Less Chops, More Heart: An Interview with Mimi Fox

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So where are you? I know you've been traveling.

MF: I'm home in Oakland now. I've been living here almost twenty years. I moved here from New York. Made the opposite commute that most people do. I just couldn't take New York, having grown up there and I really needed to get away. Came out here to the San Francisco Bay Area and I just love it.

Tell me about your home.

MF: Well I've got a little cottage in the Oakland Hills. And I got a million guitars and a cat. It's nice for me. It's very quiet and very peaceful.

You actually grew up in NY, right? How did that shape your life, do you think?

MF: Well, I think there were a lot of different factors. Basically, I lived in Queens for some of my early years and we moved out to the suburbs. We moved a lot. We sort of lived all over the East Coast for a while and I was also out in Colorado when I was about 5. So, what I'd have to say more shaped my life was my family environment. Even though no one else in my family is a musician per se, my mom sang up until the time I was about 12 and she was very much into the music of her period which would have been Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, pretty much all of the great jazz standards. You know I heard that music in the house and I consider myself very lucky. I heard what my older brother and sister played, like the Beatles, and my sister was really into Motown and my dad was into Dixieland so I think having a family that really loved music – and I got exposed to stuff really early – was very very helpful.

I heard that you started out playing drums. How old were you when you started?

MF: I started banging around on my mom's soup pots when I was probably about 7 or 8. And she finally got me a little snare drum when I was about 9. Then I was taking drum lessons at school. Eventually in junior high and in high school, I was playing drums in the jazz band. And I did start playing guitar when I was 10 but it was more playing like folk music and stuff like that when I was a little kid. Gradually got into blues and funk and then actually when I moved out here in 1979, out to the San Francisco Bay Area, then I started studying with Bruce Forman, a great bop player, and I got really serious about jazz guitar. So it's been kind of an interesting progression but I always loved jazz. I was playing drums in a jazz group when I was like 16 and we were doing stuff like "Chameleon" by Herbie Hancock, so I was pretty precocious but jazz guitar seemed like a whole other galaxy.

What's your first jazz memory?

MF: There have been two pivotal moments both in jazz and in my guitar memory. When I was 12 my sister was already in college, my older sister, and she took me to hear Julian Bream in concert at her college and I just started crying. I was only 12 but I was so moved. She took me back stage to meet him and of course he was very gracious, a very very sweet man and very witty. But I was so moved by his playing. He was playing classical guitar and lute and I don't know ... it definitely wasn't Simon and Garfunkel, let's put it that way. It was so beautiful. I'd just never heard anything like it. So that was a very pivotal moment. Then when I was 14 some of the guys I was playing drums in this band with were listening to stuff like Coltrane and one day I was in a record store and I found this album on sale and it was "Giant Steps." I really didn't know anything about it but I thought "these guys say Trane is really so great, so I'm going to check this out" and took it home. That really blew my mind. I mean it was one thing to hear my mom singing Cole Porter; it was another thing to hear "Giant Steps" and "Countdown." But the tune that really just moved me and I played it over and over again was "Naima."

And what about that one made you cry?

MF: I guess you could say I laugh a lot, I cry a lot. That's kind of my thing. Yeah, that tune just knocked me out. Those two are very pivotal moments. Then I guess when I was about 18 my mom and I went to hear McCoy Tyner in concert in New Haven. I was in Connecticut at the time and that was another incredible moment for me. I just remember the entire concert not moving. Just sitting completely fixated and transformed. So these are just some of the moments, some of my early moments, that are just real high points for me.

Can you put into words what it is that music does to people? How is it that you can be affected the way you were, and how is it that you, in turn, might affect other people? How does that happen?

MF: This is a deep question. Let me think about this for a sec. Of course I know there are people who try to study music from every angle and qualify it and quantify it and say well these particular scales and these particular notes affect this chakra. In California so people like to talk about charkas. But seriously speaking, why it affected me so much I think it was a combination of the fact that, as I mentioned, for me personally, I was exposed. I had the good fortune to be exposed to a lot of great music. My mom would keep me home from school and we'd listen to Tchaikovsky and Beethoven and Brahms and she would just decide she was going to do that, which was pretty hip when I think about it now. Because I was exposed to it I had some sense of what the language was just by having it around me. Again, this is for me personally. I can't speak for other people what moves them. But obviously I've had that experience many times at concerts where there will be a moment and something will happen and it just sort of transports you. I'm sure that scientists and music scholars will look at it and say, "Well these clusters of tones have this kind of effect." I remember reading The Secret Life of Plants and there's one chapter on how music affects plants. Apparently they took a group of plants and put them in a room and played heavy metal and real loud dissonant rock and that kind of stuff. The plants withered but when they were exposed to jazz and classical music, those same plants then started to thrive. So, obviously music has a big effect, maybe not just on us but also on animals and plants too. I know my cat, she loves to hear me play guitar. She doesn't like the vacuum cleaner but she'll sit with me when I play. She doesn't like real "out" stuff because I guess she's kind of conservative in her tastes. (laughing) She likes bop and she likes blues and bossa is cool. Latin jazz she likes, but if I would put on some Cecil Taylor, that's not her favorite. So she's pretty "inside." I guess she's an inside cat. No pun intended. Then the second part of your question – maybe more important – is how do we hope by playing music, how's that going to impact other people. My whole goal is ... you know I've had shows and I've talked to a lot of my musician friends about this ... you know sometimes you'll have a show where you yourself may not feel it's your best but someone will come up to you and say, "Oh, I was so moved by this piece." And to me that's a success because obviously I could sit on a desert island and play my guitar but to be able to feel like I'm reaching someone, even if it's a night where maybe technically I don't feel I was at my best or maybe for whatever reasons there were moments when I was just unhappy with, if I'm able to reach someone else, that's a very special thing. I don't know if I'm answering your question but I think it's a great one. I'm actually going to ponder it when we get off the phone.

I want to talk a little about composing because I read that you are quite a prolific composer, over 400 pieces. What can you tell us about your process or your approach to composition?

MF: Well, you know I try to stay real open and again I think all the great composers that I've listened to have affected my composing, but I think that it can happen any one of many ways. For instance I was in Japan recently and just being there for several months – everything from being in the trains to walking around the shrines with a friend – all of these experiences that we have affect us, or affect me, and they are going to go into a sort of grist for the mill, they're going to go into this sort of pot of experiences that you have in your life. So melodies may start to come to me. Sometimes I'll just be sitting down with my guitar and I'll get into a groove, a bass line will come to me that I think is really hip. And from that then I'll put a melody on top. But a lot of times for me, I need to be inspired by people, by some experience I'm having. Sometimes I just get a song title and I'll decide I'm going to write a song based on that. A lot of times, just from my emotional experiences, I'll

be able to draw on new ideas. And sometimes it may be also what I'm working on in my own personal practice. I may be working right now, and for the past few years, I've been working a lot on different polytonal arpeggio concepts and some of these ideas may come out. But that's from a more cerebral, analytical side of the music and I personally like to start my composing more from the emotional. Obviously everything you have in your database as a musician and as a composer, everything you are aware of is helpful. But I like to let my heart and my emotional experiences sort of start the process rather than the other way around. Not that the other way around isn't as legitimate but it just doesn't personally work for me as well.

It sounds to me that in your life you feel there's a connection between spirituality and music. Can you describe the relationship at all?

MF: Hmm, wow, you're asking all these deep good questions. This is not like, "What guitarist did you start listening to?" That's easy, this is the real shit. Let me think about that for a second. Hmm. Well, on the deepest level like when I started crying when I heard Julian Bream or when I put on "Naima" when I was a kid and played it over and over again and sat there crying, obviously it was touching me on a very deep level. Again, this is my goal, to be able to reach people. I know there are some jazz musicians that might have a more introspective or more personal reasons for playing, but for me it's all sort of one. I really want to be able to reach people at a given concert because they can buy the CD and listen to it a go, "Oh, well that's great, I enjoyed that." But when you're in a live show I really feel like you can push it a few notches and really try to say something to people.

Try to tell me something about your feelings about the relationship between the performer and the audience.

MF: For me, my whole goal – and I guess this is a spiritual thing – is to get out of the way of the music, to get out of the way of the technical aspects of playing the guitar and actually get down to making music that can reach people. For me what this means is that you really have to become, as they say, ego-less. The ultimate challenge is, as a guitarist, when other guitar players that I admire and respect are in the room, can I get out of the way of that stuff and not let it affect me? Generally in most gigs and when you're touring around the country, you don't know who's going to be there. You don't know when you're playing a big festival or club or wherever you are, who's going to walk in. You just never know. You could be in the middle of nowhere and someone wonderful could walk in. So you have to be able to get that out of the way. Some people, even when it's not other players they might admire, just in general when they get up in front of an audience, there's a little ego thing that happens. For me, I really try to counteract that and just really let the music take me where it needs to go. If I'm playing a certain passage, I don't care who walks into the room. There's got to be a logical flow to the lines and more importantly there has to be this desire to really try and communicate something because jazz and music, it's a language. It would be the same thing if we were having a conversation and some linguistic professor from Columbia walked in and I would try to start impressing him with my eloquent and elegant vocabulary. But I see a lot of players do that. I don't fault them for it, I've done it myself, but I'm always trying to move away from that. It's sort of like we're the vessel for this other thing to come out of us. I think it's a difficult place to get to, but for me it's the ideal place.

How do you prepare to get there?

MF: A lot of it is in my own practicing. First of all I do a lot of meditation and a lot of deep breathing and that kind of stuff, which helps me relax and focus. I've also discovered something for me that works which is that instead of going on and playing a medium tempo number or a blues or something that is a fairly easy warm-up number, I often like to go out and play something super fast that takes a lot of focus, lot of concentration and that sort of helps me work out the kinks. Then, I'm ready to sort of do anything; it's sort of like it's an adrenaline thing. I think part of what goes on, it's not just the ego, I think there's an adrenaline rush that comes and I think you have to learn to manage it. Some of it, I feel, just comes from years of playing and years of playing in increasingly more demanding and high-profile situations. When you're able to do that, pretty soon it

just becomes like breathing or taking a walk or feeding the dogs or petting my cat. This is what I do. I am a musician; I have these skills and this talent. You know, it becomes more of a natural, organic process is what I'm saying, rather than something where you're suddenly in the spotlight. Obviously you are when you step on stage, people are looking at you and they're listening, but you want to try to almost be, you know, while you're aware of that at one level, on another plane, at least for me, what I try to do is I try to be as relaxed as I would be with a candle lit sitting on my couch playing late at night with my cat. That's where you're probably going to find me in the most relaxed state, just really deeply into music. So I try to bring that with me wherever I go. There's always a point in a gig when I know that I'm starting to move into that place because I feel all the tension just leave. I've discovered that for me I like to start off with a real burner kind of number, burn off a lot of energy, a lot of adrenaline and I just feel like ahhhhhhhhh.... Then I can just relax.

What do you like most about being a musician?

MF: I like those moments I was just talking about where there will be a moment in a solo or a moment in a song where I'm going for something new, where ideas are coming out, and/or I just feel like I can do anything. And again, I don't mean technically although I might have some nights where I really feel like I can fly and other nights where you feel like you've got leaded boots on your fingers. It all just depends. So that aside, that may or may not be happening but it's that moment when you just feel like you're creating something new, something really beautiful and fresh is coming out and you're completely out of the way of it.

What do you like least about being a musician?

MF: I don't like the politics. (Laughing) Let me try to phrase this diplomatically. What I like least is some of the business aspects of it. I have an agent who I love and who has become a dear friend. And I've met great people in this business but it can be hard constantly being out there in the public eye. There are times when maybe at the end of a six week tour and I'm at a big festival, and afterwards you sign CDs – and again it seems like something funny to complain about, but just schmoozing with people and signing CDs, I'm so exhausted all I want to do is hit the hotel room. I'm tired. You know what I mean? So, I'd say a combination of the road, just the wear and tear of the road thing, and then the politics of some of the business, the marketing and all those other aspects that are important if you're going to be successful. I think for most musicians, for those of us who really are musicians rather than those who came out of a business school with a MA in business – and I know there are some musicians that did that ...more power to them – but most of us that are musicians and that's what we love, the aspect of putting ourselves out there and advertising and marketing/promotion, I think that aspect of it is somewhat at odds with who we really are as people. I just speak about that for myself personally. Those two things are very disparate to me.

Well that's interesting because one of the questions I wanted to ask if you feel the need to reconcile your musical desires with the marketing and commercial demands. Or are you in tune with both?

MF: (Laughs) Yes ... and yes. You know, this goes back on a deeper level. I've had all kinds of offers over the years to play with rock bands and some pretty big names. They've asked me to join groups or do this and that and obviously that would take me away from jazz. I've had these offers over the years, and many musicians who can play other styles and are versatile enough to cut that thing, at some point in their career they're going to be faced with those questions too. For me I have just decided "no." Other things can come up once in a while, but they don't take me away from jazz. I had a gig recently where I got to play with Stevie Wonder who I loved when I was a kid, and it was a real high. I loved him when I was a teenager and it was real fun to do that. But you know it was a one-time thing. And that's fine. But a lot of players don't realize that if you go on the road and do that kind of thing…what you think ostensibly is, "Wow, this is going to give me a lot of exposure." Yeah, give you exposure but then no one's going to buy your jazz CD because they're going to expect, they're going to want to hear you playing the same little 8-bar stupid lick you had to play with so-and-so instead of

hearing this whole other side of the deepness of who you are as a player. They're not going to care about it anyway.

This leads nicely to a discussion of style. There's a bio on one of the websites that describes you as a "straight-ahead guitarist who plays in the style of Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass and Pat Martino." And in another clipping you were called "the high priestess of bop." How do you feel about these kinds of descriptions and what, if anything, do they mean to you?

MF: Well, I think that people need to have them to some extent because what they're trying to do is, for instance, if someone wants to buy a CD it's got to have some description. Certainly all the people you mention, needless to say, it's no disgrace for me to be put in that classification. Of course there are some players who only know 4 notes and if they said I sounded like one of them I wouldn't like that too much. This reminds me of the time a record company sent me on a radio interview in Seattle. Of course I assumed it was a jazz station. Little did I know. I walked in and I was a little concerned because the woman interviewing me had like 10 piercings and strange glasses on. Turns out she was an MTV host. Turns out the station was a major rock station, which I didn't know. Well, she played some of my music, sits me down and talks to me, and says at one point, "So what rock players do you like?" And of course, me being honest and thinking I'm on a jazz station, I say, "None." The next thing you know 20 lights light up in the control room. All these people are calling in. "You stupid jazz idiot! What about Eddie Van Halen! What about this guy! You need to listen to so-and-so!" It was so funny. All I was trying to say was it wasn't my cup of tea, that I went basically from folk music, and some funk I loved as a kid, into jazz. That's where I am. I don't gravitate toward rock.

When you say, "I went into jazz and that's where I am," what does that mean to you?

MF: Well, on the deepest level, it means that I want to keep growing as a human being. Musically, it means I'm moving away from the I-IV-V structure of a simple blues, away from some of the simple folk songs I loved as a kid. I still love that music. It means that I'm an improvisational musician; that I study. You know that we're talking about years and years of study and practicing many many hours a day and devoting myself to finding the language of jazz which goes back to early blues and then into the beginnings of Dixieland and then dance music jazz and then into bop and then into post-bop. It means that I'm trying to school myself, educate myself with an awareness of all those idioms and all of the different things jazz can be, plus Latin jazz which is such a misnomer and it covers such a broad scope from sambas to bossas to calypso to mambos. You know, that in itself is such a huge undertaking, so it means that I'm open to all of the improvisational music that can be classified as jazz. People try to really quantify this and it's so hard. I don't care what Wynton says. Yes, it's about the swing. Yes. When I think of all the players that I love to listen to whether it's guitars or horns or singers, yeah, as Duke said, it means nothing without the swing. I think it's really hard to answer that but in general, jazz players know what it is and we know it when it isn't there. There are a few rock players who are wonderful improvisers. Alan Holdsworth is a brilliant guitarist and I only heard of him because one of my rock students, years ago, brought in a tape and I was blown away. But it wasn't jazz. He is a great musician and he does borrow scale ideas and improvisational ideas from jazz but he is not rooted in the language and the history of jazz. Therefore, if he takes a tune and plays over it, first of all the harmony isn't going to be jazz. Again, you know, we're talking about the chord structures, how the song moves. It's a very deep question to answer and of course, as you know, because jazz especially in the modern era encompasses everything from ... I mentioned earlier Cecil Taylor, or Eric Dolphy or Archie Shepp and all the avant-garde stuff, but all of those players still know the language of jazz.

Talk to me a little about education and music.

MF: Well, again I'm really much more of a hands-on type of person than an academic. I get really upset when I see people trying to teach jazz as if you're going to read it from a book. Books are helpful, they're tools. They're aids in helping you assimilate and understand things. There are some people that assimilate information

very well from books. I can remember years ago observing another teacher's class. The instructor was talking about the blues and he had written, "The blues scale is a I-flat III-IV-flat V" and blah blah blah. Later, sitting at lunch, he asked, "Mimi, what did you think of my class?" And I said, "Well, I think you're a very nice teacher" and blah blah blah, ... and then I said, "What about playing the students some early blues? Take out some Bessie Smith, take out some very early Louis Armstrong, take out some Ida Cox, and take out some Mahalia Jackson. Let these kids hear what Eric Clapton thinks he doing." Eric Clapton just didn't grow up out of nowhere. You've got to take people back to the roots of the music. So that is my whole thing. It's an ear thing. I mean jazz is something that you really have to be picking up by listening, and listening, and then listening.

What do you say to students or young artists who might approach you after a show who are hoping to make a living in this business?

MF: I'd say two things: get a watch and be a good person. First thing because musicians have had a reputation historically and chronically for being late to rehearsals, being late for this and that. Of course it doesn't happen in New York or LA or places where people are really serious about it. But there's still a thing that musicians can be flaky and I think it's very important to counteract that with being responsible and being on time and very professional. So I really encourage people to do that because if there are two people going for an audition and one person is there early or on time and the other person's late, and all things being equal, we know who's going to get the gig. So I always encourage people to do that and I always encourage them to practice as much as they can and listen and do all of those things and go out and hear music as music as possible. Also, to be a good human being. I just think that's very important. Some people get a real tunnel vision approach to their practicing. I've had guys that come in who are 18 years old and have already got carpal tunnel syndrome or some kind of tendonitis. That just shouldn't be happening to someone that's 18 years old. So they are practicing too much and their life gets out of balance and I just think that's real bad.

How do you measure success?

MF: (very long pause) Well, there's musical success, there's professional success. I think for me how I measure success is by joy, by how much joy I'm feeling. I've gotten to play with some wonderful people through the years, playing with Joe Pass, playing with Herb Ellis, playing with Charlie Bird before he died as part of this great guitar series, that was a real honor, and there are so many great players I've worked with, Bruce Forman, Russell Malone, and in those moments, there is a joy that takes over where I realize all of those years of practicing and all the years of sacrifice both financially and personally, really mean something. And it's not because I'm playing with people that may or may not have a lot of notoriety. There have been some great players I've played with that no one has ever heard of probably. But, boy, they're wonderful players. And there's a certain joy that happens. Same thing can happen in a concert. It comes back to that moment we were talking about earlier: what I love most about being a musician. Those certain moments where, ahhh, there's just a feeling of joy. It just makes you feel like all those years of slugging away and playing in dingy clubs and coming home smelling like a cigarette factory, you know, actually paid off and were really worth it

Do you read your own press?

MF: I try not to. I remember reading some article about Monk years ago where he said he doesn't ever care about it. Of course, you know, he was alternately getting praised and then totally slammed. And I mean I've had overwhelmingly great press but what I've discovered for myself is that if I get something -- I've never gotten trashed -- but if I get something like is a 3 out of 5 or something that's even a little bit lukewarm, I'll remember that and I won't remember all the great things. So, I've just decided that's my personality. So I let my agent get everything and I figure anything that's making it into my press kit will be good so I'll read it after the fact. Also I don't like to be unduly influenced and if someone is writing that I'm the best thing since canned ... you know, pinto beans. I'm not sure it helps me grow as an artist. I mean I usually think constructive criticism can be helpful but for someone with my personality, it's just as well not to. I really think most musicians feel the way I

do. I mean, even if they've got a tough upper lip and a thick skin, I know it affects them because I've played with some great players that still remember some review from 30 years ago. And we're not even talking about The New York Times or Washington Post or Los Angeles Times; we're talking some 'podunk' paper, and these people are still pissed off about it. Great players, still ticked off. And so, I really try not to read my press too often.

Out of the clippings that you have read, is there anything that's been said about you that just tickles you for some reason or other?

MF: Well, I actually like some of them. For my new solo CD, Standards, Andrew Gilbert who writes for Downbeat wrote a really nice thing. He wrote, "Her first impression is made with her phenomenal technique but it's her emotional depth as a player that leaves an enduring mark." And I like that because he talks about the emotional depth as a player that leaves an enduring mark, and that comes back to what we were talking about earlier. I'm really glad that he felt that way or that he did pick up on that because that's my ultimate goal. My whole goal is to be able to reach people. Also as a composer, I'd rather somebody be moved by a beautiful piece than go, "Isn't that fascinating!" Even though it's all part of jazz and what I love about jazz is sort of the fact that it does encompass the whole range of emotions from really hot, maybe gritty and bluesy and lush to something that's just exquisite. But if I have to choose, I'm going to go with the exquisite over the snazzy and fast, you know, super technique kind of stuff. I mean it's great to have enough technique to do what you want to do and say what you want to say, but to me, it's the heart of music that counts. I really would rather listen to a player with less chops but more heart than the other way around.

Do you think that being a woman brings anything different to your music?

MF: Yes, but it's interesting. I don't think it's because I'm a woman per se. In other words, I don't think it's either biological or hormonal. I think it's more life experience. All of our life experiences affect the music, and how could they not? You want them to. And so all of the experiences I've had, good or bad, they are funneled into what makes the music come out and come out of me, either as a player or as a composer. Certainly my experiences as a woman in this world and dealing with some of the BS that you have to deal with definitely have affected me. Sure, I mean I don't see how it could not.

What specific challenges or obstacles do you feel you've encountered?

MF: As a woman or as a player?

Either.

MF: Well, you could just say I had a very challenging adolescence and those personal experiences that I had ... definitely strengthened me and informed who I am as a human being. I've also lost a lot of friends, and I think those experiences informed my life and my worldview, giving me a lot of compassion as a human being and hopefully some depth and some insight. And so that's going to affect me. You know, as a woman, certainly over the years when I was younger and would go to jam sessions, I'd have my guitar right on my back and get up on the stage and they'd say, "What do you want to sing, sweetie?" I had a whole list of wisecracks ready to answer back but after a while I realized that I had to stop personalizing some of these comments. It wasn't maliciousness, it was just ignorance on people's part. And I just stopped letting it get me and I'd say, "Well, what I want to sing on my guitar is 'Have You Met Miss Jones' in F, thank you very much." And I just wouldn't let it get me down. Really, it was irritating. But it just sort of strengthened my resolve and made me practice harder. So in some ways you could say I definitely made lemonade out of lemons.

Would you say that's your greatest strength?

MF: Yeah, I'm a gritty little New York girl. Yes, I would.

What's your biggest weakness?

MF: Oh, I'm too sensitive. But it is also part of what I think is a double-edged sword. It comes back to the review thing. I can get out of 20 reviews, even more, out of a 100 reviews, I can have 98 great ones, 99 good, you know, the 99th will be a good one and the 100th will be lukewarm and I can't remember the other 99. And so I think my sensitivity is sometimes a liability. So that's something that I'd love – to be passionate and empathetic and sensitive in the "quote unquote" good way and shed some of the hypersensitivity in the other way because I think that would help me. But it's an ongoing process. And maybe if you interview me 10 years from now, I will be reading all the reviews. I think the thing is that there are reviewers and there are reviewers. Some are very knowledgeable and some really have a minimal understanding of the music.

Let's take the approach that the writer, the critic, the reviewer is really no more educated than the audience. What do you feel about educating the audience? What would you want to tell the audience to listen to or how to listen or what to listen for?

MF: See, this comes to all the different levels that you can listen to music on. Aaron Copeland has a great book on what to listen for in music and I think the first printing was in the '30s or '40s maybe. He goes into the different levels that you listen to music, that one can listen to music on. One is a very visceral response that all of us have. You can ask the average, the proverbial man or woman in the street, "What do you think of this?" And if you play something very dissonant they'll go, "Well, it doesn't sound very pretty." And that's accurate! Even though you or I might say something about "the use of the melodic minor scale juxtaposed against the chord up before the blah blah blah ...." All they know is it doesn't sound pretty, and that's right, you know. Or you could ask a little kid in elementary school, "Does this music make you happy or sad?" And if it's in a minor key it's going to make them sad. They'll say, "This music sounds sad." So, I think there are many different levels to listen to music on. But I think it's different in jazz. In order to be able to review it intelligently you can't just be an average person. If I were to review a movie, I would not be going as someone who understood what the director was trying to do, or how the photography was set. This is not an area I know a lot about. But, would I still be able to say how the movie affected me? Do I feel the dialogue was trite, or wasn't moving? I'd have an opinion but I certainly wouldn't be able to give the kind of review that someone that's studied all the works of this director. That's a whole different bag. I think in the case of jazz, if you're going to give a truly knowledgeable review, because it is a very deep art form (which it isn't often treated as, by the way, by reviewers), then you're going to have a problem because you could still respond to it on that one level, "Well, I like the show, the music was punchy." But then you're like American Bandstand. "I'll give it a 10, I can dance to it."

Tell me about what you're working on currently.

MF: I'm leaving in mid May to go to Thailand for several months with Scotty Wright, a wonderful jazz singer, great scat singer and just a beautiful voice. We're going to Thailand together and we're also hoping to do a CD together in Thailand. Just the two of us, just guitar and voice. And Standards, the solo CD I just mentioned, will be released in May of this year on Origin Records, which is a wonderful jazz label out of Seattle.

Tell me, what makes for a good musical relationship? Whether it's a duo or a special guest artist with you.

MF: Well, here's what I feel. There's two different ways that people go about this. There's the "I'm the leader and you're the side people" thing. Because there are people that just must be leaders and there are people that really enjoy not having the full pressure. They enjoy being contributors but don't need to be, don't have the driving force or the ego they need to be in that kind of front situation. Then there's more the collaborative type of thing where everybody in the group is not necessarily contributing equally at all times, but where you have a real synergy. My favorite format is a trio with a really smoking drummer and bass player that are both very giving in terms of the music, what they can give. I don't want a bass player just sit and walk through the changes; I want someone who's a great soloist that's going to contribute to the whole band sound. Especially in

a guitar trio situation – other than organ, that's my other favorite thing to do, guitar, organ and drums, I love that sound. My most typical situation that I'm met with and that I do perform in is that trio situation. So as a guitarist you're demanding more of the bass player in that situation without piano. They've got to fill more harmonic ground. Certainly they don't have to but it's great if they can. I also want a drummer that plays melodically, who knows how to color and shade things and develop both lines behind me that have shape and contour and also is a strong soloist. So, I'm looking for a very different thing. I may still be the leader in that. It's my name that got the gig but other than that – and I'll do the schmoozing with the crowd – but other than that, I expect them to give 100 percent. That's more of a collaborative thing and I just personally enjoy that more because then the music has more flow to it. And the audience feels it too. It's not just, "Oh, this is the guitar player's group." If I'm on the road and for whatever reason I don't have the opportunity to bring my own rhythm section, if I've got a pickup rhythm section for the night, it's going to be more the former type of thing unless I just luck into the most magical situation. And that has happened where I can hear after the first note, after the downbeat, and I'm like "Oh my god, these guys have worked together a lot, they are great players, we're going to have a lot of fun!" And they are really going to stand with me as peers completely in terms of what they are giving both musically and personally. That's a very exciting situation. That's how I view the musical relationship; we're in it to serve the music and try to create something wonderful, hopefully exciting and fresh, you know, together.

Who have you not yet had an opportunity to play with that you would really want to work with one day?

MF: In rhythm section or just in general?

In general, your wish list.

MF: Other than Jim Hall – who I would love to play with one of these days, I love guitar duets – I have played with some of my all-time favorite people. So as far as the guitar goes, I'm pretty happy. And this is just my little girl's heart from having heard him, McCoy Tyner, he would be high on my list. Art Blakey's dead, but I sure would have like to work with him. Billy Higgins I haven't played with yet and I would love to. Ray Brown. I played with him briefly in L.A. for a special guitar summit and I wanted to do a whole gig with him and I would have except that I signed this contract to go to Thailand, so I'm going to miss this opportunity. Hopefully there will be another. I'd love to play with Joe Lovano. There are so many great people. I think there are a few singers that I would like to work with: Kevin Mahogany, I like him. I really enjoy working with singers.

Is that an unusual thing for a musician to say?

MF: Not necessarily. I mean, I particularly like duos because with singers, I like that give and take and I like the pressure on me to be the whole rhythm section. I just enjoy that challenge. I guess because my mom was a singer and I grew up hearing that. And I also love the human voice. Everything from Ella to Betty Carter and everything in between, I really ... you know, I just love to hear some of these lyrics phrased beautifully. Whether someone is a great scat singer or just has a wonderful way of phrasing and has a gorgeous voice, I guess there's part of me that's a frustrated singer but I managed to find a way to transmutate that talent onto the guitar, so it works for me. I do really enjoy working with singers. Also, I would have to say probably Ron Carter, Dave Holland and there are some great bass players. I mean, I have played with a lot of great bass players but they are two that I'd love to work with. Ray Drummond I played with some but I'd like to record with him. I love him, as a person and as a player. I think I've hit some of the people ... I'm just going right off the top of my head.

Do you have any heroes? They don't have to be in music.

MF: Yeah, I do. I have one big hero and she never ceases to amaze me -- Gloria Steinem. I love her.

Why?

MF: I met her years ago. Because I love the fact that she's still slugging away, first of all, 30, 40 years later. She's had a hard life personally. She had a mom who was mentally ill and a lot of personal hurdles to overcome in her own life. But I just really like the way she has stuck to her guns. And I personally feel like I've benefited

from the most recent wave of the women's movement. Just to have the courage to stand by what I wanted to do in my life. My dad got me a subscription to Ms magazine the first year it came out when I was 16 years old and it really changed my life. It gave me a framework to look at – like, well, let's see women have only been voting since the 1920s and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, when you read back on all that stuff and you see how hard those women worked to just get some basic rights, and then to see how we've benefited from them and whether you define yourself as a feminist or whatever in your life today, we wouldn't be who we are without some of those women. I mean, just the opportunities that are available to us. And I like that Gloria Steinem is still out there, very eloquently fighting for women's rights and human rights all over the world. So, I really admire her. That whole wave of the women's movement had a big impact on me. It really boosted my self-esteem and made me realize that things that I was personalizing in my life were often more of a result of somebody's conditioning than something I had to personally take on. So, it really liberated me. My spin on it was rather than to feel bitter about maybe opportunities that I had been denied or other women before me had been denied, was more to take it and turn it into something positive. Like, okay, well here is where we are today. What can I do today and how can we move forward. It served as very positive for me.

Speaking of feeling liberated, let's talk more about your new CD. Recording solo must feel incredibly liberating.

MF: It's liberating and terrifying. It's sort of like the fool card in the Tarot deck. This guy standing right at the edge of a cliff and you're not sure if this schmo is going to jump off the cliff or if in fact they jump off the cliff, where they're going to land. If, in fact, this is their one magnificent moment of brilliance and connection with the universe. You have no idea. So the fool is ... is the joke on them or on us? Who's the fool? That's kind of how I feel about recording solo. It's an amazing thing, right. There's no rhythm section to get in my way. Nobody to dictate where I go. No one to say, "You can't do this" I mean musically speaking, you know. There's just such a sense of culling, literally culling everything that I've learned as a musician and an artist in my life into one sort of cogent, concise statement. So that is liberating but it's also like, wow, talk about walking on stage naked! You know, here I am folks. If you have a night where you feel like you fall short with a trio, that's one thing but if you have a night where you fall short and it's a solo performance, it's going to stand out more. Everything is magnified.

How did this particular recording project come about?

MF: Well, I had some recordings from a live show that was done when I was home, when I was in town at Berkeley at the jazz school. They have a concert venue and I did a solo show there, which was actually a tribute to Joe Pass. I had done some of the tunes that Joe had made famous and a few of his not very well known originals, a few blues that he had written and a very funny tune which I love to do because of the play on my name. It's called "A Foxy Chick and a Cool Cat" and I love that Foxy Chick. It's so hysterical and if anyone knows Joe Pass, it's so tongue in cheek. So I just decided I would do a whole show and of course it would be a solo show. I really wanted to do that. I think there comes a point as a musician if you're a guitarist or piano player where because you can play solo and because the world of solo guitar and solo piano can be so rich and so exciting, I think it's a real milestone. I had 3 or 4 pieces in the can already from that show that came out really nice, that I was pretty happy with and then I just decided to go into the studio and add to it because I'm on the road so much. I just decided I really wanted to get this out, so when I met the folks up in Seattle at Origin Records, and they said to me, "hey, if you want to do a solo recording, we'd like to do it with you," that's how it sort of came together. I'm real happy with it. Like I said, it comes out in May of this year.

If you were to trace, your own five recordings, plus all the others you've done as a side person, if you were to look at these in a progression, does it say anything – and if so, what – about your evolution as an artist?

MF: Yes. You always want that. You never want to feel like you're moving backwards or that you hit a plateau that you can't move from. So, for me, each recording I try to do something a little different. "Against the Grain" was my first recording as a leader, which was actually recorded in 1985. I was 28 when I did it. So I really feel like it really was everything I was about at that time. I'm still really proud of it but when I listen to it now, it's very different. I've grown a lot as an artist both technically and harmonically. Each recording that I've done I've really tried to continue to show who I am as a human being, which of course includes who I am as an artist. Obviously, Kicks has an organ trio on 4 of the cuts with Joey DeFrancesco and Will Kennedy, which is a lot of fun. So that was one thing that I had always wanted to be able to do. And Turtle Logic had more of my working quartet from the Bay Area with more of my original tunes on it. So each of the albums has a different feeling. This new one of course is solo. Maybe my next one will be a Latin jazz thing, something a little different. I'll have to see when the time comes. I really don't believe in making the same album over and over again. I try to have a different concept for each and then who I am as an artist in my development will be showcased but in a new way. I really do feel that there are people who make the same album over and over again. You know what I mean, don't you? I'll do one bossa and I'll do one ballad and I'll do one bop tune and I'll do two blues – well, why don't we just write a formula then? Even though they keep developing as artists, which is cool, it really basically feels to me like the same album, different year. I really don't like to do that because it strikes me as a little more contrived.

Goals is too shallow a word, aspirations sounds a little lofty but ...

MF: Perspirations?

Yeah, those too. When you look to the future, do you ever say: some time in my life I want to do X, or I really want to master this or get to that?

MF: Well, one of my goals happened a few years ago. I had wanted to take some of my existing guitar solo pieces I had written and score them for orchestra and wanted to play them with an orchestra, at least a chamber orchestra. I had the opportunity of playing with the Santa Rosa Symphony and also with the Seattle Symphony some of my pieces. Then, there's a composer down here in the Bay Area, Mary Walkins, and we're collaborating and writing a jazz guitar concerto. That's a huge undertaking and something I'm excited about doing. Having the experience of playing with those two orchestras – I did Vivaldi and it was a real challenge because I'm not a classical guitarist but I have enough right hand chops that I was able to do it. I can do it adequately, I think. Then I improvised on the Vivaldi, which was just a real thrill. I had the cello section raising their eyebrows. I couldn't tell if they were thrilled or aghast. I'm still not sure but they came up to me afterward and say, "Wow, Mimi, that was just special!" I think that was good. I'm still not sure with some of these classical folks. Anyway, I've done that and as you asked me earlier, there's definitely some people I would like to play with and that would inform some of my goals. So, those are some of my aspirations but I guess that was one of my biggest things was to be able to play with an orchestra and being able to improvise and do all that. It was very exciting.

Having had that experience now – the sort of symphonic and grand sound – has that changed your approach in any way?

MF: Yeah, because it's changed my ears.

How?

MF: Well, what happens now is that when I'm doing a solo recording, I'm hearing cellos. I'm hearing a bassoon. I can actually hear those instruments while I'm playing. Obviously, I'm not hearing them front and center. I wouldn't be able to blow myself. If they're too front and center, I suppose I would just stop and say, "Well, even though this is my album, there will be 20 seconds of silence here to give the strings a chance to blow." I mean, you know, that would be kind of crazy. Now that I'm thinking about it, I don't think so. Hey, if

people can't take a joke... "What happened to this recording, Mimi?! I'm listening to this recording of 'Donna Lee' and there's like 30 seconds where there's nothing going on. You know, what is that?" I'd say, "Hey, it's not a defective CD. If you can't hear the violas, man, you've got a problem."

An interactive CD.

MF: Exactly! (laughing) Anyway, it's really changed what I hear and it's definitely changing what I'm playing because I feel that I'm moving away from a bop thing. I mean I'm glad I have all that background. I love bebop, I do enjoy listening to it, but I feel that I'm integrating the bop with the more contrapuntal approach, more counterpoint, and it's just my lines are actually changing. So, I just feel there's no telling where I may go musically at this point because of having that experience. And also because of all the classical music I do listen to.

What has been the best moment in your life, to date.

MF: Playing with some of the great players that I have admired have been some of the best musical moments of my life. Outside of music I'd say one of the most exhilarating times was when I was about 21 years old and I did a 10-mile race. Out of a field of about 290 women, I finished third. So that was very exciting. I couldn't walk for a week but we're not going to talk about that. I was so sore! Some of the ways I've challenged myself physically have been exhilarating. I've done a few 15 and 20-mile hikes and long runs. Very gratifying.

Do you have any other hobbies?

MF: Well, I totally love baseball and I'm an avid Oakland As fan. I used to be a NY Yankee fan. Obviously, growing up in NY ... but at some point I just decided after being out here for 20 years, it was really ridiculous that I not convert. So now I've converted. And again, it's just one of these little geeky pastimes that I have that I really enjoy. I love going to baseball games. The Oakland Coliseum, unlike the old Candlestick Park in San Francisco, is very warm so it's a nice way to spend the day even if you're not a baseball fan. Often times when I'm in town, I volunteer for different organizations here and take a lot of the low-income kids out to a baseball game. We get there early so they can get autographs of some of the players they like. They have signing days. That's a real special thing that I like to do. A few years back I had a grant where I went into the California prison systems and I did concerts and lectures. That was a very exciting experience and they were so grateful for me coming in and doing concerts, then talking with them about music. Talk about a captive audience. But that was a real high, actually. I think that any time I do that kind of work, it's true that you get back a lot more than you give. So, I do enjoy that, and those are probably some of the best moments of my life.

Well, you certainly give a lot with your music, and you've been very candid with our readers and we appreciate that.

MF: Well, thank you. I liked the questions. Maybe, just this once, I will read the piece when it comes out.

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