



All About Jazz Take 5 Interview

Which instrument(s) are you playing?

My main instrument is the guitar (although that's already a plural; see my answer on « sound and approach to music » below). I also play some drums, percussions and vocals.

Who are you teachers and/or influences?

I've had and continue to have numerous influences, but to name the most important ones: Pat Metheny, Mike Stern, John Scofield, Bobby McFerrin, Michael Brecker, Chick Corea, Uzeb, Joe Zawinul, Tribal Tech, the Yellow Jacquets...

When did you realize you wanted to be a musician?

I discovered Jazz and improvisation, at the age of 15. I had been learning music theory and various instruments for quite some time, but while I knew I loved music already, I also felt that something was wrong.

In fact, I couldn't see the point in learning a tune, playing it, and then move on to the next. This just didn't make sense to me. But once I discovered improvisation, I suddenly realized that it was what I had been looking for: music as an everlasting personal development path, experiment and game. Music as a lifetime of research and evolution. Music as a language in perpetual motion. It's all about Jazz and Jazz is all about that: it's a philosophy of music rather than a particular musical genre.

What is your sound and approach to music?

I'm a guitar player not because I love the guitar, but because when I discovered Jazz and improvisation and fell in love with it, I was learning the guitar. Before that, I had been learning drums and piano and I might have been stuck with these, had I discovered Jazz earlier.

The result is that I've never actually been in love with my instrument. Some guitarists are in love with their guitar, or a particular genre/sound of guitar. I'm not. Sometimes, I even regret not being a drummer (because I think rhythm is more important than harmony), a pianist (for their ability to support harmonically any possible improvised idea in real time),

or even a sax player (for this incredible physical connection that you have with a wind instrument).

As a consequence, I try to explore all aspects the guitar can offer, in terms of techniques, sounds, genres, and even beyond the instrument itself. I use seven different guitars, including an electric sitar and a fretless guitar, nylon or steel strings, I drive synthesizers from my guitars (yes, I was a huge fan of Uzeb from day 1!), I do some guitar slapping like bassists would do *etc.*

Perhaps being some kind of a « frustrated » guitar player is also at the origin of my work as an *a capella* singer (heavily influenced by Bobby McFerrin). In a way, I've always felt that no instrument will ever be capable of connecting you to your own music as directly as the voice can do.

What is your teaching approach?

To me, academic music teaching (especially in French conservatories) is doing it all wrong. Consider that in the 21st century, with all the background in pedagogy that we have, conservatory students still need to follow at least a one year cursus of music theory prior to even touching an instrument. This doesn't make any sense. Do you learn grammar before you actually talk?!

To me, the key point is this: *music is a natural language* and should be thought of as such. Look at children. They learn how to speak because they have things to say, and they know how to speak long before they actually learn how to read or write, let alone grammatical knowledge. But I don't want to say too much here because I have written a fairly detailed blog about this, so I'd rather point you to it: <http://www.didierverna.com/blog/index.php?opost/en/2011/09/23/The-%28natural%29-Language-of-Improvisation>.

What is your dream band?

I cannot really answer this question because the answer would be different every day, or maybe different for almost every composition I wrote. I can however give you an example of a feeling that I have, just now... Right after releasing my second album as a leader (« Roots and Leaves »), I feel that I will never be able to play Mister Crusoé properly, and that this tune should really be played by the Parallel Realities quartet instead!!

Give us a road story: your best or worst experience.

Have you ever played at a party where nobody listens to you, where everyone is drunk at 22:00 and where people start throwing raw chicken pieces at each other at 23:00? I have.

What is your favorite venue?

Interestingly enough, it's easier to remember the worst venues than the best ones! But I guess I like all places for different reasons. I love the promiscuity of night clubs that give

you a special connection with the audience. I also love playing in theaters for the space and amplitude it gives to the music.

Your favorite recording in your discography and why?

Always favor the last one. And then, be sure to move on to the next!

What do you think is the most important thing you are contributing musically?

Anything I can think of sounds pretty pretentious or arrogant to my own ears, so I'd rather not say, or say, I contribute mostly to my personal development. The key to any art form is to do it for yourself before anything else. The rest is beyond your control anyway. I do intend on developing more fretless guitar playing and synth-access though...

Tell us something not readily known about you.

Did you know that apart from being a musician, I'm also a part time assistant professor in Computer Science? I could never make a decision as to my professional career, so I decided to not choose one, and remain a part-time this / part-time that. Not an easy life, but no life is easy I guess... On that matter (the relation between Science and Music, you may be interested in reading this blog entry: <http://www.didierverna.com/blog/index.php?post/2007/04/03/Lisp-Jazz-Aikido>

What was the first jazz album you bought?

« The Kid » by Didier Lockwood if I remember correctly. The fact that we have the same first name is pure coincidence. It also was my very first contact with Jazz, Fusion, and probably the trigger that made me stick to guitar, Jazz, and improvisation.

What music you are listening to these days?

- Chick Corea: the Vigil
- Moutin Factory Quintet: Lucky People
- Sakesho: We Want You to Say
- John McLaughlin: Floating Point
- Didier Verna: Roots and Leaves... of course! (actually, I don't like to listen to myself...)

What would be your desert Island picks?

I cannot answer this question in terms of albums, because again, the answer would change every day. I can however answer in terms of tunes:

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- All fast blues and anatoles basically drive me crazy (e.g. Suspone by Michael Brecker and Bait Tone Blues by Mike Stern)
 - Third Wind by the Pat Metheny Group, and most of the Brazilian Suite
 - Tumbleweed by Michael Brecker
 - Solar and Cantaloupe Island by Parallel Realities (live)
 - Spider, Loose, Not Even the Shadow of a Tail of a Lizard and 60 Rue des Lombards by Uzeb (World Tour 90)
 - Pretty much every tune on Tribal Tech's Primal Tracks
 - Raju, Inside Out and 14U by John McLaughlin
 - Dive, by Mike Stern

How would you describe the state of jazz today?

I don't understand the question. Seriously, because Jazz is a research process, it can never die, so it's alive and kicking, almost by definition. Of course, there are things that I like more or less in its current state, but just about as everybody.

What are some of the essential requirements to keep jazz alive and growing?

Nothing. Seriously. See my answer to the previous question and the blog entry that I mentioned above. There will always be curious musicians, open minds, just because it's in Human nature. So just as there will always be scientific research, there will always be musical research, and *that*, is Jazz.

What is in the near future?

Apart from some gigs with the @-quartet for the release of the new album, I want to re-develop my solo, *a cappella*, Bobby McFerrin-like performances, I would like to play Jazz-Rock / Fusion again, I want to develop a repertoire of Caribbean music. I have another very special project in the oven, but it's still a secret... On a shorter term, I'm working on a guitar/voice duet with a repertoire of bossa-nova and Jazz standards.

What is your greatest fear when you perform?

Not being up to the expectations of the audience, and losing electric power in the middle of a tune (it has already happened to me)!

What song would you like played at your funeral?

I don't want a funeral, so I want Crystal Silence :-)

What is your favorite song to whistle or sing in the shower?

Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise (the Dave Weckl version) or One Liners (Mike Stern) but they really are the same song.

And by Day?

The same I guess. Boy, now that I think about it, it really is a sticky one...

If you weren't a jazz musician, what would you be?

In fact, I've already answered that question earlier, because I'm already something(s) else, but I would also have liked to be an actor (I did some theater acting), a humorist (I have a sense of humour), or an Aikido teacher (I do have a teaching certificate).

Thanks!