

## Q&A with Fernando Ulibarri

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***Composer and performer Fernando Ulibarri reveals the ins and outs of the just-released album Transform***

**You are a 34 year old Costa Rican that has spent 15 years studying and working as a musician in the U.S. Does this bi-cultural character influence your music in any way?**

I’m sure it is an influence in some ways, but it’s certainly not something I’ve set out to consciously portray. My main concern when writing and performing this music has been to stay true to what I’m hearing, staying in the moment, so to speak; listening and reacting to what the other musicians are playing.

**Why *Transform* as a title for the album? Does it refer to you or to your music?**

*Transform* is the title of a composition that I wrote a number of years ago and that the band has been playing for a while. It is a pretty transparent and clear-cut melody, with an open form that allows us to take the music into a variety of directions, sometimes unexpectedly. We enjoy playing it a lot.

The band did a few takes of the song when we were tracking the record. When I was mixing the album I decided to take segments of those different performances to construct variations... sort of creating a new composition based on what the band had played. I ended up using two of these variations on the record. So, it seemed fitting to title the album like that.

**It seems that your album can be enjoyed in two basic ways: as a collection of individual pieces, and as a larger-scale compositional work. Was that a deliberate choice on your behalf?**

That is certainly something I wanted to achieve --to have songs that stood on their own, but also to establish compositional unity throughout the album. Some of my favorite jazz records (*Speak No Evil*, by Wayne Shorter; *Footloose*, by Paul Bley; *Kind of Blue*, by Miles Davis, and *Crescent*, by John Coltrane) have that quality. They develop a thread that goes through the album, and gives unity to the whole work.

**The music in *Transform* has been composed at different moments of your evolution as a musician. Do you think it shows in your album?**

I'd like to think that the album shows the music as it stands at this particular point in time. This group of musicians has been playing these songs for a while, and the music has gone through many stages. Last year I felt this process should be documented, which is why I decided to record it.

I felt the music has achieved a sense of identity when we play it live, mainly because of the fact that the same group of guys has been playing it for some time. I hope the record shows that.

**How would you define the character of your compositions?**

There seems to be two kinds of broad categories of compositional styles. One produces music that is meant to showcase the composer. In this kind of music the complexities come directly from the author of the work, and the players are there to try to execute and present the vision of the writer.

The other kind, which is where I think the music on this record falls, is one that is simpler in design, thus allowing the complexities to come more from the players and their interactions with each other. You feel the personality of the writer a little less in the music, which in turn gives room for the performers' personalities to come forth. The music is open to more possibilities; it's able to take more unpredictable twists and turns.

I would say the music on this record is simple, in the sense that the melodies are easily understood. But there is a lot of complexity in the approach that we are taking when performing it. The way the music is written sets up this possibility, which is taken to its full potential because of the talent and creativity of the performers, and the time we've spent working together as an ensemble.

**In addition to composing and performing, you mixed the record and did a lot of editing and post-production, particularly on both takes of *Transform*. Could you elaborate on that?**

For anyone that has grown up listening to music since the 60's, the idea of a record having post-production, or its own "sound" if you will, is pretty much a given. This is something that is not new in jazz. Miles Davis was already toying with the concept when he recorded *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. And most certainly people like Pat Metheny, Wayne Shorter, Allan Holdsworth, Chick Corea, David Torn and many others, have explored the concept in various different ways.

My decision to mix the record, and edit the takes of *Transform*, came from the desire of having more control over its sound; I wanted to present the music in the most personal way possible.

**How do you mainly see yourself: as a composer or as a performer?**

I'd say both. I love to play, but writing is a very rewarding experience, which is nurtured by performance.

The goal of this record was to showcase both of these strands of creativity, in addition to the sound of this particular band, with such a great group of guys.

**Which jazz musicians, both composers and performers, would you define as the major influences in your music?**

I've always been a fan of bands. I like groups of people that develop an identifiable sound. The Miles Davis Quintet (all of them), The John Coltrane Quartet, The Ornette Coleman Quartet, The Duke Ellington Orchestra, The Jazz Messengers, The Horace Silver Quintet, The Bill Evans Trio, Weather Report, The Keith Jarrett Trio, Return to Forever, Kenny Dorham/Joe Henderson, Chick Corea/Miroslav Vitous/Roy Haynes... these come to mind at the moment.

Regarding the mixing and production to the album, the approach that people like David Torn, Manfred Eicher, Rudy Van Gelder, Tchad Blake, Tony Visconti, Roger Nichols, Brian Eno and other producer/engineers take to the records they make was something running in the back of my mind. Not as something to copy, but more as something that was possible; as a general aesthetic to shoot for.

As far as musicians, there are so many... Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Herbie Hancock, Ornette Coleman, Chick Corea, Paul Bley, Joe Henderson, Freddie Hubbard, Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Keith Jarrett, Louis Armstrong, Joe Zawinul, Nancy Wilson, Johnny Hartman, Tim Berne... I could go on forever.

**What do you think may be the best balance between inspiration and craft when composing?**

I think you need both, and the balance should be dynamic. It's impossible to have everything you write come from inspiration. The idea starts as an inspiration of some kind, but you need technique and craft to put it on paper. You also need experience to know what will work, or to try to guess what will work, for the ensemble you are writing for.

**How would you describe the kind of exchanges that went through among you and the other performers while recording "Transform"?**

Interaction is the most important aspect of it. I like to call it listening. You can't play any kind of music if you don't listen. Certainly, improvisational music like the one on this record would be severely limited if listening and interaction weren't happening.

In the case of this particular band, I'd say that the personality of all the players affects how it sounds. For me, personally, it starts with John Yarling (drummer) and his approach to playing time. The way he chooses to orchestrate the music on the drums has a strong impact on the sound of the band. From there, Josh Allen (bass), Jim Gasior (keys) and I --all craft our own approach. John will listen to what we do and that becomes the beginning of our musical conversation.

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