

By Barry Cleveland

Elegant Thunder

Mimi Fox Storms the Bebop Bastions

Mimi Fox has been wowing San Francisco Bay Area audiences for years, but, as a result of nearly incessant touring and a string of stunning recordings, word of her prodigious talents has now spread across the continent and throughout the

globe. At a time when public interest in jazz has ebbed considerably (or been diverted into the gelded "smooth" variety), it is rare to encounter an artist who has not only mastered the traditional forms, but who has managed to reinvigorate them.

Like many of her fatback-playing forebears, the New York native was essentially self-taught on her

instrument. Gleaning bits and pieces from her jazz-singing mother's standards repertoire, her father's Dixieland records, and her sibling's Beatles and Motown collections, the young guitarist quickly went from strumming a few chords at age 12, to performing in folk and funk bands by the time she was in her mid-teens. After relocating to California in 1979, Fox studied more formally with ace jazz guitarist Bruce Forman, and later taught herself to read music after realizing it was essential for surviving as a session player and for transcribing solos by jazz-guitar greats.

Since that time, Fox has established herself as a great jazz guitarist. The late Joe Pass—a friend and mentor—declared that she “plays with a tremendous fire, and can do pretty much anything she wants with her instrument.” In addition to her association with Pass, Fox has played alongside legends such as Charlie Byrd, Kenny Burrell, and Jim Hall, and has recorded with an impressive array of other artists, including saxophonists David Sanchez and Don Lanphere, organist Joey DeFrancesco, and fellow guitarists Calvin Keys, Russell Malone, and Charlie Hunter.

Fox's clean and economical playing incorporates exquisite harmonic constructions, lightning-fast runs and arpeggios, deft use of natural and artificial harmonics, tricky rhythmic phrasings, and captivating dynamics into an organic whole that pours forth with the passion of Charlie Christian and the stylistic continuity and grace of Wes Montgomery. On her latest CD, *She's the Woman* [Favored Nations], Fox fuses such diverse elements as the self-penned up-tempo bopper “East Coast Attitude” and a playful rendering of the Beatles “She's a Woman” into a cohesive, mature, and delightfully individual musical statement.

One of your specialties is startling arrangements of standards. Many of those songs have been done to death, yet you've managed to breathe new life into them. How did you approach that task psychologically?

There are so many great players and great renditions of standards that in order to make an arrangement fresh, you have to make it your own. For me, that involves allowing all of my different influences to take their full weight, while still making musical sense. For example, when rearranging Miles' “All Blues” for solo-acoustic guitar, I tried to find



Fox's custom S3 archtop, with (left to right) her Yamaha CG100-A, Guild F-30, and Takamine 12-string in the background.

a way of re-harmonizing the song using all of my jazz knowledge, both harmonically and scale-wise. But, after that, it was more of an emotional decision as to what *felt* right. So there are your years of study and the intellectual aspects of the music, and there is also the mystical—when things seem to just emerge from somewhere else. My job as an artist is to take someone somewhere they hadn't thought they would be going.

What percentage of your playing is improvisational?

I try to improvise as much as I can, but the answer really depends on how you define improvisation. Is it improvising if someone uses a pet phrase, but instead of starting it on the last sixteenth-note of beat four, they start it on the downbeat of two, and therefore displace the rhythm? Or does it count as improvisation if, instead of playing a familiar lick in sixteenth-notes they play it in triplets? To a classical musician, you bet your buns it does! For a jazz artist, where you're training yourself to work on these types of things all the time, it's yes and no.

The question of improvisation also brings up something I've been working on a lot lately, which is playing in odd meters.



For example, if you have a two-bar phrase under your fingers, and it's supposed to have eight beats, and you're suddenly playing in 7/8 where there are only seven beats, do you rush ahead to finish the phrase, or do you let it drop over into the next one and then compensate? One reason many people have trouble playing in odd meters is that they tend to practice in 4/4, and their ideas come out naturally in two- and four-bar phrases. When they're playing in, say, five or seven, they're forced to see how much they are actually improvising, and how much they're just relying on their bag of tricks.

A lot of your playing seems to totter on the edge without ever falling off. To what extent do you feel it's important to transcend current abilities and reach for something beyond?

I have a lot of courage when it comes to improvising. I'm pretty conservative in a lot of areas of my life, but when I go to improvise, I figure that's my chance to really fly by the seat of my pants. What does it really matter if I fall on my ass? I *do* have recordings where I feel like I fell off the edge, but I'm sort of proud of that fact. At least I'm taking chances. I often

"I consider myself a musician and a composer first, and a guitarist second."



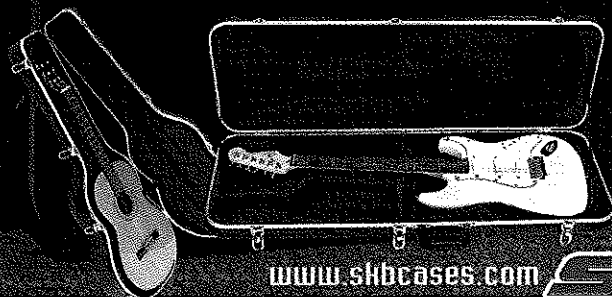
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hear people who may be great musicians, but I feel they regurgitate the same stuff I've heard them do many times before. It may be flawlessly executed and harmonically logical, but it doesn't move me.

You have a keen sense of dynamics. Is that something that comes naturally?

No, it's something that I've worked on, and studying classical guitar probably helped me in that area. Many musicians neglect dynamics, which is a shame because they have such an emotional impact on the listener. There are so many ways you can play a single note. For example, let's say you're approaching the G on the 5th fret of the D string. Are you going to slide into it from below, or are you going to come into it from above? And how is that going to affect the sound? How are you going to attack the note? Is it going to be soft, or do you want a more piercing sound? It's all very much about what you're trying to say in a particular phrase or section of a song.

You use clean, pure tones, whereas a lot of jazz players these days are using more effects and distortion. Why did you choose the path you did, and what keeps you on it?

The fact is that I just sound stupid with effects pedals. Believe me, I've tried them. But I guess because I'm a roots-based/early jazz/blues/folk musician, my orientation is

very acoustic. And I'll tell you the truth: I enjoy the challenge of having no effects, and getting a clean, well-articulated sound with nothing to hide behind. I've had lots of students who can shred with the distortion up, but when I gave them a little acoustic guitar and asked them to play the same thing cleanly, it sounded terrible. If you've got all of this distortion and other stuff going on, it's hard to tell if someone is actually articulating well, or just slurring across a bunch of notes. There's nothing wrong with that, it's just not my thing.

I know you've performed with Muriel Anderson. Who are some other female guitarists GP readers should be aware of?

In New York, there's a great electric blues player named Debbie Davies, and Sheryl Bailey and Jane Getter are excellent

jazz and fusion players. There are also a number of classical guitarists who are phenomenal, such as Sharon Isbin and Janet Marlow, who plays a 10-string. Badi Assad is also absolutely amazing.

If you were able to impart one essential bit of wisdom to a student, what would it be?

Work on being a good human being. That's my own personal bent, but I don't see how the other stuff can come together if you're a jerk. I think it's very important to develop yourself spiritually and emotionally, and that's something young students find hard to come to terms with. And I don't mean just being good to others, but also to yourself. For example, I've seen great 18-year-old players with tendonitis, and there's something obviously out of balance there. If you're practicing 15 hours a day, it's too much. ☐

FOX'S FAVES

GUITARS

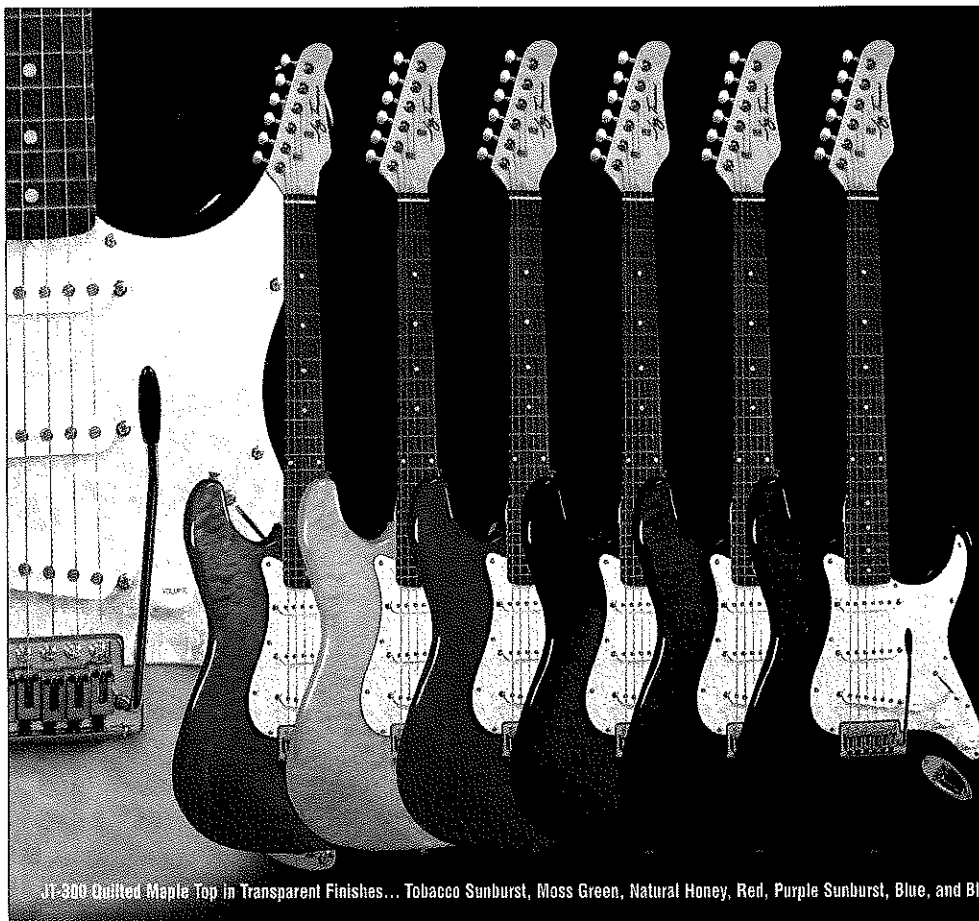
Customized Heritage Sweet-16 (with HRW pickups), Gibson ES-446, Fender Stratocaster, S3 archtop, Guild F-30 acoustic, Novax acoustic baritone (with fanned frets), Takamine 12-string, Yamaha CG100-A classical.

AMPS

Early '70s Fender Deluxe Reverb, Roland JC-120.

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