

# I Remember... Joe Pass

By Lawson G. Stone

In May of 1994, in a pew in St. Mels church in Woodland Hills, California, with about a hundred others, I celebrated the life and grieved the death of Joe Pass. We heard solid words from the priest, poignant remembrances by family members, a touch of humor from friends. Flying the Red-Eye back to Kentucky I found myself re-reading a year of letters from Joe. Just two years before, I had known next to nothing about jazz guitar, even after twenty-five years of playing around with guitars. Then came the day I heard a recording of Joe's on the radio and felt the ground drop out from under my feet. Joe Pass had a rare magic. Jazz historians and scholars will name him with Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, and Wes Montgomery, musicians who changed forever the way we play, listen, feel about the guitar.

But I am no musical expert, no professional player. I'm a clergyman and theology professor. The grace and power of Joe's music inspired me as I took up music again after a decade of disappointment. As I struggled with my own playing and wondered at Joe's, I felt the man behind the music so concretely that I could almost see and touch him. Finally I wrote simply to thank him for his inspiration. One day a hand-written letter from Joe came, beginning an exchange of letters spanning the final year of his life. Joe encouraged me in my slow growth as a musician, and as he lived through the trauma of terminal liver cancer, he reached out to me, as well as to others, for encouragement and spiritual support. I briefly experienced Joe Pass as one who, unlike many celebrities, recognized the anonymous fan, the amateur. I remember Joe Pass, the man with a heart, who gave himself to us.

## Giving Himself in His Recordings

Joe gave himself to us in his many recordings. Many players record and are forgotten, but Joe's recordings keep being reissued. In a throw-away culture of 15 minute fame, Joe's art holds on to us. Virtuoso is as bracing and surprising a display of acoustic guitar virtuosity now as it was twenty years ago, before "unplugged" was fashionable. Catch Me even presents a fingerstyle performance of a jazz

standard on an unamplified classical guitar. *For Django* is still a high-water mark in jazz performance. *Appassionato* brings the acoustic ensemble's expressive power to the tunes of Charlie Parker, Neal Hefti, Dizzy Gillespie, and the like. How many guitarists today attempt "Relaxing" at Camarillo" or "That's Earl, Brother" on the acoustic instrument? Why this permanence? Joe didn't just play. Joe gave himself. The sheer beauty of the guitar's *sound* on *Blues for Fred* startles listeners accustomed to layers of electronic enhancement, editing, and distortion. The freshness of his playing unfolded his creative gift of improvisation. Advising me about improvisation, Joe wrote in April 1994:

"I don't play anything that's hard to play, because the object for me is to play music, to communicate, not to show hard things or fast things.

"Only play what you *hear* and can *sing along* at the same time. You cannot *think* and *improvise*. You will always come out late or off or wrong or stiff or unsettled. Always take chances, make mistakes, go for it. I have not one recording that is free from a *clam!*"

This concern for the heart came out in the answer to a question I asked him about the virtues of various styles of playing. He wrote:

"You know that there are, I feel, several ways of approaching jazz improvising. There is the long line playing like Tal Farlow—there is the phrase playing like Lester Young or Jim Hall, like the telling of a story—short lines—statements. I was at one time undecided about which way to play and what was really true jazz (creative) *But I have since forgotten about it and play the way I feel and hear...*" (emphasis added).

His concern for authenticity in music also came out when I vented frustration at all the fingerings of so many different scales, and my difficulties playing fast:

“Listen. Scales are only for learning where the notes are on the fretboard. So if you hear something your fingers know where those intervals are in several different places. And there are *NO* correct fingerings for the scales. You have 4 fingers, you use 4 fingers.

“I play mostly fingerstyle now (no pick) and a lot slower—and more melodies, though I do play one or two pieces with a pick, to show off for the young cats (guitarists).”

Joe stressed that improvisation, in order to express truly the music of the heart, must remain simple in conception:

“So since I feel inspired to help you with my simple ideas, I also say, learn the basic chord pattern to a tune—*BASIC MAJOR MINOR DOMINANT*, that’s it! Three kinds of chords, three kinds of scales, major, minor dominant. Diminished scale is a dominant scale, augmented scale is a dominant scale, the altered dominant scale covers all of them. In the key of C, G7th altered dominant has every sound you want: G Ab Bb B Db Eb F G. So that’s it. Make everything simple.

Joe’s idealism and integrity weren’t just ideological purism. He could give both salty and pragmatic advice to a player of debatable native talent:

“Use your ear and trust your ear! If it’s good, great; if not then do another hobby or read music or play only diminished scales—can’t go wrong.”

Joe’s playing is all heart, fresh and surprising without being odd or avant-garde. Of course, he had the best musical training—the club circuit. He summarized this “education” for me:

“I left school to play on the road, bebop, and hang out in diners and pool rooms...I learned a lot of songs in the forties playing gigs—road houses, VFW, Polish American Club, Sons of Italy...Boots and Saddle, Villa Venice, etc., all around western Pennsylvania; traveled with trios all around the east coast, Detroit, Chica-

go, Baltimore. Every town had a lounge, every trio on the circuit was guitar, bass, piano, *a la* Nat King Cole, who was big with his trio then—“Sweet Lorraine,” “Little Girl,” “Just Friends,” “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” Route 66”, “Body and Soul,” you had to be able to play these pieces—you had to play the guitar because you were an important part of the group.

Joe packed his heart and soul, and this remarkable education, into the music. When we hear it years later, we still discover behind the music a living human heart and hands, communicating with us, giving himself to us.

### Giving Himself To the Music of Others

Joe gave himself in his preference for applying his great musical gifts not on his own compositions, but on the tunes of others. Joe could and did compose. My first recording of his was *Virtuoso III*, all original Joe Pass compositions. But when Joe got his hands on some great standard, true magic happened. He wrote, “I am very much into old standards, melody and harmony. By very much, I mean I prefer that approach.” Joe loved harmony, the movement of voices, the apt substitution. He explained,

“So I learn with my ear, and I always ‘listened’ and harmony was important to me. A new chord change in a tune was like a burst of sunlight when I heard someone play it, especially when I knew the song and what I played.”

As for melody, Joe seemed to feel that embellishment was the mother of improvisation. He recommended,

“Playing the tune itself is a *great idea*. The melody will become part of your musical vocabulary. I would play and did play the melody and improvise between the phrases, always getting back to the melody. Later I would change the melody.”

I have at least six recordings of him playing “All the Things You Are,” and they’re all fresh, all different, all splendid tributes to the tune.

He also gave himself as a player among others. Who can listen to his playing with Ella Fitzgerald or J.J. Johnson and not be breathless? We listen in wonder as Joe keeps pace with Oscar Peterson, weaves in and out with Herb Ellis, or blends closely with that old smoothie Red Mitchell that it sounds as though the bass and guitar are being played by one mind. Best of all was the cohesive magic Joe created with his long-standing partners John Pisano, Colin Bailey, and Jim Hughart. Joe wasn't just a soloist. "Comping" never had so great a practitioner as Joe Pass. Joe gave himself to the music of others.

On his last tour, Joe performed with Pepe Romero, Paca Pena, and Leo Kottke. Far from being daunted by the diversity of this group, Joe was energized by it. He wrote:

"This is a wonderful tour. The guys are great players, and real great human beings. A lot of love and friendship. Real! No competition, and I'm telling you, I have not worked in any situation as warm and friendly as this. We all travel on a large bus, sleeps 8, has all the things we need. A driver, sound man (good one) and stage man, a ... tour manager, and all guitar players too ... anyway, I am enjoying myself and these guys have inspired me and renewed my interest in the guitar—all are great players."

### **Giving Himself to Amateur Players**

Joe gave himself in another way. He was eager to help others find the secrets of great playing. He wanted others to discover what he experienced in music. He was the master magician who, having dazzled us with his feats, steps off the stage and starts showing us how it's done. His books, the note-for-note transcriptions that Roland Leone so painstakingly prepared, the video, the guitar-clinics—Joe gave himself to all of us who will never even play a paying gig. That's the heart behind the music. I recall thinking as I wrote that first letter that Joe Pass probably had neither the time nor the interest corresponding with an unknown amateur. I wondered if the impression of graciousness I had from the music was real. Over the last year I learned that it was. Here was a giant, a legend, taking time to talk to a total unknown.

A true virtuoso, he took the time for the amateur. Joe could be tough and cantankerous; but behind his occasional curmudgeonly remark was only a playful spirit. I know there are many others like me. Perhaps his sympathy with unknown players came from his road experience. He once wrote:

"There were always guys around who could really play, unknowns, in small towns like Peoria, Hammond, Indiana. I remember one guy played piano with one hand, and flugelhorn with the other in a trio, playing a Charlie Parker piece, with great harmonies. I hung around him all the time he was in town. Thrilled!"

No brooding, aloof, figure, Joe remained an engaged, and engaging player. He also had a sense of humor. I sent him a birthday card on January 13, 1994, noting that, by coincidence, his birthday was the same as my wedding anniversary, my best man's birthday, and close to my own birthday. I kidded that this could not be coincidental, that maybe we were tied in to the plot to assassinate JFK—the movie Oliver Stone having just made a big splash in the media. He carried the joke a step further:

"By the way, January 13, is the birthday of my wife's sister ... and of my best friend-guitarist's wife, so we should bring Fidel Castro into the JFK plot, and some of my mafia friends, who by the way refer to me as 'Hey Kid.'

The poignancy of this joshing around is that, as he wrote these words, he was going through excruciating radiation therapy as his illness erupted into its final devastation.

### **His Final Gift**

Joe gave himself in another way. Joe Pass did not live the life of a saint. Drug addiction and jail time nearly derailed his career in the early years. He overcame that problem, however, and went on to greatness. Something else, however, happened to Joe in 1991. He wrote,

"I was never really religious and believe it or

not, never thought once to thank God for the gift of music I had. Anyway I found a tumor in my liver ... while I was on holiday ... last March 91 ... I turned to God and Jesus, and I had what I know to be signs of his blessing, and answers, from all kinds of places and people I didn't even know ... I have found a peace and love I never knew. I try to read the Bible, mostly the New Testament."

True to form, Joe didn't turn to faddish contemporary "spirituality." The Bible, Jesus, and prayer became his refuge. Throughout the final months of his life, Joe expressed an amazing sense of peace that his life was in God's hands. My last conversation with him occurred with him in mid-May of this year. Fluid choked his lungs, making it hard to talk. Between spasms of coughing, he admitted that his pain was so great that while listening to a recording of Sarah Vaughn, he realized he could no longer "hear" improvisation in his mind. Despite this final, cruel blow, Joe confessed hope even then that his life was in God's hands.

Unlike some who receive spectacular press attention precisely because of their alienation and self-destruction, Joe Pass died what the priest at his memorial service beautifully named a "happy and holy death," in faith and hope, giving his life and musical gift back to God. Because of that, we can never finally lose what he gave us.

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## TAL FARLOW TRIBUTE

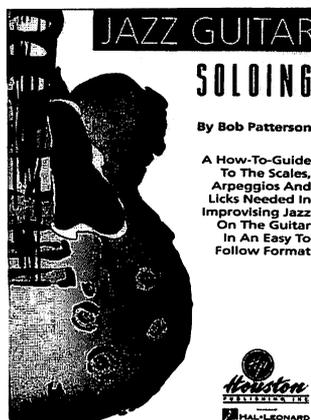
**O**n June 24 there will be a tribute concert in honor of Tal Farlow to be held at Merkin Concert Hall 129 W. 67th St. NY. Some of the artists scheduled to appear are Jack Wilkins, Howard Alden, Herb Ellis, Joe Diorio, Mundell Lowe, Attila Zoller, Remo Palmier, Jimmy Bruno, Sal Salvador, Vic Juris, and Pat Martino. There are special appearances scheduled by Johnny Smith and George Benson.

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