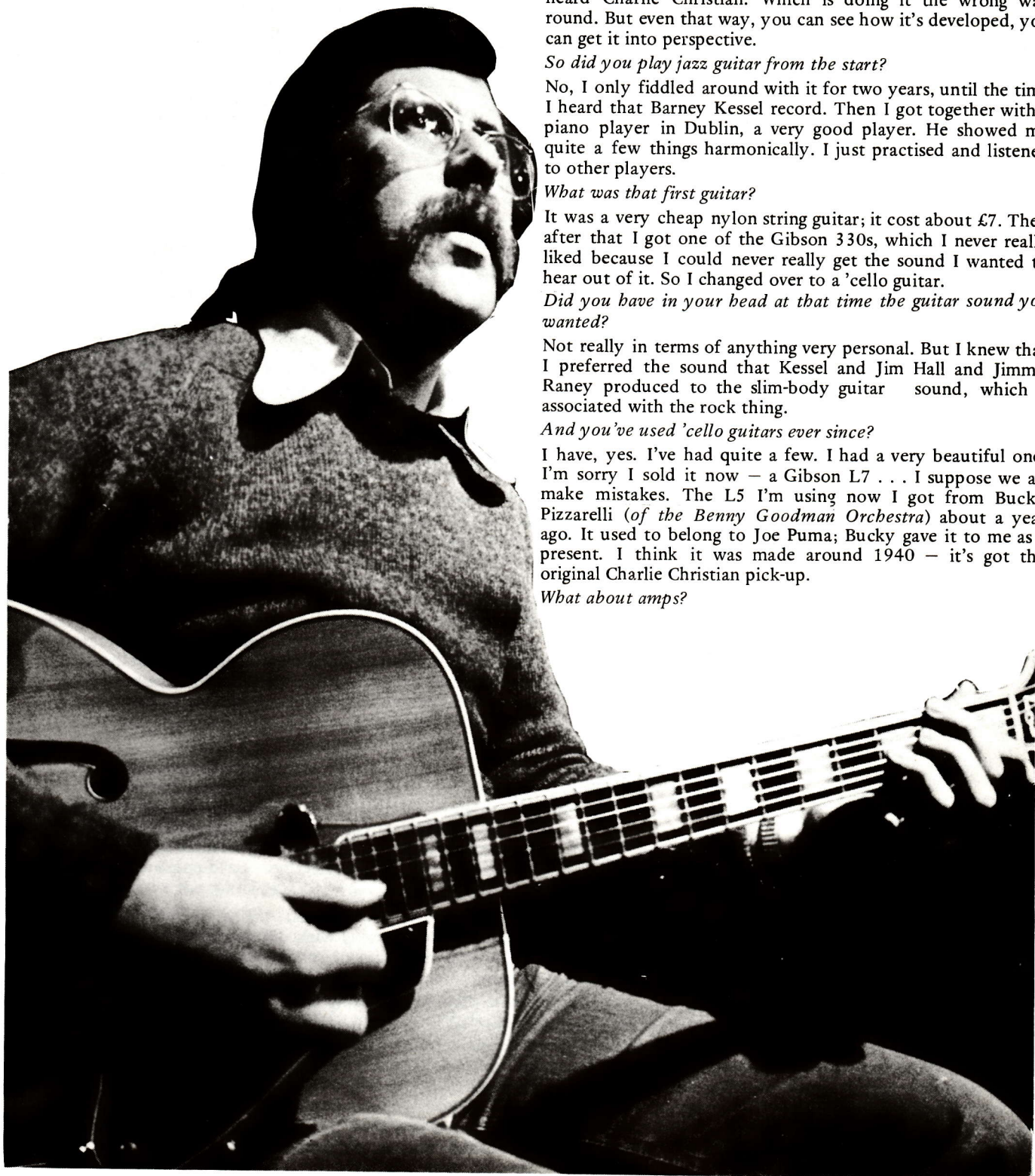


'It's beautiful if you
can communicate ...'

LOUIS STEWART

talks to Jeffery Pike



Not many Irish jazz musicians get to play much outside their own country, so it was especially nice to see Louis Stewart in London in November, blowing up a storm with the Tony Lee Trio. Louis hasn't been tempted into the electronic jungle which seems to attract many jazz players these days; he still plays jazz that has form and melodic shape — and swings like the clappers. His tone is rich and full, his technique fast and fluent, and his thoughtful harmonic approach is solidly based on the great jazz guitarists of the '50s and '60s. So it was no surprise to learn from him that it was Tal Farlow and Co who first inspired him.

I had piano lessons when I was a kid, but I never practised, so I stopped that. When I was about 15 at school, a friend of mine had a record of Les Paul. That intrigued me and I bought a guitar after that. Then I heard Barney Kessel on the radio and he knocked me out; so I started listening to various jazz guitar players. I did things in reverse, I suppose, because I listened to Barney, Tal Farlow and Jimmy Raney and then I heard Charlie Christian. Which is doing it the wrong way round. But even that way, you can see how it's developed, you can get it into perspective.

So did you play jazz guitar from the start?

No, I only fiddled around with it for two years, until the time I heard that Barney Kessel record. Then I got together with a piano player in Dublin, a very good player. He showed me quite a few things harmonically. I just practised and listened to other players.

What was that first guitar?

It was a very cheap nylon string guitar; it cost about £7. Then after that I got one of the Gibson 330s, which I never really liked because I could never really get the sound I wanted to hear out of it. So I changed over to a 'cello guitar.

Did you have in your head at that time the guitar sound you wanted?

Not really in terms of anything very personal. But I knew that I preferred the sound that Kessel and Jim Hall and Jimmy Raney produced to the slim-body guitar sound, which I associated with the rock thing.

And you've used 'cello guitars ever since?

I have, yes. I've had quite a few. I had a very beautiful one, I'm sorry I sold it now — a Gibson L7 . . . I suppose we all make mistakes. The L5 I'm using now I got from Bucky Pizzarelli (of the Benny Goodman Orchestra) about a year ago. It used to belong to Joe Puma; Bucky gave it to me as a present. I think it was made around 1940 — it's got the original Charlie Christian pick-up.

What about amps?

◀ I've used a little Fender for about the last eight years. I used to have an Ampeg which I liked very much, but I couldn't get replacement valves for it in Ireland, and the sound got so bad I had to get something else. I quite like the Fender, but I find that you have to get it up to a certain volume level before it starts to sound full and mellow. I've played through amplifiers that were less powerful which give you that round sound without having to turn it up so high.

I'd guess you use medium gauge strings for that full tone . . .

Yes, though I change around quite a lot between brands, experimenting. At the moment I'm using Darco New Yorker strings. When I was living in London I used D'Angelico, which I loved, but you can't get them back home. I always use medium gauge. I've tried using light strings and I love the sustain they give, but I can't get on with the feel of them, especially when the tempo goes up: they feel like jelly under my fingers. And you have to turn the amplifier up too much to get the attack that I like to hear.

How did you set about teaching yourself to play jazz?

Well, I listened to all the records I could get. Initially to guitar players, and then to horn players. And though I loved the guitar players, I preferred the lines the horn players played . . . although when Wes Montgomery arrived, those early records he made were fantastic. It's a shame that most people only know Wes from those records he made with strings, playing pop tunes — which he did beautifully — but he was capable of so much more than that. I came over to London just to hear him at Ronnie Scott's when he was here. Beautiful.

Did you have any lessons?

I never had lessons on the guitar. You can learn so much on the guitar from watching other players — but unfortunately there was no one around at the time to watch! It was very much a trial-and-error thing for me. Which has its advantages: you do discover little things that happen by accident which you can use later on.

What was the jazz scene like in Dublin in those days? Was there much scope for you to play what you wanted?

At the time I was aspiring to play jazz there were only one or two venues going, and they were mostly Dixieland. There was one modern jazz session going. It was impossible then, as it is now, to earn a living playing the music. I had to do other things.

What's the scene like now?

There's a lot more things happening, but of course nothing like the activity on the scale that goes on in London. I do about three regular gigs a week, plus various concerts at universities. We've had a few British players over there — Pete King, Kenny Wheeler, Tommy Whittle — and they were well received, they played to good audiences. When you consider the population of Ireland — I think it's less than four million — it's remarkable how many good players there are there.

We don't hear much of them in Britain, though. Do Irish jazz players feel that their scene is restricting?

Musically it's restricting, because you end up playing with the same half-a-dozen people all the time, which isn't good. I mean, it's nice to have an understanding with the various players you play with, but it's stifling too. That was what I liked about living in London, the opportunity to play with different musicians all the time.

When did you first come to London to play?

I came in 1968 after the Montreux Jazz Festival, instead of going back to Dublin. I had no work lined up at all when I arrived. But fortunately I was doing a Sunday morning session and I met Cedric West, who I'll be eternally grateful to because he put enough gigs my way in the first couple of months to stop me from starving. Then I got a call from a mutual friend to say that Tubby Hayes wanted a guitar player and would I go along. Well, I wanted to improve my playing and to work with good players . . . but I wasn't sure about jumping in the deep end with Tubby: he used to do those fantastic tempos which terrify me, even now. But I went along and he said it was all right and asked me to join his quartet. I worked with him for about 18 months. After about six months he started re-forming his big band, and he wrote the guitar into the ensembles with the saxophones and trumpets, which was a tremendous experience for me. Tubby was one of

the most dedicated musicians who ever lived. I think he would be in any sphere. I learnt a lot from Tubby.

When you first joined the quartet, did you have to work hard to cope with the material, those tempos?

Yes, I did try to develop my speed. Of course, Tubby was playing material that was harmonically more interesting than the stuff I'd been doing formerly. So . . . I know it's a cliché, but it was a challenge. I also worked with Harry South, who gave me my first broadcast on Jazz Club, and I did a few things with him after that. He's a lovely arranger; he really makes you feel at ease.

In your days with Tubby, you made a great impression on the British jazz scene, got some great reviews . . . yet more recently, we haven't heard much of you.

Well, there were two tours with the Benny Goodman Orchestra — that was when I was still living in London. Then when I went back to Dublin, he called me up to do a third one.

Why did you leave London?

It was nothing to do with music, just personal reasons. Like accommodation. When you're trying to find somewhere decent to live in London, and you're Irish and a musician, with a wife and two children . . . eventually I realised that if I went back to Dublin I could make as much money and buy a house and live comfortably.

Making money from what?

Well, there's gigs, and there's some recording work and some TV. Most of the recording work is country music — Irish country music! But it's a way of subsidising my jazz playing.

What sort of music do you listen to now?

Apart from guitar players, I like Chick Corea, Joe Henderson. I listen to some classical guitar; I love Williams and Bream. I love the classical guitar, though I've never played it and I suppose I'm too long in the tooth to ever try. What else? Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans, Gary Burton, people like that.

Do you think these people have an influence on the way you play?

I hope so. With the exception of a few guitar players, I think that other instrumentalists, piano players and horn players, get much more continuity in their improvisation, and better timing and phrasing. There are some marvellous guitar players that can do it; but guitar players never seem to be in the vanguard of what's going on — with the exception of the rock scene.

Why do you think this is? Is there any reason why the jazz guitarist shouldn't be as great an innovator as the pianist or horn player?

There isn't really. I suppose it is a complicated instrument to improvise on — the fact that you can play the same note in so many places, and there are so many permutations of fingering and picking. That can mess up players for years — I know it did me. I just worked and worked on the different methods of picking. The only time I ever really feel I'm playing music is when I can forget all the physical factors involved and just think about the music.

How much practice do you do?

It varies. I might practise six or eight hours for a couple of days, then I can't look at the thing again for the next few days. Then again, it depends on how much work I'm doing at night. One of the things that messes me up is, if I sit at home and practise scales for any length of time before a gig, when I go on I just can't think musically — I end up playing scales!

Is that the form your practice takes — scales?

Mostly it's improvising, and trying to get the picking together, experimenting with different phrasing and slurring, and with chord voicing. I seldom sit down with a set practice routine.

Is your playing developing in any particular direction?

I'm still working within the accepted framework. I think some development might come naturally, though I'm not aiming to be revolutionary. I like sometimes to play outside the harmonies, to play free for a bit. But I only do that on a tune that has form, so you can safely go outside the harmony, the way Chick Corea does or Joe Henderson. Not that I do it as well as they do, but it's interesting. As regards playing free all



Photos: Fergus Bourke

the time, without any harmonic structure or form to the tune . . . I've been involved with situations like that on a couple of occasions and some of it was enjoyable, some of it was disastrous. I wouldn't like to play like that all night; but occasionally when you're playing you feel the need to forget about the chord changes.

One of the things I'd like to develop is using my right hand fingers. Ninety-five per cent of the time I use a pick, but I like very much the concept of guitar playing that Lenny Breau has. He plays like a piano player, he can comp chords and improvise a single-note solo at the same time. I think that's beautiful.

You said you play with a pick ninety-five per cent of the time . . .

Well, occasionally I try and play with the fingers if the volume is low with the group. I love the way that Joe Pass plays with his fingers — that's terrific. I can never manage to use the pick and fingers together like that, and playing loud I find it difficult to control my finger-style playing, even though the instrument is amplified. But for some quiet and intimate things I like to use the thumb and fingers.

What sort of pick do you use?

Small ones. I seem to be able to control a small pick better for fast picking; it's not as cumbersome. I was using tortoiseshell picks for a long time, but I've been using thick Gibson plastic picks recently, cut down a bit to make them smaller. They seem to give less extraneous sounds than the tortoiseshell ones. I don't know why, I've never gone into it. Like most guitar players, I suppose, I experiment all the time.

You've got a very fluent right hand action, playing up near the fingerboard and using a lot of wrist, lots of muscular control. Of course there's less resistance in the strings when you play up towards the fingerboard and don't rest your hand on the bridge. To be honest, the reason I developed that way of

playing back in Ireland was seeing photographs of my idols, Tal and Barney and others: they all had their hand up there, so I thought it must be the best place to have it. I don't think many jazz guitar players rest on the bridge. Lots of rock guitarists do.

Do you think you've got anything to learn from rock guitar players? Sounds, effects?

To be honest about it, the usual rock guitar sound doesn't appeal to me. It's not that I'm against fuzz and wah-wah and the various devices; I know they're all valid within the context of the music. But I think it can cover up the personal sound. I personally find it very difficult to identify most of the rock guitar players one from another, whereas if someone puts on a Jim Hall record, after two bars you know it's Jim Hall. But rhythmically, they do some interesting things.

What are your future plans?

I shall be playing in and around Dublin, playing as much jazz as I can. I do a bit of writing as well, mostly for TV programmes. I'm hoping to come back to England and work with Tony Lee again soon: I really enjoyed this tour.

When you play in clubs and pubs, are you playing for yourself or the audience? To put it another way, how affected are you by audience reaction?

I have played gigs where people haven't been listening at all, they've been drinking and talking . . . and it's murder. So now we try to pick the venues carefully, to avoid that as far as possible. If I'm playing in some place where they're not receptive at all, I turn off and try to enjoy myself with the people I'm playing with. I'm always very uneasy if people aren't receptive to what we're doing. But when they are listening, it makes it all worthwhile. It's beautiful if you can communicate with someone. ●