

All About Jazz

Pete McCann: Mild-Mannered Superhero Guitarist



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By [MARK CORROTO](#)

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I guess it comes from history, I'm not afraid to try anything. —Pete McCann

A mainstay of the New York scene, guitarist Pete McCann released his sixth recording as a leader *Pay For It On The Other Side* (McCannic Music, 2018). He is also an in demand sideman working in everything from duos to big bands, and his guitar can be heard on 100 recordings. McCann shared with us what it is like to be a busy husband, father, and working musician in the 21st century.

All About Jazz: Thank you for doing this Pete. I wanted to start off, I want to talk about your new record *Pay For It On The Other Side*, but before that, can you tell us what a day in the life of Pete McCann is like?

Pete McCann: It can usually be a variety of things, but since I have two kids in college now I have a lot more flexibility in my schedule. My wife and I are enjoying the other side of life right now and so usually what happens, I wake up, she's usually gone to work and I have to look at my calendar and see what I have to do for the day. That can usually be a variety of things like rehearsals, teaching lessons, getting ready to do a recording or transcribing a chart. The most important thing is finding some time to practice! Then of course whatever time I can find to book gigs in advance and do correspondence. I do some sort of exercise for a ½ hour (chuckles) because at my age its really entirely necessary. Lately it is any combination of teaching, transcribing, a gig, a performance recording, anything. It's different everyday and I'm really happy that I'm not in a set sort of thing.

AAJ: Are the lessons private, or are you at a university?

PM: I do some private lessons at my house, and then I have a couple students at City College in New York. So, for them to get to me in Jersey is kind of a pain in the neck, so I usually end up meeting them at City College to do lessons up there.

AAJ: You didn't mention travel. But I know from following you on social media that you are on the road quite a bit.

PM: I try to be, that's where you make the most leeway into meeting new people and getting a gig in the future for either your own band or another band you already work with, so that's super important.

AAJ: You mentioned your kids are in college, and I know your son is interested in music. Is that correct?

PM: Yes. My wife and I are very proud of our son, Joseph, who just started at Eastman School of Music for Jazz Performance on alto sax.

AAJ: I know from many musicians' stories they always talk about their parents supporting them, but always telling them they need a fallback degree or fallback profession. I don't know if that happened to you with your folks in Wisconsin. And a follow up question, have you talked to your son about what it's like to be a professional musician?

PM: I sort of had the jazz bug early, from 7th grade on. I had a guitar teacher named Steve Sturcell who urged me to go to the Shell Lake jazz camp in the summer and dig in. So I did, and that inspired me to really get into music. I started gigging when I was 16 in Eau Claire, Wisconsin with some college students who went to the Univ of Wisconsin Eau Claire. Just being around those guys and doing little gigs at this hotel restaurant bar inspired me to become a musician because I thought it was the greatest thing in the world to be paid money to play music and this was music I was going to play anyway. My mom was entirely enthused about it and my brothers and sister were into other things and weren't necessarily into music like I was. She was happy that I was doing something different and unique. My father was a more practical common sense sort of man, and he said during my senior year in

high school, "Do you want to try to make a living playing music? It is going to be harder than you think." (laughing) He was right! (laughs) But I told him "this is what I want to do, I can't think of anything else that I'd rather do more." He was apprehensive and who can blame him. Now that my own son wants to be a musician, I have told him, "you see how hard I work, I'm pretty much working all the time. If I get a day off, I'm usually doing something around the house. That's really not a day off." When you're not working, or not teaching or touring or playing gigs you fill the rest of your time with other things that have to be done like cleaning out the rain gutters or getting the oil changed. When my wife comes home from work, she's very tired and doesn't have time for other things. She's a teacher and has to prepare for the next day. My son has the advantage of seeing what life can really be like as a musician. He knows what he's getting into.

AAJ: OK, so you didn't have to give him "The Talk"

PM: "The Talk" (laughs). Recently when he was about a month in at Eastman and started second guessing his whole decision he said "how am I going to make money doing this?" I said, "Look, just finish college first. You're in a great school that will prepare you with a variety of skills that will make you marketable. Your sight reading will be amazing, your ensemble playing is going to be top shelf. With those two things alone, you're going to be able to step into situations and not feel like you don't belong there." Wherever he ends up as a musician, I think he is going to be well-prepared.

AAJ: You talked about this jazz bug at age 16. I was thinking in preparation for this interview about a blindfold test, but it maybe more interesting to find out what you were listening to at 16. I get the feeling that it was more than just jazz, because of your love of [John McLaughlin](#) and [Allan Holdsworth](#), and of course the Webern project and the Eric Satie recordings. What would you have been listening to at age 16?

PM: The advantage of growing up in a household with seven people, was that everyone had their own music that they were into. My dad and my grandfather listened to Country & Western on WAXX radio in Wisconsin. They played Hank Williams, Dolly Parton, Roy Clark, etc. In the house, my mom

loved classical, and 20th century classical music, so she listened to National Public Radio. My sister played classical flute. My older brother liked to listen to hard rock. I spent a lot of time with him listening to Bachman-Turner Overdrive, Kansas, Pink Floyd, the Eagles, you name it. My younger brother wasn't into music just yet. I took lessons at Morgan Music in Eau Claire. I listened to everything and practiced from my Mel Bay books. When I got the jazz bug, I started making trips to the local record store in town, UMS Music, and started buying jazz records. I would also go to the local public library, check out six to ten records, schlep them home in my backpack and play them on my mom's stereo.

AAJ: it sounds like there were no pigeonholes for you. It's all music.

PM: Exactly. When I was in high school, Guitar Player magazine started inserting these little flimsy plastic records. This was well before the age of digital music. You'd actually get a record you could play on your record player, and I'll never forget one of the records was an Allan Holdsworth recording that just changed everything. I was like "this is awesome, who is this guy?" Getting into him led to John McLaughlin and then when I went to my first year of college at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, my teacher, Mike Irish, hipped me to Mahavishnu. He said, "man you got to check out these records." Jazz/rock fusion sort of changed everything for me. It was another door I had to open.

AAJ: That eventually led you to the Mahavishnu project

PM: Yes. It was great playing in that band.

AAJ: I was looking at the liner note to your new record, and it reads, "Many thanks to my family, Pete Mills, Matt Pavolka, Mike Sarin, etc." When I first read it, I thought you included Pete, Matt, Mike and the others as your family. Then I read it again and I saw it was "my family" comma "Pete Mills, etc." But it works both ways, doesn't it?

PM: Absolutely. The reason I named Pete Mills right after my family is because he was an invaluable part of my last record and the previous record,

too. He was my mixing and mastering consultant. He's my nonpartisan band mate. (laughs) What happens is, if you ask your bandmates about mixes and stuff, then you feel obligated to do what they ask you to do. If I ask Pete, he'll give me an honest opinion. We try to compare other records while we're mixing. I have a few personal favorites that I like to use as benchmarks for recording quality and panning and stuff like that. Pete comes first in the liner notes. As for the other musicians, who I've been working with over the last year or if I've done some touring with them, I thank them. We are all in this together. It's such a vital community and it's great if someone asks me to do a tour with them, I want to thank them in my liner notes, for sure.

AAJ: With this recording, I notice the label reads McCannic Music. Is this your first venture into starting a label?

PM: Yes, it is and I had some serious conversations with a few important people in my life. Joe Fiedler is one of them. He started his own label a couple years ago and never looked back and another guy I am very fond of and have tremendous respect for is [Dave Stryker](#). He did the same thing. I asked them if it is really worth having a record label in the mix. I decided to go it alone this time because it is hard to give someone a finished CD and expect them to promote it and get press for you, to do all this stuff on the back half, because there are so many musicians trying to do the same thing right now. I think every single record label is stretched as thin as you can imagine. The beauty of having your own label is you're in control of every aspect. The onus of selling records is all on you. The beauty is, every CD I sell, I see the profit. It's not that much. I like having a little more control over what's going on.

[A](#)

AAJ: Let's talk about your new record, *Pay For It On The Other Side*. How did you come up with this title?

PM: I called it *Pay For It On The Other Side*, because I believe we will all be paying in one way or another for the way we're living today. The title sort of sums up what I've been feeling a lot lately in what seems to be an 'all about me' world. I've been reading about, and practicing, mindfulness which helps me to be more considerate of other people.

AAJ: I am reading a couple books on Flow Theory, which is about getting into 'the zone' for an athlete, like Michael Jordan or a surfer. Then they have extended Flow to teamwork like Navy Seals on a mission. They all try to work with one mind. All the Flow books cite the perfect examples for both individual Flow and group Flow as jazz improvisers. Are you familiar with Flow Theory? Obviously you're familiar with flow because you're an improviser, but is Flow the reason you keep to a consistent lineup for your recordings?

PM: Yes, definitely you have an internal thing that you can't describe. When you play with a musician and you get that happy little tingle in your spine, it really feels good. That's the first thing I think of when I'm playing music with somebody. We have a common shared sense of time and feel. My band and I have shared history, especially with Mark (Ferber), we used to play in this group, The Other Quartet. I think I've traveled more miles with this guy than any other musician. Henry (Hey) and I went to University of North Texas together. I'm very happy with his success and his ability to crossover into other markets that aren't jazz-centric. John (O'Gallagher) opened my mind to looking at music in a different way. He's such a unique alto saxophonist. He's coming at jazz from a different perspective. He's written a tremendous book which uses a lot of set theory and how you can apply that to jazz improvisation. He's one of my favorite jazz musicians on the planet. Last but not least, Matt (Clohesy), is just an amazing upright bassist. He can also play electric beautifully and that's a rare thing in New York when you get somebody who doesn't mind bringing two basses to a gig.

AAJ: For a Pete McCann record, you need a certain brand of musician because, it's not like you're doing a straight ahead date and you get a straight ahead musician who is comfortable. Pete McCann has to find musicians who can hit it with post-bop, hard rock, Brazilian, some blues and fusion. That whittles down the possible cast of musicians, yes?

PM: That's very true and I always think of that. If I'm doing a set of dates and somebody in my band can't do the tour, I think oh no, I've got to find someone I can fit in there. It's not easy, but that's the beauty of living in New York.

There are so many great musicians and a lot of them are completely open minded, like myself and don't mind learning music and trying to step into somebody else's footprint. Even though shoe sizes are going to be different, they'll still bring whatever they play and their history as a musician to the table and it's always refreshing.

AAJ: Currently you have this quintet. You toured this year with Spin Cycle, Correct?

PM: That's true, we just did a nice tour in October and I am looking forward to doing some more gigs with them next year.

AAJ: Tell us about some other ensemble you are currently working with.

PM: I've been working a lot with singers lately. I've been playing with Kendra Shank, Susan Tobocman, Beat Kaestli and Jocelyn Medina. I've been in Jocelyn's band for a few years now and lately we are trying to write some new tunes together. In addition to Spin Cycle, I play regularly in a group led by Rob Scheps and Tony Garnier. Tony is the bassist for Bob Dylan, and has been for the last 27 years. He's kind of venturing into playing jazz and it's been fun playing with those guys. I've been working with a couple big bands led by Christopher Zuar and Migiwa Miyajima. Migiwa just had her CD release at Birdland in September. On Monday I'm going to Blues Alley in Washington D.C. with Joel Harrison, another great guitarist, so it's a two-guitarist band. I really enjoy working with him too. In addition to all those groups, I'm still on a list of people you can call to come in and sight read some music at the drop of a hat and play a gig. I'm always on call.

AAJ: How is it that you have all these different sides? You can step in and play a Jimi Hendrix song and then you can switch to some soft Brazilian acoustic music. How does that happen? How does one musician do that?

PM: I guess it comes from history, I'm not afraid to try anything. I just recorded some mandolin for Christopher Zuar's Big Band. That just scared the crap out of me. I was like, I don't really know anything about this. I had to get my mandolin chops together. The instrument is tuned in fifths, so it is

completely foreign to me. But, I love a challenge. Some years ago I did a recording with Dave Pietro, a friend of mine from college, he wanted to do a record of Brazilian-influenced music, so I checked out as much Brazilian music as I could. I checked out João Gilberto's guitar playing and I love his comping style when he's singing. I love music, and if there's guitar in it, even if there isn't, I try to figure how I fit into the panorama and what I can bring to every situation.

AAJ: I don't know if you want people to know this, but at one time you played some banjo

PM: (Laughing) Yes, I do own a banjo. When I was in college Jack Peterson, my guitar teacher at North Texas used to say, "the definition of a gentleman is, a guitarist who owns a banjo, but doesn't tell anyone about it." (laughs) No, I play on one of [Matt Wilson's](#) early recordings. (note: *Going Once, Going Twice* (Palmetto, 1998) I'm part of a recording with an auctioneer and it's hysterical. I got so much press just from playing banjo on one of Matt's records. It was hilarious. I thought, man I should start playing banjo all the time. The banjo I play is called a plectrum banjo. It has a longer neck than a regular tenor banjo, so I can tune the banjo like the top four strings of a guitar. I get away with playing single note lines that way and I don't have to think about tuning the banjo in fifths, like it's supposed to be tuned. I had to play banjo quite often in college. I'd get gigs in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area playing Dixieland, like for a store opening or a parade. I still have the banjo, it's a 1927 Vega that I bought over the phone because I needed a banjo for a gig I was doing at the Dallas summer musicals, way back in, I don't know 1987.

AAJ: If you had to claim a comic book super hero character, who would it be.

PM: That's a great question, especially since Stan Lee just passed away. I have a Midwestern-looking Clark Kent thing, because I have short hair, glasses and I look like a banker or something. People always tell me, you look like my cousin or my uncle, whatever. That's why my second record is called *You Remind Me of Someone*. I don't look like some dude who should be up there shredding guitar. The shredding guitar comes from listening to shredding guitar players and heavy metal, Holdsworth and McLaughlin, Scott

Henderson. You name it. This is awesome, I want to do finger tapping too, this is pretty cool. I've never been able to grow my hair that long, maybe that's why I've had the same silly look for 35 years. Just ask my wife (laughs).

AAJ: Tell us what we can look for in 2019 from Pete McCann.

PM: Just trying to do some more touring and do things in Europe. Next year will be my 30th year, as a musician living in the New York area. Eight years in New York and twenty-two in New Jersey, right across the George Washington Bridge. I'm plugging along. I'm happy. I'm very proud of my younger son, as I mentioned, and my older son, I'm incredibly proud of. He's studying politics at Ithaca College. I need to write more music and do another record soon. That's always on the horizon. Try to do something a little different on my new project.

AAJ: Where can folks find you on the internet?

PM: They can always find me at [website](#). My new record is on every streaming service, Amazon, iTunes, CD Baby, etc. Then of course, If you live close to where I'm doing a gig, come down and buy a copy of my new CD.

AAJ: Do you keep your touring schedule on your website, so we can find you?
[note: scroll down to view his calendar]

PM: Oh yeah, my gig page is an open book. You can tell exactly where I am just about everyday of the week.

AAJ: Even if you are an internet troll or a cat burglar?

PM: Especially if you are an internet troll.

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