



Photos of Bill Solley by Nick Tsakiris



Bill Solley

Fingerstyle Jazz

Bill Solley and his wife Kim are both natives of New Orleans, Louisiana. They were enjoying great success both as a duo and individually when in 2005, Hurricane Katrina changed their lives forever. With all that they knew being destroyed, they relocated to Houston, Texas. This is a chapter that changed, but could not define, who they are. Kim and Bill continue to tour and perform both in the Houston area and throughout the world. Once I heard their music I could not help but be impressed and moved.

Individually and together they have performed with artists such as Bobby McFerrin, Nicolas Payton, Kirk Whalum, Arturo Sandoval, and Oleta Adams. They have toured extensively in England, The Netherlands, Japan, Denmark, Brazil, South Africa, Argentina, Germany, and the United States. They are repeat performers at the prestigious Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, Italy.

By Bill Piburn

The first time I heard you play was on the BET network when you and Kim won their talent contest. That was maybe ten years ago. I remember just flipping through the channels and was blown away by both of you. I believe I then tracked you down through Jimmy Foster or possibly Howard Morgen.

Yeah, I don't remember how that happened. It may have been through Jimmy Foster since he lived in New Orleans — he could really play man! I learned a lot from him.

I remember calling him after I heard him play and I told him, you are without a doubt the best guitar playing, guitar builder I've ever heard. Do you know his background?

Jimmy and I went back as far as the late '70s. He had a shop on Banks Street in New Orleans and a lot of players would take their guitars to him.

Also in the late '70s, I met Phil deGruy. At that time I was heavy into classical guitar, jazz was just an afterthought. I met Phil through a mutual friend and that's what started my journey into jazz. About that time I also met "Hank" Mackey. He taught a lot of guys in New Orleans — Steve Masakowski, Phil, and myself, to name a few. He was a great teacher, and turned me on to Pat Martino, Wes, and Joe Pass. He had all this stuff written out and of course he's a great player. I learned so much from him. I believe he is still teaching.

I understand that you have a degree in classical guitar. Could you talk about your journey from classical to jazz?

I got my degree from the University of New Orleans. I studied with a Cuban guitarist named Elias Barreiro. He was a student of Segovia. He was teaching at Tulane at the time, but he was also teaching at the University of New Orleans. I studied with him through high school and college.

After college I had met Phil and started listening to jazz and it really piqued my interest. I said, I've got to find out what's going on with this music! Phil was really getting his act together then and was getting to know Lenny Breau and Ted Greene. Phil would travel to study with both of them. What was great for me was that when he returned, I got to pick his brain! Phil was great, he'd show me stuff and never really charged me. We'd just hang out and he'd show me stuff.

I'm not sure when there was a turning point for me

from classical to jazz because I've always loved classical. I think it's just my nature to be curious. I'd hear something and I just had to know what it was and how it worked. I'm still like that.

I would like to address your right-hand technique. You basically use a traditional classical right-hand scale approach but you apply it to jazz improvisation. I've seen this before but it's not that common and you do it so well.

When I started playing jazz I used a pick and continued to use a pick for quite some time. Then I moved to New York and was there for seven years, still using a pick. Then I discovered acrylic nails when my wife started having her nails done. My nails are thin and they break easily. Once I was able to have nails that wouldn't break it was a turning point for me. I thought, I've spent all this time learning to play with my fingers, what am I doing? For a while I would put the pick in my mouth and go back and forth but finally I just did away with the pick. I thought, I'm just going to do it and from then on I would only practice and play without the pick. Again it's basically classical guitar technique. The single-line stuff is mostly index, middle and at times I'll use the thumb in conjunction with the index and middle.

I've watched you play enough to see that most of the time your thumb will come into play when you move down to the 4th string or lower. If you're playing lines from the 3rd string up you tend to use your index, middle.

Yes, it's kind of weird because I never think about it. I have noticed as you said, I tend to use more thumb as I move into the lower register.

I'd like to extend my thoughts on improvising with the classical approach. Not only are you improvising the note choice but you are also improvising the use of slurs and slides. This of course has an effect on the right hand. So you are making instantaneous adjustments.

I guess so — all I can say is that I don't think about it. I will tell you that I've practiced a lot of scales using index, middle, and thumb. I've also practiced thumb, middle. I've even practiced using middle, ring finger. When I am improvising I just go for it. I don't know what I'm doing in the moment.

It's interesting, I've asked both Earl Klugh and Martin Taylor the same question and they had the same response. Earl said, "I only think about my left hand." I



think Martin is influenced by Joe Pass who also just went for it when playing fingerstyle lines.

Tell me about making the transition from classical to jazz regarding the harmonic aspect. As you know a jazz musician has to understand and deal with harmonic elements that are not required of a classical musician.

Cary DiNigris was very influential on my chord chemistry. (Laughs) He got it from Harry Leahey a guitarist that was from New Jersey. Part of it was taking a scale and harmonizing it in 7th chords and then putting them into particular string groups. You then invert the chords and put them into different string groups. You end up with a crazy number of possibilities. He plays with Chico Hamilton; he's a phenomenal guitarist. I met him in New York. He also helped me a lot with my time and also with soloing over tunes in different positions.

One evening at the 55 Bar in New York, I had a conversation with Mike Stern and asked him to recommend someone to study harmony with. He suggested Edgar Grana, who taught at Julliard. I only took a few lessons but he taught me how to have more bass movement in

my compositions as well as contrary motion and extended harmonies. Harmony as you know is an ongoing process. I'm always exploring and probably will until the day I die.

It's a fascinating subject and as you say we can keep turning corners.

Absolutely! Another thing I've noticed and maybe you have as well — as I get older the more I like sweet and sour together. Things that used to sound dissonant to me do not sound so dissonant anymore — it's kind of weird.

You use a lot of percussive elements in your playing. Tell me about that.

Well, I love funk guitar and R&B. Because Kim and I have this duo, it led me into the 7-string guitar so I could cover the low end. Then I started doing this groove stuff under Kim since we both love R&B. I'm trying rhythmic things while keeping the sound of bass and guitar going. It's all done fingerstyle of course. If you tried it with a pick, forget about it! I love playing



like that. You can also do this with Brazilian stuff and with swing. I'm tapping on 2 and 4 while playing basslines and comping chords. It works great with the 7-string.

You currently live in Houston. If I'm not mistaken didn't you relocate to Houston due to hurricane Katrina?

Yes, that's right. Kim and I had a house in Slidell and we got four feet of water in the house. Kim's parent's house got ten feet of water! It went down to six feet of water but stayed for a long time. Her grandmother's home was the same. So we all ended up in Houston.

We had met Arturo Sandoval just before the storm hit while playing at Emeril Lagasse's restaurant. We were there for two nights. On the second night he brought his trumpet and sat in with us, and we soon became friends. After the storm hit he said, "I have a condo in Miami that I'm not using. Why don't you just come stay here for awhile?" So we took him up on the offer and stayed at his condo for a few months before getting our own place in Miami. We stayed about another six months before returning to Houston to be with the rest of the family. Arturo was very kind to us. He even helped us get gigs. At the time he had opened his own jazz club. We played there and also did a few gigs with him. The entire Cuban community in Miami was just great.

It's an advantage that you and Kim have the ability to plug into just about any large com-

munity and can get gigs and make a living.

Yeah, it worked out nice. They have some great musicians down there!

We also hooked up with percussionist Sammy Figueroa and did some gigs. He's played with everybody and is currently playing with Sonny Rollins.

How is Houston compared to New Orleans for gigs?

The fact that Kim and I are a duo helps. We are able to keep busy playing at a few jazz clubs and some nice restaurants in the Houston area. We also travel to play festivals and other gigs. On occasion we return to New Orleans to play. I'm also doing a lot of teaching. I have about thirty students at The Conservatory of Music at Cinco Ranch in Katy, TX. I've been teaching there for five years now.

Let's say you have a student who has a classical background but would like to get into jazz. What would you advise?

Listen to Pat Martino and Wes Montgomery or just Wes Montgomery, (laughs). Do everything they do and at some point do it your own way.

Do you suggest students transcribe solos, note for note?

Absolutely! And get it into your playing.

Each year I have one or two students who are exceptional. I have one who is doing really, really well who is only fifteen or sixteen years old! I told him,



man, why don't you start transcribing Wes Montgomery? Cop his feel and his lines. After all, what did Pat Metheny and Pat Martino do? They copped Wes in the beginning, that's all they did. You've got to get it in your blood and then at some point you go your own way.

It helps that he has perfect pitch. He is already looking at The New School in New York, and Julliard. He has also considered North Texas State.

Vic Juris teaches guitar at The New School as well as my longtime friend Steve Cardenas.

We all deal with the same harmonic information yet when you listen, let's say to Lenny Breau, Ted Greene or Ed Bickert, they are all harmonically deep, yet unique. The same goes with most of the great piano players.

It's endless in the possibilities. I think one part of it is the constant experimenting and digging it takes to get to that point. I don't think that stuff just comes out without a lot of work. I also think that most great musicians look for a way to say it in their own way.

What is your opinion on thinking of key centers opposed to breaking things down into the individual modes?

I tend to only think of the key center even when it's a modal vamp. I never think about modes, I only think of the major scale the chord comes from. I like to boil things down to its simplest terms. I also use the jazz minor, (melodic minor) over the altered dominant chords. I'll sometimes also use the diminished and whole tone.

I understand that the goal is to think as little as possible when improvising but at this point do you think of chord-scale relationships, arpeggios, triad shapes or just responding in the moment?

I think it's all of the above. I do know that when I'm improvising at my best is when I'm totally relaxed — that's when things start to happen. That's when it just comes out. I'm not playing things that are planned or programmed. It's kind of a weird feeling and hard to describe. It happens at times but it doesn't happen all the time.

What have you been working on lately?

I've been getting into some material from this guy Bruce Saunders. He teaches at Berklee and The University of Texas in Austin. He's got a lot of interesting things on his website that you can print out. He has lot of transcriptions and lessons. He does a lot of stuff coming from a modern approach:

<http://bruce Saunders.net/index.html>

I know you love jazz but you have a wide interest in many styles. I admire that.

That's true, thanks. I just bought a Les Paul and I love to run it through a little amp with a blues driver! Straight-ahead jazz, I love it! Classical, funk, blues, I love it! Maybe that's a bad thing but I can't bring myself to do just one thing. I've been getting a chance to teach some classical guitar, so much beautiful music. I don't know if I'd be happy doing just one thing, I love all of it!

[Editors note: Bill supports and thanks The conservatory of Music at Cinco Ranch, Gabriele Ballabio guitars, KJL Amps, and Mojo Hand guitar effects.]

<http://youtu.be/iPHhO56EQ8Y>

<http://youtu.be/2PD2Z7Wlk3w>

<http://cincoranchmusic.com/instructors/bill-solley/>



*"Bill Solley is one of the greatest
fingerstyle jazz guitarists on the planet"
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Kim Prevest and Bill Solley