

Bill Frisell: A Portrait—an intimate documentary about a unique guitarist

Richard Phillips
23 February 2018

Australian filmmaker and jazz vocalist Emma Franz’s almost two-hour documentary takes viewers into the musical life and work of virtuoso guitarist and composer Bill Frisell. Spending time with this talented, but humble and quietly spoken musician, is an enjoyable and stimulating experience.

Frisell, a multi-Grammy award winner and regular recipient of *DownBeat*’s “Guitarist of the Year” prize, is regarded by his peers as the most innovative and influential American jazz guitarist of the past four decades.

His recorded work covers an astounding range of musical genres—from jazz, blues, country, pop and avant-garde, through to film scores, chamber music and classical symphonic works. Frisell, in fact, has recorded 46 albums in his own name since 1983, and played on more than 200, with a startlingly diverse range of musicians.

Franz personally shot, edited, and directed the film over several years (see interview). She has produced an intelligent and intimate work and one that rejects the usual fast-moving “made-for television” templates and clichés. It has a relaxed tempo, which perfectly suits Frisell’s laidback personality and musical approach.

The documentary does not use voice-over narration, but weaves together live performance, rehearsal and in-the-studio footage of Frisell, interspersed with insightful observations from his closest collaborators and interviews with Frisell himself. Those commenting on his skills and artistry include Paul Simon, Bonnie Raitt, Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette, Jim Hall, John Zorn, Joey Baron and others. Nels Cline, guitarist for the indie rock band Wilco, says Frisell’s impact “on the landscape of creative guitar music—not just jazz—is incalculable.”

Whether on acoustic or electric guitar, and

irrespective of the genre or with whom he is playing, the Frisell “sound” is subtle, multi-layered, delicately phrased and often ethereal. His interpretations of other compositions—from jazz standards to American country/folk traditions or pop—reveal his uncanny ability to get inside the basic melodic structure of the piece and enrich it in unexpected and beautiful new ways.

The film opens with the BBC Symphony Orchestra rehearsing one of the guitarist’s new compositions at London’s Maida Vale Studio, and ends with its performance at the Barbican Centre in November 2009. The piece is conducted by Frisell’s former lecturer, Michael Gibbs, and features Frisell and drummer Joey Barron.

The documentary points to a connection between Frisell’s musical approach and influences, and the visual arts.

Early in the film, the guitarist recounts an unusual dream, in which he is shown brilliant colours and asked to musically replicate their appearance and intensity. His wife, Carole d’Inverno, is an artist, as is Jim Woodring, a close friend and collaborator. Frisell has recorded and performed music for some of Woodring’s animations, while Woodring has produced a number of album covers for the guitarist.

The documentary also features the 858 Quartet group, who play a fascinating hybrid of jazz and classical music. Along with Frisell, other band members are Jenny Scheinman (violin), Eyvind Kang (viola) and Hank Roberts (cello). *Richter 858*, the group’s first album, was released in 2005 as part of a limited-edition volume of paintings by contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter. Frisell’s *Disfarmer* (2009) album was to accompany a retrospective exhibition by the reclusive Depression-era Arkansas photographer Mike

Disfarmer.

Born in Baltimore in 1951, Frisell initially played clarinet, but then switched to the guitar, studying music at the University of Northern Colorado and the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Early teachers included guitarists Johnny Smith and Jim Hall.

In the late 1970s, Frisell travelled to Europe, where he met Manfred Eicher, founder of the prestigious ECM Records, and became the label's in-house guitarist. There he recorded with Paul Motian, Jan Garbarek and other leading contemporary jazz musicians. He later settled in New York, playing in John Zorn's "Naked City," and with other avant-garde jazz groups, and in 1989 moved to Seattle. He now lives in New York.

Frisell's unpretentious temperament—the antithesis of a so-called guitar celebrity—his wry humour and almost childlike joy over each creative discovery, are infectious.

Behind his apparently relaxed demeanour, however, Frisell remains forever the student, constantly challenging himself and exploring new musical avenues. "It seems like some of the best things I do are those done before I figure out what they actually are," he explains in the documentary. The creative process, he insists, must be about resisting the temptation to try and repeat something from previous performances that was creatively satisfying at the time.

Frisell's artistic curiosity is also manifest in his opposition to any rigid musical categorisations. Towards the end of the documentary, he admits to an earlier prejudice against country music and a preoccupation with trying to be what he thought would be "cool" and "fashionable" in jazz circles. No one should "be afraid to admit or recognise the music that moves you. People just have to listen to [the music] and forget about what it's called," he says.

As well as being a fascinating overview of Frisell's extensive body of work and his creative spirit, Franz's film is a valuable historical document. The documentary features, for example, the final concert of the Paul Motian Trio at the Village Vanguard in New York. Frisell and saxophonist Joe Lovano were long-time members of the highly influential, 25-year-old group. Motian, a brilliant drummer and composer, died in 2011.

Sadly, two other important musicians—Jim Hall,

Frisell's principal mentor, and John Abercrombie—both of whom offer insightful and generous assessments of Frisell's skills, died in 2013 and 2017 respectively, before the film was released.

* * *

Bill Frisell: A Portrait premiered in the US in 2017 and was screened in Australia at last year's Melbourne Jazz Festival. The largely self-funded documentary will be shown at a special Sydney screening organised by Birdland Records at 7 p.m. on February 28 at Events Cinema in George Street. It is also available on Blu-ray and DVD and can be purchased at the documentary's website.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact