

# RALPH TOWNER

BY ROB GARRATT



Photos by Caterina di Perri

Ralph Towner can well remember the first time he played an electric guitar. Because it was also the last time. “One day I was at John Abercrombie’s house – we were jamming and for whatever reason, I picked up his electric guitar and just played one note on it, and it was the most dreadful sound,” laughs Towner, recalling his long-term sparring partner’s reaction. “Abercrombie said, ‘Never touch that again!’, and I never did. I was never that interested in electric guitar. It never attracted me.”

It’s Towner’s work on the nylon-string classical, and 12-string acoustic that mark him out as one of the world’s most distinctive living guitarists in improvised music, his fingerwork instantly identifiable on the dozens of records he has performed on over the past five decades. Towner has simply never strayed from his two sonic bases, pursuing these contrasting yet complimentary approaches with an almost religious conviction.

Now, mastering a particular instrument and developing your own trademark sound are among the highest callings of a jazz musician. But Towner’s purism remains incongruous: the electric guitar has been every jazzier’s instrument of choice since amplification became an option – for both practical and aesthetic reasons – and Towner came of age artistically at the very height of electrification, the heady 70s when nerdy, gnarly post-Hendrix fusion was the flavour of the day.

The most remarkable part of the story might be that Towner didn’t even pick up a guitar until he was 22.

Towner has been playing guitar for less than three-quarters of his 83-year life. He shares a birthday with Chopin, March 1, he proudly tells me – a nod to both his first instrument, and earliest musical milieu.

The scene is set in Chehalis, a small railroad town in Washington state, where Towner was born, absorbing music from an early age from his mother, a piano teacher who practised Bach at home and played organ in the church. Regardless, it’s the early jazz records sent home from his older servicemen brothers that he remembers today.

“I had two older brothers in World War Two, they collected all these records and sent or brought them home. I had everything from Spike Jones to Nat King Cole to Duke Ellington, and a lot of swing – Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller. I’m only five, six, seven years old and I’m already wading in all this music,” says Towner.

At five years old, the family moved south to Oregon state, where Towner discovered his first calling, the trumpet, mastering the instrument well enough to perform in dixieland bands from the age of seven. After finishing school, Towner followed in his mother’s example, studying piano and composition under acclaimed contemporary composer Homer Keller. Then came the fateful encounter with the classical guitar, in his fourth year at the University of Oregon. Determined to master the instrument as quickly as possible, he

enrolled in the Vienna Academy of Music in 1963, studying for a year under the great Karl Scheit – who only spoke German – and completely abandoned the piano he had already mastered at a conservatory level. “Each one of these instruments required complete obsession with it, not playing and mixing these things. I locked myself in my room and practised. My time in Vienna was complete, total – at least eight hours of guitar practice, for seven days a week, every day for a year,” he adds.

“I realised that at the age I ran into the guitar, in order to play it the way I wanted to hear it, it was too late to teach myself. I didn’t have any time to waste going down the wrong roads or trying things that don’t work. That’s why I abandoned everything, put everything on hold and just submerged myself in the guitar in Vienna. All I could do was practise and learn that thing.”

The result of this roundabout journey is that Towner has always approached the instrument “pianistically”. More than any guitarist, it’s Bill Evans and his beautiful, intuitive approach to harmony that remains Towner’s greatest influence. “The technique I’m using, with all the fingers on the right hand, being able to isolate each note and control it, it’s more pianistic,” he says. “That’s what attracted me – I heard the guitar and thought oh, my god, I can do pianistic things.”

The classical method allows a delicate differentiation of dynamic emphasis, of colour and contrast, shade and light.

After returning from a second year in Vienna, in 1968 Towner followed the zeitgeist and moved to New York, where he found ready employment as a hired hand in the after hours scene.

“All this preparation meant that I was finally ready to move to New York City. When I got there, I basically survived on my piano,” he says. “It didn’t take long before things really started happening. Everybody was getting together from all these different groups, including some great players like Wayne Shorter, Dave Holland, John McLaughlin. We would have sessions, but they wouldn’t be like the old bebop sessions where everybody was trying to kill each other off.”

Into this mix, Towner arrived with two distinct instrumental skill sets to proffer. Ironically, despite the five intense preceding years consumed by the guitar, a prevailing shortage of pianists made him much in-demand behind the keys whenever a regular player was double booked or out sick. Almost six decades later, he recalls with awed tones a particular late-night SOS. “I must have gotten the call around midnight: ‘Sonny Rollins is down here all by himself and he needs someone to play with’. So I went down and just did duets with Sonny Rollins in the middle of the night. That was an education,” says Towner. “It was a really incredible time, full of new players and music from all over the world, a storybook time.”

One of the things that allowed all this to blossom was that rents in New York were cheap. “I

lived in the West Village in a little apartment, two bedrooms – it was like \$150 a month,” he recalls. “You could play one bad gig at a wedding that would pay your rent.”

The rest of the time musicians could devote to rehearsing and trying out new tunes with the wealth of talent the city was awash in. “There was still a lot of competition because you were moving in this river of really great talents, but you could sort of tell if you were improving by how famous the guys you were playing with were,” Towner says.

The guitar gigs Towner did score were mainly with Latin American bands playing Brazilian music, with samba and bossa nova then having a pop culture moment thanks to the two-way crossovers of Sergio Mendes and Stan Getz. “I’d really gotten Brazilian music down, to the point where people didn’t know if I was Brazilian or not,” boasts Towner. But he never pursued a recording career riding on the trend.

Between these quick-money comping gigs, Towner immersed himself in the musical idealism the era offered. The late-60s was a transitional and divisive time for improvised music. While jazz had been nudged out of the mainstream conversation by the rise of the LP-era’s literate rock ‘n’ roll, the end of the decade saw the more open-minded – and commercially astute – music leaders of the day experimenting with electrification, studio effects, rock-based instrumentation and harder backbeats. And Towner was in the middle of it all, soaking up the sounds while working as a sideman for leaders like Freddie Hubbard and Stan Getz.

However it was an encounter with Wayne Shorter, then on the cusp of forming Weather Report with Joe Zawinul that left the deepest mark on Towner. We spoke of this meeting a few weeks before Shorter’s death, age 79, on March 2.

“I went over to Wayne Shorter’s apartment and it was just him and I. He played all kinds of things he was writing, and I had little cassettes of things I’d written. It was amazing, just an afternoon with Wayne,” says Towner. “He was so original, just his person, the way he expressed himself – he was very abstract. I left that afternoon feeling like I was completely stoned, the conversations were like big coloured balloons and we were floating around showing each other music. It really was a transcendental experience.”

This heady rule-breaking period of experimentation birthed the arena-filling fusion supergroups that would define the face of “jazz” in the 70s: Chick Corea’s Return to Forever, Weather Report, and John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra. Out of this hotbed of music, Towner found his own path playing both guitar and piano in the world-flavoured Oregon. Formed out of alumni from the Paul Winter Consort ensemble, it united Towner in a decades-long partnership with an old university buddy, bassist Glen Moore, as well as multi-reedist Paul McCandless and

percussionist Collin Walcott. This core quartet would release a string of 15 albums between 1970 and 1984 alone, before Walcott’s sudden death in a bus crash while on tour in East Germany. Towner and McCandless escaped serious injury, and the group would continue to perform and record until 2017, when time was called for health reasons after an especially arduous European tour.

Suddenly elevated from jobbing sideman to established guitar virtuoso, thanks to Oregon’s success, Towner embarked on a solo career in 1972, beginning an ongoing relationship with the then-fledgling ECM Records that has produced 25 albums over five decades. In many ways, it appears an ideal pairing: the German label’s reputation built on its appreciation for space and silence, intimate acoustic encounters, copious atmospheric reverb, and for blurring the borders between jazz and classical music. Sounds like Towner’s approach.

“That’s 50 years? Holy cow,” says Towner with surprise. “It’s just such a great experience to start with that kind of reverence and space. When you’re in the studio, there’s very little talk, and very few takes. There’s a musical experience that you have just by not thinking ahead: ‘Oh I can do better, I’ll do another version of this’. The trick to playing is to stop thinking that way, to turn off any kind of verbal thing that’s going on in your head – like, ‘Did I leave the gas on when I left the house?’ You really find yourself in a space where you’re dealing only in a language of music.”

Over the decades Towner has recorded and built musical relationships with many ECM mainstays, including Gary Burton, Jan Garbarek, Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnette, Kenny Wheeler, Paolo Fresu, Wolfgang Muthspiel, and the long-running guitar duo with fellow transplanted American, Abercrombie.

Towner, who has called Italy home since the 90s, responds well to the label’s hyper-focused production process. Most albums are typically finished in just three days in the studio – two for recording and third for mixing on-site – in part due to the book-balancing of Manfred Eicher, the 79-year-old label founder who has personally produced the majority of the imprint’s 1,800-odd releases.

“Manfred started that principle of recording. It was an economic choice, but the money that was saved was invested in the best possible studios, best recording equipment, the best engineers, and to top this off this vinyl that was really precious, the sound of these recordings – for once a jazz company was recording with the same standards as, let’s say, Deutsche Grammophon,” he adds.

Towner’s creative career hit an early high with his third solo release, *Solstice*, a classic of ECM’s formative 1970s period that remains among the guitarist’s best-known and most celebrated recordings. Written with a specific cast of distinctly European players in mind – Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek and drummer Jon Christensen, and German bassist Eberhard Weber – and recorded

over the winter solstice of 1974, the LP captured an eerie sense of displacement, Towner's rattling 12-string stalactites painting distorted, unsettled images in the mind.

"I always loved *Solstice* - it's almost all one takes, the sound of that album is like it occurred in the headphones as we were recording it, and it's mind blowing that it all worked," says Towner.

"I knew these players and their playing, so I wrote all the music with everybody in mind," he explains. "Really good musicians should be able to do it intuitively - so I used really, really complicated chords, but a kind of rubato playing where the chords would change, following the soloist. The melody was written, but there's no bar lines, no marking at all, and it's played so it sounds like a rubato, but all done over incredible driving drums. It's got this incredible energy, but with the intensity of the attention to phrasing, the way each phrase builds up to a point. Everything had to have meaning to it. It's not there just for decoration or showing off."

As Towner relives these hallowed moments in his own discography, one detects fleeting feelings of remorse. Lately, he has been using YouTube to dial up his vintage recordings, and sheet music of his older compositions is sitting on the music stand behind him while we talk.

"Now I've been listening to this old stuff, thinking: I wish I could play like that now," he confesses. "But I also feel like I'm playing better and taking more time to develop things. But those early times are so much... Maybe I'm just slowing down because I'm old. There's a certain supposed grace you get when you get older. You're not constantly filling things, and overplaying."

And there certainly is a sense of grace - and space - found in Towner's latter-day playing. Earlier this year, ECM released *At First Light*, Towner's eighth album of solo guitar - 50 years after his first unaccompanied outing, *Diary*. It's an approach he's grown into with the passing years, building on a run of solo releases *Ana* (1995), *Anthem* (2000), *Time Line* (2005) and Evans homage *My Foolish Heart* (2016).

"I'm just playing solo because it's something I do quite well, I think. And you actually hear more of what I'm involved in," he reasons. "As a soloist you're basically mimicking a group, it's as if I'm responding to different parts of the guitar, rather than interacting with a group, the music I'm playing is sort of interacting with itself."

Recorded exclusively on six-string guitar, *At First Light* features almost all new material, paired with a single traditional and two '60s pop tunes he remembers fondly. Executed with the measured poise of a sonata recital, it's easy to assume the set's intricate originals are completely composed, but Towner says in every case, the arranged music serves as a jumping off point, with more than half of the ensuing performances improvised. Once more it's Towner's assimilation of formal composition

delivered through a jazz lens that marks him out as a true original.

"It's kind of in the moment all the time. With the pieces I write, I have the freedom to embellish them. I try to improvise on the tunes in a way that sounds like it's been written," he says. "There's sections that are completely off the top of my head, but that's the whole point of the improvisation, to develop the written part and really set the stage. The tunes I write have a special kind of emotion and I'm trying to make a plot out of the whole thing, it's like writing a short novel or a short story for each tune - so you're witnessing most of it being written in front of your ears."

*At First Light* is out now on ECM.

