

The Bern Nix Trio: Alarms and Excursions  
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“Bern Nix has the clearest tone for playing harmolodic music that relates to the guitar as a concert instrument,” says Ornette Coleman in whose Prime Time Band Nix performed from 1975 to 1987.

Melody has always been central to Nix's musical thinking since his youth in Toledo, Ohio, where he listened to Duane Eddy, The Ventures, Chet Atkins, and blues guitarist Freddie King. When his private instructors Don Heminger and John Justus played records by Wes Montgomery, Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, Barney Kessel, and Grant Green, Nix turned toward jazz at age fourteen. “I remember seeing Les Paul on TV. I wanted to play more than the standard Fifties pop stuff. I liked the sound of jazz.”

With Coleman's harmolodic theory, jazz took a new direction—in which harmony, rhythm, and melody assumed equal roles, as did soloists. Ever since Coleman disbanded the original Prime Time Band in 1987, harmolodics has remained an essential element in Nix's growth and personal expression as a jazz guitarist, as evidenced here on *Alarms and Excursions*—The Bern Nix Trio.

The linear phrasing and orchestral effects of a jazz tradition founded by guitarists Charlie Christian, Grant Green and Wes Montgomery are apparent in Nix's techniques, as well as his clean-toned phrasing and bluesy melodies. Nix harks back to his mentors, but with his witty articulation and rhythmical surprises, he conveys a modernist sensibility. “I paint a mustache on the Mona Lisa,” says Nix about his combination of harmolodic and traditional methods.

Nix likens the challenges of harmolodics to the fluidity of horn players: “As it applies to the guitar, harmolodics can have melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic transpositions or modulations. If you're a horn player, you're automatically closer to it. Horn players always think of transposition. There are so many possibilities—it's like taking rules you've learned and bending them, reapplying them. Ornette would joke around and say, 'If anyone ever asks you what the changes are, just reach into your pocket and rattle some change, or if they ask you what's the key, you pull out your keys.' The harmolodic method is not a cut and dried method; it's more like a philosophical inquiry into the nature of music, or the metaphysical properties of music. It's very open-ended.” Nix advocates an approach in which notes can be held long or short. His concept of elasticity in melodic phrasing befits a harmolodic swing tune with much interplay and textural development.

In a guest editorial (*Guitar Player*, January 1988), Nix comments in similar fashion: “With the harmolodic concept, a musician no longer worries about chord changes, stylistic constraint, or conforming to the rigid arithmetical tyranny of the bar line. Diatonic tendencies can be occasionally indulged, but they must by and large be eschewed. Players are encouraged to see that one note can go in any number of directions. That one note also represents other possibilities. For example, if a guitarist plays F he should be aware that D and E flat are also the same note, when thinking in terms of transposition. All players are simultaneously soloists, as well as accompanists. The idea is to create spontaneous music that is compositional, as well as orchestral in

scope. The intriguing thing about the harmolodic theory is that you constantly confront one metaphysical problem after another in trying to ascertain what it really is.”

A sense of exploration embodies Nix's thinking, which he sought to investigate in a trio setting in the Mid-Eighties with bassist William Parker and drummer David Capello. He utilized his trio to pursue his soloist capabilities more fully than he had in Prime Time and to compose in a more linear and textural vein while retaining his harmolodic identity.

Working initially with Capello in street theater, Nix later played small downtown venues in New York City with his trio. Through these efforts, the Bern Nix Trio developed a distinctive sound full of witty interpolations, haunting lyricism and serpentine melodies.

Aside from his trio work, Nix has recorded and performed with saxophonist James Chance's post-punk bands, in political and satirical sketches with saxophonist Ed Montgomery, and with actress Robbie McCauley, as well as performing incidental music for Theater for the New City and with performance artist Iris Lord at Verna Gillis's Soundscape.

Nix warmly embraced the non-traditional phrasing on saxophonist Jemeel Moondoc's “Nostalgia In Times Square.” And in eclectic duos with Arto Lindsay on Kip Hanrahan's orchestral “Coup d'etat” and in performance with guitarist Elliott Sharp at various downtown venues in New York City, Nix has exhibited his ability to share musical ideas with artists who espouse diverse musical approaches.

From his work in the ensemble String Faced, Nix brings bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Newman Baker to replace his regular trio members for this release.

In much of Nix's music, he doesn't think in terms of bar lines and key signatures. With an open-ended approach to structure, his trio can take different aspects of melody and develop them as motives. “I like to leave it open to the personalities of the players,” he says. “The tunes can be freely interpreted in a democratic way without yielding to chaos. There's not the hierarchy found in standard jazz or classical music. I'll harmonize the melodic interval, but won't necessarily use the 'correct' chord,” Nix says. His use of quartal harmonies (voicing in fourths) makes his sound ambiguous. “I might put a third in the bass, use a voicing in fourths or a cluster on guitar,” said Nix.

On “Z Jam Blues,” whose title is a pun on the traditional “C Jam Blues”, Nix constructs four sections that can be played off and repeated any number of times around the basic themes. Nix's guitar states a bluesy melody with Fred Hopkins playing an E flat variation on bass as an ostinato figure, while Newman Baker on drums plays in a free-time variation of the melodic motive. Nix's later repeated refrains rollick back and forth as they refer to different parts of the melody to give the piece thematic unity.

“Acuity” is a duo between Nix and Newman Baker. The guitar opens with repeated pointillistic figures setting up an anti phonic pattern. As the pace quickens, Baker's cymbals slash, yielding to his long improvisational drum solo marked by a variety of rolls and cymbal textures. The guitar repeats its figure at an even higher intensity. “You have to be on your toes to play it,” said Nix in explanation of the tune's title and the skills required of the musicians.

In the tradition of Wes Montgomery, Nix uses octaves and plays off melodic themes on “Ballad for L.” Although it comes off as a traditional romantic ballad, Nix mixes up harmonic and melodic intervals to give it an ironic edge. “It's my tribute to the

futility of naive, romantic love,” he says. With its repeated scalar runs and staircase figures, this slow ballad contrasts Nix's bright guitar with Hopkins's depth on bass. As a trio, they fragment harmonic lines or take one or two intervals from a melody to develop a new theme.

Adapted from the Thirties torch song later popularized by Charlie Parker on *Bird With Strings*, the tune “Just Friends” in Nix's hands is a fairly straight-ahead version, but the trio plays around with it a little. “Since you start in the key of G with a four-chord, you can think of it as a Lydian mode,” Nix points out. “Much of the tune is descending two fives.” Nix likes standards, and prefers to play them in a harmolodic vein while retaining much of the feel of the straight-ahead version. Hopkins's bass opens at a faster pace over Nix's widely spaced comping with Baker's drums embellishing in light textures. As the guitar is soloing, the bass falls to the background and the notes are stated closer together until all restate the opening theme.

With its quick shifts in pace, phrasing, and direction from single note lines to rhythmical clusters to fast-paced arpeggios, “Desert Storm” is Nix's antiwar song. “It's a harmolodic free bop tune with a traditional feel to it. Sometimes, I'll extrapolate from chord changes,” he says. Following a straight-ahead swing pattern with syncopated rhythms, “Desert Storm” draws on standard jazz phrasing. There are no chord changes, but Nix uses melodic intervals openly. There's a lot of interplay with one musician picking up on the phrasing of another. “You could look at it as a modal vamp, but I chose to play it more openly,” he adds. Baker's drum solo sets hard edges against slashing textures. Hopkins's bass solo maintains a deep vibrato. At the end, the guitar reenters on a bright high note alongside the drums.

“Let's Don't” is Nix's harmolodic safe-sex song. “It's my postmodern reply to Cole Porter's “Let's Do It” in this age of latex.” On this cut, Nix briefly falls into strumming like Freddie Green, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the jazz tradition. His widely spaced single notes often end on chordal refrains. In dark tones, he cautiously understates his theme. Lyrically clean tones are interspersed with many variations in rhythm. Shifts in tempi are marked by bright lines and a growing rhythmical density, starting out on a dominant chord with a tri-tone in the bass vamp.

While he was growing up Nix heard blues guitarist Freddie King play “Driving Sideways.” Nix drew on the song's title to develop his harmolodic concept on “Driving Sideways Backwards.” Employing his own melody, Nix juxtaposes his dark single lines with bright playful refrains to develop motives, melodic paraphrases, and permutations that give “Driving Sideways Backwards” a dense, rhythmical feel. Hopkins's bass rumbles underneath Nix's scalar runs and the trio repeats refrains turned forward and backward before restating the opening theme and slowing down at the end. “The tune has some harmonic free association even though there was no coke or cigars on the date,” laughs Nix.

Both “Pat's Theme” and “Ballad for L” were written from 1975 to 1976 when Nix was living in a loft with Ornette Coleman on Prince Street in New York City's SoHo district. “I dedicated 'Pat's Theme' to a friend who's been supportive of my artistic development over the years,” Nix says. The trio plays out front before stating a melody, with Hopkins's arco bass and Nix's pitch variations and bent notes. Nix combines single note lines against scalar refrains and chordal strumming. The tone of the piece darkens, punctuated with bright notes and descending chordal refrains. Baker's cymbal roars like a

gong. “We play off the chord changes. It's a simple straight-ahead tune. We extend melody and harmony. I like to integrate harmolodics with tradition. The song itself sounds like an introduction to something. So you could think of it as an intro within an intro,” Nix says.

The closing cut, “Boundaries,” has neither bar lines nor precise points of rest. Nix has written a tune to some extent based on a diminished scale, which allows his trio to play around with notions about the boundaries in music. “I want to blur tonality,” he says: “We have no precise harmony, no precise tonal reference.” One might think of the trio on “Boundaries” as three actors speaking with no set text in three separate spontaneous dialogues that develop simultaneously. “I use a lot of octave displacement here,” says Nix. It's a tricky melody to play.”

With a strong respect for the guitar jazz tradition, Nix reinterprets melodies and harmonies through his technical innovations without adopting any use of electronic devices: “A lot of guitarists today use a lot of gadgets. I want to create a new sound on the guitar without them.”

“The mystery of improvisation has always intrigued me,” he says. With his trio, that mystery lies in the spontaneous interplay, in the call-and-response patterns, and in the open ways in which what comes next delicately speaks to tradition, yet feels modern.

—Robert Hicks

Robert Hicks is a freelance writer who contributes to *Jazziz*, *Downbeat*, *The Villager*, *Guitar Player*, *Bass Player*, and *Coda*.

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*Just Friends* written by Sam M. Lewis and John Klenner and published by EMI/Robbins Music, ASCAP.

All other compositions written and published by Bern Nix.  
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Bern Nix, guitar; Fred Hopkins, acoustic bass; Newman Baker, drums

- 1 Z Jam Blues (3:54)
- 2 Acuity (7:46)
- 3 Ballad for L (5:13)
- 4 Just Friends (4:57)
- 5 Desert Storm (4:48)
- 6 Let's Don't (7:58)
- 7 Driving Sideways Backwards (4:21)
- 8 Pat's Theme (5:23)
- 9 Boundaries (4:51)

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