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Pete McCann Interview Outtakes

Bill Milkowski, Feb 25, 2010

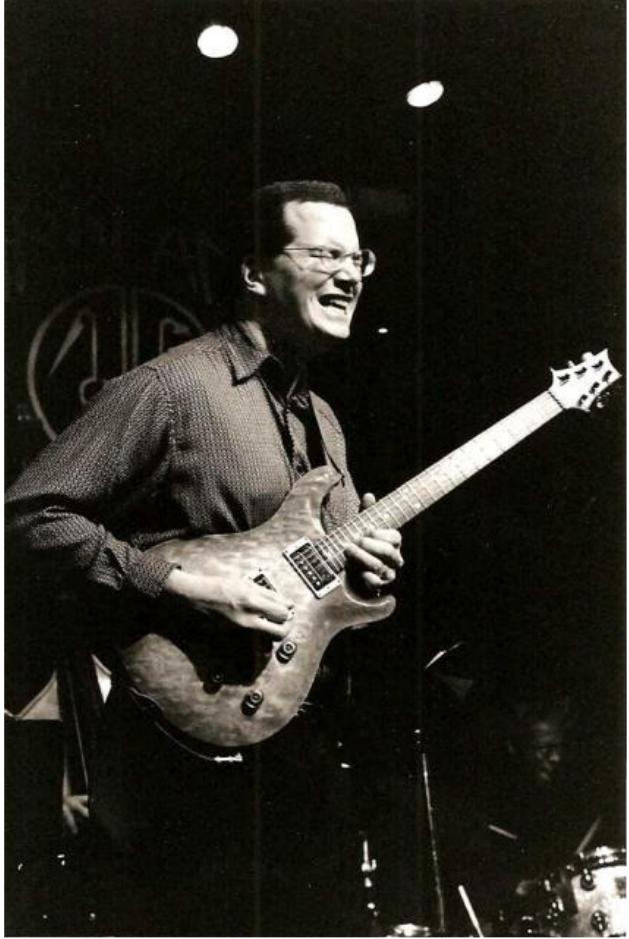
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The following are very lightly edited interview outtakes from my Pete McCann Artist Feature in the April 2010 issue of *Guitar Player*.

You strike me as someone who very easily straddles two aesthetics—having this reverence for the jazz tradition while also having this great enthusiasm for taking it out in an edgy, dissonant, rockish vein by embracing electronics.

Absolutely. I grew up listening to guys like Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery—you name it. Every jazz guitarist I could get my hands on. Everything changed when the jazz-fusion era came around. So even though my training in high school was pretty much straight ahead sounding guitar, when I got to college it was all thrown out the window when I discovered fusion. A couple of teachers hipped me to Inner Mounting Flame, and that was it.

You can hear that quality on a tune like “Rhodes Less Traveled” from your new album. There’s almost like a James Gang element going on in there, which would suggest that you were into rock before you got into jazz.

Well, I grew up in a household full of music. My dad was listening to country and western, and my mom was listening to National Public Radio so she was into contemporary classical. My sister was studying flute and my older brother was into Kansas and Boston and Led Zeppelin. So it was the Charles Ives household. You never knew what you were going to listen to, and often there would be a few different things going on around the house at the same time. So I had all those things playing in my head, so to speak. I guess at some point or another they’re going to come out, they’re going to influence what you eventually sound like.

What does that tune “Rhodes Less Traveled” connect with in your own makeup?

I guess it’s a pop song without lyrics. I listened to a lot of pop music and nowadays pop music is kind of...there’s not so many chords anymore, I guess it’s just mind-boggling. I guess it’s disappointing in a way, but nothing stays the same. I think it’ll get rediscovered at some point. There seems to be like a 30-year curve to what becomes popular again.

Well, the whole concept of a bridge doesn’t even exist in pop music anymore.
Exactly, it’s a lost art form.

Even James Brown, who would vamp forever in E, eventually got around to taking it to the bridge. And nowadays, there’s no more bridge.

Exactly.
But you take it to the bridge on “Rhodes Less Traveled,” where you get into that very heavy Band of Gypsies-Meters-Zeppelin thing. So clearly you enjoy that kind of crunchy rock sound. It’s part of your makeup as well as Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery.
Exactly, I can’t deny it. And it’s bound to come out sooner or later. It’s in there and there’s nothing I can do about it.

Can you detail specifically, like on “Rhodes Less Traveled” and “Angry Panda,” your use of distortion? How are you getting those crunchy tones on those tunes?

Well, this is the first recording I’ve done where I went in stereo—two different amps and two different speaker cabinets. And I had

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The Guitar Player Poll

What do you do first when you want a different tone?

- Change guitars
- Change amps
- Add pedals
- Fiddle with guitar knobs
- Tweak amp controls

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an old Boss GT-3 multi-effects pedal which splits the signal into stereo. So I had two Mesa Boogie amps and relatively...not full-on volume, because if they get to be too loud they're very uncontrollable. But with a stereo split and basically a Pro-Co RAT pedal. You get this super great, like natural tube compression. Then if you put the RAT before all of that, it squeezes it down even more. That's how you get like a super ringing, singing like tone. I've always listened to guitar players who get this amazing sound, like Jeff Beck, Eric Johnson, Allan Holdsworth—they all seem to get this very horn-like quality to their instrument. That's something I've tried to emulate. So on songs like "Angry Panda" and "Rhodes Less Traveled," that's exactly what I'm going for.

And do you, like Kurt Rosenwinkel, distinguish between the old RAT and the new RAT?

[Laughs] I distinguish between whatever RAT's working at the time. I do have a broken RAT and I have a newer RAT. It's amazing how the stuff really does start changing over time. I think what happens is, companies start using circuit boards instead of hand-wired soldering, because it's just too expensive and too time consuming to wire it all up yourself. Case in point: I went to get my Paul Reed Smith fixed recently, because the rotary switch had broken, and they sent me one in the mail and it looked completely different. I had the guy who ordered it for me call them and they said, "No, that's the one we're using now. It's a tiny circuit board instead of all these different wires going every which way. It just took too long for them to wire up. It's the same thing with a new amp and an old amp. You open up an old Fender and there's all this beautiful detailed wiring that was done by hand. And nowadays you open up an amp and it's circuit boards galore and humongous power transformers.

And that affects the tone?

Absolutely. That's why you see these old vintage amps and they are three or four thousand dollars. And you're looking at this little amp wondering, "How can that be?" But you plug in and play through it and you're like, "Wow, I understand now what that's all about."

And then you have someone like Eric Johnson who can distinguish between different batteries.

Exactly. I have a friend, Jamie Saft, a great keyboard player. He swears by powering pedals with batteries only versus power transformers. So when he goes on tour, one of the things that he puts in his suitcase is a giant block of 9-volt batteries. But I don't know how he gets through airport security anymore, as that looks kind of suspect.

That's a real bracing kind of a tone that you get on those two tunes. But on the other side of the tonal spectrum, on tunes like "Fielder's Choice" and "Tributary," you have this very warm, mellow tone like Jim Hall. What's going on there?

Well, I'm using the same guitar that I used on the rocked-out tunes, which is my trusty 1988 Gibson ES-335. It's really an interesting guitar because if you roll back the tone pot on the neck pickup, it gets nice and warm. And if you soup it up a little bit with reverb and delay and kind of dial back the distortion setting on both amps, then it becomes this warm, very characteristic jazzy sound. And it's really cool to only have to bring one guitar to a gig and yet get all these different sounds out of it. That's kind of something that people know me for in the city. Because I do bring a lot of sounds with me to each gig, no matter what size rig I have. If I have a small multi-effects box and a good amp with me and that one guitar, I can go to a lot of different places.

I thought those heavier, crunchy rock tunes would've been the Paul Reed Smith.

I only really play two guitars. The Paul Reed Smith I've had for 18 years, and I bought that guitar to replace a Les Paul and a Strat that were stolen out of my rented home in Queens when I first moved to New York in December 1989. That guitar was the one guitar that replaced both of those sounds.

How did that theft happen?

Well, I had been in New York two years and just before Thanksgiving of 1991, I was coming back from a gig in Boston with my friend Lindsey Horner and I was stuck in a really long traffic jam. I got back to my home and I went to the kitchen and saw broken glass on the floor and thought, "Oh my god, what's happened?" So I immediately thought, "Someone's broken in." And I looked around the house and my stereo was gone and then I ran upstairs to look at my room. I had three instruments up against the wall in gig bags, and they were gone—the Les Paul, the Strat and a Yamaha Broadbase that I was playing in club dates. And they left all the amps; too heavy to schlep. So it was one of those experiences where I could've gotten in my car and just drove away from New York and said, "That's it, the city has beaten me. I'm not going to live in such a hostile environment." But I called a close friend of mine who I went to college with and who was also living in New York, and he said, "Oh man, don't let that voodoo get you down" So if it hadn't been for him I would've moved back to wherever—Texas, Wisconsin, I'm not really sure. So I stuck it out and here I am 20 years later.

You're definitely a hands-on guy in terms of repairs and going inside the guts of the instrument, right?

I try to be as much as possible. I can repair switches, and if something comes unsoldered I can fix that sort of thing. That all goes back to when I was in high school my Dad let me use the soldering iron in the basement of our house and I went crazy and started taking apart radios that didn't work and tried to fix stuff that didn't need to be fixed. It was a great experience. So I can fix a few little things here and there, and if there's something I can buy at Radio Shack to replace something, I'll do it. It's a lot of fun. I enjoy making my own patch cables. I'll go to a store and buy 50 feet of patch cable and make five or six different patch chords out of that. When you think about what it costs to buy a really good cable, then if you have to buy four more cables, now you're talking a hundred dollars, easy. So if you buy one cable and just hack 'em up and solder them yourself, and then you can repair them yourself obviously too. I guess I have a little bit of the handy man fix-it gene that I inherited from my father...

Who you dedicated this record to.

Exactly. I remember all the times that he drove me to guitar lessons and he went to all my concerts. When I first went to North Texas to check out the school, it was in the dead of winter during break from where I was going to school at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. And I was like, "I really want to check out this school," and he was like, "OK, I'll drive you there." So we drove pretty much non-stop from Eau Claire, Wisconsin to Denton, Texas. That's where "The Extra Mile" comes from. My dad had a fear of flights. I think he had a bad experience coming back from the Korean War on one of those giant C-32 planes. From then on he never flew, except one time he did fly to my wedding in New York. That was the only time, I think. He preferred to drive.

And so he always went the extra mile for you.

Yeah, both my parents. It's really great that they saw that I might do something with playing music. They drove me to all the jazz camps I could ever go to, and lessons. They really let me do a lot with my career early. I started doing gigs when I was 16, with all the college guys who would let me set up and try out some tunes from The Real Book. It was just a great experience. You wouldn't think that Eau Claire, Wisconsin could be a little, tiny mecca of jazz going on in such a rural state, but it was a great place to grow up. Geoff Keezer lived four miles from my house and I went to go play with him from time to time when he was 12 or so. I used to play gigs with his dad, who was a great jazz drummer. And then 20 miles away from Eau Claire is Menominee, where Ethan Iverson is from. So there's something in the water up there in Wisconsin.

Yeah, starting with Les Paul.

Yeah, exactly. The ultimate tinkerer. What would we do without him? Multi-track tape recording, it's really amazing. He's sorely missed.

More specific questions about the sounds going on here...you have quite an array of tones from track to track.

"Isocèles" has just at tinge of distortion. It's a different intent than "Angry Panda."

Well, that one I did use the RAT for and a Tube Screamer sort of sound that I got from the Boss GT-3. And it's pretty cool because it does have a slight compression you can add to it either before or after the distortion. So it's kind of fun. You can get all these different ways that the distortion affects the compression and vice versa. And then of course, even after everything is down

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on the computer you can add compression or minimize compression with Pro Tools or whatever you're using after that. And I was fortunate enough to have Sean Pierce mixing and mastering this record. He had worked with Bill Frisell on many of his projects and I first met him through working with Chris Tarry, a Canadian bass player. He mixed a couple of Chris' records and I thought he just did such a great job and he was really easy to work with. So this is the first record I mixed via the internet, which was kind of a strange task to get used to at first. But it was an interesting way to do it. The result was really good, I thought. He's based in Winnipeg. Every day we would email and send files. I'd listen back and I bought a really good pair of reference speakers for my micro-studio in my basement, and just listened to these tracks. I guess the process took longer than usual but I'm really glad that his ears were involved in the final product.

And probably something that couldn't have been done five or ten years ago.

Exactly. I think people were really amazed at the Frank Sinatra "Duets" record where they didn't even have to be in the same studio together and still got this amazing result. It's such a relatively new way of recording, even from my first record which was done on DAT tape. And that was direct to two-track DAT tape so you kind of had to get the mix the way you wanted it to be before you even started recording for the day. So ten years ago, you'd go into the studio and set everything up and basically work on getting a sound for hours and hours, and then kind of just jump through your record as fast as you could. And then ADAT came along so you could go back and fix things. And then of course the direct recording to the hard drive just opened up a whole new world of possibilities. It's kind of like a huge blessing but also a huge curse at the same time because you always have the choice of going back and fixing notes or shaving off an ending that didn't come off right. That's why everything sounds the way it sounds today. Everything is pretty much perfect.

And you know who you can thank for that? Steely Dan.

Yeah, but maybe some day we'll all get tired of this fixing everything and go back to imperfection and the more humane feeling of the recording.

What's going on with the tune "Stasis." Is that a Whammy pedal?

Oh, the octave up sound? That's also the GT-3. I did have a Whammy pedal but it's been sitting in the basement for three, four years. I'm trying not to use it so much because it became part of my gear bag that I was lugging around. I just got to the point where it was like, "I don't want to be known as the guy who always brings a Whammy pedal to every single gig." But that particular sound on "Stasis" is an octave—the note sounds an octave higher from where you play it. The thing about the GT-3 which I like is, the track of the note is not exact. Whereas, the Whammy pedal, it's insanely exact. The GT-3 has a slight lag time to where the note gets heard and it's also not true to pitch. It's just a little bit off. And I think over the years every time Boss comes out with a new GT pedal it gets better, and that is because there's more processing involved with each element of the thing. That's why boards keep getting bigger and bigger and there's more processing and it's more crystal clear, like the new GT-10. But at some point, I don't like that. I want more uncharacteristic sounds. I'm looking for something that's not true to pitch or something that's just a little muddy. Because if I'm going to be dragging around this big board, I want to be happy with it. It's something that I bought on eBay for \$175. It's really been great. It's a great thing to bring around and it has tremendous amount of sounds and you can store patches and then when you recall them they sound exactly like they did the day before. When I used to play with the Mahavishnu Project I had two pedalboards that I made that were all taped and velcroed in with all my favorite pedals—Tube Screamer, RAT, Ibanez delays a Mu-Tron pedal, wah-wah, and a giant Ernie Ball volume pedal. The whole case weighed like 60 pounds and after I quit playing with that group I was like, "I'm not gonna drag this stuff around anymore. I just don't see the point." So I went online and bought the GT-3 and just spent hours and hours programming everything to the way I like it. You can hear the Mahavishnu influence on those opening arpeggios from "Angry Panda."

The tune "Pi" is an intimate duet with acoustic guitar and upright bass. It's like a cleansing breath in the middle of the recording—very sweet, lyrical with that Midwestern heartland quality.

I don't know. I think a lot of that has to do with my dad always listening to WAXX radio, which was an AM country radio station in Eau Claire. They played Tammy Wynette, Roy Clark, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings. I guess I was always hearing that music in the back of my head...and I guess it does seep out. I love the acoustic guitar. I wish I could play it better, but I definitely wanted to have an acoustic tune on my record. All four of my records have some acoustic playing on them. I think it's a nice little change of pace from the aggressive rocked out thing. It's nice to take a moment and pull back from it all. And I also wanted to feature Matt Clohesy, the great bass player, and have him stretch a little bit.

On the title track it sounds like you're disguising the picking sound. Is that with an effect?

Well, I've tried to get away from picking every note. For a while there, when I was in the Mahavishnu Project, I was trying to pick every note—but then I soon realized I'll never be John McLaughlin so why should I try? It's so much easier to slur notes and hammer on. That's the great thing about the guitar. There's so many different ways you can get a note out of it, get the note to ring. And all the greats are there right in front of you that don't use a pick. Jeff Beck, John Abercrombie, Mick Goodrick, Joe Pass, Wes—it's all eye-opening. I'm definitely trying more and more to lay off the pick. It never stops, the amount of time that you can spend trying to do something.

This is your fourth record. Do you see an evolution or continuity?

I do see some continuity. I'm trying to explore all the different avenues of jazz I can. I'm sorry if they don't fit into the traditional categories we're all used to labeling something as—it's either fusion or it's straight ahead or it's avant-garde or Latin. I don't care about any of that. I just want to play music, and whatever I write, whatever I feel like writing that day, that's what came out. And whatever I've listened to, that's also gonna come out. I mean, I can't help but be influenced by every type of music and all different types of guitar players. Rock, jazz, fusion guys, country guys. There's no end to what you can work on, and why should there be? There's no finite set of rules or regulations that you have to adhere to to play jazz guitar.



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