



## **Ulf Wakenius - Just Jazz Guitar - August '02**

**by Mark Stefani**

For those readers who may be unaware, Swedish-born Ulf Wakenius has held the prestigious role of jazz guitarist in the Oscar Peterson Quartet for the past four years, extending one of the most noble guitar traditions originally defined by Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, and the late Joe Pass. I recently had the great pleasure of getting to know Ulf, the man who was discovered by jazz bassist Ray Brown, himself a veteran of 17 years with Mr. Peterson. "May you reign forever!" is what Oscar has to say about this talented musician, while legendary jazz guitarist Hank Garland refers to him as a "genius."

Needless to say, I feel honored and privileged to conduct this very special interview for Just Jazz Guitar Magazine.

**M.S.** Ulf, for starters, perhaps can you give the readers some basic background about yourself. What age did you begin playing, and what first attracted you to the guitar?

**U.W.** I started to play when I was 11 years old, on my mother's guitar. She was into Swedish folk music and she knew a lot of Broadway melodies from the American songbook. The neighborhood where I was growing up, outside Gothenburg, Sweden, had a lot of guitar players.

**M.S.** What style of music were they into playing?

**U.W.** At that time most of the guys were into the blues. There were only two choices by the time you turned fifteen. Either you bought an autocycle or you got yourself a Gibson guitar. You know what choice I made (laughs). It was a very creative atmosphere. We got together, a lot of guitar players, and had serious blues jams. Once I picked up the guitar I never looked back.

**M.S.** Was blues and jazz music always your first love?

**U.W.** I was attracted to the virtuoso blues guitarists: Johnny Winter, Eric Clapton, and I loved B.B. King for his tone and feeling. That music had a magic that I also found in jazz a little later. What I basically have been doing all of my musical life is trying to keep that excitement and magic you felt when you started up. The late great saxophone player Joe Henderson, whom I had the pleasure to play with, said: "Never forget the first notes you played and how that felt." I think he was referring to the feeling I was talking about.

**M.S.** From a traditional jazz guitar point of view, what player or players would you cite as major influences?

**U.W.** I actually have a very long list of influences that goes way back, historically starting with Carl Kress and Tony Mottola. I had a guitar duo called "Guitars Unlimited" that used to play their duet arrangements. I think they were amazing. A lot of cats don't know how great they were. Django Reinhardt, of course, was a big early influence. A true genius and a true boheme. I love the story when he was going to make his U.S. debut with the Duke Ellington Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. Django was walking in Manhattan towards Carnegie, when he met an old friend, the French middle weight champion in boxing. He asked Django to join him and play some pool. Django said "of course," and it ended up that he missed the first set with Duke.

**M.S.** That's one I haven't heard. Django was obviously an unusual character.

**U.W.** I don't know if it is a totally correct story, but it is a good one. How he could do the things he did with the left hand injured, doing those incredible runs with only two fingers, is a mystery. Talking about guitarists way back, I actually ran in to Eddie Durham at a jazz festival some years back, the guitarist some say was first with electrified guitar in jazz.

**M.S.** What other well-known players have affected your work?

**U.W.** Other big influences has been George Benson and Grant Green, both on my top ten list of all time favorites. I like them both for their impeccable groove. George had very early, mind-blowing chops. Another big contribution he has made is to popularize bebop jazz guitar by bringing it in to pop and soul. Talking about George Benson leads you automatically to Hank Garland, a huge inspiration for me. Fantastic chops, swing and a beautiful sound. Hank sent me "The Hank Garland Jazz Collection," which I consider the "Holy Grail" of jazz guitar. He would have been number one in my opinion, if it weren't for the car accident.

**M.S.** That was very unfortunate, but at least his influence has lived on, in Benson, yourself, and so many other jazz guitarists. Any thoughts about Jim Hall?

**U.W.** Jim Hall, the "poet" of jazz guitar. I had the pleasure to play a couple of concerts with Jim. He sounds very fresh and up to date. One of my favorite records with Jim is "To Sweden With Love" with Art Farmer. They play Swedish folk songs and Jim's guitar playing is fantastic.

**M.S.** I also hear some Wes Montgomery influence in your work.

**U.W.** Wes, what can you say? The man who had it all. A natural genius. He never played a bad note. Every note he played was a statement carved in stone. Wes had humor. They asked him in an interview if he practiced a lot. He answered, "I open my guitar case once in a while and throw in a piece of meat." (laughs) Another guy I shouldn't forget is Kenny Burrell. He has a simplicity and soulfulness in his playing that gets right into your heart. He also has a very delicate chord concept. I love his bluesy playing. He is one of the giants. Finally, the three guitarists who I'm following with Oscar: Herb Ellis I consider the best rhythm player of all time, along with Freddie Green. The work he did with Oscar belongs with the finest jazz guitar playing ever. I'm also a great fan of the stuff he did with Joe Pass, like "Two for the Road." Barney Kessel, the guitarist who maybe has the most well-balanced chord concept in the jazz guitar world. I think Barney's choice of voicings is simply beautiful. It's like cooking a dinner. Too much or too little spice ruins the dinner. Barney just mixed it perfectly. A jazz guitar royalty in my book. And Joe Pass, my main cat. Joe did everything. He played single string like a god. His solo guitar was out of this world. He mastered the blues totally. I love to listen to everything from the early "Catch Me," "For Django," "Joy Spring" albums, to all the "Virtuoso" albums and everything with Oscar. It feels almost unreal that I have succeeded him with Oscar.

**M.S.** Any thoughts about more contemporary guitarists in the jazz field?

**U.W.** Sure. First I will mention Pat Martino, who has made a fantastic comeback. It is very touching how he overcame his illness. Today he sounds as great as ever. I caught him live at the Iridium jazz club in New York a couple years ago, and he totally floored me with his playing. I think his latest CD "Live at Yoshi's" is a triumph for him.

**M.S.** Agreed. Out of curiosity, have you ever met Martin Taylor?

**U.W.** Martin Taylor is an amazing player and a gentleman. Martin has invited me to do a duet CD with him. I'm really looking forward to that.

**M.S.** So would many fans of jazz guitar, myself included. How about your favorite beboppers?

**UW:** I have to tip my hat to guys like Jimmy Bruno, Bruce Forman, Robert Conti, Russell Malone, Jack Wilkins and Mark Elf, for keeping the bebop flame. Strong cats who are following an inner conviction rather than any fashion turned in jazz. John Pisano. A superb player. He is doing a lot of good for jazz guitar with his "Guitar

Nights" in L.A. Finally, Pat Metheny. I think he's in the forefront of contemporary jazz guitar, and his importance can't be overstated. He is, in my opinion, an extension of Jim Hall, and his influence on young guitarists has been tremendous. Pat is coming out of Jim Hall and Wes. You can actually trace a little influence from the great Swedish guitar player, Rune Gustafsson. Pat has develop a unique and very personal guitar voice.

**M.S.** It isn't easy to become unique as a musician. Any advice for aspiring jazz guitarists?

**U.W.** In an era when a lot of so called contemporary jazz guitar is based on tricks and gimmicks, many guys haven't checked out what I consider minimum requirements. You can't, in my opinion, explore the future if you haven't a grasp about the past. You don't have to sound like a clone of the masters, but you should know what they are about. You should learn the jazz guitar tree. Pat wouldn't sound like he does without Jim Hall and Wes. George Benson comes out of Wes and Hank Garland, Wes and Barney Kessel come out of Charlie Christian, and so on.

**M.S.** It's common knowledge that jazz music is very popular in Sweden and in many parts of Europe. Can you elaborate on that subject?

**U.W.** Yes, jazz is very popular in Europe, including Sweden. If you talk about Swedish jazz, it has a very strong, lyrical side. I guess it comes from the blend with Swedish folk music. Talking about that, I think the so called "standards" (Broadway melodies) have become a form of musical Esperanto. Like Jim Hall says, "If you go to South America to play with a jazz musician and you don't speak Spanish or Portuguese, you just say 'Stella By Starlight' and you can start a musical conversation."

**M.S.** How about your reputation as a jazz guitarist in your part of the world?

UW: I think I'm fairly well-known around Europe, as the guitar player in Oscar Peterson's quartet.

**M.S.** You have many admirers, including virtuoso guitarist John McLaughlin, who wrote such nice liner notes on one of your CDs. I get the impression that you two are good friends, and that he was an early influence on your work. Is this true?

**U.W.** I wouldn't call him a close friend, but he has definitely been very nice and supportive to me. John was a very strong early influence, and he still inspires me. I was taken by his visionary approach to music, and I like to call him "The Miles Davis of guitar." Like Miles, he has always moved ahead musically. He has also, in my opinion, done one of the top ten all-time great jazz guitar albums, "My Goals Beyond." That title says it all.

**M.S.** Some credit bass legend Ray Brown for discovering you. What circumstances led to meeting Mr. Brown?

**U.W.** He didn't exactly discover me, but he has certainly been very helpful in getting

me exposure to a wider audience. I'm very grateful for that. Ray has helped a lot of musicians, including Diana Krall. I met Ray on a European tour, and that opened the way to more collaboration with him. To hear Ray playing a slow blues on the bass is something else. He is the king of that, a bass icon.

**M.S.** I assume that "Seven Steps to Heaven" is your best-known recording with Ray Brown. Did you do more recordings or extensive concert touring with Ray during that time period?

**U.W.** Yeah, "Seven Steps" hit the top of the Gavin list. The other one we did, "Summertime," was voted one of the top ten jazz CDs in the U.S. in 1998. It's fascinating to work with Ray in the studio. He just picks a standard and makes a head arrangement on the spot. Then he shows everybody their part. Everything is done so fast there is not even time to write it down. Then, shortly after, you record. He told me they call him jokingly "The Lone Arranger" (laughs). I had the pleasure to do one European tour with Ray. I also had a stellar quintet featuring Ray and Mike Brecker.

**M.S.** Speaking of bass legends, I understand that your current working band is that of the great Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen. How did you first meet and what's it like playing with him?

**U.W.** I've been very fortunate to play with, in my book, the two greatest bass players in the world, Ray and Niels. I have been working with Niels for over 10 years. That has been great. We have toured all over the world and played with a lot of great musicians. We met at a recording session, and started to work together after that. I think he is the ultimate virtuoso on acoustic bass. MS: Yes, when I first heard Niels playing on "The Trio" release with Oscar and Joe Pass, I was astounded at how easily he dominated the upright, regardless of tempo. UW: He sometimes plays things that are against the laws of nature. I can hear a similarity in his way of phrasing with Jaco Pastorius. They actually recorded "Donna Lee" at the same time, not knowing of each other. He played with Bud Powell when he was fifteen, and by seventeen he was invited to join the Count Basie Orchestra. Pretty heavy. I really recommend the "Chops" CD, with him and Joe Pass. A classic.

**M.S.** You must be extremely proud to be working with Oscar Peterson, and carrying on such a noble tradition of jazz guitarists who've held that role. Did you meet through Ray Brown?

**U.W.** It was actually Niels who recommended me. You can read in Oscar's own words how I got into the group, at his website: [www.oscarpeterson.com](http://www.oscarpeterson.com). The section is called "My Favorite Musical Moments" and the chapter is "The Swingin' Swede." I consider membership in the Oscar Peterson Quartet the greatest gig in the world for a jazz guitar player. It's an extremely big honor and the guitar chair has a tremendous tradition. It is amazing when Oscar sits down and talks about Art Tatum and Ella Fitzgerald, and the Jazz at the Philharmonic stories.

**M.S.** I can only imagine. Any Oscar Peterson guitar-oriented stories?

**U.W.** He told me a great one about Wes Montgomery. They were playing with the Oscar Peterson Trio in San Francisco in the sixties. I think it was at a club called the "Black Hawk." They saw a guy sneak in every night with a guitar case and place himself in the back of the club. The fourth night he approached Oscar and introduced himself as Wes Montgomery. Oscar immediately asked him to sit in, and Wes replied: "Oh, no! I don't jump into that deep water!" That gives you an idea of how great that trio was.

**M.S.** Ulf, playing with Mr. Peterson would be a "dream come true" for any jazz guitarist. What's it like to be on stage with such a powerful and historic jazz figure?

**U.W.** When we kick off a slow medium blues you can feel that you are close to the source of what I call "real" jazz. Sometimes it swings so hard that it is unbelievable. I mean, nobody comes close to Oscar's groove. Some concerts we play "Sweet Georgia Brown" as a chase between piano and guitar in a really fast tempo, and when Oscar plays fast he means business, or as he calls it, a "fight to the finish." Another thing I really enjoy with Oscar is when we play a totally laid back "Easy Does It" by Count Basie. To hear Oscar's touch and swing in those laid back tempos is the greatest school you can have. Herbie Hancock said about Oscar: "The most influential jazz piano player alive today. He has it all." So, standing on stage with the Oscar Peterson Quartet sums up everything I have been striving for my entire musical life.

**M.S.** Speaking of historic figures, it seems as though you've performed with dozens of famous jazz musicians. Besides Joe Henderson and those we've been talking about, what other artists come to mind?

**U.W.** I have been privileged to play with guys like Bags (Milt Jackson), Herbie Hancock, Mike Brecker, Clark Terry, Phil Woods, Johnny Griffin, Toots Thielemans, Max Roach, Jack DeJohnette, Art Farmer, James Moody, and Benny Golson. I also realized that I've played with the historic Oscar Peterson "Night Train Trio" of Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown, and Ed Thigpen, but unfortunately not together (that would have been a gas). I've worked with them separately.

**M.S.** The early reviews on your new CD have been spectacular, to say the least. Can you tell us a little bit about your latest recording?

**U.W.** So far the response has been totally great. For my latest recording I chose to play acoustic, some tunes solo and some tunes playing duet with myself. It is a challenge to do a record like that, and to have a broad palette of directions on the tunes. It's also fun to be making up the arrangements. I like to think that I have my own voice when I'm doing that, so this is a concept that I will use again in the future.

**M.S.** To date, how many recordings have you made, both as a leader and as a sideman?

**U.W.** I have done 10 recordings as a leader. As a sideman, maybe 50 CDs. The most important, of course, would be "Summernight in Munich - Trail Of Dreams" with Oscar,

and "Seven Steps To Heaven" and "Summertime" with Ray, all recorded for Telarc.

**M.S.** Very impressive. Ulf, what about your equipment? What guitar and amplifier do you prefer for your jazz work?

**U.W.** I use a 1962 Gibson 175, and an old Aria Pro 2. Both guitars have a great sound. I sometimes use my Gibson L5. Every guitar has D'Addario strings, .012 and up. I use Gibson heavy picks. When I play acoustic, I use a Yamaha nylon string guitar. For amps and speaker I use the Acoustic Image-Clarus 2 R with a Raezers Edge Stealth 12-inch speaker. It is a match made in heaven. Sometimes I have to use other amps because of the circumstances. Then I choose a Polytone (the older ones) with a 15-inch or 12-inch speaker. I also used to play the Lab series. I might try to get some endorsement from an arch top builder, if I like the guitar.

**M.S.** Your "Enchanted Moments" recording shows an entirely different side of your artistry. Have you always been involved with the acoustic guitar as well as the electric?

**U.W.** On that particular album I chose the acoustic guitar, because it sounds so great when you're playing ballads. I've always had a love for the acoustic guitar, since I'm very much into Brazilian music. I did a 1984 solo record in Rio de Janeiro, and after that I was hooked. I did some tours with the Brazilian accordion player, Sivuca. That deepened my love for Brazilian music. I went back to Brazil a couple of years ago with Oscar Peterson, and we played for a crowd of 35,000 people in Sao Paulo. That was a thrilling experience.

**M.S.** I understand that there is a new Wakenius family member. Congratulations. Any thoughts on children and music, or your kids following in Dad's footsteps?

**U.W.** Thanks. I have a 4-month-old son, named Carl Ludwig. I think you should expose the children very early to good music. In Africa they have the babies with them when they have their drum gatherings, so they get the rhythm very naturally. My other son, Eric, is fourteen years old. He's been exposed to a lot of good music, but it didn't have any effect on him. He got into computers instead. That's fine with me. I don't think you should put any pressure on the kids to follow in your footsteps, but it wouldn't hurt if the new one got into guitar. I could sure use a rhythm player in the family (laughs).

**M.S.** What are your future plans and goals?

**U.W.** In September I'm doing some concerts with Oscar Peterson in the U.S. and in Canada. The tour ends with a gala performance for the English Queen Elisabeth in Toronto. Oscar also wants to record a new album. I will try to get over and play a little more in the U.S., by myself and together with guys from here. That could be fun. There are so many good musicians I like to play with. Otherwise I'm just trying to improve myself on the instrument, live a happy life with my family, and look forward to the next O.P. gig.

### **Oscar Peterson on Ulf Wakenius (CD liner notes):**

"After having played with Ulf Wakenius for the last four years, and listening nightly to his musical offerings in my quartet, I have no other recourse than to believe that my dear friend and guitarist Ulf does not recognize geographical barriers when it comes to musical conception. As I listened to this new album of his, I could not help being not only amazed but also thankful for the opportunity of playing with this great Swedish talent.

Tune for tune, I could only marvel at not only his musical dexterity, but more importantly to me, his deep roots into the true lifeline of Jazz and the Blues. Ulf has presented us here with an honest and deeply moving photograph of himself musically. In this world of "wannabe" guitarists, who for some reason seem to forget that the guitar is not only a formidable, lyrical and harmonic goldmine within itself, it is a real musical treat to listen to this talented Swede become as one with this musically gallant instrument. This album is not cluttered with other instruments getting in the way of his expression, but in reality is a collection of musical truths whose roots are deeply embedded in the only true recipe for Jazz: the Blues. Ulf pays tribute in the most musical manner to many of his stringed predecessors, and most noticeably, Joe Pass, a gentleman I had the musical pleasure of having in my group for years. To even contemplate dedicating a tune to the now deceased genius of the guitar, to many other guitar players would be a nightmare of unfathomable proportions due to the depth of Joe's talent. Ulf succeeds where many others would have failed miserably. His lyrical virtuosity and harmonic dexterity are things of musical beauty, and in this album they are displayed to their fullest extent. I close only by saying thank you for being here, Ulf, and with your playing, extending the tasteful and talented history of Jazz guitar. May you reign forever!"

=====

### **To Ulf Wakenius (from Hank Garland):**

"First, I would like to thank you for recognizing your peers for you truly are a "master" of jazz guitar. I listened to "The Guitar Artistry of Ulf Wakenius" and I was so taken with your talent. You are the whole band and every song took me back to the days of playing with Wes Montgomery, Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel, Charlie Parker, etc. This is jazz and I can say you are the very best jazz artist I have heard in years.

You stay on the melody and that is something I do not hear anymore. I have totally enjoyed every song I have heard you play and have kept your CDs playing ever since I received them. I loved "Seven Steps To Heaven" Ray Brown Trio. Outstanding guys! I loved "Summertime" & "Enchanted Moments." I would recommend any jazz guitarist or anyone that loves jazz to add all these CDs to their collection. My friend, you are a genius and I wish all the best to you. Thank you so much for staying with what I call "jazz" and mostly for mentioning my friends Oscar Peterson, Barney Kessel, Joe Pass and myself. It has been my true pleasure to listen to your music. I will always treasure your music!"