

Q&A with Phoenix Guitarist Pete Pancrazi

by Ed Benson



EB: Tell us about your background. Where are you from; were you always interested in jazz guitar? What was your first guitar?

PP: I'm originally from Yuma, AZ which is a small town in Southwest Arizona. It's right on the Arizona/California border and about 10 miles from Mexico. It really wasn't the kind of place where you'd hear any jazz music, mainly country and Latino music. I really didn't discover jazz guitar until I was in my 20's and started traveling to the coast and going to concerts and clubs in San Diego, LA.

Did you go through the rock n roll phase?

Absolutely. In fact, rock and pop was about all I played until I went to Berklee. I remember hearing the Beatles and Stones when I was a kid and from then on I was hooked on great pop music.

Did you study formally before going to Berklee?

Not extensively. I read a couple of guitar scale books and took a few classical guitar lessons, but that was it. I really just learned to play basic chords and blues/rock type solos by listening to records. I went to Berklee when I was 29 years old. I was working as an insurance agent in 1986 and I heard about the college and decided to apply.

After Berklee did you move to Phoenix? If so why?

I always intended to move back to Arizona, since my family lives here. I thought that the Phoenix area would be a good market, having a population of nearly 2.5 million when I moved back in 1990. My first professional experience was in business. I've always looked at markets in terms of their potential. I knew that with that kind of population and very little jazz music compared to New York or LA, the potential to perform was certainly there.

Is there much of a jazz scene in Phoenix?

I don't know if you'd call it a jazz scene, but there's definitely a music scene here and some really fine local musicians. There are plenty of music series which include jazz acts. I personally play about 10-12 times a month locally during our season, September-May. I tend to do most of my traveling during the summer months.

Are most of your gigs solo?

I play some solo gigs but I also do duos, trios and quartets. It all depends upon the venue and the budget.

What's your favorite playing setting-solo, duo trio?

I really like them all. Each setting has its own freedoms and challenges. I enjoy performing with groups because of the interaction between the players. Every group has its own character and personality. It's also rewarding to create the performance yourself in a solo setting. There's a certain intimacy and energy that can be very powerful when you're dialed in during a solo performance.



Do you teach? If so where? And what do you teach? Are your students mostly at an advanced level?

Yes. I teach at a couple of local colleges: Mesa Community College and Glendale Community College. I teach Jazz Combo, Class Guitar and a Jazz Theory course. I also give private lessons at the colleges as well seeing some students in my home studio. I teach intermediate and advanced students interested in jazz guitar, but also teach jazz improvisation to other instrumentalists as well.

You remind me of a Chicago guitarist by the name of Eddie Hazel—fine player and vocalist. There aren't many players like that around now. Why not?

Thank you. That's nice to hear. I've just recently discovered him. I really like his voice and his understated playing style. I'm not sure why there aren't more singer/jazz guitar players. Maybe it's because the role of singer in jazz is viewed as being separate from the instrumental discipline. It seems natural to me since I come from a singer/songwriter background. In pop music, the guitar player/singer is the norm.

Can a musician make a living playing guitar in Phoenix?

I really think that depends on the individual. If you have a clear vision of who you are as an artist and you're willing to invest yourself in the marketplace,

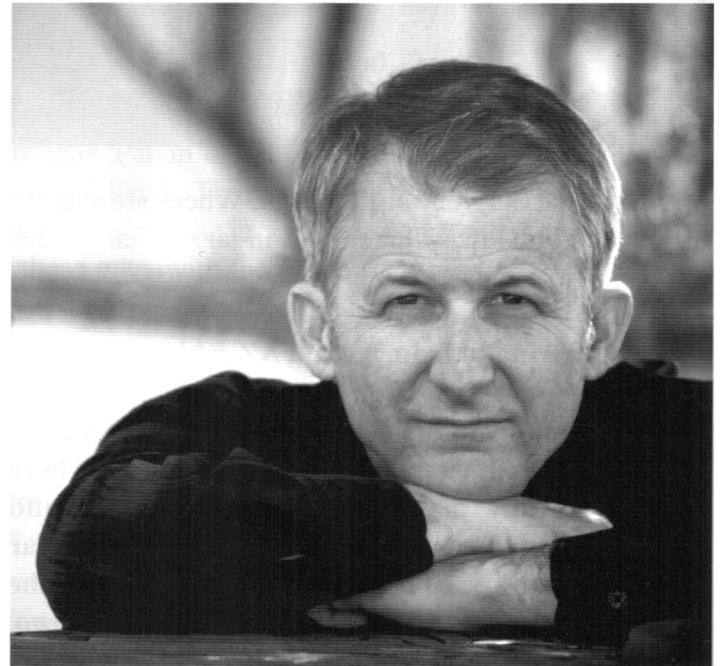
you can definitely make a living here. But I would imagine it's like that in many markets. The players that make it are the ones that are flexible and creative and who find multiple ways to present themselves: performing, teaching, arranging, publishing, etc.

Who were your early influences?

In jazz, I've always gravitated to melodic players like Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall. For me, it's got to be more than just an intellectual exercise. Simple or complex, it's got to sound sweet. I guess it goes back to my singer/songwriter roots. Great songs have great hooks. I listen for that in jazz as well.

Any plans for a new cd

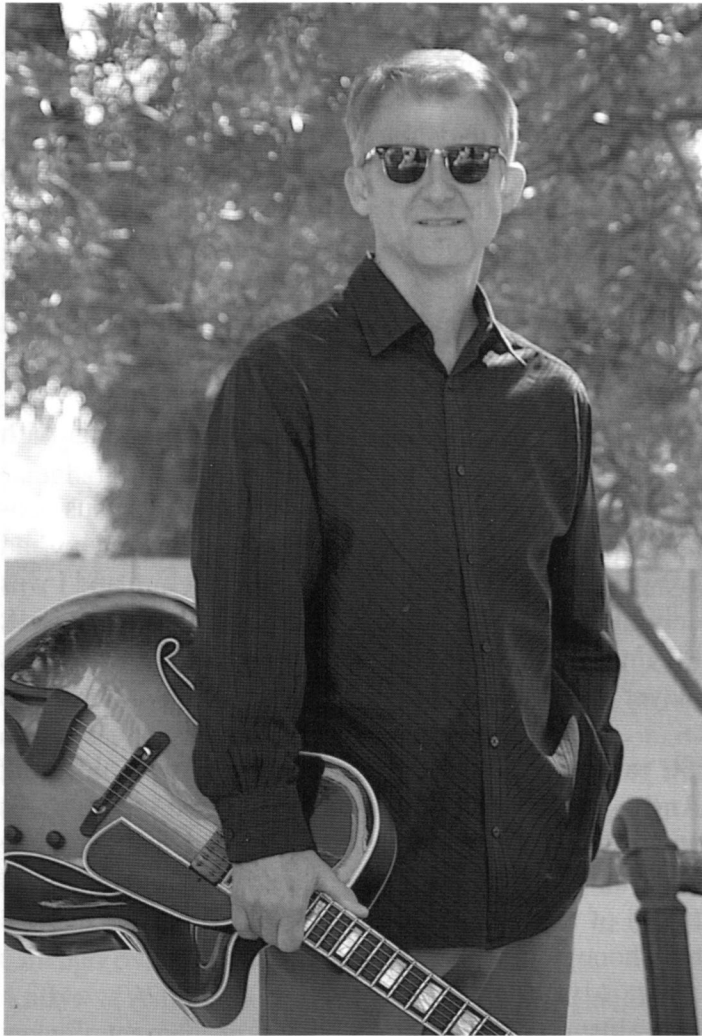
I'm currently working on a set of tunes by pop artists like James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and the Beatles and arranging in the jazz style. I'm calling the CD "Heroes."



What was your first paying gig?

It was in junior high school. I was the drummer in a band with my buddies. We played for a school dance. I noticed that the girls liked the guitar players so I switched instruments. The next time we played I was on guitar. I'll do anything for my art. Ha!

Any memorable gigs-good or bad?
To me, gigs are like pizza. There's no such thing as bad pizza.



What guitar and amp do you use now? Have you owned many others over the years?

I currently play a 17 inch archtop made by a local guitar maker, Phoenix Guitar Company. It's got a 1-3/4 scale at the nut and a single Kent Armstrong inset pickup. The company is really coming into its own and is making some great archtops. I use an Acoustic Image, Clarus 2R and a variety of speaker combinations. It's a great amp for guitar/vocal demands.

I've owned my share of strats and Les Paul knock offs, but my first jazz guitar was a mid-70s Gibson ES175. I played that guitar from my Berklee years until 2002 when Glenn Mckerrihan made a guitar for me.

Has your playing changed since you left Berklee?
I find that I play with a lot more space now than when was learning. I'm much more concerned with my overall sound and time-feel. At Berklee, learning the jazz vocabulary was my main goal. Over time, I've become more selective about how I use that vocabulary.

Check out Pete's four CD's: Trio Songbook, The Pete Pancrazi Quartet: The Christmas Collection; Swing-a-Funka-Sambadelic and Stand Alone
Song lists and samples are available on his website.

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