Joe Pass

Sometime in April a small group of fans, Tom Charlton, George Clinton, Ramon Gallo, and Ivor Mairants, collected in the Musicentre to meet the most genial Joe Pass, a musician of quiet virtuosity and taste.

Transcription and photos by George Clinton

RG: *Did I read somewhere that you started out on a Spanish guitar?*

No, I started on a Harmony guitar, an acoustic model with with steel strings. I began on simple chords like most everybody, then I studied for a year on the Nick Lucas book. After ▶

Joe's tiny half-pick

◀ that I got on to the Carcassi classical method for a while because the pieces in it were a lot better. They had a lot of movement in them, more chord changes and sophistication than the books of chords I'd come across. So I think that developed some sense of harmony in me.

TC: *Did you come from a musical family, Joe?*

No, my father worked in the steel mills.

Was guitar playing easy for you in the beginning?

I guess it came sort of easy for me; I have certain difficulties, not a lot. But you've got to remember that I grew up playing the guitar. I started when I was nine, and by the time I was nine and a half, ten, I was doing seven or eight hours' practice every day. I did two hours' practice at six o'clock in the morning before I went to school, and another two hours as soon as I got home from school in the afternoon. Then I did four hours at night before I went to bed.

I did that until I was fourteen or fifteen. I didn't like it— I hated it, but my father was very firm about it; he saw a little something happening, so he figured he'd just push. I don't remember too much how I felt about it except that I'd rather be outside playing ball and things. I never could ride a bike, like even today I can't do these things. But, I know how I learned, and what I practised. Like, for instance, somebody would play the guitar on the Sunday morning radio programme, any guitarist — maybe Vincente Gomez or somebody, and my father would say, 'Get the guitar Joe, and copy it.' And I'd sit there and try, and he'd say, 'Did you get it?' and I'd not got it 'cause I don't know what I'm doing. Then he'd say, 'OK, learn this song,' and he'd whistle a tune and I'd find the notes, and then he'd say, 'Fill it up; don't leave any spaces.' That meant to do all the runs in between the phrases of melody.

Then I had a couple of music books; the Nick Lucas and Carcassi, like I said, and every day I had to start from the beginning and go through them. And then he'd also bring home piano music, anything . . . like, once he brought home the *Flight of The Bumble Bee* and said, 'Play it.' That was the way I learnt to play, by actually playing a lot and filling in all the spaces and not leaving gaps in the music. And then he would say, 'Play me a song — make it up.' He might do this every day. He didn't know anything about music, he didn't play an instrument; but he wanted us to become something more than a steel-worker like himself. For instance, he had the idea that my brother who was eight or nine was going to be a writer, so he had him write stories every day, books of stories; he'd say, 'Make up a story and write.'

But I think it's important to start young, at nine, eight, seven. I really believe that, because for me, I was open to everything and whatever happened on the instrument became part of my music. So I think you have to push children if you see talent and if they show interest. You've got to be firm about it, not exactly like my father — he was super-firm. Mind you, he deserves all the credit for how I play today.

GC: *Did you learn scales?*

Yes *(demonstrating about a dozen scales all over the fingerboard, and playing with impeccable technique)*

Out of a book?

No, my father would say, 'Play a scale,' and I'd play one and he'd say, 'What about the rest? There must be one above,' so we'd figure them out. I'd start the scale on the root of the chord and I'd go as far as my hand would reach without going out of position, say, five frets, and then I'd go all the way back. So when I practised I'd start right away on scales. As well as the usual ones, I'd play whole tone scales, diminished, dominant sevenths, and chromatic scales. Every chord form, all the way up, and this took an hour.

Another thing I'd do which is something I get my pupils on, is make up scale patterns. You do this so that the head and the fingers are doing the same thing. You continue making up these lines for as long as you can without making a mistake, and if you do make a mistake then you go back over it. I think one of the things about speed is . . . people say, 'He sounds fast and clean': it's not really as fast as you think, it's because your fingers and your head know where they're going. This is subconscious of course. You should be able to hum along with whatever you're playing. I don't sing out loud, but it's there in the head; you have to have a melodic thought.

Do you think that learning the way you did was a great help when it came to playing jazz?

Well yes, I think that I started to get a feeling for the instrument. I think that you have to have the instrument in your hand till it feels like an extension of yourself, and for me holding the guitar for seven hours a day and going *(plays more scales)* — and hating it, did just that.

RG: *What was the first professional band you worked with?*

Locally I worked with a small group — guitar, guitar bass, and violin; we played at parties and dances. That was when I was fourteen, I worked weekends to help support the family. Sometimes I made more money than my father; we used to make five dollars a night.

Did you get influenced by any particular guitarists?

Django Reinhardt; I listened to him first. Then Charlie Christian. Then I heard all the others — Tal Farlow, and Barney, Jimmy Raney — all those from the 'forties. I think the big influences as far as jazz guitar is concerned are Django, Charlie and Wes. These were the three big influences, players who actually added another dimension to the instrument.

IM: *You've said that you were more influenced by tenor players.*

Yes, but at one point I sort of drifted towards listening to pianists, Bud Powell, Al Haig and Art Tatum. I remember when Art Tatum had a trio with Tiny Grimes. I thought 'Wow!' I listened to Tiny, but it was the piano — that was the one. And then I listened to a lot of horn players — Charlie Parker, Dizzy, Stan Getz and Coleman Hawkins, and I got more influenced by horn players than anyone else.

But one wouldn't recognise any resemblance between your playing and Django's.

Well I never copied him. I don't remember that I copied any guitar player note-for-note. But I remember copying Charlie Parker note for note.

Looking back on the Bop age, what do you think about it now?

I think there are still a lot of people playing it; I think it's lost its label, but basically, jazz players who've come up from that

era are still playing it, and it's still influencing a great deal of new players too. There seems to be resurgence of straight-ahead jazz all over just now; which is good.

IM: *To get things in perspective, as far as your records are concerned, your first record 'Sounds Of Synanon' was important in that it marked the end of your troubles; what set you off on the road to Synanon?*

It all started when I split from home. I got the opportunity to go on the road and I went off with groups and trios. And I got introduced to drinking and all that. I was rebelling really and although I wasn't influenced by knowing that other jazz players were onto it, there was a point where there was a definite identifying with that, because it was part of the whole scene. It's just part of the environment and still is; but that doesn't mean that you have got to get caught up in it. But I thought that was the way to go, and I went from one thing to another and that's how I got started. I got heavily involved and people were saying, 'You'd better cool it, you'd better stop.' But I mean, I couldn't hear anything they said. Everybody, people close to me, my family; I didn't hear them; you never do.

Well, after a certain number of years everybody that gets involved starts to realise and see that this is not it, so you look for a way out and the difficult thing is that you can't find that way out, and it can be right there in front of you but you can't utilise it; you can't do anything about it. Well, I'd been through a lot of other places looking for a way out; you see, you have to be ready for it or you won't get out. So I was ready and I was looking for years. And in one of the places I was in I heard about this self-help group place and it's funny because I didn't plan on going there I just sort of stumbled on it while I was in Los Angeles. I even ended up in the same town, and there it was. So maybe it was an accident, but I'd planned at the back of my mind to find a way out. But that's how I got to it; I just walked up to the door and said, 'Here I am.'

I was there for two and a half years. I didn't do a lot of playing then. In fact, when I got there the guitar had absolutely no meaning for me and they said, 'OK, the guitar, put it in the corner and forget it!' Like, you don't play the guitar, because that's something that stands in your way. So I didn't play the guitar for a long time, I did other things, like straighten out my head and my person. Later, I maybe played the guitar on Saturday and then perhaps Friday and Saturday.

But the most I feel I've accomplished has been after that scene. Using drugs didn't help me to play, all it did was to hang me up for about fifteen years.

GC: *On that first record, 'Sounds of Synanon', what guitar did you use?*

It was a solid-bodied guitar donated to the Foundation. It was a Fender, but I had to use it as I didn't have one. I had to get used to it though because solid guitars are generally very fast, the neck is fast. Without an amplifier there's no tone at all, but you can really skate on it. Before that I'd used a Martin round-hole fitted with a De Armond pickup. I used that for years and then I used all the various Gibsons. Those guitars I consider good for road work because they take a lot of punishment and although they have no tone unamplified, they have a better tone than a solid body, much better.

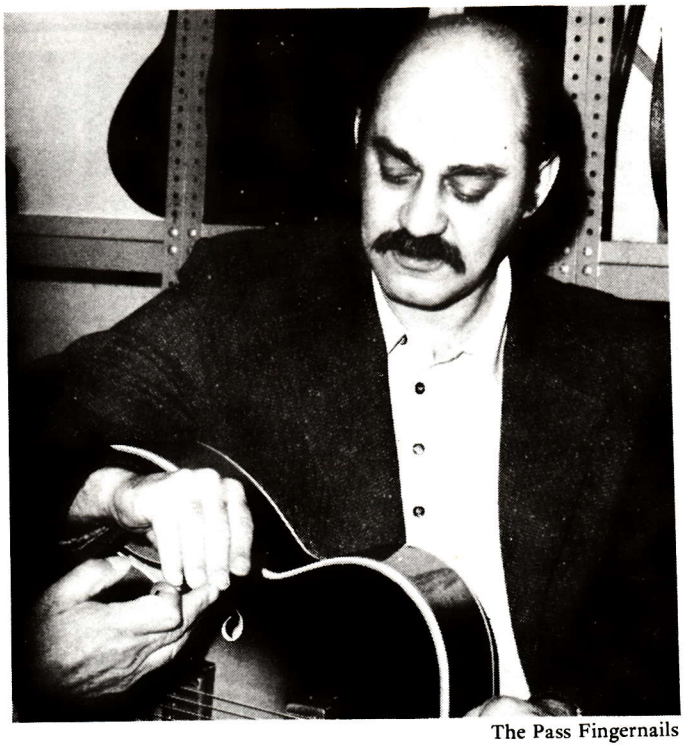
I have a solid-body now which I use for rock dates, if I get a call for that kind of pseudo rock. I do it as a gig but I don't like to do a lot of it and I don't get called on a lot because they know I'm not a rock player. But I have the tools and I sort of try to do it. What I feel is, rock generally has a lot of jazz flavour.

Regardless of the guitar, do you always use the same kind of pick?

Always the same kind. It's half a pick really, a pick broken in two. It's a medium-thin gauge, not soft, but firm. But I use my fingers a great deal too; and pick and fingers, or thumb and fingers. It's not quite as fast with the fingers though.

What does it depend on?

It depends on the feeling of the group I'm with. Like, if it's a hard group I have to use a pick because I can't get percussive enough with the fingers. And it depends on how fast we're playing; there's a certain point where the fingers can't move as fast as a pick, although I think if someone started doing it from the beginning, say, jazz guitar just with the fingers, I think they would find it the best way to play. I think contact with your instrument with your hand is better than a pick. So I use a small pick, at least, it's fairly close; I'm always touching the strings. I'd use fingers and thumb for playing ballads, but then again, if it's not a vocalist, and not very soft I'd use a pick and fingers. The pick always plays one string. I use a pick if I'm playing with horns and say, a loud rhythm section. But a lot depends on the kind of feeling I'm trying to get. Sometimes I just use my thumb because it has a really nice warm sound and so that works a lot for me. And if I'm playing with pick and fingers, I'll sometimes use my little finger as well. A great deal of playing is with the left hand; people often think you're picking everything, but you're not.



The Pass Fingernails

This is a long trip for you isn't it?

Yes, twelve weeks, and I'm a little tired. I haven't been out for more than five or six weeks in the States, and that's really a lot for me. You know, to me, music is important, it's the way I make my living and I like it and I enjoy playing. But it's not the most important thing in my life – that's my family. ●