

the art of
improvisation

LET'S GET LOST

BILL FRISELL'S improvisations grab you by the ears and yank

hard, pulling you along on feverish, free-associative journeys. You

Touring the harmonic
follow a twisted road map, tracing obscure back roads that criss-
backroads with
cross from 52nd Street bop shops to mythical juke joints, from
Bill Frisell
university music departments to speed metal hell. ■ Frisell's

florid imagination and soulful intensity invite comparisons to ev-

by joe gorr
everyone from Sonny Rollins to Jimi Hendrix. His sonic stew may

taste like it's seasoned with an encyclopedia of 20th-century music, but his radical cut-and-mix never suggests a kid playing musical dress-up ("Look! I'm Wes! Now I'm B.B.!"), never succumbs to the back-to-the-'50s literal-mindedness that plagues current jazz. For all its dialects, Frisell's language is instantly recognizable, always coherent. His music can be intellectually challenging, but he's not afraid to be beautiful, even naive.

Music from somewhere else. Are the surprising twists and breathtaking textures that animate Frisell's records and performances subject to intellectual scrutiny? Bill, barely unpacked from a series of New York dates, gladly entertains the question in his cozy Seattle den. "The best music I make, writing or playing, comes from instinct," he muses, choosing his words with care. "I'm just not thinking about notes. Sure, if you stop me, I can identify what note I'm playing and explain its relationship to an underlying chord, but the music I feel best about comes from somewhere else. The things I've studied intellectually have taken years to seep down, and now they come out naturally."

But Bill doesn't downplay his formal education, and he disagrees with those who argue that conservatory educations hatch musical eggheads: "It's only the players' fault if they let themselves be programmed by the routines that these places establish. There are all kinds of things you can do with the 'rules' that a school might give you. For example, in the harmony classes at Berklee, they'd have 'avoid notes,' notes you weren't supposed to use over a particular chord. Naturally, those were the first ones I'd check out."

Into the deep end. "When I improvise over a tune," says Frisell, "any note of a melody can be a diving board that sets me off on different melodic ideas." With that thought in mind, we de-

cided to analyze "Unsung Heroes," the opening cut from *Where In The World?*, the Bill Frisell Band's latest Elektra release—an interesting choice, since it has no chord changes in the traditional sense.

"The first section," explains Bill, "is a real simple riff in *D*, almost nothing [see Ex. 1]. There's just the repeating pattern and a melody, but they affect each other in really interesting ways. A lot is implied by the bass line and the melody, but little is completely stated. Another weird thing is the way the bottom line is so idiomatic, just a clichéd blues thing, but the melody shoots you off into all these other keys, changing the way the repeating riff functions. There are momentary flashes of different tonalities that can send you off in different directions as you're soloing."

Bill notes that the melody by itself might be perceived as being in *B♭* major, but he immediately rattles off other tonal implications: "You can hear the first *B♭* of the melody against *F♯* in the accompaniment [measure 3, beat 1] as the dominant seventh with a raised fifth in *Gm* [*D7♯9*]. Or I might hear those same two notes as *G♭* and *B♭*, part of a *G♭* major triad. And look at where the melody descends to *E♭* [measure 6]. I might hear it as *D♯* against *F♯* in the accompaniment, part of a *B* major triad. The longer you play with it, the more ideas you find."

Your wake-up call, Mr. Frisell. Bill starts to improvise while I play the basic tune as shown in Ex. 1, mimicking Bill's pick-and-finger technique. Every few minutes we stop and dissect the material Bill is using. It's a somewhat awkward process; Bill's playing is beautiful, and I feel as if I'm rudely shaking a sleeper awake every couple of minutes to interrogate him on his dreams.

Bill starts out in *G* minor; a bit of his improv is shown in Ex. 2. "*G* minor sounds more 'in there' than any other key," he observes. "It's the least ambiguous." As in subsequent examples, Frisell generates tension by playing against the 12/8 time signature's three-eighth-notes groupings, substituting two- and four-note subdivisions of the beat.

The guitarist then moves to *B♭* major; with the same key signature as *G* minor, it too sits easily with the composed melody. But he soon veers into *B♭* blues [Ex. 3]. The licks, somewhat standard in their own right, sound tense and exciting over the *D* ostinato riff. "*B♭* blues is pretty far from *D* major," admits Bill, "but the way the composed melody leans up into *B♭* over and over gives you enough support to go there. Besides, the 'wrong' thing can sound amazing if you play it clearly and simply. I'm really inspired by the music of [early 20th century composer] Charles Ives, the way he gets so many independent tempos and keys going at once."

As we sidle into *E♭*, Bill takes up a straight triplet figure that