

Charlie Byrd
USA

Interview.

'I improvise as many different points of view as I can.'

Published in *Guitar* magazine. March 1979.

Venue: London.

Lance Bosman

**'I improvise from as
many different
points of view
as I can'**

Charlie Byrd



Two discoveries in Charlie Byrd's early musical life promoted a line of pursuit which has placed him foremost among finger-style guitarists. One was the classical guitar repertoire; and from a study of this came the sudden realisation that, with classical techniques, he could regenerate years of experience in the jazz guitar. While bearing traces of single-line electric guitar and the melodic/chordal style of Dick McDonough, Charlie's playing is very much his own, easily recognised by its multi-pronged attack. Marshalling classical devices, melodies and improvisations are spurred along as two or three contrapuntal voices with added passages of recurring bass pedal notes.

Charlie received wide acclaim from public performances

at jazz haunts, notably the Showboat in Washington D.C. and Village Vanguard, New York. He has also played with Woody Herman's band and secured an international reputation from his arrangements and through recordings with Stan Getz of the bossa nova. Between work in his regular trio of acoustic or Ovation electric guitar, bass and drums, he teams up with Herb Ellis and Barney Kessel for the group The Great Guitars.

A composed, soft spoken talker and not above self-criticism, Charlie recalled the motives that led him to adapt the classical guitar for jazz, his approach to improvisation, and the balance he aims for in programme planning and performance.

Story: Lance Bosman

My early interest in the guitar was playing whatever current music I heard, and the classics didn't enter into that. My father played the guitar and mandoline so we played together for recreation. Then I got interested in jazz in its more pure form, and after my army service in the last war, I developed an interest in classical music knowing nothing whatsoever about the classical guitar. This was in 1947 which would have made me 22, and I was very enthused. I didn't realise the guitar had this kind of history so when I discovered that I went gung-ho for it though I continued to play jazz and at the same time studied music and composition. Then in 1950 I abandoned playing publicly for a while to study the classical guitar only.

I believe that you attended the Segovia classes.

That occurred in 1953 and I felt then so thrilled to discover a heritage for the instrument that I wanted to fully pursue it; though at the time I had no idea that I was going to use the classical guitar in jazz. I knew jazz, but the thought of applying my experience of it to the Spanish guitar didn't come until much later, and then very suddenly. As I say, I was attending a class with Segovia and another with Papas, and it suddenly struck me that if I was going to get anywhere with the guitar I was wasting half my life, the half involved in jazz. I had pursued jazz with a lot of enthusiasm, so to expect myself to become a classical guitarist after having been a jazz player was asking too much; anyway, I was 24 at the time. There was John Williams, Julian Bream and all these people younger than I, but older in terms of the classical guitar. So amalgamating jazz came as a great inspirational flash to me: I wanted to use my total experience to set a pattern for the later things I wanted to do.

And you exploited devices from classical playing, counterpoint, pedal point, tremolo and arpeggios. Did you consciously apply these to jazz?

Yes, with the difference being that I was trying to bring my two selves together, you might say. I wanted to apply the rhythms and phrasing in jazz and retain some of the linear playing of the American jazz guitarists who took their inspiration from sax players. These characteristics I tried to apply with as many classical techniques as I could.

Recently there's been a tendency with classical guitarists to include jazz standards in their programmes. Some players are so steeped in the classics that there doesn't seem to be a feel for jazz, it's not in the blood.

Well you could put it in terms of being in the blood. I think it also has to do with experience. The amount of devotion a classical guitarist has to apply in order to play the repertoire up to today's standards is definitely a full time job; so I'm not sure that I would recommend to classical players that they go out and jam with jazzmen in order to play their kind of music. I think that music is primarily experience—you might almost say ethnic, like jazz; there's no substitute: musicianship will never substitute actual playing. Classical players who attempt to play jazz seldom achieve the fluidity of a jazz player; there's no doubt in my mind that they could with the proper amount of doing, so I think that classical players who want to play jazz, if they allow themselves time enough, they'll succeed; there's no reason why they shouldn't except for the fact that the element of time comes in—can you do it all. For myself I don't know how much of a world beater I could ever have been if I'd have walked the straight and narrow path of the classical guitar. I have no doubt in my mind that I could have been a better classical guitarist than I am today had I chosen not to dilute that with playing Latin American music and jazz and all kinds of things. Me, I judge it to be worth it; I still love classical guitar music very much. I still practise and perform some I prefer, you might almost call it, dabbling in many kinds of music; but I like to experience all this and that's a very difficult thing to do as a player. You know, a conductor can learn various styles and know them in his mind and be able to conduct or compose or arrange; but actually to play an instrument in various ways requires a physical thing, it's like being a cricketer and a footballer in one. Whatever success I've had, I think it's due to the fact that I've had such a broad approach to it. Also, I might blame my failures on that too but I don't say this in any regretful way because it is what I chose to do. I don't think everyone needs to be a perfectionist, or as close to that as you can be, in one given style. It's what the person chooses for themselves. There are some jazz players that I like very much to listen to, but I wouldn't want to restrict myself to doing only what they do.

And you exploit jazz characteristics on the classical guitar.

Oh yes, I certainly do. For instance I use a sliding slur very much as jazz players use it. A one finger slide is used in classical music to

some extent but most people try to avoid that. Tarrega for instance did it though Segovia decided that slurring wasn't very musical and doesn't use it much. I like bending the notes; on nylon strings this is tricky because nylon doesn't respond in a bend nearly as much as steel. If you ever saw Django play, he did a lot of really jamming that note right up to full half tone. This is very hard to do on the classical guitar but you can suggest that and that's what I work at. My father, when I first took up the classical guitar, had an old gut string guitar at that time and that's what he didn't like about it, you can't bend the notes as well as you should. Ornamentation on the guitar is a problem: the minute you apply vibrato or push the note in any way, it can only go up; so you're really distorting the pitch. It's not like a violinist's or singer's vibrato which surrounds the note, it's vibrato in one direction only. That's something that has to be carefully done.

I notice that you use pedal point frequently with bass notes and even in the treble during improvisations.

As you develop techniques for improvising, pedal point is one of those that works well the guitar. I think to improvise in a contrapuntal way on the guitar is extremely difficult. Maybe it's hard on any instrument, but the guitar more than keyboard because of the fingering problem. Jazz pianists, the old stride player or a modern one like Oscar Peterson, at least have the freedom of both hands. On the guitar everything has to be fingered in such a way to do what ever counterpoint you're aiming for; the fingers have to be placed in a way that anticipates continuity in each voice. So pedal point on open strings is one of the devices that seems to work very well.

I question the use of tremolo, an idiomatic effect more suited to classics and Popa Piccolino's Neapolitan songs.

The problem with tremolo goes beyond that. Tremolo on a stringed instrument has its place, and sometimes sounds good; but it does impair the rhythm. Players of highly rhythmic music need to be careful about applying it. This brings to mind a Brazilian player I know, and most Brazilian players are more or less like him in that they use very little tremolo; they go for single note figures, cleanly executed as on the guitar. And there's the pieces by Vivaldi that have been played on the mandolin: even those, designed for the tremolo, lose some of their impact. I think the same thing happens in jazz. Even so, I've dabbled with the tremolo occasionally, and still do, because one of the problems in playing finger-style jazz is that there are certain techniques that I don't do enough.

Your arrangements: do you normally notate them down to the last detail?

That varies all the way from refined arranging to some I barely sketch, depending on what I want to accomplish. We were talking earlier about counterpoint: well for me, I write out everything contrapuntal; if it's just the melodies with chords, I'll only make a sketch.

A general point: do you have preferences for the bases of your improvisations, the chords rather than the melody, or vice-versa?

I like to improvise from as many different points of view as I can. Sometimes vertically, sometimes horizontally, perhaps abandoning the harmonies entirely, along the lines of recent jazz and Indian music where it becomes a scalar improvisation. I do try to fit the improvisation to the mood of whatever I'm trying to create, and I try for variety. I'm less intrigued now with the idea of throwing harmony and form aside than I once was, though I still do it some, but found that as a player and listener I've become bored with free-form and that. I think that without form, the spontaneity that takes its place is sometimes aimless: it's hard to build and relate things. I've been on record sessions where they play an hour or so and then go in with the scissors and tape and try to give it some form—take a four-bar thing out that's really hot, and retape and repeat it; and where there's nothing happening, they'll snip that out, all this kind of thing. Some sense of discipline ought to be imposed and that doesn't have to be harmonic. I like the Indian players, the way they improvise, but that's very structured; even though they don't follow chords, there are definite rhythmic ideas, it has other things to hold it together. But when jazz players abandon the chords, they haven't much to hold on to, except their own imagination. Like I say, my interest has waned over the years. I've really got back to two premises, melodic and harmonic.

Are certain of your improvisations devised beforehand to be included in the arrangement, or are they always spontaneous?

There are other possibilities besides the two that you've mentioned. I have on occasions sketched in ideas for improvisations, worked them into a tune. I've also experimented by practising different kinds of improvisation just to give myself exercises; for

instance, confining myself to a specific number of notes, maybe two at a time or very small numbers like that which is very good discipline and training for improvising. More often than not, the improvisation grows in performance; but to say absolutely spontaneous is not quite what I mean. If I set an arrangement of a tune I'll maybe plan the first chorus, an interlude and the end, or just the outer sections. With this I'm ready to play with the group, a bass part and drum part with something important in them; so then I'm ready to improvise on that. Sometimes, if the tune is off the beaten track, it'll take me a while before I become pleased with the improvisation: it seems to be a matter of experimenting with it. I start out with very little improvisation, just one chorus possibly, and I'll work that simply until I get a feel for the flow of it — the improvisation will kind of evolve rather than be worked out in front.

During the course of this preliminary working-out, you strike an idea that you like, one that lends itself to development, would you use that in the improvisation despite the fact that it's predetermined?

Yes I would. I have a friend who's had the privilege of working in the Ellington band during the time of all the great players, and he said that they mostly played the same choruses, just embellished a little each time; but basically when they stood up to play something tonight it was not so different from what they did the night before. And as far as I'm concerned they played jazz didn't they?

A technical point, you often double the melody line: do you have a tendency for particular intervals as counterpoint to the melody? Generally 3rds, 6ths or octaves. It's a simple way to add body, weight to the sound rather than for harmonic interests.

Working with the Spanish guitar alongside Woody Herman, did you have problems setting the balance?

We did some public performances using just the mike and the arrangements that participated in. Everyone would leave me alone as soloist, very much as in a guitar concerto. If you balance skillfully you have the orchestra out when the soloist is in. The guitar has to be treated very delicately; I mean, you can't write Wagnerian brass passages behind a guitar solo and expect it to make sense. At present I've got an Ovation electric/classic, a funny name if ever I've heard one. Although it serves my purpose, for someone who's looking for a pure classical guitar sound, I think they'll be disappointed in this; it's somewhere between an electric guitar sound and the classic guitar. At low to medium volume it's got quite a nice tone: at higher volumes it becomes more like an electric guitar and that's an advantage when I'm playing with Herb and Barney, or against trumpet and saxophones. I try to use it in both those ways, even on solo parts with Herb and Barney; I play the rhythm down and then treat it more as an acoustic guitar. To play that way is much more interesting for me and for the audience who have the contrast and change of dynamics.

Do you use it for club work too?

I usually carry acoustic and amplified, the one played will depend on the situation; if there's an amplifying system and I'm able to get volume enough for the drummer to play a relatively full background,

then I'll hardly take the electric monster from its case; it'll be the classical guitar. But at other times we find that the system isn't so hot, and the acoustic system isn't either, then the Ovation saves my life.

At these venues you might play classical pieces too. Is it difficult to switch from a jazz inventive role to a classical interpretative one?

It does offer some problems, solved better at some times than at others. It is difficult to switch from reading to playing by ear — especially if it's a programme of new things. If I'm playing maybe thirty or forty minutes of unfamiliar music which I'm really having to look at, I'm so concentrating on reading that I can't even remember my own name; my hands seem to be so related to the eye. A danger exists when playing classical and trying to be creative with improvisation; sometimes I think I'm being too flippant in trying to do it. Actually it's best if you give forethought as to exactly how the jazz and classics are to be joined, what you're going to play. If I do a session of classical in the middle of programme it will accord with that jazz that I've played before.

You mean you're leading up in mood from jazz to classics, and preparing the audience for that?

Yes, and also my hands, no rip-around blues. And what feels good for me probably makes sense to the audience in terms of transition; if it feels comfortable to my hands and mind, it's likely a smoother exchange for their ears too.

Your arrangements of the bossa nova, that's an idiom that falls nicely between classics and jazz. It's jazz fashioned for the finger-style guitar almost as if the bossa nova was conceived for the instrument. Is that why you're inclined to it?

I would agree, it's definitely why I'm inclined to that music. The popular style of playing in Brazil is that way; if you go to a party, probably two thirds of the people will know how to play the guitar and that's how they'll do it, with their fingers.

Were your arrangements with Stan Getz worked out co-operatively, or did one of you in particular do them?

I did the arranging so far as the rhythms were concerned, and wrote out sketches for melodies and other things, but we worked together on counterpoint and that.

Your records 'Guitar Artistry' and 'Blues for Night People' achieve I think all those aims you've spoken of. 'Latin Byrd' I found disappointing, what with the languid and erratic entries of strings, I found disappointing, what with the languid and erratic entries of strings, and that your improvisations weren't given time to get off the ground.

I'm inclined to agree. The other records are a much more accurate representation of what I'm trying to do. I don't know what the solution is for blending guitar with larger ensembles. It seems to me that for all kinds of music, classics as well, the failures far outnumber the successes in bringing the guitar and orchestra together. I'm in favour of trying to do it, but maybe the orchestrator should understand the guitar better, and that guitarists should be more aware of what they're trying to do when the orchestra's playing. It's a problem, the reasons for making records like that aren't very good. For instance, radio time in the States very much enhances the sale of records; but if it's George Benson or whoever, any format that falls into the instrumental trio category, you can forget it, they aren't going to play it. You add the strings, they'll play. It has to do with a rigid 'this is our style, and we play this kind of beautiful music'.

And yet jazz guitar does act as bridge between commercial popular and the classical guitar.

There seems to be a growing trend towards more education of jazz-type playing, and I'm happy to witness the increasing success of this. The people involved in this kind of education have to be really inventive on their own in order to present and organise it whereby it can be taught progressively. Also they have to find ways of getting past the administration of schools who don't want it taught in the first place. It's always true to some extent that you get people interested in music, really interested I mean, who are going to come out at the other end with something more than just this social phenomenon which the Beatles could be called — those that are really involved will come round to something else and jazz is a very natural place to go isn't it, because it has so many similar roots.

Are you happy in your direction, do you anticipate new moves?

I'm perfectly happy doing what I do, day after day, a little bit better. I have a few things in mind that I would like to accomplish: it means going back to simpler ideas. Some of things I've tried to do have been a bit heavy handed; but apart from feeling that I should lighten up a bit, there are no great new directions.

ALHAMBRA

**SPAIN'S OUTSTANDING
GUITAR
NOW AVAILABLE FROM:**

Juan Teijeiro Music Company
2, 4 & 6, Cheshire St., London, E2.