



DAVE HOLLAND: Bassist, Composer, Businessman

BONUS! Guide to Summer Jazz Programs

JazzTimes

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

PAT METHENY'S

Orchestrion

ONE MAN'S ROBOT BAND

BY DAVID R. ADLER

MINGUS
A Historic Profile
BY ROBERT PALMER

STYLE WARS
Has Jazz Become Fashion-Impaired?

FENDER'S Jazz Bass
TURNS 50

NAT HENTOFF ON
ANNIE ROSS
NEA Jazz Master



Tomasz Stanko
Francesco Cafiso
Cachao
Anthony Jackson
Mark Egan



Welcome to the MACHINE

Combining a yen for solo projects and a career-long immersion in music technology, Pat Metheny explores another frontier: "orchestrionics"

By David R. Adler
Photographs by Jimmy Katz

The scene is almost eerie: an abandoned red brick church in a Polish section of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, doors all apparently well shut. A bit of searching reveals an entrance with a buzzer, behind a rusted front gate. First buzz, nothing. Second buzz, and at this point you'd fully expect some wizened janitor to open the creaking door and glare. But no, it's Pat Metheny, all smiles, hair tucked under a backwards Yankees cap.

Inside, the entire carpeted ground floor is a makeshift concert stage—the rehearsal set of the *Orchestrion* tour, perhaps the most conceptually radical project Metheny has ever undertaken. The eye scans across a full ensemble's worth of instruments, but they are set to play automatically, powered by a complex system of electromagnetic (solenoid) and pneumatic switches. A robot band, crudely put.

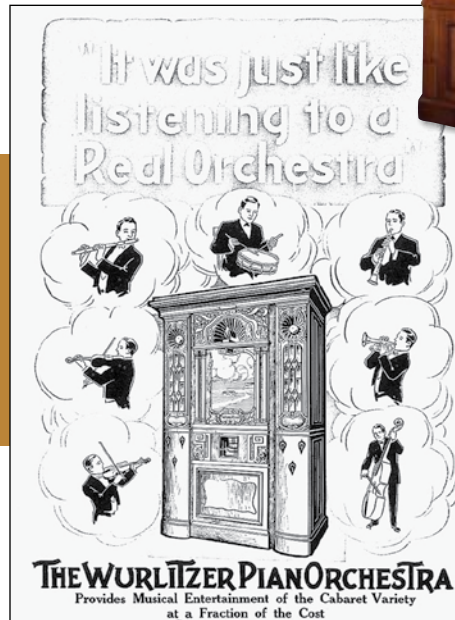
HIS ROBOT FRIENDS:
Metheny, with automated instruments, at his
Brooklyn rehearsal space, November 2009.



There are drums (Jack DeJohnette's old set) and percussion mounted at various heights and angles; an acoustic guitar and electric bass tacked up to a vertical board, with little felt hammers in place over each of the frets; mallets (Gary Burton's) suspended above every bar of the vibraphone and marimba, enabling all note combinations at all times; two Yamaha Disklavier pianos at opposite ends of the room; two elegant wood cabinets displaying rows of clear glass bottles, air-blown to sound something like an organ or mellow woodwinds; and an upright metallic instrument known as the GuitarBot, invented by Eric Singer of the League of Electronic Musical Urban

album, *Orchestrion* (Nonesuch), and that will carry over to the live setting. Using an advanced, idiosyncratic version of automated-instrument technology, Metheny is "recontextualizing the idea of what constitutes a solo performance by a single musician," as he writes in his liner notes. He's also raising provocative issues about jazz, musical culture and even society at large.

On this tour, Metheny will lean on his trusted road crew more than ever. But for now he is alone in this church, toiling not only to polish the music from the album but also to fill out the rest of the live show. We sit down at a work station near a large computer monitor,



ATTENTION!

Hotels
Cafes
Restaurants
Confectioneries
Dance Halls
Tea Parlors
Road Houses

If you want a misty haze, power money-makers, that works on all twelve cylinders, every day in the year—then read this circular. Get the facts on the greatest of all entertainment features—the Wurlitzer Pianorchestra, the Big Business Enticer that has been a cyclonic success from Maine to California. Investigate our proposition just as you would investigate anything else that might help you get more business.

CLASSIC CONTRAPTIONS: While Metheny's machinery operates in plain sight, orchestrions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, like the German "Rex" model (c. 1915) above and the Wurlitzer depicted in the ad (c. 1920) at left, were commonly housed inside of large, elegant cabinets.

a digital piano keyboard and a small dish-shaped space heater. It's Jan. 5. On the wall, a white-board calendar shows the date Jan. 20 highlighted in several colors. "Gear leaves for France,"

it says. The first question is obvious: How is the tour prep coming? "It's a mess!" Metheny declares. "We're completely fucked." He's still smiling. "In terms of degree of difficulty," he continues, "this is a 10 on every level, and that was part of the incentive for me."

Ironically, *Orchestrion* follows a relatively quiet 2009, during which Metheny and his wife welcomed their third child, Maya. "It's the first year since I was 14 or 15 that I was not on the road, so it was a very interesting time," he muses. For the teen prodigy turned mid-career jazz icon, it was a time to reflect, a time for family—and, wouldn't you know, a time to confront the mother of all projects. The tour began in Europe; it arrives back in New York at the Town Hall on May 21 and 22.

Pulling the music together artistically was the key challenge, but hardly the only one. "There's the issue of getting the instruments to work," Metheny explains, "but then they've

got to work every day for about 150 gigs." The fragile one-of-a-kind gear also needs to cross the ocean, bump around the U.S. throughout April and May, and depart again for eight June shows in South Korea and Japan. "Part of the thing is putting together a pretty significant spares kit for everything that could go wrong. Things you can swap out. But it's a lot of sleepless nights." And a lot of money too: "comparable to a full-blown Pat Metheny Group tour in expense," according to Metheny's longtime manager, David Shoemson.



At a show-and-tell for journalists during the mixing of *Orchestrion*, Metheny laid out the rationale that would appear in greater detail in his liner-note essay. Fascinated as a child with his grandfather's player piano, he was drawn into what he calls a "secluded corner of musical instrument lore," specifically the orchestrion, which succeeded the player piano as a simulation of live musical performance. A rococo ancestor of the jukebox, one could say. And, for practically a century, a dead end, an industry long abandoned, except by a small diehard group of mechanical musical instrument enthusiasts.

Enter Ken Caulkins, one of Metheny's commissioned builders, a kind of Californian Willy Wonka, whose YouTube channel ("kenquien") shows instruments sprawled around a room, even tacked to the ceiling upside-down, playing Russian melodies like "Zhivet Moya Otrada" and "Kalinka" in a slightly insane Slavic robot version of John Philip Sousa. As the camera pans around, you realize that this is probably the closest visual parallel to Metheny's *Orchestrion* that exists. Musically, of course, it couldn't be further from Metheny's aesthetic. Caulkins readily volunteers that before the project, he hadn't heard of Metheny.

The *Orchestrion* mixing session, at Legacy Recording Studios (now MSR Studios) in Manhattan, gave Metheny his turn to play Willy Wonka. First we gathered with him among the instruments in the main recording room. Joe Ferla, the engineer, fired up "Expansion," which would become track three on the album. No one could hear the instruments going direct to the board. But we could hear drums and percussion in driving rhythm as the grand piano knocked out the deftly plotted chords, like an invisible Lyle Mays. All by themselves, mallets struck the vibraphone and marimba with uncanny precision. The GuitarBot clicked and clacked like mad but nothing was audible. Themes developed, tempos changed on a dime and a riot of sound filled the space.

"REX" ORCHESTRION COURTESY OF THE MORRIS MUSEUM

In the control booth we heard the eight-and-a-half-minute tune again, this time fleshed out with bass, Metheny's burning guitar track and all else. The GuitarBot popped in and out of the mix and doubled the springy melodies with a strange whizzing sound, like a fretless guitar of alien design (which is essentially what it is). When the take ended, the glass bottles got stuck sounding their final chord. Stopping them was apparently a process, so Ferla just shut the control room door, grinning.

Robots or no robots, we'd just heard one of the most compelling pieces in Metheny's oeuvre, fresh from the womb. "There were many moments during the project when I was just completely lost in the music," Ferla said later, "and I didn't think at all about who was playing."

"Expansion" and "Orchestrion," the 16-minute lead-off title track, are the breakthroughs here—technically stringent yet admirably direct and inviting, a stirring leap forward in terms of detail and form. "Entry Point" and "Soul Search" are darker and moodier, beautifully recorded, drawn from a more identifiable well of Metheny-isms. "Soul Search" foregrounds the glass bottles to start and works up to a swing passage that Nate Chinen, in the *New York Times*, wasn't wrong to cite as awkward. Call it a calculated risk, a pushing of the ride cymbal to its limit ("It's all about the ride cymbal for me in almost any ensemble," Metheny remarks). "Spirit of the Air," the final track, is all midtempo groove and minor-key hooks, tapping into the Steve Reichian pulse that has influenced some of Metheny's previous work, most recently *The Way Up*.

Weighing his options, and after lots of trial and error, Metheny decided to let *Orchestrion* reflect "my general world of harmony and melody and rhythm, the stuff that I've worked on for years," as he puts it. "It's really a very clear illustration of what I hear. ... The simple/complex dichotomy is my specialty, so there you go—that became a sort of platform."

At the studio, he remarked briefly on the voice-leading approach of "Expansion" and the way the harmony is defined mainly by bass motion. Elaborating at the church, he grabs an unplugged electric guitar and plays small, ambiguous cluster voicings and intervals on the high strings, shifting them around stepwise while grabbing an array of bass notes on the bottom two strings with his thumb. The tonal centers are elusive, but a familiar lyricism begins to emerge. This, Metheny points out, is the language that leads back to *Bright Size Life* in 1976. "Expansion" is that idea but ... expanded," he says.

While composing, Metheny jumped between Digital Performer, Sibelius and Able-

One Man Bands: FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Take a little bit of ego and add a whole lotta gear and what do you get? Albums on which the artist attempts to play (or simulate) all the instruments. That whole thing about collaborating with other musicians and exchanging ideas is overrated anyway. **By Jeff Tamarkin**

MATT CATINGUB

Hi-Tech Big Band (Sea Breeze, 1984)



The son of jazz vocalist Mavis Rivers and a mostly self-taught multi-instrumentalist who joined Louie Bellson's big band at 17, Catingub was well qualified when, six years later, he created several tracks for this big-band album sans big band. Programming a Yamaha DX7 synth to emulate all of the orchestra's sounds save for saxophone, drums, piano and bass—all of which he plays himself—Catingub swings with ease and style.

KEITH JARRETT

Restoration Ruin (Vortex, 1968)



Good luck acing a blindfold test with this one in the mix! Imagine a Keith Jarrett album that includes only a smattering of piano, but does feature the 88s genius on guitar, harmonica, soprano sax, electric organ, flute, bass, drums, tambourine, percussion and strings. And vocals: really, really bad vocals. Then imagine it's not even a jazz album but some sort of faux folk-rock. The next time Jarrett thinks about berating his fans, he should probably apologize to them for this hot, steaming mess instead.

DAVE KING

Indelicate (Sunnyside, 2010)



King's rhythms, while always quirky and intelligent in the Bad Plus, are fractured, angular and wholly unpredictable here, and one suspects he took this route not because TBP doesn't allow him all the freedom he needs but simply because he itched to leap further into the unknown. The symbiosis between King's piano work (the only other instrument used) and percussion is airtight—whether his piano is following his drums' lead or vice versa is unclear—and it's equally difficult to ascertain whether the music is improvised or through-composed. But those mysteries are precisely the album's charm.

FRANK ZAPPA

Jazz From Hell (Barking Pumpkin, 1986)



Many Zappa loyalists were furious at the release of *Jazz From Hell*. Here was their idol virtually abandoning his guitar (with the exception of one track) and cheeky lyrics in favor of the Synclavier, a digital synthesizer and sampler on which Zappa composed and created the music here. Beneath its electronic veneer, however, Zappa's usual complex time shifts and dense interplay are accounted for, and those who had no trouble with his previous deviations like the classical *Lumpy Gravy* no doubt enjoyed it. Grammy voters also dug it, as the album won Best Rock Instrumental Performance in 1988.

JOE ZAWINUL

Dialects (Columbia, 1986)



Released post-Weather Report, Zawinul's DIY affair shifts seamlessly from crisp, danceable global grooves to airy abstraction, all of the synth and rhythm tracks laid down at a home studio. Zawinul also provides vocal colorings, but they're not all him—among the few outside contributors is Bobby McFerrin. What makes *Dialects* such a successful solo show is that it projects the warmth and wholeness of a full-band recording, never feeling like the vanity project many accused it of being. If Zawinul's goal was to prove he could function outside of a conventional group setting, he hit a bull's-eye here.

ton Live software. "I think I have three manuals like this memorized now," he laughs, holding up the phonebook-thick Digital Performer guide. "I've got seven or eight other tunes that I was hoping to build into the thing, but I kind of ran out of time, to tell you the truth. As it turned out, the pieces are connected thematically, and I went with it. The issue of form was going to be so fundamental, so I started paring away the things that weren't directly related to the basic building block, that ascending-third thing that comes and goes a lot."

After composing came recording and mixing, and more logistical hurdles. "One thing I had to deal with," says Ferla, "was the mechanical noise coming from the solenoids. There was a certain charm to hearing them, actually, but I kept the microphones away as much as possible. Also, a lot of the power supplies were common to a number of instruments, so they had to be set up near each other—I couldn't put one in a booth, for instance. So we had to lay instrument-by-instrument when we were actually recording. And for the pneumatics, there was an actual vacuum cleaner motor, so that was in an isolation booth. You turned this on and it was just like somebody vacuuming in the next room."

Solenoids are widely used in cars and appliances, LEMUR's Eric Singer explains, so bringing them into a musical setting is inherently tricky. "If someone's designing a part for a washing machine, they're certainly not thinking about making it quiet," Singer quips. In Metheny's rig, the vibraphone sustain pedal is controlled by a wheelchair motor. Elsewhere, the mechanism from a garage door opener is at work. This kind of repurposing and cobbling-together harks back to the orchestrion age, with its aesthetic of "Victorian futurism," as Chinen calls it. Robert Mackey, in the *New York Times Magazine*, recently wrote about the tech industry's search for "lo-fi solutions," a move toward the rough-and-ready summed up by *Wired* as "the good-enough revolution." Remote-controlled Predator drones, Mackey tells us, run on snowmobile engines.

In *The Pat Metheny Interviews* by Richard Niles, Metheny recalls taking up the guitar at "the moment when the world shifted from black and white into color TV, photographs, and everything else"—a comment that renders his tech obsession all the more logical. He sees a link between *Orchestrion* and previous solo projects, mainly his multitracked 1979 record *New Chautauqua* and his quasi-one-man effort *Secret Story* from 1992. But the clearest precedent is his work with the Synclavier from 1979 onward.

"It was huge news, five years before MIDI even existed. No one had seen a sequencer like that, no one had ever heard samples. It was as revolutionary as anything could be, and it was very expensive. Right now, GarageBand that comes with your Mac is probably 100 times more powerful. But at the time, that set of potentials caused me to write a bunch of music, including 'Are You Going With Me?,' which is a tune that I would not have written otherwise. It would not have come up."

What Metheny calls "the new orchestrion" is in some sense just another compositional device, and in fact part of an established and living tradition. Mechanical music expert Steve Ryder, via e-mail, observes that automated instruments can be traced back as far as ninth-century Baghdad, where the Banū Mūsā brothers diverted stream water over a paddle wheel to power a type of flute. Haydn composed pieces specifically designed for organ units small enough



to fit inside clocks. Metheny mentions Conlon Nancarrow and George Antheil, who used player pianos in ways not unrelated to orchestrionics. Today, LEMUR's other clients include "mutant-trumpeter" Ben Neill, violinists Todd Reynolds and Mari Kimura, composers Joshua Fried and Bora Yoon and human beatboxer Adam Matta. Why does LEMUR do what it does? Eric Singer turns the question around: "Why does anyone create a new kind of musical instrument? Why did someone create the violin? As a new form of musical expression."

Soon after *Orchestrion's* release, blogger David Hill wrote that the project is "possibly antithetical to jazz and improvised music, in that the project removes much of the human interplay you would normally hear in a jazz ensemble." The wariness is understandable, and deep-seated ambivalence toward technology is

not new. But Metheny isn't disavowing human bands. And as we'll see, he's using orchestrionics in freely improvised settings on the road. Hill also wondered: "Can these machines duplicate the rhythmic complexity of Metheny's music?" The machines can match and even exceed the complexity of Metheny's other work, as *Orchestrion* shows, although sheer difficulty was never the goal ("There'll be a pretty significant 300-page folio of the music that I hope people will play," Metheny notes). But keep in mind that different musical environments have their own aesthetic demands, and it's often a mistake to judge one by the standards of another. At any rate, Metheny's core impulse is hard to assail: seeking new possibilities and firing the imagination. Art, in a word.

Metheny likes to personalize the machines, referring to them at one point as "these guys." Like any prospective band member, each brings something unique to the table, and the

trick is to identify it. Metheny thinks aloud: "What are they good at? It's not like you can just give them some chord changes. You have to generate material for them to play." And the end result? "There's sort of a connection to the Pat Metheny Group, but there's also the percussion ensemble aspect of it. It's not like a big band, it's not like an orchestra—it's kind of like a rhythm-section band. More and more I'm seeing it as an instrument, as a thing. It's a conglomeration of people who don't even know each other, who have unwittingly conspired to make this thing."

"When we're working on [the robots]," says Eric Singer, "we're really looking at the trees, and to be able to step back and see the forest in action is completely different. To hear Pat rock out, for lack of a better term, on all our instruments is remarkable."



Orchestrion clocks in at under an hour. How to expand and fill a live concert was something that vexed Metheny until the end. "I still have 15 days to figure it out," he said back in January, and at the time of this writing, judging from the set lists popping up online, he solved the problem. "[The machines] are very good at a sort of free thing," he offered at the church, "and I think I'll be able to pull off a part of the program where each night I'll start with nothing, and I'll build a thing. As the tour goes on I'll probably get better at that. Certainly I'll play some solo guitar too. The other part of the sleepless nights is that not only have I never done a solo tour, I've never even done a solo concert."

Metheny also rummaged through earlier music and found good candidates for orchestrion reworking. The first set lists from France include material from *Offramp*, *New Chautauqua*, *We Live Here*, *Secret Story* and more, all involving different instrumentation and conceptions. One item, "Dream of the Return" from *Letter From Home*, he happened to arrange the very morning of our church chat. It was time to demonstrate the glass bottles, so Metheny reached for his nylon-string guitar, activated the PA system and muttered that he hadn't warmed up.

For the next seven minutes, the church was a concert hall, and "Dream of the Return" was transformed from an unabashed pop/rock torch song with synth-guitar and Pedro Aznar vocals, into the most intimate of acoustic guitar ballads. The bottles were like a choir, voicing chords in a slow and steady pattern as Metheny walked through the melody line. A piano joined, more instruments followed, a tambourine tapped time and got a little ahead of the beat, almost rushing (a mind of their own, these robots). Then, with a ritard and an ascending piano flourish, the machines took over and performed a written chamber interlude in a new tempo that lasted 90 seconds. Metheny stopped playing and just watched his work unfold. Mallets, bells, bottles, piano, cymbals and incidental percussion held forth in a spectacle of dissonance and extraordinary color, sounding like Metheny meets Boulez, or perhaps Gunther Schuller.

If the purpose of orchestrionics was to lead Metheny to "a new bunch of notes," then "Dream of the Return" has to rate as a slam-dunk, and it raises strong hopes for the live show. But behind every sonic marvel and unpredictable detour lies a temperament that has guided Metheny from the start. "To do that 'Yeah, but' thing, that quality is a major part of the interest of jazz," he says. "It's the form that not only welcomes that—to me the form kind of mandates that." JT

New from MCG JAZZ

Sheryl Bailey A NEW PROMISE A Tribute to Emily Remler

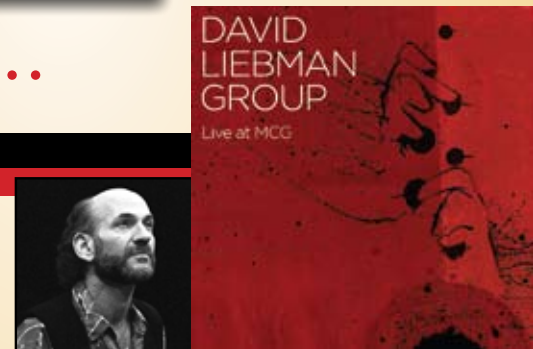
"... unique musical journey that sounds strong and consistent from beginning to end... be amazed by Bailey's masterful solos, melody renditions and ensemble soli as well as the way in which it all blends together with the wonderful big band arrangements." — Dan Adler, Jazz Improv Magazine



Also available...

David Liebman Group LIVE AT MCG

"The David Liebman Group combines a plethora of cross-stylistic, pan-cultural interests into a singular, transcendent and incendiary whole." — John Kelman, All About Jazz



Call 412.322.1773 x 140
www.mcgjazz.org