



Mimi Fox

Breaking Barriers in Jazz

Hailed by no less than guitar legends like Joe Pass and Jim Hall, as well as winning numerous music polls, Mimi Fox has established herself as one of the leading jazzers around today. She keeps a rigorous schedule of touring, recording, and teaching.

Aside from her solo work, Fox has also played with everyone from Branford Marsalis to Diana Krall to Stevie Wonder, among many others. Her latest offering is *Live at the Palladium*. We caught up with her as she prepared to hit the road yet again.

Watching you live, one can see that you often scat solos to yourself. Why do you do that?

Many jazz improvisers do it, and the answer for me is two-fold. First, it slows me down and helps me breathe with the music and play more melodically. Secondly, it's fun and gets me more deeply into the music. It also helps me tune out extraneous noise – mostly from within my own hyper-critical head (laughs)!

Who were your major guitar influences?

Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, and Bruce Forman for jazz. But as a kid, I also enjoyed Glen Campbell, Stephen Stills, and Paul Simon.

Jazz requires an enormous amount of background training – sight-reading, theory, chord harmony, modes, technique. When you teach, how do you keep new students from being overwhelmed by it all?

Teaching is as much about knowing what *not* to teach as it is what to teach,

and especially when. You have to dole out the information step-by-step and give encouragement and praise each step of the way. I try to teach all my students how to become their own best teacher. People assimilate information in different ways, so it's crucial for each student to understand their own learning process. My job is to help them figure that out.

You've played with lots of top jazz musicians. Do any performances stand out in your memory?

I've been fortunate to play with so many great artists. I had a blast recently playing with [jazz organist] Joey DeFrancesco who asked me to play a bunch of shows with him. I loved playing with both Stanley Jordan and Mundell Lowe because, in very different ways, they bring great energy and individuality to the table. I also loved working with jazz vocalists Greta Matassa and Scotty Wright. I cherished my time playing with Charlie Byrd, as well as, more recently, Jim Hall and Kenny Burrell. I also love playing with saxophonist Houston Person. And Branford is unbelievable!

There are tons of great jazz standards, but you write your own material. How do craft an instrumental that's memorable?

I compose from the heart and use all the inspiration of people, places, and things that have touched me in my music. But I also have been influenced by great composers like Ellington, Monk, Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, as well as Gershwin, Cole Porter, and certainly pop writers like Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, and the like.

What are your favorite guitars, and how do you like them set up?

I have been a Heritage endorser since 1991 and I love their instruments. I have a Sweet 16, a Golden Eagle, and my road warrior – a 575 Custom with a spruce top. I am a hollowbody gal all the way because I love a big, fat, warm tone. I use flatwound Thomastik-Infeld strings, in particular the George Benson set with a .012 on top. I seem to have pretty low action, but not as low as my friend [noted jazz guitarist] John Pisano (laughs)!

What amps do you use? And do you use any effects?

No effects for me, as I'm fond of a pure, warm tone with nothing added. For amps, I like the Fender Deluxe Reverb or the Roland JC 120. For small gigs, though, I use the TomKat amp from JazzKat.

Aside from singers, jazz is a fairly male-dominated arena. Is there a glass ceiling for female jazz musicians?

I could write a book... but suffice to say, things are getting better for me and other women artists. I think that as society continues to change, it will only improve for women musicians. I have certainly dealt with my share of BS, as have all the women musicians I know. But we continue to make music and are comforted by the people who support us. I'm lucky to make my living as an artist, and try to surround myself with good people of all stripes. I try to always keep a positive attitude and I'm pleasantly surprised to see how far that goes!

Jazz is an American art form, yet its top musicians have to tour Europe or Japan to stay afloat. Why does jazz resonate more overseas than in the U.S.?

Just as "world music" is appreciated here, when American jazz artists visit other countries, we're considered exotic and special, mostly because we are bringing our music to another culture.

Other countries understand that jazz is a great art form, while people in the U.S. sometimes take it for granted because it was invented here. And maybe because of the huge contributions of African-Americans, as well as racism, there has also been a tendency not to take it as seriously as people take chamber music or symphonic classical music. But I would hold Bird, Trane, Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Betty Carter as great artists and composers, right up there with Bach, Mozart, and Stravinsky.

You're a natural improviser, but that ability can be difficult to master. How can a player improve his or her improv skills?

I consider myself a natural musician with a strong affinity for music and a good ear, but I think becoming a strong improviser is something anyone can achieve as long as they put in the time. You have to work on scales, arpeggios, and learn hundreds of tunes, as well as practice every day. It's a long haul, but that's what it takes for someone to become a very good improviser. You get out of it what you put into it. – *Pete Prown*

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Dobie Gray's "Drift Away" is one of my favorite songs. I've read that Reggie Young played the lead parts, but also heard that Troy Seals played the Telecaster fills on the choruses. Who played what? – Mark Hayden

Reggie says that Troy Seals played acoustic on the session, while he played the electric tracks. Reggie's first pass was with a Les Paul Deluxe, playing the mellower tones in the intro and verses. The first overdub doubled the intro with the same guitar, but with the tape speed varied to give it a chorus-type sound (this was before plug-in chorus effects) The second overdub was with the '69 Telecaster Custom he still plays today. The amp was a silverface Deluxe Reverb.

In the August '06 issue, Billy Squier talked about a Strat mod that uses the middle Tone knob as a volume control for the neck pickup. What is that, exactly? – Scott Sloyter

It's an old-school mod with variations depending on which pickups are wired to the selector. In Squier's example, the back two pickups are wired to the stock three-way switch a la post-'67 Telecaster wiring. They're wired to a master Volume and master Tone, while the neck pickup is wired to the bottom Tone control, which becomes a volume control for the neck pickup. With this, you can get the in-between positions without having to balance the three-way, and you can use all three pickups, or the front and rear pickups together. This *will* devalue a vintage Strat, though, because it alters the solder joints.

I found a Premier Twin 12 in mint condition, but its pots are scratchy and the speakers have small magnet. Is this amp worth restoring? – George Farnsworth

The Official VG Price Guide lists that amp at \$700 to \$800 in excellent condition, so it's worthy of restoration. Clean the pots with compressed air followed by DeOxit cleaner. Then have its filter caps replaced and perform other minor maintenance. The speakers may work fine, given the amp is low-powered. If not, get a set of Jensen C12Rs.

Zac Childs is a professional guitar tech based in Nashville. If you have a question about guitars, anything from nuts and bolts to historical or celebrity-related inquiries, drop a line to him at zac@askzac.com.