

I N V I S I B L E

BILLY JENKINS

J U K E B O X

Every month we test a musician with a series of records which they comment on and mark out of five – with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear.



KEN STUBBS

BILLY JENKINS is the Groucho Marx of modern music – funny, talented and anarchic. Developing an original, highly theatrical guitar style that he terms “spazz”, he has recorded more than 20 albums over the last 15 years, many of them made with his occasional, all-star British big band, the Voice of God Collective. Jenkins rejects ideology, categorisation, commercialism and the over-reliance on technology, and describes his musical philosophy as *Don't be frightened, I do not mean to hurt you*. Now 36, for the last decade he has been the curator (his phrase: the “Rigsby”) of Greenwich's Wood Wharf recording studios complex. This month he is touring with Steve Noble and Roberto Bellatalla in *The Shakedown Club* and promoting the *First Aural Art Exhibition*, recorded highlights from the last ten years – selected by a panel of 18. Last year he released three cassettes entitled *Big Fights* which contain recordings of 12 three-minute guitar and percussion exchanges in the form of boxing matches. In keeping with this concept, Billy Jenkins was tested under the strictest WBO/WBA/IBF/WI/MU conditions: three minutes (max) per track to answer; more than three wrong and he was out of the competition.

Billy Jenkins was tested by Philip Watson

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART

“Dali's Car” from *Trout Mask Replica* (Reprise).

Seconds out, round 1.

That was a track from *Trout Mask Replica* by Captain Beefheart. I recently played this album to a prominent English saxophonist, who will have to remain nameless but who leans towards ECM-ish type music, and I was shocked and disturbed to realise that he had never heard any Beefheart. My producer, Tony Messenger, is a great fan of Captain Beefheart and he's done some disgraceful things mixing Beefheart cuts with Prince drum tracks, and I very much admire the effect he creates. There's something raw, exciting, naive and stimulating about Captain Beefheart. Every copy of this album that I've ever heard is scratched which is great because it means they've been played a lot, and it adds to the music. Five out of five. How long have we had?

One minute, 20 seconds.

Shit. Er . . .

This album was produced by Frank Zappa. Is he an influence?

I was very much interested in Zappa when I was younger because of his skill as an arranger and writer. I also enjoyed his guitar playing and his conceptual ideas – he's very much an all-round musician. Although I gave up on Zappa at the titties-and-beer phase . . . Er, although I've enjoyed Beefheart, I haven't continued to listen to his records. It's cruel to say, but Beefheart is a little like JJ Cale in that he sets up a musical situation in one album and the next five are all the same. Likewise Johnny “Guitar” Watson who has three tracks on each side at the same tempo on every album. Maybe Beefheart isn't quite that bad, so I ask myself, [*Five seconds.*] (Spoken very fast) why I haven't continued to listen to him, but the truth is I've been too busy playing.

JAD FAIR

“I Got You” and “Deadmen Walk” from *Great Expectation* (Bad Alchemy).

It's either Kahondo Style or The Flying Lizards or Christian Marclay.

Not bad, it's certainly in that arena.

Well, they don't rehearse at Wood Wharf, so

I don't know who it is.

It's Jad Fair.

Who's that?

An American-primitive proto-punk rocker, very much respected on the present guitar underground, people like Sonic Youth. Did you like it?

Well the medium was well performed, and I liked the use of quick stereo panning. Yeah, I enjoyed it, so even though I've only heard this brief snatch, I'll be very kind and give it five because it succeeds, it's an interesting diversion. But I won't play Beatles tunes as a matter of principle because they're well-off enough as it is and because they were very clever in stealing their influences from other people and calling it their own. So for me to hear a Beatles tune and like the arrangement is rare, I'll give it five.

You're on the ropes here Mr Jenkins – that weren't no Beatles tune.

Wasn't it “Money”?

No, it's “I Got You”. It's a James Brown song. You're joking. Oh shit, sorry, and I'm running out of time. Well the reason I got confused is because that track takes a James Brown groove over which I musically superimpose “Money, That's What I Want” because of the connection between The Beatles hard sell and James Brown's hard groove, and because . . .

That's three minutes. The bell's gone.

Ah, come on ref . . .

CHARLIE CHRISTIAN

“Solo Flight” from *Classic Jazz Guitar* (Sequel).

I forewarned you that guitarists are not my speciality: I play the instrument and listen to guitarists, but I also listen to saxophonists, trumpeters and pianists. It seems to be co-led with the clarinet which would suggest Goodman meets Christian, but I don't think it's Christian. I think it's an American recording, but I don't know, you'll have to tell me. *You were right first time.*

Yeah, I don't really know his style – I thought also it might have been Gene Krupa. I went and bought a Christian record in the same way I went and bought a Pink Floyd record – because everyone had one in their collection, no other reason. At the risk of coping out, I would give it five again. It's on the button because it's well played, it's a



workman-like, professional session.

It's been said that the history of modern jazz guitar begins with Charlie Christian. Do you agree?

But what about Eddie Lang – he was playing electric guitar at the end of the 30s as well. It's nebulous isn't it. It's like discussing who invented jazz – was it Buddy Bolden, the Original Dixieland Jazz band or Jelly Roll Morton?

You still have a few seconds left for a final quote.
I must listen to more Charlie Christian.

FRED FRITH

"The North" from *Guitar Solos 2* (Caroline).

It's British. There's a little bit of rhythm in it which would suggest an element of rockism. And because of the instrumentation, I would say Henry Cow.

Well, it was actually Fred Frith solo, although on this track he's actually playing two guitars simultaneously.

Yeah, I could tell it was him because of the spoons on the guitar.

Frith once said, "I like marginality, I embrace it completely." Is that something you identify with?

Yes, I suppose I do. If you look at minority sports, like croquet, bowls or darts, then there's always a lot of good in them which is not shared with the public at large. But it seems the longer you go on, the only way you can obtain a living is by working among those who like what you do – which is a little disappointing. So I will continue to upset the purists that demand the most left of the left non-sensical musical literacy – the type of people who have nervous breakdowns and like horrible music . . .

Break! I'm going to have to interrupt you there Mr Jenkins to keep the fight moving on. Henry Cow were considered something of a political rock band. Do you think politics has a place in music?

Well, I went to see a concert once which featured different political rock bands, but I felt they were a touch too "hessian". It was just waffle – well-meaning, intellectual waffle. They're happy deliberating it, of course, but they wouldn't die for it. But I liked this – it had form, it worked. So, it comes out level with the others: five. And I too use spoons on my guitar – we're all East Enders at heart!

RITCHIE BLACKMORE

"Burn" from *Deep Purple Live In London* (Harvest).

[Laughing] That's Deep Purple. [A long discussion ensues in which Jenkins (correctly) names the band members and discusses their individual merits.] You see, I like heavy metal because it's a wonderful, adolescent pantomime – unashamedly so. And heavy metal's good for the badge industry. Let's not forget that the role of the musician in society is to provide employment for journalists and photographers.

I can't imagine what you mean. Anyway, you're a Deep Purple fan?

I'm a fan. They were starting to go on the wane in this period, the golden period had passed, this is the purple patch of Deep Purple. So it's four-and-a-half.

STEVE ALBINI

"Nutty About Lemurs" from *Guitaror-rists* (Glitterhouse Records).

I've not heard this before. Possibly Eugene Chadbourne, but the right hand isn't fast enough for it to be him. I have no idea.

It's a guitarist called Steve Albini. He's from Chicago; used to play in a rock band called Big Black.

Well, again, I liked the full use of stereo – I didn't know people still did that these days. It's nice to have a healthy bout of panning. But I don't know about this. When would I play it? I get enough cacophony as it is in the studio – if you stand in the right spot, you can hear three bands rehearsing at the same time. That's far more interesting and chancey than what I heard here. Emotionally, it sort of held me, but only superficially. The tonality of it is just like somebody going nin-yin-yin-yin-ya, nin-yin-yin . . . there's a bit of rudeness there that I don't really want to hear. What would I listen to it for? Technique? There's nothing there. It makes me think "so what?"

Twenty seconds. Marks?

I'll give it two-and-a-half because it's half way there.

PAT METHENY

"Minuano (Six Eight)" from *Still Life (Talking)* (Geffen).



KEN STUBBS

I'll stick my neck out, grow my hair long, and suggest it's Pat Metheny.

Certainly is.

It just made me think "space-age hippy". I thought that we'd eventually get to the golden sound of the toilet roll coming off the guitar, the impurity of sound put through several effects pedals which just leaves me 50 yards away emotionally. Very nice – I like it when I'm not in the same room.

Below the belt! Do you think it has anything going for it. Isn't it beautiful melodically?

No, all I hear is an American imagined beauty. It's too prissy; it's a prime example of musical macramé, and what use is macramé to society other than for people to say, "that's a nice macramé you have hanging on your wall?" One out of five.

You can give it a negative mark if you like.

No, I wouldn't do that. The gentleman is obviously sincere in his pursuit of a musical picture, but it's not one I can relate to, it's not part of my life. A few years ago in *The Wire*, Manfred Eicher himself said, "I'm disappointed – where is the opposition?" And I thought if I had enough capital I would be that opposition because it would be nice to confront him so the picture would become whole. There's a lot of music like this coming out of Britain at the moment and to me it appears that many of the participants are stuck artistically midway between floors at Boots.

JOSE FELICIANO

"Light My Fire" from *Best of Jose Feliciano* (Kaz).

That's Jose Feliciano; "Light My Fire". I know this record inside out because I have just got hold of a single of this with "California Dreaming" on the other side, and I've just played it and played it. [He gets out his acoustic guitar and plays the tune.] I just love the feel of this, and his sound, and the vocals. You get that thing in your heart. It sounds daft, but it's actually to do with the vibrations around your middle body, it's the pitch, the feel, his delivery. I'll give this 10 out of 5. Is he still active?

I don't know – I think so.

I have a soft spot for Jose Feliciano in the same way I do for Sacha Distel and André Previn. It's their ability to crossover, to change career, but still do both very proficiently. The serious music critics dismiss him as light entertainment, but this is a success because he has crossed over bringing in emotions which are only normally accessible to a minority. And it's the intrigue of a

man with the disability of having no sight, but one is almost jealous of his aural perception. He don't half make some good music. *And like you he does standards in his own way.* Yes, I shall be borrowing this from you, if I may Mr Watson, for my new performance project: "Torch Songs of a Napalm Delivery". I will very much look forward to hearing this.

What would you like to say in the last 10 seconds?

I would like to think that Jose is still active and that he is a happy man.

EUGENE CHADBOURNE

"I'm The Only Hell Ma Mama Ever Raised" from *There'll Be No Tears Tonight* (Fundamental).

Eugene Chadbourne. [He plays along, mimicking Chadbourne's fast right-hand style.] I saw him perform locally only a few weeks ago – the third time I've seen him this year – and I think in the last 10 years I've

seen him maybe once a year on average. Nick Page, the guitarist on the *Motorway At Night* album, introduced me to Chadbourne and he played me this track called "Country and LSD" or something, and it was in the same key, and had the same structure and intent, as my piece called "Country and Western". And then I found out he was covering the same standards I was covering – "In A Sentimental Mood" and "Night and Day". It's quite intriguing that two people should have very similar ideas but never touch. It's a nice balance between disconstruction and construction, so therefore I would give him 20 out of 5.

That's a knock-out winner in the last round. Have you ever met him?

No. When there are close comparisons with someone, perhaps it's best not to. But he's bought out a vast amount of cassettes and tapes so maybe we should do a cultural exchange.

He's an incredibly fast player isn't he.

Yes, he has a good right-hand technique, it's a very quick vibrato [he demonstrates on his guitar]. Maybe it's just a nervous thing. ■