



A CENTURY OF THE ACOUSTIC

The players—and instruments—that have helped shape the sound of jazz from the swing era to the present

When you see the words “jazz guitar,” what pops into your mind’s ear first? Odds are that you hear the clean, smooth, rich sound of an electric archtop, possibly with its tone knob rolled down for extra low-mid emphasis, picking out chord melodies à la Joe Pass or octave lines in the manner of Wes Montgomery. Without a doubt, this is the stereotypical jazz guitar sound, but over more than 100 years of history, there have been many others. And a significant percentage of them were (and are) produced without the aid of a pickup, cable, or amplifier.

The entire first wave of jazz guitar greats—including hallowed names such as Eddie Lang and Django Reinhardt—were primarily acoustic players. Although unamplified instruments fell out of favor in the bebop and early post-bop eras of the 1940s and ’50s, they began to reappear in the jazz of the ’60s, thanks in part to the bossa nova craze. That rebound has continued into the present, as guitar technology has improved. For the past 50 years, many jazz guitarists have been looking to add more timbral variety to their

playing, and they’ve often found it in an old standby: the acoustic guitar.

AN ICON IS BORN

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when jazz was developing in New Orleans, the guitar was a popular instrument. But the flattop acoustic guitars sold by manufacturers like C.F. Martin, Stella, and Regal simply couldn’t put out enough volume to be heard over the brass and drums of an early jazz combo. The clank of a banjo was far more audible, so banjo players became a fixture in early jazz.

Not surprisingly, as jazz began to flourish in the 1910s and ’20s, guitar sales declined. Gibson turned to its top designer, Lloyd Loar, to come up with something that might turn things around for the company. Loar’s solution was to make an acoustic guitar built more like a violin, with a body that had two f-holes rather than a single circular soundhole, and an arched top that gave the strings’ vibrations more room to resonate and thus more volume. The result of Loar’s labors was the Gibson L-5, first produced in 1923. It wasn’t the first

guitar to boast f-holes and an arched top (luthiers James Back and A.H. Merrill had patented similar designs in the 1890s), but it was the first to reach a mass market. Though the model took several years to catch on with players, the market’s response can best be gauged by the fact that the L-5 has never gone out of production since it was introduced.

It certainly didn’t hurt that one of the L-5’s top endorsers was Eddie Lang, arguably the first great jazz guitar soloist. Born Salvatore Massaro in Philadelphia in 1902, Lang picked up the guitar in his early 20s (he’d previously been a violin and banjo player) and soon became famous for his work with violinist Joe Venuti, the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, and especially singer Bing Crosby. Lang’s technical skill and advanced sense of harmony were remarkable then and remain indisputable today, yet to modern ears he can sound a bit rhythmically stiff. Some of his fellow jazz guitar pioneers of the 1920s and ’30s, including his frequent duet partners Lonnie Johnson and Carl Kress, summon up more swing in their



1962
Charlie Byrd
& Stan Getz
Jazz Samba



1971
Ovation introduces
its first piezo-pickup
acoustic-electric



1964
Getz/Gilberto
"The Girl From
Ipanema"



1988
Ken Donnell
patents the MiniFlex
in-guitar mic

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

Latin Jazz

Fusion

Smooth Jazz

Contemporary

Free Jazz

ACOUSTIC GUITAR IN JAZZ

BY MAC RANDALL

playing. Sadly, there's no way of knowing how Lang's style would have evolved in later years; he died at the age of 30 from complications following a tonsillectomy.

Lang, Johnson, and Kress weren't the only important jazz guitarists in the pre-electric period. Among those who also helped expand the instrument's range and visibility were Nick Lucas, Roy Smeck, Allan Reuss, Dick McDonough, and Otto "Coco" Heimel. But overshadowing them all was a man who came from a different continent and sounded like he came from a different universe.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Jean "Django" Reinhardt was a gypsy, born in Belgium in 1910. Twenty-four years later, he and French violinist Stéphane Grappelli founded a group in Paris, the Quintette du Hot Club de France, that astonished audiences with its sophisticated European take on traditional jazz. Listening to the many recordings that Django made over two decades, it seems barely believable that he'd lost the use of two left-hand fingers due to injuries sustained in a

fire at his home. His playing, whether on original compositions like "Minor Swing" and "Djangology" or American pop songs like "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Night and Day," is more fluid, more lyrical, more imaginative, and (when needed) faster than that of most guitarists with fully functional fretting hands. It's likely that his determination to succeed as a musician despite his handicap had more than a little to do with the compelling sense of urgency that radiates from his every note.

The vitality and confidence of Django's playing has inspired countless musicians across genres—including Willie Nelson and B.B. King—and given rise to a whole subgenre of gypsy jazz, dominated by guitarists such as Biréli Lagrène, Jimmy Rosenberg, and Stéphane Wrembel. Reinhardt's choice of guitar also proved influential. He preferred Selmer guitars, which had an oval-shaped soundhole, a long scale length (26.38 inches), and a top that was bent, rather than carved, into an arch.

Gibson and Selmer weren't alone in manufacturing archtops. John D'Angelico, another soon-to-become-legendary guitar maker,

opened his New York workshop in 1932. At first, his gorgeously appointed New Yorker and Excel archtops didn't come with pickups, but within a few years, he and every other luthier would need to offer them. The introduction of the single-pickup Gibson ES-150 in 1936 changed the guitar business—and music—forever. Using an ES-150 and later a fancier ES-250, Charlie Christian established his reputation as the first major electric guitarist in jazz. Most of Christian's peers quickly followed his lead into the realm of amplified guitars. Although hollow and semi-hollow guitars with f-holes would continue to be the prevailing style in jazz for decades to come (exemplified by Gibson's L-5CES, ES-330, and ES-335), their pure acoustic tone would rarely be heard onstage or on record.

There were a few exceptions to this, however, most notably the archtop guitars made by Epiphone, Stromberg, and Gretsch. One of the foremost acoustic archtop devotees was Freddie Green, the longtime guitarist for Count Basie's band. Green dabbled with electric instruments only briefly, choosing to stay

all-acoustic to the end of his nearly 50-year career. A consummate rhythm man known for his driving, “chunky” chording style, Green rarely played a single-note line. One of his few recorded solos is on “The Elder” from 1962’s *Back With Basie*; fittingly, it’s all chords.

BRAZILIAN WAVES

About a generation after acoustic guitars faded out of the jazz limelight, they returned. But this time they were a different style of guitar: classical guitars with nylon strings. Such instruments were crucial in the work of Brazilian musicians like João Gilberto, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Baden Powell, and Luiz Bonfá, all of whom played guitar and all of whom had a huge impact on American jazz in the 1960s, as writers and as performers.

The stream of influence didn’t just flow in one direction, either. Many great Brazilian acoustic guitar players were deeply in love with jazz, and some moved permanently to the United States to team up with American musicians. To name just two, Laurindo Almeida collaborated with big-band leader Stan Kenton, saxophonist Bud Shank, and the Modern Jazz Quartet, while Bola Sete forged alliances with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianist Vince Guaraldi.

Excited by the new wave of music from Brazil, one notable American, Charlie Byrd, is credited with bringing bossa nova north to the USA. Electing to play jazz on an acoustic nylon-string guitar in the early 1960s, Byrd joined forces with saxophonist Stan Getz and recorded *Jazz Samba*, which featured pieces by Jobim and Powell, among others. After the album’s April 1962 release, it stayed on the *Billboard* pop album charts for 70 weeks, bringing what was just beginning to be called bossa nova to the attention of mainstream USA listeners. Two years later, those listeners’ awareness would be raised further by Getz’s epochal collaboration with João Gilberto, *Getz/Gilberto*, which contained the worldwide hit “The Girl from Ipanema”—and prominent nylon-string guitar throughout.

A REDISCOVERY OF THE ACOUSTIC GUITAR

Guitarists experimented boldly with ways to change their sound in the jazz-rock fusion era of the late 1960s and ’70s. Many of these changes—like the use of solidbody electric guitars played through bigger, louder amps; and effects like distortion, tremolo, and reverb—were shocking to traditionalists. But one particular development couldn’t have been more traditional. As an occasional respite from all the high volume, fusion guitarists increasingly found themselves drawn back to the acoustic guitar.



COURTESY OF CONCORD JAZZ

Each illustrious player who emerged during this time brought a different stylistic focus to the instrument. Englishman John McLaughlin blended blues, Spanish flamenco, and Indian classical music, often at lightning speed. Al Di Meola (who would famously join McLaughlin and flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucía to form a dazzling acoustic trio during the early ’80s) was obsessed with Argentinian tango, particularly the compositions of Astor Piazzolla. Pat Metheny’s playing had a rustic, down-home quality, steeped in American folk and country. Ralph Towner, like Charlie Byrd before him, chose a nylon-string classical guitar as his main axe, but the music he made—both as a solo artist and with the group Oregon—roamed even further afield than Byrd’s, incorporating touches of modern classical music and genres from all over the world.

Not coincidentally, the ability to amplify acoustic guitars without damaging their natural tone grew by leaps and bounds during these years. Since the 1930s, guitar pickups had been mostly magnetic, and an acoustic guitar with a magnetic pickup pretty much sounded like an electric guitar no matter how you tweaked it. The 1970s, however, saw the emergence of piezoelectric pickups (crystal strips laid along a guitar’s bridge underneath its strings) and

transducer pickups (essentially small internal microphones), both of which produced very different tones. Many players tried all three pickup variations, often blending them to achieve a more true-to-life acoustic sound.

Although the means of amplifying acoustic guitars began to change in the ’70s and beyond, the popularity of the archtop in jazz continued unabated. At its head was Jimmy D’Aquisto, an apprentice of John D’Angelico who founded his own company in 1964 after D’Angelico’s death. In his lifetime, D’Aquisto—who died in 1995 at the age of 59, the same age that D’Angelico was at his passing—built only 257 guitars, and they are highly prized by collectors. Two of them, including the one he made in 1983 for the late jazz virtuoso Jim Hall, are in the permanent collection of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

THE TRADITION CONTINUES

Today, the acoustic guitar continues to play an important role in jazz. Many of the great ’60s and ’70s players are still working, and they’ve been joined by a younger but no less talented crew. John Pizzarelli, the son of storied guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli (veteran of the Benny Goodman Orchestra and NBC’s *Tonight Show* band), shares his father’s fondness for both the

ESSENTIAL LISTENING

If you're looking for a good overview of acoustic jazz guitar, check out these albums, presented in roughly chronological order of recording. The Yazoo sampler includes tracks by Eddie Lang, Lonnie Johnson, Carl Kress, Nick Lucas, and Dick McDonough, among others.



Various Artists
Pioneers of the Jazz Guitar
(Yazoo)



Eddie Lang
Jazz Guitar Virtuoso
(Yazoo)



Luiz Bonfá
Solo in Rio 1959
(Smithsonian Folkways)



Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli
The Quintessential Django
Reinhardt & Stephane Grappelli (Living Era)



Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd
Jazz Samba
(Verve)



Count Basie
(featuring Freddie Green)
Back with Basie
(Roulette Records)



Ralph Towner
Solstice
(ECM)



Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin, and Paco de Lucía
Friday Night in San Francisco (Philips)



Pat Metheny
New Chautauqua
(ECM)



Julian Lage
World's Fair
(Modern Lore)



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Jontavious Willis

Great American Songbook and acoustic archtops, often breaking out a custom seven-string with a low A below the E. Rising star and this month's cover subject, Julian Lage mines the same vein of Americana that sustained Metheny and Bill Frisell. Mimi Fox plays acoustic guitar with her string trio, which has recently been exploring tunes from the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. And Raúl Midón's mastery of Latin rhythms enlivens his dexterous playing style.

As for that universal symbol of jazz, the archtop, it's still being made and treasured, in both its amplified and unamplified form. Luthier John Monteleone continues to craft particularly sumptuous examples in his Long Island, New York, studio, and in 2011 the D'Angelico name was revived for a line of guitars that includes the EXL-1, which is based on John D'Angelico's original Excel design. Finally, back at Gibson, the L-5s keep on coming down the production line, as they've been doing for almost a century. The sound of jazz may be more varied than ever, but some traditions are clearly worth upholding. **AC**



The Gibson factory
circa 1936

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