Jeff Parker & Chris Speed

The musicians and longtime friends discuss their Covid-era solo projects, the endless gifts of the Thelonious Monk songbook, and the challenges of building a community for improvised music in a new city.
Guitarist Jeff Parker and reedist Chris Speed first met in the late 1980s when they were both students in Boston—Parker at Berklee, and Speed at New England Conservatory. In the years since, they’ve each taken circuitous routes in music, parlaying their broad sensibilities and creative curiosity into many disparate projects.

Parker moved to Chicago, where he joined the instrumental rock band Tortoise and began a long-time collaboration with cornetist Rob Mazurek in various incarnations of the Chicago Underground Quartet and Isotope 217. Since 1995, he’s been a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), where he spent years playing in Ernest Dawkin’s New Horizons Ensemble. His long and diverse list of collaborations also includes work alongside Fred Anderson, Joshua Redman, Brian Blade, Matana Roberts, and Nicole Mitchell, among many others. More recently, he’s led his own band The New Breed, where his skills as an electronic music producer are on full display.

Speed settled in New York, working in collectives like Human Feel, with Kurt Rosenwinkel, Jim Black, and Andrew D’Angelo; John Hollenbeck’s Claudia Quartet; the Balkan-flavored quartet Pachora; and his own idiosyncratic quartet Yeah NO, which borrowed ideas from electronic music and minimalism. In 2014, he assembled an agile, history-informed trio with Dave King and Chris Tordini, and this past fall he joined The Bad Plus—where, along with guitarist Ben Monder, he’s helping to remake the veteran piano trio into something new and entirely unexpected.

Both musicians are now based in Los Angeles and recently released solo records made during the pandemic. They spoke over Zoom in November 2021.

—Peter Margasak

Jeff Parker: I had your solo CD playing on repeat in the car for a month. I really enjoyed it, man. That’s kind of a cool thing about the lockdown period—there were so many bedroom records and solo projects that people got into over this strange time . . . a lot of very reflective music, you know?

Chris Speed: I was inspired by your solo record that came out before the pandemic [Parker’s 2016 album Slight Freedom]. It has such great ambience, and such great moods that you made for each one of those pieces. I was wondering what sort of prep went into that.

JP: That record came about when I first moved to LA. I didn’t know anybody. I rented a practice space. Lee Anne [Schmitt] had a friend who was in a weekend warrior rock band, and they rented this rehearsal space in Highland Park, and I gave him a hundred bucks a month. I would go and use the space in the day when they weren’t in. I just went in there and I had my amp and my looping
of that. It was just like, okay, I guess I can work on this. To be honest, I've been focusing on making my own music for the last few years. I never really had the physical space to do that until I moved out here. For one, I was kind of isolated from a real community of musicians; and two, I finally had these kinds of rehearsal spaces at my disposal. For me, especially with the guitar, you think solo guitar, you think Joe Pass, Ted Green—these super virtuosic, really intricate, floral arrangements. The stuff that gave me the confidence to do it was the Steve Lacy solo stuff. Sonny Rollins has done some solo pieces. And, of course, Monk. All three of those guys are super virtuosic, but their solo stuff doesn't come across like that at all. It just kind of sounds like them just playing, you know? Could that by also keep tabs on jazz—or whatever it is. We want to keep music moving forward. I think we do more interested in doing new music and writing our own music, learning from. And yet—and I think we're similar this way—we're more interested in doing new music and writing our own music, with differing degrees of jazz influence, depending on what we're writing. We want to keep music moving forward. I think we do that by also keep tabs on jazz—or whatever it is.

**JP**: We don't know what to call it now.

**CS**: Right! During the pandemic, when I was doing all this—and thought was the meat of the compositions, and just make some statement that someone would want to listen to.

**JP**: That's a beautiful record. You got the vibe with just ambience, the way it was captured. But I will say—dude, that tune that Skuli [Sverrisson] wrote, with the circular breathing and the steady stream of fast 16th notes for like five minutes or something... that is some super-duper virtuosic clarinet playing.

**CS**: I did work on that for a while, for sure. I'd actually learned that song—a different version—because I played that with Skuli. He wrote that for Pachora like 20 years ago. It's such a beautiful, circular, through-composed piece. I love treating it like an etude. I like this idea that we make our own etudes. It's fun to play through Bach or Bird solos to work on technique, but it was just nice to have a piece that's so personal, that a friend wrote, that I could use as an etude. It goes into some very beautiful Skuli-ish kind of harmony that's not jazz, it's not modern classical, but it's something in the middle there. It's nice to have a piece like that to continually work on. I wanted to present it as a solo work because I think it holds up. But I did spend some time just trying to make it flow somehow.

**JP**: Yeah. It's beautiful.

**CS**: I appreciate it. Your new solo record—is it your music, improvised?

**JP**: There's a couple of older compositions by me, a lot of improvisations, and, of course, I did a Monk tune.

**CS**: Of course!

**JP**: And I did a standard.

**CS**: You are my favorite interpreter of not only Monk tunes, but just tunes in general.

**JP**: Really? Thanks, Chris. I love playing tunes. I love playing standards. But I never wanted to be, like, a bebop dude. I was always very interested in a lot of other stuff. It's funny—I think a lot of people don't even really know that I can play straight ahead with any proficiency.

**CS**: People that know you only from Isotope 217 or Tortoise or maybe even your own band might not understand where you're coming from. I feel similarly—bebop and jazz, that's sort of the core of what we do. It's an endless gift that we get to study and learn from. And yet—and I think we're similar this way—we're more interested in doing new music and writing our own music, with differing degrees of jazz influence, depending on what we're writing. We want to keep music moving forward. I think we do that by also keep tabs on jazz—or whatever it is.
What drew me to jazz as a kid was not really knowing what was going to happen—knowing that it came from improvising. Then improvising opened up a whole other world of creativity.

—Jeff Parker

I’m sure I wasn’t alone in this—it was also nice to be able to kind of take stock of all these influences. I had been studying classical music long before I was listening to jazz, and I was listening to rock music before I ever listened to jazz. I was way into Led Zeppelin before I even heard of John Coltrane, you know what I’m saying? With my solo thing, I was trying to access a little more of the classical or new music side of those influences I grew up with, even though I consider myself a jazz musician or improviser at this point.

JP: You were always really inspiring to me in the Boston days because you seemed so open-minded. I distinctly remember you back then being one of the only musicians who used to talk about people from the AACM. I remember you telling me that you were checking out John Stubblefield when we were in Boston. I was like, Damn, Chris is checking that stuff out?

CS: Stubblefield came and played [Boston concert venue] The Middle East. I’d only known of him because of the Mingus band, I guess. As we know, jazz is such a community of musicians and, as a saxophone player, I just wanted to hear as many different ways of playing the saxophone as possible. Those guys after Ornette, what they were doing in the 70s and in the AACM, it’s still sort of unsung in a way, and Stubblefield’s a part of that. I was kind of crazy for Ornette Coleman and late Coltrane, and I was trying to check out cats who came after them. I also was super inspired by how your crew was so about playing sessions and just playing together. Even back then, it was Monk and Ornette that I remember you being super into. It’s funny—that music keeps getting better.

JP: It does. It just pushes you. You never know where you’ll end up just from studying creative music, man. What drew me to jazz as a kid was not really knowing what was going to happen—knowing that it came from improvising. Then improvising opened up a whole other world of creativity, just making stuff and not knowing what to expect.

CS: I think that’s why we’re drawn to musicians like Monk and Ornette. Someone like Ornette—even though his music was derided, even though he faced so many obstacles getting his music heard or accepted throughout his whole life—for me, I feel like it just proves the power of what he was doing, that it’s still so strong. What seemingly might be sort of difficult music to listen to is actually the most beautiful, melodic music out there. To me, his music is the highest level.

JP: I agree. I get kind of bugged because I feel like a lot of younger musicians don’t really check him out and go through him like our generation had to. It was kind of unavoidable. Now I don’t hear a lot of cats talk about him. I don’t know. I don’t hear that openness now, the emotion.

CS: There’s something so compelling about his directness. I mean, he’s the full package, obviously. You hear it in one note when he’s playing, that urgency and then in his compositions, his way of committing to this idea of improvising. . . I don’t even know what to say about music today, or who’s checking out what.

JP: Yeah, it’s probably not a door I should open. But I’ve been complaining about it!

CS: Maybe that’s just getting old, too.

JP: Yeah. But Ornette is such a big part of my experience.
CS: I remember you playing that tune “The Invisible,” and I remember you playing “Lonely Woman”—obviously, everybody knows “Lonely Woman”—but you played a gig at [Highland Park venue] ETA a couple years ago, and just hearing 50-year old Jeff Parker playing “Lonely Woman” was just, to me, classic. It doesn’t get any better than that for me. You’ve been sort of acclimating in LA a little longer than I have, but I was very impressed by how you got stuff going, like at ETA, how it evolved from a Jeff Parker group playing standards and Monk tunes, and now it’s just a focus on your music. The fact that you do both—it’s inspiring.

JP: When I first got out here, it reminded me of when I first moved to Chicago. There was this facade of commercialism, but underneath it felt like you could do almost anything. There was an untapped kind of thing where people wanted stuff happening. Ryan [Julio, co-owner of ETA] asked if I could play at his place every week, more of just as a place to work. Nobody was calling me because I didn’t know anybody. So I was kind of like, well, just let me play in your place every Monday, just so I can keep my chops together. And then it kind of built up from there. Now, with [longstanding LA jazz venue] The Blue Whale closed, he’s kind of trying to fill that void.

CS: The thing about improvised music is that we have to do it. It’s not something you can just think about or want to do, you have to do it. Our favorite musicians, the reason why we love them so much is because they were performing and working all the time. I think maybe by moving to LA we don’t have that intensity that maybe you had in Chicago, or that community that I had in Brooklyn. It’s a little harder—but you did it. You were like f*** it, you got a gig, got some bands working. I guess that’s what we need to do.

JP: Yeah, we need to do it. Are you doing a lot of writing right now, Chris?
CS: At the moment, I'm not. The last few months have been spent just learning Bad Plus music. I've been in that world, which I love. I love having a task to do, and I like learning new music. It's been challenging just because of the immensity of it and having to memorize everything.

JP: That's an exciting lineup, man. I'm excited to hear you when I have a chance.

CS: It's been really fun. I've known Ben [Monder] for so long, but we haven't done that much together. He's such a guitar hero, and such a good dude and a fun guy to hang out with. I feel lucky, because there's not that many gigs out there for an aging saxophonist, if you know what I'm saying. I love Dave [King] and Reid [Anderson]'s compositions.

JP: That's a great rhythm section.

CS: I was playing with Dave and Reid right before with Tim [Berne]—we were doing our Ornette-Julius Hemphill cover band—and I felt like I went from a punk rock band to an orchestra. With Reid's music, I've had to focus on some different things—intonation and stuff like that—so it's been fun, but challenging.

JP: It was pretty bold of them to totally change the direction of a 20-year-old piano trio.

CS: I've seen them play so much, and yeah; they were a piano trio. I never thought I would get to play with them, ever. It was surprising to me when they opened it up to that degree. I think they're super psyched because there are certain things that they can do now that you couldn't do with a piano, even venues to play. It's a different world. It's been fun to do some of their older songs with this new instrumentation. Dave and Reid asked me and Ben to join, and then a couple weeks later we were rehearsing new music they wrote, and then we recorded it. They just get it done. They come in with pretty clear structures and melodies, but then we have to sort of assemble it all, like every band does. They have 12 new tunes, and then we learned about 10 of the older songs. I would have loved a few more gigs, but we rehearsed quite a bit for it. I came to New York twice in September and we had about eight rehearsals, and then we did a couple gigs in Oakland, before we went to the Power Station in New England.

JP: My whole relationship with touring is another thing that changed with Covid. I've grumbled about this stuff in the past. I like being at home and I like making music in the studio. That's my preferred way to work. I have a long-term goal of not touring anymore—'cause I don't like it, man. I'm not wired for it. I was never really wired for it, and I like being at home. I'll tell you that, straight up.

CS: I love your situation. You have your garage, and you can actually get work done and you have those skills with recording. Who is wired to tour? That's how musicians make a living and that's what you're supposed to do. But yeah, you become numb to how tough it is on your body, and mentally. Am I really playing that great when I've traveled 12 hours and missed a train? You arrive at the venue and it's, 'Okay, make great music.' Of course, we both have young kids. I don't want to be gone that much. For me, it's just: I need to work. But I'm with you. If you find some other ways to pay the bills, I'm all ears. I've been enjoying teaching. You mentioned you're also teaching Bennie Maupin's ensemble?

JP: And I'm also teaching at Cal State Northridge. Yeah, it's been good. I like teaching ensembles, but I hate teaching guitar.

CS: I like playing with the younger musicians, too. I think it's important to stay connected. It's nice to have an ensemble where I can bring in Monk tunes, Ornette tunes, Julius Hemphill's music, and expose them to it.

JP: That's what I've been doing, hopping them to Jackie [McLean]!

CS: I know! We all love Jackie so much. You read about those sessions and Miles firing him after that because Jackie got too high or whatever, but his songs and his playing are so amazing.

JP: He was a soulful musician. Jackie was one of those musicians for me. My father loved him. He is so raw. Nothing but soul. Especially in music school, you get so pressured to have everything perfect. And then there's this dude who just puts it out there. But he's still a very intelligent, very studied musician. I used to always get furious when cats would go in on him at music school. 'Oh, man, he plays so out of tune!' I was like, 'I*** you!' The guy swings like crazy.

CS: Beautiful ideas. Those are our heroes. They're revolutionaries. They're hanging out together—him and Sonny and Monk. That was their scene. We miss it in music school—we miss some basic ingredients of what makes art attractive or really vital. Obviously, we need to study. But we're missing those elements of what made that music so great—just having it be part of the culture. I guess that's what we're trying to do, to keep jazz relevant somehow. Not that it needs any help from me—I didn't mean that to sound so arrogant. But just having it not be some abstract ancient thing that you learn about in school, like Greek. You want it to have a little more life in it. And that's a hard job to do these days.

JP: Definitely.

Peter Margasak is a Berlin-based music journalist who spent more than two decades as a staff writer at the Chicago Reader. He’s currently at work on a book about the intersection of jazz, experimental, and rock music in Chicago between 1992-2002.