



JOEL HARRISON – PASSING TRAIN

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Passing Train is a surprisingly confident debut by an old-timer who is constantly discovering new dimensions. Harrison uses his entire creative experience as a jazz guitarist like a magician who has managed to escape from the box that he had previously maneuvered himself into. If ever there was a jazz musician able to take absolute liberties for himself, then it is Joel Harrison with his coming-out as a singer-songwriter.

Joel Harrison is a jazz guitarist. Joel Harrison is not a jazz guitarist. Joel Harrison is a country music switch hitter. Joel Harrison is not a country music switch hitter. Joel Harrison is a classical composer. Joel Harrison is not a classical composer. Joel Harrison is a singer-songwriter. Joel Harrison is not a singer-songwriter. All of these statements are true, and in any given combination make sense. Joel Harrison is a guitarist, composer, and most recently also a singer whose activities cover a broad spectrum. It is immensely exciting to explore the gigantic spectrum of varying styles and to trace them back to their collective source and find the derivation of Joel Harrison's personality. In doing so Harrison is much too modest to pose as ruler of a musical galaxy. He conveys his versatility in an amazingly simple phrase: "Not having a center is my center. It's not easy to be me. I almost laugh when I think about it."

Joel Harrison definitely does not suffer from a multiple personality. He is an artist with a firm creative will, he is constantly focused on the logical completion of the project he is working on at any given time, and he has the necessary skills at his disposal to meet his requirements. Just as it is legitimate to summarize his complete works, it is also legitimate to let each record simply speak for itself. "Of course I know the market we inhabit," the visionary Harrison reflects soberly, "and I respect the listening habits of the audience. I can't expect that every project will please every listener. If I can make a lasting impression on somebody with just one record, then I've made quite an achievement. Yet if you listen very carefully, in all of the projects you will find something that sounds like Joel Harrison."

With *Passing Train* Harrison will more than likely find music lovers who previously would not lend their ears to his music. A wanderer between traditions, Harrison started out as a jazz musician eager to listen to rock and non-American music. During the nineties he was an exponent of Californian avant-garde jazz. Among others he worked with musicians such as Nels Cline, John Schott and Scott Amendola. He had just established himself as a jazz guitarist in the Bay Area before moving to New York in 1999, where he established completely new coordinates in *Free Country*. At that time it was not customary for jazz musicians to seek out and close ranks with the folk and country music scene. But the determination with which Harrison overrode all conventions was met with speechlessness at that time. In *Harrison on Harrison* he extemporized on songs by his famous namesake from the Beatles, thus opening a completely different outlet with his affinity for good songs.



In *Passing Train* Harrison presents another song album, and again everything is different. Admittedly *Passing Train* proves his overt passion for American folk songs, but this time all of the songs are penned by Harrison. Added to this, Harrison plays not only the guitar, he also sings. Never before has he strayed so far from the genre of jazz as he does on this album. "More than anything, this time I have completely abstained from improvisation. I have been a songwriter for a long time. This album was a big challenge for me. Musicians that improvise have a completely different approach to music. The new record seems at a first glance to be my most popular, but the whole process was anything but simple. On the contrary, the creative process was very complex."

Harrison worked on *Passing Train* for six years. Yet despite all complexities, Harrison manages to make each song sound simple. Good songs sometimes have to ripen, like good wine, to develop their bouquet fully. Harrison wanted to waste as little time thinking about how trendy, commercial, or accessible his songs would be, as he did on the question of whether or not his album, when seen from the jazz perspective, might be seen as light fare. He simply knew what he would like to listen to, and continued working on the album until he had reached his goal. Whoever who listens to these songs, without knowing his jazz albums, will not be able to tell the extent of Harrison's profound knowledge of jazz. Good songwriting, as the guitarist well knows, is always a matter of understatement. As contradictory as this may sound, in order to allow his character develop fully in the songs, he holds himself much further back than would be possible in a jazz context. Instead he has, for the first time, words at his disposal. "Powerful songs live from the combined effect of words and music. Nothing touches us like a good song. Every great songwriter and performer had a special sense of this joint effect, without possibly being able to describe exactly where the interface is, and how it could be created. Even the greatest classical and jazz musicians listen to songs for their own pleasure."

A special feature is the singing. The number of jazz guitarists who have at some point discovered the singer in themselves is actually pretty small. On *Passing Train*, however, Harrison is not a jazz guitarist. Still, he had to get used to his voice first, and it is precisely this first encounter that makes the singing on *Passing Train* such an intense, fragile, and emotionally powerful occasion. "I have never tried singing on an entire record. I cannot even claim that I particularly like my voice. Originally, I didn't want to sing the songs at all myself, but they just kept returning to me. I had to work hard on keeping the balance between vulnerability and a hardness in my voice. Admittedly, I don't have a trained voice at my disposal, but there are certain emotions, such as sadness or a 'bluesiness,' that I could express best myself. I've learned from the greatest R&B singers that songs are more authentic when you trust the resources that you already have at your disposal."

In the song *Glory Days*, Harrison also delivers a timeless contribution on a fundamental conflict in present-day America. With its hymnlike insistency the piece is reminiscent of Steve Earles provocative antiwar song *John Walker's Blues*. Yet Harrison's sensitivity when handling this—particularly in America—very multilayered theme of "war and peace" is hard to top. "Instead of using the whole antiwar rhetoric, I wanted to tell the story of somebody who was just simply there. It didn't even have to be the war in Iraq, it could also be any other war. I was concerned with the inner devastation experienced in the soul of somebody at war. For me it is about a soldier who feels betrayed, and has to live with the certainty that his honor has been stolen."

Simultaneous with "Passing Train" the label Intuition will release Joel Harrison's Album „The Wheel“ (Five Movements for Double Quartet and Guitar) INT 3426 2.