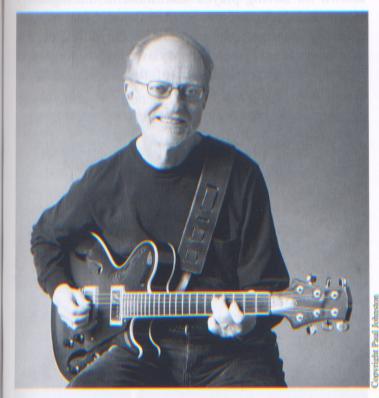


Interview with Bob DeVos

By Marc A. Ybaben, Ph.D.



s you might have read in other interviews I've written for *JJG*, instead of practicing guitar like I should be doing, I am too often searching the Internet for new sounds and new gear. Fortunately, though, that has led me to find wonderfully talented musicians and luthiers, and so I like featuring them here so others can enjoy them as well.

I actually came across guitarist Bob DeVos several years ago, now, so this interview was a long time coming! His latest release, *Shadow Box* (see accompanying song analysis), has already been getting local and Internet accolades, and represents the next step in his rich body of work.

JJG: Thanks for taking time to answer some questions for us, Bob. How did you approach your new project?

BD: I wanted to record again with my working trio: Dan Kostelnik on Hammond B-3 organ and drummer Steve Johns have been playing with me since 2005. Saxophonist Ralph Bowen often performs with us as a quartet; he and I have a similar musical outlook: he's a virtuoso and has a strong grasp of the blues vernacular — we all share that. I began the project — *Shadow Box* — thinking about certain tunes that we have been play-

ing regularly, I also started with a deep understanding of everyone's sound and strengths; I often compose with Dan, Steve, and Ralph's individual sounds and approaches in my mind. These days, a working group isn't common. Over the years we've developed a level of interplay and communication that normally isn't found in groups that only come together occasionally or for a given project.

I want my recordings to have a thematic concept — to be real albums with a beginning, middle and end, to be more than a collection of tunes. So, in choosing tunes, I think about the CD as a whole. This time out -Shadow Box is my third CD with my trio — my jumping off point was Wes Montgomery's "Twisted Blues," a tune which isn't a 12-bar blues in form: it's a 32-bar song form, but it has a strong blues sensibility. It's tricky to play on and fun to play on. Similarly, "Blue Print" — which I wrote for this CD — is a 32-bar song that sounds like a blues. Percy Mayfield's "The Rivers Invitation" is a 12-bar blues with a bridge, which we give a New Orleans second line groove. The blowing changes for the title track, "Shadow Box," are over an F minor 12-bar blues, but the melody gives no hint of that. So, this "twisted" blues concept carries over to most of the tunes that I wrote and chose for this project.

JJG: Great. You compose a lot of tunes on your albums; how do you approach composition – from a spontaneous, inspired standpoint, or a more structured format?

BD: Definitely from a spontaneous, inspired stand-point. I can best respond by first giving examples of how I wrote three of the tunes on the current CD. With "After Burner," I woke up with a melody in my head, picked up a guitar, and there it was. With "Shadow Box," the title track, I had been playing and listening to Herbie Hancock's "Eye of the Hurricane" and thought, "Why not write an F minor blues that has a melody that isn't a blues at all?" When I wrote "The Wizard," I had just gotten off the phone with John Abercrombie; we had been talking about a waltz he had just written. That made me think, "maybe I'll write a waltz." (A few days later, John and I got together, played both of our tunes, and they were completely different.)

Usually, I bring my new works to rehearsals with my trio where we try different tempos and rhythmic feels, and I may decide to compose introductions or endings. Composing is like any muscle: I have been doing it so long that I have internalized the structural components into how I think about music on a daily basis.

JJG: Wow, I'd love to see you and John play together! What does composing do for the musician; what do they learn from the process as compared to practicing improv, chord solos, etc.?

BD: My ultimate goal in improvising is for my solo to sound like — actually to be — a unified composition. For me, composing and playing are integral parts of the same process. Composition is a structural process that often carries over into how well you improvise. I studied classical composition with Edgar Grana. We studied classical form and how to develop a musical idea thematically, which is how the great American songwriters — Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern — thought.

JJG: In today's music industry, people are moving away from recording albums, but rather recording and releasing individual tunes electronically. You mentioned earlier having a thematic concept for your albums ... What's your philosophy on that modern practice? What are the financial and artistic costs/benefits for jazzers?

BD: My younger students are into downloading and often just download one tune; that's just the way things are. My recordings are available as downloads; I'm not going to change this, but I don't subscribe to it. Each of my tracks makes a strong statement on its own, but, in addition, there's a flow to the tunes — an experience that is lost if you don't hear the whole album. I put the same kind of thought into planning a set for a live performance; I want the listeners to have an experience that transcends any one tune.

Also, there's a big difference in the file size of a CD recording and an mp3 download; an mp3 has a lesser sound quality than a CD. I'm an audiophile and I want to hear my music at the best quality that I can hear it — if I could record on vinyl, I would. I put a lot of thought into my choice of engineer and studio and the CD's overall sonics; I work very closely with the engineer on the mixing and mastering. I also put a lot of thought and listening time into the final sequencing of my recordings.

JJG: Your recordings are often with an organ trio, plus sax on some tunes – what combo format do you like best, and why?

BD: Basically, I like playing with great musicians, no matter what the format — from duo to big band. I am known for having played with most of the legendary Hammond B-3 players. I will always love working with a good organ group; it allows the fullest expression of my blues sensibility. My own organ group looks to keep the heart and soul of the traditional organ group, but bring it into the 21st century — and we really play jazz.

That said, there is a certain looseness and flexibility I can get playing in a guitar-bass-drum trio; there's an openness of sound, and it's an environment that favors intense listening among the three musicians. Also, with guitar-bass-drums (with or without saxophone or trumpet), I am the only chord instrument — that means more responsibility, but allows me more opportunity to determine the group's direction.

I like interplay with other musicians — how they inspire you — but I do sometimes play solo. My wife Carol asked me to record a solo CD, which I have done, but have not put out yet.

JJG: Excellent! So do you also perform many duo gigs, i.e., guitar and voice, guitar and sax, etc.? What are the challenges for you in that setting?

BD: Most of my duo gigs are guitar-bass, and I play fairly often with other guitarists. But I have done countless duos with singers and horn players.

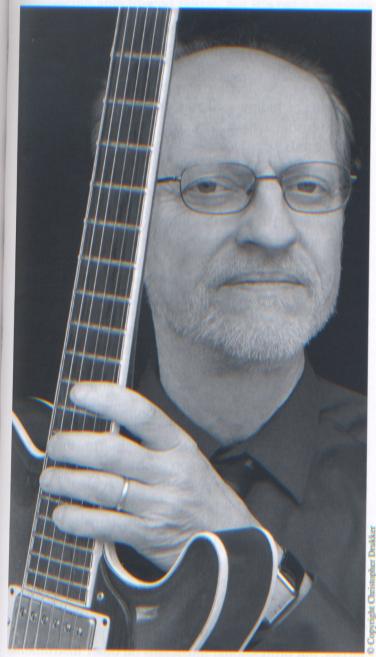
One big challenge when doing a duo with a singer is that you are not going to be playing in standard keys. The keys are determined by the individual singer's range. You have to be ready to play in any key; that can be a challenge if, for example, the singer calls "Lush Life."

When playing with both singers and horn players, you are accompanying them for the melody and their improvisations with chordal harmony and possibly bass lines. Then they stop singing or playing, and you are usually on your own — you're essentially playing solo. Sometimes, a horn player knows how to play guide tones — single note lines that imply some harmony. This can develop into interplay with both musicians soloing together.

JJG: I think that's a pretty challenging setting, and takes a lot of practicing to make it sound "right."

So what is your approach to comping when playing alongside an organist or pianist, vs. playing in a "piano-less" combo or duo?

BD: First off, comping, for me, is both accompaniment and complementing: I am there to make the solo sound better no matter what the instrument. The key is always to listen to the soloist more than to yourself, to give support.



When working with an organist, most players — not all — are playing bass with their left hand and soloing with their right hand; the guitar is the natural complementary instrument to fill in chordal harmonies. I know there are organ groups without guitar — including on "Unity," one of my favorite Larry Young records. Your readers may enjoy this story: I was playing at an Organ

Summit in the 1990s. The producers scheduled me as the guitarist for Bill Doggett and Rhoda Scott. They hadn't scheduled a guitarist to play with Jack McDuff, so he went to the organizer and said, "You have to have the 'gittar' with the organ; without the 'gittar,' there's no organ." So, I played that day for McDuff too.

JJG: (laugh!)

BD: From the outset of working with organ trios, I learned that the Charleston rhythm is the basic swing rhythm of comping, playing on the first beat and the "and" of the second beat. Once you're comfortable with that feel, you can vary and play around with it, but that is the basis. It's important to listen and learn from how pianists comp. Listen to Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, McCoy Tyner, how they fill the spaces, how they relate to the soloist, how they vary their rhythms.

When I'm playing with a pianist, it's a different story than organ: The pianist is comping for himself with his left hand. Some pianists' styles better allow for a guitarist to comp than others. What you do depends on what the pianist is doing: is he leaving space with his left hand or not? If he's not leaving space, play nothing — in that setting, the guitarist is not adding, he's just getting in the way.

If I'm playing in a group with no organ or piano, then the comping role is entirely on me, and I have a lot of freedom with this instrumentation. Sometimes that freedom means recognizing the times when you shouldn't play anything; when *not* playing adds contrast to the solo and varies the sound of the group. A prime example I studied at an early age is Jim Hall with Sonny Rollins on "The Bridge." An example of my playing in a group without organ or piano would be the CDs I did as part of the Ron McClure Quartet on Steeplechase Records.

JJG: Great ideas, thanks. Your solos have a strong sense of "direction," in my opinion; how do recommend learning/practicing that?

BD: First, thank you. I think of solos as spontaneous composition, writing an alternate melody over the tune's chord changes. I don't like when a guitarist's solos sound like a succession of unrelated fast licks: there's a different lick over each chord in the progression, and there's no musical coherence. I start my solo and continue to develop it to have a logical musical progression that arrives at a climax. I recommend listening to how Herbie Hancock and Bill Evans

approach their solos — there's a logical flow, and everything sounds like it's supposed to be there. I recommend transcribing their work.

I am always gratified when guitarists transcribe my solos. I might get an email from anywhere in the world with questions about my solos that they are transcribing, and I am glad to write back. The guitarists whose solos initially inspired me are Wes Montgomery, Grant Green, Jim Hall, and Kenny Burrell.

This question also goes back to my response about the synergy between composing and soloing. One exercise you can try during practice is composing a solo, actually writing it out, so that it starts somewhere and builds to a conclusion in a logical manner. I'm not saying to prewrite your solos for performance and memorize them, not at all. I'm saying that you compose a solo as a way to train your mind to think in terms of a logical flow. It's a valuable exercise designed to help you when you are improvising spontaneously on the bandstand.

JJG: Hmm, that would be a pretty challenging exercise, actually; I think it would "force" the player, so to speak, to get away from the usual patterns/licks that are easily thrown into a solo. I'm going to have to try that! Switching gears, here: I know about your guitars (see *JJG* Nov 2010), but can you tell the readers about them? What makes them different, from your perspective?

BD: I have two guitars built by luthier Rob Engel that are just fantastic instruments in terms of playability, sustain, sound, and appearance. Rob builds archtop guitars that don't feedback at high volumes, especially important when playing in organ groups which generally go past acoustic volume levels. I have the first guitar of this type that he built for me when I was playing with Charles Earland's group in the 1990s. Charles would always have two Leslie speakers set on stun! Rob's guitar passed the test admirably.

I also have two Gibson archtops, a Super 400CES, and an L5CES, that I use on lower volume gigs and on some recordings. I used the Super 400 on some tunes on *Shadow Box* as well as one of the Engels.

JJG: Your Engel guitars have fairly sophisticated electronics (i.e., different pickups, coil splits, etc.) – how much do you actually utilize the guitar's potential on a typical gig or recording?

BD: I use Lindy Fralin pickups, they seem to sound the closest to the PAFs in my Super 400 — that's the sound I like. My newer Engel guitar is wired for parallel and series but not split coil. I do use the parallel sound, usually for funk rhythm playing, and I do like to use the bridge pickup also.

JJG: Cool, so not "just the neck" pickup like a lot of jazzers use? In some videos I've seen with you online, you seem to be playing through big tube amps. How does amp selection factor into your overall sound?

BD: I have a collection of Fender amps that I have modified, including a Showman, Deluxe Reverb, and Princeton that I have used live and on recordings. I have recently been using a Fuchs 50W Clean Machine built by amp guru Andy Fuchs which is just fabulous in terms of headroom, overall sonics, and flexibility. I used one of Andy's ODS 50W combos to record *Shadow Box*. Because this amp sounds so clear in the lowest and highest registers of the guitar, it's expanding my palette in terms of note choices.

JJG: Sure, I know Andy – wonderful amps! When teaching, how do you approach: (a) a serious, semi-professional player who wants to play/perform better; and (b) a pro or serious student with plans/aspirations to become a working professional?

BD: I teach established, professional guitarists all the time — some on a regular basis, some as a onetime master class — as well as guitarists with either professional aspirations or playing largely for their own enjoyment and growth. I approach each player differently, and I never do one size fits all teaching. I always start by listening to a new student play, playing along with them, and asking them about their goals. I spend a lot of time outside the lesson thinking about what each person needs and what I think he/she can do best.

I feel that the best material to show to any musician is something they can put to use immediately; that's the material they will remember best. I largely teach guitarists, but professional musicians on other instruments have come here to study improvisation or writing or comping.

JJG: What do you have the different students do differently (if anything)?

BD: This depends on my evaluation of their skills after we have played a couple of tunes together. Someone may be new to playing standards, or have a limited knowledge of chord inversions, or may know scales and modes but not know how to apply them. I may want to work on how to play melodies, or address technical issues.

I enjoy teaching because it is a reverse thought process; I have to explain things that have become completely natural for me, things I no longer think about. I recommend being able to read music, but it's not a necessity — I've taught plenty of guitarists who don't read.

With professional players I might work on their improvising one solo line over multiple chord changes instead of playing one idea per chord. I think of this as playing through the chord changes; all the notes in the line will fit each chord harmonically. It requires a good knowledge of the harmonic structure, especially in terms of knowing how to resolve the thirds and sevenths of the chords. I may have someone who wants to develop solo playing, and we'll work on that, or it could be someone who needs to improve their comping skills.

JJG: What overall recommendations would you have for each of these students?

BD: One thing I stress to everybody is listening to music intently through recordings and especially live performances. I can hear the masters in New York City - I live just outside the city - musicians like Roy Haynes, George Coleman, or Jim Hall. Hear these musicians now while they're actively performing.

JJG: Great idea. What's your philosophy in terms of learning modes – of the major, melodic, harmonic minor scales, etc. etc. – vs. some other ways to learn improvisation?

BD: I think of all these scales as arpeggios that are connected by passing tones; the arpeggio is the basis for each mode. Instead of practicing a scale in the usual horizontal manner, play it starting at the root and proceed in thirds. You will play the standard four note arpeggio first, then the ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth, which are the upper partials.

Utilizing this scale knowledge to be able to create melodies is another thing; no one wants to listen to someone running scales through their solos. Scales are just part of the tool kit of improvising.

JJG: If you were doing a Master Class with a combo – say, a guitar, sax, bass, and drums quartet – and they were decent players playing tunes from the

Real Book, what musical/technical aspects do you think would likely come up? What are combos like that possibly lacking?

BD: What these combos usually lack is professional experience. If they're reading tunes from a book, they may not know the tune well enough. The key skill, however, is relating to each of the other band members. The musicians can be too involved in their own technique instead of concentrating on hooking up with the rhythm section and really listening to the soloist. Instead of trying to show off the new fast lick you have practiced, it would sound a lot better to play simpler, to concentrate on finding the groove.

JJG: OK, I like that. How does a combo develop non-verbal communication with each other during a song or performance?

BD: Rehearsals make a difference; when you rehearse, you can have verbal communication to discuss intros, endings, feel, or whether a tune may alternate between Latin and swing feels. Once these guidelines are established, it is easier to get to the next level, to get to non-verbal communication which requires intense listening to each other and perhaps a little eye signaling.

JJG: Makes sense; I know a lot of players who won't rehearse – they just want the gig! – so it's hard to develop that skill. You have a very "bluesy" jazz sound throughout your playing, which I like. How would you suggest integrating that "vibe" into a straight-ahead tune, such as *ATTYA*?

BD: Again, thank you. My sound, in part, came from my earliest guitar influences: Wes, Grant Green, Kenny Burrell. When I first heard these players, I was already a huge fan of B.B. King, Albert King, and many other blues artists, so the blues was a natural bridge for me to cross over into learning to play jazz.

The other part comes from all the great blues inflected jazz players I toured with as a young man, and the expectations of their audiences. When somebody puts a gun on the bar and says, "that gittarist better play the blues," you play the blues.

JJG: (laugh!)

BD: One way to start developing this blues vibe on "All the Things You Are" would be to improvise through the tune using pentatonic scales only. You could use minor 7th and minor 6th pentatonic scales. Once you are comfortable doing that, try adding the blue notes into the mix — the blues scale just has one

added note. Experiment and let your ears tell you when you get it right.

JJG: Great – I'll try it! You cut your teeth playing with famous organ trios – are the stories true, that the leaders call out different tunes each night, and change the keys around just to keep you guessing?

BD: Well, that's how they worked, but they didn't do it to keep me guessing; they knew I could do whatever they wanted. The legends that I played and toured with — Richard "Groove" Holmes, Jimmy McGriff, Charles Earland, Trudy Pitts — were professional; they wanted to present their music the best way possible. Every night was a performance, not a test.

So, yes, different tunes were always called; it was simply expected you know the whole repertoire. Similarly, I never repeat a set when I lead a group: you think about the audience, the venue, the time of day, of year and what you and your fellow musicians feel like playing at a given performance.

Actually, the demands I met as a young musician were far more challenging. There was never a set list of tunes. There were no rehearsals. With "Groove" and the Jimmy McGriff-Hank Crawford Quartet, no one even called a tune. My first night with Jimmy and Hank, I met Hank and the drummer Jimmie Smith for the first time backstage. No one said a thing about what we were going to play. We got on stage and Jimmy pointed to an F with his left hand, and we were off. After 12 bars, everyone was smiling, so I knew I was OK. That band never called tunes; Jimmy would play what he thought was right for the moment, for a given audience. He assumed – correctly — that everyone would know what he was doing.

Or when I was younger, "Groove" Holmes would play "Cherokee" and take it through all 12 keys, but he wasn't testing me, he knew I could do it. I play with leading musicians all the time who call one of their own tunes that I have never seen nor heard. I listen; I play it; I improvise on it.

JJG: Man, what a blast! So how can a student prepare for such rigorous gigs like that?!

BD: One, you have to know a huge repertoire, but that is what being a professional means. If you get caught on a gig or at a jam session not knowing a tune, make it your first priority to learn it. Ear training certainly helps. Students should go to as many jam sessions as

they can, play with different musicians, play along with CDs. And, these days, leaders sometimes bring music for their own new tunes. Sight reading is very important, too.

JJG: Any memorable gigs/tours you can tell us about?

BD: I have been playing and touring since I was 16, 17, so that is many years. European audiences listen intently and are very appreciative as are American audiences in certain clubs and concert halls. I enjoy photography and art and architecture. Those tours where I have time to absorb the culture of another country are most memorable — I once had two full weeks in Paris; I walked the entire city. Some fairly recent tours of Belgium were very meaningful to me; my wife joined me towards the end of one of these tours, and we walked the town where my father was born and saw the works of artists in the settings where they painted centuries ago. There was also the Belgium beer.

What is most memorable are the many great musicians I have played with — early on, playing a five night, four week stint as part of Richard "Groove" Holmes's band with Sonny Stitt was the ultimate bebop experience. When I was playing with the Jimmy McGriff-Hank Crawford Band, Stanley Turrentine joined us for a few memorable concerts. When I played with Stanley, my first thought on stage was that he was on the first jazz record I ever bought, Kenny Burrell's "Midnight Blue."

There are musicians who are also very good friends and mentors — especially Hank Crawford, Trudy Pitts and Mr. "C" (Bill Carney), and Charles Earland. Early on, we would be playing every night of the week and twice on Sundays, so if no one performance stands out, the total experiences are very strong and really made me who I am. There are musicians who have meant a great deal to me and my playing — with Charles, there was no holding back; you played with everything you had whether there was one person or a thousand people in the audience. Eric Alexander and Jim Rotondi were in that band and they remain as friends and musical collaborators. Trudy and Bill were my start in jazz, and standing next to Hank Crawford, I couldn't help but play the blues.

In 2005, I was asked to be the musical director of An Organ Summit Supreme in Newark, NJ — where I had first heard the organ greats — within weeks I was play-

ing with them in the now long defunct Newark clubs, places like the Key Club and the Cadillac Club. The concert was a tribute to Jimmy McGriff, who while ill with multiple sclerosis (MS), still held an audience. The last set, I played with Lonnie Smith and David Newman and with my long time friend Rudy Petschauer on drums. My wife Carol and David's wife Karen told me no one took a breath during one of my solos. I don't even remember it, but it was a real day of memory and tribute. Twelve hundred people of all ages had come out — hip, young guys were dancing with equally hip grandmas; the vibe in the room was incredible.

Having my own working group these many years is great. We've developed a high level of communication and the audience response across generations has been exciting. Every time we have a new CD out and new music, it's especially exciting for us to play, too.

JJG: Great stories – thanks! At your stage of musical development, what are you working on?

BD: This varies according to the musical situation which is on the horizon. I may have music to learn for my own gigs or recordings, or someone else's gig. This makes practicing easier for me because I know what I need to work on. At other times, I might start off my practice session by playing a tune and eventually finding something that I want to expand on — maybe play-

ing over a specific chord. I constantly work on technique, especially in terms of having a fluid sound. I listen to a lot of recorded music and may hear something that I want to transcribe: it could be an entire solo or maybe one chorus or a tune that I'd like to learn. And, I'm always working at expanding my vocabulary of musical ideas and further developing my personal style and sound.

JJG: Excellent. Bob, thank you so much for your time! Any other closing message for our readers?

BD: Express your own self through your instrument; develop your own sound, your own means of expression.

Selected discography as a leader:

Shadow Box (Savant Records)
Playing For Keeps (Savant Records)
Shifting Sands (Savant Records)
DeVos Groove Guitar! (Blues Leaf Records)

Videos:

http://www.youtube.com/user/gittar08/videos Bob can be reached at www.bobdevosjazzguitar.com

Dr. Marc Ybaben can be reached at: marcwhy@comcast.net

"Shadow Box" Analysis by Bob DeVos

I was listening to Herbie Hancock's CD "Maiden Voyage" and started thinking about the tune *Eye of The Hurricane* and George Coleman's solo on that track. The melody does not sound like a blues, but once the head is over, the soloing changes are F minor blues.

When composing *Shadow Box*, I liked the idea of similarly writing an F minor blowing vehicle with a melody and chord changes that didn't hint that the tune would become a minor blues. There are many C minor blues — *Mr. P.C.* and *Birk's Works* — but I thought F minor would be a good key, as it sits well in both the guitar and tenor saxophone ranges.

There is something else: Many of my tunes — *Maine Stay*, *Shifting Sands*, *Speech Without Words*, *Lost and Found* — have melodies that listeners and players respond to readily, but the harmonic structure is complex. This is true of *Shadow Box*.

Shadow Box begins with a 16-bar vamp over a Gb Lydian bass line which leads into the main theme. The first melodic theme is in the first 8 bars of the A section. That theme is constructed from an F minor pentatonic scale. Its chordal harmony adds color and complexity; it moves towards the key of Ab Major. I am making use of tritone substitutions here with the BMaj7#11 chord acting as a sort of F7 chord leading to Bbm7, and A7#5 as an Eb7 leading to Ab.

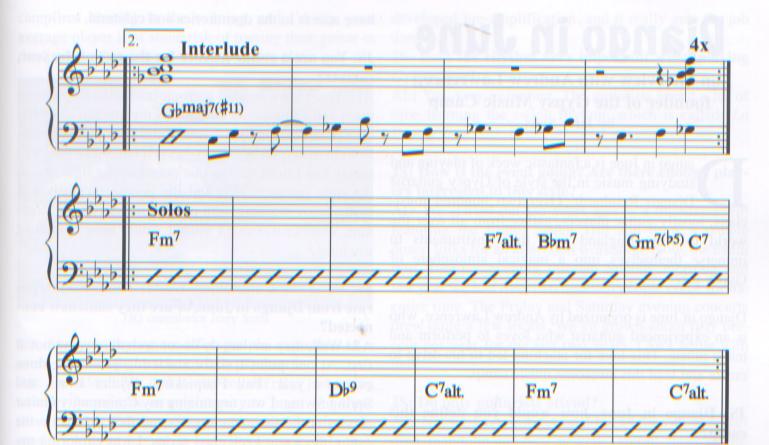
The next 8 bars has one 4-bar repeating melodic theme that plays over two different sets of 4-bar chord changes, so when the melody is repeated it sounds different. I am still playing around with the key of Ab here, again with some tritone substitution with the B13 chord instead of F7. I lead things back to F minor in the two bars of ¾ time, except that we go back into the Gb Lydian vamp for 4 bars before repeating Letter A.

After repeating Letter A, we take the second ending into the 16-bar Gb Lydian vamp, which both serves as a springboard for each of the soloists and as an ostinato vamp for the drum solo.

Shadow Box

Bob DeVos Gbmaj7(#11) D|maj7 Fm⁷ Ebm⁷ A7(#5) B♭m⁷ Dbmaj7 Cm7 Dbmaj7 Cm7(b6) Ebm⁷ Ab13 Db13 Cm¹¹ \mathbf{B}^{13}

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JJG Quiz #1 Answers

- 1. Gibson ES-150, 16" (1930s model)
- 2. Jimmy Raney
- 3. Jimmy Raney
- 4. Experiments with Pops, 1967
- 5. Terry Smith
- 6. Sal Salvador
- 7. Johnny Smith
- 8. Howard Roberts
- 9. Guild George Barnes Model
- Kenny Burrell, Jim Hall, Attila Zoller, Doug Raney

JJG Quiz #2 Answers

- 1. Makin' It, Take Your Pick
- 2. Howard Roberts
- Jim Hall, Howard Roberts,
 John Pisano, Dennis Budimir,
 Gabor Szabo, Larry Coryell
- 4. Gabor Szabo
- 5. Single Pickup
- 6. Jim Hall
- 7. Hank Garland
- 8. Ollie Halsall / Gibson SG Custom
- 9. Dick Garcia, Toots Thielemans
- 10. Oscar Moore, Irving Ashby, John Collins, (Les Paul)