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Pete McCann: Looking Forward

By [Matthew Warnock](#)

Jazz guitarist and educator Pete McCann has been a first-call sideman and bandleader on the New York scene for almost twenty years. Possessing a musical style that draws from the blues, jazz and rock genres, McCann's playing and writing styles are as diverse as his influences. Having worked with such world-class performers as [Lee Konitz](#), [Chris Tarry](#), [Dave Liebman](#), [Kenny Garrett](#), [Greg Osby](#), [Brian Blade](#) and the Maria Schneider Orchestra, McCann has appeared on over fifty recordings as a sideman. Alongside these accomplishments, McCann has also released four highly-acclaimed albums under his own name, including *Extra Mile* ((Nineteen-Eight Records, 2009).

Having graduated from the University of North Texas' jazz program, and spending time at the Banff School of the Arts in 1988, McCann is also an in demand guitar teacher, as well as performer and studio musician. During the school year McCann can be found on faculty at the New School and City College in New York City, while during the summer months he spends time at the New York University Summer Guitar Intensive and the Maine Jazz Camp. Alongside his regular teaching gigs, McCann has also taught clinics throughout the world while on tour with the many different groups he has performed with.



With all four of his albums receiving praise from fans and critics alike, and a consistently busy schedule as a performer, educator and recording artist, McCann is keeping his sights set on the future. After building a strong foundation during his twenty years on the New York jazz scene, McCann's strong work ethic, diverse playing skills and love of music are pushing him forward into what is surely to be a long and successful career in the music industry.

All About Jazz: There is a strong element of rock on your new album *Extra Mile*, especially on tunes such as "Stasis." How much of an influence was rock, and instrumental rock, on you during your musical development?

Pete McCann: I'm definitely influenced by the great jazz-fusion guitarists such as [John McLaughlin](#) and [Allan Holdsworth](#). Even though I don't sound anything like those guys they're still some of my musical heroes. I've always been interested in the distorted rock guitar sound and what I can do with it in a jazz setting.

AAJ: It seems like the line has been blurred in recent years between being a jazz guitarist and an instrumental artist, especially with people like yourself drawing from many different musical backgrounds. Do you consider yourself to be a jazz guitarist or an instrumental artist?

PM: Well, my training comes from a jazz guitar standpoint. When I was coming up and first learning to play jazz guitar I was listening to more traditional players like [Joe Pass](#), [Wes Montgomery](#) and [Lenny Breau](#). When I got to college my guitar teacher put on *The Inner Mounting Flame* (Columbia, 1971) and that was it for me [laughs].

Then, when I was studying at North Texas, I got to see (John) Scofield live a few times and he blew my mind. It's hard to categorize what a jazz guitar player does anymore. As soon as we step on the distortion box it moves to the other category right away. I guess I try to walk the fine line between both fields.

AAJ: When checking out the tune "Angry Panda" there's a Bill Frisell influence that seems to be coming out in the writing and in your playing. Was Bill a big influence on you early on in your career?

PM: Of course, going back to the first album I ever bought of his, the ECM record *Rambler* (ECM, 1984), with [Kenny Wheeler](#). When he stepped on the distortion box he got this beautiful sound. He's always been right there walking the line between many categories. He mixes rock, jazz and the Nashville vibe that he's gotten into recently and it comes out great. He's definitely on the list of twenty or so guys that have heavily influenced me over the years.

AAJ: Since you do straddle that line between the rock and jazz worlds, do you ever find it tricky to book a venue for your music? It seems it might be too rock for a pure jazz club, but too jazzy for a pure rock club. Is that ever an issue when booking your group?

PM: I do find it difficult to get into some venues around town because they expect people to play more straight ahead stuff. I've had luck at the 55 Bar and the Cornelia Street Café, since they're more into modern jazz. I've also been able to play at the Jazz Standard, though I don't think my



kind of thing goes over too well there [laughs].

It's kind of frustrating though because I do feel like I've been pigeonholed a bit as the guy who likes to turn on the distortion and rock out, and there are only a few places in the city where I can do that type of music. At the same time, I'm too jazzy for the rock clubs, so it's tricky finding the right place to perform my music.



AAJ: You mentioned John McLaughlin being one of your main influences, someone who's written a lot of music in odd-time signatures. How much do you experiment with odd-meters in your writing and playing?

PM: The new album took about four years to put together and during that time I sat down with the first three Mahavishnu records to try and find new inspiration for the tunes I was writing. They really broadened my mind to odd time signatures. I would sit down with pen and paper and try and write a tune in 11/8 or 15/8, then find a vamp that fit that time signature and see where it took me with a melody line. I love to play in seven and I live to play in five-four. I wish the traditional jazz guys would play in odd meters more often, so I try and do what I can to explore different time signatures in my music.

AAJ: There's a track on the new record, "Pi," that features you playing acoustic guitar. What draws you to the sound of that instrument in particular?

PM: I read the book *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel and that tune was inspired by the storyline of the book. The acoustic guitar is in my palette of sounds that I choose from when I'm writing new material. I played nylon string in college, and the steel string guitar is in the

matrix of sounds that I like to draw from. I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm the world's foremost accomplished acoustic player, but I like the sound of it, and more importantly so does my wife and so does my mom [laughs].

AAJ: Do you bring the acoustic guitar onto the bandstand or do you prefer to only use it in the studio?

PM: It's pretty much only for the studio. These days I'm happy playing my Gibson 335 or my PRS solid-body electric. I can get a decent acoustic sound out of my 335, which was one of the reasons I bought that guitar. When I'm playing with singers I can just turn down the volume and, if it's quiet enough in the room, people can hear the acoustic sound of the strings ringing through.

AAJ: You run your guitars through Mesa-Boogie amps and there seems to be two camps of players when it comes to Mesas, those who prefer the older models and those that prefer newer models. Which Mesas do you prefer to use, vintage or newer models?

PM: I've talked to a bunch of guitarists who use Mesas and some are very set on using the Mark series from the early '80s. I have three different Mesas. I have a hundred-watt Lonestar and a fifty-watt F50, both of which are new from the last three or four years. The reason I bought an older Mesa, the Studio 22, is because it's half as loud as the fifty watt so it breaks up right away. They're all unique amps, but they have that crispy top end and full mid-range Mesa-Boogie tone, which is something I'm trying to embrace more in my sound.

AAJ: Guitarists seem to be picky about playing with pianists and keyboardists. You've done a lot of performing both with and without a keyboard player in your band. Do you prefer to play in an ensemble that has a keyboardist or one that doesn't?

PM: When I'm playing at a place like La Lanterna, where there's barely room for guitar, bass and drums, I like to use the guitar trio set up. When I play at the 55 Bar I like to have a keyboardist there with me because there's room and they have a really nice Rhodes there. It's become kind of the Rhodes piano room in New York, because there aren't that many other places that have that instrument in house. When I plan a tour with the band if I can afford to bring a keyboardist along I will, but in the past I've just gone out without one. It's very expensive these days to bring a band out on the road, so often times it's just a matter of finances.

AAJ: As well as being an accomplished performer you are also an in demand educator. Do you find that being a teacher has positively affected your playing career and vice-versa?

PM: I think my teaching does kind of seep into my performances. I did my CD release party at the 55 Bar back in July, right in the middle of the NYU guitar camp that I was teaching at. It was great to have an audience that was made up mostly of guitarists from the camp, so I could get some good feedback after the gig. I can tell just from their comments if they dug it or if it wasn't their thing.

Teaching opens my ears to new players as well. Students will turn me on to new players all the time, really opening my eyes and ears to players I haven't heard of before. I'm always amazed that when I teach someone about jazz guitar I rediscover some element that I've neglected in my own playing, and that I have to go back and check out on my own.



I think that these days anyone playing jazz for a living has to be involved in teaching somehow, even if it's just to supplement their income. Whether it's teaching fulltime at a college or private studio, or just doing clinics out on the road, it can really help out at the end of the year with trying to make a living in the jazz world.



AAJ: You live in New York, which has been the focal point of the jazz world for many decades. Jazz seems to be taking a hit in other cities across the country right now. How is the scene holding up in New York?

PM: First of all, there aren't enough gigs to go around. In my case I'll do just about anything I get a call for. I'll do teaching, I'll do sideman gigs and demo projects. For instance, last night I spent time at my friend's studio recording radio jingles for Virgin Atlantic radio. He has a contract with them so I went in and did ten ID's on rock guitar, acoustic guitar and mandolin. It pays really well. It has nothing to do with advancing my art but it pays the bills [laughs].

I have to do many different things to help make ends meet because forty dollar jazz gigs don't really cover the bills at the end of the month. When I first came to New York I was living in an apartment with some friends and the rent wasn't bad. Now I have a house with my family and the mortgage is a lot more than rent was twenty years ago. I know a lot of my friends are involved in Broadway and club dates, and I do club dates as well. When the phone rings we have to be ready to take the gig in order to make things happen.

AAJ: What advice would you have for a young guitarist who's just out of high school or college and is thinking of moving to New York to start their career as a professional musician?

PM: I get asked that question a lot, from my students especially. One of the most important things for me, surprisingly enough, is to have really good computer chops. Learning music notation software as well as editing and recording software can really come in handy when first starting out. I have a computer downstairs that I record music on and I think any student coming out of school these days should at least have a cursory knowledge of music software.

The other advice I would offer is practice, practice, practice, which is what everyone told me when I was in school and darned if they weren't right [laughs]. It's really important to be able to read well, on top of knowing tunes and being able to comp and blow.

I was lucky that I was on scholarship when I went to school, but I worry about the next generation of music students who've had to take on a ton of debt to get through college. That's why I think knowing how to use recording and editing software, or other skills besides playing, can really help younger players make a living in the music business these days. It's always great to have something to fall back on when the gigs are sparse.

Selected Discography

Pete McCann, *Extra Mile* (Nineteen-Eight Records, 2009)
 Pete McCann, *Most Folks* (Omnitone Records, 2007)
 Pete McCann, *Parable* (Palmetto Records, 2000)
 Pete McCann, *You Remind Me of Someone* (Palmetto Records, 1998)

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