

## CADENCE INTERVIEW

ARTIST: WOLFGANG SCHALK

INSTRUMENT: Guitar

INTERVIEW by Karl Stober



*In 2013 Wolfgang Schalk introduced **The Second Third Man** featuring Michael Brecker (Remixed & Remastered), which was produced by himself by Frame Up Music, his own company. Schalk has had five CDs as a leader with all original music. The spin injects its eclectic moods with intro piece "High Up To The Sky", which exploits Schalk's strings prowess along with Brecker's tenacious tenor saxophone, making the transition from melodic subtle tones of the strings to a wonderfully iconic upbeat horn seem almost effortless. This album and the sound's contained within the jewel box, strap the listener in for one therapeutic session of a pure jazz melodic workout.*

*Cadence: It's been stated that you are one of the best jazz guitarist worldwide today. Why do you think that's so?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** It's great to be recognized by the press in such a positive way but I really don't give it too much thought. If people would say that I'm one of the worst guitarists I would not jump off a cliff. I feel good about where I stand musically because I can say that whatever I did so far is an honest statement. For sure I'm the best in my living room...LOL.

*Cadence: What musicians had the biggest impact on your style, your technique, and your music philosophy?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** The list is long but to name a few: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Wes Montgomery, George Benson, John McLaughlin, Joe Zawinul, Django Reinhardt, Pat Metheny, Karl Ratzer, Jimi Hendrix, John Scofield, Jim Hall, Harry Pepl, Bach, Mozart, Chopin and so on. At the beginning I was more interested in the music in general than in the guitar. But that changed. Diving into the world of those incredible musicians sucked me in. You can go so many directions with the guitar and every style can be a lifetime commitment if you want. From single note playing like Pat Martino or John McLaughlin to solo jazz guitar like the great Joe Pass for instance. It really depends on each individual. Wes and George Benson are definitely some of my big guitar heroes. The guitar is kind of a weird instrument. Look of what Lenny Breau did with it. He was like the Bill Evans of the guitar. Of course, he must have checked out Evans like mad, but still, only a genius can get that far with six or seven strings. I don't want to lock myself into a certain style. My story is somewhere in between. The thing is, the horizon constantly changes, meaning if you reach a certain level you move on to the next step and so on. It's an endless journey.

*Cadence: How would you compare your musical prowess to that from past guitarists from all genres?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** I'm trying to learn from everybody, it doesn't matter which genre, time period or instrument. But inspirations come from everywhere, not only from music. I think everything we observe kind of reincarnates on a certain point in a new shape. I saw a beautiful cactus in the desert and somehow this melody took shape in my mind. When I came home I wrote the song "A New Something" which is on the "Wanted" album. Music is one of the greatest and most powerful things on earth and I think we are not even aware of how much music can impact us. I heard Weather Report with Jaco live when I was a kid.

This was a gig I will never forget and I think those kinds of moments you carry on your whole live. Or the musical universe of Bach for instance. It is impossible to put it in words what impact this music has on us.

*Cadence: Let's briefly go to your childhood. When you first start becoming interested in music and then jazz?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** I grew up in an artistic family but there was no jazz in the house at all. And in our village, people did not 'get jazz' at this time. So my story is not the typical I listened to my parents' records kind of tale. I was interested in both, music and the visual arts since my childhood. When I was around six years old I built my first drum set with stuff I found around our house and jammed with my older brother in our parent's stable. As a kid I was a big Pink Floyd fan (I still dig what they did, especially their early stuff). I would say I was open for anything "-unusual" music and art wise. I got into jazz in my teens and the so-called 'fusion stuff' got my first attention. The electrifying playing of Jaco Pastorius turned my head upside down. I dug Weather Report, the electric Miles, and Mahavishnu etc. And talking of Weather Report, there is Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter. And digging into Miles there is Coltrane, Parker and so on...you know what I'm saying. That's how I discovered this music. So I actually went backwards in history.

*Cadence: How would you describe the "it" factor about as a guitarist?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** Well, it's like diving into a jungle and fortunately it turned out to become my life. The guitar is an instrument that almost fits in any style of music you want. I had a great teacher in Graz, Austria. His name is Franz Posch. He was and still is an incredible guitar player. Franz saw my talent early on and got me on the right track. You can spend 500 lives in studying an instrument and still be frustrated. So I think it is really important to be honest with yourself and

work hard. The rest will come step by step...

*Cadence: Some musicians feel there is a difference in playing in the US versus playing overseas. In your travels do you see that and if so explain to us what the difference is.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** The audience in Europe seems hungrier for jazz than the audience in the US. For instance you see incredible musicians playing in New York in tiny places for a small audience. When the same cats play in EU they pack big venues. The way musicians are treated in the EU is better. Usually the fee is much higher and food & drinks for musicians usually are free in clubs, which should be the standard everywhere anyways. And at festivals you are usually treated like a king. Also, the jazz clubs in EU are more diversified and less cookie-cutter, unlike many US clubs with the drink/food minimums and maroon tablecloths!

*Cadence: Talk a little bit about your education not as a guitarist but as a jazz guitarist.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** "Ich weiss das ich nicht's weiss. "Sorry for quoting Goethe in German here. It means, "I know that I know nothing". LOL. Here is another one: "The way is the goal" and that's what it is all about. It's an endless journey and we all learn from each other and make creative stuff out of it. It is like an intergalactic relay race and I love it.

*Cadence: Discuss with us the process you go through when developing a song.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** It seems like that each song has a different kind of law. You can go many directions with a new idea but I think if you really dig deep into it, there is only one "truth" for that particular composition. And to dive into this channel is a fascinating process. You kind of need to find the right "frequency" for it and give yourself to it. I used to write down almost every single idea and kind of hammered a tune out of it. That works for certain songs for sure but the line between constructing and composing is thin. If you try to nail down a song too fast you might miss out on something. So very often now, I let the songs hang around in my mind for a while before I write them down. In this way the new piece has a chance to breath and stays kind of elastic until its birth. But like I said, there is no formula. It also happens often that new songs flow through me quite fast and those tunes I usually bring to paper immediately. Yes, I write everything by hand on paper. A computer would distract me. Anyways, when I bring the new compositions to a rehearsal, gig or recording session I usually don't like to say much about it. I provide the basics and let my band play it the way they feel it and that's when the real fun starts. I'm lucky to be able to work with such incredible musicians.

*Cadence: Let's go little bit deeper and discuss your approach to an album.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** My recording sessions for a new album are usually very spontaneous for many reasons. I don't like thinking about the future in general and I'm not a big fan of constructing a project. I try keeping things open until I schedule the recording session. For instance, for my last two albums "Word Of Ear" and "Wanted" fifty percent of the music was brand new compositions I brought right to the studio. I did send the music to my musicians before the session but we never played or rehearsed the tunes before. We did rehearse each tune quickly before we hit the recording in the studio, but that's about it. I like that concept because it keeps the whole process as fresh as possible. And to bring brand new songs to birth right in the studio during the recording session is a really special moment. Well, it is a kind of gamble too. We do the recording sessions usually in one day. So let's say, in case the new material would not be what I thought it is, meaning I don't like it, I would sit in the studio with my band with material that sucks. But like I said, I like this kind of insecurity; it gives the whole thing a special kick.

*Cadence: How do you find working in the music industry in the past differs from when you first started to today?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** Generally speaking, as we know, the music industry went through big, rough changes in the last 10 years but I actually believe it's not as bad as many folks think it is. The industry screwed up badly and the major labels lost their might, a power they never should have had to begin with. So the good news here is that music and any art will always survive and there are many ways to reach an audience without any big gatekeepers in between. I released my first

two albums on the Austrian label West & East Music which was distributed then by BMG. After that I signed a recording deal with Universal Music for the release of my album "Space Messengers". In 2008 I founded my own record label Frame Up Music. The big difference between now and then is that I now have the full control of worldwide distribution; oversee marketing; get paid directly by various distribution channels; and most importantly, I have musical freedom.

*Cadence: You've often said you want to make music on your own terms. Please explain what those terms are?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** The only thing I'm doing is following my instincts and that's about it. I write and play what I would like to hear without making any kind of compromises meaning it comes out of a natural intuition.

*Cadence: You often talk about Wes Montgomery being a major influence in your career. Can you elaborate on that?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** Genius is very often an overused word but Wes was one for sure. He was a natural genius. And not only in his playing, he also wrote some of the hippest tunes too: "Full House," "Four on Six," "Far Wes" and "The Trick Bag" among so many others. I'm amazed by what Montgomery accomplished during his very short life.

*Cadence: Discuss with us the philosophy of a jazz guitarist.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** I really don't have one and I can't speak for the rest. Like I said earlier, you can go so many ways with the guitar and every individual has a different approach and story.

*Cadence: You recorded seven CDs in your career thus far. How does each one differ and how is each one alike?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** My playing and writing since my debut album has changed. The first two albums I did were kind of electric jazz. Then I did two acoustic albums "Rainbows in the Night" and "Space Messengers" -- both recorded with my quartet in New York with the amazing Dave Kikoski on piano, Andy McKee on bass and Ian Froman on drums. I loved this band a lot and we had a great chemistry. Since my move to Los Angeles in 2006 I have enjoyed working with different musicians. It is great to have a working band, it's probably the best, but somehow I kind of dig playing with different musicians at the moment. It is full of surprises and motion. "Wanted" was my first recording in Los Angeles. It's acoustic too but the West Coast clearly had an impact on my sound. Not only because of the great band including Dave Carpenter, Geoffrey Keezer and Marvin "Smitty" Smith. Also the dry desert wind must have done something with my mind and writing. My latest recording "Word of Ear" is an acoustic conception with an electric touch. With the amazing rhythm section of Michael Valerio on upright & electric bass and Tom Brechtlein on drums you can go everywhere... so much fun. I used two great piano players for the session. Helen Sung played a few tracks and George Whitty, who also played keyboards on a few titles. All my albums so far are all original music with the exception of my 3/4 arrangement of Thelonious Monk's Round Midnight. So how is each album alike? Well, since my debut album I have developed a sound and style that is identifiable and truly me.

*Cadence: Your current CD The Second Third Man featuring Michael Brecker (Remixed and Remastered) seems quite demanding musically, talk to us about its birth and how you went through the process of recording it.*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** This album was recorded in Austria and NYC in the mid 90s. My Austrian band was on fire at this time and we had a great chemistry. I visualized having Michael Brecker involved in The Second Third Man early on and I wrote a few tunes including the title track with Michael in mind. Without any expectations of course, I called Michael's manager Darryl Pitt and sent him a tape. I then heard back from Darryl saying Michael says hi and that he would love to play on my album.... my phone almost fell out of my hand. Michael Brecker was my hero and is one of the greatest musicians on earth. So you can imagine what was going on in my mind. It was crazy... Michael was like Jaco in a way. He hits one note and...man, what else can be said? His energy, warmth and virtuosity impacted the project in such an incredible way. And what an outstanding beautiful being he was. His passing is such a terribly sad loss for this planet. The album was first released in 1996. The mix we did then was OK but I was never really happy with it. The original analog tapes sounded much better unmixed and it took me some time to realize this. Anyways, thank God my friend &

engineer Reinhard Buchta saved the original tapes of the recording sessions. Last year I discussed with Darryl Pitt the idea of doing a remix of the album. When we revisited the sessions in the studio it was quite an emotional process and it felt like we had just recorded it. The new mix turned out incredible and I'm very glad and proud that we released "The Second Third Man" on my label Frame Up music in 2013.

*Cadence: Is there any certain cut on the album that caused you more difficulty than the other?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** As I remember I played all the tunes live with my band before we went into the studio. So there were no really rough surprises during the session but of course it is always a challenge in the studio. Anyways, the tune Frank, I wrote for Frank Zappa, has quite a weird unison melody. It knocked me out when my friend Werner Feldgrill played the complete melody with the bass just like it was written for him. Actually I just wrote the basic hits for the bass because I thought it was unplayable on the bass. But Werner wanted to play the whole thing unison with us in up-tempo (probably just to piss me off...LOL) and he played it better than me on the guitar. What a bad dude.

*Cadence: What most excites you about your career and albums thus far?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** Whatever I did so far and everything I will do in the future is 100% music from my heart. So I can say mission accomplished for the moment and that's a good feeling. I think we are all on a mission here on earth, and there is no difference between a baker, tailor or artist. That's how I see it. I'm so lucky to be able to do what I love to do the most. That is a wonderful gift and I'm thankful for it every single second. I'm thankful for the struggle too because it is a part of it.

*Cadence: What is your favorite guitar to use and why when performing live and why?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** My main guitar since 2012 is a Gibson ES 175 from 1951. I do have a second 175 from 1979 but I mostly play the blond one from 51 now. I love the feel and the acoustic sound of it. It's such a beautiful old soul. The other guitar I use a lot is my nylon string classical guitar built from master Luthier Alan Carruth. I have about eight guitars but these are my main instruments at the moment.

*Cadence: What is coming up for you next?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** A few gigs with my band in the Los Angeles area and after that I'll be going to New York (my second home) for a few months. EU dates are in the works for late Fall. And I am very excited about the custom archtop guitar the amazing luthier Ryan Thorell is building for me. We are just in the progress of working through my wish list. Ryan is an exceptionally talented spirit and having him build a guitar to my personal specifications is quite an honor.

*Cadence: What would you like your fans to get out of your music?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** Well, if I think that way I'll certainly fail out of the gate. The only thing I am focused on is getting something out of me that is 100% right to me. That does not mean that I don't play for my audience. Actually I believe that if I reach my musical goal it will impact my audience and the rest is out of my hands. And if my music makes people feel good, that's actually an incredible thing.

*Cadence: What would you like to say to your fans?*

**Wolfgang Schalk:** I'd like to say thank you to everyone out there that comes to my concerts and/or buys my music. I really appreciate it a lot. And for those in the audience please come over and say hello.