



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

Alan Pasqua: Lifetime's Aglow, A (non) Antisocial Interaction

Alan Pasqua | Cryptogramophone

By [Phil DiPietro](#)



Any discussion of Alan Pasqua must start with at the scintillating beginning of his official discography. His first recorded performance featured the then 23-year-old wunderkind of Fender Rhodes on The New Tony Williams Lifetime's *Believe It* (Columbia, 1975). His first sounds committed to wax were texturized Rhodes thickening "Snake Oil," then shadowing its serpentine melody as stated by Allan Holdsworth, a guitarist seemingly stolen from the future by the unit's provocative leader, the

now-legendary Williams. At that time, the drummer had rededicated himself to somehow reenergizing his already incendiary Lifetime phase by completely revamping it with new talent.

Pasqua was a critical piece of Williams' balls-to-the-wall outfit, chosen as much for his blossoming compositional leanings, fostered by his studies with George Russell, as his flat-out blistering skills as a pure player. His first composition for Lifetime, and therefore the world, was his only one on that cataclysmic debut. It was a composition so exciting, and still so fresh, that it remains in Allan Holdsworth's set lists today, in performances with and without Pasqua, usually as an encore: the prototypical jazz/fusion masterpiece, "Proto Cosmos."

The New Lifetime supernova burst after two tumultuous years, but spawned an offshoot solar system in which Pasqua and Holdsworth remain stars today. Pasqua's career veered into the highest annals of popular music, following up the Lifetime stint immediately with fellas named Dylan and Santana, helping to launch the career of one Eddie Money, and compiling an overwhelming, pages-deep list of session appearances. Even as his industry path continued to glitter with such jewels as co-composing the theme for the CBS evening news (still running since 1987), his love for all forms of jazz never waned. While continuing to record with Holdsworth, Pasqua began to carve out a separate career path as a formidable acoustic pianist, perhaps Los Angeles' leading light in that genre, with releases such as *Milagro* (Postcards, 1993) and *Dedications* (Postcards, 1995).

Today, Pasqua's career revolves more closely around the jazz world, as he continues to release acoustic sessions with his former college roommate, drummer Peter Erskine. But he's somehow remained relatively underrated as a composer and performer of electric jazz, and unheralded for his groundbreaking and seminal work, both harmonically and as a sound-sculptor, as it relates to the evolution of electric piano styles. That

changed in 2007, as fans of electric jazz were gifted with two stellar recordings, one of which was a live DVD with Allan Holdsworth, complete with state-of-the-art sound and video quality, recorded at Yoshi's. But it was *The Antisocial Club* (Cryptogramophone), one of 2007's finest releases, which packed the most stunning surprises. With new personnel, new tunes, a new keyboard providing a new arsenal of sounds, and a discriminating genre-specific aesthetic that remains intact and strikingly up-to-date, Pasqua accomplished nothing less than re-evolutionizing that previous Lifetime right into this one. It's like he never stopped--and, as we'll find out, he never really did.

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Back to Electric, Part One

All About Jazz: Sorry, but I'm suddenly intimidated. In preparation for this, I discovered I was not aware of all this bio for you. I am a fan of electric jazz and know you from that. I had no idea about Santana and Dylan and all of that. Did you tour with these people too?

Alan Pasqua: I was in Bob's band for a year and I was in Carlos' band for two years.

In 1978 I played with Dylan. I met Carlos, actually, while I was out on the road with Bob--he knew of my work with Tony and we just kind of stayed in touch. When I finished my time with Bob he had an opening in his band for a keyboardist so he gave me the call. I went up to the Bay Area and did that for a couple of years.

That was a lot of fun! I grew up of course playing in rock music and bands when I was a kid so it was like the best of both worlds. I got a chance to improvise but also play some good tunes. With Santana I was on *Marathon* (Columbia, 1979) and *Zebop!* (Columbia, 1981). [Keith Olsen](#) produced that--it was a more commercial venture. With Dylan it was *Street Legal* (Columbia, 1978) and *Live at the Budokan* (Columbia, 1979). Really different [laughs].

AAJ: Pardon me for not knowing about that. And I was presuming to start by talking about your new record, which is ridiculously great, and go backwards, if we are going to possibly hope to cover Alan Pasqua. The inspiration for the new record seems to me to be totally out of the Tony Williams Lifetime thing, but people are saying it's out of the Miles electric thing too. Do you feel the same way?



AP: No--it's uh--a great question! I'm so glad you asked [laughs].

It certainly came out of my time with Tony. I think--if I kind of wind the clock backwards--Allan Holdsworth and I reunited a couple of years ago after a long spell where we hadn't played anything together. He showed up at one of my gigs--it was a total surprise--and it was so good to see him. Then I was over in Europe touring and was talking to one of the booking agents over there and mentioned to him that I was thinking about putting something together with Allan and he just jumped at it and said, "Do it and I'll book it!" That started the while thing rolling. We did that [live DVD](#) at

Yoshi's in Oakland, which came out really nicely. A great production company and film crew did that called Altitude Digital--wonderful cats from Austin Texas.

AAJ: They did that [Out Trio](#) thing with Terry Bozzio, Alex Machacek and Patrick O'Hearn.

AP: Exactly.

So I had to dust off, you know--I had to get rid of the cobwebs because I hadn't played electric music in a long time--electric improvised music. So it just kind of led me down the road, of course, of equipment and all that stuff and I finally discovered this Swedish keyboard called the [Nord](#). It was such a shot in the arm for me because I had heard it and I thought it sounded incredible and then I actually played it and it knocked me out. It allowed me to do things--it's a really intuitive instrument so you can kind of program it to do what you need it to do--and in real time.

Before, like in the old days with Tony, I had an [Echoplex](#) and a phaser and a wah-wah pedal and a volume pedal and all that stuff.

AAJ: I was going to ask you about that--you've always been right there--an incredible sound guy--at the cutting edge as far as just sounds on the electric keyboards--let alone what you're playing. You obviously take great care as far as what's going on in terms of those great sounds.

AP: I'm interested, you're right, in those more classic sounds and I don't like to spend a lot of time getting it. I'm not one of those guys that likes to tweak stuff forever. I get real bored real fast, so I need to have something good quickly. So again, it's the Nord that just flat knocked me out--and that kind of was the basis for this whole *Antisocial Club* record.

AAJ: Those sounds?

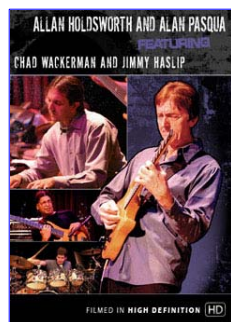
AP: Yeah. Once I had that instrument and I started working with it more it was like--ah-hah. I was just getting really familiar with it when we made the record. Then Holdsworth and I went on the road this last summer to Japan and Europe and I really got the chance to play with it and really get it to work even more favorably--to check it out and see what it could do.

AAJ: So you're saying you made the *Antisocial Club* record before the Holdsworth tour, even though it took until, like November for the CD to come out?

AP: Yeah. It came out in October [2007] and we made it in March.

AAJ: Now I get it. That's incredibly fast--you just got the Nord last year and most of the sounds on the *Antisocial Club* are on that?

AP: Everything on the CD is the Nord except, of course, my acoustic piano on the last track. Everything else is on that one instrument.



AAJ: Well, that's surprising. I was going to ask you about the acoustic piano recording on "George Russell," because it had a treated quality to it. Now you're saying it's the other way around.

AP: That's the Nord processed with like, [DDI](#), and a bunch of other stuff. It has a great acoustic piano sample on it and really terrific Rhodes and great, built in, on-board effects, which is kind of the capper for me. That's what makes it really shine--really sets it apart--because then you don't have to bring all that other stuff with you--just the

cables alone.

AAJ: You get that really great processed Rhodes sound on the first tune--that

dirty Rhodes. You used to have to use like--a whole macro circuit board lookin' thing!!

AP: [laughs] There's this great analog overdrive circuit on that keyboard. Then you can program that in real time, you can add just by hitting a pitch wheel--you can add tons of distortion or not--just kind of dial in what you want--it's really great.

So a lot of the inspiration from the record came from Tony. And I mean, of course, Allan--but really Allan in the days of Tony. Then before Tony, when I was in Boston, I was a member of a band of a great bandleader and great trumpet player named [Stanton Davis](#), who was one of George Russell's really kind of disciples. He had a band called "Ghetto Mysticism" and I was the piano player in that band for awhile. [Bill Pierce](#) played tenor, sometimes Leonard Brown played tenor, and Jerry--[Jerome Harris](#)--was the bass player for awhile. It was a killer band! It was all instrumental groove, funk music and it was a tremendous influence on this project as well.

AAJ: Billy Pierce is still here at Berklee--we'll get on him to get you back here.

AP: I love him. I want to come back to too. I love New England I grew up in New Jersey but I consider myself more of a New Englander. I just totally get it and I just love it up there. I am a die-hard Red Sox fan--like crazy, I mean *crazy*--and so's the whole family. We'll be back one day.

AAJ: So what's the chronology on Boston and Stanton Davis.

AP: I was in Boston from '72 to '75 and then I went on the road with Tony right during that time.

AAJ: So critics are making that Miles connection just because there's a trumpet in the band then?

AP: [laughs] Yee-ah. I mean I hear this stuff about *On the Corner* (Columbia, 1972) and [*In a*] *Silent Way* (Columbia, 1969) and *Bitches Brew* (Columbia, 1969) or whatever and, my God, I love those records--good grief, I listened to that stuff so much when I was in school and back in Boston. So of course I'm going to be influenced to some degree by that, but I listened to M'wandishi [Herbie Hancock] just as much and the Meters and Kool and the Gang and Sly and then...Tony! *Emergency!* (Polydor, 1969) and *Ego* (Polydor, 1970) and all that stuff. I don't know--I think people that have reviewed the record and have made that comparison so strong to say it's another Miles Davis rip--I think they missed the boat.

AAJ: Well, the thing is, all the reviews seem to mention Miles, but I only saw one mentioned it negatively. The rest are saying the record is great!

AP: Well, most of the time, yeah, thanks. Most of the reviews have been great.

AAJ: The *Down Beat* thing pissed me off! So I presume that's what we're talking about.

AP: Some reviews, you know, they don't do their homework. They get guys to listen to half of one track and they write a review about it. They read the liner notes and if the liner notes piss them off, they include that too!

AAJ: I don't remember the liner notes.

AP: There aren't any! [laughs]

AP: I wrote one little hilarious line that describes the *Antisocial Club* in really small print and then I just thanked Jaki Byard, George Russell, Stanton and Thad. They were my teachers in Boston.

AAJ: They were all Conservatory people.

AP: Yeah. I went to NEC [New England Conservatory].

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The Antisocial Club

AAJ: NEC is really beefing it up in the jazz department. They've hired some avant-garde associated professors in there and some well-known players come up from New York regularly to give private lessons.

Getting back to the record, you use these relatively simple themes, whether fast, complex, or more spare. Let's take a fast one--"Fast Food," with that complex sax and trumpet unison line--it draws the ear in and then the band takes off.

AP: It's just that one line [sings]. The whole vehicle for that is that the one line can happen at any time in the song. Some of that comes from when I was at NEC, George Russell had the big band and we did one of his unbelievable pieces called "Living Time," which was Bill Evans trio and two full big bands.

Ironically, that's how I got to meet Tony Williams, because we took our band to New York and did "Living Time" at Carnegie Hall. Bill had already passed but Stanley Cowell was the pianist, and Sam Rivers was on the date, too. So they set my electric keyboard--I was playing Rhodes--and my amps right behind this giant yellow drum set. I was like, "Holy shit! I wonder who this is?"



[laughs] And it was Tony. And Allan Holdsworth was in the audience that night because he had just come over from England and he and Tony were formulating the new Tony Williams Lifetime. They were trying to figure out who to use for keyboards and two days later--I was living on the Cape, in West Yarmouth, in the winter for God's sake--and I got a phone call from Tony, saying, "Would you come down to New York?."

But it was that concert, "Living Time," that...

AAJ: Excuse me, but this was as a student?

AP: Yes. So, we'd be playing one groove [hums a heavy funk ostinato] and then there'd be some improvising over it and all of a sudden another conductor would be bringing in the other big band--completely different key, completely different time signature and tempo--so all that stuff was a gigantic influence on me. So take "Fast Food," that's right out of the George Russell thing, as is the song "George Russell," of course.

AAJ: The first tune, "Antisocial Club," builds off a bass line that most beginning bassists could play.

AP: That's an old R&B bass line that someone actually accused me of stealing--I mean, really, I don't want to hear about it.

AAJ: I couldn't agree more. It's similar in that you're again building off the simplest structures.

AP: I'm trying to use simple ideas against interesting harmony--melodies that will become familiar, quickly and just different concepts--morphing different themes. For instance, following up on "Fast Food"--they could be in the middle of that horn line and progression and I would just throw up a cue and bam--everything stops--and they start playing the cycle again. So it has nothing to do with a grid of tempo or time--it's just random and that creates tension, which is a really good thing in music.

AAJ: I'd like to ask you about a technique that I particularly associate with

the Rhodes work of Herbie Hancock, but you've been doing it since the Lifetime days and it occurs in a few thrilling places on your new CD. For our readers I am going to cite some specific examples on just one tune. They occur in "George Russell" at approximately 3:50-4:05, 4:12-4:30, 4:39-4:44 and, a bit differently, with superimpositions, at 4:50. What is this technique that lends such killer abstraction and weight to the chord voicings there? It occurs on "New Rhodes" and "Wicked Good" as well.

AP: Yeah, man, "Wicked Good" came right out of Boston, right [laughs].

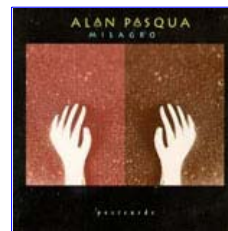
And yes, those little moments--those areas--that's totally Herbie influence and George Russell again. I'll plug different chords over different harmonic areas. So, let's take an example: if it's an F-minor chord, well the sky's the limit. I might play an A major-seventh on it, which is totally completely out. There's only one note that's in common but then I might take that major7 sound and just start moving it around and playing different major sevenths so you're getting all that stuff moving against the tonal center of F minor. Then I might hit an augmented major seventh--that's even more of a harmonic rub. I'm just moving and shuffling the pieces around and that's what creates that sound.

So, just to restate, if you're a musician and you're trying to practice this--first play like that F minor7 chord and keep the root down below, or have the bass player do it. Above it, instead of playing any of that F minor, play something totally unrelated to F, such as A major-seventh, and then keeping that F down there anchored, play a bunch of major seventh chords and really try to listen to what they sound like against that F. Some are going to sound really inside, some are going to sound completely whacked. When I'm doing that I'm not interested in keeping that F minor sound in my head, I'm interested in how many beats it's supposed to last for, so I may resolve back into it at the end of two measures, or whatever it is.

AAJ: There are very few cats that have mastered that sound on electric keyboards.

AP: It's not used that much on electric. .

AAJ: Yes, but it sounds great! I can't really pick it out in acoustic settings that well. But my ears have always perked up when Herbie did it on Rhodes and you're one of the few other cats I noticed that incorporates that in their playing. So, I mean, you're right there in '75, a couple years after *Crossings* (Warner Bros., 1971). I guess what I'm



trying to get across, in terms of the audience for the interview, is placing you, Alan Pasqua in perspective as one of the original Rhodes cats, one of the stylists, picking up on not only the sound aspect--with the pedals and the distortion and everything, but the harmonic things that make the instrument sound great. I mean, you came right out of that seminal period.

AP: Yeah, well that's right. I totally came out of that and that's where I got it all from, too. So hat's off to Herbie, man. I can't take credit for inventing it, but I'm glad I got that sound across.

AAJ: So how'd you put this band together?

AP: A lot of it was because of Jeff Gauthier, the head of Cryptogramophone. He had suggested I work with [drummer] Scott Amendola, who I knew and who I love. He suggested [guitarist] Nels Cline, who I loved but never played with. I brought in [bassist] Jimmy Haslip, who is just a dear old friend of mine--he's one of my oldest buddies in LA and of course, he was in the Holdsworth quartet with me--he is just a beautiful cat.

And then Jeff Ellwood is a tenor player that I play with in LA from time to time who just doesn't fit the mold of the usual saxophone player for me--he's basically willing to take some chances. And then, Ambrose Akimusire, I had

heard because I teach at USC [University of Southern California]--I 'm in the jazz department there. Ambrose was part of the Monk Institute gang and I heard him play and I just thought, "Man, this is the first really unique sounding trumpet cat I've heard in a long time." So I immediately I wanted him involved on it. Ambrose is great.

AAJ: Well, great band, great choices.

AP: Kind of an unusual band, but it worked.

AAJ: And we forgot [percussionist Alex] Acuna, who really adds some great sounds from moment one.

AP: Absolutely. Alex is, well, Alex is totally great.

But yeah, Jeff hooked Nels and Scott into the picture first, and we needed them.

AAJ: It's a great mix--like Nels, for example, just is not going crazy in his usual Nels super-out way.

AP: He's amazing has great ears. See, that was the amazing thing really. I came into those dates very under-prepared because I knew if this music was going to succeed it was going to succeed because of the musicians, not because of all the directions I was giving them. As soon as they heard the stuff, they just knew what to do. I didn't have to tell anybody anything. Maybe, "OK, we're going to play this line and when I point at you you're going to play it again." It was more like roadmap stuff. But conceptual stuff I did not have to discuss, which is amazing.

AAJ: But you came in with tunes, right?

AP: Oh yeah, I had the shells written--the heads to all the stuff. But all the blowing and how the stuff was going to be played was them. But you know [hums the gorgeous dual-horn melody from "Antisocial Club"]--all I had written down was D7 [laughs]. And then, you know, here's a bass line and here's what I'm going to play. Everybody just went, "OK, yeah, we get it--it's this." And they nailed it!

AAJ: You didn't come in with a recorded track or demo version or something?

AP: Nothing. We never even rehearsed. We went in and did it in two days. Come in, kind of go over the idea and record. Old school, man!

AAJ: I guess so. So it's out of your experiences with Tony and Stanton Davis and George Russell.

AP: I can add Mahavishnu [Orchestra, guitarist John McLaughlin] as a gigantic influence on me.

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The Acoustic Alan Pasqua

AAJ: Fair enough. And then, just to take the next step of trying to make an A/B comparison of that against your acoustic piano trio or ensemble type records is just...

AP: It's like my career [laughs], you know, playing in Bob Dylan's band and then doing this. It's just a whole different thing--it's just eclectic--I'm lucky, because growing up I was just able to play a lot of different kinds of music. I'm fortunate that I've been put with other musicians who've done the same--like my association with [Peter Erskine](#). Those piano trio records they're so special also, because of the cats I'm playing with.



AAJ: That last one on *Crypto, My New Old Friend* (2005)--that's a special record. Some of the familiar tunes--talk about surprisingly familiar tunes, I mean they'll bring a tear--that version of "Wichita Lineman" and especially "Smile," where you get it to the point of being able to hit almost any tone cluster on the downbeat of where that word, "Smile" occurs in the lyric...

AP: We like playing slow tunes at slow tempos. That tune came about that way because playing it I realized it has a natural transposition point in it towards the end of the lyric. It wants to go to another key. So I explored the next key and thought, "OK, I'll play it in this key." When I got to the end of it in that key I was in yet another, but when I got to the end of that one, I was actually back in the first key, just very naturally. It's an augmented triad and it keeps cycling around. So "Smile" is like "Giant Steps" in that way. It's all based on that augmented chord.

AAJ: As a listener, and maybe we should do a straw poll on this, but every time you hit that key change every muscle in my body relaxed [laughs].

AP: Ahh, good [laughs].

AAJ: It has a physical effect--very cool stuff. So, I hate to reference other players or be facile, but it has a space about it, a church-like thing that's very much like a Keith Jarrett record.

AP: No man--don't hate to say that. That's like a giant compliment. Keith is an unbelievable influence on tone production and concept and spirit.

AAJ: So much of the record is down-tempo, languid or slow. But some of the lines themselves, like the runs you get off on "All the Things" have ridiculous chops and velocity to them.

AP: I'm more interested in melody--it means more to me I guess. That's why I write those kinds of tunes, in addition to the non-originals I choose.

AAJ: That recording--the sound quality itself--is incredible as well. I know some of the other things you've done with Peter, the Fuzzy Music things, were out of his home studio.

AP: *My New Old Friend* was done at [Conway](#), in LA. We did *Badlands* (Fuzzy Music, 2002) in Peter's home studio, *Live at Rocco* (Fuzzy Music, 2000) was at the club and we have a new one called *Standards* (Fuzzy Music, 2007) that we've done live in a theatre down in San Diego with two stereo tube microphones--kind of an interesting concept to record.

AAJ: The sound on *My New Old Friend* just adds to the pristine nature of the whole concept.

AP: I think part of what you're responding to there is the piano sound. I took my piano to the studio to record that one. I'm so lucky I have this amazing instrument so instead of using the studio piano and having to deal with that thing and have it tuned correctly--I just called some movers and had them bring my piano over there. I have a Yamaha S6--it's a special handmade piano. They modeled it after a Hamburg Steinway with a very warm sound. Yamaha typically sounds brighter but this thing has a lot of warm and fuzzy to it. I didn't use it on any of my other records, but I did use

it on the last track of *Antisocial*, "Message to Beloved Souls Departed."

AAJ: A beautiful tune. And that other one--"Prayer"--beautiful breakers-up of the frenzy.

AP: You need to have that, at least I do, or else the frenzy doesn't mean anything. I can get that shit anytime I want just by going out and sitting on the freeway [laughs].

AAJ: Regarding "Highway 14," I'd like to ask, as a bassist, how that came about. You rarely hear acoustic bass used that way in a classic piano trio setting, where the whole song is really based off a very lyrical, arching, repeating ostinato.

AP: It's like a cello line, and Darek [bassist [Darek "Oles" Oleszkiewicz](#)] is so incredible because he plays so in tune that I can write something like that and he can play it. That line is doubled on piano so it becomes a different sound than just the acoustic bass. It doesn't sound off, or weird, or even slightly different because his pitch is so scary.



AAJ: That is such a different tune on that record.

AP: Thanks, you know Kurt Elling covered that on his latest record. He put lyrics to it and re-titled it "[And We Will Fly](#)." It's on his latest Concord release.

AAJ: I'll bet you not too many people know that.

AP: They will now

AAJ: Did he consult you on that?

AP: Oh yeah, he called and asked. I was like, "Yeah, are you kidding me?"

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Standards

AAJ: I can see why he was touched and moved. So tell about the newer one

AP: Well, Peter Erskine, Dave Carpenter and myself have a new disc out now called *Standards*. Finally we did a standards record, I did all the arrangements. For me, when I get to arrange songs that I love that are already great pieces of music, there's just not a whole lot you can do to make it better. I just try to make it a little different using reharmonization and other things. I think about music like this in a very organic way. I just try to approach it with ultimate respect to the music, and that way I can give it my own treatment. The stuff is very simple, but I think it's very cool. We wound up doing it in this theater and, because of the nature of these microphones, we had to kind of alter the way we were actually playing in that everything could be heard just so clearly.

So it was just a matter of moving two mikes around the room. So what I wound up actually doing was not using any left-hand chords when I would solo, almost throughout the whole record. So on every track, if there's a piano solo, ninety percent of it is just a single note solo piano line.

AAJ: That's got to be unusual. Not many records out there featuring that concept, restricting your left hand!

AP: Very sparse--really clear--makes the piano sound more like a horn.

AAJ: Did the mikes just make the left hand sound muddy?

AP: There was just too much information, yeah. Depending where the mike was. It had to be in a certain position for the bass and the drums, so if I entered left-hand information in those frequencies, it was just causing chaos.

AAJ: I can understand that, considering how trio gigs sometime sound from the listener's seat. Sounds like you took a negative and made it more a positive.

AP: There was no audience and we used no headphones, so we were just onstage and listened back to a couple of tracks and we realized what was going on. It was just a matter of readjusting to play the room. So it came out great. That's on Peter's label Fuzzy Music and hopefully we'll get to tour it.

AAJ: I'd like to see that. Which makes me realize I forgot to ask about touring the *Antisocial* project.

AP: That may happen. If I'm going to do it I'd like to do it with that band and Nels is really busy with Wilco.

AAJ: Did you do any LA-area gigs off of that record?

AP: I haven't done any gigs with that band, no. I'm OK with that too [laughs]. People are like, "Why don't you want to play with that band?" And it's not that I don't *want* to play, it's that the right situation hasn't come up. I just don't want to do a gig for the sake of doing a gig and wind up trying to recreate something. I'd rather just wait to the right time.

AAJ: Like Erskine and Carpenter too, you really straddle the acoustic and electric worlds pretty effectively, more than many other players.

AP: It's just probably because I did both at an early age. I was hugely influenced by Bill Evans growing up. I was able to play in electric bands in college. I didn't play in piano trios in college--that came later but that seed had already been cast because that's what I'd been listening to.

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The New Tony Williams Lifetime/Alan Holdsworth

AAJ: So, we touched on Lifetime a few times while discussing the new record, but I'd like to ask a few more questions. How old were you when you were playing with Lifetime? You were a very young man.

AP: I was 23 in 1975, when it happened.

AAJ: Again people don't put you there, but you are one the original Rhodes stylists.

AP: Thank you man, but that's just something I get to live with.

AAJ: It's a separate aesthetic, your sound was so thick and mean and aggressive.

AP: We played loud--really loud! We had a good time in that band I'll tell you that much.

AAJ: And what happened to the fourth member, bassist Tony Newton?

AP: He's in LA, still working out here--I've run into him a few times.



AAJ: An enigmatic figure for sure. You're involved in some other very interesting fusion history as well. Allan Holdsworth's *Velvet Darkness* (CTI, 1976) has many stories associated with it. Some, including the *Allmusic Guide*, say it's just a



taped rehearsal.

AP: Oh man that was hilarious. It wouldn't go so far as to call it a rehearsal but it was done very quickly. Allan didn't have a lot of control over what he was doing because of the record label.

AAJ: And then the mythology around Allan himself.

AP: Allan is really something. He's incredible and a great composer and really, really nice cat, too. When we play together we have so much fun and so many good memories to go with it.

AAJ: Hopefully more to come.

AP: God willing I hope so, man. I'm not done twiddling knobs yet.

AAJ: So, what was it about that Carnegie Hall gig with George Russell that made Tony and Allan want you to be in that band?

AP: When they heard me that night I had some solos. I think there was probably something about the way I played, even at that early stage of the game, where I might have had a spark of my own voice, where I just wasn't a derivative of some other keyboard player, playing a bunch of somebody else's licks. They probably responded to that and my energy as a player.

Then when we got together it was kind of interesting because Tony would not really ever tell me what to do or tell me what to play. He might tell me what not to play. He might say, "Don't play that. Try something else." Or, "Make it more rhythmic." He was a great composer too and he also knew a lot about composing and orchestration, so he had a really big part in the sound of that band and ultimately shaping how I voiced my chords with Allan's melody line. On all those tunes, like "Mr. Spock" and "Fred."

AAJ: You immediately brought in one of the prototypical fusion tunes of all time. If I was to compile the fifteen greatest fusion tunes of all time, it would be on there--I'd make it the leadoff track.

AP: "Proto Cosmos." Again, right out of George Russell.

AAJ: Did you [compose](#) that before Lifetime or right when you got together?

AP: Right at the beginning of Lifetime. I think the bass line was--let me think about this [hums bass line]--yeah, it's a twelve tone row. The bass line is kind of weird. You don't even notice it. You hear [hums the theme-the phoneticisms only make sense if you break out your copy] bum da da da da da dum, ba dada dum ta dum, then *ba ba bum*. The bass line is going against the melody, four against six. But, yeah, it's a twelve-tone row. That's all George. I got so much out of him I didn't even realize it. It's weird because when I was actually with him, I didn't even know what the hell he was talking about half the time--the stuff is pretty complicated.

AAJ: Is he still associated with the Conservatory and taking students into his band?

AP: Maybe to a degree, but George is up in years so he's not probably not mentoring at the same level. During my time he definitely took students into his band--Stanton was in his band [note: evidently Stanton Davis is still a member of [the Living Time Orchestra](#)].

AAJ: So the Carnegie Hall thing wasn't his band *per se*?

AP: Our thing at Carnegie Hall was billed as "George Russell with the New England Conservatory Jazz Orchestra," with all the special guests I referred to earlier.

AAJ: Evidently, it featured Alan Pasqua just



enough to get Tony's attention, as well. I'd like to know your take on how Tony went that direction, electric or funk or fusion, after Miles and why he went back the way he did after Lifetime? He revisited more traditional forms later.



AP: Yeah but he didn't want to then, at that time, with Lifetime. I was always bugging him to play something straight-ahead but he never would. I just wanted to groove with him that way. One night at a gig though, right in the middle of "Fred," he just broke into it, like totally straight-ahead burning swing, and I just looked at him. My eyes must have been wide, as big as saucers, so I started playing, and as soon as I started he just hit this giant rim-shot like, "BAP!" And just stopped and started laughing, and did this unbelievable drum fill and then right back into the funk. He was just messin' with me.

AAJ: Any Lifetime lore from that short two-year period would be appreciated.

AP: Larry Young came by for one of shows, it was unbelievable to meet him. Joe Farrell did the same. He came by at [New York's] The Bottom Line.

AAJ: I'm very fond of Joe's records with another great Rhodes stylist, George Cables

AP: George's Rhodes, I think, is the best Rhodes sound ever.

AAJ: That's a heavy compliment coming from you.

AP: You know, like the stuff he played on [Joe Henderson's] *Black is the Color* (Milestone, 1972) and those other Joe Henderson records from that period. That's the best Rhodes sound I ever heard. That and probably Herbie's Rhodes sound on *Crossings* (Columbia, 1972). Now, that's pretty scary stuff.

But back to Tony. Tony told me he wanted to sound like Keith Moon, that he loved Keith Moon's playing. That was a big impetus for him--he was into the English drumming thing. So when I finally got the gig with him and got to New York, I was with him and he said, "Come on, we gotta go down to Manny's Music and pick you out a Fender Rhodes." I walked over there with him, because we were at SIR, rehearsing, and there's Mitch Mitchell. So Tony sees him and the two of them just like, disappear. They went off and talked and did their thing and I stayed there and tried electric pianos for a while. This was '75. So, yeah, that makes me 23.

I went down to New York and we probably worked for a couple of weeks together and Tony was like, nonchalantly, "OK, cool. We're going to make a record." We did it at the old [30th Street Studio](#), CBS--unbelievable. It took two days to make, with no overdubs or editing of any kind. Pretty much everything was first take. Nobody knew, nobody had like a clue...I still have this vision, I remember this studio and how immense it was. I had these giant amplifiers--Acoustic brand guitar amplifiers--two of 'em--with four fifteens and two horns, six hundred watts--and it just looked like this little dinky thing in that [room](#) [laughs]. I also had a Rhodes and a clavinet.

AAJ: How about this simple question? How'd Tony get Holdsworth? I never understood how Holdsworth got to Tony Williams from England.



AP: Let me think. He was with Soft Machine right before that--it might have been from that. But I do know Tony was looking for him. There was a mutual cat that brought them together and I forget who it was. Allan stayed in Tony's flat up in Harlem and kind of worked out a lot of that stuff with him. By the time I came along, a lot of it was done, and



then they brought in Tony Newton after me.

AAJ: You almost could have covered that low end yourself.

AP: Yeah, but I don't like to do that though and Tony was badass too--a good bass player. And he brought in some tunes as well.

Let's see--another great story is that we were in Iowa one time and chased by a tornado. We were eating lunch at some truck stop in the middle of nowhere, Iowa, and I remember, all of a sudden, looking up and out the window and saying, "Wow! What is that?" The sky was purple and Tony just said, "Ohh, shit!"

AAJ: You were just passing through?

AP: No we played there. We did a gig there. We did a lot of touring in the US, just in, like, a station wagon. We just drove around.

AAJ: Tony Williams Lifetime now coming to Iowa! Did the record company assist in this effort?

AP: Yeah, to a point. It was the four of us and we had a driver, a road manager, one crew guy, and Tony's cat came with us, Tilly. The cat came in a gym bag [laughs].

AAJ: And the equipment goes ahead?

AP: Yeah

AAJ: Sorry, but the cat gym bag thing just reminds me of Paris Hilton.

AP: Yeah, now the gym bag looks sexier and costs a hundred bucks instead of two bucks [laughs].

AAJ: So basically, one moment at Carnegie Hall with George Russell's NEC ensemble and the next two years with Lifetime.

AP: It was some heavy stuff. You know, I recently got a hold of George and sent him a copy of the *Antisocial* record. I don't know the particulars, if he's not well or just really up in years [note: Russell is 84] but I communicated through his wife, Alice, and she said, "He rarely listens to anything, but he listened to your record twice and he loves it. And by the way he wants to write a piece of music for it, for the band." I just thought that was so hip! What a freakin' pioneer! He lived his whole life explaining a concept that people pretty much dissed. Someday people are going to go, "Holy shit! What was this guy talking about?"

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Books and Personal Favorites

AAJ: Are these books you've written out of his concept?

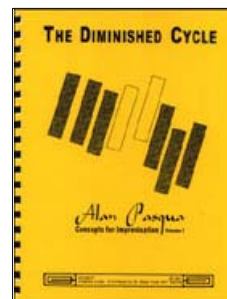
AP: Not really. They're just stuff that I've formulated and discovered over years of playing and thinking about music. One of them is called [The Diminished Cycle](#) (Charles Collin), which shows how to use different harmonic concepts on chords than what you normally would. It's using a lot of the diminished scale, but then not using it in a linear way, because when you play it in a scalar way you know what it is after three notes. But if you break it up and play it intervallically and jump around, say the way Trane did, all of a sudden it doesn't sound diminished--it sounds like, "What the hell is that?" It sounds very elusive. That always piqued my interest. So the book is about finding places where you can plug this concept in and how to alter the chords to fit.

The other book is called *The Architecture of Music* (Charles Collin). I think it's really fascinating--it's like a philosophy almost and a way of life and how you approach pieces of music that you're writing, learning to play, or playing on. During the time I've spent teaching I've noticed one thing about students, each year that they all have in common. The student coming in is dealing with the minutiae of playing on chords and maybe very well, too, but they're still executing stuff on chords. My book is about kind of taking more of a horizontal approach. Instead of looking at every chord, which is like, the local train, let's look at the express train, which is going to stop, maybe once every eight chords.

AAJ: That's a great analogy

AP: Yeah. Then you can kind of see--if you look at music it's kind of like you can rise above it and look down on a piece of paper and say, "Well, I need the first chord and I need the last chord and I need the first chord of the bridge, and probably the last chord going into the bridge. Now what *else* do I need? What can I remove?"

It's almost like a house. What wall can I knock down and leave the structure still intact? There are weight-bearing walls and if I mess one of them up I'm in deep water. It's the same thing with a song or any piece of music. Some harmonic parts of that song are essential and other parts are not, so I like to find the parts that are not and omit them--remove them. What it does is create space--harmonic space--it buys me time to create and think in a bigger piece of a tonal center and I don't sound like I'm just jumping all over the place. You can do it with anything. We did it on "Giant Steps," which typically is a song that will kick your ass because it moves so quickly in certain ways, in a non-traditional harmonic way.



AAJ: Yeah, that would be an example of a local-train tune.

AP: Yeah, that's how Trane wrote it and how he played on it, but if you had Lester Young playing on it it'd be a whole different story.

AAJ: What do you feel are some of your best compositions and solos that have been documented on recordings? What would you point people to?

AP: It's an interesting question. I did two acoustic records in New York in the mid-'90s with a label called Postcards; they were called [Milagro](#) and [Dedications](#).

Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland were on *Milagro* with Michael Brecker, then Dave and Paul Motian were on *Dedications* with Randy and Michael and Gary Bartz, who I just love.

Milagro got really great reviews in *Down Beat* and they really loved the compositional work on that record. That was kind of a hybrid for me, of like the Claus Ogerman influence, and more George, and [Herbie Hancock's] *Speak Like a Child* (Blue Note, 1968) kind of stuff. But now I was playing acoustic piano and the Bill Evans references are pretty apparent.

The next record, *Dedications*, was more overlooked. I don't think *Down Beat* even reviewed it, but it got high marks in *JazzTimes* and *Jazziz*. I was really happy with that record, with my playing and, in particular, a composition called "Ellingtonia," that's a tip of the hat to Duke. Dave was terrific and so helpful in the studio. He totally mentored me, man. Dave and Jack and Paul all got to me in a different way.

Dave was kind of like the big teddy bear that saw this nervous kid in the studio. He told me this story: "You know, man, when I first joined Miles'

band, John McLaughlin came over to me and said, 'Hey man, it's a big stage.' And I said, 'Yeah.' Then he said, 'Carve a piece out for yourself.'" Which was basically saying you're here because you deserve to be here and you belong here.

AAJ: On the other hand, it must have been impossible to keep working with those rhythm sections.

AP: Well, I used them on the record because my label had a nice budget to give me and it also helped me go from, "Who the hell is this guy?" to "Who the hell is this guy and wow--look at the guys he's playing with!" So it gave me some instant credibility.

AAJ: I see. But that's a theme for you. Again, we can make the argument that these guys should be trying to make the hang with you!

AP: Well, years later I would certainly feel more comfortable in that department, but that was my first go around. Paul Motian was amazing, too--just a beautiful spirit and amazing concept-maker. This guy made more music out of cues that he didn't get. On certain tunes we recorded. I'd say, "OK, this is how this tunes going to end." And he'd come to the end and he would just keep playing. I would be like, "Oh, shit," but of course I'd keep playing because the tape's still rolling. Then, by the time it was over and we'd listen back to it, I'd just look at him and go, "I can't believe you did that!" And he'd say, "I know man, I'm sorry." I'd be like, "No, what you caused to happen was unbelievable. I couldn't have thought that up in a million years." Just conceptually he was so great.

AAJ: And he continues, every so often, to work with new players on the scene.

AP: Wonderful, wonderful cat. Y'know, I chose to move to California a long time ago. Had I stayed back east, I would have had a lot more chances to make music with those guys. But I got to do a lot of other things.

AAJ: Yeah five or six pages worth of discography, in small font! You have years here where you're listed on twenty different albums.

AP: I've done a lot of different things--a lot of pop and rock stuff. It's important to me that I did that because I enjoyed it, too.

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Back to Electric, Part Two

AAJ: You've done all that, plus you've managed to carve out careers on the acoustic trio type path and the electric band path.

AP: But realistically, the last time I played fusiony electric kind of music full-time was *Velvet Darkness*.

AAJ: I just assumed you kept doing it all along.

AP: No, you know why? Because fusion, or what they call fusion, took a turn. And it took a turn, for my money, for the worse. It got really misinterpreted by a lot of musicians. It became this really technical bullshit music that was not what it was in the spirit of. Too many chops and "Big Me" type music. I mean, Miles started it with *Silent Way* and *[Filles de] Kilimanjaro* (Columbia, 1968)--there's nothing "Big Me" about that--it's all ethereal and cerebral stuff and textural--it's textural not technical. Along the way people like Chick and Mahavishnu put more chops into it but it was still really textural music. All of a sudden, it just got...I don't who started it, but...chops became more important than the content of the music.



So when Jeff Gauthier approached me to do a record and said he didn't want it to be acoustic,



that's why I was so, like, "Oh!" I was like, "You want me to do an electric record? Listen, man, if we're going to--if *I'm* going to do an electric record--it is not going to be typewriter music!" I mean, I played "Snake Oil," which I think was about the fastest thing that the Lifetime band ever

did. That wasn't about chops, or maybe it was when it was time to solo, but the content, the thematic music, the sound of the band absolutely wasn't that. That's why Miles' music and all that early stuff, Herbie's and Chick's, there was a lot of soul, a great deal of soul in that music, and that kind of all went away. That's why I stopped playing it--I just said, "I don't want to play this shit. This is boring."

AAJ: You continued to appear on Allan Holdsworth's recordings though.

AP: Oh, yeah, he would call me and ask if I'd play on a tune, or some tunes on his records, and of course I would. But the thing I was highlighting was, I wasn't playing that music live or at other sessions. That brings up a funny story. I actually forgot to show one day. Allan called me for a session and I was busy in the studio doing some other stuff, and I had gotten in really late the night before, but I agreed. The next day, I was asleep and the phone rang like at 10 o'clock and I said, "Who the hell is this?" And it was him and I can just hear him now, he said, "Oh, man, I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to play on this shit either." [laughs] And I said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I totally forgot." And he says, "Oh, no man, this shit is awful. Don't even bother coming down." And that was *Atavachron* (Relativity, 1987) or *Metal Fatigue* (Relativity, 1985), which were great records.

AAJ: That seems to be his deal. Putting himself down.

AP: Oh, totally. He's very self-deprecating.

AAJ: You are also on another classic recording that is a very different thing in the jazz world, the Michael Brecker orchestral recording with Claus Ogerman, *Claus Ogerman Featuring Michael Brecker* (GRP, 1991).

AP: Yeah that was amazing. That started out as just the orchestra. Brecker was an afterthought. It's unbelievable. Claus wanted it to be like piano trio type Bill Evans stuff and then the label made him redirect. It worked out well.

AAJ: In terms of your keyboard stuff, is there somewhere for people to go to check that out--you know the tech end or the harmony end--like something more technical in Keyboard Magazine?

AP: Funny thing--the marketing guy from Crypto checked that out. In the late '80s I was in this rock band called [Giant](#) on A&M records. They did a big feature on me back then because I had blond hair and had a B-3 that was painted like an M.C. Escher painting in black and white. They said, you know, it was the coolest thing since French toast. Now, they're not responsive, which really pisses me off because now I feel like I really have something to say. I feel like I could actually make some contribution to their magazine but...[laughs]

AAJ: Our gain. You seem like an expert on not only the obvious harmony and theory, but also sound architecture.

AP: I've had my moments. I attribute a lot of it to the engineers I've worked with in the past. They've taught me a great deal. For me, getting the keyboard sounds is like--hey, I spent thirty years learning how to get a good tone on piano. I just can't spend it getting a good sound on synth. I maybe instinctively know what's good and what isn't. I just move on when something's no good.

AAJ: I went to your website to figure out your rig and didn't find much.

AP: That's because it's really nothing. I'm playing acoustic and the Nord and I had a Korg CX-3 that I was using on the road with Holdsworth, and I've played B-3 on some stuff. It's funny because when I went on the European tour with Allan they got me the wrong CX-3, an old model that sounds awful, so I told them I wasn't going to use Korg and not to even bother getting me another one. I decided I was going to do the whole thing on Nord. I had more fun making sounds from effects, like throwing Leslie on the Rhodes and taking the bottom end off of it and making it distort. All of sudden it sounds like somebody clearing their throat. It's like, man, this isn't even an electric piano. It really morphs so quickly into something so unusual and then it stands up on its own

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Alan Pasqua: Educator

AAJ: Tell us about the teaching you do.

AP: The teaching thing came out of nowhere. I was called by a buddy of mine that teaches over at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] to sub for him, for one day, in his jazz improvisation class. I asked, "Do you want me to do anything special?" He said, "Just do whatever you want." So I went in and I think I gave them a lecture on Coltrane, something I was listening to and really interested in at that moment in time. At the end of class a bunch of students came up to me and said things like, "Man, that was the greatest class we've had in a really long time." They gave me so much positive feedback that it just kind of made me think that I was having a really good time, too.

I enjoyed it so much that I was encouraged to contact the guy over here at USC here in LA; his name is Shelly Berg, and he's the head of the jazz Department. I told him I might be interested in teaching some piano lessons if there was any interest. They gave me four students and it went very well. The next semester they brought me back and asked me to run one of the ensembles. The following year he said to me, "Look, I want to bring you on board on the faculty and have you teach jazz improvisation here." The cool thing was that it was two days out of my week and was still able to travel and tour and do other things.

He basically gave me no guidelines as far as the curriculum was concerned and told me to put it together and to "Teach how you think it should be taught." They gave me a lot of creative freedom to get it together and now it's seven years later. Now I'm upper level faculty and hopefully about to get tenure this year. It's been a really [rewarding experience](#)--it's made me a better player and improviser and it's made me more thorough as a musician because I've had to explain myself over and over and make sure people understand it.

AAJ: Well, it sure sounds like you're taking all the positives out of it.

AP: I'm lucky, too, because the students that come in are very gifted and I get to work with very talented people. Otherwise I couldn't do it. It would take too much out of me.

So now, if I'm out on the road, like with Holdsworth, I'll do a master class. In Scandinavia, I went to three different universities over there and did a week's teaching in Copenhagen. It's kind of really made me more global.



AAJ: Speaking of which, let's end with what's coming for you in the next year or so and anything else you want to add.

AP: As for this year, it's interesting. I'm just kind of staying put, hunkering down, not traveling. I'll be doing some work at school and composing and maybe in the fall something will get put together with Allan and myself. I think actually, everybody in that band wants to do a record--it's just that everybody lives in different places, but I think we'll record relatively soon.

As for anything else, thanks for doing this and let's make sure the discussion about the new record straightens out all these people that think I ripped off Miles. In fact, I'd like to refer them to a little something about that very subject over at the [Crypto blog](#).

Selected Discography

Peter Erskine/Alan Pasqua/David Carpenter, [Standards](#) (Fuzzy Music, 2007)
Alan Pasqua, [The Antisocial Club](#) (Cryptogramophone, 2007)
Alan Pasqua, [My New Old Friend](#) (Cryptogramophone, 2005)
Alan Holdsworth, [Against the Clock: The Best of Alan Holdsworth](#) (Alternity, 2005)
Peter Erskine//Alan Pasqua/Dave Carpenter, [Badlands](#) (Fuzzy Music, 2002)
Peter Erskine//Alan Pasqua/Dave Carpenter, [Live at Rocco](#) (Fuzzy Music, 2000)
Tom Scott & the L.A. Express, [Smokin' Section](#) (Windham Hill, 1999)
Alan Pasqua, [Dedications](#) (Postcards, 1995)
Lee Ritenour, [Alive in L.A.](#) (GRP, 1997)
Alan Pasqua, [Milagro](#) (Postcards, 1993)
Claus Ogerman, [Claus Ogerman Featuring Michael Brecker](#) (GRP, 1988)
Stanley Clarke, [Hideaway](#) (Epic, 1986)
Carlos Santana, [Havana Moon](#) (Columbia, 1983)
Santana, [Zebop!](#) (Columbia, 1981)
Bob Dylan, [Street Legal](#) (Columbia, 1978)
The New Tony Williams Lifetime, [Believe It](#) (Columbia, 1975)

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