

The Genius of Joe Pass

by Jim Ohlschmidt



Photo courtesy of Fantasy Records

In 1978 jazz guitarist extraordinaire Joe Pass told Downbeat writer Lee Underwood that in the future, “the idea of solo [jazz] guitar playing won’t be so strange. Lots of guys will be doing it, and doing it well.”

Time has shown Pass’ prediction was on the money. Twenty years later, we have brilliant artists such as Martin Taylor, Tommy Crook, Jim Nichols, and others who play solo jazz guitar as though it was always meant to be played that way. Although he may not have originated the concept, Joe Pass unquestionably showed the world how it should be done, a feat which earned him a rightful place alongside Django Reinhardt, Charlie Christian, Les Paul, Wes Montgomery, and Tal Farlow as one of the instrument’s great innovators.

“The Genius of Joe Pass” offers prime examples of his breathtaking solo work, and shows how his exquisite improvisations evolved and became increasingly sophisticated as Pass became more confident and free with his playing. This video is by no means a complete retrospective of his work. Pass’ discography is immense; such a compilation would require many hours of viewing, and the difficulties in obtaining and licensing that much footage make such a project nearly impossible. The footage assembled here unequivocally documents what made Joe

Pass truly unique among the jazz guitarists of his time, and the huge debt those who have followed his example owe to this remarkable man.

Joseph Anthony Jacobi Passalacqua was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey on January 13, 1929. While he was still a toddler, the Passalaquas moved to the coal and steel country of Johnstown, Pennsylvania where Joe's father, Mariano, labored as a steel worker to support his growing family. By the time Joe became interested in the guitar at age nine, he had three younger brothers and a sister. Although neither of his parents were musicians, Joe's father took a keen interest in his eldest boy's desire to make music and bought him a \$17 Harmony guitar.

Pass told Downbeat that in Johnstown there were "a lot of local Italian cats in the neighborhood who drank wine, and sang, and played the guitar. So when my father got me the Harmony, he had some of these friends of his to come over and show me a G chord, a D, and an A. Pretty soon I could play 'em better than they could!"

It wasn't long before Mariano became Joe's musical taskmaster. In a 1976 article for Guitar Player magazine, Pass gave writer Jon Sievert a detailed account of his father's stern influence and the arduous regimen of daily practice he imposed. Pass recalled:

"Dad's thing was to play, play, play. He wasn't a musician – he was a steelworker – but he seemed to know what was necessary. I would say 'Play what?' and he'd say 'Play this,' and he'd whistle a little melody line off the top of his head. He'd bring home all kinds of piano music – classical, popular, all kinds – he'd make me sit down and figure it out. Vincente Gomez used to have a fifteen minute radio show on Sunday, and Dad would make me sit right by the radio with my guitar. Gomez would play all of this wild flamenco music, and Dad would say, 'Get that, get that.' It was really hard. I was only eleven years old."

The gruelling practice schedule lasted several years. Pass told Sievert: "Dad would get up for work at 6:00 a.m., wake me up at 6:30, and I'd practice 'til I went to school at 8:00. I'd get home from school at 3:00, and he'd be home from work at 3:30; I'd have to practice from 4:00 until dinnertime. Then I would practice from 7:00 until 9:00. And on the weekends, when I didn't have to go to school the next day, I might play until 1:00 a.m. All the time he

kept telling me, 'I'm doing this because I don't want you to have to be a steelworker or a coalminer.'"

Pass told Downbeat: "My father would insist that I learned tunes, and then fill them up. Play the tune, learn the melody, and do the fills. He instinctively felt I should be doing these things. He would hum an Italian song, I would play it and then he'd say 'Fill it up!'"

As Joe's skills developed, his father scraped together \$300 and bought him a Martin flatop. "I don't remember what model it was, but it was one of the smaller ones," he told Sievert. "That was the first amplified guitar I ever played. I put a DeArmond pickup on it and played that guitar for many, many years. It was a fine instrument."

Joe also began taking lessons with a local music teacher who played violin, guitar, saxophone and piano. "I had a lesson every Sunday morning for a year and a half, and it was a different lesson every week. I really learned a lot from him," Pass recalled.

By age twelve Joe was playing with a group of local musicians who gigged at the local V.F.W. hall. "We'd play waltzes, pop tunes, standards, just about anything," he told Sievert. "I was lucky because most of them were experienced jazz-oriented musicians who had gotten bogged down with families or for one reason or another couldn't go out on the road. They all had day jobs of some kind, and they were into guys like Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, and Roy Eldridge. We had drums, piano, tenor, trumpet, and guitar. There was no bass player, and I played all of the bass lines because the piano player was usually the local school teacher who just read the song sheet. We played things like 'Stardust,' 'Christopher Columbus,' and 'Body and Soul.' I was twelve years old and improvising. They gave me all the room I could take."

At age 14, Pass was playing in a wedding band that was loosely patterned after the Quintet of the Hot Club of France. "We had a bass, violin, a rhythm guitar, and me" Pass told Downbeat writer Lee Underwood. "We'd play swing tunes like 'Honeysuckle Rose' and 'Lady Be Good,' and I would play the melodies. The guy who headed the group was a friend of my dad's so I was in good hands. A chaperone-style gig. I'd play the job, take my three bucks, the leader would drive me home afterwards and that would be it, you know?"

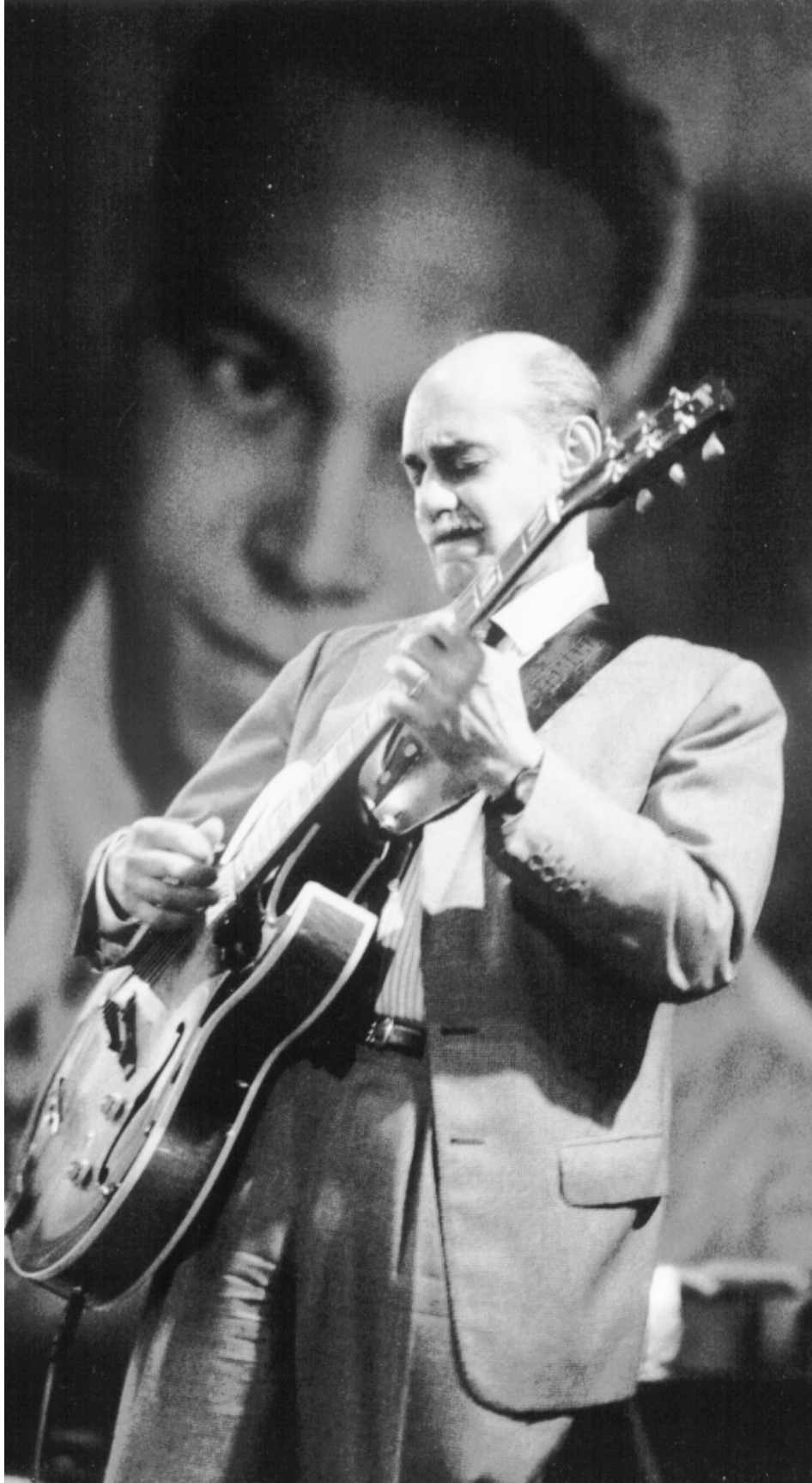


Photo courtesy of Just Jazz Guitar



Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass

Photo courtesy of Ellen Luders Pass

Pass got his first taste of the road while still in high school when he toured with the Tony Pastor Orchestra in the summer of 1944. According to a discography assembled by Tabo Oishi published in *Just Jazz Guitar* magazine, Pass probably played his first studio date with the popular East Coast dance band that year (although Oishi notes that the album's liner notes show the recording date as June 10, 1947). Encouraged by his son's early success, Joe's father sent him to New York to study with Harry Volpe, a well-known studio guitarist, the following year. According to Pass, things didn't work out as well as his father had hoped.

"I went to his house for my first lesson, and we started off by playing a couple of tunes together, and I was playing more than him," Pass told Sievert. "Then he opened a book and said 'Play this,' and I was stumped because I couldn't read rhythmic notation. I had to start over at page one, and my old man was not happy when he heard about that. It was a big disappointment. I quit going after three or four lessons because I got a gig playing three nights a week in a dance hall."

When he returned home, Joe rebelled against his father's forceful direction. "I got to a point where I really hated the guitar and resented it," Pass told Sievert. "Then

Dad got very sick and went to the hospital, so he wasn't around to make me practice. I started doing all the things I shouldn't have been doing – my mother was a real softie. I ended up in New York again because a local boy who had made good as a musician came to Johnstown and heard me play, and told me I had to get out of town if I really wanted to get something going. He checked around, and I ended up with a choice of going with Ray McKinley's band or Dardanell's Trio. This was in 1948. I chose the McKinley gig, but they used complicated charts which I couldn't read, so I split after three weeks."

In 1949, New York's 52nd Street was the mecca of the bebop revolution. As Lee Underwood wrote: "Clubs abounded – Minton's, Birdland, The Royal Roost, The Onyx Club, The Three Deuces, The White Rose Bar. Every other door was a "jazz joint." Dizzy was there, Charlie Parker was there, Curly Russell, Al Haig, Billy Eckstine, Kenny Clarke, Billy Holiday, Coleman Hawkins, Miles Davis, and Art Tatum. They were all there and so was young Joe Pass from Johnstown, Pa."

It would seem that at age 20, with nearly six years under his belt, Pass was the classic young turk poised to take the bebop jazz scene by storm. He no doubt found his way into some very interesting jam sessions, but he was all too eager to adopt the hard-drug lifestyle of that infamous nocturnal fraternity. Within a year Pass was a junkie with a serious habit.

"Staying high was first priority," he told Rolling Stone writer Robert Palmer in 1979. "Playing was second, girls were third. But the first thing really took all my energy."

The next 15 years were the darkest period of his life. "From about 1949 to the end of 1960, I spent most of my time in the interstices of society. I lived in the cracks," he told Downbeat. As Palmer wrote in Rolling Stone, Pass' drug-addled existence during these years "could have been lifted from the pages of a Jack Kerouac novel." Pass spent a year in New Orleans, where he lived in a "crash pad" with several other musicians and author William Burroughs. "In New Orleans I had a kind of nervous breakdown because I had access to every kind of drug there and was up for days," he told Palmer. "I would always hock my guitar."

After New Orleans, Pass hit the road and kept moving, working an endless string of nightclubs in Las Vegas, Peoria,

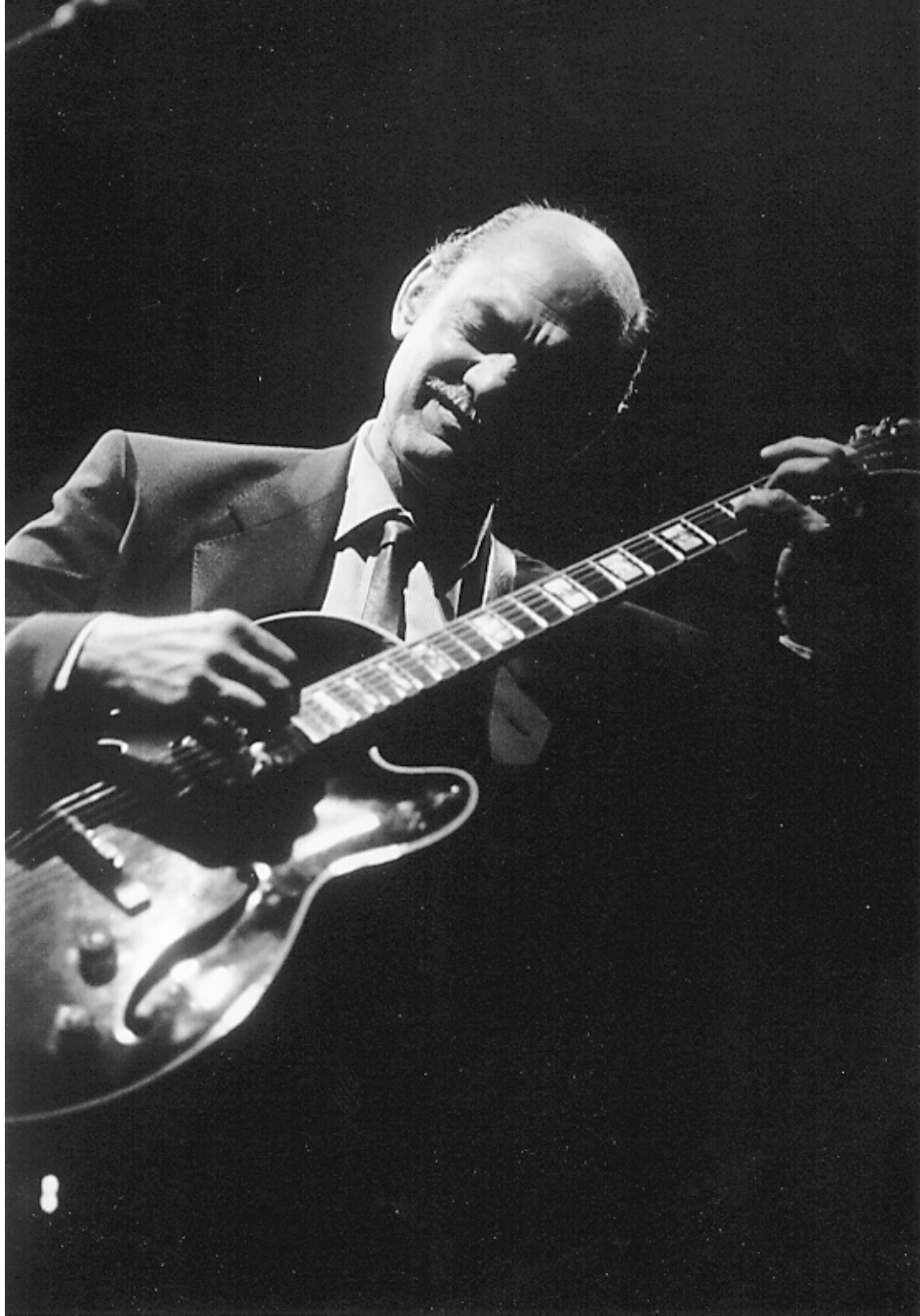


Photo courtesy of Fantasy Records

Chicago and Fort Worth, Texas, where he was busted for dope and jailed for five years. Lee Underwood wrote in *Downbeat* that when Pass was released, he resumed his habit and soon was, in Pass' own words, "out on the street and not playing a note."

It's unclear how Pass found his way to California that year, but as Underwood wrote: "In 1960, he stood on the steps of Synanon's Santa Monica drug rehabilitation center holding a gunnysack full of onions, the only thing he owned."

No guitar. No money. No future. No hope. A sack full of dusty onions and a broken life.”

According to Palmer’s article, a former roommate of Pass, pianist Arnold Ross, convinced him to get with the Synanon program and clean up his act. It was a particularly fortuitous decision for Pass: Not only was he in the company of other jazz musicians in the throes of drug rehabilitation, but Dick Bock, owner of World Pacific Records, was one of the clinic’s sponsors. Bock recognized the considerable talents of Pass, Arnold Ross, trumpeter David Allen, saxophonist Greg Dykes and several other musicians recovering at the clinic, and featured them on an album of seven instrumental selections called “Sounds of Synanon” recorded at Pacific Jazz Studios in Hollywood late in 1961.

That album and the footage that begins this video confirm that Pass’ stay at Synanon quickly and irrevocably turned his life around. Taken from a 1962 appearance on a Los Angeles television broadcast called “Frankly Jazz,” Pass (presumably accompanied by players featured on the Synanon album) states the melody of “The Song is You” and then launches into an extended flight of swift, melodic improvisations played with alert, coherent authority. “Sonnymoon for Two” finds Joe stretching out in a more relaxed, bluesy vein that hints at the style he would master in the years to come. With every blue note and expressive phrase, Joe Pass is definitely in the driver’s seat.



Tal Farlow & Joe Pass

Photo courtesy of Just Jazz Guitar

“A lot of kids think that in order to be a guitarist they’ve gotta go out and be a junkie for ten years, and that’s just not true,” Pass told Underwood. “I can’t credit any of that time saying that was when I really learned. I spent most of those years just being a bum, doing nothing. It was a great waste of time. I could have been doing then a lot of things I’m doing now. Only I had failed to grow up.”

1962 was a banner year for Pass. According to Oishi’s discography, he appeared on no less than seven albums, working at Pacific Jazz Studios with artists such as Les McCann, Richard “Groove” Holmes, Leroy Vinegar, Johnny Griffin, Bud Shank, and others. By year’s end he was one of the busiest guitarists in Los Angeles.

Although Pass coaxed a remarkably warm, fat tone from the Fender Jaguar he played in those days, a fan noticed that it wasn’t the best instrument for Joe’s style. “Back in my Synanon days, I didn’t have a guitar of my own; all I had was a solidbody rock and roll guitar that belonged to Synanon,” Pass told Sievert in 1976. “I was playing a gig at a local club with it when this guy named Mike Peak came in and saw me playing jazz with a rock guitar. A few months later, on my birthday, I came home and there was this brand new (Gibson) ES-175 that he had bought for me. He was in the construction business and played a little guitar himself and just felt that I should have the proper kind of instrument. It’s the only electric I’ve used since then.”

In addition to steady gigs at L.A. clubs such as Shelly’s Manne Hole, Pass was in high demand as a studio guitarist and he began getting national press in music magazines such as *Downbeat*, where he was a subject of Leonard Feather’s “Blindfold Test” column. In his introduction Feather wrote: “It came as a surprise to Joe Pass that he won this year’s International Jazz Critics Poll in the category now known as ‘artist deserving of wider recognition.’ Though he wound up with more than twice as many votes as any other guitarist, Pass was astonished at the results, clearly because he suffers from a striking case of modesty and is not yet completely convinced that he has any talent at all.”

Others were well-convinced. In the years that followed Pass recorded with major artists such as Julie London, saxophonist Earl Bostic, and the Gerald Wilson Orchestra,



Martin Taylor & Joe Pass
Photo courtesy of Just Jazz Guitar

and he toured with the George Shearing Quintet from 1965 to '66. Pass made several excellent jazz records of his own in the '60s for World Pacific/Pacific Jazz, including "For Django," "Simplicity," and "Guitar Interludes," which Oishi notes as featuring Pass' first unaccompanied solos on record. Pass also recorded "Joy Spring," his first live jazz album, on the Blue Note label in February of 1964 (although the album wasn't released until 1981).

His studio work during this time also included such lucrative jobs as playing for several television series such as the Woody Woodbury Show, Good Morning America, and the Donald O'Connor Show. Although his work as an anonymous studio musician gave Pass a level of financial security most jazz musicians only dreamed of, it was a realm he apparently was not entirely comfortable with. As Pass told Lee Underwood in *Downbeat*: "You have to have your regular guitar, a 12-strings guitar, a banjo, a mandolin, a wah-wah pedal – all the tools of the trade. When they call you, they expect you to be able to do everything that's contemporary. 'Can you remember what so-and-so did on such-and-such a hit record? Well, we want that.' And if you can't play that, they don't call you again."

By 1970, Pass was living comfortably in Southern California, he was married, and had started a family. But rock and early attempts at jazz "fusion" were radically changing the guitar sounds and styles that were making it on records. The Pacific Jazz label was defunct, and although



John Pisano, Joe Pass & Tommy Tedesco

sessions that year with a group of progressive L.A. jazz musicians including electric bassist Carol Kaye, saxophonist Tom Scott and pianist Joe Sample (reissued on a Hot Wire CD ironically titled “Better Days”) showed that Pass tried to adapt his well-informed and carefully-built technique to the new scene, his heart just wasn’t in it. As he later told Leonard Feather in another “Blindfold Test” column: “I think there’s a big attempt by a lot of guitarists to make this marriage between rock rhythm sections and feeling, and blowing jazz, and I think it’s a hopeless proposition. It’s not going to work. It has to happen automatically; if it’s contrived, it just doesn’t make it. You can’t deny the influence of the new kind of rock rhythm sections, the drummers and electric bass players, and most of them play very good, interesting and inventive. But just to put one element with the other, it doesn’t work. I tried it and I know. The feeling is different.”

Pass longed for an opportunity to make a living at playing the mainstream and bebop jazz he loved since he was a teenager. As fate had it, that opportunity was just around the corner. Norman Granz, founder of Verve records and jazz impresario behind the highly acclaimed “Jazz at the Philharmonic” records and concert tours, had formed a new label called Pablo, with world-wide distribution through RCA. Although Pass was still unknown to most of the jazz world beyond Los Angeles, Granz recognized his phenomenal talent and recorded him in a live set with

pianist Oscar Peterson and bassist Niels Henning Orsted Pedersen at Chicago's London House in May of 1973. "The Trio" album was a huge success for Pablo and won a Grammy award the next year. Not missing a beat, Granz simultaneously released several other superlative outings featuring Pass, including an album of duets with Ella Fitzgerald called "Take Love Easy" where he accompanies her mostly on solo acoustic nylon string guitar, and an album of hot licks with Herb Ellis called "Two For The Road."

As a result, Pass' reputation skyrocketed throughout the country and across the Atlantic, and his name began appearing near the top of reader polls in *Downbeat*, *Guitar Player*, and *Melody Maker*. In November and December of 1973, Pass spent several days at MGM recording tracks for the most important Pablo album of his career, *Virtuoso*. As Lee Underwood wrote in *Downbeat*: "'Virtuoso' startled everybody: one man, one guitar, complex tunes, and a display of technique that raised the short hairs on the back of the neck." Released in 1974, the aptly titled *Virtuoso* album frankly set the guitar world on its ear. As pianist Benny Green wrote in the liner notes, "there have been almost no guitarists who ever attempted what Joe Pass pulls off so prodigiously on this album."

Pass played like a house afire, although the impulsive energy in his improvisations and arrangements was guided by his typically keen sense of discipline, taste and rhythmic



Photo courtesy of Fantasy Records

poise. Richard Cook and Brian Morton wrote in *The Penguin Guide to Jazz*, “Pass smoothes away the nervousness of bop yet counters the plain talk of swing with a complexity that remains completely accessible.”

As he explains in the interview near the end of the video, his solo direction was more Granz’s idea than his own. In 1978 Pass told *Downbeat*: “I don’t think anyone prepares himself to be a solo guitar player. They said to me, ‘Play a solo.’ I said ‘What should I play?’ They said ‘Whatever you want to play. You’ve got a union card, so play!’” In a 1975 *Downbeat* article Pass said, “There are a lot of ways to do a solo album. One way is to take a tune and work it out, decide on changes, intro, and ending, modulations, tempos – work it out, and go in and do it. What I did, though, was just go in, and somebody would say ‘Why don’t you play *How High The Moon?*’ I’d say ‘Yeah, that might be nice.’ I had no tempo in mind, no key, necessarily. I just tried to make it from beginning to end. . . I found myself getting into traps and having to get out of them.”

The solo performances compiled here, beginning with the improvised blues from a 1974 concert with Ella Fitzgerald at Ronnie Scott’s club in London, show how Pass rose to the challenge of playing alone for jazz audiences accustomed to rhythm sections and horns.

“It’s sheer terror, but I do it,” Pass told *Downbeat*. “At first, I didn’t think jazz club audiences would listen to a guitar player one or two or three one-hour sets a night without using bass or drums. What jazz audiences think of as ‘jazz’ is rhythm. They want to hear drums. So I thought I would solo twenty minutes or so, then bring on a rhythm section. I tried it that way, and I tried it all alone. The response was good.”

In particular, the Montreaux footage offers a detailed, close-up view of Pass’ remarkable right hand technique. “Ninety percent of my playing is with the fingers,” Pass told *Downbeat* in 1978. “Three years ago it was about fifty-fifty. Now, except for maybe a real fast tune, I play almost all with my fingers. With fingers, you get different qualities, different voicings. With a pick, you get a special sound, but you can’t do as many things. With the fingers, however, you can play only so fast; so a lot of the playing gets done with left-hand slurs, run-ons, pull-offs. Returning to the



Photo courtesy of Just Jazz Guitar



Joe & Ellen Pass

Photo courtesy of Ellen Luders Pass

pick after that is tricky, because it's a different kind of coordination between the pick in the right hand and the fingers of the left hand."

In 1994, Pass told *Acoustic Guitar* magazine editor Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers that playing guitar with your fingers instead of a pick was "the best and only way to play your guitar, because you're actually in touch with the instrument – you actually feel it, like a horn player feels a horn in his mouth."

In addition to developing an impeccable technique, Pass adopted an a Zen-like attitude toward mentally articulating the music while he played. As he told *Downbeat*: "You have to eliminate your own consciousness, because once you begin thinking about what you're doing, you're not allowing the music to take on its own shape and form and momentum. You're trying to direct the music. The idea is to get away from directing the music, and just allow it to flow out by itself. Sometimes I'm on the stand and I feel pretty good, and the music just starts coming out. When it's like that, I'm not making the music go places; it just goes. I don't play the same tune the same way twice . . . I never know where I'm gonna start, or where I'm gonna end."

In the 1977 BBC broadcasts included here, Pass' elaborate fantasies on familiar standards such as "Prelude

To A Kiss” and “Misty” show virtually no impedance between the spontaneous flow of his rich musical ideas and the nimble facility of his hands upon the instrument.

“I find the more experienced I get and the more I can play without trying to impress anybody, the more freedom I have,” he told Sievert. “What I try to do is just get up on the stand and follow a thought without worrying whether someone likes it or not. So I get stuck here and there or it gets a little uneven, and I have to play my way out of it. It’s then that I start finding new things, because it calls on everything I have inside me. That’s when I get closest to playing music.”

By 1980 Pass was the most exciting and respected guitarist in jazz. His recorded output on Pablo throughout the decade was incredible; he made no less than four albums a year, although it was not unusual for him to make seven or eight records annually as he had done in the 1970s. His collaborators on many of those albums are a who’s who of jazz: Milt Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Clark Terry, Freddie Hubbard, Zoot Sims, Sarah Vaughan, J. J. Johnson, André Previn, Toots Thielemans, and Count Basie, who recorded several superb swing albums with Pass in small groups known as the Kansas City 7 and Kansas City 6. Pass also recorded three solo albums – including a live set recorded at Akron University in 1985 and a terrific tribute to Fred Astaire called “Blues For Fred” in 1988 – and an album of Brazilian music called “Crazy Rhythm . . . Azymuth” recorded in Rio de Janeiro in 1987 for the Milestone label.

Among the fine bassists Pass performed and recorded with throughout his career, he seemed to share a particularly keen musical dialog with Niels Henning Orsted Pedersen. In the footage from their 1982 appearance at the Copenhagen Jazz Festival, Pass and Pedersen engage in some remarkably intuitive interplay on Oscar Pettiford’s “Tricotism.” Their brilliant playing is due, in part, to their listening skills.

“In a duo setting, I’m thinking of counterpoint lines, of movement,” Pass told Lee Underwood in *Downbeat*. “I’m listening to the other person and trying to fit; I don’t take the lead.”

All the stops are pulled out for “Move,” the high-speed bebop finale that closes the video. Both players seem to



Photo courtesy of Fantasy Records

be pushing themselves to limit as Pass and Pedersen spin off rapid flurries of notes that leave them both a bit winded but exhilarated by the tune's end.

The 1990s began as another stellar decade of records and world tours. In addition to several fine albums with his own quartet (including a great jazz Christmas album), Pass recorded two more solo albums as well as collaborations with Red Mitchell, Tommy Gumina and an album of Hank Williams material with none other than Hee-Haw star Roy Clark.

In 1992 Pass embarked on an extended concert series with flamenco master Paco Peña, classical virtuoso Pepe Romero, and acoustic fingerstyle innovator Leo Kottke. Billed as the "Guitar Summit," each guitarist performed a

solo set and, as the tour progressed, they experimented with performing together as a finale. Pass relished the musical interaction and camaraderie of his tourmates. In a letter to Just Jazz Guitar writer Lawson G. Stone, Pass remarked: "This is a wonderful tour. The guys are great players, and real human beings. A lot of love and friendship. Real! No competition, and I'm telling you, I have not worked in any situation as warm and friendly as this. We all travel on a large bus, sleeps 8, has all the things we need. A driver, sound man (a good one) and stage man, a tour manager, and all guitar players, too. Anyway, I am enjoying myself and these guys have inspired me and renewed my interest in the guitar."

Pass' role in the Guitar Summit was cut short late in 1993, when he left the tour due to increasingly debilitating pain. Kottke, Romero and Peña continued the tour as they waited with hopeful optimism for Pass to return, but it was not to be. On May 23rd, 1994, Pass died of liver cancer at age 65. His family and many friends, the great jazz musicians with whom he worked, and countless fans around the world all mourned the passing of a man whose enormous talent was surpassed only by his humility.

"When somebody tells me I sound great, it's hard for me to believe," he told Downbeat writer Lee Underwood back in 1975. "If I didn't play the guitar, I might be doing something infinitely simpler in in life. I don't know what the hell that might be. Maybe I'd be a milkman or something."

Fortunately for those who love jazz, Joe Pass chose music.

– Jim Ohlschmidt

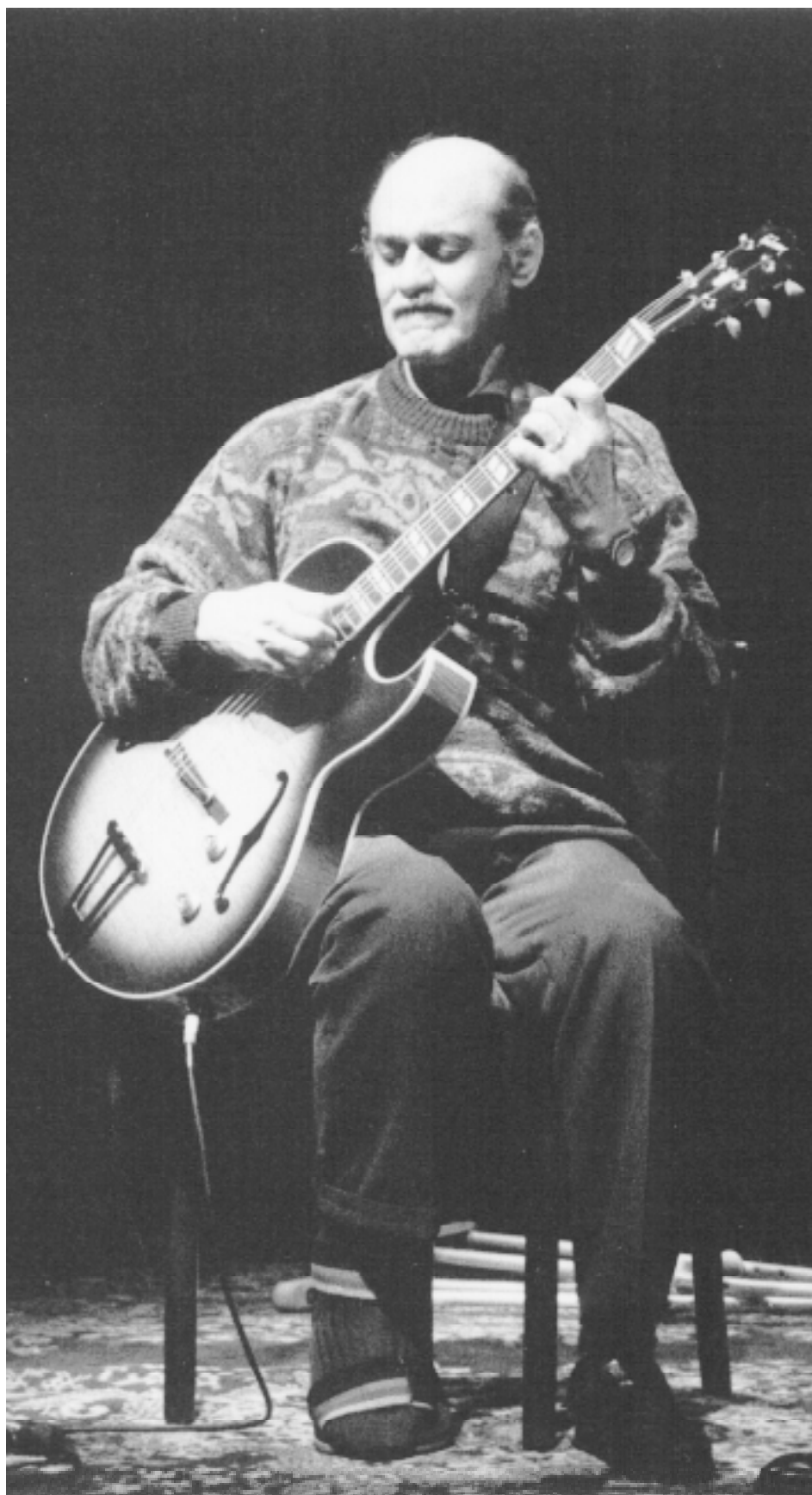


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