



JOE ZAWINFUL

On Joe Zawinul's new solo album, "Dialects," he brings the folk sounds of the world into his jazz.

BY GREG PTACEK

Music fans know Joe Zawinul's music far better than his name. Mention Weather Report, and almost everyone calls them their favorite jazz band. Even those who aren't intimately familiar with their music know the tune of "Birdland," the hit single he wrote for the mega-album *Heavy Weather* (1977). Mention his name, and the response tends to be, "Zawin what?", except from those jazz aficionados who know to rank him with Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck and a handful of other modern jazz masters.

That's o.k. with Joe. He would much rather be a musician-artist than a musician-celebrity. Born in a Slavic town of 58 people in rural Austria, he's never left his roots, emotionally or intellectually. *Dialects*, his first solo album since co-founding Weather Report with Wayne Shorter, reflects his respect for farm people and their folk music, whether from Austria, Africa, Asia or Australia.

On a recent sunny California morning, Zawinul sipped coffee poolside at his Pasadena home on a hill overlooking the Rose Bowl. His house reflects his personality: down to earth, more comfortable than hip, pets everywhere.

He shared his thoughts on his album, the impending break-up of Weather Report, Sting as a jazz artist, rock 'n' roll, the future of jazz and the recording industry.

CEG: Why did you decide to make a solo album now?

JZ: I've wanted to make this album for 15 years, but my work with Weather Report always precluded it. When you put out an album, sometimes two albums, every year, there just isn't time. Several of the songs, though, I had written many years ago. It only took me two months to put it together. With Wayne [Shorter] doing his own album, it finally gave me an opportunity to do mine.

CEG: What's the future for Weather Report, now that you and Wayne Shorter are off on your own?

JZ: Weather Report has a new album coming out April 15. The band will probably tour between June and November, but we might have to bury the name. Wayne has his own band now and isn't part of Weather Report anymore. Wayne and I share the copyright for the name, so we probably can't go under that name. If we can't, then it's very likely we will call the band Weather Update.

CEG: What kind of research did you do to capture the international sound you've achieved on *Dialects*?

JZ: Absolutely none. The album is just my impression of the many peoples and places I have visited. I was not trying to imitate other culture's music. I don't even know any African or Japanese music. If it sounds authentic, it's because I'm a good listener. The music I created was based more on people's speaking patterns than anything else.

CEG: How are jazz and folk related?

JZ: To me, jazz is simply improvised rhythmic music with a heavy folklore background. Pure jazz is improvisation. All of *Dialects* is improvised; in fact, two of the tunes, "The Harvest" and "Zee Bop," are total improvisation—composed, played and recorded simultaneously. And all the others were improvised, but the sound of the original improvisation was not good enough, so I recorded them again. There was no master blueprint to the album. That would take the pure soul away. That would be like trying to prepare yourself to tell a girl you love her. How do you practice something like that?

CEG: How has rock 'n' roll affected your music?

JZ: To be perfectly honest, rock has never had any effect on my music, aesthetically. Certainly, there have been great rock musicians. Jimi Hendrix comes immediately to mind. But Weather Report was not influenced by them. We're really a traditional jazz band, in the sense of Ellington and Louis Armstrong, that continues to explore new territory.

I grew up as an accordion player, playing with gypsies and playing folk music. Folk music is in my blood and my bones, and therefore I love jazz. Rock 'n' roll used to be great, or at least some of it, but I honestly could not name five rock musicians that I like, that I consider to be excellent. My kids listen to that stuff, and I do like the Talking Heads.

CEG: What do you think of the recent synthesis of pop and jazz, say, for exam-

ple on Sting's *Dream of the Blue Turtles*?

JZ: He's more of a jazz musician than a rock musician. The Police invented their own brand of music and they've said they are very influenced by Weather Report. In one interview, Sting actually said he is trying to emulate my vision but in a song form with lyrics, etc.

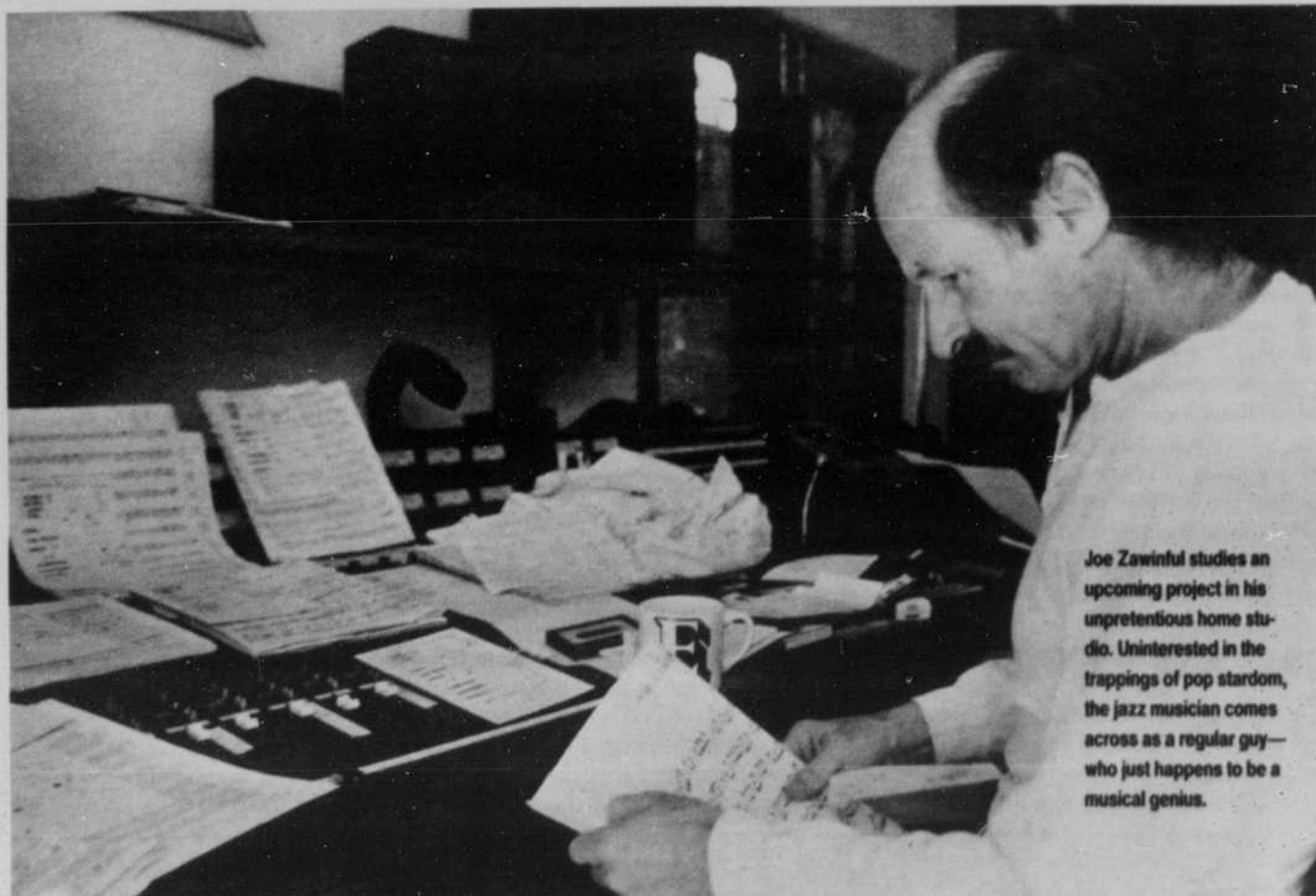
But pop musicians like Sting are so rare. If I were to work with him, I could make him into a superior jazz singer. He's got a great voice, number one. He's got really good rhythm concepts, he's a musician—a good bass player and he's got confidence. All the ingredients are there.

CEG: What's holding jazz back from reaching a wider audience?

JZ: The powers that control the recording industry don't want jazz to be great. If jazz becomes great, then what happens to all that other junk that so much time and money has been invested into? If you own a restaurant and you really think you've got a shot at making a lot of money by selling your version of junk food, you're going to ignore someone who tells you to serve really good food so that people know what it's like.

It's the same thing in the record industry. Most people who run the industry are in it because they like to listen to music, and it's an easy job. They have no qualifications. They get a big expense account and can take their favorite stars to lunch. And whoever shakes more hands is the most powerful.

I was never a handshaker. I'm not interested in power lunches. I'd rather eat lunch here with my wife and kids. I am a musician. I don't need cocktail parties. ♦



Joe Zawinul studies an upcoming project in his unpretentious home studio. Uninterested in the trappings of pop stardom, the jazz musician comes across as a regular guy—who just happens to be a musical genius.

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