

John Lennon's music connects with jazz-guitar greats Bill Frisell and Michael Occhipinti

By [Alexander Varty](#), June 21, 2012

Special coverage

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Bill Frisell knows exactly what he was doing on the evening of February 9, 1964: like every other 12-year-old in Denver, Colorado, he was at home, watching the Beatles make their American debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

“I can remember the next day at school—everybody wanted to get a guitar,” the soft-spoken musician recalls when reached at home in Seattle. “Those guys came along, and it just changed everything. I really think that’s why I’m playing. Seeing those guys together doing that, and hearing that sound, it’s just huge in my life.”

Until recently, however, that influence has lurked in the background. Frisell didn’t comb his hair into Beatle bangs and start a rock band; instead, he began his long apprenticeship as a jazz musician.

“I spent my whole life with their music, but I’d never really played it until recently,” he says, bemusedly. “I’d certainly never spent as much time playing a John Lennon song as I have playing, like, a Thelonious Monk song, or an old standard song that I’ll play over and over and over again for year after year, trying to figure it out more and more. I never did that with his music, so I’m just finally starting to do that now, in a weird way.”

Well, maybe it’s not so weird: Frisell’s recently released *All We Are Saying*, on which he recasts 16 Lennon compositions as jazz instrumentals, is one of the most accessible items in his discography. What is strange, though, is that there are two guitarist-led Lennon tributes coming to this year’s TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival, with Michael Occhipinti’s *Shine On: The Universe of John Lennon* being the other.

They’re quite dissimilar: Frisell mines the late Beatle’s music for incandescent melody, while Occhipinti, working with an all-star cast of Ontario singers, suggests what Lennon might have sounded like with a degree from the Berklee College of Music. Both, though, are convinced that the English pop star’s tunes lend themselves well to jazz improvisation.

Occhipinti’s connection with Lennon’s oeuvre is as old as he is: the youngest in a large Sicilian-Canadian family, he didn’t get to see the Beatles live, unlike the rest of his siblings, but their music was omnipresent when he was growing up.

“My earliest memories of playing records on my own are always of Beatles records, 'cause that's what my brothers had,” he says from his Toronto home. “So I think it's safe to say that by the time I was 10, I knew every single Beatles song—but by the time I started playing music, I'd moved on to other things.”

Now that he's returned to the Fab Four, he's become more aware of Lennon's talent as a guitarist—something often overshadowed by the singer's catchy lyrics and controversial opinions. It's Lennon the composer, though, who's most on Frisell's mind.

“Those songs are these amazing structures,” he says. “Some of them are extraordinarily complex, strange, unusual musical structures. But even with the simplest ones, there's something that happens that's just unexplainable. There's just this touch of magic to them, or something.”

“I mean, ‘Give Peace a Chance’? There's nothing there, really—but it's everything you need.”

Bill Frisell's [John Lennon: All We Are Saying](#) is at the Vogue Theatre on Friday (June 22). Michael Occhipinti brings *Shine On: The Universe of John Lennon* to the free Downtown Jazz series' Robson Stage on Sunday (June 24). The events are part of the [TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival](#).