

THE AUSTRALIAN

Pat Metheny: In tune with the big picture



Jazz guitarist and composer Pat Metheny performing in Rome, Italy, in July 2018. PICTURE GETTY IMAGES

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Pat Metheny, a youthful 65-year-old, began playing professional gigs as a teenage prodigy in the 1970s. Extraordinarily successful over 50 years, the American guitarist has won so many polls, released so many gold albums, and been awarded so many Grammys (more than 20) that his fans have lost count, not to mention the honorary doctorates.

Metheny is unique in that, as much as any jazz musician alive — along with pianist Keith Jarrett — he combines artistic acceptance (by hardcore jazz fans) and popularity (with music lovers otherwise uninterested in jazz).

In a recent interview, Metheny dismisses what he describes as “all the subsets of the way music often gets talked about”. That is to say, the words often used to describe music don’t particularly interest him. “I am interested in the spirit and

sound of music itself,” he says. Accordingly, his thoughts are deeply philosophical.

“To me, music is one big universal thing,” he tells *The Australian*. “The musicians I have admired the most are the ones who have a deep reservoir of knowledge and insight, not just about music, but about life in general, and are able to illuminate the things that they love in sound.

“When it is a musician who can do that on the spot, as an improviser, that is usually my favourite kind of player.”

So it is with the members of Metheny’s quartet, touring in Australia this week. It hasn’t been easy to find such compatible players; Metheny is frankly enamoured with each of them.

Mexican-American drummer Antonio Sanchez has been Metheny’s most important collaborator for 20 years.



Drummer Antonio Sanchez: described by Metheny as “one of the all-time greats on his instrument” ...

Noting Sanchez's maturity and musicality, Metheny describes him as "the drummer I thought would never be born. He is one of the best musicians I have ever known and is really one of the all-time greats on his instrument".

A recent recruit, Welsh pianist Gwilym Simcock, has something in common with another one of Metheny's favourite pianists, Brad Mehldau. "Both claim to have been inspired to take up this music from hearing some of my records as



Welsh Pianist Gwilym Simcock: a deep understanding of the sensibility of what Metheny's thing invokes and requires...

young kids," says Metheny. "Gwilym has a really deep understanding of the sensibility of what my thing invokes and requires."

In the case of the Australian bassist Linda May Han Oh, who has been in the group since 2015, Metheny says she is “the face of Australia right now in the music world”.

“Linda is a force in the universe, and she’s one of the most important musicians to show up in New York in a long long time. She has a sound that is as powerful as the strongest bass players out there, like Ray Brown or Christian [McBride]. And she has the kind of harmonic skills and wisdom and insight that come with somebody who has played a lot of really hard music and is able to communicate.



Linda May Han Oh: one of the most important musicians to show up in New York in a long time, according to Metheny...

“I struggle in a way to find people that can hang, and she can hang, man. It could be anything. It could be free, it could be rocking, it could be swinging. She plays incredible solos, but the main thing is, whenever she plays, she goes

to the back of the hall and grabs people. And that is rare. She is such an amazing musician, and every minute I've been on the bandstand with her has just been a thrill.

“It's so hard to be able to hang with a great rhythm section, with people who are going to play tunes in all 12 keys, and deal with the fundamentals of what the language is. That's a 10- or 15-year thing right there, before you even get to the philosophical value of what it is to be a musician.

“And then playing hundreds of gigs gives you a whole other perspective on not just music, but the way music fits into people's lives, and what music actually is in the context of the fabric of our reality as humans. You can't smell it, you can't see it, you can't touch it, you can't taste it. But man, music is this forest in our realm that is completely unlike anything else.”



Pat Metheny: music is this forest in our realm that is completely unlike anything else...

Metheny's tour of Australia comes hard on the heels of his new album, *From This Place*. It appears to be a genuine watershed in his career. When these tracks were recorded, the guitarist realised this was not just another album.

He felt he was personally on a new level of musicianship, and also coming to “a maturing awareness of what music is. I realised that the music I had brought in was not what I thought it was. It was part of something else”.

Metheny became aware that the expansive nature of his music called for a larger platform, and commissioned eminent arrangers Gil Goldstein and Alan Broadbent to amplify the music with orchestral settings, played on the album by the Hollywood Studio Symphony.



The result, he says, is “one of the records I’ve been waiting to make my whole life”.

Metheny is open to the interpretation that *From This Place* contains a strong message about the state of America, but he believes it is abstract, rather than literal. “The skills that allow you to improvise at a very high level are in their own way a kind of reporting,” he says. “If you’re going to have to deal with the moment in such an intimate way, you’re going to be pretty tuned into some stuff.”

The opening track, *America Undefined*, uses a phrase borrowed from the writer James Baldwin. Metheny says Baldwin was “an incredible source for me of understanding of things that, as a white kid from out in the middle of nowhere, I really did not understand”.

The album’s title track is sung by Meshell Ndegeocello, whom Metheny regards as “a really important voice and face for where America is right now”. He concedes that, culturally, the US is in a fragile state. “We are unfortunately still in the midst of the insanity of what’s going on here. Literal insanity. And man, if we’ve ever been undefined, it’s right now.”

The Pat Metheny Quartet performs in Perth on March 4, Melbourne on March 6, and Sydney on March 7.