PAT METHENY

The ECM Years, 1975–1984

MERVYN COOKE

Oxford Studies in Recorded Jazz

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Cooke, Mervyn, author.
Title: Pat Metheny : the ECM years, 1975–1984 / Mervyn Cooke.
Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2017. | Series: Oxford studies in recorded jazz | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016028859| ISBN 9780199897674 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780199897667 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Metheny, Pat—Criticism and interpretation. | Jazz—1971–1980—History and criticism. | Jazz—1981–1990—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC ML419.M477 C66 2017 | DDC 787.87/165092—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016028859

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Paperback printed by WebCom, Inc., Canada
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

FOR SALLY—AND OSLO 2005

SERIES PREFACE

THE OXFORD STUDIES in Recorded Jazz series offers detailed historical, cultural, and technical analysis of jazz recordings across a broad spectrum of styles, periods, performing media, and nationalities. Each volume, authored by a leading scholar in the field, addresses either a single jazz album or a set of related recordings by one artist/group, placing the recordings fully in their historical and musical context, and thereby enriching our understanding of their cultural and creative significance.

With access to the latest scholarship and with an innovative and balanced approach to its subject matter, the series offers fresh perspectives on both well-known and neglected jazz repertoire. It sets out to renew musical debate in jazz scholarship, and to develop the subtle critical languages and vocabularies necessary to do full justice to the complex expressive, structural, and cultural dimensions of recorded jazz performance.

Jeremy Barham
University of Surrey
Series Editor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANKS ARE DUE first and foremost to the series editor of the Oxford Studies in Recorded Jazz, Jeremy Barham, not only for the initial invitation to contribute a volume to the series, but for his constant support and encouragement along the way, and to the stalwart staff of Oxford University Press in New York—principally Suzanne Ryan, Adam Cohen, Andrew Maillet, and Jamie Kim—for their constant enthusiasm and undiminished patience during a number of those inevitable and unavoidable delays in meeting deadlines which must be the bane of a publisher's existence. During the production process, the text has benefited enormously from the expertise of both copy-editor Patterson Lamb and project manager Damian Penfold. I should also like to acknowledge the valuable input of the anonymous readers who commented in detail on the work as it took shape.

Researching and writing about the work of a living musician can uncover all sorts of unexpected twists and turns, and in the present instance it has been a particular delight to discover the still undimmed sense of sheer excitement in the creative process—and in life on the road as a crucial part of the jazz musician's formative experiences—shared by those who worked closely with Pat Metheny during the period with which this book is concerned. Band members Mark Egan, Danny Gottlieb, and Paul Wertico have all been exceptionally generous with their time and shared many fascinating reminiscences about those years with me, and I am also grateful to others closely connected with the ECM recordings under consideration here for taking the time to answer my many queries: these include William Clift, Deborah Feingold,

Klaus Frahm, Rainer Kiedrowski, Richard Niles, Rob Van Petten, and Gerd Winner. Most importantly, however, I am hugely indebted to Pat Metheny himself for his interest in the project, for the many insights into his music and career he has been willing to share along the way, and for his considerable patience in addressing my many queries and tolerating my (I hope not too frequent) ineptitudes.

The following libraries have offered invaluable support in tracking down essential but often elusive source materials: Baylor University Libraries, British Library, Cleveland State University Libraries, Five Towns College Library, Hallward Library (University of Nottingham), University of Houston Libraries, McIntyre Library (University of Wisconsin), and New York Public Library. I am particularly indebted to Jonathan J. Quick for his kindness in supplying a copy of a hard-to-obtain Metheny article from his personal collection, and to Ed Hazell for his generous assistance in locating a transcript from a Metheny workshop held at Berklee College.

Copyright in the music reproduced here is acknowledged in the captions to individual examples, which comprise transcriptions from audio recordings by the present author prepared for this volume and appearing here for the first time (AT), brief extracts from the *Pat Metheny Song Book* (SB), and hybrid examples in which *Song Book* material is combined with additional transcribed passages (ASB). Guitar parts in the examples are notated one octave higher than sounding pitch in accordance with conventional practice.

For their help with sundry matters, I am grateful to the following: Mike Brannon, Peter Elsdon, Martina Fischer and Anna Schneider (Haus der Kunst, Munich), Dan Forte, Christopher Harting, John Hilderbrand, John Howland, Andrew Justice and John Murphy (University of North Texas), Sandro Kancheli (ECM), Ted Kurland Associates, Simon Paterson, Ken Prouty, Kenneth Robinson, John Shore, Alison Stevens, Joseph Vella, Gary Walker, Philip Weller, Justin Williams, Katherine Williams, and wattsjazz (Ann Arbor, MI). I should particularly like to thank ECM for their generosity in allowing me to use their sleeve artwork by way of illustration, Rob Van Petten for permission to reproduce his original (uncropped) *American Garage* photograph, Deborah Feingold for permission to reproduce her *Offramp* session photograph, and Stuart Greenbaum for allowing me to quote from his unpublished full-score transcription and detailed analysis of 'First Circle'. I am indebted to Alexander Gagatsis for having constantly refreshed my perceptions of jazz and jazz scholarship through many endlessly fascinating and stimulating discussions on the subject, and

special (and woefully overdue) thanks are also due to Kim Roper for having first introduced me to the music of Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays very many years ago.

Last, but most important of all, my love and gratitude are as always extended to my cherished wife Sally, who has shared many special Metheny moments with me over the years, both at home and abroad, and who has been a truly amazing source of sustained moral support during the writing of this book.

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INTRODUCTION
A NEW PARADIGM

> [W]e all have to rise to this challenge, and it's a big one: the challenge to recreate and reinvent [jazz] to a new paradigm resonant to *this* era, a new time. It's simply not gonna cut it to just keep looking back, emulating what has already been done with just a slightly different spin on it . . . we have to get our collective imagination working hard on a vision that is more concerned with what this music can *become* than what it has already *been*.[1]

PAT METHENY'S CEASELESS desire to create music of contemporary relevance within a broad jazz aesthetic inevitably conjures up an image of constant travelling, often boldly, towards new and exciting artistic frontiers. In a very real sense, his entire career (spanning more than four decades at the time of writing) has been a never-ending journey of exploration, and metaphors of journeying and narrative are never far below the surface when his music is discussed. Although in academic circles it has long been unfashionable to chart the trajectory of an artist's creative achievements in a linear fashion, in Metheny's case a strong sense of ongoing continuity and inter-connections across his oeuvre is

1 Pat Metheny, keynote address for conference of the International Association of Jazz Educators, New York City, January 2001, in Lloyd Peterson, *Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant-Garde* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006), 322.

inescapable. Indeed, he has himself described his whole recorded output to date as one continuous album, or 'one long set'.[2] The present study examines the substantial body of eleven albums he recorded for the label ECM at the start of his recording career and shows how this single-minded sense of purpose—manifested in practice by formidably strong band-leadership—has in no way prevented his music from achieving an astonishing technical and expressive diversity along the way.

On a basic level, these albums appear to fall into two broad categories, although the division is by no means always clear-cut. On the one hand, Metheny's 'straight-ahead' jazz playing is reflected in vibrant recordings with trios (*Bright Size Life*, 1976; *Rejoicing*, 1984) and a quintet (*80/81*, 1980), mainly featuring his own compositions but also celebrating the music of Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden, and others. On the other hand, no fewer than seven of the albums document the concurrent evolution of the Pat Metheny Group, in which—alongside an undiminished commitment to improvisation—Metheny furthered his compositional aspirations occasionally in conjunction with keyboardist and sometimes co-composer Lyle Mays, with several resourceful rhythm sections. The core quartet that laid the foundations for this music appeared first under Metheny's name (*Watercolors*, 1977), and then as the Pat Metheny Group (*Pat Metheny Group*, 1978; *American Garage*, 1979; *Offramp*, 1982; *Travels*, 1983; and *First Circle*, 1984), with one vitally important Metheny–Mays album issued under their joint names during a break in the full group's activities (*As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls*, 1981). The remaining album in the collection, *New Chautauqua* (1979), is a unique solo project notable for an innovative musical language involving fresh soundscapes and multiple guitars, and one that had a significant impact on his other work.

Metheny's high international profile and huge fan base are arguably matched by no other jazz performer in the world today: as Ian Carr put it, he has long been the kind of 'jazz superstar' whose like has not been seen since the career of Miles Davis was at its peak.[3] Across the world, Metheny and his various bands routinely fill theatres and open-air stadia with cheering crowds while at the same time creating music endowed with an intellectual and emotional sophistication that offers considerable technical and interpretative interest to the professional analyst and

2 Richard Niles, *The Pat Metheny Interviews*, ed. Ronny S. Schiff (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2009), 103. For more on Metheny's strong personal sense of goal-directed journeying from the outset of his career, see also Niles, *Pat Metheny Interviews*, 91–2.

3 Ian Carr, 'Bright Size Life', BBC Radio 3, June 27 to July 25, 1998; introduction to episode 1.

critic. Carr's comparison with Davis is not fanciful, nor based merely on phenomenal audience pulling-power: as John Scofield memorably said of the trumpeter, in terms equally applicable to Metheny, 'Nobody else could do big long tours every summer and fall and sell out stadiums all over Europe. And these people were not jazz snobs, they just dug Miles. He could make a believer out of a non-jazz person with the beauty of his sound and the rhythm of his notes.'[4] The comparison is relevant not only because of the contemporaneity of both musicians' work, which enabled it to appeal well beyond a mainstream and potentially limited jazz demographic, but because their success was only possible as a result of punishingly hard touring schedules, embracing literally hundreds of live gigs each year, and a deep commitment to maintaining exceptionally high performance standards no matter the size of their audiences or venues. Since the present series of books is concerned primarily with recorded artefacts, it is necessary constantly to remind ourselves that the recordings examined here are inextricably associated with the innumerable live appearances in the course of which the music had for the most part already been shaped. These recordings are the residue of the enormous amount of hard work that went into perfecting Metheny's music time and time again on the road during the period with which this book is concerned, a tremendously exciting and rewarding (if utterly gruelling) activity which carried with it transient and elusive musical qualities that were to some extent impossible to recapture in the recording studio.

The albums chart a clear trajectory from an early emphasis on original composition—rather than the interpretation of standards—into creative territory that involved the exploration of increasingly complex (and sometimes electronically generated) timbres and extended musical structures. The music represented here deftly balances, to varying degrees in different contexts, spontaneous improvisation, avant-garde experimentation, straightforward melodic appeal, and firm structural control. The Metheny Group's early output in particular initiated a move towards increasingly large-scale formal conceptions which was ultimately to culminate in *The Way Up*, a complex and uninterrupted *c.*76-minute piece toured across the globe and recorded in 2005. Metheny has himself commented that *The Way Up* was

> a pretty ambitious undertaking on a number of levels, certainly, compositionally. That level of detail is something that we probably

4 John Scofield, interview for *Wire* (September 1991), quoted in Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead? (Or Has It Moved to a New Address)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

have been heading towards from the very beginning. Right from the start, one of the major tenets of the group was that we wanted to go beyond song form type material whenever we could.[5]

Central to the present project are considerations of the various musical influences on Metheny and how these affected the course of his stylistic development; the improvisational methods of the extraordinarily fluent guitarist, especially where these arise directly from chord patterns he himself devised (which tend to fall into two distinct types: harmonic changes that readily enable the fertile exploitation of musical ideas that come naturally to him, and those which contrastingly require a more considered creative response to self-imposed challenges and restrictions); the relationship between improvised material and pre-composed structures; the music's harmonic language and its implications for long-term structural articulation; the exploration of different guitar sonorities and tunings, and synthesizers driven by both guitar and keyboard controllers, and how these timbral potentialities gradually impacted upon the musical language; the relationship between studio recordings and live performances; and the roles of the record producer—at first ECM's founder Manfred Eicher but later Metheny himself—and recording engineers in defining unique sonic environments.

Implicit in the list of diverse musical parameters in the preceding paragraph is the concept-driven mentality that has always been at the core of Metheny's creativity. In all of his projects, an initial concept is first explored (privately) in the shape of written musical ideas which grow naturally from it; the most fruitful of those ideas are then communicated to players chosen specifically for the conceptual purpose at hand. The impressive roster of stellar performers whom Metheny has hired throughout his career has inevitably enabled much beneficial collaboration to take place as part of the ongoing process of fully realizing his creative ideas; but—in the case of the Metheny Group in particular—a potentially misleading mythology of some kind of creative 'co-operative' driving his work has grown up over the years. In part, this misconception may unwittingly have been triggered by the public credit he always gave his collaborators for their input, but the 'co-op' mentality is also an attractive ideal in academic studies of jazz

5 Anon., 'A Fireside Chat with Pat Metheny' (February 24, 2005). http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=16664&page=1 (August 11, 2013).

in which the concept of musical democracy in various (more plausible) historical instances is highly and rightly prized. The most accurate description of how Metheny's potent leadership skills work in practice is perhaps the notion of a benevolent dictatorship, and it has always been his own strong belief that being a bandleader and a conceptualist are symbiotic manifestations of the same creative impulse. The singular artistic vision at the helm of all his projects remains, however, deeply rooted in practical considerations: much initial material is rejected in the search for music that will remain both rewarding to play and to hear during the eventual recording process, and which when played live on extended tours can withstand performance after performance for nights on end. As he put it in an interview published in 2014, the basic musical materials need to be of a kind that the players 'can pound on ... rhythmically, harmonically or melodically and they bounce back to retain their original shape no matter what'.[6] In the case of compositions from his early period which, at the time of writing, are in some cases now around forty years old, this quality of robustness has meant that music which was originally conceived with a highly specific bandleading vision in mind has subsequently been able to develop an entirely unforeseen creative life of its own.[7]

As well as offering the first substantial historical account of Metheny's professional activities during his early years, and providing (also for the first time) a detailed analysis of how the style of his music evolved through these groundbreaking albums, this book also illustrates the wider significance of the ECM label in establishing a variety of internationally appreciated musical idioms which in some cases departed radically from blues-based, bebop, and fusion styles. Many notable US jazz musicians recorded with ECM at some stage in their careers, as shown in the following chapter. In Metheny's case, the present study provides a timely opportunity to investigate how one of the most gifted musicians of his time was enabled to find a distinctive personal voice through the creative opportunities offered by an enterprise—described by Thomas Steinfeld as 'probably the finest garage company ever to exist'[8]—which today continues to maintain its strong presence in the jazz and modern classical markets.

6 Metheny, interviewed in Gil Goldstein, *Jazz Composer's Companion*, 3rd edn. (Mainz: Advance Music GmbH, 2014), 102.

7 *Ibid*.

8 Steve Lake and Paul Griffiths (eds.), *Horizons Touched: The Music of ECM* (London: Granta, 2007), 386.

As shown by the quotation at the head of this chapter, Metheny's artistic credo from the very outset was firmly anchored in the strong belief that jazz musicians must reflect in their work the specific times in which they live, and not remain rooted in the comfortable but sometimes remote haven of past styles. He expounded this view persuasively in his 2001 address to the International Association of Jazz Educators:

> It is jazz's very nature to change, to develop and adapt to the circumstances of its environment. The evidence of this lies in the incredible diversity of music and musicians that have evolved, and lived and flourished, under the wide umbrella of the word 'jazz' itself from the very beginning . . .
>
> There is an important and consistent element in the jazz tradition of young people coming along and molding—reinventing—the nature of the form itself to fit their times and their circumstances, as only they could possibly know how to do . . .
>
> I always encourage musicians (who are of course citizens of the world first, and jazz musicians second) to address *all* of the music that they love and that they are attracted to as people, regardless of its style, regardless of its content, as a unified set of materials when they consider their full options—and potentials—as modern-day jazz musicians.[9]

In short, it was not enough to be a technically fluent improviser and/or capable composer if the music produced by either method was not 'embodied in a conception'[10] relevant to the musician's own times. A healthy eclecticism of the kind Metheny outlines above is reflected in his own music by its absorption and reworking of influences as diverse as bebop, free jazz, rock, pop, country & western, Brazilian music, classical music, minimalism, and the avant-garde. Narrow definitions of the label 'jazz', which have historically caused unwarranted consternation amongst commentators inclined towards purism and an often elusive quest for the white whale of authenticity, are rendered entirely pointless by a holistic approach to stylistic diversity in music of the kind Metheny both advocates and practises. As Eric Porter has observed, problems of this kind tend to arise in jazz criticism when certain 'value

9 Peterson, *Music and the Creative Spirit*, 318–20.

10 Metheny, quoted in Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead?*, 18.

components' such as 'experimentation, black vernacular practices, composition, populism, etc.' are 'used in excess, that is, to the extent that they are seen as pushing a particular musical project into territory more properly encompassed by a different genre'.[11] Metheny's music, in all its shapes and forms, has nevertheless always remained deeply rooted in jazz stylistically, with a commitment to improvisation the key factor:

> I've always felt very lucky that somehow, early on, no one ever told me, 'Well, this is jazz and this is that.' It was never an issue for me. And yet everything I've been involved with as a musician has had to do with improvising which, from my point of view, has made everything that I play jazz, with no fear of style.[12]

His distinctive blend of improvisation and pre-composition in a stylistically diverse environment, and (crucially) the ability to place an immediately recognizable personal stamp on a multitude of musical possibilities and thereby avoid incoherence, are two of his most notable achievements. The ECM recordings demonstrate an increasingly bold exploration of this phenomenon.

Metheny once described the attempt to bring together improvisation and composition as 'one of the most treacherous areas in jazz',[13] but he noted that in essence such initiatives—which are as old as jazz itself—simply unite 'similar tasks that happen at wildly different temperatures'.[14] In 1998, he told Carr that the principal creative challenge in his work with his own band had been one of 'constructing environments for improvisation that are malleable yet at the same time in many cases . . . were obviously searching for a certain kind of drama in the music that is dangerous territory'.[15] Creative aspirations are in this context far more important than commercial success, as evinced by the sheer length of the more elaborate pieces in his repertoire, which is not conducive to

11 Eric Porter, 'Incorporation and Distinction in Jazz History and Jazz Historiography', in David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (eds.), *Jazz / Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 17–18.

12 Quoted in Pawel Brodowski and Janusz Szprot, 'Pat Metheny', *Jazz Forum* 97/6 (June 1985): 35.

13 Niles, *Pat Metheny Interviews*, 47.

14 Peterson, *Music and the Creative Spirit*, 194. Compare Bruno Nettl's view of composition and improvisation as 'part of the same idea', in 'Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach', *Musical Quarterly* 61/1 (1974): 6.

15 Carr, 'Bright Size Life', episode 3.

airplay. Although (as suggested above) some of Metheny's followers have been tempted to keep his regular group's output and the 'straight-ahead' recordings made with predominantly improvising musicians apart on structural and idiomatic grounds, he felt creative arranging techniques were just as feasible in (for example) a trio environment, and a challenging project such as *Rejoicing* at times strikingly defies a listener's expectations of what three instrumentalists can achieve in textural and structural terms.

As part of the search for 'a certain kind of drama in the music', electronics became increasingly important during the ECM years as a means of expanding timbral potential, at first with the Oberheim polyphonic synthesizer and later with the far more capable Synclavier and Roland GR-300 guitar synthesizer. Metheny commented that his group work had always been concerned with a 'broader sense of orchestration in a small group setting . . . The group has never been more than seven people and yet at the same time we're really writing on an orchestral scale.'[16] Drawing parallels with Weather Report, which similarly expanded the potential of a standard jazz combo by exploiting electronics during the same period as his recordings for ECM (see Chapter 4), he bemoaned the tendency of critics to want to categorize timbral experimentation as 'less serious or more commercial or less experimental . . . To me it's actually the contrary: to me that's more experimental, *more* difficult.'[17] Metheny once described his group as 'the place where I can play more of the music I like the most,' but also as 'the place to experiment'.[18]

Although some of the music considered here reflected a conscious reassessment of American vernacular idioms, the connection with ECM—the European label famous (at times even notorious) for its promotion of innovative jazz and improvised musics which do not necessarily spring directly from blues-oriented performance traditions, and often created by performers not born in, or native to, the United States—encourages a fresh perspective on another much-debated issue in the history of jazz: its enduring national significance in its country of origin. In his 2001 speech, Metheny commented:

> I have always had some misgivings about the whole idea of emphasizing the Americanness of jazz to the point of exclusivity. While, as Americans, we should be proud of its heritage as a key

16 Niles, *Pat Metheny Interviews*, 47–8.

17 *Ibid*.

18 Carr, 'Bright Size Life', episode 3.