



Mark Stefani - Jazz Improv Interview

What is the premise for Vision Music and what prompted you to create it?

The name of the company dates back to the late eighties, and represents my career as a full-time music instructor. The website itself was launched in the late Summer of 1997, when one of my jazz students suggested that I would be a perfect fit for the internet, given my background in both the education and literary fields. Basically, I built the site just for fun and as a means of sharing knowledge with others, but then the artistic inspiration and obsession took over.

Tell us about the source of ideas for content for the articles and music on the site?

Well, the source of ideas would take a long time to list, but both the articles and the musical content reflect more than 35 years of transcribing my mentors, arranging timeless standards, and observing the study efforts of aspiring musicians. Writing was my first love. I was a journalism major throughout school and a relatively late starter in music, at 18-years-old. I've always had a passion for communication, much like my late parents, who were both jazz musicians. Vision Music is dedicated to their memory.

What kind of effort has it taken for you to build it up?

In retrospect, it's taken a massive amount of work to develop the site beyond the original, 10 to 12 page affair. I really can't think of any other way of describing the

effort, because I also had to learn web design on the fly as part of the process. Most fans assume that I have a staff, including a graphic designer and a webmaster, but that's not the case. You should see the countless emails I've received, applauding the "team" at Vision Music. The site's now well over 900 pages deep, and sometimes I wonder how I ever found the time and energy to build it, but it's been well worth it.

Please discuss the Jam Central Station part of the Vision Music website and how it works.

The JCS page is undoubtedly the most popular part of the site, entertaining over two thousand improvisers each day. Players, regardless of their instrument, love to jam, even if they're too busy to hit the practice shed. I'm no exception, and for as long as I can remember I've used some kind of backing tracks as part of my lessons. So it was only logical that I could potentially replicate that with an online, virtual jam session. The format is piano trio, with the ability to toggle off keys or bass. Players are able to see a nice rhythm chart while the music plays, and JCS includes resource links for those in need of basic scale or chord references. Many fans download the tracks and make custom jam CDs. I did all of the arranging and sequencing for Jam Central Station, which has been the number one improvising page on the web for years. I'm very proud of this innovation, because it represents having fun while learning, which is the bottom line in music for me. JCS is all of that, and the most compelling reason to return to the site on a regular basis. Currently there are almost 200 jazz, blues, latin, and pop tracks available, with no end in sight.

How has it achieved or fallen short of fulfilling the vision you had in mind? And, where do you want to take it in the future?

As an educator and artist, I'm always looking ahead, but I really have to pinch myself when I can find the time to reflect on the events of the past eight years. It's been nothing short of a dream come true for me. The artistic exposure has given me the opportunity and privilege to meet many of my mentors and gain their respect, as well as fulfilling a goal of writing for major publications, like Just Jazz Guitar and Jazz Improv Magazine. Needless to say, with over five million site visitors since inception, there are players all over the world who consider me their coach. It's a great feeling to realize that my hard work and inspiration is appreciated by so many. And as far as my private teaching practice is concerned, eight years ago almost all of my students were local residents. Today the vast majority study with me through the Lessons by Mail interactive correspondence program, which extends throughout the states and in many foreign countries. It's been a major turning point in my educational career.

A few years after the website launched, I began inviting fellow players and teachers to share their knowledge with students at our "Teacher Feature" guest faculty page. Jazz guitarist Robert Conti was one of the first to team up with me, along with the now late Hank Garland and his good friend, George Benson. Other artists include Jimmy Bruno, Henry Johnson, Wolf Marshall, Steve Laury, Joe Diorio, Chris Standring, Ulf Wakenius, Joe Giglio, and even such fingerstyle and classical guitar legends as Liona Boyd, David Tanenbaum, and Muriel Anderson. One of my future goals, among many others, is to expand the faculty with non-guitarists and continually strive to

make Vision Music an educational site with universal appeal to all players.

You have cited among your influences on guitar: George Benson, Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell. Could you discuss the specific impact each has had on your musical identity and life perspective?

My lifelong affinity for the blues made me a logical disciple of the Wes Montgomery lineage. I consider Wes to be the father of jazz guitar, and it was his innovative use of octaves, chord solos, and call and response phrasing that's had a lasting impact on both my playing and composing. The guitar has a thin sound in the jazz genre, and while so many guitarists use speed to achieve dynamics in a solo, Montgomery was the epitome of playing less yet saying more, using the percussive strength of the guitar to great effect.

While Wes' impact on me was more of a conceptual nature, I've been a longtime fan of Kenny, and have transcribed numerous Burrell guitar solos over the years. I've always loved his big, fat tone and his deep respect for the blues. Of course, there's no question that George Benson has been my main jazz guitar influence. I really can't even begin to describe how much I've learned from years and years of studying his work. Benson's phrasing and rhythmic imagination are just off the map, and those are areas sorely lacking in so many jazz guitarists that I hear. Frankly, I don't know where my playing would be without the knowledge I've absorbed from George.

You have also mentioned non-guitar players as being influential for you. How have jazz pianist Oscar Peterson, saxophonists Tom Scott, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane played roles in your music?

First of all, my dad, Roy Stefani, was a superb jazz trombonist, so I grew up in a non-guitar environment. I was exposed to a lot of Basie, Miles, Oscar, and others when I was young. As a matter of fact, the only jazz guitarist I knew of was Freddie Green, because Pop would play Basie tracks for me and point him out, although I could barely hear him behind all those horns. However, I really wasn't a big jazz fan until I heard Oscar Peterson play "Misty" and make it sound like "Stormy Monday." Then a light bulb went off and I realized the kind of jazz that I wanted to play.

I've never seen myself as a guitarist per se, but as a musician who happens to play the guitar. If I have any trade secrets in sounding unique, it's simply the fact that I've spent so many years learning from great pianists, saxophonists, trumpet players, and bassists, then adapting that knowledge to the guitar. In that sense, the artists you mentioned have had as much an impact on me as any guitarist I can name. Being a jazz instructor, it amazes me how many aspiring players only listen to those who play their instrument, yet they want to sound different. The solution is obvious.

Your album An Evening To Remember with saxophonist Dennis Marcellino released in 1996, generated ample airplay and sold over 40,000 copies. Those are exceptionally successful sales figures for a jazz album. Tell us about the kinds of marketing, promotion and sales efforts you undertook to generate that success?

ETR, re-released as "Tenderly" several years ago, was originally produced by Sugo Music in Half Moon Bay, CA. They are an aggressive indy label, and their founder, Stevan Pasero, had tremendous faith in us and a vision of marketing a jazz duo CD with timeless classics. They attached a publicist to the recording upon release, which resulted in national jazz radio exposure and stellar reviews, but it was Sugo's "in house" marketing efforts that really pushed those first-year sales figures.

Mark Twain said that he never let his schooling get in the way of his education? What were the benefits and or challenges about your formal education experience that supported, impeded or challenged your development-musically, spiritually, emotionally, etc. or otherwise?

What I can reveal is that 99% of what I know was not learned in the classroom, so I can truly relate to Twain's statement, especially with regards to jazz. I can't tell you how many students I've met with a formal education, even a degree, who are lost, frustrated souls when it comes to real-world music and the core jazz language that is so critical for success. While I firmly believe that an artist should leave no stone unturned in their quest to evolve, many aspiring players fail to realize that the great legends learned by imitating and assimilating the knowledge of their mentors, and that transcribing is the ultimate means of developing your ear and your mind in a highly personal manner, one often not accomplished in a learning institution. Many of the greatest musicians in jazz lacked formal training, but knew how to speak the language very well. It's all about understanding the path itself.

Tell us about your activities and the kind of environment Portland, Oregon provides for your music and the creative musical artist in general.

Due to the development of Vision Music, plus being a full-time teacher, composer, and writer with endless deadlines, I have very little time nowadays to perform. However, Portland is a superb area for musicians when it comes to traditional jazz and blues music. I have the privilege of coaching some of the top players in the area, so despite my crazy schedule, I am well tuned in to the local scene.

Can you cite some key understandings have you gained about contracts, business human nature based on your experiences with the organization and as a leader and business operator?

Although my colleagues respect whatever business acumen I've gained from years of personal experience, I have to confess that I've learned everything by the seat of my pants and observing others. It's not unlike the way I've acquired musical knowledge. I always say that transcribing transcends music, and that the best way to learn is through trial and error, and by witnessing the successes and failures of others. Any business understandings I've gained have been through the same method.

One of the ways artists in jazz have in large part, developed their own styles and reputations, has been to apprentice-to play in the groups lead by high-profile, established jazz artists for extended periods of time. Playing in such situations

over extended period of time, doing tours and so forth, has provided first hand experience for such emerging jazz artists, an assimilation of knowledge based on an oral tradition, and doors have opened for them as a result of the endorsement of the leader or leaders for whom they apprenticed. You have either not had that opportunity or chosen to create your own situations or destiny. Could you comment on how this reality has helped or hindered your music, creativity, opportunity? Could you talk about the value of the aforementioned apprenticeship system and how available it still is, or will be, versus taking an independent approach of learning, developing, creating one's own style, and business opportunities.

My situation and goals are considerably different than those of a jazz player primarily consumed with performing, touring, and recording. Despite that reality, I've managed to become a very good improviser and composer by understanding what I needed to know, and how to go about acquiring that knowledge. I also attribute my skill level to the fact that I've chosen my influences very wisely, and have spent many years religiously transcribing their work. So, while there's nothing like the experience of actually being the guitarist on stage with someone like an Oscar Peterson, it doesn't automatically mean that you will learn what I've learned, because you still have to transcribe and study hard for that to happen. If I've proven anything as an evolving player, it's that you don't need to rely on the good fortune of having the opportunity to play with great musicians in order to create your own destiny.

Discuss the temptation to focus on or be drawn to technique over the music itself that some artists experience. How have you (or had you initially, earlier in your career) thought or worked to balance the two?

Technique is all about achieving a balance between what you want to say as a player, and possessing the physical skill to communicate it. Musicians, most notably guitarists, often get over-consumed with chops and speed, and almost always at the expense of the message itself. Dialogue is everything in a music performance, just as it is when speaking. For instance, if you talk too fast, the listener can't digest what you're saying. Even if there's powerful content involved, it becomes diluted, so the mission is a failure. I feel blessed that my father was a trombone player, because you have to take a breath at least occasionally on a horn, unlike the guitar or piano. That leads directly to superior phrasing and dialogue. Pop was always chastising guitar players, due to their penchant for speed over substance, and I am constantly on the soap box preaching to my students and echoing those sentiments.

You often compose songs for musicians whose music you like, or with whom you develop a relationship? Could you talk about the source of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and in general musical ideas for those kinds of compositions?

Much like my father, I began composing late in my career, at 36 years of age. I never thought that I had it in me to write original music, but I had spent the previous 18 years playing and arranging countless standards in all genres, plus transcribing the improvised solos of numerous jazz and blues musicians. Little did I know at the time that there was a creative purpose in developing what had become an enormous

stockpile of classic melodies, progressions, licks, solos, and bass lines. I often say that it was like making deposit after deposit in a musical bank account, and when the inspiration finally descended and I started making withdrawals, the result was simply overwhelming. I've now composed hundreds of originals in a wide variety of styles.

Yes, one of my well-known trademarks is writing tributes to so many mentors, family, friends, and students. It's my way of paying respect and showing the gratitude for the inspiration that they've given me. There's nothing that can match the feeling of dedicating a song, one that comes from the heart, to someone special. It's a gift that keeps on giving, because I think of them every single time I play it, and vice versa.

Could you share some of the ideas about composition that have impacted your improvisation? And how your improvisation corresponds or doesn't to compositions you might play?

For me, composing and transcribing are essential parts of improvising. A solo is really a matter of spontaneously arranging what you hear, and the harmonic strength you achieve is directly tied into what you've learned from observing great tunes and players. I usually start with a chord progression that appeals to me. Then I sing or hum a melody without resorting to my mind or my instrument. It's only after the fact that I will transcribe and analyze what I improvised, which keeps the ear in the foreground and the brain and technique where they belong, in the background. From either the composer or listener's perspective, all that ever matters in the long run is how a song sounds. Everything else is secondary.

How does your activity as an educator and clinician challenge, support or otherwise impact your artistry and how have these activities affected your awareness or perspective about life?

I am a passionate teacher who believes that you grow as an artist by sharing what you know, a trait that I inherited from my parents. It's never been about money for me, although I am grateful to have found a way to support my family as a musician. I firmly believe in the spiritual "give and you shall receive" philosophy, so the effect that teaching has had on both my art and my life has been huge.

What kinds of advice, suggestions or encouragement from influential artists have you received that made a significant impact on you?

This gets back to what I said earlier about transcribing transcending music, because what you glean from those who influence you can go far beyond the music itself. I've always had a curious mind, and a fascination for how someone succeeds in getting from point A to point B. In other words, what did George Benson or Oscar Peterson do to acquire their knowledge? So, whenever I have the chance, I try to talk to those I respect or read interviews with them, besides studying their music, because how they've learned has just as much a significant impact on me than anything else.

What pitfalls must we be vigilant about encountering or succumbing to in our lives as we pursue a life, career, and creativity in music?

People frequently tell me how lucky I am to be doing something that I love to do, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Despite the obvious challenge in making a living as an artist, music or otherwise, I realized long ago that the only true security in life comes from within, and from following your heart. Not doing so is the pitfall I always try to avoid, because material wealth means nothing, and life is too short to waste.

How do you stay balanced?

Toughest question so far. Unlike some artists, I am not obsessed with my vocation to the point where I don't find time for my family and for doing other things. That's very important to me, and in the long run I believe it contributes to my life experience and artistry. I feel fortunate that Janice, my wife of 33 years, is also a fine guitarist and teacher, because many of my colleagues don't have that kind of understanding and support on the home front. Balance in life is an ongoing challenge for everyone.

If there is one for you, what is the connection between music and spirituality?

Oh, there's a definite connection for me, because I believe that musicians, whether they perform, teach, or compose, are spiritual healers who fill a very special need in our society. I feel extremely honored and grateful to be a part of that process, and whatever joy I can bring to others makes makes everything I do worthwhile.