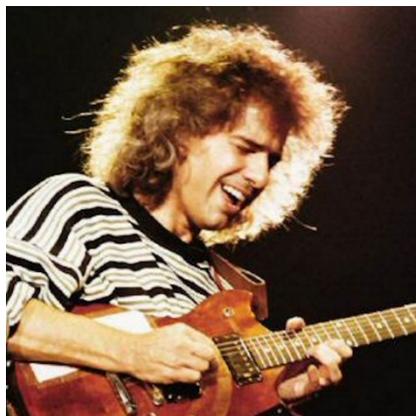


“Bright Size Life”--Pat Metheny (1976)

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Essay by Mervyn Cooke (guest post)*



Pat Metheny

Rarely has a jazz musician made such an impact with a first album released when they were just 21 years old, as was the case with Pat Metheny’s “Bright Size Life.” Although the disc took some years to garner the international critical acclaim which it is accorded today, its highly distinctive musical idiom had immediately announced the arrival of a formidably inventive talent, evident both in the originality of the compositions by Metheny it showcased, and in the guitarist’s extraordinarily fertile improvisational powers. Added to that already heady mix was the strongly characterised playing of bassist Jaco Pastorius and drummer Bob Moses, and the album stands as a remarkable document of one of the freshest trio sounds ever heard in jazz.

At the time “Bright Size Life” was recorded, Metheny was a member of Gary Burton’s quintet, which he’d joined as second guitarist (playing 12-string) in 1974. Already thoroughly schooled in the bebop style from his early years in Kansas City, Metheny absorbed not only the creative and practical advice of the group’s leader, but also the distinctive playing of fellow members Mick Goodrick (guitar) and Steve Swallow (bass), as well as admiring the work of Moses in the drum chair. Swallow encouraged Metheny to compose at the keyboard as a way of avoiding guitarists’ clichés, and the characteristically displaced harmonies and arpeggiated chord inversions in Swallow’s own music were to leave their mark on “Uniquity Road” in “Bright Size Life.” Metheny played on three albums which Burton’s group recorded for the European label ECM in 1974–76, the third of which (“Passengers”) featured the guitarist’s own compositions. These included “B & G (Midwestern Nights Dream)” (named after the two chords on which it’s based), a piece which by that time had already been recorded on “Bright Size Life.” It was thanks to Burton’s influence that Metheny had the opportunity to make his debut album as leader on the same label, Burton remaining in ECM’s Ludwigsburg studios in Germany during the “Bright Size Life” recording sessions in December 1975 as an (uncredited but de facto) co-producer. The official producer was Manfred Eicher, whose leadership of the ECM label--which he co-founded in 1969--had already done so much to enable the exploration of contemporary jazz styles that in many cases departed strikingly from the music’s American roots.

Metheny felt that Moses' free spirit "messed" with him and never let him be complacent, and this was exactly what he needed as he emerged from Burton's mentorship. The guitarist later recalled:

He was the first drummer I played with who had that wild, you-never-know-what's-gonna-happen-next sort of groove. At first I didn't know what to do with it... You'd be playing along with him and all of a sudden he'd start beating on the tom-toms, real loud. At first I thought, "What is he *doing* over there?" Then I realized that drums aren't necessarily where you play your solo on top of; at their best they're part of the music, a commentary.

Pastorius had been a close friend of Metheny's since they met in Florida in 1972, when they found they had much in common: both were self-taught and felt their respective instruments had been insufficiently exploited in contemporary music, and they shared a common interest in an unusually wide range of musical styles. Furthermore, both of them had cut their teeth playing in organ trios, a format that sometimes gave them room in which to experiment. Pastorius's subsequent fame, including his spell as a member of Weather Report, became so great that these days it's necessary to remind ourselves that he was a virtual unknown before "Bright Size Life," and that Metheny was well aware he was making a stand in pitching the electric bassist to ECM (having for a time considered Dave Holland as an alternative, acoustic bassist for the project).

Metheny and Pastorius had unleashed their experimental impulses in an album recorded in New York in the summer of 1974 with Paul Bley on electric piano and Bruce Ditmas on drums, featuring compositions by Paul and Carla Bley. Given the liberal doses of free jazz on this quartet's album, it comes as no surprise to learn that when Pastorius and Metheny later joined forces with Moses to form a trio at the Zircon Club near Berklee--where Metheny was by then teaching--the compositions of Ornette Coleman were an essential part of their repertoire. Their admiration of Coleman's music was later reflected in the final track of "Bright Size Life," "Round Trip/Broadway Blues," which delights in buoyant head melodies played in octave unison by guitar and bass, and free soloing above a time-no-changes walking bass.

The Metheny-Pastorius-Moses trio performed together during breaks from Burton's schedule, and appeared in New York, Boston, and across New England from 1974 until the end of 1976. The combination of Pastorius and Moses as rhythm section was described by Metheny as "completely wild," though this is not especially evident from "Bright Size Life," which sadly proved to be the trio's sole recorded legacy. Moses recalled a degree of tension in the group during the sessions, which he felt were caused by Metheny's growing desire for refinement, conflicting with the bassist's unpredictable musical temperament; certainly, the album does not suggest they were a "power trio" akin (in Moses' own estimation) to Eric Clapton's British group Cream. Moses felt that ECM's preoccupation with sonic refinement "kind of squelched" the trio's enormous energy when they entered the recording studio: "They didn't want it to be too ballsy and grooving. To me, the album is really lightweight compared to what we were doing on the gigs."

Metheny's own recollections of the trio's recording were more positive, and in a 2002 interview he singled out "Bright Size Life" as representing the very best of his early work:

I had saved up a lot of, basically my whole life into making a statement about what I wanted to say. I had many opportunities to make records up until that point; from the time I was 15 or 16 years old. I really wanted to wait until I felt that I had something that was mine stylistically. That was very important to me. The other good thing about “Bright Size Life” is that myself, Jaco and Moses really were a band... We had very similar ambitions. We were on a mission to rethink the roles of our instruments as improvising vehicles for ourselves.

All the tracks (apart from the Coleman tune) on “Bright Size Life” were Metheny’s own compositions, designed to facilitate the specific manner in which he wished to improvise and generally following the traditional head--solo(s)--head format but distinguished by a notably fresh harmonic language. In the opening (title) track, Metheny consciously set out to exploit large intervallic leaps and use basic diatonic triads which he felt were lacking in jazz standards; and he followed the same approach, this time in a minor key, in “Unity Village.” Some of this music had originated with a didactic intent, since certain tunes had been conceived as studies for his guitar students at Berklee. The song “Bright Size Life,” for example, a 32-bar melody in the familiar AABA pattern, was originally entitled “Exercise No. 2.” As with all good studies, however, the technical challenges involved proved to be merely the starting points for creative musical conceptions.

Other compositions on the album presented melodic challenges based on specific intervals. The through-composed tune “Unity Village” explores angular but lyrical patterns based on sevenths. Patterning based on fourths characterises both “Missouri Uncompromised” and “Omaha Celebration,” while sixths predominate in “Midwestern Nights Dream.” “Sirabhorn” (named after the guitarist and vocalist Sirabhorn Muntarhorn) begins, by contrast, with simple descending scales, richly harmonized, and also reflects the experience of working with 12-string tunings in Burton’s group: here Metheny lays down a 12-string accompaniment over which he dubs a solo on his six-string to create a quartet texture. The 12-string is also featured in “Midwestern Nights Dream,” which he later adapted for six-string when recording the piece for Burton’s “Passengers.” There are suggestions in the track titles of “Bright Size Life” of the personal significance of the guitarist’s Missouri background: the overdubbed guitar duet “Unity Village” celebrates a place close to his hometown where he spent enjoyable summers, and other titles (“Missouri Uncompromised” and “Omaha Celebration”) also reflect the region and its history.

An early review of “Bright Size Life” in “Down Beat” was lukewarm in its praise, and (like Moses) seemed of the opinion that the music’s “dynamic suppression” was partly the fault of the record label. It nevertheless singled out “Midwestern Nights Dream” as its “most stunning, and ominous, performance,” being both “somber” and “masterfully executed.” Another review declared that the album “clearly affirmed an incisive understanding of melody and harmony, and the ability to go beyond technique.” Metheny himself felt the project strongly reflected his and Pastorius’s joint need to express their “dissatisfaction with the [musical] status quo at the time” by exploring fresh improvisational and harmonic territory in a new kind of music that was quite distinct from the then prevailing stylistic poles of bebop and fusion. His overall verdict:

The general reaction to that record when it came out at the time was kind of blasé. People noticed it a little bit, but it seems like every year that goes by, that record has a higher standing. It is interesting to see how long it takes for the message that you are trying to communicate to trickle down...

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.