

The Harry Pepl Archive opens up a European jazz legacy

Harry Pepl's career linked European jazz scenes: with Benny Goodman in Berlin and Copenhagen, with Werner Pirchner in Montreux, and in France as a member of clarinetist Michel Portal's band. He recorded for ECM with Jack DeJohnette, wrote for the Kronos Quartet and worked early with MIDI guitar and computer-controlled piano. At www.harrypepl.com, the estate of the Austrian guitarist, composer and improviser Harry Pepl (1945–2005) is becoming accessible as a growing online archive. Its 413 press documents, 193 works and 114 recordings trace a musician's journey between Vienna, Berlin, Montreux, Paris and Copenhagen.

"There is so much that, when I start to tell the story, everything comes tumbling down on me: all the sounds, all the notes, the music and the experiences - really, the whole world!"

Harry Pepl, 2005 (Nikolaus Kohler, thesis, 2006, p. 150; translated from German)

A distinctive voice in European jazz

Le Monde called Harry Pepl a "giant of improvisation". In its obituary, Der Standard counted him among the world's leading guitarists; the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung recalled a musician who was among Europe's fastest jazz guitarists in the 1970s. Yet virtuosity alone does not explain Pepl's significance. His playing combined rhythmic precision, unusual chord combinations, curiosity about sound and a distinctive humour.

Pepl first learned jazz from records and developed an unmistakable voice in European jazz. In 1980 and 1981 he was a member of Benny Goodman's band, including concerts at the Berlin Philharmonie and Tivoli Copenhagen. With Werner Pirchner he formed the Jazzzwio from 1975 to 1985, one of Austrian jazz's most individual formations. The duo appeared at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1981. On the ECM album with Pirchner and Jack DeJohnette, Pepl's musical language met that of one of the influential American drummers of his generation.

With Air Mail, his Austrian-American band with Wolfgang Puschnig, Wolfgang Reisinger and Mike Richmond, Pepl developed his music further in an international quartet. From 1984 he worked in France with Michel Portal's Unit. In the band's orbit he encountered musicians including Dave Liebman, Daniel Humair, Jean-François Jenny-Clark, Joachim Kühn, George Lewis and Mino Cinelu. The album "Men's Land", recorded in Amiens in 1987, was released on the French label Label Bleu.

Pepl's students at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz included Wolfgang Muthspiel, who named a 2004 album after Pepl's composition "Air, Love & Vitamins". The piece became an Austrian jazz standard and continues to be reinterpreted. Pepl wrote three works for the Kronos Quartet, which premiered them at the Orpheum in Graz in 1991.

From MIDI guitar to real-time composing

For Pepl, technology extended improvisational thinking. He was among the early users of MIDI guitar in Austria. On "Schönberg Improvations", he used it to control a Bösendorfer 290 SE computer-controlled grand piano. In his later work he developed his own form of real-time composing.

In his home studio in Hernstein, Pepl recorded improvised tracks one after another: guitar, bass via MIDI guitar, piano, drums and voice. Each new track responded to those already recorded. From one musician emerged a virtual band that, despite the staggered recording, sounds like an ensemble playing in a shared moment. Pepl called the project "Harry Pepl's Lonely Single Swinger Band".

The method is now a subject of scholarly research. Pianist and jazz researcher Stefan Heckel devoted his 2024 dissertation "Instant Composing" at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna to Pepl's late work. Drawing in part on 22 interviews with contemporaries, it examines how Pepl transferred improvisational interaction to multitrack recording. The archive makes accessible records of ADAT digital multitrack tapes, minidisks, CDs and hard drives, some with separate instrumental tracks.

The material is also being reimagined on stage. Since 2018, Clemens Salesny, Martin Bayer, Andi Schreiber and Valentin Duit have improvised with Pepl's original tracks as "Harry Pepl (tape) & The (Lonely) Single Swinger Band". Their 2025 album "Live" placed second in the Best Album category at the Austrian Jazz Prize.

New discoveries and a growing archive

The archive brings together biography, catalogue of works, discography, chronology, press, photographs, video and scholarly sources. As of 23 October 2026 it listed 114 recordings, 193 works, 278 people, 276 chronology entries, 413 press documents, 114 literature entries, 171 photographs, 49 videos and 318 quotations. An online finding aid describes twelve collections. Each entry can be cited; catalogues are also available as open data.

Research continues to bring discoveries to light. Five concert recordings previously unknown to the Harry Pepl Archive were found in the catalogue of France's Institut national de l'audiovisuel, most from Paris. Posters from the Vienna Library added evidence of a dozen Vienna appearances between 1975 and 1991. Further records came from the archives of steirischer herbst, Wiener Festwochen, Donaueschinger Musiktage, Moers Festival and Banlieues Bleues. Fellow musicians including Furio Di Castri and Bo Stief contributed their memories.

Ten recordings from five decades can be heard in a freely accessible listening guide. More than 40 further recordings from the estate, including broadcasts and the premiere of the Kronos Quartet works, are available through personal access. Researchers, universities and ensembles can request listening copies, score scans, programmes and print-quality photographs.

"The vast majority of the estate has not yet even been surveyed. The archive is a beginning: it makes what exists visible, documents every entry and invites researchers, musicians and the media to continue working with us," says Daniel Pepl, publisher of the archive and custodian of the musical estate. (Translated from German.)

Voices on Harry Pepl

- "He was an amazing guitarist, pianist and composer. His harmonic, rhythmic and sound concepts were very unique!" | Jack DeJohnette, statement for Ö1, 2020
- "Giant of improvisation" | Le Monde, quoted in Kleine Zeitung, 1988; translated from German
- "was among the world's most important guitarists during his active years" | Der Standard, obituary, 2005; translated from German
- "He was an improviser of the very highest order" | Stefan Heckel, dissertation "Instant Composing", 2024; translated from German
- "Your father was a very good and original guitarist and deserves to be remembered." | Scott Yanow, American jazz historian and author of "The Great Jazz Guitarists", 2026

Selected links

- Archive and research: <https://www.harrypepl.com>
- Press information and photographs: <https://www.harrypepl.com/presse/>
- Online finding aid: <https://www.harrypepl.com/archiv/findmittel/>
- Listening guide: <https://www.harrypepl.com/fuer/hoeren/>
- For researchers: <https://www.harrypepl.com/fuer/forschung/>
- Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/5yyKXQa10VR4rXTzfKEsVf>
- Apple Music: <https://music.apple.com/at/artist/harry-pepl/13452426>

Press photographs

Two images are available in print quality in the press area. Reproduction for coverage of the Harry Pepl Archive with the appropriate credit.

- Harry Pepl live with Air Mail, Linz, February 1985 | Photo: Felix Nöbauer
- Harry Pepl, studio portrait with guitar | Photo: musical estate, private collection

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