

Open Letter to Bill Frisell



Dear Bill,

Your wife introduced us a few weeks ago, just after the Bill Frisell Harmony performance at the Big Ears Festival. I had just finished sobbing over the “We Shall Overcome” arrangement, so not at my most composed. I tried to express a sliver of what your work has meant to me, but it did not come out quite as clarion clear as I had hoped. You were gracious even as you seemed baffled by my prattling.

I don’t blame you. I have had, over the years, at least half a dozen opportunities to walk up to you and tell you my how-Bill-Frisell-changed-my-life story. I never really wanted to because I knew that my words would never convey the immensity of the thing. When I met Carole earlier that day, I joked about how I would probably never tell you – or anyone – the whole thing. And because she is kind and lovely, she took me in hand and introduced us so I could get it over with, and, alas, I was a fumble-tongued fanboy. But I’m a better writer than talker, so here goes my shot at redemption.

In Fall, 2003, my family hosted a 3-month guitar course at our home in Atlanta. Anywhere from 16 to 23 guitarists bunked into our house, all of us cooking and cleaning and working together to create some truly wonderful music. The recording that came from those weeks represent, to my ears, the best of what is generally known as Guitar Craft. Guitar Craft was founded by Robert Fripp in 1985 and continues to this day under a variety of different guises. Plenty of info out there for the curious.

It was a tremendous experience, one of the keystones in my life as a musician.

And then came November. It was over, the cadre of scruffy guitarists scattered back to the winds, our bustling beehive of a home pretty darned empty. I was left wondering *what next* for my work as a musician. The Guitar Craft approach is highly disciplined, with an emphasis placed on technical precision. In fairness, it is about much more than this, and the music is, at its best, breathtaking. But after 3 months of fine tuning to where sustained cross-picking of 16th notes at 132 bpm is like falling off a log, I will aver that the emphasis on chops began to feel a bit weighty. Further, Guitar Craft is excellent training for learning how to work productively with other Guitar Craft players. But the roadmap for working with non-GC folks – which was my looming reality with everyone gone home – was not clear. I needed to figure something out.

In December, as a reward for her superhuman forbearance, I took Stanwyck to New York for a spree. She is a painter, so it was mostly to be about visual art. But it happened that you were playing the Vanguard with Kenny and Tony, so we decided to check it out. I was vaguely familiar with your work, so I was not really prepared for what happened. I was expecting some jazz chops, man, some blazing and scorching, some primo face melting. Instead, I got a Hank Williams tune. Somewhere Over the Rainbow. A Dylan joint. Some three-chord folk ditties. What the World Needs Now, fer cryin out loud.

I mean, come the fuck on, man. And yet, I was captivated, my drink untouched. I was *in*, totally there, ready for whatever you did next.

And then you started Jules Styne's *People Who Need People*, and I laughed out loud. More of a guffaw, really. And you stopped and looked around and said, "You think I'm joking or what?" and went ahead and played it. And I was in perfect heaven. You can hear this on the Further East/West album. Yes indeed, I

once recorded with Bill Frisell.

I did not think you were joking. I laughed because I felt this liberation at the idea that any song is worthy, any song can be a vehicle for your joy. It was not about chops or speed or any of the stuff that – while valuable to a point – had begun to get in my way as a musician.

So I walked out of the High Church of Vanguard with ideas, ways to move into another phase of work. Standing on the street corner at 7th Ave. South and Perry Street, abrim with a sense of possibility and momentum, I turned to Stanwyck and said, “I think my inner Jerry just got permission to come out and play.”

So when I got home I started listening to ALL the Frisell, and all the everything that Frisell pointed to, like Jim Hall and Johnny Smith and Lee Konitz and Paul Motian &c. Going through the Harry Smith and Alan Lomax collections. Learning the standards and originals as best I could in New Standard Tuning because, hey, 20 years of fretboard mapping is not going over the rail just like that.

But more than anything: More than the quirky melodies (hello “Rag” and “Amarillo Barbados”) or the intricate nesting-doll jigsaws of pieces like “Throughout” Carla Bley is correct. This is a perfect piece., there was something about the attention to space, the willingness to listen and play spare. The idea that a couple of well placed notes might be sufficient, if not superior, to a cascade of shimmering 16ths.

And this somehow started to slip into the everyday of my life. Listening more. Contributing less often, worrying less about whether I can keep up with the fastest hi-flyers. Full disclosure: I never could. Thinking about texture and negative space and color. Somehow, your playing that night in the Vanguard twigged a response that ran deep and utterly transformed how I worked and thought as a musician and human

being. Since then, I have seen you at least two dozen times, and every time, I learn something else about living life tethered to a slab of wood and six wires.

There is no blame or complaint on Guitar Craft in this. The volumes I learned in that orbit continue to reverberate. But the time had come for me to explore a different path. It could have been a different spark than your show, but it wasn't. Reckon I'm glad it wasn't an Abba tribute band that weekend, but then again, that might have been pretty damn skippy, too. Music is.

In a way, that night was about connecting me back to the aspects of playing that had made me want to play in the first place (cf. my "inner Jerry" comment). That feeling of connecting with the music in an organic way. The idea of music as an ongoing conversation that can happen between people of a wide range of backgrounds and vocabularies.

Over time I became a different musician, which is to also say that I became a different human being. Maybe not readily apparent to most people around me, but palpable and dramatic from within my own skin.

The day before we met, you and Abigail Washburn hosted a Sound & Silence event. Sitting in a circle of people actively cultivating Silence is a familiar activity for me and is a central part of the Guitar Craft work. (Another thread/strand coming full circle.) Afterwards, during comments, a young woman commented that your guitar playing had imposed a masculine intrusion on her experience. Her experience is her own, and I do not doubt her sincerity, but I found her characterization at odds with how I hear your work.

For better or worse, I'd suggest., the guitar has become a cliché for phallic excess, a priapic extension of the armadillo-trousered rock god, the guitar community long a hotbed of dudebro exclusion. And Guitar Craft, despite the

best intentions and the participation of some fantastically strong women, has historically been something of a sausage fest.

But I do not get that with your playing. Your reserve and propensity to understate, to hear what is being said before contributing, strikes me as more representative of what we might short-handedly call *the feminine principle*, a manifestation of nurturing and yielding. (And yeah, the whole feminine/masculine dichotomy is every bit as fraught with nonsense as left-right brain or moon/sun energy reductions. But let's just go ahead on since we got this far.)

Like many of my generation, I was raised to attain standards of masculinity that are not just physically and psychologically impossible; they are utterly ruinous to those who try. Toxic masculinity is an almost impossibly perfect label for this shit. I have no idea if your upbringing carried the same freight, but as white guys of a certain age, it seems we must have endured some of the same pressures and expectations.

Like I said, the changes in the way I play guitar began to seep across to how I lived, loved, acted as a friend and parent. And vice versa. My pursuit of a *feminine* aspect of playing flowed back and forth between the playing/non-playing me in a way that helped me shed some of the baggage of my raising and allow myself to embrace a sense of vulnerability as something positive rather than shameful.

It has been a good change. It has been honest and hard earned. And here, 15 years after that first real exposure to your music, I remain utterly grateful for the information you shared and proud of the work I've been able to do.

When we met, I was wrapped up in this narrative of how important your work had been to me, so it is only natural that I would have been a blithering dope. Maybe next time we meet

we can talk about stuff, just a couple of guitar players sharing stories. Like, hey, were you ever a Deadhead? How did you like the Art Ensemble 50th anniversary show? Isn't Carla Bley the absolute coolest? Or even, hey, you're married to a painter, too? It's like we're twinsies!

Bless you, Bill, and thank you beyond what words can express. Wishing you and your wonderful partner Carole all the best in the world.

See ya around,

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