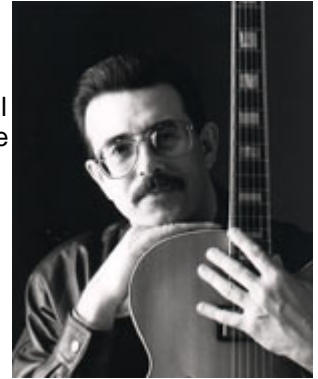


## THE INTERVIEW

Peter Leitch interviews Peter Leitch at 62

### **P.L. Has your playing or your music changed over the years?**

P.L. I don't think there have been really drastic changes, but rather a slow, steady evolution. I think that one is influenced by all of one's life experience, and in some way all of the music we've heard. I think I'm a better guitarist now. I know, for example, that there are musical situations that I am more comfortable with now, that I wasn't 20 years ago. Things have been dropped from and added to the vocabulary, not always consciously, and I'm playing with much more confidence now. As far as writing goes, I'm working on some new things, and also getting back to some older things that I had put aside. I've been working on some music for a larger ensemble that I hope to get recorded in the future. Also, I now feel comfortable enough with the guitar to have produced a solo recording (my first!), and it's just been released! (Self Portrait, Jazz House 7003)



### **P.L. You have 14 or 15 CDs on the market, and have toured in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Australia, played some major festivals, and had a steady Sunday night gig at Walker's in New York for the last 10 years. Why aren't you better known, have more name recognition?**

P.L. Beats Me! You have no idea how many times I've heard, "Man, you play so great! How come I've never heard of you?" I've always taken care of business-- showed up on time, tried to look good on stage, given 100+ %, had great bands, played interesting, dynamic music etc. Perhaps I'm not the right person to answer this question. Maybe you should ask the promoters, writers and record companies. Yeah, that's it--call up those nice folks at Blue Note or Verve. Ask them. Ask any of the "jazz journalists" who have never even bothered to come to hear me! Actually, part of it is probably my fault. I've never been able to come up with that fine combination of aggressivity and insincerity one needs to be successful in any business, especially in New York. One just believes in the work, and keeps on keepin' on. We have to separate the music from the business. The work is what's important--what will survive in some form or other. The business (or "industry" as they like to call it now) and its practitioners are soon forgotten. Dust to dust, as it were. Why would you make an industry out of jazz anyway? There's no real money there! Industry produces things that are really useful and necessary, like cement blocks, widgets, and air fresheners. There's no percentage in producing things just to be listened to or looked at. Also, I've never been that kind of virtuoso player that attracts attention. I'm just not that good a guitar player! I mean, I have enough "chops" or facility or whatever you want to call it to do what I need to do, but I've always been more interested in playing music rather than playing the guitar. The instrument has always required a musical context, for me, so consequently I've never been able to just pick up the guitar and blaze away mindlessly like some great guitar players. I think that some guitarists get caught up with, or trapped inside the instrument. I've always been attracted to music that was not necessarily guitar generated or oriented. I've always been more interested in finding the essence of something rather than looking for absolute perfection, which is why one might listen to Sonny Clark instead of say, Oscar Peterson (as great as he is). Sonny is playing the pure distilled essence of that music, while Oscar is playing the piano (albeit extremely well!).

### **P.L. Do you attribute any of this lack of recognition to racism, or so-called reverse racism, or have you ever encountered it?**

P.L. If I have encountered it, it didn't come from black musicians, or black people. It generally came from white promoters, writers, and record companies. Numerous times in my career I have been the only white musician in a group, playing black clubs (going back to R&B bands in the 1960's) and was usually made to feel welcome. When I moved to New York in 1982, I failed to realize that race was still a major issue in the U.S. Coming from Canada, and especially from Montreal, where there was such diversity (black, white, English, French, etc.), I didn't quite grasp the history. Actually, when I moved to N.Y., I found that a lot of the black musicians that I met were more welcoming to me than the white ones. A lot of them (white musicians) just looked at me kind of funny, or just looked right through me--I guess because I hadn't gone to the right schools with them, or wasn't connected to good gigs, or was a foreigner. But racism exists in complex forms. It's tied to economics. In the early and mid '90s I was recording and touring with John Hicks, Ray Drummond, and Smitty Smith. I couldn't believe some of the things white musicians said to me, things like: "Why are you playing with those black guys? They are not going to hire you." My first reaction was, "Well, you're not hiring me!" If you are really serious about the music, you can't be thinking about that stuff. And some of "those black guys" have hired me! Anyway, I'm enough of a sociopath that generally if

enough people tell me not to do something, I'll go right out and do it! But to answer the question--it's not just racism. There are a lot of different factors at work here.

**P.L. What music was important to you when you were learning?**

P.L. Bird, Coltrane, Miles, Monk, Hank Mobley, Jackie McLean, Sonny Rollins, Woody Shaw. But I'm still learning.

**P.L. Did you listen to guitar players?**

P.L. Wes, Kenny Burrell, Jim Hall, and Rene Thomas were my favorites. Grant Green also. These were players all making strong individual statements. You could hear one measure of music, one phrase, and you knew it was Kenny or Jim, or Wes. The music they played was so deep it transcended the instrument.

**P.L. Rene Thomas?**

P.L. Rene was a giant! Because his career took place mostly in Europe and Canada, he did not become as well known as he should have been. The musicians knew! They always do. Rene was influenced by Jimmy Raney, but by what he did with that language rhythmically, and in terms of his attack, he made it his own. He was Sonny Rollins' favourite guitar soloist.

**P.L. How did you come to record that tune with Woody Shaw?**

P.L. My friend Neil Swainson, the great Canadian bassist, was Woody's bass player at the time. He was working with Woody in New York, and staying at my apartment. I sat in with Woody that week, and a couple of days later I drove Neil out to Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, to do the record date. I remember thinking, "I'll just throw the guitar in the back of the car." When we arrived, Woody asked me: "Did you bring your guitar? I've got a tune I'd like you to play on." It was Sonny Rollins' tune "Solid," which ended up being the title tune!

**P.L. Popular music?**

P.L. When I was a child, I listened to the radio a lot. One actually heard a wide variety of music then. You would hear a mix of good show tunes, really bad white pop records, and artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard, both of whom I loved. By the time the Beatles and the rest of them arrived I was already deep into Miles, Trane and Monk etc., so I couldn't really take the '60s rock and pop groups seriously. I remember going to see Bob Dylan at a coffeehouse in Montreal, in 1962 or 63, just to see what the fuss was about. We were like "Whaaat?!" He couldn't sing, couldn't play the guitar, and he was drunk! I know the lyrics were supposed to mean something and there was supposed to be some sort of meaningful poetry, but I thought the Fugs had more to say in terms of pop social commentary. I liked Otis Redding and the Volt/Stax artists and early Motown. Listen to the way the horns sounded on those records--the blending and writing. It was very simple, sometimes just a couple of trumpets and a baritone saxophone, but a huge sound! I loved Hendricks, although it never occurred to me to try to play guitar that way. I especially liked his singing. Something about his phrasing reminded me of saxophone players like Dexter Gordon or Hank Mobley. Joni Mitchell's first couple of albums were important to me, particularly the first one. It was so fresh and personal, and had a kind of raw quality. She was using simple chords from the folk tradition, mostly triads, but in a new way both in terms of their progressions, and her unique tunings. After that, her music seemed to gradually get slicker, and involve L.A. studio musicians, and I lost interest in it.

**P.L. How does your music relate to your study and practice of photography?**

P.L. Well, they are both kind of linear, analog vestiges of the industrial revolution. I remember when I first became serious about photography--It was like, "Wow! I finally found something less relevant and less lucrative than trying to play this music on the guitar!" There are a lot of parallels. Shooting pictures, on the fly, as it were, in the instant, is a lot like playing music in real time--improvisation--these are ways of living the moment. In both cases, one is working out of a particular tradition with a knowledge of a large pictorial or musical "vocabulary" or vernacular. The darkroom processes are analogous to recording studio production processes. One could go further and say that the shadow, or dark areas, of a photograph correspond to the bass in the audio spectrum, the highlights to the treble, and all the grays in between are the mid range areas. Shapes, angles and lines are like rhythms. One tries to learn ways of seeing, in the same way we develop our musical ear. All this hopefully gives us a more acute perception of what's going on out there. Again, one looks for the essence of what we see, rather than trying to create a perfect photograph.

Recently, I have become interested in the possibilities of digital video. A friend of mine, Pamela Timmins, and I produced a short DVD about the making of my last CD (Autobiography, Reservoir Music 179) using digital video footage she had shot in the studio and elsewhere, and we are working on another project. Unlike painting or still photography, video or film occupies time and space in much the same way as music does.

### **P.L. Do you do digital photography?**

P.L. No, I do the old-fashioned silver process, you know, film and negatives and printing in the darkroom. The digital process interests me for editing, and for color work, which I plan to do in the future. But I'm not set up to do anything digital at this time. I guess I'm just an old fashioned modernist. You know, where the photograph, the print, is an actual object, to be looked at, held, admired, criticized, or whatever, like a CD or an LP, rather than a collection of virtual information to be disseminated electronically. Also, there is a certain depth, texture, tactility and plasticity, almost an explosive quality, to a traditional silver print, that I don't find in a digital print. The digital technology has unleashed upon us such a massive assault of images (and sounds) that we are becoming desensitized. Susan Kismaric, a curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, recently said in the N.Y. Times: "A lot of photography at this point in time is about decorating. It's not about taking the time to look." And again in the Times (4/21/06), photographer Henry Wessel: "People don't pay much attention these days to the descriptive, expressive and suggestive facts found in a good still photograph." I think these statements can be applied to music as well. I think that the technology has promoted a kind of instant gratification syndrome that has resulted in a drastic shortening of the attention span. We have become a culture of abbreviation.

This is happening globally too, with whole cultures leaping directly from the rice paddy to the mouse pad. We are losing some of the linear thought processes we learned from the industrial revolution, such as the ability to determine cause and effect, consequences and ramifications, or "read" a photograph, or to listen to music and be aware of what's happening on several elemental levels at once, (rhythm, harmony, etc.), or even to be able to listen to a piece of music continuously for more than three minutes.

### **P.L. Is living in New York important to you? Has the city changed in the 20 plus years you've lived there?**

P.L. Living in New York is important to me, because the city is first and foremost a resource. The very best of everything (music, art, technology etc.) is available here, and quickly and often cheaply! And there is still, in spite of the changes in the city, a kind of energy, an edge, that one doesn't find anywhere else. You have millions of people all running their own scams, dodges, and ideas, operating under the radar, so to speak, all packed into a geographically limited space. In the competition for that space there is friction, both physical and psychic, and with friction comes energy. It seems almost as if that energy has built up and concentrated over hundreds of years into a space where there is nowhere to go but up. There are still chop houses where people eat and drink in a manner reminiscent of the excesses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century robber barons. Until the late 1990's, there were actually jazz clubs that stayed open after 1:00 AM!

The commissioners of 1811, who laid out the grid plan of Manhattan's numbered streets and avenues, in their infinite wisdom, or at least in an effort to provide maximum real estate for the available space, failed to make any provision for back alleys or service routes. One consequence is that, unlike most other cities, EVERYTHING is in the street here--garbage placement and collection, commercial loading and unloading, automobile repair, drug dealing, prostitution, the homeless, etc. This all insures that a certain energy, spectacle, and a kind of low level anarchy remain, in spite of Mayor Bloomberg's (and his handlers in the real estate biz) attempt to turn the city into Toronto or Denver.

When I moved here (1982) there were very few chain stores--no McDonalds, no Gaps, no Starbucks, no Barnes & Noble etc. etc. The uncontrolled skyrocketing of commercial real estate prices in the 1980's and 90's resulted in the displacement of many individually owned businesses--a great loss of diversity and cultural (and visual) richness, a process that continues today with the post 9/11 construction boom. However, if one looks, there are still plenty of places where rents or tears in the fabric of the new city allow the old to seep through.

One no longer sees people riding unicycles in Manhattan, and along with some of the character, most of the characters have gone. Moondog, or the eternal drummer, people like that, haven't really been replaced, unless you count the naked cowboy in Times Square (wearing his Parks Dept. permit around his neck and not much else). If Moondog were to appear on Sixth Avenue today, with that big spear, making those strange sounds, they'd have his ass in jail in a minute! But, all in all, just when you think you've seen it all, you walk down the street, and there's still a good chance you'll see or hear something you've never encountered before. Some people look out of their country house windows at the wonders of nature--I got to look out my bedroom window at terrorists flying

areoplanes into buildings. Post 9/11 New York is different. I guess if terrorists or the bird flu doesn't finish us, we'll all die of an overdose of police. I know it's getting more difficult to photograph in the street, or other public places, without being questioned or harassed. Still, the stone, the bricks, the glass, the concrete all still sing to me.

Musically, artistically, New York forces you to grow and develop. I used to play at a place called Bradley's. I would be playing and look up into the room and it would be "Oh Damn, there's Tommy Flanagan sitting there"! Or Kenny Barron--or Ron Carter or George Coleman. Your heroes -- people you grew up listening to on records. It was like breathing rarified air or something. You'd better have it together! I would go home every night and work twice as hard on the music. You can always hear music or see art on the very highest level. It's inspiring and keeps the standards up.

**P.L. You've lived in New York for 25 years. Do you still have an identity as a Canadian?**

P.L. Yes and No. As much as I dislike the idea of nationalities and borders, I suppose I can still relate to it. Growing up in Canada, in Quebec, in the 1950's and 60's as a Protestant anglophone, one was brought up as a British subject. In Quebec, which was (and still is) primarily a francophone, Roman Catholic culture, one felt particularly isolated. The monarchy was very important (to the Anglos). We were loyal to the queen, and even our flag at the time had the union jack on it. At the same time, we were bombarded with American culture--music, film and print-- via radio, recordings, television, the magazines, all of which left little room for developing one's own cultural identity as an English-speaking Canadian in Quebec. Because there was no textbook publishing industry to speak of in Canada at the time, at age 12 I knew much more about George Washington, the two Roosevelts, or Winston Churchill than I did about Sir John A. MacDonalld or Louis St. Laurent. Of course I knew about Dollard St. Laurent (Montreal Canadiens defenseman in the 50's who wore #19). There wasn't much of one's own to hang on to, so if we were lucky enough to connect with other cultures we had a choice! In my case it was African American music and (later) European American visual art that moved me.

**P.L. What are your politics? Do you have any?**

P.L. Yes! We have no bananas! Some governments wear elaborate military uniforms and use guns to control the people, others wear cheap looking suits and use lies. Religion too. I guess it's all the same. In 61 years on the planet, I don't think I've been aware of a politician who wasn't running some kind of scam. Maybe John Diefenbaker. Maybe. William Burroughs wrote a delightful little essay called "Commissioner of Sewers," which explains it all for us. If you want to be commissioner of sewers, and keep the gig, you'd better have something on the sheriff, or the mayor.

I do think that we are facing some severe crises in the future. A major energy situation is looming, and global warming is escalating, bringing with it extremes of weather. At some point in the future, the demand for oil will match and exceed the supply, which could cause our oil-based economy to collapse. We should be developing alternative non-polluting, sustainable ways of producing energy. Solar power and hybrid vehicles are good places to start. Not consuming is actually the most revolutionary thing we can do. Not giving money to Time Warner, or to lawyers. Avoid the constant mindless chatter of complacent consumerism.

Recently, sitting in a dentist's waiting room, I picked up one of the mainstream "news" magazines. (Time, or Newsweek--I don't often see these publications). I saw an article on wounded soldiers in Iraq, with photographs-- people with shattered faces and limbs blown off. How can people support a government that instigates and perpetuates (for money) this kind of atrocity? Are we so inured to violence that we don't see the difference between this and "cops & robbers" on television? I think this is all part of the media induced desensitization I was referring to earlier.

**P.L. Why did you resign?**

P.L. If you don't know, why do you ask? Be seeing you.