

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



JOE PASS

[This is the fortieth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

World-class guitarists: Wes Montgomery? Django Reinhardt? Even Les Paul? Right. All of the above. How about Joseph Anthony Jacobi Passalacqua? If you haven't listened to this man's guitar mastery, you've missed out on a real treat.

Willing to trade 29 unwieldy letters for a mere 7, Joe Pass was born in NJ in 1929, got his first guitar from his father (who paid \$17 for it) at age 7. He was encouraged (browbeaten?) to practice 6 hours a day, learning by ear and by sight. He was told to play his music with absolutely no spaces between melodic notes; in other words, to fill the blank spaces or rests with improvisation. And learn he did! Although not considered an eccentric, Pass developed a strange lifelong habit of breaking his guitar picks in two, and playing with the smaller part (much later using only his fingers without a pick).

By age 14, Joe was playing with the likes of Tony Pastor and Charlie Barnet locally, while still in school. He left school in the tenth grade to play and travel with various jazz groups. In the late 40s, like so many others, Pass got hooked on heroin. The 50s, for Joe, was a lost decade. He spent most of his time in prison. But with a two and a half-year stay at the *Synanon* rehab program, he got, and stayed, clean. (If you, like me, are tired of hearing how a lot the jazz greats fell under the spell of the needle, I apologize – but that was the scourge of the times. If only they had chosen to skip the "highs," I often wonder how much greater they could have become).

Emerging from the rehab, Joe once again took his music seriously. He did studio work, performed with television show bands, played with pianist George Shearing, recorded three albums, and played on releases with jazz artists Earl Bostic, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Chet Baker, Julie London and Carmen McRae. He worked as a sideman for Frank Sinatra, Donald O'Connor, Della Reese, Steve Allen, and Johnny Mathis. Pass also subbed on the Merv Griffin Show when great guitarist Herb Ellis was unable to make it.

In 1973, Benny Goodman asked Pass to sub for his guitarist at a gig. Joe's performance blew Goodman away. Benny asked him to join his tour of Australia, which Joe relished. Upon his return to the States, Pass signed a record deal with Norman Granz's new *Pablo* label and immediately started recording *Virtuoso*, his first solo album, yet to be followed by three more. (My favorite, the first -- *Joe Pass: Virtuoso*, Audio CD released March 30, 2010, remastered, on the Original Jazz Classics label, available on Amazon, ASIN: B0038M61JQ).

For the next 20 years, Pass played with hundreds of the greatest names in Jazz, who recognized his mastery of the instrument. As well as soloing on albums and engagements, Joe was half of one of the most famous and accomplished duos in this history of Jazz. His willing accomplice was the legendary singer Ella Fitzgerald, with whom he recorded six albums during Ella's prime (1973 – 1986).



Pass discovered that he had liver cancer in 1992 but continued to perform until early 1993, when his health problems forced him to withdraw from touring. May 7, 1994 saw Joe play his last performance, at a nightclub in Los Angeles. "He sounded better than most guitarists," one of the musicians in his combo said, "but afterwards, he looked at me with a tear in his eye and said, 'I can't play anymore.' It was like a knife in my heart." Pass died about 2 weeks later.

In a *Guitar Player* tribute, writer Jim Ferguson commented on Pass's career as a guitarist: "Bebop, Latin, ballads, blues, originals, solos, duos, trios, big ensembles--Joe did it all. No player in recent memory has made so many recordings in so many styles and contexts.... In all probability, Joe Pass was the most versatile, well-rounded, mainstream guitarist in history."

Fellow musician and educator Gary Starling summed up the type of person Joe Pass was to him: "Beside being one of the most influential jazz guitarists ever, Joe was a warm and wonderful person. In 1976 I called him and asked for a lesson. After a bit of questioning, he agreed. I spent a couple of hours at his house and learned enough to keep me busy for years. At the end of our casual lesson, I asked him what I owed him. He said \$40, but asked me if I was working and if not, not to worry about it. I was proud to pay him. ... He was a true gentleman and a regular Joe. God bless him."

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic