

**This interview with
PAT METHENY
was conducted by the Library of Congress
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Library of Congress: “Bright Size Life” is considered a masterpiece. But you recorded it when you were only 21 years old. Looking back, are there any things you wish you had done differently?

Pat Metheny: I don’t feel like anything I have ever started has ever ended; everything is ongoing. I could happily play all the music from “Bright Size Life” right now. It still seems viable; the arguments there still seem valid and worth thinking about. I know there are musicians who go through life kind of like a snake shedding its skin, moving on the next thing, and then the next. [But] it isn’t like that for me--it is more a process of adding onto a pre-existing structure, like adding rooms and wings and additions onto a house. Everything since “Bright Size Life” is connected to me as one long trip, one long record, one long composition with a varying cast of characters that come and go to create a kind of exposition on the evolution of the basic premise that was expressed on that first record.

Thinking back, at the time it came out, it had very little impact. It got a couple of good reviews and was mostly not noticed much one way or the other. My sense at the time was that I wanted to make a record that might be the only record I would ever make. I hoped to make a statement on things that were important to me in terms of melody, harmony, trio playing, and even kind of life in general.

It really wasn’t until about 20 years later that I noticed that people had begun talking about those intentions in ways that were mostly lost on folks at the time of its release. That is something I have noticed to continue to be true across the years. It seems to take around 20 years for enough people to get a sense of what a record or a band was about for it to become something of note. I do seem to hear a lot of younger guys referencing things that were introduced on that record all these years later, way more now than in the immediate aftermath of its release.

LOC: What effect—if any—do you think Boston’s jazz scene had on you and your development as a musician?

PM: By the that time I got to Boston to teach at Berklee and join Gary Burton’s band, I had worked professionally for four years with many of the best musicians in my hometown of

Kansas City and had taught at the University of Miami for a year before making the move up.

The Kansas City scene was undoubtedly the most important of the three cities for me in being formative in pretty much every aspect of things.

Regarding the Boston scene of that era, Gary himself, along with Steve Swallow, kind of defined whatever it was that made that period special. It was great to be on the front lines of that, and I could write a book about the incredible impact both Gary and Steve had on me.

LOC: What did you glean from working with such other musicians as Bob Moses and Jaco Pastorius?

PM: We were a real band that had a lot of fun together and had played a lot by the time we recorded. Bob Moses is one of the greatest drummers of our time, and remains massively underrated to this day. When we started playing together as a trio, I was 19 and Jaco was 22, and Moses was a few years older than either one of us, a significant thing at that age. Moses had already been on the New York scene for years, having started as a teenager himself playing with Roland Kirk, Keith Jarrett and, of course, Gary's great quartet of the late '60s. Both Jaco and I looked up to him.

I had met Jaco within the first week or so of moving to Miami in the fall of 1972. We became good friends right away and worked together occasionally in the Miami Beach hotel showrooms with the kinds of folks who would come through there for week-long engagements. One of the funniest ones we did together was as the band for comedian Dick Shawn who encouraged us to improvise around what he was doing, but mostly we did shows where we played the charts in front of us since we were both pretty good sight readers. After those gigs, we would go to Jaco's apartment; he was living on top of a laundromat at the time with his wife and two very young kids, and play all night.

When I moved to Boston to teach at Berklee in early 1974, things started happening pretty quickly. I had joined Gary's band and began touring internationally with him. When Gary's band wasn't working, I would fly Jaco up from Florida to do trio gigs with Moses. It is hard to describe the impact that Jaco had on the bass now because it has been so absorbed into the vocabulary, but between Moses and whatever my rising thing was as the new guitar player in Gary's Quartet, that trio quickly became quite a thing. When we would do gigs, there would be lines around the block.

When I was offered the chance to make that first record, of course I wanted to do it right away. The record company people suggested I use established players. Fortunately, Gary Burton wisely stepped in and noted that I had this excellent band already with this amazing bass player that at that point no one had ever heard of and that we played well together, and that he disagreed and that I should use my regular band. Gary did feel, also correctly, that the tunes I had written up to that point were not yet to the level that he thought I could get to, so rather than jumping right in, there was a period of months (which seemed like years to my 19-year old self) of writing and submitting tunes for Gary's take on them, then playing them at our next trio gigs to see how they worked live.

Gary also was in the studio when we recorded "BSL" a one-day session tacked onto the end of the sessions for Gary's record "Dreams, So Real" that Moses and I both played on. It is really a shame that Gary was not credited as producer on the recording as he should have been.

LOC: The only cut on the album not written by you is "Round Trip/Broadway Blues" by Ornette Coleman. Why did you choose to include that on this collection?

PM: The first time Jaco and I got together, we discovered we both knew that tune. At the time, I would say that it was not an especially well-known Ornette tune. The fact that we both knew it independently of each other created an immediate bond and a kind of mutual recognition that we were both looking for something that went beyond just the traditional nature of how our respective instruments were approached at that time.

LOC: I assume you identify yourself as a “jazz” artist. If you had to get more precise, let’s say, what *type* of jazz to you create and perform?

PM: I really just try to honestly represent in sound the things I love about music.

I am not a huge fan of the whole idea of “genre” or styles of music to start with. To me, music is one big universal thing. The musicians who I have admired the most are the ones who have a deep reservoir of knowledge and insight not just about music, but about life in general and are able to illuminate the things that they love in sound. When a musician can do that on the spot, as an improviser, that is usually my favorite kind of player.

I feel like I am a musician in this broad sense first. And all the subsets of the way music often gets talked about in terms of the words people use to describe music is basically just a cultural/political discussion that I have found that I am really not that interested in in the same way I am interested in the spirit and sound of music itself.

There seems to be a natural human inclination to categorize things. The goal for me would be to honor and explore creativity in general, but particularly as applied to sound and music.

Thinking back on “Bright Size Life” in a broader way and now with some distance, one of the less recognized aspects of the larger tradition in our general area of music has been the whole thing of inventing conceptual context. The goal for me has mostly been about creating environments for myself and the players that I found to be most capable of joining me to describe a particular area of interest for a specific part of what has turned out to be a pretty long journey. On reflection, I would say that it is on that conceptual level as a composer/bandleader that the central areas of what I aspire to be as a musician are most clearly represented, maybe more than what is going on on the instrument and what I might do as a player. “Bright Size Life” laid a foundation that I am still able to refer to as a touchstone in my ongoing aspiration to become a good musician.