

HAL MERRILL

Extended Biography



I started steel guitar lessons at the age of 7. It was the encouragement of my parents that got me started. In fact they encouraged all of their children to play music. I studied with a number of teachers, learning traditional songs and Hawaiian songs by the "Oahu" teaching series. We played at music festivals that were especially geared toward helping children with the challenge of performing before an audience.

By the age of 20, my interest in the steel guitar had slightly dwindled, as my interests were leading me toward rock guitar. Then a revelation happened. A friend told me that there was a guy in town that was playing rock music on pedal steel guitar. And not just any rock music. He was playing Jeff Beck's "Blue Wind" on pedal steel. I just had to go see this guy, and so I did. His name was Don Davis, and I was extremely impressed, to say the least. He had it going on. Not only did he play his own exquisite style of pedal steel guitar, he was an excellent vocalist and band leader.

What was even more interesting to me, is that he also was a teacher. I signed up for lessons that very night. I thought that since I had been already playing lap steel for a number of years, it would be simply a matter of continuing on the path that I was already on.

Wow was I in for a surprise! At the very first lesson, Don said to me, "You know all of the techniques you learned from your previous teachers? You are going to have to go back and completely re-learn how to play, how to hold your hands, everything. You are going to have to develop an entirely new perspective on music."

And I said, "O.K."

You see, it was the perfect scenario for someone to learn. I was ready and willing to learn, and Don was the inspiration and had the proper techniques. Not only was I learning techniques of playing, but I was being taught how to "teach myself". He didn't just teach me songs, he taught me how to teach myself songs. All of the practical things, like learning the form, music theory application, memorizing the song, developing chops, and most importantly, paying dues, which means performing on stage night after night. There is no substitute for performance. Music happens in front of an audience, not in the practice room.

My interest in jazz began in earnest one summer night at a street fair, in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Don was performing in one group, and then, later, none other than Maurice Anderson, of worldly fame, was playing pedal steel guitar with a jazz group. I will never forget that event.

There was no question in my mind from then on: I wanted to do that. The sound was so mesmerizing, and they were so talented and the group was so tight, you were just drawn into the sound.

So I studied with Don for a number of years. He took me through various stages of playing and performing. For the next 12 years, I traveled on gigs with various blues and pop groups, and the days were free to study jazz. Throughout this time I was enrolled for a couple of semesters at Montana State University in Bozeman, at Chabot College in San Leandro, and studied jazz composition with Bill Rossi in the Seattle Area.

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One of the most challenging times was getting used to performing at jazz jam sessions. I can tell you that it takes a lot of guts to get on stage with seasoned jazz players, playing pedal steel guitar, and getting to where you are comfortable with this. Over time, however, I learned more and more jazz standards, and started to get a real feel for how the music works, how to listen and communicate with the other players and how to use finesse in developing improvised solos.

I can thank the Jump Ensemble, which includes Gregg Robinson, Marty Hasegawa, and Mark Filler. They were especially kind in helping me develop as a musician and in helping me with recording projects.

There are some very interesting challenges to playing jazz music on steel guitar. One of them is a credibility issue. Unless you are really, really proficient at it, you can quite easily get written off as an oddball, eccentric character that simply entertains the concept, but doesn't quite follow through, perhaps akin to a side show at a carnival. Just like there are a thousand mediocre saxophonists for every really good one, the like is true for pedal steel guitar.

And then even when you develop considerable proficiency, even with good players, it takes time to make the music really come through. That's why I swore off of live sessions for awhile. There wasn't really time to develop a chemistry that would allow the music to really shine through. To explain it realistically, us mortals may have a few opportunities to be in the right circumstances with the right people that allows the real true music to come through. But we have the greats to aspire to, and I am deeply inspired by most of them. Most recently Pat Metheny, Bill Evans, Toots Thielemans, and earlier in my life, Miles and Coltrane, and Charles Lloyd, of course.

The sound for my playing is still very much developing, and always will be. I hear something a little different every time I play it, and listening, might hear a phrase by Bill Evans and wonder what it is. By the time it gets into my music it ends being completely different, of course. I try to play what the sax players play, what the piano plays, what the guitar player plays, but it ends up sounding like the steel guitar, and that's good.

I am striving to share as much of this with as many people as I can, that's what it's about. It's about carrying on the tradition and art of jazz music the best way we know how, and everybody's way is a little different.

"The impressionism really is apparent in Hal's composing and performing. Both are beautiful and take your mind to a different place."

~Jim Stahlhut | Producer, composer, bandleader and jazz guitarist, Denver, CO

"Great compositions, great arrangements, and great sound (regarding "Story")!"

~ Susan Gatschet, KUVU, Denver CO

"This artist, Hal Merrill, is taking the steel guitar in an entirely new direction."

~Matt Rosenberg, "The Seattle Times"