

THE AGE OF CON-FUSION

PREFACE

I am a professional jazz musician, but that's not how my career began. I started out playing guitar in a Funk band on the East Coast and then moved to Los Angeles where I played for many years in various Fusion bands before deciding to dedicate myself to the art of Jazz. In LA I had expected the Fusion scene to produce the music of the future, especially the fusion of jazz and rock along with some R&B and Funk elements. But music history decided otherwise: what had seemed to be a promising and exciting blend of disparate music styles turned out to be more like "confusion" and ultimately, as a serious art form, led to a dead-end. That said, the music and its musicians deserve to be remembered. This document is my attempt, based on my first-hand experience, to describe the LA Fusion scene of the 1980s and early 1990s, to analyze its elements and its evolution(s) and to attempt an explanation of why it was doomed to fail.

*Rick Hannah
Strasbourg, France
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The Age of Con-Fusion

THE JAZZ MUSIC SCENE IN LOS ANGELES 1975 - 1995

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I

THE CHOICE.

New York or LA, that was the choice.....but definitely not Baltimore! This was the message given to me by my instructor Larry Wooldridge. He was the man who taught all the up-and-coming guitarists in the Baltimore area. I had been studying with him for close to a year and he seemed pleased with my progress and dedication. I took him seriously. I had been to New York a few times on day trips, once to buy a guitar, and the Big Apple seemed ominous to me. I was not playing Jazz on a professional level. The band I was in at that time, Both Worlds, was an R&B band in Baltimore with horns that played Earth, Wind, and Fire and other Pop/Funk music of the day. I liked this band and the music, but with Larry I was studying Jazz along with the guitar. Larry was very fastidious in his teaching style, writing out by hand many pages of music for guitar study, with the emphasis definitely on Mainstream Jazz. I was also jamming a lot, learning tunes and hanging out with pianist Bob Butta in particular, and that was interesting to me as well.

I knew nothing about Los Angeles, apart from the music coming from there, some of which we were playing: Tom Scott and the LA express; The Jazz Crusaders with Larry Carlton; Lee Ritenour; and last but not least, Chick Corea. I had just seen Chick in D.C. at the Cellar Door with Stanley Clarke on bass, Airto Moreira on drums, and the out of sight guitarist Bill Connors. Wow!! What a night! What a band! Chick was playing tunes from his "Light as a Feather" disc as well as Fusion stuff from his new LP "Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy". The combination of his compositions along with the group's playing was too much. Bill was playing a Les Paul guitar with kind of a John McLaughlin approach sound-wise, but his lines were smooth, more "Jazzy" if you like. This was the first time I really heard Fusion music. It was clear they were trying to blend disparate elements of popular music, in this case the sonorities of Rock and Jazz with the more Classical influence of Chick's compositions. This was around 1974 and I told myself, "this is the future of music". Why not? Take the best of each and blend them to make something new.

It had already been done. Jazz by definition was a Fusion of Ragtime and the Blues. Rock-a-billy, with Elvis at the helm, was clearly a blend, even in its name, of Rock-n-Roll and Country. Louis Jordan successfully combined Jazz with the Boogie-Woogie beat to create what we now call Rhythm and Blues. And the Beatles had taken American R&R and added the "British element". I followed Chick's band Return to Forever up to Philadelphia to hear them one more time at the Bijou and managed to talk to Bill. He was not happy. He and Chick weren't getting along. I couldn't understand it. Nobody was playing guitar like Bill! The next thing I know he is out and here comes Al Dimeola. Definitely not the same thing! Say what you will about Al, but there is no Jazz in his playing. You could say he has this "electric-flamenco" thing, which I guess worked with some of Chick's tunes, but the Jazz part went right out the window. (More on Chick later....)

So what was happening? I wasn't sure, but I knew if I stayed in Baltimore I might never find out. Disco was coming in and the whole live music scene was on the wane anyway. I had one contact, thanks to one of my students named Steve Nodar who had family in Los Angeles, and they were willing to put me up for a few weeks. So in 1976, with the help of my parents, off I go in my '66 Chevy across the United States to the West Coast.

II

FIRST YEARS IN LA, 1976-1980

On my arrival, my first thought was to try to find a band doing more or less the same music as Both Worlds. LA being so big and all, I had hoped there would be a vibrant live club scene as in Baltimore. Wow! Nothing of the kind. The only available gigs were with Top-Forty Bands, most of which were not staying put in LA. I did audition for a couple of these, but they were looking for guitar players who could sing, so that left me out. I explored for a while until I found Jimmy Smith's Supper Club in North Hollywood where they held a jam session every Monday night. I had some experience playing standards jamming with Bob Butta and friends back home although I had never considered playing this music for real. Art Hillary was the organist who, along with a drummer, hosted the evening. Art was a kind soul who knew a zillion tunes and was very accommodating. The horn players were lined up on one side of the stage and the rhythm section on the other. The level of players was high and there were two guitarists who came in on a regular basis that were killin': Rick Zunigar and Billy Rogers. Hearing those two play was worth the price of admission alone, worth the price of moving to LA. Rick was an LA native who played with Freddie Hubbard and later with Stevie Wonder. Billy, who came from Omaha, was playing with many groups, most notably The Crusaders; his most notable recording with them was "Street Life".

Usually Jimmy Smith would waltz in at the start of the last set and take over. If you happened to be on the bandstand when he was on it, you got to play with him. This happened to me a few times. He really was "incredible". There was a mirror on the ceiling right above the organ

where you could see what he was doing. The most impressive thing for me was his being able to play the bass with the left hand and with the foot pedals in synch. If I remember well, he played in his stocking feet.

I made that session faithfully every Monday until the club closed. Every time I got up there they would call a tune I didn't know and I would try to play it by ear on stage....very hard to do. Then I would ask what the name of the tune was, go home and learn it, go back the next week and invariably they would call something else, and it would be the same vicious circle. Sometimes I would come home in tears. But I started learning tunes. I also started digging the music and considered trying to play it seriously. This was pure Jazz and there was no blend. As it turned out, this was the last of that breed in LA and when the club closed after about a year, for me, there was no other club in LA that I knew to replace it.

During that time I had a brief encounter with the Vegas-style lounge circuit. I somehow managed to audition for Roberta Linn, the former champagne lady from the Lawrence Welk show. She was using a four-piece band which at that time included Dave Mitchell on electric bass, Marc Siegel on drums; the piano chair varied but the one that stood out for me was Joe Galante from Rochester, NY. Joe was a big fan of Oscar Peterson, and was doing his best to emulate him. The music was basically standards, which was good for me to continue to learn tunes and try to apply what I had already been working on from my time at Jimmy Smith's. The "show-biz" atmosphere however made conditions difficult. The good news is that we worked all the time, including a long stay at the Atlantis restaurant connected with Sea World in San Diego. The bad news is that it was not a creative gig - once you learned the charts it was always the same thing. I lasted doing the same thing about two years and then decided to leave the gig and stay put in LA.

The one person from Jimmy Smith's with whom I had established a musical relationship was a saxophonist named Felix Ramos. He was playing soprano, very much in the Coltrane style, and we got along well. He found a regular gig right on Hollywood and Vine once a week and invited me to play. The band was called EEBO, and we had Brian Batie on bass, Stu Pearlman on keys, Rodney Mecks on drums. This was a Fusion of Jazz and Funk. Beside playing standards, sometimes in a swing and sometimes in a funk groove, we would do things like an instrumental version of Steely Dan's "Black Cow", for example. At that time Brian was also working with Willie Bobo, a percussionist who had just had a hit with his version of Jobim's "Dindi". The one claim to fame that EEBO can make was winning the Playboy Festival contest for new talent that year, in 1980. The cats got to play the festival, but unfortunately without me because I had joined the band after they submitted their demo to the contest.....rules, rules!

By then, the idea of Fusion music was taking hold in L.A. In the case of EEBO, we were using electric bass and keys and of course electric guitar. We were playing arrangements of standards in a funk style along with some originals. Drums were funk oriented as well. Everything was big and on the loud side, but nowhere near the force of the average rock band. I don't remember any of us questioning our path.....the one we were on seemed natural. It seemed to me other bands were trying to do the same thing. When the gig ended, we went our separate ways. I remember Brian Batie going on the road. Felix tried to put another band together, adding Hilliard Wilson on electric bass and Chip James on drums. This was my first but definitely not my last encounter with Hill. As I recall, the band didn't end up doing much after that and eventually dissolved in the early 80s.

III

THE MUSICAL ELEMENTS OF FUSION

I would like to pause in this chronology to explore some of the musical elements of Fusion,

starting with the guitar. From a guitar standpoint, there is a big difference between an acoustic and an electric approach to music. I started guitar when I was 11 years old, playing an old acoustic that my father had lying around, but only for one year. I got my first electric guitar, a red two-pickup Airline guitar from Wards, made out of fiberglass when I was twelve. I was so excited. Electric guitar was it! Why, I wasn't exactly sure, except that it was LOUD! Oh, and by the way, I also got an Airline amp! The guitar didn't make any sense without it. Playing Beatles and Stones was cool as I formed my first group. I was taking lessons at the time at Stringer's Music Store in Towson and I definitely remember my teacher complaining about this new rock sound as if someone "kicked in the speakers" for the effect. He was a Jazzer and was teaching me arrangements of standards like "The Shadow of Your Smile". I remember him ordering a custom Epiphone acoustic guitar from the store and when it came I got to try it. It was a full body f-hole, much like an L-5, with no pick-up. I played it a little and was blown away by its acoustic nature. I also over time got to try all the big Gibsons at the store - the Johnny Smith, ES-175, L-5, Byrdland, etc.: they usually had one of each in stock. Of course on the R&R side, they had an array of Gretsch guitars, especially the Chet Atkins "Country Gentleman", the choice of George Harrison. It's funny, as much as I liked the Beatles I was never into that particular guitar or its sound. I have never owned a Gretsch.

For those of you who do not play guitar, this part of the story might seem unimportant, but you must remember that so much of this new sound was guitar-oriented. In fact all popular music since 1960 has been this way. However you may feel about guitars, you can't dismiss this fact. The problem has to do with the big difference between the electric and the acoustic guitar. One is loud, one is soft. One relies on electricity and all it entails, the other on the quality of wood and craftsmanship. On one, you can play very basic things and by virtue of the sheer volume get someone's attention. With the other, the command of the instrument and its nuances can seduce the listener into paying attention. The very definition of rock music can be boiled down to this - playing loud for effect. Granted, the effect can be impressive. Volume can present drama: an enormous wall of sound to drive you. There is nothing wrong with intensity if it has purpose. The problem with most loud music is having intensity for its own sake. It's like someone yelling at you at the top of his lungs to get the point across....after a while, you get the point and it's time to calm down and move on.

Of course if we are going to place any blame for this phenomenon, we can thank technology. In the 1950s the average amplifier size was that of a large bread box. By the 60s the average amp size was that of a refrigerator! When my parents asked me why I had to play so loud, as they did on many an occasion, I think the only real answer I could give was "because I can!". The music just didn't work if you played it soft. There just wasn't that much to it. I think some bands really could use volume well....Led Zeppelin comes to mind. But a lot of it was just tough on the ears.

The result was that every instrument became amplified, if for no other reason than just to compete with the guitar. Piano players became "keyboardists". Acoustic bass players switched to electric. Every instrument used some kind of pick-up system, with the possible exception of the drums which just got bigger to compete with the new sound.

Now during this time the guitar of choice for Rock music was either the Les Paul or the Fender Stratocaster. Ironically, Les Paul originally designed his model for Jazz players. There were some exceptions to which I paid close attention even back then. The first was, believe it or not, Ted Nugent. He had a band called The Amboy Dukes and he played a Gibson Byrdland. I think even up to the time he was doing "Catch Scratch Fever" he was playing one. When I discovered Elvis Presley's music, I noted that Scotty Moore was playing a big Gibson L-5. But the biggest of the lot was Steve Howe from the band YES. He played a Gibson ES-175 from the late

50s or early 60s running through a large Fender amp, and it rocked for me! The band played very cool music applying their obviously European Classical influences in a British Rock format. Aside from these few examples, the further exploration of using Jazz guitar in a Rock band stopped there, and the message was - if you want to play rock, you need a rock-style guitar.

So for Fusion music in general in LA, the music was electric, and therefore the guitars were electric as well. I tried using the L5-S influenced as I was by Pat Martino who was using one for a while when recording one of the more successful (for me) Jazz-Fusion discs - "Joyous Lake". Unfortunately this guitar didn't sing enough for me. Looking back at the history of the electric guitar, I think its evolution gets interesting in the 50s in Chicago amongst the blues musicians. Guys like Muddy Water and Howlin' Wolf were taking their acoustic blues from the South and adapting to the clubs in the big city. They had small tube amps that they turned all the way up and any of you who know the character of these amps know that they resonate a lot at high volumes, thus giving the guitar a vocal quality.

The single note style of guitar playing through these amps became a sort of electric version of call and response which had already been developed in the South with the acoustic blues, where the guitar imitated the voice of the player who was using it. The British guys heard this and started imitating that style, except by this time in the late 50s and early 60s the amps were getting bigger, so you have guys like Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page playing loud blues in their respective bands. I saw Cream live in Baltimore, and when they went into the song "Crossroads" for example, to me it was just a loud version of something you probably could have heard in Chicago years earlier. I'm not saying it wasn't good, but it was loud.....let's just say it was "good and loud" :)

So by the 80s this is what the electric guitar was all about - singing: It was used as a solo voice which could also in a secondary role provide some basic rhythm. The heroes of this era in LA include Robben Ford, Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour. In NYC, by the way, there were also rising stars in the Fusion field such as John Scofield and later Mike Stern. As far as I know, there were no acoustic guitars in Fusion with the exception of Pat Metheny who really was in a different sound-scape unique to himself, along with his clones.

And this is where the con-Fusion starts. For most other instruments in this genre the problem is probably not so extreme. In that I mean if a guy plays saxophone, and he can play well, he can play Jazz one night, maybe R&B the next, Rock or even Classical the next using the same instrument. The same is true for piano. Bass is a little trickier, but the good guys play both acoustic and electric. Even with drums you can make a case, although the size of drums vary and I can't think of anyone who plays great Funk or Rock who could compete with the likes of an Elvin Jones for Jazz. This is not true for guitar. The Gibson L-5, the Les Paul, and for example a Ramirez classical are not the same thing. It is not the same instrument. In fact each guitar type makes one kind of music very well, and the other kinds of music only marginally well, no matter who is playing them. So the heroes of one instrument are by definition the heroes of one genre. This was never so clear to me as when I heard a recording of Jazzer Joe Pass with a fuzz tone pedal trying to play something coherent.....wrong choice Joe!! I have yet to hear someone who is a master at more than one genre on guitar.

So, here's the dilemma: if you say something is Jazz-Fusion and you have an electric guitar player you are diluting the essence of what makes Jazz in the first place. Jazz is primarily an acoustic music. The heroes of Jazz from the beginning have played acoustically be it horns, reeds, keyboards or strings. No matter how good someone plays, he is not going to sound better on a Les Paul than he would on a Jazz guitar trying to play Jazz. Therefore the idea of a real blend of two genres gets cloudy very quickly. Let's look at our Fusion heroes:

1) Robben Ford - probably the most talented of the lot - I have heard recordings of him playing Jazz with his brother up in the Bay area before he came to LA. He had it. He was playing a big Gibson at the time. Then he moves to LA, starts playing an ES-335, falls in with the Yellow Jackets and pursues the Fusion....for me this was interesting. Finally he decides his true passion is the blues, starts singing and playing a stratocaster, and the rest is history. No more Jazz.

2) Larry Carlton - having an auspicious start with the Jazz Crusaders bringing in his white-man blues style to give them a new color. Leaving that band to be on his own, he then creates a Fusion style which is typically LA - Funk with a hint of Jazz in a Pop mix.

3) Lee Ritenour - probably the epitome of the LA studio guitarist. He could read, play classical, had a couple of slick LA groups, but frankly, for my taste never played any Jazz. His attempt to imitate Wes Montgomery is laughable.

4) John Scofield - This guy can play Jazz, but he prefers to think he is a blues-rocker. The only guy I ever heard playing a beautiful ballad like "The Touch of Your Lips" with distortion.

5) Mike Stern - A confused blend of Charlie Parker and Jimi Hendrix. Traditionally his solos have been fused versions of both.

So if these are the heroes of the genre, imagine what the rest of us are up against. There is no consensus, a con-fusing situation.

Which brings me to my greatest pet peeve.....my "greatest love of all" pet peeve, George Benson. If there was anyone leading the charge in the 60s for Jazz guitar and Jazz music in general, it was him. Probably the most talented guy on the planet, we all were in awe of him. I spent a good ten years dealing with his stuff. Of course, he always sang.....even on the early recordings - but a couple of tunes at most per record. The rest was sure-fire instrumental burners. Even his funky stuff was Jazzy (Body Talk, eg). I have to give him credit for keeping the real Jazz guitar sound through it all. I also thank Pat Martino for that. But when his gold record "Breezin'" hit the market, it all changed. Not overnight, but little by little it all became about George Benson the pop star who sings, and oh, btw, he plays a little Jazz guitar. I think single-handedly he is responsible for the evolution of the LA smooth-jazz scene that's still prevalent today. The only problem is many of these SJ artists never established themselves first in the Jazz genre like George, so it's hard to take them as seriously.

If you think about it, most Fusion artists who became popular in the beginning of the era had already established themselves and had careers in the Jazz genre. Chick Corea had played with Stan Getz, Keith Jarrett had played with Charles Lloyd, Zawinul had played with Cannonball Adderly, etc. This gave credibility to anything new they were going to present. I think this is what gave the music "legs" in the beginning. The next generation of players are ones who came into the scene relatively unknown or by association. Miles Davis was responsible for introducing to us many of these artists: John McLaughlin, Mike Stern, John Scofield, Bob Berg, Robben Ford, Marcus Miller, etc. Jaco Pastorius came out of Weather Report, as did Alphonse Mouzon. Of course Al had done a stint with McCoy Tyner as well. It's when you get guys with little or no Jazz background who seem to come out of "nowhere" that the music gets, shall we say, "suspicious": Kenny G, Dave Koz, Russ Freeman, etc.

IV

THE ERA OF JOSEPHINA'S

So in 1979 with Jimmy Smith's closed I was looking for a place to play. I heard about a

place called Josephina's. They had a Monday night jam session as well, hosted by a drummer named Mouse Johnson. Mouse, among his many other accomplishments, had played with Lou Reed. When I came in, the atmosphere seemed friendly enough. They were playing some standard tunes, but also some funkier things that you might hear on the CTI label at the time: Freddie Hubbard's "Red Clay" or "Little Sunflower". Also "Mr. Magic" by Grover Washington, Herbie Hancock's "Chameleon" or "Watermelon Man", "Always There" by Ronnie Laws and "Freedom Jazz Dance" written by Eddie Harris but made popular by Brian Auger. It was an electric set, with Derek Jackson on electric bass and John Balbuena on Fender Rhodes. Josephina's was an Italian Restaurant run by a man named Richard Statler who after the dinner hour turned the whole front of the room over to the music. He was a music lover himself, and really seem to support what was happening. There were many cats coming through to hang out and play, but on the guitar side, the only ones I remember were Rick Zunigar occasionally coming through and on a rare occasion Billy Rogers. I don't remember any steady singer at that time. I started coming every week and really got to know everyone. At some point Mouse asked me to sub and eventually to join the group.

The group consisted of Mouse, me, John, Derek, and Marietta Waters on vocal. She had just spent a few years on the road with Sergio Mendes in the Brazil '77 edition of that group. So along with the Jazz-Funk tunes like those mentioned above, we also played Latin-influenced songs with Jazz tinges, like "The Island". I must confess that up until that point I had never worked with players who were so accomplished in the music business, and I was happy about it and welcomed the new level. It also gave me an opportunity to get my skills together in terms of reading and writing, as people would be constantly bringing new things in to play. I also transcribed tunes for Marietta. She was doing tunes like The Crusaders' "Street Life", Stevie Wonder's "Bird of Beauty" and Sergio Mendez's "Mais Que Nada". There is nothing like a steady gig to help you get your stuff together! The other side of it was EVERYONE was coming in there to listen or to play. Just to name a few, all of the Rufus band would come and play, including Andre Fisher and Bobby Watson. Johnathan 'Sugarfoot' Moffett from Michael Jackson's group would come and play drums. Al Jarreau would come by along with his producer Jay Graydon. There were also other celebrities. I remember one night seeing Andre "The Giant" of wrestling fame there.

I guess one could say it was a real Jazz-Fusion scene. The Fusion part was Funk and Latin. For me it was an interesting blend, and one I thought had real possibilities, a perfect music lab to try things and hopefully to discover something new. Everyone seemed ok with it. At that point, except for sitting in at Jimmy Smith's, the idea of playing straight-ahead Jazz never occurred to me. My roots were in R&B and Funk, and a little Blues that I got from listening to Johnny Winter and Paul Butterfield. I played a few standards and had shed all the Jazz cats: Joe Pass, George Benson, Pat Martino, Diz and Bird, etc., but it was still "school" work. It was something I worked on all the time at home, but I began trying to use it as part of the new music.

I assumed that everybody was doing the same thing. By that point The Yellow Jackets had come out with some interesting stuff. With Robben Ford in the band, it was formidable! Russell Ferrante could write, actually better than he played. I had played some with the drummer Ricky Lawson before he joined that band, a great guy and a great player. Jimmy Haslip was really raising the bar for the electric bass, coming strong behind Jaco Pastorius. This group at its height showed how cool, how integrated Fusion music could be if you had the right cats. This was important because they all had to agree on what was important in the music. The Crusaders were another example. They seemed the right blend of Jazz, R&B, and Funk, and when Billy Rogers joined, that was also great. It's a shame Billy had the erratic lifestyle that he did, for he was musically ahead of everyone on the West Coast I thought. I had the pleasure of hanging with him a little, and I sure gleaned a lot from him.

The interesting thing is that the environment was right and ripe for things to develop. You

could make a case for comparison with New Orleans around the turn of the last century. We all know what happened there. So why not here, in a different context of course?

V

FIRST EUROPEAN TOUR

Around this time, say at least one year into Josephina's, I got a call from Alphonse Mouzon. He was a hell of a drummer, working with McCoy Tyner, Weather Report, and more recently with Larry Coryell and the Eleventh House. The year was 1981. I auditioned for him for a tour of Europe with his band and got it! Wow! There were some other great players auditioning including Mike O'Neill with whom I later became friendly. He ended up going with George Benson, and is still I believe, gainfully employed. At any rate, at the age of 28 I was on my first international plane ride to Europe! Wow again! This was a life-changing experience for me. For one thing we were treated as rock stars. I mean I thought we were playing well, but the reaction was over the top. We had Barnaby Faith on keys and Welton Gite on electric bass. Over there the Fusion had all the characteristics of the rock music - the volume, the intensity, the personality (Mouzon was a magnetic figure on stage) that made it almost as popular. The world was our oyster. Everything seemed easy and correct.

Only when we returned did I realize that in the States there was not the same paradigm. We quickly changed into almost regular unimportant people. Wow, what a letdown! It turned out that Europe and Japan and other places were supporting most of this music, as at that time they had no artists on their end who could compete, so they were importing all of us from America. The music was organized in the States and then taken on the road. I distinctly remember guys walking around wearing tour jackets with the name of the band on the back. This was a badge of honor in LA. It made you somebody. I never got one of those! Oh well.....

So, it was back to Josephina's. Still cooking, Derek Jackson got a call to play with Jarreau, and we changed bass players. John Avila came into the picture. He could play and sing and was more rock and funk oriented. He had a band popular in the area called "Food For Feet". He introduced me to the music of the Police. It was one of the few rock bands I got into at the time and we did a few of Sting's tunes on the Josephina's gig.

VI

THE FUSION JAM SESSION

At this point I'd like to say a word about jam sessions. The idea has been around as long as Jazz. It is generally associated solely with that genre as it is difficult to have a funk jam or classical jam, etc. The reason is two-fold. First, the idea of "jamming" implies someone doing something spontaneous, which generally means people will be improvising. Right away Classical music is out as would be any other rigid forms, which to me include most Rock. It is true that all American roots music has some form of improvisation, but this usually takes place in the form of a short solo between vocal choruses. The rest of the music is pretty rigid in the sense that everyone's part is already well established, usually from a definitive recording. The one exception to this is Jazz. The parts from any instrument can and are interpreted by their respective players. Even the melody invites interpretation. Having this much freedom for all concerned is probably what created the atmosphere to jam in the first place. Musicians wanted to try things, to experiment with others, to find out what others are doing, and yes, to compete with others as to who has the best ideas. In a healthy environment this allows the music to grow.

The second reason is probably more historical. The first thing that happens on a bandstand when the jam starts is a question: "What would you like to play?" This is no small question. It

implies that whatever you call, they would or should know it. The repertoire of Jazz musicians has developed over the last 100 years and it involves thousands of tunes! This is no small feat! To be an accomplished Jazz musician you need to know, and I don't mean just be able to read, hundreds of tunes. You also need to know the style in which many of these songs are played, as well as popular introductions and endings, alternative changes or structure alterations, etc. There is no other genre that even comes close to this demand. When cats who have all these things at their fingertips get on the bandstand, the music can really take off!....the magic happens. The invention of the fake book, which was a catalog of these tunes, started in the very early years of the music, but we can thank Steve Swallow for codifying and updating much of it when for his own needs he penned the very first Real Book in the 60s. This, along with all its revisions and corollary works, has really created the official bible, the tool of the jam session.

So this is one problem with the Jazz-funk jam, such as we had in Josephina's. The idea is not very sound. There is no consensus as to which tunes are important to learn to use in this form. There is no Jazz-Funk bible.....at least at the time of the writing of this book (this could be an interesting project for someone, maybe Chuck Sher?). I think we were starting to develop one by playing once a week for so many years, but for me it never got codified. Again, there was no definitive product after all this time and effort, thus leaving the whole paradigm in the state of limbo, very con-Fusing.

VII

OTHER FUSION ENCOUNTERS

In the early 80s I got a call from Bunny Brunel. He was a French electric bassist in the style of Jaco Pastorius who had just been playing and recording with Chick Corea. He had recently moved to LA and wanted to form a band. I was a big fan of Corea, although I was not following him lately due to my dislike of Dimeola. So I didn't know about Bunny, but we hit it off and he seemed to like what I was doing.

Bunny was the epitome of the Jazz-Fusion bassist. He played upright as well, but his main thing was electric. He admitted that he knew only a handful of Jazz standards well, and really depended on his own compositions to drive his music. His compositions were influenced by Chick, meaning Neo-classic in structure with plenty of opportunities for blowing. He was also a fan of the funk, sort of Jaco style, and started writing tunes in this direction. Using the guys from Chick's band at first, namely Tom Brechtlein on drums, he quickly asked the former Tower of Power drummer Dave Garibaldi to join. For keys he alternated between Kei Akagi and Ken Shima, both Japanese although Kei was practically American having grown up in Cleveland. We started playing at Donte's in North Hollywood on a regular basis. Donte's, run by a man named Carey Leverette, was traditionally a straight-ahead room featuring many Big Bands of the era, and I think we were one of the first loud Fusion groups to play there.

From the start it was an interesting mix with real possibilities but unfortunately fraught with problems. For one thing David was very good at playing one kind of groove, the one that made him along with his bassist Rocco popular in Tower of Power. But anything else was suspect. Bunny was trying to play a cross between Rocco and Jaco and between the two of them, the groove was very "busy". Even though the harmonies were sophisticated (like Chick's music) it forced me to play simple, a kind of funk rhythm to try to stabilize the music. However, we all got to stretch in the solos. I think we tried our best, but the chemistry just wasn't there for me. Through Bunny I got to meet and play with a lot of people, including Joe Farrell, Bill Watrous, Herbie Hancock to name a few. I also began to realize I wasn't cut out for that kind of music as the guitar in Bunny's music needed a much more rock-oriented sound, and I was going for the cleaner, jazzier side.

The band lasted at least four years on and off, and in the last evolution of the band Bunny met and invited Brian Auger to play with us. I was always an "Oblivion Express" fan from way back. I saw Brian play in Baltimore around 1974 doing "Freedom Jazz Dance" and the like with that wide-open Jazz-Rock organ sound! Wow! I think he was the first Jazz-Rock band I'd heard that really was drawing serious elements from both genres. Of course, John McLaughlin was hitting big with Mahavishnu then, but I can't say there was very much Jazz in that mix...more Indian-Rock if you will. But Brian was really swinging! I mean I can verify this as I spent many a day in the car with him on the road playing "name that tune" and he knew (and could play) all the standards I knew. It was hard to stump him. He grew up hearing Jimmy Smith and all the organists along with guys like Pharoah Sanders, all coming through London at one time or another. He was also tied to the British Rock scene, having played and/or recorded with the likes of Rod Stewart, Long John Baldry, and Eric Burdon (from the Animals).

We hit it off instantly, and a relationship was formed that would last for a few years, including two tours and a disc under his name. I have to say that in the Fusion world, he was one success story, fusing the elements of Jazz and Rock. This is very hard to do, but he was adept in both and maybe more importantly kept the basic Jazz sound of the Hammond B-3 and acoustic piano. No synthesizers. I think again it was hard for a guitarist in that idiom, because the choice of sound is important. For that reason, I don't think he ever found a guitarist that really suited him. A real clean Jazz sound was too tame, and if you rocked-out too much it was over the top. Again a very con-Fusing situation.

I remember talking to Brian after our last tour and encouraging him to record a "real jazz organ record" in the style of Jimmy Smith. He looked at me and basically said "I thought we just did" referring to our recent recording together. My contention all along was that in order to do something important in a Fusion setting, you have to first establish yourself well in one genre. All the successful Jazz cats were doing it: Miles, Chick, Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul, Benson, Wayne Henderson and Joe Sample. It was the cats who had just come into it relatively unknown that were suspect: Grover Washington; Ronnie Laws; Herbie Mann; David Sanborn; Kenny G; etc. One was not sure where the roots were coming from. It wasn't clear what was driving the music. Or maybe it was, and I was just missing it.

VIII

LATIN JAZZ FUSION

I would now like to say a little more about Hilliard Wilson. When I met Hill, a life-long relationship was formed. He was my man on electric bass. He had the sound, the feel, he knew tunes, liked Jazz.....We played in a lot of aggregations throughout those years. You can check him out on some of my archived recordings on our website www.strasbourgjazzinitiative.fr

During this time I also started playing with Marietta's sister Marquita Waters. She had a band with a great Mexican pianist who also played vibes. His name was Freddie Ramirez. They had a sort of Latin top-forty band with some cool tunes. Marquita would sing her ass off, playing cow bell or some other percussion all the while.

Back at Josephina's there was a changing of the guard.....Mouse had left and Michael Perkins took over the helm. He got Marietta and myself, Alan Diaz on drums (Marietta's husband who also had been on the road with Sergio Mendez), along with Hilliard and John Balbuena on keys. He called it the M&M band. In theory it was still the Monday night jam. Michael played sax, and although he was not on the same level as the rest of us, he was a good front man and

organizer. Eventually I talked him into adding Freddie Ramirez. We then had two keyboard players, John on Rhodes, and Freddie on piano and vibes. It was a lot of sound and I thought, very cool. We played tunes like "Wachi Wada", made famous by Cal Tjader. There were now four Latinos in the band (Marietta was half Mexican); again, a good blend with interesting tunes.

You could say this was the high point of the era, at least for me. We were very versatile and really leaning toward Latin Jazz, which was ok for me. The band lasted about two years in this form. The crowds were good as well. Looking back at that blend, I believe we really could have made some inroads. Everyone was comfortable in the Latin Jazz idiom, although I think Hill and I were the outsiders as we were still learning the idiom and sort of "looking in". Had we taken it more seriously, we probably would have recorded as a group. Who knows?

Which brings me to one of the points I would like to make in writing this book. There is much more to tell before my 20 years in LA comes to a close, but even at this point, with all the con-Fusion going on, I was asking myself: with all this talent and good and sometimes very creative music happening, why wasn't it becoming successful beyond just being a local phenomenon? Even then most of us could hold our own with just about anyone, save for the real elite. I think the reason had to do with LA itself. Most musicians did not come there for the weather, they came for the money. This was where the "business" was. They came to get into either the studio scene, the song-writing scene, or more relevantly the band touring scene. Few came to try to do something original, to start from a grass-roots level and try to be discovered. Hence with any band at any given time, one of the players might get a call to go on the road, and that would be the end of the band, unless the band had a very deep "sub" list. Guys who were doing local things were biding their time waiting to be called. It was not a receptive environment for someone trying to be creative with music for its own sake.

When Freddie Ramirez left (I think at the time he wanted to form a Latin big-band for this music with which he eventually recorded), Freddie Ravel joined the band. The band was becoming more pop-oriented due to Ravel's writing and Marietta's tune selections. I'm not sure how I felt about it at the time, but I guess you could say we were "popular". So much so that we finally got approached by one of Michael's contacts to record and promote us. Finally after all those years in the trenches, someone to pull us out! We had talent - Marietta, Alan, Freddie, Hill and me. We had writing ability and personality. Indeed, Freddie went on to some success in the smooth-jazz scene. Hill ended up writing music for Prince, among others. It was a family thing with Marietta and Alan being married, but to no avail. Marietta nixed the deal, as she was convinced that they were mainly after her to sign something she didn't want to get into. She went on to sign with some German guy who tried to produce her with a pop image close to say an Oliva-Newton John.

So that ended the band. One reason was because I was tired of trying to succeed on a local level, and another because we couldn't find an acceptable replacement for Marietta. This was the typical case of everyone being in it for different reasons. Marietta wanted to be a pop star....so did Freddie as it turned out. I think Hill and Alan and I were basically on the same page, but it takes a whole band to raise an infant. I suspect this was the case across the city. There were very few bands that came up from the grass-roots of LA to become a national success.

IX

JAZZ.

I want to talk a little about the word Jazz. I know it's a lot like trying to define the meaning of life for most people, as everyone has a different take on it. So I would like to propose a working definition which will help to explain the observations I make or the conclusions I draw in this book. First I would like to quote one observation about Jazz made by someone else that I completely

agree with - *Jazz is a how, not a what*. Jazz is a way of approaching music, not a music in and of itself. You have heard the term *jazzing something up*. This is true. There are many elements involved and techniques to do this but they are all applications, in math terms: an $f(x)$, not just x . So here goes, my working definition:

Jazz is stylized interpretation of melody

First thing one notes right off - you have to have a melody, preferably a strong one. If you look at the great tunes from the last century, many set down in the Real Book, you notice the strength of the compositions. These melodies stand on their own, irrespective of lyrics - good or bad. One can retain the melody, go down the street humming it. It has form, direction, surprise, symmetry, logic, and beauty. It suggests but doesn't impose any particular harmony or rhythm, but conversely, both of these elements rely on melody for their utility. They don't function very well on their own without it.

The next part of the definition implies that someone has to interpret the melody. Without interpretation, there is no Jazz. If melody is the theme, then Jazz is the exposition of the theme. This is where the idea of improvisation comes into play. Taking a theme and expounding on it gives the player the opportunity to add his "two cents", his variation on the theme. Of course historically there have been many great musicians who have done this successfully, and their efforts, their great solos if you will, have helped create an extensive vocabulary from which one can glean ideas, but there is no exclusivity in this regard. In other words, the ideas *you* come up with can be just as valid. The idea of freedom or self-expression is strong, although not without bounds. There are rules of the road to keep everyone literally and figuratively on the same page. The other players in the group who are not directly connected to the melody, i.e. the rhythm section, also play things based on the melody and their respective roles in the music. Everyone in a Jazz band knows and respects the melody.

And finally the style. This has some historical significance. The idea of *swing* has been around since the beginning of the music so we all understand and know how to play swing-style music at this point. This does not exclude other styles: Funk, Latin, R&B, Country, Rock, etc. from the possibilities. Indeed Jazz, unlike most other genres, welcomes and embraces all of these.

I would like to say something about lyrics. For a Jazz musician a set of lyrics can either help or hinder an interpretation. I feel that lyrics should not be paramount. If one wants to consider what the lyrics suggest and use this in the emotional content of their effort, so be it, but it is not necessary. A great interpretation can take a sad song and make it happy, and vice-versa. Of course I'm talking about *instrumental* versions of the tune. Vocal versions are another story. The problems with singing in Jazz, primarily a lyric-driven effort, are well known, and with very few exceptions we have never really solved them. I think one could write an entire book on this subject, and I am not about to do so here. For me, Jazz is primarily an instrumental music.

So that's my working definition. I think anyone who tries to do anything seriously in the field of art should be able to define what it is they do, and indeed what they are trying to do with it. They should have a "mission statement". I really had the impression that most of us back then in the Fusion era could not or had not taken enough time or given enough thought to form these ideas. It is really important as it influences the choices you make. These choices can be as big as having life or career goals, or small and infinitesimal as in making song choices or even choosing how you phrase in improvisations.

EAST COAST FUSION

During the last part of the Josephina's era I returned to Europe once again with Alphonse Mouzon. This time I was substituting for Larry Coryell in a trio format with Bunny Brunel. This was my real first test of playing in a guitar trio format. We played tunes like "Dolphin Dance" along with some standards Bunny knew like Steve Swallow's "Falling Grace" and some of Al's tunes. I was playing a clean sound with a little Metheny-influenced chorusing - no rocking out. I was pleased that everyone was cool with this and how Mouzon could change color and timbre to adapt to this sound. I knew he had played with McCoy Tyner but I had never heard any of this music.

The tour lasted only a few weeks for me but while we were in Paris I got to meet and hear the late great Michael Brecker playing with Steps Ahead. They were playing the New Morning club right after us that week. We had a day off so I could make it. I was already a big fan of his music and of that band. I thought their "Smokin' in the Pit" recording of a live concert in Japan was out of sight! I considered this band as Jazz-Fusion but very much in a New York style. Brecker had already established this in his playing, taking Coltrane-type lines and using them in a number of idioms, including Pop and Funk. On the Funk side, the Brecker Bros. band comes to mind. I really thought he was leading the charge for the Fusion cause on the East coast. His choice of players also indicated that. He was using a great and versatile drummer Adam Nussbaum, along with my friend and home-boy Jeff Andrews on electric bass and the up-and-coming new Fusion guitarist Mike Stern. That was quite a group!

The compositions were complex but nowhere near as complicated as say those of someone like Chick. The playing was a mix of Jazz, Funk and Rock, the Rock part thanks to Stern's Hendrix impersonations. This was always my problem with Stern. He would start his solos playing a clean, Metheny-esque sound and midway through, change and finish with a rocked-out Hendrix exaltation. There really was no blend, just sort of a segue. You could see it coming a mile away. Even after all these years Mike is still the same. I think he really is a rocker at heart, as is Scofield, and they just have this complexity which sets them apart from other rockers. Brecker never changed his approach...he always played the way he played and I really think in the end he was a Jazz man.

HARD FUSION

Which brings me to the Fusion of Jazz and Rock. Of all the possible blends, this is the hardest. Trying to blend disparate and unrelated elements, like for example oil and water, can yield very unpredictable results. Jazz is primarily an acoustic music. Rock is electric. Jazz is usually quieter in sound, relying on nuance and dynamics. Rock lives on volume and usually a single dynamic. Jazz requires melodic and in most cases sophisticated music. Rock requires three chords. Jazz is primarily instrumental. Rock is primarily vocal. Jazz has a common repertoire that everyone draws from. Rock has original tunes that only the respective band knows and plays. Jazz uses improvisation to drive the music. Aside from the guitar solos, Rock tends to be stagnant and strict, playing prescribed parts. Nowhere, in dealing with these disparate elements, is the problem more clear than when playing the guitar. With other instruments you also have to face this dilemma, but at least your instrument and in most cases your sound stays the same. For guitarists this requires a whole different instrument along with different techniques. For my taste, no one has mastered both genres on guitar. I think you have to choose. If not, you end up in the middle, alienating people from both sides. It's a real no-win situation.

And the same is true with the music. Good or bad, most of these artists make choices. Scott

Henderson is probably one of my favorite players in the Fusion idiom, but he is definitely a rocker...a sophisticated one none the less! And to me most Jazz-Rock ends up becoming sophisticated Rock, not loud Jazz. And maybe the most important point...can you have a Jazz-Rock band without guitar? Is there one? Well, there's maybe one somewhere out there in the ether.....

XII

CULTISM

There was another phenomenon that seemed to be primarily prevalent in LA, although I'm sure some of this was happening everywhere. That was the influence of cults on the music. There are two primary cults that I was exposed to in my time in LA. One was Scientology and the other was a chanting form of Buddhism called [Nichiren Shoshu](#). Some of their members were big in the music business. Chick was into Scientology and guys like Herbie, Wayne and Bunny were doing the chanting.

Without giving a diatribe on these respective "religions" I would like to talk about what I observed from being around them. Any cult offers exclusivity on which it thrives, tending to isolate and bleed its members to survive. How can this help the music? The mission statement, the *raison d'etre*? My contention is - it can't. These cults are interested in only one thing.....their own survival and prosperity. To do this they need money, celebrities and commitment, and for musicians that has to alter their mind set as to why and how they play the music. I contend it doesn't matter how talented they are; after a while, the music is going to change, and not for the better. This could explain Chick's very erratic behavior in doing Fusion one year, then alternating to acoustic music, and back and forth, never really settling on one thing. It's as if he is doing all he can just to stay popular, to keep the money coming in to support his "habit", if you will. It's gotten to the point now that as a leader in the music arena, he has become irrelevant. Herbie too. Once he got funky with the Head Hunters band after being successful playing acoustic Jazz, he really never looked back. Wayne is also a mystery for me. Could it be their extra-curricular activities? I will let the reader decide as I can't get into their heads to know for sure what's going on!

So, another aspect to add to the con-Fusion.

XIII

UNCLE FATBACK and SCRATCH

By the mid to late 80s I was playing not only with Bunny and Brian in Bunny's band, but also starting to play as well as tour with Brian in his own band. I have to say that his music was a successful blend of Jazz, Rock and Funk and he has been surviving on this formula even today as I write this book. He has stuck to his guns and made a living being in the middle of the genres. I think you could also make the same case for Bunny Brunel. It's a small clique with an unclear future, but I applaud their efforts and stubborn stick-to-itiveness. Brian also offered a blend of instrumental and vocal in his choice of songs. I think this is also important if you are want to do Fusion music well.

During my time at Josephina's, among the many musicians I met along the way, I came to know and have a close association with the drummer Eddie Tuduri. Eddie was an East-coaster like me, from New Jersey just outside of New York who ended up in LA after touring with many different popular groups including Rick Nelson and The Beach Boys. Eddie was R&B all the way but for some reason really liked what I was doing and we hit it off. We ended up playing in many different aggregations, but the two that stand out were Uncle Fatback and later Scratch.

Uncle Fatback came as a result of pairing us up with the bassist and vocalist Lenny McDaniel. Lenny was from New Orleans and also had a strong R&B background. We decided to

try to take those elements and write original tunes, adding more Jazz elements and arrangements for which I was largely responsible. The results can be found in our archive cd section at <http://www.strasbourgjazzinitiative.fr/> This band, that included, among others, Joe Turano on keys, lasted only a short time. After a while Lenny left us to try to succeed on his own in the studio scene out there, and eventually went back to New Orleans. I would add that he was also popular for a while over here in the Pop scene in France (where I am writing this book).

In trying to replace Lenny, Eddie asked his friend Domenic Genova to join forces with us and form a new band. Domenic was a great all-around bassist who played both electric and upright. Adding to the mix was Lon Price, a great R&B styled saxophonist who also played Jazz very well. To my surprise our keyboard player Joe Turano was also a very good singer! We started playing all original tunes offered by everyone in the band except Eddie, our fearless leader.

Looking back, if there ever was a band that had all the right ingredients to be successful in the Fusion market, it was this one. I again refer to the archive recording offered on our site. Everyone played well and were comfortable in all the genres. I began experimenting with the guitar-synthesizer, trying to find an alternative to the rock guitar sound. I was not yet ready to play the clean Jazz sound exclusively. Unfortunately, as members went on the road with different groups. this band did not play very much or last too long I remember Lon going to play with Billy Vera and the Beaters and Joe with Michael Bolton.

XIV

UNFUSED JAZZ

Towards the end of the Scratch band I was really beginning to feel that the Fusion music was not for me.....God knows I had tried! Since the early 80s I had played in about seven or eight of these types of bands, I had learned a lot and had some good experiences but I was still dissatisfied. It was now the late 80s, and I began to realize that I needed to pick one genre and stick to it. The music I loved best was the mainstream Jazz that I had always been working on, playing on my own. I asked Domenic if he wanted to get together once a week to work on tunes. He said yes and the process began for me. The stratocaster and big amp went into the closet, and out came the small amp and the Jazz guitar! Literally overnight, it seemed that I had made the transition. I started listening, learning and buying Jazz music. I felt that I had a lot to learn and develop. This was an important time for me. I think Domenic enjoyed it too.

When we started thinking about playing this music, really performing it, something I had never really done before in public, we decided we needed a drummer to complete the sound. Of all the drummers I had worked with up until that point, the most swinging was Frank Wilson. We had also hit it off personally, so when our first gig came up, I called Frank and he was happy to participate. We called the group WE THREE, and you can hear our efforts in a recording in our archive cd section at <http://www.strasbourgjazzinitiative.fr/>.

My favorite musician in Jazz is Bill Evans. He was then and he still is now. He brings so much to the music: beauty, sophistication, and most of all, great concept and arrangements in the trio format. I took his model to form my own trio concept. I thought it was the one thing I could offer which hadn't been done very much with guitar trios. My style is very much piano-oriented anyway so it seemed a natural path to pursue. I love playing chords! I have stuck to this idea through all these years, and I am proud of the music I have put out, and it all started here with Domenic and Frank.....thanks guys! :)

XV

THE LAST L.A. GROUP

The last group I joined in LA was the Billy Mitchell/John Bolivar band, starting in the early 90s. Hilliard was responsible getting me in and it took a while, as I was still in transition mode from the Fusion days and still I think a little green. Fortunately they let me stay and start developing my style. This band was a Fusion of Jazz, R&B, and Blues, a mix that was easier and more obvious to me. Most black musicians historically have played all these genres at the same time, hopping from one gig to another, sometimes on the same night! I distinctly remember Hill sometimes doing three gigs a day, one of each! So for me the Jazz part was the most natural, and for the other two I had to do some shedding. We played in a variety of formats from quartet up to seven or eight pieces, using three horns and one or two singers. It depended on the gig. Billy played piano and sang some. His forte was the R&B. John was an all-around player, playing all the reeds and flute. His flute playing was strong, perhaps his best ax. Hill sang as well. Quenton Dennard was our usual drummer, another great all-around cat. This band played all over the area, including some road work that encompassed Vegas and a few festivals further out. We even played NYC one time....that was cool! You can find me on two of Billy's recordings, the one still out is called "Passion". This band really confirmed my path which was Jazz. It had the most to offer and I was the most comfortable in it.

XVI

CONCLUSION

So that brings me to the close of this chapter of my musical life. In 1996 I left LA and went back East to continue to pursue Jazz music. In looking back at this time I spent in LA, I had learned so much and yet had very little to show for it. There was so much talent out there but really no direction, or should I say too many divergent directions. I have to say that the main culprit was the pursuit of money. Since that was driving the business out there, everyone was susceptible to it. In my experience, few came to LA in the pursuit of art. Art, in the end, had nothing to do with it. If it happened to emerge, almost by accident, it was never encouraged or really taken seriously. People were too busy running, chasing the almighty buck. But this is the American way...still is! If I were asked what's wrong with American music, I would reply, look no further than the culture that creates it, or at least creates the environment for it.

I want to say in conclusion that I am not writing this book with negative feelings about this era. More to the point I just wanted to make observations and draw conclusions. After all these years, and with plenty of time to reflect, I think I have enough perspective about it now. My intention is not to shed a bad light on the music. I don't think it was meant to survive, as it was based on a sandy foundation. Ultimately it wasn't for me. I would invite others to chime in and write their own memoirs if need be to continue the discussion, as I think this era should not dissipate into the ether without further inspection, analysis and understanding.

There are many stories that I have not put in this book at the risk of being redundant. There are also other great players I have had the pleasure of playing with throughout those years who I have not mentioned here and I apologize to them if I have been remiss in this regard.

Rick Hannah

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