

Bill Frisell speaks with WSWs: “Music is like a teacher who opens your eyes to many things”

Richard Phillips
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Virtuoso jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, double bass player Thomas Morgan, and drummer Rudy Royston recently performed in Australia as part of a brief Asian tour that included gigs in Vietnam, Singapore and Japan. The trio’s only Sydney appearance was a performance in Verbrugghen Hall, the final concert in a one-day jazz festival at the city’s Conservatorium of Music.

The trio’s more than 90-minute concert consisted of an extended medley of material from Billy Strayhorn, Thelonious Monk, the Great American Songbook, traditional folk tunes and John Barry’s “You Only Live Twice.” It ended with a poignant rendition of Burt Bacharach’s “What the World Needs Now Is Love” and a tender and uplifting version of the spiritual “We Shall Overcome” as an encore.

The performance was, as Fairfax Media music critic John Shand wrote, “a masterclass in empathy, interplay, understatement, dynamics, and all aspects of musicality and imagination”—an intense dialogue between musicians that “seemed to breathe as one, like the greatest string trios.”

The 68-year-old Frisell is arguably one of the most gifted American improvisational guitarists to have emerged in the past thirty years. Having learnt the clarinet in high school, Frisell switched to guitar, studying under Dale Bruning, Johnny Smith and Jim Hall, before going on to play with John Zorn’s Naked City, the Paul Motian trio, Joey Baron and numerous others.

Frisell’s recorded output and his musical palette, which encompasses all musical styles—jazz, rock, folk, blues, movie soundtracks, pop songs, and classical works—is extraordinary. On my last count he has recorded 40 individual albums and appeared as a featured player on over 200 albums, with a range of well-known musicians, since 1983.

His CD releases in the last two years include a solo guitar album (*MusicIS* [2018]), two live performances with Thomas Morgan at New York’s Village Vanguard (*Small Town* [2017] and *Epistrophy* [2019]), along with standout contributions to *Vanishing Gardens* (2018), the jazz-country collaboration by saxophonist Charles Lloyd and Lucinda Williams. During the past 12 months, Frisell has also appeared on albums by Paul Simon, the Andrew Cyrille group, Italian trumpeter Tiziani

Bianchi, vocalist Chantal Acda and others.

Last month, Frisell signed with Blue Note Records and announced that his first album with the prestigious jazz label will be called *Harmony*, the name of his new band. Baritone guitarist Luke Bergman, vocalist Petra Haden and cellist Hank Roberts are members of the group.

The ever modest Frisell spoke briefly with the WSWs following his Sydney concert, explaining his all-inclusive musical approach and touching on some of the conceptions that will underpin his new album.

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Richard Phillips: Thanks Bill for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak with me. Your work covers such a diverse range of musical genres that it’s very difficult to know where to start. Could you perhaps discuss your general approach?

Bill Frisell: This is not something I think about too much. My whole life is, and has been, bound up with music, but the more I discover music the less I want to shut out any particular genre or style.

Earlier on, I guess I would’ve been more concerned about what I thought was fashionable or cool or something like that. But if I’m really true to what’s in my own heart then there’s no reason to exclude anything. There’s so much music that I love, and I guess jazz provided with a way of being able to explore all this in different ways.

So much energy these days is spent trying to pin down what a particular genre or particular style is. We obviously need to describe things, but too much effort is put into trying to split things up and put them into little boxes. For me these divisions are completely artificial.

In my imagination, music is just a big swirling ocean of melodies. I can be influenced by something that I’ve just heard on the radio or that I’ve remembered from when I was a kid. It could be Beethoven or Chuck Berry, or anything. I just love the way it all fits together.

RP: Could you speak about your film music and how you approached the Buster Keaton films or Bill Morrison’s *The Great Flood* documentary?

BF: I’d like to do more work for film, but for me it’s a little

bit haphazard and I don't really have a system. It's difficult for me to write music on command. If you were to say, 'Ok, I want you to write a sad song,' that'd be hard for me.

The film music I've done usually comes out of a process that I've already been involved in. I always keep writing music and so I accumulate a lot of stuff. When I've needed something for a film then I go back through this material and try to find something that resonates. But I enjoy doing film work because it pushes me, and in a good way. It boxes me in—stops me from going off on a tangent—and helps me to develop something new.

RP: What do you make of those who insist that music or other creative endeavours should be categorised according to an individual's national origin, skin colour, religious background, etc.?

BF: Music for me could be like a model for the possibilities of all people being brought together, not separated. I've got a new group, which I'm calling Harmony, and a new album coming out, and so I've been thinking about the way we go about putting music together.

Let me just read you this. If you look up harmony in the dictionary it says, "a combination of simultaneous musical notes in a chord," "a pleasing arrangement of parts."

Then it gets more interesting, "a different interweaving of different accounts into a single narrative" and there are words like "balance," "coherence," "unity," "accord," "agreement," "peace," "friendship," "cooperation," "understanding" and "sympathy."

And it goes on: "A situation in which people live and work well with other people and in a way that does not damage things around them."

I love all these conceptions because for me it's what music is all about. Couldn't this be a model for what human beings can do together?

RP: These ideas are obviously at odds with the world we're living in.

BF: Yes, but music helps me to transcend this to some extent and has done so for as long as I've been a musician. There's the music itself and then there's the music community, and the way I've always been welcomed into that community. It's always given me hope that things could get better in the world.

I was talking to Miles Okazaki [American jazz guitarist and composer] in Melbourne the other night and joked to him that if everyone could only just play the guitar then many things in the world might be a bit better.

RP: The last two songs you played at the Sydney concert—"What the World Needs Now" and "We Shall Overcome"—seemed to be a political statement.

BF: I'm not sure it was a political statement but I sure wanted to put something of those ideas, and the mood of hope they express, out there. It's kind of what's in my mind at the moment, and with any luck people will pick up on that. It's great that you noticed that.

RP: Your material, which takes in the whole gamut of

American music, is so much at odds with the political background noise and media stereotypes about the US.

BF: Yes, there's an awful lot of this background noise which is so loud and has nothing to do with the reality of people's lives. It's hard to sit through, but I can tell you that this is not the kind of stuff that I want to listen to. And I can tell you for sure that Trump is not what the American people are all about.

Music is like a teacher who opens your eyes to many things. Being able to travel around and play music breaks down lots of barriers. You might see something on television—some kind of stereotype about America or somewhere else—but if you actually go to any of these places, then it breaks down all this media stuff instantly.

RP: You've recorded and performed material from the protest folk music era—Dylan's "Masters of War"—and similar material. We're living in a period where governments are spending billions of dollars on war and the military, while cutting education, the arts and music programs. Can you comment on this?

BF: Well, I'm not really qualified to comment on those issues, I'm just a guitar player [laughter]. I know that when they cut school funding in the United States it's usually the music programs that are the first thing to go.

RP: That's certainly the case here in Australia. If you're wealthy though, you can send your kids to private schools that have good music programs.

BF: I feel so lucky to have grown up in the 1950s and 60s, when there were music programs in the schools. I don't know what I'd be doing now if that hadn't been there for me.

Music is just as important as any other aspect of education and there's so much to be learnt from it. There's math, there's history and other things involved in studying music. It also teaches you how to get along with each other, to collaborate and be a decent human being. It's not like everybody will be, or has to be, a great musician, but everyone should be given the opportunity.



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