



Paul Asbell

## KICKING JAZZ GUITAR

By Dan Forte

Sometime in the mid '80s, outside Tipitina's during the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, Austin saxophonist Kaz Kazanoff introduced me to guitarist Paul Asbell.

The name was vaguely familiar, so I asked, "Are you on any records I might own?"

"I did session work for Chess and some other labels," he said offhandedly, explaining that he grew up in Chicago but lived in Burlington, Vermont.

When I asked what artists he'd backed, he mentioned Earl Hooker, organist Johnny "Big Moose" Walker, and "...The London Howlin' Wolf Sessions and Muddy's Father And Sons album."

These were artists and albums I'd eaten up years earlier, but this guy looked far too young to have been involved with them. When he mentioned he'd had a band with the late harpist Jeff Carp, the pieces fell in place; I remembered the afro'd Carp's chromatic work, alongside Paul Butterfield's Marine Band, on *Fathers And Sons*, and with John Lee

Hooker and Lightnin' Hopkins – all projects Asbell also played on. The two were also members of a band led by Butterfield's former drummer, Sam Lay.

By the time I met him, though, Asbell was concentrating on jazz including the award-winning fusion band Kili-manjaro. On a trip to Burlington in the early '90s, I got to see him in a quartet setting in a small but packed club, and one of his former students, Phish's Trey Anastasio sat in. Not long after, Asbell was a member of the Unknown Blues Band, who recorded with saxophonist Big Joe Burrell and one of my favorite unsung folk-blues artists, George Gritzbach.

In 2005, Asbell released the first of

three solo albums – just guitar and vocals. Aptly titled *Steel String Americana*, it ran the gamut from jazz standards to blues to "Amos Moses."

In '14, I saw him in concert with a jazz sextet at Middlebury College, where he teaches. When it was time for his solo number, the band left the stage and he played Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight." But as he improvised, he gradually deconstructed it until it seamlessly became a medium-slow Jimmy Reed shuffle.

I've since tried to think of another guitarist who is so authoritative and convincing in blues as in jazz. Usually, one comes off as condescending, the other a caricature. The only person I can think of is Robben Ford, though his approach and Asbell's are almost completely different – as they should be; each developed his own voice decades ago.

On *Burmese Panther*, Asbell shows great range within a straight-ahead jazz setting, without coming off as a grab bag. The swinging "Magnolia Blossom" inserts single-string

accents into chord-melody passages and vice versa, while on the Stylistics' "People Make The World Go 'Round" (the CD's only cover) saxophonist Chris Peterman takes the lead with Asbell's solo displaying some uptown blues licks.

Best of all, Asbell's inventive compositions hold their own, never resorting to mere platforms for chops. And when he improvises, he doesn't "play his technique," which even some big-name jazzers are guilty of; his tone and musicality impress most.

It was Paul who first hipped me to a jazz guitarist of a different bent – in fact, different from any guitarist I've ever heard – Phil deGruy. The New Orleanian's *Mask And You Shall Deceive* is his first solo "guitarp" album since 2000's *Hello Dali*, though that's his best-known format. In the interim, he released *Just Duet*, featuring a diverse and impressive roster of partners, including Larry Coryell, Charlie Hunter, Mike Stern, Reeves Gabrels, Steve Masakowski, and David Tronzo.

Guitarp is the apt name of his seven-string guitar with 10 high-register harp strings. Designed by deGruy, previous guitarps were built by Jimmy Foster (in '83) and Ralph Novak, employing his fanned-fret system. That system is also part of deGruy's newest guitarp, built by Vince Guidroz and heard here.

Originally inspired by Chet Atkins, in the mid '70s, deGruy studied with Lenny Breau. He's known for his punny song titles and the humor he injects into his music; for instance, rather than a medley of "Wave" and "When The Saints Go Marching In," on *Dali* he plays a mash-up of both simultaneously, à la Chet's "Yankee Doodle Dixie." It's comparable to inventor/Guit-Stealer Junior Brown switching between guitar and steel necks while singing.

This time, he does the Beatles' "She's Leaving Home" and "Piggies" as a more-traditional medley – though his chord voicings are anything but traditional. Produced by Jay Graydon, whose session credits (from Steely Dan to Dolly Parton) are in the phone-book category, the set includes beautiful interpretations of the theme from "M.A.S.H." and "Tonight" from *West Side Story*, as well as quirky originals like "Sunny Ade Tripper," in tribute to the Nigerian juju master.

The standout for me is "Hello Dolly" (not "Dali"), taken slow and lyrically, before employing a bouncy Atkins rhythm – the eccentric guitarpist playing Jerry Herman's well-worn standard straight. Well, mostly.

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