



THE ADVANCING GUITARIST

Pat Metheny and his **Group** make their **Nonesuch** debut with **The Way Up**. Consisting of one 68-minute composition, the album represents the full flowering of a new **PMG** lineup—and of its leader.

BY DAVID ADLER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ABBOTT



NE THING IS ENTIRELY CLEAR AFTER FIVE minutes in Pat Metheny's presence: His imposing artistic stature is no accident; it's the result of skill and untiring effort.

Metheny emerged as a teen prodigy in the mid-'70s, but the fame he has found since then can't be explained by precocious guitar chops alone. His acute business sense, and his awareness of how to make the music industry work for him, has proven equally important.

With his recent move from Warner Bros. to Nonesuch, one could say Metheny, at 50, has come full circle. Nonesuch's president, Bob Hurwitz, began as a protégé of ECM's Manfred Eicher and has played a major role in Metheny's career, dating all the way back to his 1976 debut, *Bright Size Life* (ECM). Metheny has long made a point of surrounding himself with people who "get it," and Hurwitz is one of them.

Hailed by the *New York Times Magazine* as a "post-industry record label," Nonesuch has defied prevailing trends not only by putting artists first and refusing to worship at the altar of the megahit, but also by insisting on a multigenre talent roster. Thus, Metheny now sits under the same roof as kindred spirits (and erstwhile collaborators) Bill Frisell and Steve Reich, but also Wilco and Emmylou Harris, to name just a few. It's hard to imagine a better home for *The Way Up*, the unclassifiable opus that is the 14th release by the Pat Metheny Group.

Being commercially boundary-free isn't new to Metheny, however. During the PMG's six-album run on the Geffen label, he recalls, "They didn't think of us as a jazz group. We were just a band, like Nirvana. In fact, it was Nirvana, Guns 'n' Roses, the Pat Metheny Group and Cher—we were the four big artists. Nobody ever talked about it like, 'Oh, jazz.'"

But that began to change during Metheny's stint with Warner Bros. "As soon as we were pulled into that jazz thing," he says, "it's like nobody had any expectations. What's great about Nonesuch is they're not thinking about jazz, they're thinking about music. There have been two previous occasions that I almost signed with Nonesuch, and in both cases I've regretted that I didn't."

IF NONESUCH CUTS AGAINST THE INDUSTRY GRAIN, SO DOES *The Way Up*, with its underlying message that long-form music isn't dead, that today's short attention spans and bite-size media blips are things to be resisted. "The new form now is ring-tones!" Metheny says, all but agape. "It went from a symphony to an album, then to singles, then edit your single, then four-bar loops, and now it's down to one or two seconds." *The Way Up*, he continues, "is a reaction to a world where things are getting shorter, dumber, less interesting, less detailed, more predictable."

Lyle Mays, Metheny's pianist and cowriter on every PMG project since the band's inception, describes the new music as "a protest in the purest sense of the word—it offers an alternative, not just a shrill polemic." Mays' cultural critique is more wry than shrill: "I'm hyper-aware of what I consider the artificial lack of time that's been imposed on life. You turn on the TV and within a few seconds you're going to hear, 'Well, that's all the time we have.' I don't know why time is in such short supply. Where did it go? Who's keeping all the time from us?"

The Way Up, by contrast, calls for a time investment. It's the antithesis of today's default medium: the quickie download. For the

listener's convenience the CD is divided into four parts, but Metheny and crew are emphatic about the piece's singularity. "We put some IDs on it, but it's not a symphony with four movements or anything corny like that," says Steve Rodby, the band's bassist and coproducer, a PMG member for 24 years ("half my life," he points out). "There's all this scatter and noise that keeps it from being some little prissy, powdered-wig, pirate-shirt kind of record," Rodby adds.

As new and ambitious as it is, *The Way Up* builds on creative foundations that were evident in the PMG's earliest work. "If you look at the whole history of the group," Metheny contends, "we've been totally interested in expansion in terms of form. We wanted to acknowledge that at the core it's a jazz quartet, but what else can it be? There were even a couple of records where we indicated that there would be these long arcs, but those were all suite-type records, loosely connected things. It seemed like now was the time to go all the way and attempt to use the CD itself as a platform."

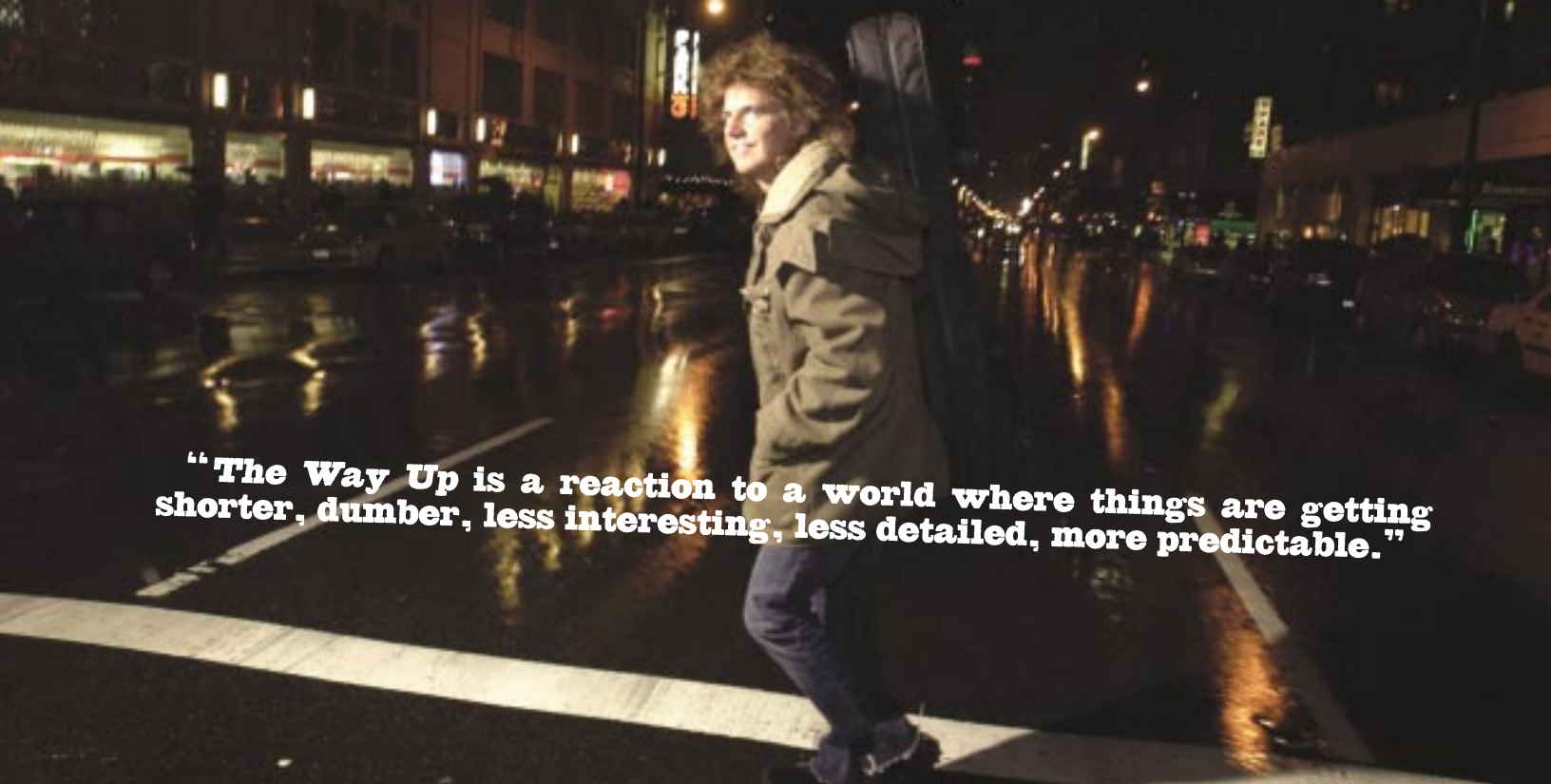
Before setting to work, Metheny and Mays held marathon discussions about the big picture. "I went back and listened to everything we had ever done," Mays says. "There was a sense of writing for the group and using everything we had in the group—extra 12-strings or what have you. I really loved that aspect of the early stuff. It wasn't very sophisticated at times, but we were young."

A decision was made to include plenty of guitar orchestration on *The Way Up*, regardless of the difficulties this might present for live performance. "The last time I really did that was *Offramp* [in 1982]," Metheny observes. "Most of the time I've been kind of like the singer, in the middle of it all." He still "sings," and burns, plenty on the new record, but also generates undulating slide-guitar backgrounds, stark wails with an EBow, fuzz-tone melody lines and other timbres not usually associated with the band.

TO PULL OFF A PROJECT THIS BIG, METHENY NEEDED A ROAD- tested lineup that had fully absorbed the PMG aesthetic. "There is a very particular dialect of rhythm section playing, texture, dynamics—all these fairly idiosyncratic things that have been a big part of our world for 20 years," he says. Mays and Rodby know that world from the inside, but the PMG's three younger members—Antonio Sanchez (drums), Cuong Vu (trumpet/vocals) and Gregoire Maret (harmonica)—had some catching up to do.

Probably the hardest job fell to Sanchez, who replaced the departing Paul Wertico for the *Speaking of Now* album and tour. "Pat said to me, 'Everybody can have a bad night, except you,'" Sanchez recounts. "With the PMG I have the responsibility to get this huge truck moving. It's massive. And the compositions have a specific dynamic curve that you have to be aware of. If you get there a little ahead of time then you have nowhere else to go. If you don't get there in time, then it doesn't create the effect it's supposed to." To say that the boss is pleased would be an understatement. "I joke that Antonio's the guy I thought would never be born," says Metheny, who first heard Sanchez playing with pianist Danilo Pérez. "He's the best of a whole bunch of great worlds in one package." Little wonder that Metheny also hired Sanchez for his trio tour with Christian McBride (a live album is in the pipeline).

To describe Cuong Vu simply as a trumpeter is to miss the electronic, sound-processing aspect of his playing, with his own bands as well as the PMG. A *Speaking of Now* initiate like Sanchez, he is



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the band’s first dedicated horn player, but with a twist. “Cuong rocks,” says Rodby. “Cuong is the total shit. It would be just like Pat to spot that guy. What he does is so trippy that half the time you don’t know it’s coming from a trumpet. During half the record he’s making these noises that are so artfully crafted, then he turns around and plays one of the best jazz trumpet solos I’ve ever heard in my life.” Rodby is referring to the Kenny Wheeler-esque flight that begins at 18:30 of “Part One” of *The Way Up*. “I wasn’t quite sure how Cuong would fit,” Metheny admits. “Particularly in the zone of playing on really difficult harmonic stuff. That has been a fairly significant project for him, to get his natural thing to include playing on changes in a more advanced way.”

Gregoire Maret has worked with name bandleaders before, including Steve Coleman, Cassandra Wilson and Charlie Hunter. Metheny was looking for a very particular sound to fill out the orchestration; Maret came through as the final piece of the puzzle. “I started research on jazz harmonica and we played with everybody,” Metheny recalls. “The last guy to come in was Gregoire. It wasn’t really harmonica that knocked me out; it was Gregoire. Very much like Cuong and Antonio, he’s a solid representative of what might happen. He’s got the imagination and restlessness that I like.”

It’s worth noting that Sanchez, Vu and Maret are all vital members of the local New York jazz scene—but entirely different facets of that scene. Somehow it makes sense that in the crucible of the PMG, they’d arrive at a common language. “It has less to do with their place in this stratified portrait of jazz,” Metheny clarifies, “and much more about how their individuality presents itself in the context of their sound. That is such a clear marker for me. I think about all my favorite musicians, they all have that. You just say their name and you get a sound. It’s a very elusive, rare quality.”

IN THE LINER NOTES TO HIS ALBUM *SO LONG 2ND STREET (ACT)*, guitarist-singer Joel Harrison writes, “The terms ‘eclectic’ or ‘genre-bending’ are increasingly meaningless.” In other words, there is a

growing acceptance of jazz as eclectic by definition. Metheny helped make it so. Dave Douglas is often extolled for his nine-dimensionality, but Metheny’s example has made careers like Douglas’ easier to imagine. Avant-gardist, stone bebopper, guitar-synth pioneer, acoustic stylist, producer, film composer, business owner, technology consultant, Ornette Coleman disciple and collaborator, writer of everything from the densest to the most accessible music: Metheny is all these things, and can’t be defined by any of them. He is a jazz master of the highest echelon, but there’s a case to be made for him as a giant of modern music, period. There aren’t a great many humans walking around with 16 Grammys in nine categories. And one would be hard-pressed to argue that Metheny has achieved this by compromising his art.

From his very first ECM recordings with Gary Burton, Metheny amazed even his mentors with his natural talent and already identifiable tone. Mick Goodrick, the Boston guitar guru (and fellow Burton band member), dedicated his landmark pedagogical text *The Advancing Guitarist* “...to Pat, partially because he made it possible, but mostly because he never needed it.” In 1979 Metheny told Fred Bourque of *Down Beat*, “I’m not drawn to the athletic approach to the music,” but in the mid-’80s his guitar technique grew to athletic proportions (the four-bar solo break in “Third Wind” remains a stirring example). Still, Metheny tends not to showboat, and has devoted equal time to pianistic reveries of the “Never Too Far Away” sort. His single-note, nylon-string ballad approach (“Farmer’s Trust,” “If I Could” and onward) has been aped so frequently as to become a commonplace in our musical culture.

Metheny took the opportunity, with his ECM *rarum* compilation, to highlight another unique aspect of his work. He described the 1978 track “New Chautauqua” as “the first time that I overtly tried to investigate the zone where I, like most other fledgling guitarists, began—rhythmic strumming.” It was one of many cases of Metheny’s expansive jazz sensibility and small-town Missouri roots meeting up like tributaries. The strumming recurred on pieces like

"It's for You" and the arrangement of "Summertime" heard on Metheny's 1999 duo outing with Jim Hall. But it found its highest expression thus far in the breathtaking "Song for the Boys," from the *One Quiet Night* album. Metheny concluded that disc with "Last Train Home," transforming one of his poppiest songs into an incisive, darkly hued meditation. It's as good an example of his aesthetic refinement and top-tier musicianship as there is, and it helped earn him, of all things, a 2003

Grammy for best New Age album. I'm sure the Recording Academy meant well. But there's no mistaking these harmonically stunning, richly contrapuntal musings for aural wallpaper.

To fully grasp Metheny's individuality, not to mention his technical progress, one can do worse than study Alejandro Moro's transcriptions of *Question & Answer*, *Bright Size Life* and *Rejoicing*, all published by Hal Leonard. "As I wrote *Q&A* first and then *Bright Size Life*, I saw Pat's evolution in

reverse," Moro writes in an e-mail from Buenos Aires. He is currently under contract to transcribe *Trio 99>00* and *Trio>Live*. Metheny, who checks Moro's work thoroughly, already envisions version 2.0 of the *Pat Metheny Songbook*, a mammoth lead-sheet collection released in 2000, the end result of a 13-year editorial collaboration between Hal Leonard and Metheny himself. In addition, there is another transcriptionist at work on *One Quiet Night*. As maps of Metheny's guitaristic and compositional worlds, these tomes are invaluable.

APART FROM THE SOLO, DUO AND TRIO efforts, all-star outings and sideman appearances that bejewel Metheny's discography, it is the Pat Metheny Group that continues to serve as his main vehicle and creative outlet. A number of seasoned jazz lovers have told me that they keep the PMG at arm's length, preferring Metheny's straightahead work. The sunny, cathartic, globalist sound of the PMG has been described as "neofusion," "smooth fusion," "folk-jazz," "light rock" and many other things. It's a sound that's been emulated and watered down by lesser artists, so some listeners underestimate the PMG's formal rigor, harmonic depth and sonic innovation. Certainly, the PMG isn't afraid of a little bombast, even a little sentimentality. But after years of filling big halls and playing to what is probably jazz's largest fan base, the band's creative capacity has done nothing but expand; its artistic seriousness has yet to falter. And its vaulting lyricism—what Antonio Sanchez describes as "melody after melody after melody"—is surely a key to its success.

"Pat set out at a funny time," says Steve Rodby, "when he felt there was a way not only to make vital new music, but new music that could be 'popular.' His ability to reinvent that time and time again is pretty astonishing. Then you get Lyle and Pat together and it's all over. Trust me, to work with those two guys is the oddest experience, because they're so gifted it's just sick."

Mays looks at the PMG's triumphs as the fruit of diligence and even impracticality—such as Metheny's early decision to purchase and cart around a Steinway grand piano. "We were putting money into sound and lights when there really wasn't the money for it," Mays says. "It's a gamble. If people will support that kind of risk-taking and dedication, I'm grateful."

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At press time, the 800-pound gorilla for the PMG was how to make *The Way Up* work live. "I'm terrified," Metheny tells me, only half-joking. The piece is intrinsically difficult, and its length makes it all the more so, but the biggest hurdle will be to approximate the album's layered orchestration and detail. "If we were really going to play everything we'd have to have 50 people onstage," Rodby offers. "What we do live is a poetic evocation or a stage version of the movie, and the record is the movie. It's like an improvisatory play off a movie text." For Mays, the studio-to-stage process, despite its logjams, can yield unforeseen creative dividends. "Part of it is a logistics problem," he says, "but it often leads to things we might not have gotten to otherwise. The solutions to these problems are really interesting to me, and in a broader sense that's a way of describing the whole game."

The material they'll be grappling with is atypical in some respects. There is relatively little wordless vocalizing, one of the PMG's giveaway sounds for 20-odd years. There are also fewer synth pads and washes. The blend of guitar, trumpet and harmonica is new and refreshing. "Opening," with its darting lines and persistent rhythmic drive, serves as a sort of overture. "Part One" begins with a stately main theme and conveys an enormous amount of information over the course of 26-plus minutes. The harmonic rhythm of one fast swing section (nine minutes in) is in fact a transcription of a kick-drum pattern played by Sanchez on an earlier scratch recording of the piece. Around the 11-minute mark one hears a series of breakneck unison lines, and at 12 minutes someone answers a five-note figure with a groaned five-note response—precisely the sort of thing one would miss on the first listen, if not the fifth. At 22:22 Metheny begins soloing over radiant slide-guitar harmonies, in one of the most beautiful passages of his recorded oeuvre.

"Part Two" and "Part Three" continue to build motivically on previous themes, but they also stress a "pulsing" concept that is central to the piece and inspired directly by the music of Steve Reich. "Somewhere around 1967, the world shifted rhythmically, to like a duple feel," Metheny says with a devious grin. He credits Reich for responding to the shift more perceptively than most. "I wanted to really lock into this

pulse," he continues, tapping a duple rhythm. "So we made our own little toy instrument ensemble—I played toy guitar, Lyle and Antonio played little xylophones, Cuong played a slide whistle and Steve [Rodby] played a violin and we went out on the streets and in the subways with an old microphone. People were giving us money and stuff. And we had a list of all the notes and all the tempos and all the intervals for everything throughout the record, so we could have this pulse that

would go all the way from the beginning to the end. It's sort of there; it shifts around depending upon what else is going on." Mays remembers the scene this way: "The funniest thing was the look of expectation from people on the street as we sat down, got organized and started to play just one note. There was this look of disappointment or even sympathy—'Well, maybe they're trying as hard as they can.' It was a bizarre social exchange. We sort of dashed expectations very quickly."



Paul Motian

Bill Frisell

Joe Lovano

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- Steve Fletterman, *The New Yorker*



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In other words, precisely the opposite of the PMG's usual impact on an audience.

The band is now winding through 32 cities in the U.S. and Canada and will wrap up at New York's Beacon Theatre on April 1 and 2. Then they're off to farther shores. Asked whether he tires of touring, Metheny says, "My metabolism is so geared to it. But there is a major change in my life, which is that I have two little kids, Nicolas and Jeff [ages six and four]. That has altered my feeling about touring. But playing gigs for me has always been kind of the goal. I know our careers are so often judged by the records we make, yet for me that's never felt completely right. Also, the road is an incredible opportunity to see something most people don't get to see—yes, people come to see us, but we get to see them. You see a little segment of the world community. It's a fantastic thing to witness. You get to measure the temperature of the world culture."

Good things are in store on the studio front as well. Nonesuch plans to reissue all of Metheny's post-ECM catalog, beginning with a remixed, remastered, bonus-tracked *Song X* to coincide with Ornette Coleman's 75th year. Linda Manzer recently supplied Metheny with a nylon-string baritone guitar, "and there's a record in that waiting to be made," he says. As for *The Way Up*, it might be a hard act to follow, but Metheny and his team have made one thing perfectly clear at every step: They're still climbing. **JT**

Listening Pleasures

E.S.T., *Strange Place for Snow* (Columbia)

Jonatha Brooke, *Back in the Circus* (Bad Dog)

John Adams, *On the Transmigration of Souls* (Nonesuch): "Incredibly difficult to listen to, but unbelievably advanced."

Keith Jarrett, *Up for It* (ECM): "As much as the word *swing* gets thrown around, this is a great modern example of what that word means."

Brian Blade Fellowship, self-titled and *Perceptual* (Blue Note): "These were significant, major records, and I was very disheartened that they weren't perceived as such."

Mike Moreno (guitarist): "A really talented guy who impressed me beyond the notes, for his general feeling, what he's going for."

Alex Sipiagin (trumpeter): "An incredibly underrated cat."

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