



OUT OF THE ASHES

John Abercrombie lost nearly everything when his home was destroyed in a fire. But the iconic 59-year-old guitarist is picking up the pieces, and carrying on.

By David Adler

PHOTO BY DETLEV SCHILKE

was Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 2003, and John Abercrombie was shoveling snow outside his house in Putnam Valley, N.Y.

"I walked in, and I saw smoke halfway down from the ceiling to the floor," he says, calmly recounting what he refers to as "the tragedy." "I thought it was in the kitchen at first. I opened the patio door, breathing the smoke. Then I walked into the living room and saw the smoke was everywhere. My wife was in the bath at the other end of the hall, so I yelled to her to come out. She came running out into the front yard."

With adrenaline pumping, Abercrombie went back inside. "I tried to find our cat and see what was in the back of the house. That's when I saw the flames were coming down from the ceiling, into the hallway. So I just got out. The firemen wouldn't let me back in. I wanted to go in and see what I could get. I wanted to break a window in the back, but they said the oxygen would feed the fire, it could blow up, and I could

get hurt. So I just had to sit there and watch my house burn down."

Abercrombie and his wife, Lisa, had lived in the ill-fated house for just six months. Now they are renting one of the several residences on a 62-acre Putnam Valley farm, and they're getting ready to buy a new home. One could do worse than this temporary abode, however. Nestled in a lush, expansive valley, the house has large windows overlooking a creek and a paddock stocked with several fine horses.

Propped on a bookshelf is one of the only pieces of décor in the place: the guitarist's 1961 high-school yearbook photo. Clean-shaven, with short, slicked-back hair, the teenage Abercrombie couldn't be farther removed from the shaggy, psychedelic jazzier who would soon get his start in bands led by Johnny Hammond, Chico Hamilton, Gato Barbieri and Billy Cobham.

Seated at his dining-room table, Abercrombie seems mournful, but not gloomy, as he reflects on what he lost, and on what may have started the fire. "I even considered it could have been this," he says, holding up his burning cigarette. But inspectors determined it was an electrical fire that began in the attic. The immediate cause is still unknown.

When we spoke, Abercrombie was preparing to tour Europe with his new quartet, in support of his 24th ECM release, *Class Trip*. Since debuting as a leader in 1974 with *Timeless*, he has always made a point of forming new bands, exploring new configurations and new guitar sounds. Now he has little choice but to embrace change: most of his old guitars are gone.



But Abercrombie has made his peace even with this. "The guitars are, in a way, the least. You'd think I'd be really upset about it, but I wasn't that upset. When you have 12 or 13 instruments you can't play them all."

Still, one winces hearing Abercrombie itemize the damage. "I had an old Gibson 175 [pictured on the cover of Marc Copland's Savoy disc *Second Look*]. Three handmade archtops went up, my old Ibanez, a gold top Les Paul, a Hamer chambered guitar. I had some really pretty things. I probably lost about 12 instruments. Also, my component system in my music room: a Walter Woods power amp and a Mesa/Boogie TriAxis preamp which was real old, my effects processor and a couple of matching speakers, really nice stuff, all of it went up. That was the sound I used for about 15 years when I recorded. My six-foot Yamaha piano was still there, but it was completely fried. That was really sad, because I spent a lot of time with that piano."

Even more sad, Abercrombie's cat was probably lost in the blaze. (A new cat, Al, with snow-white fur and intensely dark eyes, has joined the household.) Also gone were most of Abercrombie's jazz CDs, his vinyl and manuscripts of original music going back more than 30 years. "Some of it was saved because it was in the garage," he says. "My students got together and made a folder of my songs, and a lot of my friends have them. So they can all get me my tunes again."

And there were other glimmers of hope. "[The firemen] saved a couple of guitars; they put them on my front lawn. And when I went back the next day, I found an old Les Paul sitting in the case. I opened the case real slow and—perfect condition."

Abercrombie's Mapson archtop happened to be in the shop; two electric mandolins were in the garage, and therefore unscathed. Luthiers Brian Moore and Stephen Marchione will soon provide Abercrombie with new instruments. And the Gruen acoustic guitar that he played on *Three Guitars* (Chesky) with Larry Coryell and Badi Assad is being restored. "I found it hanging on my front door and I ran my hand across the strings, and it sounded beautiful," he recalls. "The tuning pegs still worked, the fingerboard seemed OK, but

the body was all charred and part of it was all white. It was really strange-looking. So I took it in for repairs. If it sounds good, I wouldn't care that it doesn't look so hot. I mean, look at Willie Nelson's guitar."

Amid all this turmoil comes *Class Trip*, the second release by Abercrombie's new quartet with violinist Mark Feldman, bassist Marc Johnson and drummer Joey Baron. There is a beguiling sonic transparency to the strings-plus-drums unit, and the players' close artistic bonds are palpable. Johnson, of course, was a member of Abercrombie's trio with Peter Erskine for seven years. Baron was hired to sub for Billy Hart just in time for the band's first record, *Cat 'n' Mouse*. "I'd forgotten how great Joey Baron is," Abercrombie admits. "He's able to play very conventionally or very free, and I wanted to go in a freer direction. Joey brought a certain element into the band, and I don't think any other drummer alive can do what he does. He's so quick. He can take the smallest germ of an idea and turn it into something."

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What truly distinguishes this group's sound, however, is the violin and guitar front line. Feldman was a student at the Banff Centre when he met Abercrombie roughly 15 years ago. His first appearance with the guitarist was on 1999's *Open Land*, which also featured Kenny Wheeler and Joe Lovano with Abercrombie's long-standing trio-mates, organist Dan Wall and drummer Adam Nussbaum. "When I used Mark on *Open Land*," says Abercrombie, "I felt a strong connection to the violin, and I

decided to have a smaller group and not do the organ anymore."

Abercrombie's faith in Feldman has paid off, and his praise for the violinist is effusive. "Mark can improvise on any form. He nails my tunes—he practices them. He will investigate how to improvise over these weird, convoluted chords. He'll also play behind me when I'm soloing sometimes. He'll play a line, or fifths, something to outline the harmony, so it's like having your own little string section. All of a sudden I'll hear these double-stops come in behind me, and that inspires me."

On *Cat 'n' Mouse*'s "Convolution," the two create a vibe that's reminiscent of Jerry Goodman and John McLaughlin on the earliest Mahavishnu records. On "String Thing" they create a softer, more intimate rapport, as they do again on the intro to "Risky Business," one of four contrasting waltzes on the new album. "*Class Trip* is more of a tune-oriented record than *Cat 'n' Mouse*," Abercrombie says. "The last one was more abstract somehow. This one is a little more lyrical." Still, the quartet imbues even its most structured performances with a sense of looseness and freedom.

Abercrombie doesn't hesitate to declare, "This is the most fun I've ever had improvising in that way, maybe since Gateway [with Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette]."

But even so, Abercrombie has an eye on this ensemble's expiration date. "I imagine we could have another CD in us," he muses. "I would like to do a live recording with this band. We did that with Marc and Peter Erskine, we did that with Adam and Dan. But we never did it with my first band, the quartet [with

pianist Richie Beirach, bassist George Mraz and drummer Peter Donald]. Bands for me seem to have about three CDs in them. It just works out that way, and then it feels like it's time to shift. I have no idea where I would shift to after this."

Over a decade ago, Abercrombie implemented perhaps the biggest shift of his career thus far: playing exclusively with his thumb rather than a pick. He was riding on a train with Dave Holland when he heard pick-free player Kevin Eubanks on Holland's 1989 album *Extensions*. "I was really taken by the warmth of the tone," Abercrombie recalls. "Kevin was playing with a stereo sound, and using distortion, and I thought, 'Wow, this is kind of close to the sound I use.' But the thumb sounded warmer."

Gradually, Abercrombie made the transition. He has sacrificed some velocity and fluidity for increased body, and his electric sound, once distant, harder to follow, now has more texture and substance. But factors other than the thumb are involved: "I've cut down on using that heavy chorus, so on the last couple of CDs it doesn't have that wide, swimmy sound. It's getting more focused." And more significant from a jazz perspective, Abercrombie adds, "I think my time improved. I feel more connected to the rhythm of what I play. I'm able to be more melodic."

Listeners can assess the difference and get an overview of Abercrombie's musical travels on his new best-of ECM compilation, *rarum XIV*. This artist-chosen survey touches upon most of the essentials: *Timeless*, the 1978 solo-guitar masterpiece *Characters*, the duets with Ralph Towner, the quartet with Beirach, the Gateway trio ('70s original and '90s reunion), the Johnson-Erskine trio, the Wall-Nussbaum trio, Kenny Wheeler's quintet and even *Cat 'n' Mouse*. About the only thing not represented is Abercrombie's late '80s guitar-synthesizer work. "That kind of wore thin after a while," he says, although in his *rarum* liner notes he alludes fondly to *Animato*, a synth-based project with Vince Mendoza and Jon Christensen. He also regrets the omission of strong material from sessions led by Charles Lloyd, Enrico Rava, Jan Garbarek and the late Collin Walcott. But other pivotal Abercrombie performances

can be heard on the *rarum* editions of Jack DeJohnette and John Surman.

Listed on the inside sleeve of *rarum XIV* is Abercrombie's ECM sideman discography in its entirety. Clearly, he could have filled a second disc of highlights. His credits culminate in four of Charles Lloyd's recent recordings; they reach back to his very first ECM appearance, on Dave Liebman's 1974 gem *Lookout Farm*, which has never been reissued. On this and two other out-of-print Liebman recordings, *Sweet Hands* (A&M/Horizon) and *Drum Ode* (ECM), Abercrombie sets aesthetic parameters still apparent in his work today, from vivid acoustic landscapes to full-on overdrive. Another of Abercrombie's most fertile periods, documented on three extraordinary and currently unavailable quartet albums with Richie Beirach (*Abercrombie Quartet*, *Arcade* and *M*), remains undeservedly obscure.

Ruminating on his 30 years as an architect of the ECM sound, Abercrombie marvels, "I've known [producer] Manfred Eicher for that long. And I'm still recording for him. There aren't many who can say that." Two who can are Gateway's Holland and DeJohnette, not to mention Ralph Towner. Abercrombie becomes reflective and a touch nostalgic when talking about these illustrious colleagues of his. "I met them all when I first came to New York in 1970," he recalls. "I always felt close to them, and people like Liebman, Richie Beirach, Marc Copland. We wound up in lofts together; we kind of grew up together. It was a very experimental time. We played in different situations, shared a certain thing. And we've always managed to keep in contact. There's always this feeling when you see one of those guys that 'we go back.' We go back to those days. We remember when things were a certain way."

While he keeps his old friends close, Abercrombie is also keen to forge new relationships. Witness his work with 24-year-old alto saxophonist Loren Stillman in a trio called Jackalope. Bob Meyer, the band's drummer, had been holding informal home sessions with Abercrombie for some time. One day he decided to bring Stillman, his protégé, along. The three found themselves playing together without a bassist, and eventually they decided

to go public. "It's kind of like [Paul] Motian's band with Lovano and [Bill] Frisell, except the music is very different," Abercrombie says. In 2003 the Challenge label issued Jackalope's *Saltier Than Ever!*, where one finds stark, stripped-down readings of Abercrombie's "Open Land," "Convolution" and "On the Loose," along with six Stillman originals and the standard "Long Ago and Far Away" (from the Wall-Nussbaum trio book).

The soft-spoken Stillman, who recently joined Andy Milne's Dapp Theory, observes that Abercrombie "has a huge role to play. He has to fill it all out somehow. There's something nice about not having that bass there, having that harmonic freedom. We've really established a language together on the bandstand." But Jackalope is seldom able to convene, aside from the occasional set at CBGB's "Freestyle Jazz" series in New York. Abercrombie is eager to tour the trio, and he appears on four tracks from Stillman's latest quartet album, *Gin Bon* (Fresh Sound New Talent). "Loren is a good guy and very intelligent," Abercrombie remarks. "He listens so well, he doesn't just play over the band. He doesn't have any attitude. He's got his head screwed on in a good way. I think he's going to be very successful." Extrapolating from this, Abercrombie adds, "I'd like to meet some younger musicians, because they're going to give me another insight into things."

The fact is that Abercrombie might be reaching more young people than he thinks. Several years ago at the club Swim, on New York's Lower East Side, a DJ was heard spinning (not remixing, not sampling) the funk breakdown section of "Lungs," a Jan Hammer composition from *Timeless*. True, as the *Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* puts it, Abercrombie may have wrestled with an "image problem" over the years, being somewhat overshadowed by peers like Scofield, Frisell and Metheny. But his playing and writing continue to set him apart. Whether he's interpreting standards with pianist Andy LaVerne, waxing trio sides with Kenny Wheeler and Marc Copland or blaring out of a DJ's loudspeakers in a hip downtown club, there is no confusing Abercrombie with anyone else.

Timeless, indeed. JT