

SCOTT FRIEDLANDER



JOEL HARRISON

HERE'S THE ALTERNATIVE

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

Joel Harrison – guitarist, composer, writer, teacher, producer – is a very busy person. Founder of the Alternative Guitar Summit (AGS), Harrison gathers and organizes an array of guitarists in a one-of-a-kind summer camp, a guitar festival and interactive performances throughout the year. The 66-year-old performs, records, tours, writes books, creates podcasts and in general acts as a provocateur for all things guitar. A graduate of Bard College, he was appointed a Guggenheim Fellow in 2010 and proceeded to establish AGS, which is led by an advisory board that includes guitarists Pat Metheny and Nels Cline and features lesser-known musicians along with name artists such as Mike Stern, Bill Frisell, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Rodney Jones and Gilad Hekselman.

The New York City Jazz Record: What came first, the guitar camp or the summit?

Joel Harrison: The concert series started in 2011 at Cornelia Street Café (in Greenwich Village). One summer I was asked to program a festival there, and it was so enjoyable that I just couldn't stop. When the camp started, in 2016, I was producing from two to four concerts a year. We were occasionally doing workshops in the city, and I had always wanted to start a guitar camp. I just didn't know how to do it logistically. And then I met the person who runs the Music Masters Collective up in the Catskill region of New York State through a mutual friend. This facility was running music camps all summer. We got to talking and put it together. The first one had about 23 sign-ups. Intimate, pretty wonderful. But three or four years later, we had 115. It kept building, partly through the good sense of my business partner, Michael Densmore. The essential characteristic is to celebrate the great range of modern guitar music, free of genre and labels. It's all about this community of creative guitar players that I'm essentially throwing parties for.

TNYCJR: And you've had success getting significant guitar players to show up.

Harrison: It's been really exciting to be able to work with people who are heroes of mine – not just the well-known people but also some of the lesser-known people who are also phenomenal. Probably 70 or 80 guitarists have been involved since the beginning.

TNYCJR: Are there any in particular that have been regulars?

Harrison: Oh, yeah. In the beginning, for our concerts, we regularly had Ben Monder, Nels Cline, Steve Cardenas, Liberty Ellman, for instance. At the camp we started inviting Kurt Rosenwinkel four or five years ago. Gilad Hekselman has been a regular. And Bill Frisell a few times, Julian Lage a few times. Those are the better-known people. But I have to say that when I started this, it was a way to advocate for lesser-known players.

And a funny thing happened as I was going along, those lesser-known players got much better known. I'm not saying that their success had anything to do with me, but I was sort of celebrating these people a little before others were. I guess I need a new crop! It's been really interesting because you have first-time meetings between people who don't necessarily ever play together, don't even necessarily know each other, but create this in-the-moment dialog with the instrument. But commerce becomes part of this, whether I like it or not, trying to balance that as far as the camp goes and also the concert series. I can celebrate the little-known people all I want, but if I can't get people to come to the camp or to a concert, it's not going to work out.

TNYCJR: I suspect that part of the camp's appeal is that students see these established and upcoming guitarists operate and create together and form a community, right?

Harrison: That's exactly right. My business partner describes the experience of the camps as being allowed backstage, the curtains parted. You get to hang out with the creators, it's up close and personal. You're dining with these people, you're jamming with them at night. You're watching these amazing duets unfold between, let's say, Julian Lage and Marc Ribot or Steve Cardenas and Miles Okazaki. It's guitar paradise.

TNYCJR: The website mentions that people who don't play are still invited to show up.

Harrison: That doesn't happen very often, but there are guitar lovers who don't necessarily play or don't play much. And to me, this is the greatest guitar party in the world. Why not just come and see all the concerts and the jam sessions? I think it should be attractive to almost anybody who loves improvised guitar music. Or improvised music, period.

TNYCJR: And I would think that one of the appeals to the campers is human contact beyond what would normally be a rudimentary exercise of learning an instrument and then playing a tune. They get to understand that it's not just music on paper or not just playing notes, but it's an embodiment of sorts.

Harrison: I couldn't put it any better than you just did. Yes, that's the real message of the camp, not any technical exercise. It's about finding meaning, finding your own voice.

TNYCJR: When you think of some of the people that are appearing this year at camp and then at the summit, they obviously must enjoy it.

Harrison: Oh man, they all contribute so much, and they love doing it. You know, the camp goes by quite

quickly and people often come specifically because they have a passion for one particular artist.

Julian Lage is an extremely empathetic communicator. Camp enables people to come up to him during breaks or lunch or whatever and say, "Your music saved my life." Rodney Jones was sitting at the lunch table with one of our perennial campers, and they were talking about Kenny Burrell. The camper was saying how much he appreciated Burrell. Rodney said, "Want to talk to him?" So he called him up on the phone! I mean, that's pretty cool.

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FREE CONCERTS
www.jazzfoundation.org

Charlie Parker Jazz Festival

8/21 - Cucho Martinez & Friends
El Sol Brillante - 522 E. 12th St - 5:30PM

8/22 - Calvin Hill Quartet + Film Screening:
The Drum Also Waltzes
Jackie Robinson Rec. Center
85 Bradhurst Ave - 6:30PM

8/23 - Bertha Hope Quintet: Elmo Hope at 100
Harlem Rose Garden - E. 129th St - 5:30PM

In partnership with City Parks Foundation, Ariana's List, and NYC Parks

Hudson River Park Jazz at Pier 84

Hudson River Greenway & 44th St - 7PM

8/7 - Whitney Marchelle
8/14 - Debbie Knapper and the Knappertime Band

BBQ Blues Festival - 2nd Stage

Pier 76 - 408 12th Ave - 1PM

8/10 - The Phil Young Blues Experience
Tina Fabrique
Charlie Burnham
Beareather Reddy
Gordon Lockwood

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ANDREW CYRILLE QUARTET

BILL FRISELL - DAVID VIRELLES - BEN STREET

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BILL FRISELL FOUR

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

TNYCJR: You have a record coming up soon, I understand, a gathering of guitar players.

Harrison: Yeah. This is the first collective enterprise, if you will, of the Summit, where I asked members of our community to do solo pieces. This was something that took place originally during the pandemic. We did a virtual concert series of solo performances, and it was wonderful to see what people were coming up with. I decided to collect some of these and add a few others. It is called *The Middle of Everywhere*. We've got Fareed Haque, the legendary guitarist from Chicago. Nguyễn Lê, one of my favorite guitarists of all time. Nels Cline, Liberty Ellman, Anupam Shobhakar, who plays electric fretless guitar and is a classical Indian musician and a metal player, Camila Meza, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Anthony Pirog, Cecil Alexander, Miles Okazaki and Henry Kaiser. You've got to have pretty eclectic tastes to truly appreciate the record. We celebrate the release this month at Le Poisson Rouge.

TNYCJR: I also understand that you have a new book.

Harrison: I did a guitar book a couple of years ago, interviews with 27 visionary guitarists, and I wanted to follow up with something different. The new book is called *Pity the Genius: A Journey through American Guitar Music in 33 Tracks* (Cymbal Press)—it's short essays on guitarists from 100 years ago to the present, some that would not be very well known but are incredible, again celebrating the singular position of the guitar in American music and history. It's about this remarkable landscape of unique players, all of whom have played a part in making our music the beacon that it is around the world. I try to make it personal. There's people I studied with who I think were incredibly influential, like Mick Goodrick, who's probably the most impactful and influential jazz guitar teacher of our lifetimes. There's Danny Gatton, who has, to me, truly earned the title of the world's best unknown guitarist, although people referred to Roy Buchanan that way, too. I wrote about them both, and they're both from my hometown, so it was close to my heart.

You find these pockets of influence that people are in danger of forgetting. Sister Rosetta Tharpe: a phenomenal person, not just a player, so ahead of her time. John Abercrombie: I mean, we should really continue talking about him into the future. A young man named Arthur Rhames, who grew up in Brooklyn and died at a very early age, but was a huge influence on a portion of the Brooklyn community. He left us so soon that his full impact was not able to be borne out. I talk to people who knew these individuals: Vernon Reid about Rhames; Gil Goldstein about playing with Pat Martino; John Previti, Gatton's bass player of 20 years. I try to get to the heart of these people.

TNYCJR: So, for you, their music is not just a product of technique. There's a lot of people who play guitar, but not a lot of people who play guitar in a way that goes beyond just hitting notes.

Harrison: It's so true. This book is more about the *inside* of people rather than anything academic. Here's an example. Allan Holdsworth is especially known for his technical bravura. But when I took a closer look and talked to people who knew him, I saw the profundity of his contribution to the guitar world in a new way. Some of Allan's pieces are heartbreakingly beautiful. The man did *not* have an easy life. There's a ton of feeling in a lot of his work, something bittersweet. When you look deeper you begin to see the soul illuminated behind the notes, and that is, to me, everything. Why are we here? Why do we make music? What do these artists, who properly could be called shamans, reveal to us about the truth of life?

TNYCJR: What motivates you to get so involved with the guitar world?

Harrison: It's a means of discovery and enlightenment for me. I've learned an unbelievable amount. It's a way of hanging out with my friends and heroes. The world *needs* outlets for creative music. We all do our part. It's also just a lot of fun. I guess you have to wonder why I would volunteer, essentially raise my hand and go, "Oh, I'm going to do all this stuff." I think it's because I truly believe in the idea of community being a restorative function in the world we live in. People wonder about the name "alternative." What does it mean? It's purposefully vague. It's in opposition to the status quo. What I can say is this: 15 years ago I saw that few festivals invited me to participate. Almost none espoused the virtues I hold dear. Most are timid, predictable, just fucking boring. So I started my own!

For more info visit alternativeguitarsummit.com. *The Alternative Guitar Summit featuring Harrison with Kurt Rosenwinkel, Mike Stern, Nels Cline, Wolfgang Muthspiel, et al. is at Le Poisson Rouge Aug. 24. See Calendar.*

Recommended Listening:

- Joel Harrison—3 + 3 = 7 (Nine Winds, 1995/96)
- Joel Harrison—*Harrison on Harrison (Jazz Explorations of George Harrison)* (HighNote, 2005)
- Joel Harrison—*The Wheel* (Intuition/Innova, 2008)
- Joel Harrison String Choir—*The Music of Paul Motian* (Sunnyside, 2010)
- Joel Harrison 5—*Spirit House* (Whirlwind, 2013)
- Joel Harrison, Anthony Pirog, Stephan Crump, Allison Miller—*The Great Mirage* (AGS Recordings, 2023)

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quit dialysis, dying a short time thereafter on December 5, 1972.

Alto saxophonist Charles McPherson, an admirer of the trumpeter long before they played together on what was one of Dorham's final studio recordings, pianist Barry Harris Sextet's *Bull's Eye!* (Prestige, 1968), explained "Kenny's melodic, linear line in his playing is just beautiful. His improvisations are great for their harmonic accuracy and logical, seamless connections to each song. He is one of the greatest." And important to McPherson was Dorham's contribution to bop: "I like all of his records with Bird... They were as great as the ones Bird did with Miles. To me, he is the most Charlie Parker-playing trumpet player: he understood the language of Parker better than anyone and was not a copycat."

French horn player and multi-instrumentalist David Amram had a long friendship and working relationship with Dorham. The two met in 1952 when he was introduced to Charlie Parker after a concert. "When Charlie learned I was a classical composer, he suggested I talk to Kenny, since he was a hell of a writer. Kenny took me downstairs and showed me stuff on trumpet and voicings on the piano. He was a natural mentor and remained that way even when he worked in a music store before he passed away. When we finally got to play together on a record, *Blue Spring* (Riverside, 1959), Philly Joe Jones didn't show up for one date and instead of getting upset, he sat down and wrote two more arrangements. Watching him play piano, his harmonic knowledge was staggering, and I appreciated over the years how that enabled him to play all those gorgeous notes and amazing phrases on trumpet. He was an improviser in the highest sense of the word."

Many of today's trumpeters who weren't yet even born by the time of Dorham's death, also have great appreciation for this overlooked master's contributions. Says Jeremy Pelt: "Dorham is as essential to the development of the language as any more often

celebrated trumpeter. His level of invention and harmonic acuity is something we should all aspire to achieve." And Mike Rodriguez reaffirms: "His deep melodic, incredible sense of harmony and soulfulness continue to influence my playing and I feel he should be remembered as one of the masters of modern improvisation."

"Kenny Dorham Centennial Celebration" (featuring Jeremy Pelt, Mike Rodriguez, Tim Hagans, Josh Evans, Jimmy Owens, Brandon Lee and Joe Magnarelli) is at Dizzy's Club Aug. 30-Sep. 1. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- The Jazz Messengers—*At The Café Bohemia, Volume 1-2* (Blue Note, 1955)
- Kenny Dorham—*Afro-Cuban* (Blue Note, 1955)
- Max Roach 4—*Plays Charlie Parker* (Mercury, 1957-58)
- Kenny Dorham—*Quiet Kenny* (Prestige New Jazz, 1959)
- Kenny Dorham—*Matador* (United Artists Jazz, 1961-62)
- Kenny Dorham—*Una Mas* (Blue Note, 1963)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

We Jazz' worldwide distribution is handled by !K7 (except in Nordic countries where We Jazz does it) and direct-to-customer sales are through the label's bandcamp page. Another outlet is the label's online record store, digelius.com. The name is from the now defunct Helsinki record outlet. "I love record stores," says Nives. "We already ran a small record shop out of our office and Digelius was about to close so we just connected the dots. For now we're doing online sales and event pop-ups. My goal is to one day re-open the Digelius physical store in a meaningful way."

With all of We Jazz' projects, does Nives sometimes feel overwhelmed? No, he says: "I suppose it's about the drive and how to manage it. I have the same hours in my day as everyone. I'm just trying to do interesting stuff that feels right and learn more each day."

For more info visit wejazzrecords.bandcamp.com. We Jazz artists performing this month include Jonah Parzen-Johnson at Nublu 151 Aug. 29. See Calendar.

(ENCORE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

break from his focused concentration to glance up at the applauding audience and issue a shrug—a gesture of humility. Given his significant achievements, perhaps it's humility why he is not more widely known.

Despite the esoteric concepts that drive his music, Gregorio underscores everything he does with a deep sense of melody and beauty. As Lopez explains, "He doesn't seem to give a shit about being in the limelight. He's just interested in making music, and that's really admirable."

For more info visit guillermogregorio.bandcamp.com. Gregorio is at Ibeam Brooklyn Aug. 22. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Guillermo Gregorio—*Otra Musica: Tape Music, Fluxus & Free Improvisation in Buenos Aires* (Atavistic, 1963-70)
- Guillermo Gregorio—*Ellipsis* (hatOLOGY, 1997)
- Guillermo Gregorio, Pandelis Karayorgis, Nate McBride—*Chicago Approach* (Nuscope, 2005)
- Guillermo Gregorio/Paul Giallorenzo—*Multiverse* (Peira, 2012)
- Guillermo Gregorio/Brandon Lopez—*12 Episodes* (Relative Pitch, 2017)
- Guillermo Gregorio—*Two Trios* (ESP-Disk', 2018/2020)