



<http://www.jambase.com/Articles/19467/Bill-Frisell-Keep-Your-Eyes-Open/0>

Bill Frisell: Keep Your Eyes Open

by: [Dennis Cook](#)

The first time you hear [Bill Frisell](#) play will change the way you hear guitar forevermore. His approach is so textured, nuanced and wholly individual that it stands the instrument on its head and makes one rethink all of their preconceptions. While generally tucked into the jazz section, Frisell actually draws on the gusto of [Western swing](#), African modal exploration, Sonic Youth worthy avant-garde-ism and a healthy chunk of Hendrix's wild, intense ability to suss out strange connections others simply miss. He has been a dazzling collaborator with the likes of [John Zorn](#), [Petra Haden](#), Paul Motian, [John Scofield](#), Allen Ginsberg, [Earth](#), [Rickie Lee Jones](#), [Vernon Reid](#) and most recently [Jenny Scheinman](#) (violin), Greg Leisz (steel guitars, mandolin) and [Viktor Krauss](#) (bass) on [Disfarmer](#) (released 7/21/09 on Nonesuch), where Frisell and company put music to the late photographer **Michael Disfarmer's** black and white photo portraits of the 1940s and '50s. It's just one more remarkable piece of work that adds to the diversity and intrinsic curiosity that resides firmly in all of Frisell's music, a player for whom the whole expanse of sound is open and eagerly explored.



Bill Frisell by Michael Wilson

His gentle demeanor, soft hands and bright smile hint at only part of his character, perhaps disguising the rugged string mangler that surfaced on Earth's *Bees Made Honey In The Lion's Skull* last year or the revered-but-brutal [Naked City](#) recordings he's done with Zorn. He's equally comfortable flying on Brazilian airs as he is pouring country licks into fusion frames. From his early days as part of the stellar '80s ECM Records stable to his recent projects with David Piltch, [Loudon Wainwright III](#) and Jenny Scheinman, Frisell's involvement is a signal that one has stumbled across music worthy of one's precious time, worthy of pondering at length, if only to hear what streaming beauty or wild hair Frisell has unleashed this round. To watch the man work – as one can do with intense focus on his splendid new DVD, [Solos: The Jazz Sessions](#) (arriving September 1

real time. His overall movements can be somewhat slight at first glance but, like many great players, one picks up on volumes in his changing expression and subtle bodily shifts. In fact, Frisell might be the calmest rock god ever, a shredder true but without all the usual thrusting and leaping about.

JamBase had the honor of a slice of Frisell's time to discuss *Solos*, it's equally stunning companion DVD ([Films of Buster Keaton: Go West, One Week, High Sign](#) with original scores by Frisell – and his music in general. One of the few living musicians afforded the same kind of respect we usually reserve for brilliant players only after they're no longer around to appreciate it, Frisell is an originator and an inspiration of the highest order, and we're chuffed as heck to hear what's on his mind.

JamBase: I watched the *Keaton* DVD with my son, who is two-and-half years old, and he really flipped for it. I think there's something really special about how instrumental music can bypass a lot of our language oriented logic, and I saw that perfectly in my son's giggling, delighted reaction.

Bill Frisell: That's so cool. This was the very first experience I'd ever had trying to put my music to film, and, like a lot of things I do, it just seemed to fall into my lap. It wasn't my idea in the first place. There's this place in Brooklyn that's changed a lot now but it's called St. Anne's Church, and they used to put concerts on in this, I wouldn't say *quite* dilapidated, but really old, cool space. I had done a number of concerts there and they had this idea of doing something different than just having one of my bands play.



Disfarmer Quartet by Michael Wilson

I wasn't even really that familiar with [Buster Keaton](#) when it started. I'd seen bits and pieces as a kid and just thought of him as this funny guy. The whole thing was an amazing education for me, and the perfect way to get my feet wet in experimenting with what happens with the music and the relationship to [the image]. I didn't feel like there were any rules I had to follow.

JamBase: It puts you in a space where you don't have any of your normal boundaries or touchstones.

Bill Frisell: And also because I'd never done this before I was just like a painter that'd never painted before, throwing paint around and seeing what happens. For me, it was a really cool way to operate without anybody breathing down my neck [*laughs*]. If my first experience had been doing some Hollywood movie I would have had a lot more preconceptions about what I was doing.

I wonder if the particular subject matter, Buster Keaton, brings in something that's hard to bring into music sometimes, namely humor.

There's that but one of the things I learned was there was so much more in there [with Keaton]. That's where I really felt like I hooked up. It was almost like he was another player in the band or something. The range of emotion in what he does is so huge. It's incredible. Every gamut of human emotion is there in what he does.

I'm a big silent film fan and Keaton has long been my main guy. Seeing two of my favorite artists paired up in this way was unique and felt right. Despite the expanse of years between you two, there's a spark that emerges in this collaboration where it's clear you two had some things to say to each other.



Bill Frisell by Jimmy Katz

That was cool, too, like this feeling that I worked with him though I never met him for real.

That's one of the gifts that art allows, a conversation with people you never could meet in the flesh. In covering the canon in jazz you're doing that all the time. Rock does the same thing to a degree but this idea of a canon, a group of songs passed around and played with some regularity, is at the core of jazz's conversation with the past. You're never going to meet Thelonious Monk but you'll *meet* Monk in attacking his music.

You're describing a huge part of the whole process really. Monk is a whole subject right there, but you can still connect with people who played with him, like I play with [drummer] Paul Motian. All these lines in this music mean everyone's learning and giving stuff back and forth. It's an incredible feeling to just get some of this stuff passed around.

And part of why this music feels so vibrant is it's never treated like an artifact. Given how you're often defined as a jazz musician, I've long wondered if you've ever had the urge to put together a straight rock band?

I wish I could! With a lot of groups that I play in and the places we have the potential to play is pretty huge. I don't even really think of the *style* we play in, but I do wish we had the chance to play in places like High Sierra [Music Festival] more. I like to think I could play at the same places the Grateful Dead play [*laughs*].

I think you could, and that broad spectrum in your music is why I opened nearly two years of public radio shows with pieces you played on - there's a lot of directions to explore in your work. Though you're filed under 'Jazz,' I've never felt you adhered to any one pathway or genre.



Bill Frisell by Jimmy Katz

It's frustrating. I know we have to categorize it in some way but those labels tend to keep people apart. Hopefully just the music comes through and people are reacting to the music itself rather than to what it's supposed to be called. You have to ascribe something in some way so people know what it is, but ultimately it's so much beyond any kind of descriptor. Now I sound like an old whiner! But, I think back to the old Fillmore shows and what kinds of things happened there with different bands together on one night, Miles Davis and Neil Young or Charles Lloyd. I think it still happens a bit now but it seemed more normal then to have Ravi Shankar and Jimi Hendrix on the same bill. It makes total sense to the way I like to listen to music, where I'll listen to Bach and then some African music then Monk. It makes sense to me!

Musicians tend to find places of overlap and connection rather than difference in the music they come across. Has that wide variation and open-mind posed challenges for you? It's much harder to market music that doesn't conform to expectations.

Well, for me, it's maybe what's kept me going. Like you said, it's maybe a little daunting for the record company – if I have one – or my managers to market, but I've been really lucky that the people around me are supportive of that way of doing things. Just booking gigs, I feel sorry for my booking agent [*laughs*]. I have all these different bands, but that's how I work. It's not one group that goes out and does a specific show. Every time they try to get me something they have to go through the problem of trying to explain what I'm doing this time. I know it makes it 20 times harder in that way, but I've been very lucky to have these people.

Continue reading for more on Bill Frisell...



It's still kind of weird playing alone. Music for me is so much about what happens in the relationships with other people.

-Bill Frisell

You also have this ever-growing circle of likeminded players like Jenny Scheinman and [Eyvind Kang](#) who approach music in a similar way. Tell me a bit of what this community of compatriots is like.

Talk about being lucky! Now, it's like this full orchestra surrounding me. I have friends, really close friends, this group of people where I don't have to explain anything. There's a huge body of music that we've all played together, so it's like a live organism that keeps on growing. The circle of people just keeps growing, but there's maybe a core of a bunch of people that we put in different combinations together. We come together and then we go apart and do our own things, and when we come together again everybody just has more experiences that keep feeding this kind of giant plant.

I like that image, and it just keeps throwing out fresh tendrils the longer you all play together.

That's what I feel, and that's where I feel just blessed. I'm just so lucky to have these people.

You have a pretty unique style, and finding players who can lock in with your particular style seems like another challenge. You're not up there whipping off Wes Montgomery licks generally and finding musicians, particularly other guitarists, isn't easy, yet you've found folks like Greg Leisz who vibrate on your frequency.

[Greg] is just awesome! That thing I was saying about not having to talk about it, I had that from the first moment with him, like he was the other half of my brain. He's left-handed and I'm right-handed and our birthdays are exactly six months apart. There's some weird sort of balance thing.



Bill Frisell by Jimmy Katz

Have you found other guitarist with a similar crossover, even if not to the same degree?

There's sort of a brotherhood of guitar [*laughs*]. There's tons of guitar players I love to play with, and that's part of what attracted me to [the instrument] in the beginning, the whole idea of having a band and a bunch of guitars all banging away together. I don't do it that much on gigs but I've played recently with [Russell Malone](#) and [Jim Hall](#), who was my teacher. I've done things with [Marc Ribot](#).

Marc's a perfect example of the kind of guys you seem to lock up well with, fellow travelers who've carved their own way on an instrument that isn't easy to establish an individual identity on. It's hard to speak clearly on electric guitar in particular with so much history behind it now. I have a soft spot for the Bass Desires band with Marc Johnson and [John Scofield](#).

Me, too! It was sort of our Allman Brothers Band [*laughs*]. Maybe two years ago we did a Bass Desires reunion in Europe, three or five concerts, and it was cool. We didn't try to recreate anything. We're where we're at now and we did that. Like a lot of my projects, it was a certain time where it was meant to happen. Same thing with things I've done with John Zorn. People still always ask about Naked City, and there was a time for that but we've all moved on. I'm not saying that I don't like these projects but you can't really go back, though some people wish we would. It doesn't feel right.

The first thing I ever heard by you was Eberhard Weber's *Fluid Rustle* [1979], which may be your first official studio recording. What's amazing in hindsight is how together your sound is out of the gate. Your future style in germinal form is already apparent.

That is [my first], though I'd done a couple homemade things. It's such a gradual, day-to-day thing chipping away at [one's personal style]. It's not really a matter of finding it. I think so much of it comes from your limitations. I'm hearing something in my head and I'm striving towards it but can't ever really get there. So, you just do what you can do in the moment. And so much of it is what you CAN'T do in what it really sounds like. It's a good thing. It's what makes each of us unique. If we could do whatever we wanted at any moment then there'd be no music [laughs]. Music just keeps on going and going and you never get to the end of it. You just keep trying and trying and trying. There's no finish line or anything.



Bill Frisell

On a technical level, I'm always struck by your use of volume. You're able to make people lean in and listen intently. I liken it to what [The Band](#) did with rock 'n' roll in the '60s.

I actually like to play at all kinds of volumes [laughs]. I like what happens when you play loud, unless it gets to the pain level; I'm not into that. Sometimes when you play soft it intensifies the communication between the musicians playing and hopefully that intensity can project out past the fact that it's soft and become powerful. I like when there's dynamics. They suck people in. I just don't want it to be the same thing all the time. I like when there's big surprises, big jumps in there, too.

With the people I'm playing with there's tunes we can play where it's not about the tune itself, which becomes a kind of framework where all kinds of new things can happen. I need to write new things and come up with new compositions and all that, but there's something great when people have this shared conversation that they've played for years and years.

Your approach to [Bob Dylan](#)'s music in recent years shows off this dynamic, where a shared composition is approached in a way that's fresh and illuminating. What got you interested in bringing in what he does into what you do?

That just seemed like a cool thing for me because he's just been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I first heard him on his first records in the early '60s, right close to the same time I was being attracted to the guitar through surf music and all that. It's been a part of my life the whole time, so a lot of his songs are just in my blood. Those are my standard songs, where the generation before jazz guys would play George Gershwin songs – and I play those songs, too – but he's sort of George Gershwin for me.

You're helping expand the canon, changing the definition of what's deemed worthy of inclusion. It doesn't have to be just "My Funny Valentine," as fantastic as that

song is.

Aside from the simple structures of a Dylan song... no, 'simple' isn't the right word. The words themselves become part of what's generating what I'm playing. You can't separate the melody and chords from the words. That gives you this whole other emotional edge to draw from, even though it's instrumental music. There's all this stuff I use that goes beyond the notes and the scale and the chords.

I love playing with singers, or pretending I'm a singer [laughs]. Greg Leisz has played with many great singers and when we play together I get to pretend to be a singer and he always backs it up and knows just what to do. With a singer you're trying to find a place where you're supporting them but you're also being subversive and having an effect on the emotion of a song but coming more from the inside instead of blasting out all over the top of it.



Bill Frisell by Jimmy Katz

I wanted to make sure we touched on how you incorporate country music into the instrumental work you do. You're one of the few guitarists that's ever reminded me of [Merle Travis](#) when you get cookin'.

He's awesome! That's a huge compliment because I'm not even close to him! Just yesterday, I was looking at footage of him on YouTube. [Country music] wasn't something I was drawn to consciously, and when I was younger growing up in Colorado I think I shunned it. It seemed corny when I was younger but as I got older I began to realize how music is all coming from the same place, the same root, and also realizing how much music I'd heard as a kid that'd come from [country music].

As a longtime attendee of your shows, I find it fascinating to watch the music manifest itself in your body, something *Solos* lets fans do in the comfort of their own home.

It's pretty uncomfortable to witness my body jerking around. It's kinda hard to watch, for me. The music is going out more from my head and what's going on with my body is just residual. The music just takes over and it's certainly the last thing I'm conscious of.

We've been talking a lot about collaboration so I wonder what it's like for you to be so exposed in these solo performances?

It's still kind of weird playing alone. Music for me is so much about what happens in the relationships with other people. There's this momentum when you or someone else puts

something out into the air. It's like a conversation where things go back and forth and it generates into more and more and more. But, when you're alone you put an idea out into space and then it just keeps on floating out there and you're stuck! It doesn't come back to you, really, the way it works. First of all, I have to get really comfortable with the idea that there's going to be space. When I get uncomfortable I try to fill up that space. It's been a challenge. I first tried to play alone 30 years ago and it's a common guitar player thing, but for me it's always been a challenge.

Well, this setting makes one get down to some of their primal truths as a musician because there's no one else to play off of. And whether we need to see and interact with these truths or not, it's not always fun, per se. I think it's a brave thing to do. So, what is the reflection coming back at you in this solo experience?

I guess I'm just looking for progress or something. It's almost an emotional thing. Each time I hope I get a little more comfortable with being myself. All music is that anyway, whether there's other people or not. It's all an invitation to take the next step.

JamBase | Above And Beyond
Go See Live Music!