

*Jeremy Steig: New York Satyr*

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## Jeremy Steig: New York Satyr

“Believe it or not, I’m a jazz flute player who also draws” *Jeremy Steig*



From the outset, **Jeremy Steig**’s career has been divided between two interests. Born in New York in September of 1942, the son of New Yorker cartoonist and children’s book author William Steig, and Elizabeth “Liza” Mead Steig, the head of the Art Department at Lesley College. With this background, not to mention these genes, it is no surprise that he has had a lifelong involvement with the visual arts. At the same time, however, music has vied for Steig’s attention since his school years, and he has had a career as a flutist over the last forty years that has seen many twists and turns

and has resulted on over forty albums featuring him as either leader or sideman.

Steig was very much a child of the sixties, and this is very much reflected in his playing, which has been influenced as much by “progressive” rock as by the jazz players to whom he was exposed. The ones he cites are John Coltrane, Thelonius Monk and Bill Evans, but his approach to the flute clearly reflects the impact of Rahsaan Roland Kirk who burst on the scene at the 1962 Newport Jazz Festival, the year before Steig’s first recording, *Flute Fever*, appeared. The style that has emerged from these influences has proven effective across the boundaries between jazz, rock, and funk, and Steig has played and recorded with musicians from all these genres, including Joe Henderson, Eddie Palmieri, Yoko Ono, Jimi Hendrix, Tim Hardin, Jim Hall, Big Joe Williams, Junior Wells, Eddie Gomez, David Amram, Art Blakey, Paul Bley, Joe Chambers, Jan Hammer, Johnny Winter, Tim Hardin, Richie Havens and Tommy Bolin. Asked about the late rock icon Bolin, and what the guitarist might have accomplished if he had lived longer, Steig made his feelings clear about the value of jazz compared to rock. “He [Bolin] would have done more for music in that role than just to be another jazz musician. Jimi Hendrix raised everyone’s consciousness by introducing great improvising to a huge audience.”

The other factor has been a significant in Steig’s career as a flutist has been a physical one. As a result of a serious motor-cycle accident in Bermuda when he was 19, he was left with half his face paralyzed. “I took a week to decide whether to be a musician again or not. It was a tortured week. After all, I could make a living and a satisfaction at art.” He decided to try and play again, although it took surgery and six months of recuperation before he could do it. Even then he needed the help of a special device. “I didn’t have the muscles in the left side of my mouth to hold the air in,” Steig recalls, “so if I blew, my lips would just open up. I figured that if I put something under my lips it would divert the air through the middle.” So he created a mouthpiece out of cardboard and tape. Eventually he was able to rebuild his embouchure, although he needed to use the device to record *Flute Fever* and his second album, *Jeremy & The Satyrs* in 1968.

In an on-line interview with Scott McIntosh of the Tommy Bolin Foundation, Steig provided some insights into his early development as an improvising musician:

I started playing recorder at age 6 . . . in first grade. I was improvising almost immediately, picking out melodies by ear, and then making up new parts to go with them. When I was 8, I “retired,” to do all the things that kids do, until I was 11. At that point, my mother wanted me to take up an instrument again, and they were teaching clarinet and flute in the school I went to. I had never heard any kid play the clarinet without sounding like s--t, so the choice of the flute was easy. Luckily, the young flute teacher I had was Paige Brook, who had just joined the New York Philharmonic. To this day, I have never heard anyone play as good as Paige did. (He just passed away a few months ago.)

Apart from giving Steig a technical foundation, Paige Brook encouraged him to explore jazz and rock. It was a direction he was already intuitively pursuing: “As soon as I started playing the flute, I was playing by ear and improvising, just like with the recorder. I didn't know what I was “after” until I was almost 15. I bought a Clifford Brown/Max Roach record, and I realized that I had been playing jazz all along, without knowing the word.” This tendency was reinforced at the High School of Music and Art in New York where he met the great bassist Eddie Gomez.

I went to high school with Eddie Gomez. It was a music high school and we used to go into a room full of basses in between periods and play jazz duo. When the teachers caught us, we were reprimanded for playing jazz and would get "N" on our report card (meaning not satisfactory.) Eddie and I are still playing together. By the way, the same school now has a jazz program. (I consider "jazz education" the kiss of death to the music.)

While pursuing his formal training, Steig took full advantage of the opportunities provided by the New York music scene, in both jazz and rock:

Back in the 60's, I used to sit in with everybody. Back then, musicians weren't so protective of their territory, and they all let me sit in with them. I sat in with a wide variety of musicians, and with rock bands, too. I found I could keep my “soloing integrity” while playing over a funky beat. One week, I had my band backing up Tim Hardin. In the middle of the week, Tim disappeared and never came back. (As he was prone to do.) For the rest of the week, we played Tim's tunes without him, and we were able to stretch out a lot more. And that was the beginning of the Satyrs. The next gig, I added a blues singer named Adrian Guillery. We decided that we'd invented jazz-rock. Of course, there were about 50 other people who had come to the same conclusion.

It is hard to say exactly who invented jazz-rock, but Steig was certainly part of its first wave, to which he contributed his second album *Jeremy and The Satyrs*. But he did not restrict himself to this genre.

Like I said, there was a lot of sitting in going on. I had the greatest sitting in situation for any horn player, ever. Because I sat in with the Bill Evans Trio (their last set) every night, for about 10 years, whenever they played New York. In those days, New York was a very passionate place. It was unbelievable how many fabulous musicians there were. Some- times we would find spaces where we could play music, like lofts and stuff. We'd carry huge amplifiers up, maybe, 5 flights of stairs—just so we could get the right sound.

As well as working with Bill Evans, he played at a club on Bleeker Street with Paul Bley and Gary Peacock. “When Gary couldn't make it, Steve Swallow played bass, and when Paul couldn't, Carla Bley played.” The sessions with Bill Evans eventually led to a recording, *What's New*, issued in 1969.

After completing these early sessions, Steig formed his own group, *Jeremy & The Satyrs*. They landed a two and a half month residency at the Dom on St. Mark's Place playing six nights a week. Soon they headed west where they played opposite Cream at the Fillmore and Winterland. “[Cream was] recording *Wheels Of Fire*,” he recalled. “Fillmore sat 3,000 and Winterland 5,000. It was just an amazing experience.” It was around this period that Charles Lloyd was appearing at these same rock venues. Between them, Lloyd's quartet and *Jeremy & The Satyrs* broke new ground in the area of jazz/rock fusion. Steig has issued around forty recordings since then, in which he has continue to range over a wide range of genres. There have been duo albums with Eddie Gomez, fusion sessions with Jan Hammer, straight-ahead recordings with Urbie Green and Art Farmer. He has also worked with pop/rock artists such as Tim Hardin, Richie Havens, Yoko Ono, and Tommy Bolin.. Whatever the context, Steig's playing has drawn on a variety of extended techniques, particularly the speaking-humming-playing technique associated with a number of jazz players — Sam Most, Roland Kirk, Yusef Lateef — several of whom he counts among his influences. According to Celeste Sunderland in an *allaboutjazz.com* article:

Bobby Jaspar, Roland Kirk, James Moody, and Yusef Lateef who inspired him to start singing into the flute, are in Steig's opinion, some of the major contributors to the instrument. He remembers how he could never get a gig in the high school dance bands be- cause they only wanted saxophone players who doubled on flute. “Back then flute wasn't getting it's due. But since then it's been in small groups, and in a small group, flute has just as much say.”

Steig has clearly contributed to this process, and has plenty to say, but very much on his own terms. Idiosyncratic in the extreme, Steig belongs to no particular school and cares little about genres. His career has been an on-again, off-again affair since these early recordings. For- tunately, it seems to be in an on-again phase currently, as he has recently returned to performing, mainly in New York City, with a quartet featuring Vic Juris, Cameron Brown and Anthony Pinciotti, the group featured on his recently issued CD. His strong, even wild, approach to the instrument continues to add a vital ingredient to the tradition of the flute in jazz.

## Recordings:

Jeremy Steig has appeared on over forty recordings since 1963, but few of these are easily available. I have never seen one of his CDs at *Tower Records* or any major record outlet. I have had to scour used record stores and Ebay to get hold of the recordings I do have. Amazon.com had nine listings under Steig's name, but only four are actually available, only two at a reasonable price. Steig's own site has a comprehensive discography with information and cover art of each of his albums, but no way of purchasing any of them, although the site appears to have a store under construction. My selection is limited by availability.

***Flute Fever***, Columbia LP CS 8936 (originally released 1963)



Produced by John Hammond, this album introduced not only Jeremy Steig but also pianist Denny Zeitlin. Zeitlin has carried on a dual career as jazz pianist and psychiatrist and was still in medical school at this time, while Steig was only twenty. The quartet is filled out by Ben Tucker on bass and Ben Riley on drums and the program consists of three standards, *Lover Man*, *What Is This Thing Called Love?* and *Willow Weep for Me* and originals by Sonny Rollins--*Oleo* and *Blue Seven*--Thelonious Monk--*Well, You Needn't* and Miles Davis--*So What*.

It is an uneven session. Zeitlin and Steig are both fiery players, but harmonically they have different conceptions, Steig playing in a very free manner while Zeitlin sticks more closely to the changes. Reviews at the time criticized Steig for not playing the changes, but the issue is more the lack of coherence between soloist and accompaniment; one might just as easily criticize Zeitlin for not providing a more appropriate setting for Steig, or Hammond for putting the two of them together in the first place. Clearly, Steig was not too worried about the changes. He writes, for example, about *Blue Seven* as “so far above the usual B-flat blues. Playing it was like being in the clouds; I was so carried away, I almost hated to come back to the tune.”

The reality is that, in 1963, pianists did not know how to accompany this kind of playing, as is very evident from both Ornette Coleman's and Albert Ayler's first records. Ayler's *Bye Bye Blackbird* from *My Name Is Albert Ayler* is similar to Steig's treatment of *Willow Weep For Me* where Jeremy ignores the changes, for the most part, while indulging in a range of extended flute techniques, including flutter tonguing, singing/humming/talking into the instrument. In the liner notes, Willis Conover calls it “a haranguing vocal unison with his flute-playing, a kind of glossoalia, not real words.” He continues: “This trick isn't original--Roland Kirk and Sam Most do it. Slam Stewart used to hum with his bass bowings. . . .” Interestingly, he claims that Steig learned it from a different source: “Jeremy Picked it up from hearing Yusef Lateef singing with a flute on a record . . .” which could have been any

of several Lateef recordings available at the time, such as 1960s *The Centaur and The Phoenix*, or one of the Cannonball Adderley sextet.

Returning to the liner notes, we find Steig outlining his approach to his instrument: “I’m not Dizzy Gillespie and I know it. But I have a contribution. If you want to hear that kind of music, you’ve got to come to me. . . I play jazz on the flute. The easy thing to do is put vibes and guitar with it and play pretty. This is wrong. The flute is a strong instrument, it shouldn’t be played with a thin sound, and it almost always is, because it’s always the second horn for some sax player.”

In a later chapter of this book, Ali Ryerson professes the exact opposite sentiment, that the flute is a beautiful, rather than strong, instrument, and that the appropriate selection of material is essential. This is exactly the dichotomy brought into focus by Rahsaan Roland Kirk: whether to bring the flute to jazz or jazz to the flute. Steig is definitely in the latter school and he is very good at it. One critic describes Steig’s sound as “swirling and snorting like an asthmatic in a cigar lounge.” Listeners who enjoy this approach to the flute will enjoy Steig’s work, both here and throughout his career. Those who, like me, find a little of this goes a long way, should take their Jeremy Steig in small doses.

Perhaps the most successful track on the album is “Oleo” which apparently was a last-minute addition to the album, recorded in one take, giving it a greater spontaneity than other tracks. Steig takes several solo choruses accompanied only by Tucker’s bass, then when Zietlin and Tucker enter they embark on a kind of simultaneous and very free improvisation, before Zietlin settles into his solo which is as ferocious as Steig’s.

Steig later said that the album was “just a blowing session it didn’t prove anything.” Perhaps, but it set a marker for some early players, coming at a time when there was still little jazz flute on record. 27 years later, when James Newton recorded *If Love*, he worked with Michael Cain and other players who were right with him when he embarked on such adventures, and he also had original compositions to draw upon. Steig was just a little ahead of his time.

### ***What’s New: Jeremy Steig and Bill Evans* - Verve (V6-8777), 1969**



Nothing much has changed here since *Flute Fever*. Again, Steig selects a program of standards, and if anything, Bill Evans is more meticulous than Zeitlin when it comes to the changes, so the mismatch is even more pronounced. I have never understood this record so it would be best to cite Evans’ own words:

It was in 1964 in Daytona Beach, Florida that I first heard Jeremy when he was there as part of the Paul Winter Sextet . . . It was not until latter 1968 that his apartment’s proximity to the Village Vanguard and the Top Of The Gate gave rise to

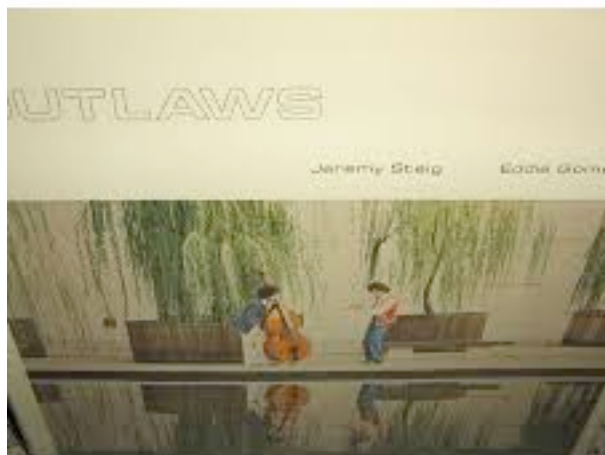
frequent late sessions with my trio. The musical results during these times varied; but often enough we got into something I considered memorable. Out of this came the idea for a recording in this context. Jeremy's playing . . . has a side of intensity that occasionally might defy belief. I played flute and piccolo for fourteen years and therefore feel a justification for my high estimation of Jeremy's exceptional scope as a flutist.

Evans is quoted as saying "It has always seemed to me that the small jazz group of solo instrument in front of piano, bass and drums, represents, perhaps, the purest combination for desirable playing and listening; something like a gem in its ideal setting." This is a great insight, in spite of the fact that Evans recordings with such a quartet were quite limited. It worked beautifully with Cannonball Adderley, Lee Konitz, or Bob Brookmeyer, less well with Herbie Mann. Overall, however, I am not sure that this group is the best setting for Steig. It is a fine group, with a rhythm section of Eddie Gomez on bass and Marty Morell on drums, and the program is mostly standards, such as *Lover Man*, *What's New*, and *Autumn Leaves*, plus Monk's *Straight No Chaser*, and Miles Davis' *So What*. Like *Flute Fever*, however, Steig seems to be on a different wave-length than his accompanists. Particularly incongruous is a favorite of Evans', the love theme from *Spartacus*. On paper, this would seem to be a great album, but it doesn't work for me.

***Jeremy Steig, James Moody, Sahib Shihab and Chris Hinze: New Flute Summit*** (Atlantic 74)

This is a live recording from the Donaueschingen Music Festival in what was West Germany, featuring four flutists, three American and one Dutch. The material alternates funk, fusion and post-bop with the fusion tracks, such as *Unity* by Chris Hinze, perhaps the most convincing, although there some good moments on *My Main Sustain* and *Come With Me*. One of the landmark flute ensemble recordings.

***Outlaws - Jeremy Steig and Eddie Gomez*** (Enja, 1976)



The availability problems with Steig's recordings makes it easy to gain a false impression of his work. My own opinion has been altered quite radically by recently acquired items and there is more out there. This album is a case-in-point. Recorded live at *Die Glocke* club in Bremen, Germany, this session features a series of duets between Steig's flute and Gomez' bass. As you might expect, the improvisations are free and open, but with Gomez providing a perfect foil for Steig, the flutist plays with a remarkable degree of restraint and discipline. These two have been close friends for many years and have recorded together on a number of



occasions, all of which are worth hearing, if you can find the records. In this case, of the five tracks, *Arioso* is a bass solo by Gomez with beautifully executed *arco* passages, and one of the finest examples of the capabilities of this sometimes unwieldy instrument, quite transcending jazz/classical boundaries. Steig has his own solo spot on *Nightmare* which is anything but that. Performed on alto flute it has a stark beauty that shows a side of Steig's playing he does not duplicate that often in subsequent recordings. The other three tracks show Steig and Gomez interacting beautifully on the title track plus *Autumn Leaves* and the Miles Davis original *Nardis*. I am actively seeking copies of the other Steig/Gomez recordings such as 2003's *Jam*.

***Urbie Green: The Fox* - CTI (7070), 1976 *Art Farmer: Crawl Space* - (CTI-7073, 1977)**

It is often as revealing to hear a jazz artist working as a sideman than as a leader. Throughout the 1970s, Creed Taylor's CTI label produced many recordings with a prominent flute soloist, usually Hubert Laws, on sessions produced and/or arranged by Don Sebesky. These sessions were arranged by Dave Matthews and David Grusin, respectively, and they favored Jeremy Steig as their flute soloist. He appears on two tracks, *Manteca* and *Another Star*, on the Urbie Green record, and on all four of the Art Farmer sides. Steig sounds fine throughout; there has been considerable growth since the early sixties, and he sounds in firmer control of his instrument and more comfortable in the more straight-ahead context. Both Urbie Green and Art Farmer are top-quality soloists, so these albums are worth acquiring if you can find them.

***Firefly* - (CTI-7075, 1977)**



Having worked as a sideman for Creed Taylor, Jeremy Steig was rewarded with his own session, produced by Taylor. Again, the context is critical. This one has a seventies pop/jazz feeling on four of the six tracks, with a brass section as well as multiple guitarists and keyboard/synthesizer players. Steig emerges from the ensemble for some typically energetic solos, but sounds better on the other two selections with the less cluttered background provided by John Scofield, Richie Bierach and Steve Gadd, among others. Even so, he never really sounds comfortable in this context, and the recording does not appear to have worked out well for his career. "That's the kind of

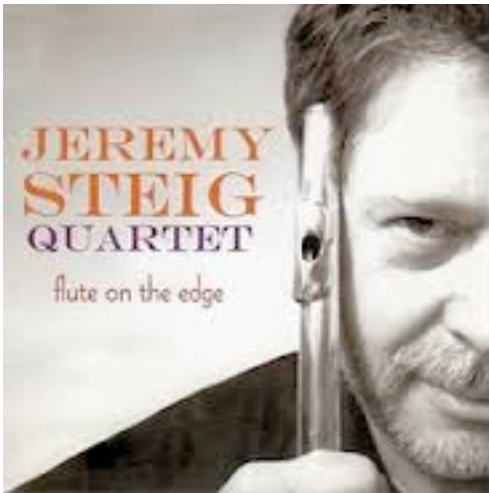
record where you do what they tell you to do," he said. "The Europeans got angry at me for doing that sort of record. They thought I had sold out. I think that was the start of the gigs not happening so much anymore." His recording career also slowed down. There were three or four albums between 1977 and 1980, then silence for more than ten years.

*Jigsaw* - (Triloka-B019GR33UG, 1992 )

By 1991, when this session was recorded, Steig had figured out what kind of setting his playing required. The result is a series of originals, several by Steig, based on simpler, more open harmonic settings, and rhythmic vamps provided by a fine rhythm section that includes LeeAnn Ledgerwood on piano and the semi-legendary Joe Chambers on drums. With this group behind him, Steig sounds liberated, cutting loose with a series of powerful solos that run the gamut of flute effects, from a full, pure, classical tone, to the talking flute sound, and everything in between. Ledgerwood's solos compliment Steig nicely, and the compositions are all interesting.

The following year, 1978, Steig came in third in the *Down Beat* critic's poll in the flute category. This is an example of the kind of work he had been doing to deserve that.

### **Flute On The Edge (Unknown label - ASIN: B00296YRRK)**



Jeremy Steig appears to be one of those things that improve with age. Of course, I have not heard his entire discography—it is very hard to get hold of—but of all his recordings that I have heard, this, his most recent, seems the best.

It is all a matter of context. I don't detect any major changes in his playing—like Charles Lloyd, for example, his work has matured over the years but has remained essentially the same. But like a gem and its setting, or a picture and its frame, context is everything. And this group seems to provide the perfect context for Steig's flute. Guitarist Vic Juris is a particularly sympathetic partner for him. “We think about music the same way,” he said. “We like to play free, and we both like blues.” More to the point, Juris achieves just the right balance between harmonic and free playing, following and supporting Steig adroitly with every step through the shifting musical landscape the flutist continues to explore.

As always, Steig explores a range of tonal effects through extended techniques. As I have mentioned, I am not a great fan of this approach if it is overdone. Noise elements, like dissonance, can be like salt or other seasoning in a dish of vegetables—pretty bland without it, unpalatable with too much of it. In Steig's case, it can be annoying when he introduces it, as he tends to do, toward the climax of a solo, only because his 'straight' sound on the instrument is so full and satisfying—a little like the sound David 'Fathead' Newman achieved on the flute. So much so that the extended techniques seem to detract from the sound rather than add to it. But this is largely a matter of taste, and many listeners find it stimulating. Be that as it may, it seems to work with Juris' support, which itself explores a range of tone colors. Bassist Cameron Brown and drummer Anthony Pinciotti are right with them throughout. You may find some of Steig's early work interesting but if you just want something representative you need not look further than his most recent recording, or look forward to his next one.