

Pete McCann

BY BILL MILKOWSKI

AFTER 20 YEARS ON THE NEW YORK JAZZ SCENE

developing his reputation as an in-demand sideman, guitarist Pete McCann has come into his own as a bandleader-composer and recording artist. Part of a pack of creative young jazz guitarists who emerged in the '90s (including Ben Monder, Dave Fiuczynski, Adam Rogers, Kurt Rosenwinkel, and David Gilmore), McCann came up revering Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery while also embracing electronics and edgy dissonance—and he was not above stomping on a distortion pedal and rocking out with grunge tones. McCann could also swing authentically in a bop-ish vein or adopt a delicate ECM-ish, walking-on-eggshells aesthetic when the music called for it. And though he has always worn his main guitar influences on his sleeve (John Scofield, Bill Frisell, Pat Metheny), the Eau Claire, Wisconsin, native continues to make strong personal statements with his sophisticated harmonic sensibility, blistering chops, and improvisational daring—qualities that come together in brilliant fashion on his latest release, *Extra Mile*, the guitarist's fourth recording overall and his debut for the new Nineteen-Eight Records label.

While playing in Bobby Previte's group the Horse during the late '90s, McCann was afforded a chance to slash and burn on covers of electric-era Miles Davis tunes and classic fusion material by Tony Williams Lifetime and early Weather Report, and as the guitarist in Gregg Bendian's Mahavishnu Project from 2001 to 2004 he machine-gun-picked his PRS Custom 22 with a vengeance on tunes from *The Inner Mounting Flame* and *Birds of Fire*. But McCann now mostly chooses a much warmer tone and takes a more legato approach on an '88 Gibson ES-335, as exemplified on pieces such as the melodic "Felder's Choice" and the elegant "Tributary" from the new album.

In addition to his Gibson and PRS guitars, McCann's rig includes a Boss GT-3 multi-effects

processor running stereo into two Mesa/Boogie amps (he owns Lone Star, F-50, and Studio .22 Plus models). He pushes the amps with a Pro Co Rat distortion pedal on the more aggressive numbers. "That's how you get a super ringing, singing tone," he says. "Guitar players like Jeff Beck, Eric Johnson, and Allan Holdsworth all get amazing tones with very horn-like qualities, and that's something I've tried to emulate. So, on songs like 'Angry Panda' and 'Rhodes Less Traveled,' that's what I'm going for."

On "Stasis," McCann gets an octave effect that sounds as if it might have been produced by a DigiTech Whammy pedal, but was actually achieved with the Boss GT-3. "I did use a Whammy pedal on almost every gig for a while there, but it has been in my basement for the past few years," he explains. "I can get a similar sound from the GT-3 that I actually like even better because the tracking and pitch aren't as exact, and there's a slight time lag between when you play a note and when you hear the harmony. Processors are becoming more and more powerful, and units such as the Boss GT-10 have a clearer and more precise sound than the older units, but I don't necessarily like that. I want less characteristic sounds—something that's not true to pitch or is just a little muddy."

On the odd-metered "Hybrid," McCann goes for angular intervals and sheer bombast, while he channels Bill Frisell on the darkly delicate "Lonesome Prairie Dog." "Pi" is an intimate and sweetly lyrical acoustic duet with bassist Matt Clohsey, on which McCann's Midwest heartland tendencies come to the fore. "I think a lot of that has to do with my dad always listening to WAXX radio, which was an AM station in Eau Claire that played country and western stars like Tammy Wynette, Roy Clark, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings," he says. "I'm always hearing that music in the back of my head, and I guess it does seep out. At some point or another, all the music that you've taken in is going to come out and influence your



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sound. The rock stuff that I love, the jazz, pop, and country stuff that I grew up with—it's all bound to come out sooner or later and there's nothing I can do about it."

McCann has been a lifelong tinkerer ever since his father instructed him on wielding a soldering iron, so he has a hands-on relationship with his equipment and enjoys getting inside the guts of his guitars, pedals, and amps. "That all goes back to when I was in high school and started taking apart radios that didn't work, and trying to fix stuff that didn't need to be fixed, which was a great experience," he says. "I can fix a few little things here and there, and I also enjoy making my own cables. I'll buy 50 feet of cable and use it to make five or six shorter cables by soldering the connectors on myself, which costs a lot less than buying ready-made cables individually. And being able to repair them saves even more money. I guess I inherited a little bit of the handyman fix-it gene from my father."

Extra Mile was mixed and mastered by engineer, producer, and composer Shawn Pierce, who worked from his home base in Winnipeg, Canada, and communicated with McCann via the Internet. "It was kind of a strange process to get used to at first, but it was an interesting way to work," says McCann. "Every day we would email back and forth and exchange files, and I'd listen back on the reference monitors in my basement studio to hear what he'd done and make suggestions. I guess the process took longer than usual, but I'm really glad that Shawn's ears were involved in the final product. He's worked with Bill Frisell on a lot of recordings, so I was fortunate to have him work on mine."

One can readily hear the continuity between *Extra Mile* and McCann's first outing as a leader, 1998's *Parable*—though the music on all four of his solo albums defies easy categorization. "I'm trying to explore all the different avenues relating to jazz that I can," he explains. "I'm sorry if they don't fit into the traditional categories we're all used to, such as 'fusion,' 'straight ahead,' 'avant garde,' or 'Latin.' I don't care about any of that. I just want to play music, and whatever I feel like writing that day is what comes out. And all of the different types of music that I've listened to throughout my life are also going to come out, though not necessarily directly. There's no finite set of rules or regulations that you have to adhere to in order to play jazz guitar." ■

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