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DVD/Video/Film Reviews | Published: September 1, 2009

Bill Frisell: Solos and Films of Buster Keaton

By [John Kelman](#)

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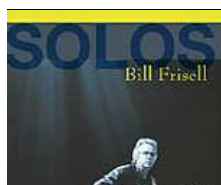
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In a career which is in 2009 entering its fourth decade in the public eye, guitarist Bill Frisell has fashioned a trajectory like no other. As comfortable playing Hank Williams country tunes as he is a **Ron Carter** blues, the guitarist has created such a distinctive sound that, even when he's playing a plain old G chord, it's immediately recognizable.



Idiosyncratic and able to take even the most conventional idea on its side, Frisell has gradually built a sizable discography—as a sideman, but more notably as a leader—that ranges from form-based free-exchange trios and larger, brass-driven ensembles, to intimate bluegrass groups and vivid solo performances. His tone is so warm, so enveloping, that it's sometimes difficult to get past the instant appeal of it to the actual note he's playing; but get to those notes and what's always there is as profoundly personal approach to lyricism, even at its most jagged, that's as much **Robert Johnson** as it is **Jim Hall**.

Two DVD releases provide a deep window into two of Frisell's best contexts. *Bill Frisell: Solos* captures Frisell, lovingly recorded at the Berkeley Church in Toronto, Canada, for a live but apparently audience-less solo set that blends his own material with traditional songs, and music by Hank Williams, Bob Dylan, and **George and Ira Gershwin**. *Films of Buster Keaton: Music by Bill Frisell* finally makes available the music that the guitarist wrote for three of Keaton's best silent films—released on CD as *Go West* (Elektra/Nonesuch, 1995) and *The High Sign/One Week* (Elektra/Nonesuch, 1995), but until now never seen *with* the films, unless you were fortunate enough to have caught one of his live performances with his then decade-old trio of bassist **Kermit Driscoll** and drummer **Joey Baron**.



Bill Frisell
Bill Frisell: Solos
Songline/Tonefield Productions
2009

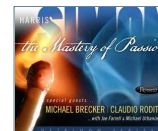
Solos is Frisell at his most intimate;

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a guitarist capable of creating a rich soundscape through use of loops, remarkable to watch as his hands and feet are busy pushing buttons and adjusting knobs, even while he's creating a broad landscape

that's surprisingly orchestral, given it's just one man, one guitar and, admittedly, an array of effects. Reverb, loops, distortion and other sound processing is used to great effect, whether it's on the guitarist's melodic but still somehow twisted "Throughout" (erroneously linked with "Ron Carter," which is really just a continuation of "Throughout") to the more heavily effects-laden "Boubacar," which would ultimately show up on the world music-centric *The Intercontinentals* (Nonesuch, 2003).

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Even when Frisell has a set list in mind, it's usually a fluid one, allowing the guitarist to go from song to song with unpredictable segues. "After all the intellectual stuff gets out of the way, then you just play; that's the state I hope to be in when I'm really playing...it's just coming out," Frisell says in one of the brief interview clips that act as links between the songs. Frisell may not have the affect of a player who's mind is elsewhere, but it's clear, during this performance, that he's achieved the desired state. "Sometimes it takes a while for the songs to sink down deep enough for it to come out that way," he continues, "that's probably why a lot of the songs I play, I've been playing them for a long time."

An answer to the question some fans have, then, about why he continues to rehash so many of the same songs over and over again. As recently as the [2009 Montreal Jazz Festival](#), Frisell—this time with a quartet—continued to mine some of the same material. But here, without either the safety net of a group or the inherent encumbrances of same (even though a Frisell group performance manages to be almost as liquid), Frisell can take his time finding his way to a tune's core. Ethereal, with music seeming to come from everywhere thanks to both Frisell's own approach to processing and the rich sound of the church, he winds his way through a rubato look at the traditional "Wildwood Flower," ending the main performance with his own "Poem for Eva." Frisell has always possessed an inimitable ability to mine the simplest of ideas and find new nuances; watching him at work is a revelation for musicians and non-musicians alike.




Joe Scofield
by Stein Hofve

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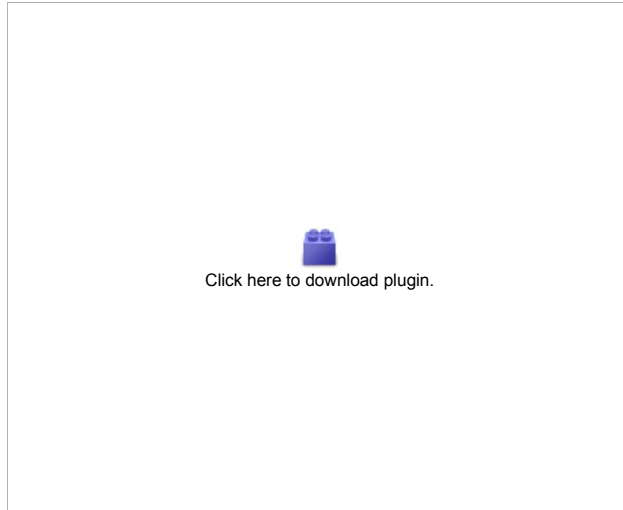


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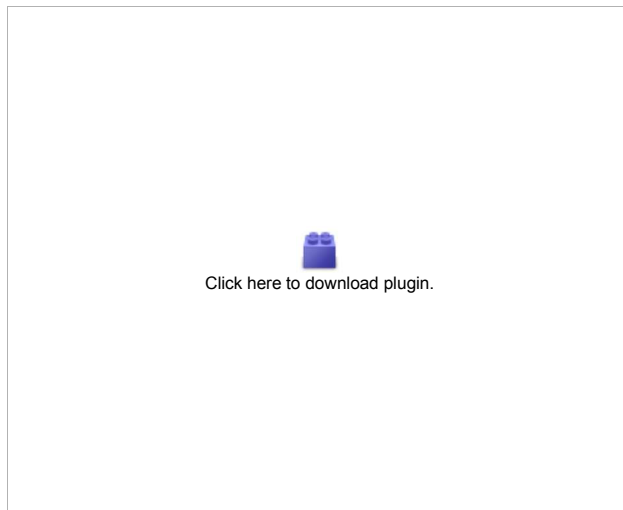
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Bill Frisell, "Song for Eva," from *Bill Frisell: Solos*



Bill Frisell, Kermit Driscoll and Joey Baron performing *Films of Buster Keaton: Music by Bill Frisell* live in Germany, 1994. Excerpt from *Go West*



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