

# INTERVIEW WITH — GARY WILLIS

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BY BILL LANPHIER

## How did you get into composition?

I took some composition courses in college, but they weren't too useful for the direction I was going. Actually, I learned more about composition from transcribing tunes for bands I played in. Transcribing allowed me to learn about the decision-making process of composers that I dug.

## Such as?

Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, Bill Evans, John Scofield, and Miles were big influences. Weather Report was one of the few bands that grooved but managed to stretch the harmony and composition envelope. Still, I always dug more R&B-oriented music, too, like Tower of Power, Sly, James Brown, and the Crusaders.

## Your varied compositional influences are evident in tunes like "Nite Club" and "Canine" at one extreme and "Wounded" and "Paha Sapa" at the other. Do you set out to write different styles?

Not usually. When I write, I just try to come up with ideas and follow where I think they should go. "Necessary Blonde" [1991] was a tune that flowed that way. Although the intro sat around for six months, once I found the beginning of the next section, bam...I

finished it in two days. After six or seven albums, though, you start to see recurring patterns in your ideas and you have to choose the direction more carefully. For my solo record, *No Sweat*, I wrote things that were fairly simple, easy to rehearse and perform, as well as fun to play. I've found that the less you write, the more the personality of each player can come out.

## Do you compose on bass?

Rarely. Sometimes, if I'm having trouble writing a melody, I'll pick up my bass to find something. But I usually get better results on keyboards. I'm not even a good piano player, so I can't fall into the things I would normally play on bass.

## How does writing your own compositions impact on whether there is a bass solo and the chords and rhythmic feel underneath all the solos?

While I'm writing a tune, it's pretty easy to tell whether a bass solo will belong or not. For example, "Nite Club" is more of a groove tune. A bass solo in that one would break down the groove too much. But, hey, since I'm the composer I get first choice! As far as the harmony goes, sometimes I write changes that are pretty challenging for me to play over. But I prefer that to "ice cream" changes that are too predictable. The feel is something we work out in rehearsal and live.

## Do you find writing or soloing easier?

Currently soloing. That's probably because during most of my years learning the instrument, I wasn't concerned with writing at all. I now look at writing as my job and I improvise for fun. What's frustrating is trying 20 or 30 different things that don't work before I finally hit on the right idea. If I work on something for too long, I tend to lose perspective. When you're soloing, there are fewer choices; you're dealing with only one instrument and one set of changes. Playing live is a fleeting thing; when the tune is over, you can't do anything to change it. Writing is always subject to change, even up until you're recording the tune.

## Where do your soloistic influences come from?

For a sense of clarity and harmonic vocabulary, [pianist] Bill Evans. Also Wayne Shorter, early George Benson, John Scofield, Clifford Brown, and Mike Brecker.

**Let's talk about your machine gun/Rocco Prestia-style bass lines for funk tunes, such as "Nite Club" and "Face First." How did you fall into that style, as opposed to playing more traditional, repetitive and simpler patterns?**

I come from a jazz background, so I want to hear the rhythm section evolve and change with the soloists. I treat the groove tunes improvisationally. From my years in L.A., I discovered that I'm not the typical "pocket" player, and if I have to play the exact same pattern for too long I'm bored. I do play repetitive enough to create a pattern, but I try to be loose enough to change.

**But you have to lock in something with the drummer, right?**

Bolting everything down with the drummer can feel good, but it doesn't leave much room for development. If you do that, as soon as the bass or drums change, even a little, the bottom can feel like it dropped out. I try to lock in only a small part of a pattern, like the fourth sixteenth note of the bar [during the solo section in "Nite Club"]. You still have to create a pattern and repeat it, but the other parts of the pattern have room to evolve. Ideally, at the end of the solo you feel like the band has arrived somewhere and the intensity is there from everyone, not just the soloist.

**Is the range of the bass the primary reason you can get away with being busy behind a soloist and not sound obtrusive?**

Staying in a lower register will help keep you out of a soloist's range, but you still need a good reason for whatever you're playing. I try to keep a balance between providing enough repetition so that the music sounds like it's settled somewhere and, at the same time, creating momentum so that it still feels like it's going somewhere. My instincts for what to play behind a soloist have been shaped by my experience as a soloist. There are times when you need to leave space for the soloist's ideas to develop and there are times when you

need interaction. It's difficult to balance because a little too much interaction sounds "busy," while too much space sounds like you're not listening. The other part of not sounding overly busy is, surprisingly enough, based on technique. Playing with three fingers on my right hand allows me to skip strings and grab different octaves of basic notes like roots and sevenths that don't complicate the harmony. That way my lines can have a lot of different notes, yet stay out of everyone's way. Also, I tend to play more dead notes, which add percussive sounds without adding actual pitches to the line. I might end up with a "busy" intensity, but it's still supportive.

**Let's talk more specifically about individual tunes. Was "Nite Club" recorded at a gig?**

I should probably keep it a secret, but no. Some of the crowd sounds were recorded at our gigs, while others are crowd samples. Clark Germain, our engineer, did a good job of creating the ambient room sound that fit the "live" vibe of the tune.

**"Big Wave" is probably the best parody of elevator jazz fusak ever written. Was the tune written around the intro concept?**

Yes, that's a rare example for me of a "concept" tune. I think this tune actually started out as a joke; what if a really big wave came and obliterated the candy-assed-wimpy-happy-elevator-dentist-chair-fusak-"WAVE-style" radio-formatted drivel that sometimes passed itself off as jazz? The first 30 seconds suckered a lot of DJs and program directors who weren't going to play our stuff anyway.

**On a live gig, how do you psych yourself down to play the Rippingtons-ish intro?**

In the studio and live, we had a sequencer play those parts so that we wouldn't corrupt our hands with the offending intro. Actually, we haven't sequenced anything to play along with in the studio since the Illicit CD.

**Do you generally write the melody first?**

That's the most important thing, but I usually start by creating drum or percussion grooves that help define

how a tune should sound and then concentrate on melody and harmony. On "Big Wave" the bass came before the melody. Then I wrote the melody at "B" on keys by turning down the volume and pounding out the rhythms. Then I went back and picked out the notes I wanted.

**Was the solo section of "The Big Wave" written with a walking bass line or did you just fall into that?**

I wrote it that way. The idea was to have it work with a progressive, fast-jazz feel on the ride cymbal, and a broken-up, funky thing from the rest of the drum set.

**Is it tough for you, as a bassist, to solo over keyboard bass lines, as in "Big Wave" and "Speak?"**

No, I've become comfortable with it, although I have to be conscious of sticking to higher registers. I've never liked the idea of everything dropping out for the bass solo and the drummer going to the hi hat. Keeping a bass line going gives depth and allows the drums and everyone else to interact more.

**Do you compose the synth bass lines and collaborate with the keyboardist [Scott Kinsey] on synth bass sounds?**

I write some of the lines and some of them are improvised. When we rehearse new music, we'll spend a whole day just getting sounds for all the synth parts, including the bass sounds. It's a day we dread, but it helps add an identity to what we do. We always tour with the new tunes before recording them and Kinsey refines the sounds as the tour progresses.

**Was the keyboard chord/melody in the first section of "Speak" part of the original concept?**

Yes, the tune existed as only that intro for months before I found the other sections. The "B" section originally was a chord pattern I came up with, mostly just to practice soloing over. The "C" section was a chord/melody idea, but it didn't have a bass line until after I found that it would work with these other sections.

**The solo section in "Speak" has a lot of chord**

**changes. It seems that you often apply the changes of your melody section to your solo section.**

There are probably a lot of changes, but they're there because of the melody. A lot of people write a completely new set of chords for solo sections. I think you end up with a more musical progression if the harmony is written with a melody in mind. The melody will give direction to the chords and make the changes flow more naturally.

**Why did you decide not to use keyboards on "Canine?"**

It's just another way to write, a way to imply harmony with single lines only and no chords. On stage we're now doing "Canine" as a straight-ahead swing tune.

**In the bridge section of Canine [bar 29], you pedal a low "E" on the electric bass and harmonize the melody in the upper registers. Was that section written in "E" to allow you to do this?**

I think I just got lucky on that one. I don't remember using my bass to check out how I would play that section until it was already finished. I've made that mistake a few times, but I was fortunate on this tune.

**Compared to some of your earlier playing, your solo in Canine [1993] shows an increasing blues influence (bars 46, 50, 52-54, 57, 60-61, 65 and 69), while still maintaining a strong jazz/bebop harmonic foundation. Does that come from [guitarist] Scott Henderson?**

No, I think it comes from all those years that I played guitar. Since I'm from Texas, I've got a pretty strong Texas-blues/R&B/gospel background, although it may have gotten disguised occasionally over the years. I remember back in college soloing over a standard for a teacher at North Texas State. His comment was, "You've got too much blues going on there!" So I was leaning that way even back then.

**Why was he resistant to blues?**

Maybe because he knew that players sometimes use blues to fake their way through changes they aren't comfortable with. Of course, I was probably guilty of it at the time, too!

**What's the trick to sounding bluesy over complex changes, while still implying the harmony?**

I think it's something that you come by with experience. First of all, you've got to be able to play the blues, period. Once you've got that under your belt, you need to get your jazz vocabulary together to the extent that your playing isn't so cerebral. Then interjecting a little soul into the tune comes more naturally.

**The song "Wounded" comes off as very powerful, yet deeply sad. Was that your feeling when you wrote it?**

I wrote it during the time when my dad was dying of cancer. The title reflects the mood of my family as well as his situation. With the exception of three or four notes, the solo on the CD was the first solo I ever played on the tune, as I was writing it. None of the solos I took on tour or in the studio felt the same, so I recreated it for the recording.

**In "Dense Dance," both the intro and "A" section use a chord/melody approach [each melody note is harmonized], but each section sounds slightly different harmonically. What's going on there?**

The intro harmony is based on the old big band sax soli technique, where each melody note is harmonized with a different chord and different voicings. In the "A" section I used the sequencer to harmonize the melody with parallel voicings; each melody note is harmonized, but each voice moves strictly parallel to the melody. In addition, each two bar phrase in the "A" section is harmonized differently, but the voicings are still parallel.

**The intro to "Paha Sapa" might be interpreted as very dark and bittersweet. Does this relate to the title?**

Paha Sapa is a Lakota Indian word for the Black Hills in South Dakota, which was the center of their universe long before we carved our presidents into them. I don't mean to be self-serving just because I feel a little "white man's guilt," but from what I've come to understand, the composition seems to evoke the sense of mystery and history associated with that place.

**In the "A" section of "Babylon," you have the bass and keys playing off each other on different eighth**

**notes. How did that come about?**

I really can't remember which part [bass or keyboards] came first. I didn't set out to write it that way and it's rare that I start out with that defined of a concept. I usually come up with ideas and if an idea is good enough, it will suggest a direction to follow. In this case, the first few bars have the bass anticipating the keys, so I switched them in order to keep it more interesting and off-balance. That way it provides contrast for the melody, which is not very anticipated at all.

**Many jazz/fusion composers wouldn't write a repeated B-E-D bass line as you did in the "B" section of "Babylon," worrying that it would sound trite or simplistic. But you pull it off. How?**

If you're always trying to be hip and clever, you can cancel yourself out. It's just a matter of contrast. All the parts in the "A" and "C" sections are pretty busy, so that section helps settle everything down before moving on to "C."

**Your bass part on the first section of "Face First" is reminiscent of Jaco Pastorius. Where do you draw the line when borrowing from other players?**

Actually, that bass line is closer to Paul Jackson's part on "Actual Proof," by Herbie Hancock. They both start on the seventh and end with a similar space at the end of the two-bar phrase. The bass lines are similar but the compositions are pretty far apart. As far as borrowing goes, when you're trying to learn an instrument, I think you should borrow from every source that interests you. If you've really intensely studied whoever you're trying to learn from, then as you mature as a player, you'll be able to honestly tell whether you're creating or imitating. It's a much easier decision to make [to not sound like someone else] if you really dig deep into the style and technique of the players you admire.