

JSO Musician of the Month

February, 2013

Ryan Meagher

By Rita Rega

Instrument: Guitar

Early Years/Education: Grew up in the Bay Area and started playing guitar because I liked Nirvana. I was already playing trumpet and trombone in the jazz bands in junior high but switched to guitar my freshman year in high school. I just got more and more exposed to jazz, and at sixteen I decided playing jazz guitar is what I wanted to do. Music is sort of in my family -- my uncle is a professional rock guitarist and singer, I grew up around it. Neither of my parents are musical. When I was 12, I actively sought out music and identified with it.

I got my undergraduate degree in jazz studies from San Diego State University on a full scholarship. I went to Stanford jazz workshops in the summers. After graduating, I moved to New York City.

New York: I had some contacts [there], like Peter Bernstein, and started following him around. I started out trying to emulate the guys I knew there. [But] I got sick of trying to do that modern New York jazz ... straight eighth notes, intense harmonies, high-flying, free-wheeling solos. I realized that's not what I was supposed to be doing. I went back to my garage band roots and brought that energy to modern jazz, taking what I always liked and making it mine. I realized I didn't need to be someone else.

I think I was coming out of a camp of "nerdy" white guys in New York, the quiet type who would never talk to girls, a really heady kind of nerd. That really influenced me, as did the uptown swinger thing. And I loved the crazy avant-garde stuff, too. Then, I really started identifying with Indie rock. I bring the Indie rock vibe to intellectual modern jazz. For example, my drummer Vinnie Sperrazza, loved Tony Williams as much as he loved Keith Moon. In New York I played with the guys I wanted to play with, I was there for eight or nine years.

To survive in New York for that length of time, I had various day jobs. One of my more fun jobs was being the cue card guy for Saturday Night Live and Conan O'Brien. My uncle has been doing cue cards in Los Angeles for The Tonight Show for as long as I've been alive, so he pulled a few strings. It's harder than you think.

Portland: I moved here six months ago. We wanted to be closer to family, and I wanted to be somewhere that had a good music scene. I really didn't know anyone when I moved here, but one of my mentors from grad school, Peter Epstein, was born and raised here. I met him at the University of Nevada, Reno, which is where I got a Masters of Music degree in jazz and improvisational music. I teach non-idiomatic improvisation. When I play like that, I like to do it with people who are on the same page with me.

Jam Sessions: In Portland, I conduct jazz composers' jam sessions. I did the same thing in Brooklyn. When I got here, I went to the jams and noticed everyone played the same stuff.

**Jack Rosenberg
Memorial Award**



Ryan Meagher Live

February 15

with George Colligan
Riverplace Hotel
(PDX Jazz Festival)

April 14

with Tim Willcox, Chris Higgins
and Charlie Doggett
the Blue Monk

Wednesdays (4:00-6:00 pm)
Jazz Composer's Jam Session
Tapalaya Restaurant

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I knew there was a lot of writing going on, and I wanted to play other people's tunes, so I started this composers' jam. It's more for us to work on stuff, to play with people you wouldn't expect to play with, and to help expand the community. We're sight reading, experimenting and trying out new things. I'm using it for practice ... It's not really geared toward an audience, it's a laboratory setting. It's kind of weird to have a jam session at that time. I guess we'll see how it goes.

Musical Influences: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Peter Bernstein (musically and personally), Nels Cline, The Shins are my favorite band; The Decemberists, Jim Hall (I like everything he does). I like classical music like Beethoven, I like the harmonic approach of impressionists and Stockhausen.

Most Satisfying Experience: Being on the Fresh Sound New Talent label twice. I idolized that record label when I was in college. Jordi Pujol, the owner, liked the fact that I had a sound. He liked my first CD, which I produced, and he let me do what I wanted on the second release. He produced and promoted it.

Favorite Recordings: Miles Davis - "Miles Smiles" (the first vinyl LP I ever bought ... something about this record that hypnotizes me -- I still will not let myself listen to it while I am driving.

John Coltrane - "Live Trane: The European Tours." This has been the only Trane I have listened to in the last year or two. I pulled out "Black Pearls" recently to see if I could imitate the infamous "sheets of sound" on guitar [read: epic fail], but I hear the live Trane discs as a sort of single malt version of Trane's period that I hold most dear. As a guitarist, I can do so little of what anyone of these guys are doing on this collection. I guess this boxed set encapsulates what it is that I love so much about jazz as a form of expression, and what it is that I hate so much about the guitar as a tool for that.

Joe Henderson - "Straight, No Chaser." Henderson is by far one of my favorite jazz musicians. In fact, I would say that much of the way I approach standard jazz repertoire comes from how I hear his playing.

Wes Montgomery - "Boss Guitar." This is the second jazz record I ever owned. It was also important for me because I would learn to appreciate organ players as a result of this CD.

"Jim Hall - Live!" What is cool about this record is that the bassist, Don Thompson, transcribed one of the best Jim Hall solos ever, and it is included in the liner notes. It is not as if one gets to choose these kinds of things, but Jim Hall came to me a little later in my development than I would have liked; alas, I have tried to be as much Jim Hall as any man should try to be.

Nirvana - "Incesticide." I could not choose between the albums, "Nevermind" and "In Utero," so I went with the fake album made entirely of B-sides. If you have ever listened to my music and you do not hear the grunge rock influence, you are either not paying attention or I am not doing a good job of conveying who I am.

Stevie Ray Vaughan - "The Sky Is Crying." Music is not a competition. But if it were, Vaughan would have won.

"James Brown - 20 All-Time Greatest Hits!" Of all the albums I have listed, this is the one I still practice alongside the most.



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The role of the guitar in James Brown's bands was important, but hardly featured. In fact, guitar was such an important chair that at times a second guitar player was added, but neither was given much room to explore the thick rhythmic tapestry that was woven by Brown's genius.

Mark Turner/Kurt Rosenwinkel - "Dharma Days/The Next Step." I am excited to perform in the same festival as Kurt this month. I studied with him a bit in New York when I first moved there, and that rubbed off on me big time. Even before I moved to New York, Kurt and Mark's music proved to be a big influence on my moving to New York from San Diego. With the amount of miles I was putting on my car from San Diego to the places that actually featured Kurt and Mark's bands, I came to the slightly more logical, "Forget this! I'll take the F train."

Michael Brecker - "Tales from the Hudson." My only jazz friend in high school made me buy this record. I had no idea that jazz guitar could sound like this. Some people had shown me Pat Metheny before, but what I had heard had been pretty smooth. When I heard this, I got it. I understood what modern jazz guitar was supposed to sound like. I can point to the moment I first heard Metheny's solo on "Slings and Arrows" as one of my defining moments as a musician.

Nels Cline - "Coward." I would not have heard of Cline if it were not for a stern recommendation from Steve Cardenas when I studied with him. This is a great record from beginning to end; the way I feel an album should be. In fact, it's my favorite "solo jazz" guitar record. That says a lot about my artistic perspective. It is "solo" in that Nels is the only musician playing an instrument on this album; but there are all sorts of varying sounds that he produces through over-dubbing and effects. And I am calling it "jazz," which people like Wynton Marsalis and Mike LeDonne may not care for ... but I hear it as jazz.

Discography: "Atroefy" (August 2007) and "Tone" (May 2011), both on Fresh Sound New Talent. "Atroefy" represents me stifling my own creativity, struggling to play that heavy creative modern jazz and putting a lot of pressure on myself. "Tone" has the same Indie Rock/Modern Jazz groundwork as the first recording. Both have the same drummer (Vinnie Sperrazza) and bassist (Geoff Kraly), with the addition of alto player Loren Stillman and woodwind player Matt Renzi on "Atroefy," and trumpeter Shane Endsley, and Matt Blostein on alto sax, for "Tone."

Future Plans: I would like to have my own band with the guys I'm with at the Blue Monk in April. I'd also like to have an electric bebop band like Paul Motion's. And I have a project called "Bloomsday," based on James Joyce's Dublin. I wrote six tunes so far in a chamber jazz setting. The instrumentation is



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challenging; I'm going to need an upright bassist that also plays cello, a violinist that also sings, and a multi-reed player.

Other: I am a big baseball guy. I feel the role that the guitar plays in James Brown's band is the same role a slap-hitting, defensive-minded, team-oriented middle-infielder on a championship baseball team plays. Sometimes he will grab a headline, but he is mostly there to make everyone else around him look good.