



Peter Bernstein Heart's Content

Brad Mehdau: Peter Bernstein: Heart's Content

I met Peter Bernstein soon after I arrived in New York City in 1988. Many people would have different ideas about what might constitute a 'New York' sound, if anything. I would call it more of an ethos that Pete came to personify for me, one that I still associate with my favorite players who reside in New York. That ethos doesn't form one specific style of playing; it's more like a collection of deeply felt sentiments about jazz music that form the basis for a broad range of possible styles.

Those musical sentiments would include the importance of melody at all times in whatever you're expressing, which means playing phrases that have a shape to them and not just running licks. That in turn implies a healthy distrust of arbitrariness in general. If you're going to play a tune, you don't fudge on learning the melody. Pete was the first musician I met who would make periodic pilgrimages to the New York Public Library to get the original sheet music for, say, an Irving Berlin tune.

That was one of many valuable lessons that I got from Pete early on. If you go to the original source to learn a tune, your arrangement of it will speak authentically as your own take on that song, instead of being your version of Miles Davis' version, for example. I think that's why whenever I hear Pete play a standard, it never sounds arbitrary. He always seems to create a definitive version of a tune, one that intersects gracefully between an unapologetic affection for the original song, and his own personal musical choices for his arrangement. They include the way he phrases the melody, his improvisation, and a host of other factors that make you smile as a listener and say, "That's Pete." 'Dedicated to You' on this record is a perfect example. Listen to how he lovingly treats the melody – it sounds like this is his own song.

The first time I heard Peter Bernstein was at a jam session, playing on a medium-slow blues. With me in the audience were several musical peers, including Larry Goldings. Larry was just starting to play the organ in addition to piano, and eventually would form the heaviest, most original organ trio jazz has seen in the last two decades, with Pete on guitar and Bill Stewart, who joins Pete on this record, on drums. (You can hear Larry Goldings on Pete's 1996 Criss-Cross date, 'Brain Dance'.)

The blues had been going on for almost half an hour and everyone's interest had peaked after about 4 minutes. Solo after solo ensued, full of well-intentioned but vapid testifying and shrieking from horn players and scat-singers. Just when it was getting painful, Pete began to solo. He basically annihilated everything that had preceded him and left all of us just shaking our heads in awe. We were emotionally reduced to jelly; he brought tears to our eyes. I left that day shaken.

What was it in his playing? To start with, there was a gravity to what he was doing emotionally that just drew me in – 'Dude, this is serious.' But it wasn't just serious for the sake of being serious. His playing was informed by what I can only describe as a profound love for music, in this case specifically the blues, which is so prevalent in Pete's music. It was like he had discovered something beautiful, and he wanted urgently to share it with all of us. A serious love that urgently needs to be shared with other people – it all translates into something that you might call the humanity in Pete's music. I felt like he was telling me something about myself that day, and I always feel that way when I hear him.

Pete's reading on this record of Strayhorn's masterpiece, 'Blood Count', is a case in point. In a solo guitar setting, he

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gives it to us stripped down. The naked desolation of the tune speaks all the more clearly. But Pete doesn't push the point. He never veers into sentimentality, and allows the pathos to speak for itself by giving us a reading that's devoid of affectation. Many other musicians would be tempted to milk this song much more. The melody, with its exotic chord tones and glissandos, and the fragrant Strayhorn harmony that underpins it, almost cry out for an overtly expressive, theatrical reading. That's why this tune is so difficult to play – if you give into that temptation it can easily become sentimental. Pete's approach is to let the sentiment in the tune speak for itself – it's already there; it doesn't need to be magnified. He coaxes the emotion out of the tune instead of loudly stating it. The effect on me as a listener is that I get more from it, not less. This version of 'Blood Count' has a wonderful twofold quality. It has what I usually associate with the song – a raw feeling of mortality, like someone hanging on. But Pete gives you a bittersweet kind of recompense: If you're just hanging on in this music, then as you slip away, losing your grasp, you're finally able to see how beautiful everything really is.

I've come to believe that the sort of 'maturity' that Pete displays on 'Blood Count' is the kind of musical attribute that's more innate than acquired. It's a question of temperament. You start with that temperament already. It can be developed and refined, but if you don't have it to begin with, it can't really be learned. Pete's no slouch, and he has a real thirst for new musical discoveries. Over the years I've seen how he assimilates them into his own playing and writing – like early on in our friendship when he got really deep into Billie Holiday, or a few years back when he turned me onto the music of Donny Hathaway. Nevertheless, there are certain qualities central to his music that he had from the gate. That was one of the things that always struck me and other musicians who were playing with Pete early on in our own development. Here we were absorbing all these influences at once, sounding like a different musician depending on what context we were playing in. But Pete, from the first time I heard him at least in 1988, already had his own identity – he sounded like Peter Bernstein in whatever situation he was in. That just blew us away.

One important quality of Pete's is his rhythmic authority. A good example on this record is his own 'Simple as That'. This is the kind of tempo that inspires the cliché, 'separates the men from the boys,' It's a medium-slow groove, and Pete can wax in this vein like nobody's business. In the opening melody, and then in his solo later, his lines are relaxed and poised all at once. Pete's feel on this sort of tempo has always been devastatingly good – he sits a little behind the beat and gets you into this slow-burn state. That quiet authority of his, though, comes from the consistency in his line: He never gets away from his ideas, he never rushes inadvertently, and nothing is ever the slightest bit unclear in what he's communicating. When I'm playing behind him on a tune like this, his mixture of relaxed swing and total clarity has the effect of pulling me into his musical statement completely. I've only had that experience playing with a few other musicians. It's what they mean when they say someone has a 'big beat.'

That quality of Pete's is probably both innate and absorbed. He always had this incredible sense of pacing in his playing, a sort of patience rhythmically. But I definitely remember checking out who he was checking out and seeing what kinds of players in jazz pointed the way for him. He has his guitar heroes for sure, but more often than not, I've noticed how horn players influence Pete. So, that relaxed kind of rhythmic authority might be informed by tenor players that I know he loves – the built-in backbeat of Gene Ammons, the behind-the-beat long eighth-note lines of Dexter Gordon, or the strong, swinging logic of Sonny Rollins' phrases.

That brings up another thing about Pete that sets him apart for me: I've always thought of him less as a guitarist and more as a musician. His swing feel – that 'big beat' that he has – is something you associate more with a horn player than a guitar player. But it goes further than feel. Particularly in his writing, he's more concerned with purely musical matters, and less with guitar stuff. Incidentally, Pete is a competent piano player. It's kind of uncanny. Even when he plays the piano, not on his own axe, he still has a harmonic concept that's completely specific to him and no one else, like in

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the way he voices chords, or the progressions he comes up with when he's just noodling. I've noticed that Pete often begins writing a tune of his own by getting an initial idea at the piano – a progression or a little voice leading figure – and then moves over to the guitar to continue writing.

'Heart's Content', the title track of the record, is a beauty. It's got some quintessential Peter Bernstein things going on. Check out the simplicity and economy of the melody. Except on the brief bridge and the coda, the melody always stays wonderfully in one minor scale, outlining a specific shape and building off of it. While the chords under it are moving and shifting a fair amount, the melody is a constant; the bluesy melancholy it gives off acts as a binder for all the harmonic activity. A lot of Pete's tunes operate on this principle of placing a largely diatonic, simple melody over some advanced, often dense chords that move a fair amount. The effect on the listener is a great kind of give and take. You get pushed along with the movement of the harmony, responding to the flux, but at the same time are emotionally anchored by the melody. And Pete is never very far away from that melody in his solo statement.

Two predecessors for that sort of jazz compositional approach might come to mind, mainly Thelonious Monk and Wayne Shorter. I know that Pete has absorbed their music a lot. There's something more about Pete that he has in common with those two jazz composers. His tunes are stitched together so well; there's so much compositional logic to them, that you can't just willy-nilly superimpose your own vocabulary when it comes time to solo. You have to address the tune in some way in your improvisations; it sort of compels you to do so. If you simply paste your own licks onto one of Pete's tunes, you run the risk of sounding strangely irrelevant, like an unwanted dinner guest.

On this recording, there was an immediate empathy between the four musicians, and Larry and I commented to each other that the date had a certain effortless quality about it. That definitely doesn't happen all the time. Part of the fun was that everyone had shared some of their most important musical history with at least one other musician there. I've had the privilege of playing with Pete on and off since 1991 or so. One of my most cherished experiences has been getting to work with the great drummer Jimmy Cobb over the years, and that's been in a band that Pete assembled, informally titled 'Cobb's Mob'. Pete's first Criss Cross release from 1993, 'Somethin's Burnin', features that band. I also played on Pete's next Criss Cross release from 1995, 'Signs of Life'.

The bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Bill Stewart have a serious groove together. They've put in a lot of time together in the bands of two other guitar players, mainly John Scofield and Pat Metheny. Larry's also been the bass player in my trio for eight years. He recorded with Pete previously on 'Consenting Adults', a Criss Cross date from 1994, a collective effort that included Pete and I, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner and drummer Leon Parker. I've always felt that Larry is one of the most versatile and underrated bass players out there. He's a very selfless kind of player. He grasps what the music calls for very quickly in any situation, and that's his first priority. Once that's established, he puts his own personality into the music. He does it in a subtle way, but it's pervasive – it affects everything in a positive way. I often catch more things in Larry's playing when I listen back to the recording than I do when I'm actually playing with him. Sometimes he affects my musical choices without my realizing it in the moment of playing together. Bill Stewart, as mentioned, has been playing drums with Pete and Larry Goldings in that trio for several years. Before he got as well known as he is now, Bill had sort of a cult status among us musicians, and we'd go here him with Larry's organ trio in New York when they were just starting out, 12 or so years ago. Bill is another musician like Pete who already had his own approach back then. His paired-down, distinctive style has already been an influence on a younger generation of drummers. Bill has a wonderful economy to his playing, one that gives the other musicians total support without ever being obtrusive. He has a consistency that you can hear on every track on this record. The groove that he establishes at the beginning of each tune never wavers for a second. I think his no-nonsense policy musically is one big reason that Pete feels so comfortable

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with him. Like Pete, he has very little affectation in what he plays.

The hardest thing to express is how someone's music moves you. With Pete, I always immediately get drawn into the sound he gets from his instrument. He's emoting with each note he plays. He has this crying tone on his guitar. His notes sustain and ring out, like they don't want to disappear. It's a fat tone at the same time, earthy and satisfying. That voice he has on his instrument compels me to listen. The emotions Pete conveys are often wonderfully mixed. One thing he specializes in is communicating an underlying melancholy that tugs at you steadily, at the same time expressing something more in the forefront that's vital and urgent, not down in the dumps at all.

Pete can fuse together those sentiments so effortlessly, I think, because they have to do with who he is in real life. He's not simple by a long stretch, and has many layers. But at his core, there's a deep integrity and honesty – that's why he's not simple, because he doesn't look for easy answers that don't ring true in the long run. That really carries over into his playing. I remember Pete telling me what one of his teachers, the late great pianist Jaki Byard, shared with him about playing jazz: "You can't lie." I suspect what Jaki Byard meant is that even if you try to lie as a player, you'll wind up telling the truth to anyone who has ears enough to hear it – that you're up there on the bandstand, just trying to lie, and you're not fooling anyone in the long run.

Peter Bernstein has a rare honesty about him as a musician. Quite simply, that quality comes naturally to him, because he has nothing to lose by being honest. The music that he offers the listener is always something that he's carried within himself first, and then loved into being. It's a beautiful world unto itself, and 'Heart's Content' is a good place to either continue enjoying that world, or discover it for the first time.

Brad Mehldau, March 2003