

Mick Goodrick: Six-String Theorist

Joel Harrison's in-depth profile of perhaps the most influential mentor in the history of jazz guitar

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Mick Goodrick (photo by Phil Farnsworth)

There was a golden age of jazz guitar in the mid-1970s, when new blueprints were being created by Pat Metheny, John Scofield, Bill Frisell, Mike Stern and others. The foundation was still Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery, but the times called for different aesthetics. Through studies at Berklee and gigs on the Boston and Cambridge jazz scene, these players would reshape the landscape. And they shared the same mentor, Mick Goodrick.

He has taught a remarkable number of prominent guitarists, also including Wolfgang Muthspiel, Lionel Loueke, Nir Felder, Lage Lund and Julian Lage, and inspired many more. Simply put, today's guitar music wouldn't sound the same without him. Now 72 and thousands of students later (including this writer), Goodrick has been an eminence in jazz education for half a century. During most of that time he's been on the faculty at Berklee, where, influenced by Hall and Wes, he studied with Jack Peterson, Bill Leavitt and Herb Pomeroy and earned his degree in 1967. He is beloved by pupils and colleagues in ways that few jazz-guitar teachers have ever been. "He had an extraordinary way of unpacking my problems by listening attentively and then offering organic and often surprising solutions," says Lage, who worked with Goodrick for two and a half years. "There was no limit to what he wanted to share. I owe an enormous part of my way of looking at the instrument to him."

The Pedagogy of Mick

His signature contribution to the jazz-guitar pedagogy has been his attention to chord structures, harmony and comping. “For the most part, I think I got hired because of my comping,” he says. “And that’s one of the things I still encourage of my students. If you can make someone sound good, maybe they’ll hire you again. The person who is comping has the best job. That person is really the head of the rhythm section, the liaison between bass and drums and the soloist. Plus we also get to solo.”

During a conversation at his cluttered Berklee office in July, Goodrick illustrates this point with a story. A well-known drummer was on the bandstand with a bassist who displeased him. The music felt locked-in, tepid. All of a sudden Chick Corea, a master accompanist, showed up and asked if he could sit in. The moment Corea started playing the music caught fire; his comping lit the rhythm section up.

Goodrick’s many books, such as the *Almanac of Guitar Voice Leading* series and *Creative Chordal Harmony for the Guitar* (with Tim Miller), are exhaustive studies in voicings, the work of a scientist, a completist, in which every last solution to a given problem is considered and annotated. He has also applied his meticulous attention to rhythmic cells and strategies for opening up the fretboard in soloing. “Every subject, whether voice leading, rhythm, motivic cells, etc., is logically taken to its comprehensive end point, so that nothing is left unexplored,” says guitarist Ben Monder. “But then he doesn’t make it easy for us; we are challenged to become our own cartographers of the maps that these systems suggest, thereby ensuring that we all take personal journeys and arrive at unique solutions.”

So how did Goodrick muster the patience to so painstakingly document each variable in a given subject? The answers are rooted in the childhood he spent in Sharon, Pa., about 70 miles outside Pittsburgh. The first is that his father was an accountant and pianist, who instilled in him an early affinity not only for music but also for numbers, math and detailed research. The second is one he is a bit reluctant to share. Goodrick discovered about eight years ago that he had a condition commonly referred to as Einstein syndrome, sometimes mistaken for autism and most often associated with children who begin speaking late. “People like this tend to be high-functioning and bright,” he says. “[They’re] involved with mathematics, have a parent who is a musician or an engineer or accountant. They make dictionaries and encyclopedias.”

Goodrick advises a practical approach to his materials, so as not to become overwhelmed by the gobs of information. Approach the books passively, he recommends; don’t worry about memorizing or even remembering the material. Walk through a page a day, and in 300 days your playing will have changed without you realizing it. Consider that one line might occupy a month’s attention.

From Classroom to Bandstand

FROM CLASSROOM TO BANDSTAND

Also a storied performer, Goodrick downplays his career on the bandstand. “I always considered myself to be like a Triple-A ballplayer,” he says. “I got called up to have coffee a few times with some great musicians.” But the list of artists he has performed and recorded with belies such modesty: Metheny, John Abercrombie, Gary Burton, Charlie Haden, Paul Motian, Steve Swallow, Jack DeJohnette and many others. Among his high points: the two-guitar band with Metheny that Burton led in the 1970s, Haden’s Liberation Music Orchestra, DeJohnette’s Special Edition and a long association with saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi. He’s also recorded as a leader, including the 1979 ECM LP *In Pas(s)ing*, featuring saxophonist John Surman, bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer DeJohnette.

“When I showed up in Boston in 1973, Mick had a gigantic impact on the way I think about sound,” Frisell says. “He took the legato, liquid phrasing that Jim Hall had developed even further. He joined notes together in ways I never heard before. He was the link from bebop to what lay ahead.”



(<https://cdn2.jazztimes.com/2017/11/MickGoodrick2.jpg>)

Mick Goodrick teaches a clinic at Berklee in 2003 with special guest John Abercrombie (photo by Phil Farnsworth)

Others point to the thoughtfulness of his playing—how focused it is, almost austere, never showy. His lyricism and gorgeous chord movement can bring an almost classical sound to a jazz tune, with long legato phrases full of hammer-ons and pull-offs. There is a singing quality to his phrasing, and he admits that his goal as a player has always been to emulate the human voice, from his moment as a boy when he was bowled over by Elvis.

“I was already aware of Mick when I moved to Boston to teach at Berklee [in 1973],” Metheny says. “When we got together to play at his Back Bay apartment a few days after I got to town, there appeared that sensation that I rarely get with another player, particularly on another harmonic instrument—that amazing feeling of unlimited possibility. It just seemed like we could both do anything we wanted. ... To be on the bandstand with Mick night after night [in Burton’s band] was incredible. Hearing him craft his magnificent solos was inspiring and illuminating in so many ways. And two guitars [with vibes!] can be a challenging thing, but somehow we were gradually able to transfer a lot of the qualities that made our duo concerts so special into an ensemble sound behind Gary.”

Wolfgang Muthspiel feels that one of Goodrick’s great assets is how interactive he is. In their duo playing, as heard on the 2010 release *Live at the Jazz Standard*, it can be difficult to tell who is playing what, as the lines crisscross in an endless contrapuntal stream. And yet he retired from performing around 10 years ago. “I had assumed I would play forever,” Goodrick reflects, “but when I hit 60 the desire kind of stopped.” He remembers playing the Montreal International Jazz Festival with Metheny in 2005. They did standards and free improv, and the music went extremely well. When it was done he felt like he was waking from a dream, as if the audience had disappeared. He had no idea where he was, and felt that he’d played at the highest level he was capable of. A voice inside told him, “You may not need to do this anymore.” So other than a couple of faculty shows at Berklee, that duo concert stands as his final performance. “Been there, done that,” he says.

What’s a Lesson Like?

What is a lesson with Mick Goodrick like? The first thing a student might notice is his sly, dry sense of humor. Though encouraging and patient with students, Goodrick is not the warm-and-fuzzy type, not a hand-holder. He is quick to disarm a student’s ego and place attention on the deeper issues of practice. Enigmatic and prone to silence, he suggests but does not demand. Recently he has focused on finding ways to quiet the part of the brain that interferes with the creative process, asking students to use drawing as a tool towards that end. Drawing, he says, helps us get past our creative filters, allowing us to be more present; these exercises trick the mind into letting go of inhibitions and analytical mental structures. Now as interested in neurology as he is in music, Goodrick asks for a drawing a day. He also recommends that his students take Zembrin, the patented, over-the-counter version of an ancient herbal supplement indigenous to South Africa that helps calm the mind. “I keep it pretty simple,” he says. “I assign the drawing exercises, offer the Zembrin, make sure they practice with the metronome on 2 and 4 and build their repertoire of standards and the attendant chord work.” Simple? Perhaps. But also deep.

I was curious if he remembered some of the more anarchical, arcane advice he offered this writer in 1977. A few examples: “don’t practice too much”; “sense your tear ducts when you’re playing a sad song”; “solo on one string”; “try destroying a solo midflight.” He did not. And yet I sensed he had very much the same concerns 40 years ago as he does now. Back then Goodrick espoused the virtues of psychoanalysis; now it’s neurology. Today it’s drawing; then it was reading *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

As for his own practice routine, Goodrick continues to explore endlessly. Not long ago he wrote out 55 different ways to comp through the Steve Swallow tune “Falling Grace.” He was worried he might never want to play the tune again due to overexposure, but instead he finds he just can’t get enough and returns to it continually. His practicing often becomes research, and a new book is born. Those books, Goodrick says, are his legacy, “without a doubt.” He mentions Monder, another master of chord structures. “With all the work the books took, all the money I lost,” Goodrick says, “it all feels justified knowing where Ben has taken this material.”

The voluminous content Goodrick has compiled offers an almost unlimited supply of ideas to us all for years to come. Sadly, many of the books are out of print, but the diligent seeker can still find copies. And don’t forget his records. There are several that Goodrick points to as peaks in his career, including 1976’s *Dreams So Real*, with Burton’s quintet also featuring Metheny; 1994’s *Sunscreams*, with Bergonzi, bassist Bruce Gertz and drummer Gary Chaffee; and a 1996 trio release entitled *In the Same Breath*, with Muthspiel and saxophonist Dave Liebman. “Mick has a brilliant mind,” Liebman says. “It’s amazing to watch him play. There’s a stillness, a detachment. He barely moves. You feel his presence, both strong and subtle.”

“He is a truly considerate person in the broadest meaning of the word,” Metheny explains. “There is a kind of awareness in the way he listens, both as a musician and as a person who invites engagement and communication. It seems we always take up right where we left off.”

I ask Goodrick how the landscape of jazz guitar is different today than it was during his formative years. “Back then,” he begins, “you either wanted to move to New York and play with Miles or get the gig with Gary Burton. So when Gary asked me to join it was an important moment of mentoring. When I graduated from Berklee in the late ’60s, I had a six-night-a-week gig, five sets a night with Rick Laird and Alan Broadbent. It may be harder to get that now. We gigged all the time. On the other hand the instrument is still evolving. It’s amazing what some people are doing. So there are still all these possibilities that are being explored.”

Goodrick is in the process of retiring from Berklee, and he will be all but impossible to replace. Catch a lesson with him while you still can.

Joel Harrison is a guitarist, composer and concert producer whose most recent album is The Other River (Whirlwind).

Read Julian Lage's Artist's Choice playlist on modern jazz guitar, including a cut from Mick Goodrick and Wolfgang Muthspiel. (<https://jazztimes.com/departments/artistchoice/artists-choice-julian-lage-on-modern-jazz-guitar/>)

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