

**Jim Hall**

USA

Interview.

'Being aware of the overall sound, I try to make my solo different.'

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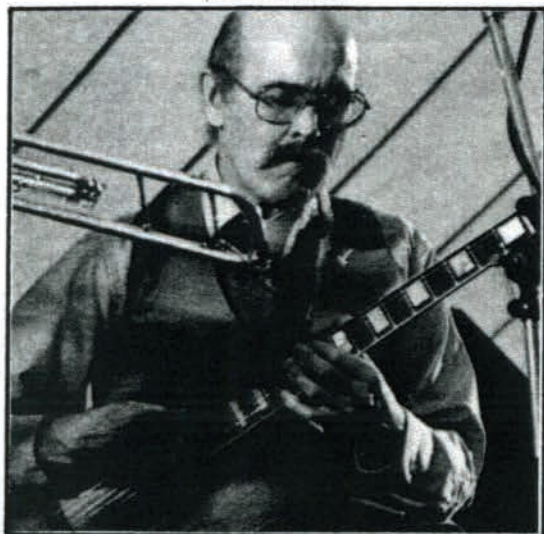
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Lance Bosman

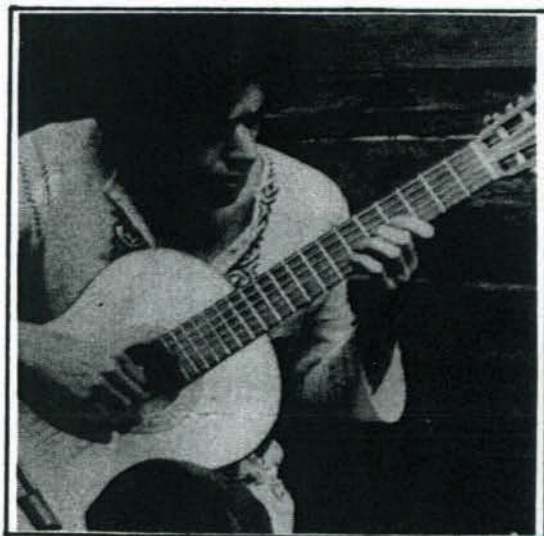
# Guitar

the magazine for all guitarists

**JIM HALL**



**BILL CONNORS**



**PATRICK BASHFORD**



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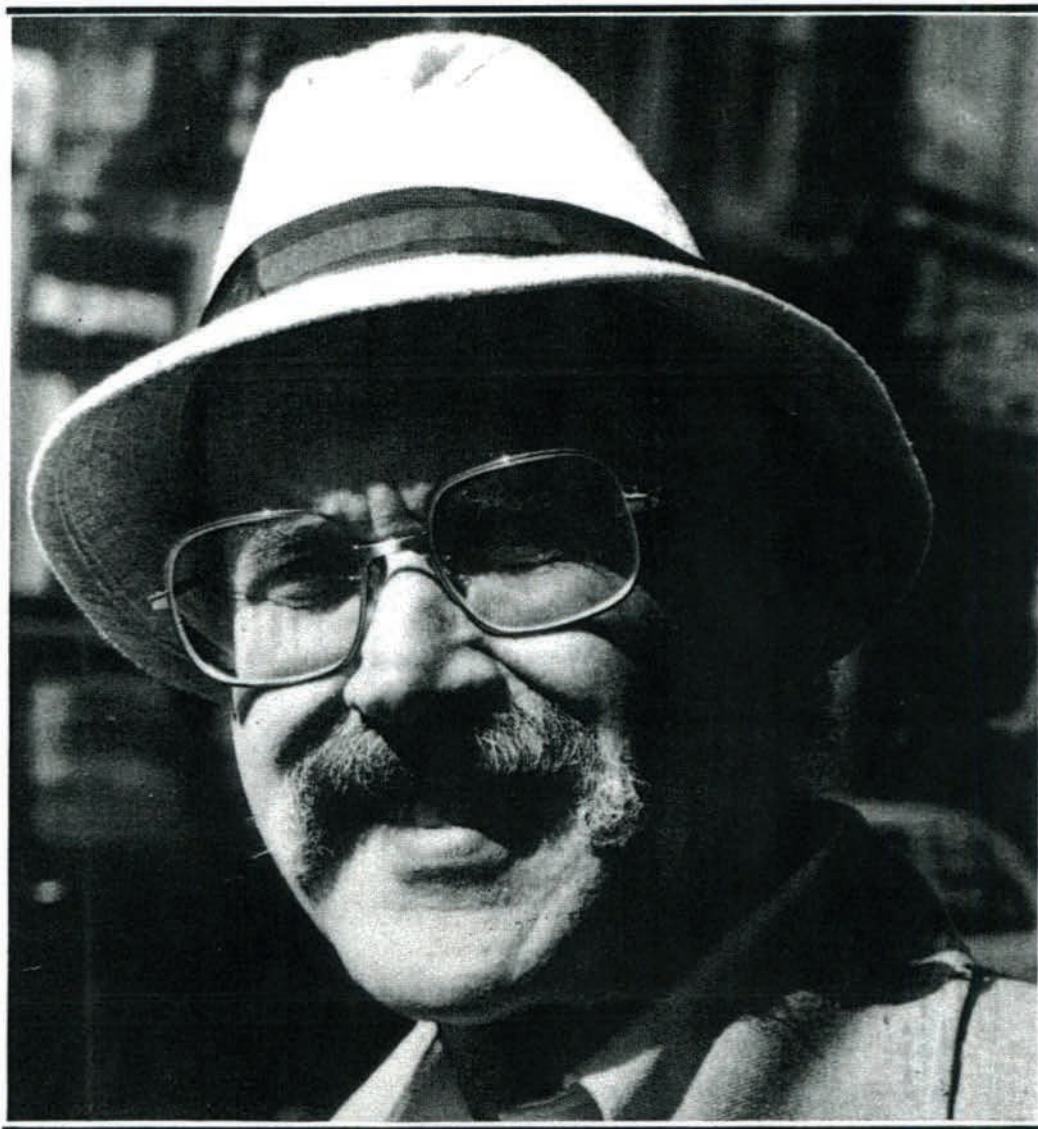
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# JIM HALL

*'Being aware of the overall sound, I try to make my solo different.'*



Photographs by George Clinton

*Master of understatement, Jim Hall's playing is immediately recognisable by its lightness of touch, contemplative manner and subtle lyricism. Developed over three decades, these features bear few traces of early influences, Christian, Reinhardt and the young Kessel, but are more adaptations of characteristics peculiar to horn blowing. From Chico Hamilton's chamber group in the mid-fifties, Jim's name has been linked with Sonny Rollins, Sonny Stitt, Zoot Sims, Ben Webster, The Jimmy Giuffre Three, Paul Desmond, and recently alongside Bob Brookmeyer.*

*Initiated into jazz by working in bars from the age of 13, Jim later embarked on a formal study for a degree at Cleveland Institute of Music. Getting itchy before its completion, he took off for California where, between playing jazz, he studied classical techniques with Vincente Gomez. This instruction encouraged him to think contrapuntally rather than in the current style of*

*vertical chord comping. Such techniques were to prove a perfect complement in the trio with Giuffre and Brookmeyer during the late 50s; with the Paul Desmond quartet in the early 60s; and in the duo with Bill Evans. His latest venture, the success of which can be judged by the warm reception at this year's Bracknell Jazz Festival, is another duo, now with Bob Brookmeyer. On this occasion the old Gibson ES 175 and 15-year-old Gibson GA 50 amp were left at home, replaced by his only other guitar, a D'Aquisto Custom. A set full of unobtrusive surprises, their numbers ranged from evergreens to free-form pieces expanded with ostinato and motive development. In contrast to the vibrant swinging in the days with Clark Terry, the restrained invention of Brookmeyer's valve trombone against Hall's dextrous chord work and matching counterpoint, guarantees the duo a sustained success.*

**Lance Bosman**



'I guess the tricks that I've picked up stem from my formal education and the players I've worked with. Gomez opened up the fingerboard, in so much that jazz guitarists tend to think of block chords, his teaching of counterpoint made me think in terms of horizontal parts. On the other side, I didn't try to imitate the runs of Kessel and Christian, it was just the feel of their music that I was after. The long lines that you sometimes hear from the jazz guitar, the meandering, I'm aware of this and it annoys me when I do it. Yet recently in working with Bob, I've been practising more of the long line thing because sometimes I get the feeling that if it's just me in the background, I get a little frightened about space — and then I have to remind myself that it's okay to leave spaces; I don't have to fill in with those clichés. Recently I've been attempting to play the guitar better technically so as to keep those lines going continuously; then knowing I can do it, I'll push them to one side.

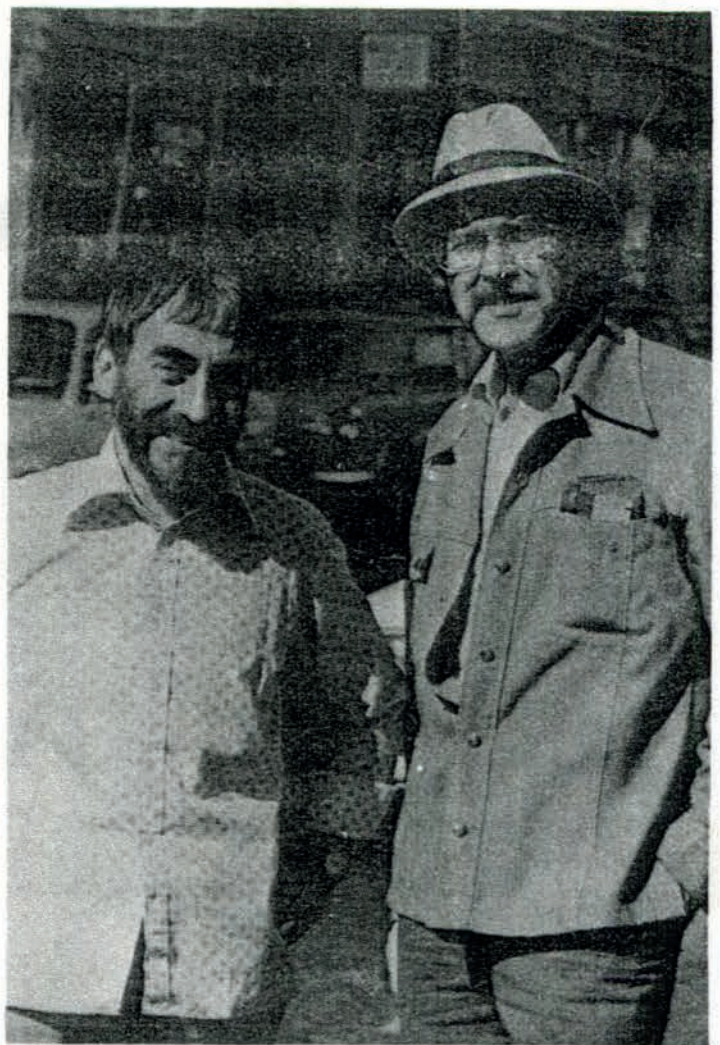
'Bob and I haven't got a huge repertoire, mostly standards, but even then if something bothers me about it, a section of a tune, I'll practice it at home and find ways in and out of it, find things to do between; but it's generally spontaneous, and that's one of the appealing things about jazz; I don't like it to feel too rehearsed, I'd almost rather make some mistake than get things set out and keeping them that way.'

For ensemble work, Jim usually provides a subdued chordal backing between the front player and pianist. His solo may enter obliquely with a single note run, but is more likely to sustain a melody over broken chords. 'Night Lights, a record made in the 60s demonstrates both approaches between spot-on exchanges of Gerry Mulligan's sax, Art Farmer's trumpet and Bob Brookmeyer's trombone. With each chorus skirting the theme yet arising as a melody in itself, you wonder whether the empathy at that session had developed over time or just happened through mutual inspiration.

'It's a combination of things, I can't remember that far back but we may have had a rehearsal, probably not. Maybe after a couple of run-throughs, I'll get the idea how the piece goes, and then work something in. Being aware of the overall sound, I try to make my solo different, make it interesting for myself, because I'm the one who hears it coming out of that amp. My phrasing may have to do with trumpet style; I used to like the way Miles Davis played ballads, so maybe I'm unconsciously attempting what I imagine he would sound like on guitar. Also, I've worked with some fantastic sax players, Ben Webster, I loved his ballad playing and Sonny Rollins was a big influence personally and musically. I don't know if you've ever heard him playing those long unaccompanied solos in the middle of a tune, fantasia like; those used to leave me with jaw hanging. So when I'm relaxed I try to do things like that.'

As with Brookmeyer, earlier duos with Bell Evans, 'Intermodulation' and 'Undercurrent', also reveal a close partnership of feeling. Though both have an introspective sense to their playing, a keen ear for what the other is doing unifies their individuality. Like he matches the guitar with the trombone, Jim will subordinate the instrument to the piano with murmuring syncopated chords, or meet it on equal terms with interwoven improvisations.

'Well I had known Bill for quite a while, and of course listened to him a lot. We may have rehearsed for those records because I remember going to his apartment, but the numbers came mostly as they hit us. The second album I know was from one trip to the studio; in fact, I remember picking Bill up in my car. Since I've been working with Bob, I've been aiming for almost a piano style, or at least produce contrast otherwise it's all chords or all single lines which is dull. At rehearsal I might stop and slowly play something over with him, gradually working back into tempo. I might try playing chords in lower registers as the left hand of a



*Jim Hall and Lance Bosman*





piano, sometimes play a single line high up, sometimes combine that with chords, and jump wide intervals like those in the violin suites; I think about that style. Though I can't play in those fast tempos like he does, we realise that we can both do something well. I know that since the days with Clark Terry his music has evolved: his playing has a new awareness.

'We began playing together last fall when Bob asked me to appear for an album that he still has to do, an orchestral album. Anyhow I wanted to be in on that, and since we lived close together in New York we started working on that. It seemed to go okay, just the two of us, so we decided to take a job in a club, then the record was postponed, and in that accidental way, was how the duo worked out.'

For a venue, a voluminous tent hardly adds to the intimacy of the duo's dialogue. More conducive would be a club surrounding, pervaded with the delicate fragrance of tobacco smoke and alcohol. But to keep a grasp on reality, the marquee at Bracknell Jazz Festival did grant space to an audience which, in different circumstances, might not find room. Even so, it must be daunting to walk on, view the expanse and then try to shorten the distance between yourself and that panorama of faces.

'I was frightened, and more than that there was no place to warm up and get your wits about you. But as it turned out, we were happy about how the people listened. Still, I found it difficult there, especially since the night before we played at the Pizza Express. I was nervous in fact, didn't feel I played all that well; but sometimes you sound different to what you imagined. Before we go on, that's an important time for me; for about half an hour before I have to concentrate but there was no place to be alone. I should be used to it, I've played at a lot of things like it, though never just in a duet. I don't mean that as a slam against the festival, it's just that I was a bit frightened.'

Difficult to describe, though distinctive to hear, is the

touch, the tone of Jim Hall's guitar. Certain notes within the phrases are curtailed, not with staccato emphasis, but shortened by the briefest pauses. A passage may begin with a fluid, stepwise ascent only to angle out with longer, unhurried time values fragmented with momentary silences. Another personal mark is the slurred chords, from time to time stroked top to bottom. These traits generate idiosyncratic rhythms and dynamics which in a quiet way enhance the contours of the lines. These refined techniques, Jim believes, were unconsciously acquired during the days with the 'Three', a time when he tuned down the guitar down a 4th so as to provide deep-set harmonic support and a full bass line for the two horns.

'That was with Jimmy Guiffre and Bob. In a lot of that trio, two would be following a written background while the third added a solo. For that we rehearsed a lot, there was a definite form. Jimmy didn't worry so much about progressions as cadences and phrases. He down-played chord progressions, I believe he thought more horizontal. I remember we used to play Stella by Starlight with Ralph Pena as bass player, and he and I tried to work out the changes; but Jimmy got annoyed at us: he just wanted a whoosy sound and not worry about the chords. In fact we got into an argument; I said at least let's know what the chords are, then Ralph and I can agree on the approach. He had very strong ideas about what he wanted in the trio; very much the leader.

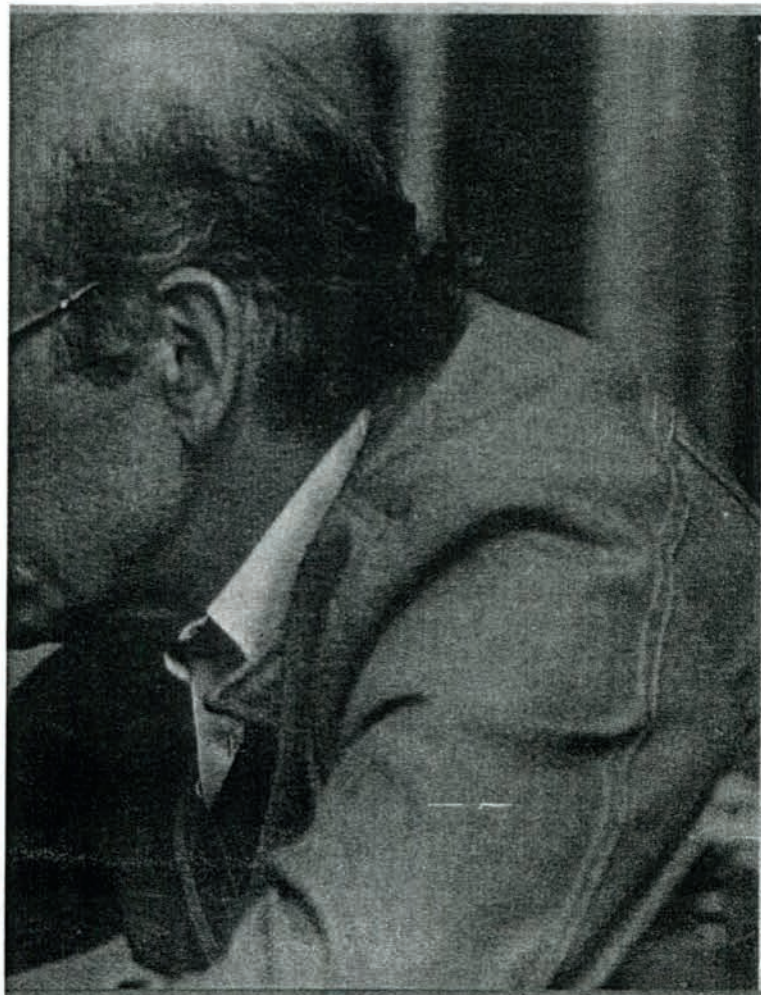
'It would be difficult to work with someone like that now. Fact is, I rebelled, though in a way his dogma was welcome because I admired him and learned so much. Jim helped me to become aware of the way in which wind instrumental phrases went. The slurs in my playing, he directed me to get the pick sound out of the guitar, to play in a way that I'd blend in; and at the same time he used to do things with his phrasing, where if we had a long note that I couldn't hold for the full length, then he'd come in and do little fall-offs on it. If you listen to his playing you'll hear it; he developed a style around that.'

Jazz resources, from simple to complex substitutions, are now so well documented that they can be absorbed progressively by the aspirant player. The drawback is that most of the clichés, tried and tested over the 40s and 50s, tend to smack of that period. Inclined to the evergreen repertoire, familiar changes are part of Jim Hall's vocabulary — though they are applied in the most unfamiliar way. But is it possible to convey this in teaching, his individual treatment, cultivated over years of practical experience.

'I haven't been teaching for quite a while because it got to a point where it was impossible to keep a schedule. Also I'm not sure I can do it that well, I had pretty good luck with a few guys, but when I first got off the road in about 65, I took students, usually professionals developing solos, and tried to keep to that. But then I'd get people I really should have screened out and didn't, and who would have done better with other teachers.

'Sometimes, if you have a teacher who's maybe not a fantastic soloist, but dogmatic on the technical side, that can be better, where you have an exact approach. I can't do it, I'm too vague about all that stuff. I've been wrestling with jazz since I was 12 or so, and hearing a lot; I just started playing, probably badly but I didn't know the difference. It's hard to impart that kind of experience to someone who's maybe never heard much jazz; you have to direct them to records. Working from a compositional standpoint rather than encourage a certain style, I would have them take their own ideas and develop them for solos. The other element is to listen and react to what's going on around you, like phrasing; if they throw out a statement, then you respond. Children do that with those sing-song things: they develop what's natural.'

To work in bars and clubs is to have a pick-me-up within reach. During the 60s, drink took hold in Jim's life,





eventually bringing his career to a halt. That period is thankfully past, although he still has inner tensions to overcome, tensions well hidden by his outward composure and gentle disposition.

'I did have a problem with drink and I don't have any more, not for 13 years now. I still don't fully understand what happened, I think it was partly my physical makeup, partly psychological, and the environment — I've played in saloons since I was a kid. Psychologically, it was not wanting to do a bad performance, and being tired on the road, those things. I had quite a bad spell with it but fortunately I got out with my health intact. It was pretty frightening once, my hands got in really bad shape, where I developed a kind of alcoholic arthritis, seems to affect the nerve ends; and it's not uncommon with jazz musicians. I knew I just had to stop drinking totally, and I still don't drink at all. It's too bad it had to be that severe because it has little pleasures; but I do okay without it. The first thing I noticed when I went back to play — and incidentally I wasn't sure that I could play jazz without drinking, they were synonymous — I noticed when I went to work with Shelly Mann and Red Mitchell that some of the emotional part was lost but clarity picked up a lot.

'I still sometimes get nervous about performances, get upset and don't have as much fun as I used to; but maybe that was okay for that period. It's much easier to deal with pressure and a reputation than it was, even though I have a problem with depressed periods, and I'm working on that with psycho-analysis for a while. I've moved to Connecticut by myself because I find New York City is really draining now. In fact, it got to a point where I just wouldn't go out, and that wasn't when I was drinking, this is recent; I'd just hole up in the apartment. So I moved to a kind of country environment, about an hour or so on the train from New York. What I hope to continue doing is work for two or three weeks then take a month off, and spell it out that way.'

Returning to present activities, the free form numbers performed at Bracknell gave added zest to the duo's basic bop programme. Free in form, their ideas are not totally free, being contained by agreed ideas and the knowledge of each other's temperament and capabilities. These abstract pieces, as Jim calls them, summon to mind an earlier participation 'Abstractions' with Ornette Colman and Eric Dolphy. On a chamber string section as virile as any avant garde composer would have it, the guitar superimposes taut, craggy improvisations on mostly original numbers and also gives a part swing, part distorted face lift to 'Django'. Could these experiences lead to more moves in this progressive style? 'I do enjoy what we call abstract; we seem to communicate well on that level. Mind, I still like standard tunes, Body and Soul, so it would depend. Avant garde, I like some of it, but generally for improvising I don't have much fun. Some of the things that Bob and I make up on the spur of the moment they can get far out, but we'll be relating closely to each other, that's what I like. Reading a difficult piece of music, I've done quite a bit of that, and at the end you feel you've worked hard and haven't got anything back. I've written a half dozen little snatches of pieces which the two of us improvise on, sort of motives, and I'm anxious to see how they work out. They'll just be abstract motives that we can develop into a piece.

'I like to fool around with motives and develop the material. Sonny Rollins does that, he can really develop a motive in his playing; and he arrived at that himself somehow. I don't think he knows classical music, it's just a logical brain, taking the smallest idea and manipulating it. That's the thing: to take something that lends itself to transposition, inversion and such like. I think that way when we improvise those abstracts; whatever material we start with, I try to store it and refer back; so maybe you'll have three or four elements to work with, rather like I'm writing a piece. I wouldn't say that other ways are shapeless, but it's what I

like to do.

'One thing that I keep saying I'm going to do is write an album of my own for brass and strings, something like that. It's an area I haven't dabbled in, writing my own settings. It's a bit of a problem courting a record company that's both interested and can afford it. There are a couple of possibilities, though it seems to me that most companies are looking for hits, but maybe I haven't shopped around enough. In one way I can understand that part of the business, having to survive.

'My next move . . . well, I've recorded with all sorts of players and I'm now figuring out the situations that suit me best. I have only so many years left to play, and I want it to pay off, so I'm careful about what I do so far as recordings go. Occasionally I have lapses but I try not to have just any trash to sell because I hope that my records are going to be around awhile. So I want to be where I can respond to the texture rather than stick in a cliché.'

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