

## Exclusive Interview With German Jazz Guitarist Manfred Junker

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By Joe Barth



### JGT contributor Joe Barth interviews one of Germany's and Switzerland's superb jazz guitarists, Manfred Junker.

Above photo: Manfred Junker (right) with John Stowell (left) – photo credit Christoph Fehr

Living in Konstanz, Germany, Manfred Junker can keep an active performance schedule in both Switzerland and southern Germany. Born in Leutkirch, Germany in 1969, Manfred has been cultivating his skills as a jazz guitarist since age sixteen.

**JB: Talk about when you started to play guitar and what inspired you to play jazz guitar.**

MJ: I started playing the guitar at the age of twelve and was fascinated by the instrument regardless of style. After changing to another teacher when I was fourteen I received instruction in classical guitar technique and through him, I got interested in improvisation (Rock, then also Jazz using the various Berklee books). Getting exposed to a lot of Jazz guitar albums by my teacher was what got me really addicted.

**JB: Talk about the things you appreciated most about your studies in Germany at St. Gallen and later at Berklee College in Boston.**

MJ: The school in St. Gallen (which is in Switzerland) was a relatively small institution that in a way was perfect for me at that point. I was still pretty "green" when I started there and had to fill a lot of basic gaps and learn to play in jazz ensembles.

Four years of very intense shedding then somehow helped me get a big Berklee scholarship after auditioning in Paris (being a guitarist, male and white did not really meet Berklee's policy of giving scholarships primarily to minorities, so I was overwhelmed and happy to get it and make the Berklee dream come true with the additional help of my parents and relatives).

Compared to the school in Switzerland, Berklee College was a whole different thing: lots of great musicians, ass-kicking rhythm sections, and an enormous energy that pushed me extremely (fueled by teachers like Hal Crook, Ed Tomassi, Jim Kelly, and Rick Peckham). It was so intense I don't think there were a lot of nights when I slept seven hours!

**JB: To you, what are three of the most influential jazz guitar albums and why?**

MJ: Choosing three albums is almost impossible regarding the wealth of styles and masters I have heard and continue to discover. So, I will stick to the three that made a huge impact on me and that I consider "classic".

"Full House" by Wes Montgomery blew me away (and still does!). A more or less improvised session (Jimmy Cobb once told me he remembers a brief rehearsal in the afternoon right before the gig), the album shows Wes at his best. Flawless and inspired playing, building intensity through his signature way of single lines via octaves to chord solos, a brilliant swinging rhythm section...everything is so strong and sounds so fresh even by today's standards, it cannot get any better in this style!

Then there is Jim Hall's trio recording "Live!" that for me captures the essence of "modern" trio playing. Three master musicians interacting at the highest level; so much taste in pushing standards without sacrificing groove, form, and melodic content. And of course, Jim Hall...I don't think any other guitarist influenced me more than him. I was so lucky to have heard him live numerous times and I can only recommend getting the extra CDs from the same week of playing that came out on ArtistShare a few years ago!

The third recording is Pat Metheny's "Travels" which I bought when I was about sixteen. Of course, the band, the tunes, and naturally Metheny's playing blew my mind. The tunes of this time in his career are not overly complex but there is always a great melody and group arrangement that, combined with virtuosic playing and a lot of energy, make them highly accessible and timeless. Of course, that was just the beginning of a very long and still strong creative career.

I just realized that these three albums happen to be live recordings; I guess a live setting is the best situation for recording when everyone involved is relaxed and inspired and does not think too much about the microphones!

**JB: Tell us about your goals in making your most recent album *Guitarists Only*?**

MJ: I like the idea of having a "topic" or headline for a recording and did CDs with tunes by Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Charlie Chaplin, Bill Evans, and Paul Simon.

For the duo album with Dani Solimine on 7-string guitar we chose to use only compositions by guitarists, covering a wide range from Django Reinhardt to Bill Frisell while still arranging these tunes to have a more or less consistent sound, I think we succeeded!

**JB: You did an entire album of Paul Simon songs. What do you find satisfying about performing his music?**

MJ: I have always loved the music of Paul Simon. So many of his songs have moved me deeply. To me, he is one of the very few real poets of popular music, a searching soul, and an inspiring innovator. So for this album, I arranged the songs for solo guitar. And even though I had to omit the important element of the lyrics, I hoped that through my renditions of those beautiful melodies, the well-known lyrics would somehow reverberate in the minds of listeners.

So of course it was very satisfying to play this material live and I still keep some of the tunes in my practice routine.



**JB: You have performed and recorded with guitarist John Stowell. Talk about John's impact on your playing.**

MJ: Huge! We met for the first time in 2012 and then each fall for gigs around the area where I live until the pandemic hit; this year we met again just a few weeks ago. At first, I was a little bit intimidated by this master musician but he was so relaxed, telling me that it felt good for him playing with me certainly helped. Right from the beginning we had a good rapport and our different styles complemented each other well. His unique harmonic concept gave me great new ideas to work on and I think both my comping as well as my soloing benefited a lot.

Apart from the music I am in constant awe about this humble and decent person who is on the road constantly and manages to make a living playing jazz, which definitely hasn't gotten easier. If I had to distribute grants or awards for lifetime achievement, he would be at the very top of the list!

**JB: With such a mass of talent coming out of the music colleges each year, what's the best piece of advice you'd give these guys for building an international career?**

Well, whether you are going for an international or a local career, the basic rules stay the same:

- Try to be as good a player and listener as possible, work on your weaknesses, and try to find out what makes you special or unique. Pursue what you really love!
- Be serious about answering calls and emails promptly, be prepared for the gig and punctual, and be friendly, clear, and honest to the people you work with.
- Try to play not only with the best possible musicians but also with the best possible human beings. People you can really trust.
- And try to be present on social media with quality content. I'd rather watch a YouTube clip by musicians once a month than see daily Facebook posts about what they eat or who they hang out with, what practice in their basement with horrible audio quality, or rant about in discussions nobody needs! In my view, a lot of musicians do not understand the importance of separating one's professional and private life. There have been several times I stopped following musicians (including buying their CDs) for their disturbing political ideas or mindless lifestyles.

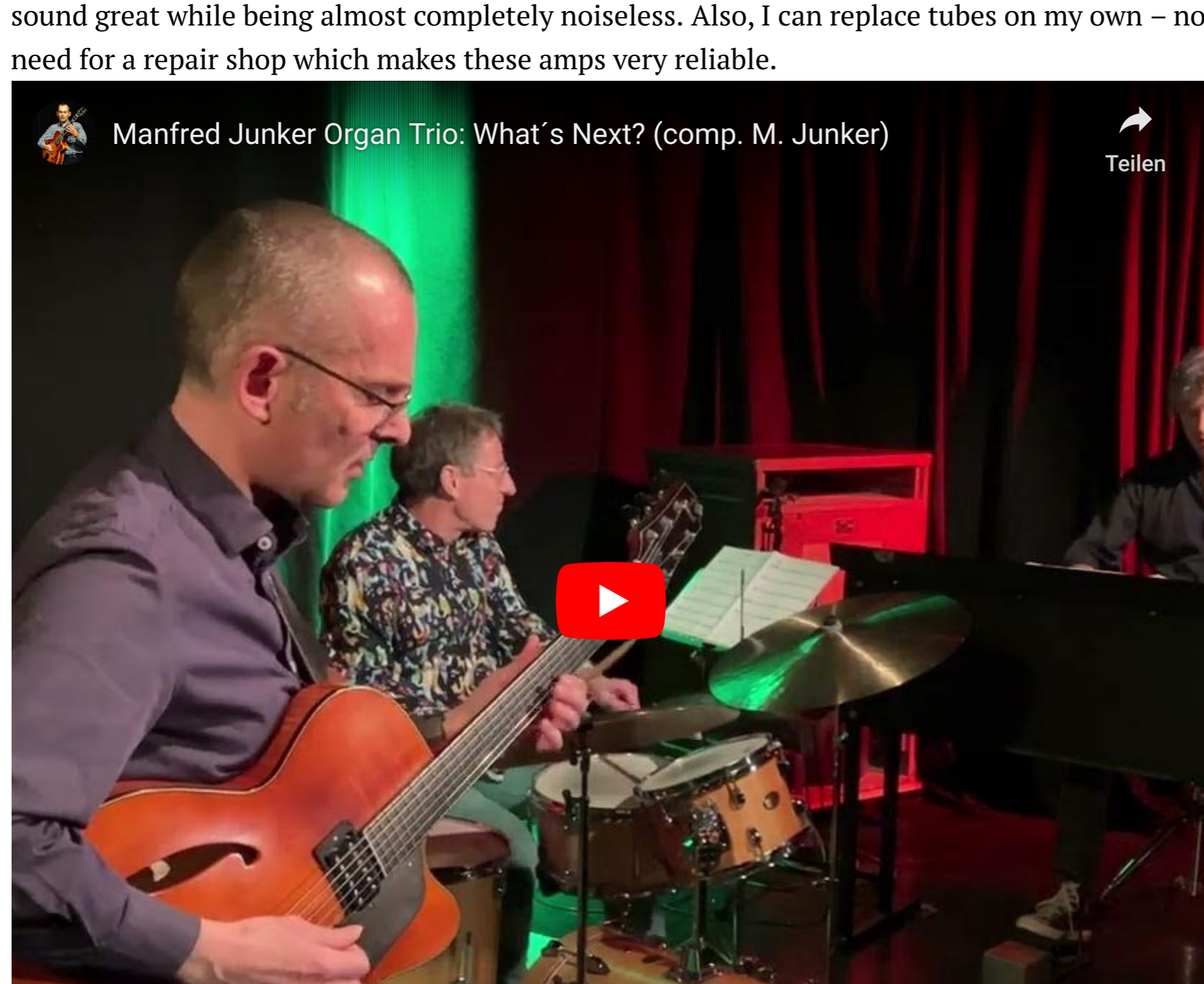
**JB: What do you appreciate most about the Striebel guitar and the other guitars you play?**

MJ: Joe Striebel lives in Munich ([www.striebelguitars.com](http://www.striebelguitars.com)). I have several archtops, flattops, and a semi made by him which are not only the perfect tools for what I need. But they are also beautiful pieces of art! Over the years he has built a totally deserved reputation for building impeccable guitars that take into consideration the wishes and needs of players.

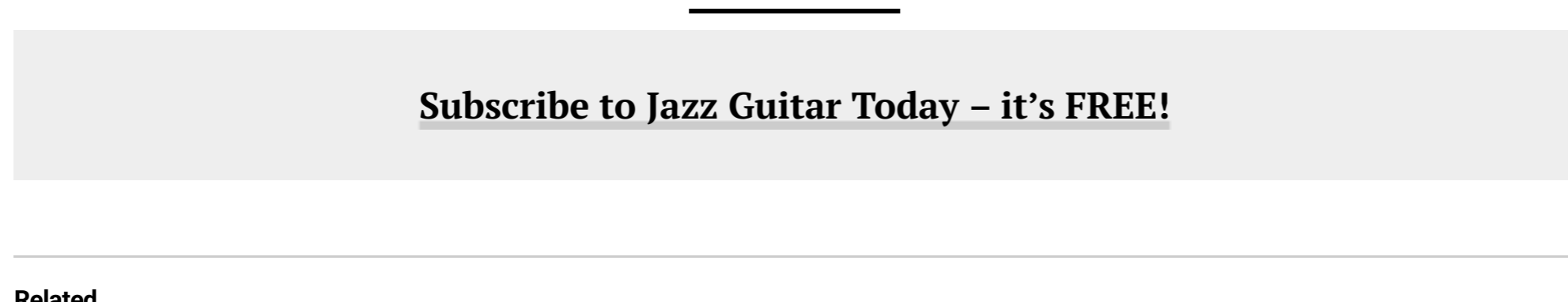
Apart from that I have several other guitars, one is a great classical guitar from German luthier Urs Langenbacher.

**JB: Tell us about the amp that you use.**

I play a 20W as well as a 40W amp made by the small but dedicated company of Matthias Guenthart in Switzerland ([www.blackholeamp.ch](http://www.blackholeamp.ch)). His tube amps are perfect for me as they sound great while being almost completely noiseless. Also, I can replace tubes on my own – no need for a repair shop which makes these amps very reliable.



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