

Ralph Towner
USA

Interview.

‘Open horizons.’

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Lance Bosman

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RALPH TOWNER

'Sound Worlds'

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Ralph Towner

Open Horizons

Lance Bosman



Photo by Lance Bosman.

IN A STYLE MUCH HIS OWN, RALPH Towner's jazz guitar could be described as progressively modern, while tinged with the exotic. Open-ranging and with a kind of timeless air, it bears few if any familiar patterns or vintage jazz strains. With a cross-cultural vision of music, Towner's composing and improvisation strives for a fusion of avant-garde, Brazilian and eastern elements.

Even so, definite themes are detectable, brief but easily remembered. But what most sets this guitarist apart is the unique harmony he extracts from the instrument. Conceived on the guitar with classical techniques, combinations of open-sounding and stopped-string chords take form and merge in shifting luminous dissonance. Between these indefinable harmonies, the melody alternately cuts through or lies back in sustained arpeggiation.

Composing for solo guitar and jazz piano, Towner also writes as a group member of Oregon. Formed some twenty years, the quartet's music, as that of their guitarist, defies pat definition. For these players too view their music across open horizons. Indeed, with their battery of percussion alone, the image on stage is of a jazz gamelan. Though most of Oregon's music is by Towner, he considers it a springboard rather than a framework for the ensemble's improvisations. Having provided the themes, the responsibility for their development is left to the team's inventive powers. These were amply demonstrated at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall in a recent concert funded by the Arts Council. Just before that, Ralph Towner recalled the distant influences that bore on his present mode of jazz. For his compositions are less of melody and structures than of atmospheric and mood impressions.

"The closest analogy I can find is that each composition is an enclosed world with its own

characters, proportions, limitations. Starting a piece is like setting out a play, a story. You have to establish a scenario of prominent and supporting characters, their entrances and exits, things most noticeable. When the soloist comes in it's like the entrance of the first character. I don't think of this when I'm writing, but totally in terms of sound and emotion. The first note or sonority, the first event, is the most critical, it's the catalyst for everything that comes. The more you add to that first event, the more you set the mood and form. So these pieces for me are real complete worlds of striking contrasts and harmonies."

But before reaching up this plane there are fundamentals to be conquered—techniques of composition, instrumental ability. Surely these must be securely grasped in order to improvise, to whittle themes and develop them. "I don't think so; that glorifies it too much. Everyone is able to do it at any age and with limited means, from one chord on the guitar or dabbling at the piano. As soon as you play a sound you can respond to it and keep going. Everyone can compose. True, it's enhanced through knowing musical language. But even with a small vocabulary you can express yourself; and that is significant, however rudimentary. So first steps are not foolish, it's just that as you mature, your language widens, your tonal palette, your means of expression."

"My harmonic vocabulary is immense compared to that I had as a junior improvising on the piano. But you don't have to have that breadth. You can express more if you have, from studying and working with other musicians, adding to your experience and vocabulary. That gives you access to a greater range of expression. But it continues as it began. I feel that I'm operating now with the same urgency and feeling that I had when

very young. That pipeline remains open, and the advantage of being a musician is that we are able to remain in touch with the same person that we were as children."

Unless subsequent education stifles that inspiration of innocence. Having dealt in a free domain of music and experienced rigid disciplines too, he rates the latter as a mixed blessing. Intensive tuition can undermine confidence, inhibit. On the other hand it provides resources to fall back on during the arid moments of creativity. "It's up to the individual to take in information without supressing that conduit back to childhood emotions. It's asking too much to have teachers that always inspire. In cases where the teacher has a limited view, I've told my students that it's their responsibility to absorb information without becoming cowered or sacrificing their sensitivity or opinions; that your own instincts aren't foolish, that you must retain your emotions. It takes a lot of strength not to be crushed."

"My guitar professor, Karl Scheit, had a strong personality, a wonderful academic teacher but, yes, he liked to mark people; and students who didn't have much fight in them shrunk from that treatment and became frightened performers, afraid of making a mistake. Your creativity needn't be crushed by education—how can you be threatened by learning? Anyway, knowledge is useful, especially when you run into a writer's block. So when you come to that 'what do I do next' when you're not feeling anything, that's when you call on your intellect and education. You can go back through the piece and perhaps find within it a mechanical key that will unlock a new door and you'll be back in the flow."

Between the piano and the guitar, it is the guitar that most attracts. Through casual improvisation, feeling out the harmonies, the sound textures that a promising line might be struck. "It's like a more expressive keyboard. For me the guitar conveys much more personality than the piano."

"I do best when I improvise a lot. It's a question of finding a kick-off combination. I don't come up with many things away from the instrument, but as soon as I find something I'm better leaving the guitar alone then. I get up and wander around, go back and forth. I pace a lot. I've worn carpets out into set routes that way."

From all his records with the ECM label, one in particular lingers in mind, *Solstice-Sound and Shadows* (1095). With the saxophone of Jan Garbarek, it was evident right from the opening track that this group had reached a rare state of empathy. An intimate session with hidden direction, the music lingered around individual reflections and unhurried exchanges. It was one of those occasions, apparently, never since recaptured. "On that record all are first takes. That was one of the rarest records I've done in terms of having the right music, the right atmosphere, the players at the right points in their career. In fact it spoiled me, it was difficult to follow. I don't think I've ever done a record since that came together in that exciting way."

With several guitars to hand, the 12-string among them seems these days to have receded to the shadows of Spanish guitars and keyboards. "I keep one classical guitar with unorthodox tuning and another normal. But



Photo by Lance Bosman.

I find the 12-string a limited instrument. It's rare that I can write a piece ideally suited to the 12-string guitar. It doesn't have the versatility of a classical guitar. Where it shines is in things where its open strings can resonate, where the harmony doesn't move quickly. I have pickups and it sounds quite good. But I have to write specific pieces to utilise the 12-string because it's not versatile. Another reason I avoid it is because it's so hard on the fingernails. So I treat it like an ugly stepsister.

"I had a nylon 12-string built, but I find I haven't played it for a year. It hasn't attracted me. So the maker is adjusting it for more resonance. As it was, it turned out to be a poor hybrid, sounding like a hyper-tense lute and a weak 12-string without much identity."

From earlier contact with the old jazz styles, the bar lines and nylon-string guitar, Towner has since turned his gaze further afield, absorbing Brazilian and Third World idioms. Brazilian jazz fusions have of course found perfect release in the fingerstyle guitar. He began playing this because, as he said, it was simply comfortable to play. Whereas bebop on the instrument sounds silly and bouncy. Considering these past ventures, the classics, the jazz piano, new music and Latin, how did he approach and ultimately blend these seemingly divergent strands?

"I did things in obsessive blocks. I aimed for a standard in each of these areas, to pursue one and then return to the other. When I studied classical guitar I didn't work at jazz. For classical aspirations I considered the great players. They set the standard for

tone quality, timbres, musicality. Two years at that without anything else, no piano or improvising. The piano was an obsession from the last years at university, active with other players in practice rooms, in bars, and listening to Bill Evans.

"My father died when I was three, my mother when I was twenty. So from then there wasn't anyone saying I should grow up and get a decent job. There was never that restriction. From age twenty to thirty I invested in these time blocks with different instruments and their music. That's a luxury that few people have, if you can call it a luxury. People say how tragic, but at that age I didn't think of owning anything... it's as if I was designed that way, I didn't think I was suffering, and I wasn't. I wouldn't want to go back to that, but could if I had too. So when I'm teaching now I realise I can't expect others to put in that much application. So I try to integrate that with the production of music."

Indirectly this raises another point: of balancing the development of technique with musical awareness. Can the two be cultivated together? With scales, most likely, technique can be developed without the distraction of emotional involvement. But healthier perhaps to strike a medium, of knuckling into exercises which have both musical merit and physical challenges built in. "I integrate that. I have the same dry exercises, but instead of boring triads I use interesting chord forms. Not a lot of movement for the left hand but these are right-hand exercises and the sound is interesting.

"I have a book if you can find it. It's distributed in the U.S. by Hal Leonard called *Improvisation and performance techniques* for acoustic and classical guitar, published in New Jersey by 20th Century music. It deals with right and left hand technique. I break from conventional patterning and approach runs from different fingers, any combination. Arpeggiation rapidly develops since you learn to apply unusual right fingerings without being restricted to patterns. I also concentrate on making each right hand note to sound with exactly the same volume and tone. If you can control that then you can easily vary them.

"This leads me to the question of sound awareness and not losing contact with it. It's not a case of exercises being dry. If you don't listen you're not cultivating fine muscular development. Unless you listen to what you're practising you waste time because you're confusing the muscles, doing different things every time. Notice weight lifters: they lift the same weight repetitively and they exert the same muscles in the same way. That's what you should be doing when playing exercises; and the only way to determine whether you're doing this is to listen to the results for consistent tone quality and volume. So much time is wasted watching television and practising simultaneously. You don't have to practice eight hours a day, slamming away just half concentrating. You'll get more out of listening acutely to what you play over a much shorter time. As soon as it starts slipping then it's time to switch. Go and read, do something else.

"The same for me when composing. There have been times when I've reached a hurdle, and become deaf going back and approaching it over and over. I can't discriminate any more. That's another reason why I get up and walk around a lot."

With the shared vision of their guitarist, the other members of Oregon also regard their music as constantly evolving, eluding definition. These players too reach out to the four corners, east to west. Measure of their present focus is the C.D. *45th Parallel* produced by



Oregon.

the group and released through VeraBra (vRv 2048 2). To colourful instrumentation themes project and contour with meditative improvisations. So effortless, it leaves us to ponder the extent of the actual composition underlying these tracts, and what cues are there to motion entrances.

"For those pieces everyone contributed to the development of the atmosphere. There are devices to ensure this: I can notate a specific number of bars, but get the best results from combining organised sections with those left totally up to the improvisers, allowing them to elaborate on what's gone before. The more the responsibility is spread around, the greater the voice and involvement of the improvisers. This carries a higher risk but also yields heightened success and drama. It takes attuned musicians, ones who may suddenly take off or even leave the form. That can be dramatic too. You can't crush it down to a drab democracy where no one is given the chance to be egotistic. If someone does leap outside the form and the other musicians compensate, the results can be incredible. All these things go on, like an abstract microcosm of a normal lifetime, with its accidents, tragedies, high points. And nobody actually gets injured, maybe embarrassed but that's all. It's a wonderful medium, one I understand from birth, but still full of surprises."